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**“If all of the sky were paper”: the Jewish chaplains at Bergen Belsen concentration camp. Part 2**

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## “If all of the sky were paper”: the Jewish chaplains at Bergen Belsen concentration camp. Part 2

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JONATHAN M. LEWIS

The first part of this article, in the previous volume of *Jewish Historical Studies*,<sup>1</sup> discussed the extraordinary role of the Jewish chaplains who served at Bergen Belsen. This concluding part discusses the tensions and conflicts to which that role gave rise, between the chaplains and the authorities and between the chaplains themselves.

*Major Reverend Isaac Levy*

Reverend Leslie Hardman, the first British Jewish chaplain to enter Bergen Belsen, thought of a poem: “If all of the sky were paper, and all of the trees were pens, and all of the waters were ink, there would still not be enough material to describe the sufferings at the hands of the Nazis.”<sup>2</sup>

Reverend Hardman’s account of his experiences at Bergen Belsen suggests that he was virtually the only British Jewish chaplain there. He referred to his senior chaplain:

It was about this time that my Senior Chaplain came to see me. He was stationed at 2nd Army Headquarters, and I had been almost bombarding him with my demands for more food, more medical assistance. At last he had to come and see me. “At headquarters it is being said of you that you’re going out of your mind.” My response was to take him to one of the worst huts. He came out with a face as white as a sheet. “Now repeat your statement”, I said. But he could only mutter, “It’s terrible, terrible.” I saw him off at the gate, and he took my hand: “You must stay here until more help arrives; I shall do all I can.”<sup>3</sup>

1 Jonathan M. Lewis, “‘If All of the Sky were Paper’: The Jewish Chaplains at Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp. Part 1”, *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 53 (2021), 57–82.

2 Imperial War Museum, London (hereafter, IWM) 17636, 19577 (Hardman, respectively oral history 1997 and BBC Radio 4, 1999, sound).

3 Leslie H. Hardman and Cecily Goodman, *The Survivors: The Story of the Belsen Remnant* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1958), 48.

Hardman’s senior chaplain was Major Reverend Isaac (“Harry”) Levy. Interviewed in 1999, Hardman said that Levy told him that he had to leave, as he was going mad; then Hardman showed him the huts, and Levy said that he had better stay.<sup>4</sup> At the age of thirty-four, Levy was only two years older than Hardman; married with a son, he was the minister of Bayswater Synagogue in London. In September 1939 he had become the first Jewish minister to volunteer, serving initially in Britain. From 1941 until 1944 he served in the Middle East, for much of the time as Senior Jewish Chaplain, Middle East Force, travelling through North Africa, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, and Cyprus. At one point he was briefly captured by the Germans in North Africa but escaped. Returning to Britain in August 1944, he was sent three weeks later to Europe, shortly afterwards becoming Senior Jewish Chaplain to the British Second Army, serving in Holland and then in Germany. For a period Hardman served with him, and they related well to each other. On 3 April 1945 during the week of Passover, Levy crossed the Rhine with the British Army and entered Germany.

On the evening of Saturday 21 April Levy wrote to his wife that he had just received a pass to visit one of the notorious concentration camps in the area; it had been referred to on the radio a few days previously and Members of Parliament had been sent across to visit it. “I have just received a letter from Hardman in which he describes some of the horrors which he has witnessed”, he wrote.<sup>5</sup> In a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* later in April 1945 attempting to describe conditions at Belsen, Levy wrote that Hardman had been there since the second day of liberation and Levy had joined him a few days later; subsequently Levy recalled that he had entered Belsen three or four days after the first British soldiers.<sup>6</sup> In fact Levy arrived there on the eighth day of liberation. The authorities had asked him to go because of their concern for Hardman. The few British and American chaplains serving in the newly liberated camps needed support as chaplains had never done before, and this seems to have been the first recognition of it by the British authorities.

On Sunday 22 April Levy wrote to his wife:

I have just returned from my first visit to the death camp of Belsen . . . I . . . went to find Jews. And, God, did I find them . . . what specimens of humanity they are after the treatment they have received. I am certain that

4 IWM 19577.

5 Isaac Levy to his wife, Tonie (hereafter, LL), 21 April 1945, private collection.

6 Isaac Levy, *Witness to Evil: Bergen Belsen 1945* (London: Peter Halban in association with European Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 16–17; IWM 11572 (Levy, sound).

