

The Henriques Archive: A Source for Research on Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust in the aftermath of the Second World War

Ben Barkow, Director of the Wiener Library

Summary: Ben Barkow outlines the life of Rose Henriques, her role in the Jewish Relief Organisations, and the contents and importance of her Archive. The Archive includes papers of the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad and Jewish Relief Units, which are an important source for research on Jewish survivors, particularly those housed in the Displaced Persons camps including Bergen-Belsen.

The Henriques Archive comprises the working papers of Rose Henriques from 1945 to 1950, when she served as head of the Germany Section of the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad (JCRA) and led one of the Jewish Relief Units (JRU) into the former concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen.

Rose Henriques

Rose Louise Loewe was born in London in 1889, the daughter of James Loewe, a well-known figure in Jewish communal life. Her brother Herbert achieved standing as Reader in Rabbinics at Cambridge University. Rose Loewe's childhood was marked by prosperity, piety and a love of the arts. Her particular interest was music, and she performed regularly on the harmonium at her synagogue in St John's Wood, London. Intent on a career in music she travelled to Germany to study piano in Breslau. Returning at the outbreak of the First World War she met Basil Henriques, who persuaded her to join him in a venture to establish a Jewish boys' club in the East End of London. The Oxford and St George's Club dominated the lives of the couple for decades. Rose Loewe initially took charge of the girls' section of the club, eventually managing the boys' section as well when Basil Henriques went off to do his patriotic duty. The couple married in 1916. Increasingly devoted to a career in social work, Rose Henriques became a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse at Liverpool Street Station in London during the War.

Rose and Basil Henriques lived on the premises of their club, first in Betts Street, and from 1930 in Berner Street, where new premises were built with a £65,000 grant from the tobacco magnate Bernhard Baron. The home was renamed The Bernhard Baron St George's Settlement.

From this base they undertook very wide-ranging welfare work, involving not only youth work but mother and baby welfare, help for the aged, and the promotion of education, participation in Jewish religious life and in the arts. Among the East End children she worked with she was affectionately known as 'The Missus'. Berner Street was eventually renamed Henriques Street in the couple's honour.

The Nazi persecution of Germany's and Europe's Jews roused the interest and compassion of Rose Henriques at an early stage. In 1943 she found an opportunity to become actively involved in planning for the end of the war by joining the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad (JCRA) which was established by the Joint Foreign Committee of the Anglo-Jewish Association and the Board of Deputies of British Jews (the same Joint Foreign Committee had called the Jewish Central Information Office into being in 1933). The JCRA had as one its chief goals the establishment of the Jewish Relief Units (JRU) – an active service unit for carrying out welfare work among the surviving remnant of European Jewry in Germany. Rose Henriques served as Head of the Germany Department of the JCRA.

British troops entered the notorious Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on 15 April 1945. The first JRU team arrived there on 21 June 1945. Rose Henriques arrived with the second team a short while after and based herself in the nearby town of Celle. A third team arrived in August 1945. Welfare work with Displaced Persons (DPs) in the British Zone of Occupation occupied Rose Henriques until 1950 when Bergen-Belsen was closed down and most Jewish DPs emigrated to the newly-founded state of Israel or to the USA.

In the post-war era Rose Henriques became actively involved in the British ORT organisation (ORT are the Russian initials of the Society for Spreading Artisan and

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Agricultural Work Among Jews), serving as Chair of the British OSE Society (OSE are the Russian initials for the Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jews), establishing the Workrooms for the Elderly in east London and presiding over the League of Jewish Women, the Association for the Welfare of the Physically Handicapped, the Whitechapel Art Gallery and the Jewish Research Unit – among many others.

When Basil Henriques was knighted in 1955, Rose became Lady Henriques. In 1964 she was honoured with the Henrietta Szold Award and in 1971, a year before her death, she was appointed a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours.

The Archive

The Henriques Archive comprises perhaps the most complete record of the effort to improve the lives of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and Displaced Persons in the British Zone of Occupation. The archive contains papers of the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad (JCRA), the Jewish Relief Units (JRUs), and copious documentation on other aspects of the Jewish refugee situation in the period 1945-1950.

The Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad was established in January 1943 by the Central British Fund for Jewish Relief and Rehabilitation (CBF). Its purpose was to recruit and organise volunteers to travel to mainland Europe after the Allied victory to carry out relief work with concentration camp and other survivors. Its Chairman was Dr Redcliffe Salaman. The JCRA worked in cooperation with the Council of British Societies for Relief Abroad. Volunteers came forward throughout 1943 and the first JRU set out in January 1944 to work with Yugoslav refugees in Egypt. Early in 1945 JRU volunteers were sent to the Netherlands, and following the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, some of these were reassigned there, along with additional volunteers from the UK.

The Henriques Archive contains documentation relating to the foundation and history of the JCRA, its inaugural conference, relations with the British Government, its committees, organisation, training and work. The files

of the JRUs include official documents of work with the British Military Government and other relief organisations including the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC), the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), International Relief Organisation (IRO), and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Also included are documents from its work in the field, relief workers' reports, Jewish survivors' reports, reports from the British, US and French zones and reports from all the DP camps. A fascinating source is a sequence of reports from over 100 locations around Germany, covering topics such as the condition of Jewish communal organisations (Gemeinde), marriages, children and adoptions, old age homes and cemeteries.

The living conditions and special problems of young Jewish people attempting to study are recorded, along with details of their student organisations, bursaries, the setting up of libraries and so forth. The Archive contains much on the question of restitution and compensation: meetings were held to discuss proposed and draft laws affecting the different zones of occupation; individual cases were documented and circulars and other ephemera preserved.

