A unique insight into the First World War through



A young duck tries to sign up to the war effort

The London Jewish Culture Centre launched We Were There Too on the eve of the centenary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 2016, and the project has already made some amazing discoveries.

Members of the project team were amazed when a discussion with The Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS) about community engagement in the project turned to disclosure of a unique, virtually unseen LJS archive from the period.

The LJS revealed that their former Honorary Archivist, Sharon Lewison, had discovered two bound manuscripts of stories, essays, poetry and drawings compiled by children and young people from their Religion School during the First World War, 1915-1916. After the war, the books had been placed in storage boxes and left for decades until she found them. The two rare volumes show how the war influenced Jewish children and young people of the period. Attention is often paid to those who fought or who served in auxiliary medical and military roles but the war had a huge impact on civilians too – and particularly children whose voices are rarely heard.

Project Director Alan Fell said: “This discovery exceeded all our expectations and we feel privileged to be able to provide the vehicle to bring it to public view."

What it is to be Jewish

Children and young people of the period were exposed to regular press reports of what was happening in the war.

These books show what they witnessed and how they responded to the dangerous world they were living in. Some of the written pieces reflect on "what it is to be Jewish" at the time or contain a Jewish reference, making the books of even greater significance as a record of the Jewish experience.

[quote=LJS Senior Rabbi Alexandra Wright]“These extraordinary volumes reveal the views and thoughts of young LJS Londoners experiencing hostilities a century ago.”[/quote]

LJS Senior Rabbi Alexandra Wright, commented: “Hostilities, whether between warring gangs, adults or countries, inevitably impact on children. These extraordinary volumes reveal the views and thoughts of young LJS Londoners experiencing hostilities a century ago. We should listen to their voices and recognise their fear, their courage and their loss of innocence as war consumes their world. There is much we can learn from children, then and now, if we look at life through their eyes.”

Stuart Hobley, Head of HLF London, said: “It is very rare to get an insight into what children thought, felt and experienced during the First World War, and this archive opens a window into how the war affected the lives of young Jewish people. It is great to see such interesting discoveries coming about thanks to the support National Lottery players have given this project”.

To view these unique volumes in their newly digitised format, visit the We Were There Too website.



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Blondel Cluff, Chair of HLF's London Committee, speaks at the launch of We where there too

The London Jewish Culture Centre launches We Were There Too