Crimes committed against Jews is another topic covered by the collection; these range from the part played by a JRU in an appeal against acquittal in the case of the murder of a Jew, to co-operation between the JRU Legal Advisor and the Prosecution Section of the Control Commission in Germany over prosecuting Nazis involved in mass murders in Riga. Crimes committed by Jews are also covered by the Archive and there are accounts of court cases against Jews as well as information about welfare work carried out on behalf of Jewish prison inmates.

Emigration is another major theme of the Archive, not only to Palestine (and later Israel) but to the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand, the Scandinavian countries and South Africa. There is also information relating to Jews who chose to return to Germany. One notable example is the repatriation of Jews who had found refuge in Shanghai and the reception they received on their arrival in Berlin. A number of reports documenting the situation in countries outside Germany are included, covering Austria, Italy, Greece, Belgium France and the Netherlands (the latter

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including a report by Dr Alfred Wiener, written in 1946).

Belsen as a Displaced Persons' Camp

Rose Henriques, as Head of the Germany section of the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad based at Celle, was particularly involved in the activities of Bergen-Belsen DP camp, the largest Jewish DP camp. The rich and complex social, political, cultural and religious life at the camp emerges from these documents.

At the end of the Second World War Germany was placed under military government and divided into four occupation zones, British, French, Soviet and American. The British Zone of Occupation comprised Schleswig Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia (Nordrhein-Westfalen), Lower Saxony and the Hanseatic city of Hamburg.

In Germany as a whole there were around 13 million people in the care of the authorities, in the British Zone around 2 million. Most of these Displaced Persons (DPs) had been forced labourers, deportees, stateless persons, concentration camp survivors and former prisoners of war. Allied policy was to repatriate people as quickly as possible – by the end of July 1945 some 3.2 million had been returned to their country of origin. In many cases, however, repatriation was not straightforward. Many DPs did not want to be repatriated, either for fear of new political regimes in their homelands or because – as in the case of the Jews – their former homes were seen as little more than the graveyards of families and friends. For Jewish survivors decisions to refuse repatriation were of course also arrived at through commitment to the Zionist cause. Such people were defined by the authorities as ‘non-repatriables’ and in the British Zone Belsen was a major centre for their accommodation.

Belsen was the largest concentration camp in the British Zone. It is reported that at liberation it housed approximately 60,000 people, roughly half of them Jewish. Many of the inmates were survivors of death marches from other camps to the east. During the first weeks after liberation many thousands died of exhaustion, starvation, sudden over-eating or disease. In addition, approximately 17,000 were repatriated to Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia, leaving

around 12,000, the majority of whom were Jewish. An indication of how significant Belsen was for Jewish life in the British Zone is that its population represented roughly half of all the Jews surviving in the Zone. In the years after 1945 it became a great centre of Jewish renewal and dominated Jewish life in the British Zone. The number of people housed in the camp held steady over a long period, although survivors departed for Palestine (often illegally) and new refugees arrived. British policy was not to allow Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union and other eastern countries into the Zone. Belsen’s comparative demographic stability strengthened it as a centre of Jewish political and cultural life.

While the British authorities envisaged the DP camp at Belsen as a provisional measure, in fact it only closed in 1950. The chief reason for this extended existence was the inability or refusal of Jewish survivors to ‘return’ to what the British defined as their country of origin. Many Jews perceived themselves as ‘liberated but not free’ and felt passionately that freedom would only come when they were able to settle in a Jewish national homeland in Palestine.

Two distinct groups of Jewish survivors are discernible: young, unmarried people who for the most part originated in Poland and other eastern European countries, and German Jews who were predominantly elderly. From early on, the young Jewish DPs embarked on relationships and marriages and many children were born in Belsen. This also tended to make for demographic stability within the camp.

The younger Polish and eastern European Jews in Belsen were predominantly Zionists who aspired to create a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. This shared conviction gave strong impetus to political organisation and activity. A Jewish committee was elected soon after liberation to promote the interests of the DPs. In September a Central Jewish Committee was established, with Josef Rosensaft as its Chair. The Committee created numerous departments dealing with issues such as health, culture, education, economics and religion.

For the JRU the situation was challenging, because the Jewish DPs were politically at odds with the British

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authorities over the issues of Jewish nationality and Palestine. The British sought to treat German Jews as Germans first and Jews second, and resisted the segregation of Jewish DPs from other groups. This led to strong opposition from the Jewish side, particularly from the Central Committee.

A number of Jewish bodies were active in the British Zone of Occupation, including the American Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint), the Jewish Brigade, ORT and others. The JRU worked to co-ordinate the activities of these bodies and maintain productive co-operation between them. The JRU itself avoided taking political positions, and sought to mediate between Zionists and non-Zionists, the Orthodox and the secular, and all the other interest groups represented. While many JRU workers were Zionists themselves and eventually made new lives in the state of Israel, the JCRA took the position that a continued Jewish life in Germany was a worthwhile and legitimate goal.

The Henriques Collection came to the Wiener Library some time after the death of Lady Henriques, when her office in Henriques Street was being cleared. Herbert Loewe contacted Chief Librarian Christa Wichmann, who arranged for the three filing cabinets containing the working papers amassed by Lady Henriques to be transported across London.

The papers of the Rose Henriques Collection offer extraordinary insights into the life of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and their first steps back into life and community. Any student of the immediate post-war period in Germany – and particularly of the reconstruction of Jewish life – must be grateful that Lady Henriques preserved her working papers and allowed the information contained in them to be transmitted to future generations.

The Henriques Archive is a superb source for anyone engaged in study or research into the vast topic of the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust. It is one of the finest collections of primary source material available on the subject and is indispensable to anyone wishing to understand this critical period of the post-war world.



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