90 per cent of those who survive will never be really normal. They have suffered too much.<sup>7</sup>

Levy went first to camp no. 2, which was centred on the military barracks at Belsen, and then to the much worse camp no. 1, the “death” or “horror” camp, initially in search of Hardman. He described the huts in the death camp:

To enter these huts was like a descent into Dante’s *Inferno*. I tried to talk to some of the inmates offering a word of encouragement and hope, but as I tried to communicate with one man who seemed a little articulate, he breathed his last. The sense of helplessness was overwhelming. These poor people needed food and medical attention not words of encouragement. What did I have to offer?<sup>8</sup>

He later recalled that people died as you talked to them and that everybody reacted with horror to what they found.<sup>9</sup> In his letter of 22 April to his wife he wrote that he

went to Camp No. 1 first of all to look for Hardman who had been living there since last Tuesday or Wednesday.<sup>10</sup> The Colonel and others had asked me to find Hardman and remove him as he was becoming hysterical. . . .

It was then that Hardman appeared. I stretched out my hand to greet him and he fell on my neck and wept like a babe. The people round me saw it and joined in the weeping and I had to take him aside and make him pull himself together. He is not hysterical, he is tired and should go away for a while but he refuses to move. He feels that he must stay and bring a word of comfort to these people. He talks of the horrors that they have suffered and I can see that each word is spelt in blood. He is doing yeoman service there but I fear that it may ruin his health but he refuses to listen to me.<sup>11</sup>

At that time to call someone hysterical was an extreme statement implying mental instability, and was often applied to women. Levy agreed that Hardman should stay. A few days later, on Thursday 26 April, Levy wrote to his wife that “I just cannot leave Hardman alone. He is working like a maniac down there.”<sup>12</sup>

7 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 13; see also Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak: The Liberation of Belsen, 1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005; Random House, 2006), 135; *Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter JC), 15 April 2005, 41 (Levy obituary).

8 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 10.

9 *Ibid.*, 11–12; IWM 11572.

10 In fact Hardman had arrived on Monday 16 April.

11 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 13–14; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 72.

12 IWM 19577; Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 15. The term “hysteria” was also applied to the American chaplain Abraham Klausner, for whom see Lewis, “‘If All of the Sky were Paper’, Part 1”, 62–5, 82 n. 93.

After his very first visit to Belsen Levy asked the authorities to arrange for the special appointment of chaplains and relief groups, and to try to accelerate the progress to Belsen of Jewish relief teams who were already in Europe. He wrote to the Senior Jewish Chaplain (SJC) Israel Brodie in London appealing for further chaplains to be sent out. Hardman was doing a great job, he wrote, and there were a Christian and a Catholic chaplain there. The conditions were appalling, worse than anyone could believe. Brodie should press the War Office for at least two chaplains, arguing that Christian chaplains were being seconded to the camps and the Jewish claim was greater and more urgent. “We cannot think of military duties when this need is so pressing. I fully expect that you will concur.”<sup>13</sup>

Levy too was called on to conduct mass burial services and helped to bury 21,000 people. He recited the Kaddish. Levy was as disturbed as Hardman by the use of bulldozers to shovel corpses into mass graves. In a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* of May 1945 attempting to describe the horrific conditions at Belsen, he wrote that to date they had buried some 20,000 people, and there were more to follow: “Two of us are trying to list the names of all of them and thus publish the last relics of Israel’s *galuth* [the Jewish diaspora outside the Land of Israel]. It is an impossible task.” In his book he explained that this was because they could not be certain that the record would be accurate, and that some died even as they listed them.<sup>14</sup>

As he wrote in his book *Witness to Evil: Bergen Belsen 1945* (1995):

Leslie Hardman had preceded me at Belsen and I must pay tribute to the work he did during those early hectic and heartbreaking days. He placed himself entirely at the disposal of the military authorities and helped to introduce some order into the chaos then prevailing. The sight he witnessed on entering the camp profoundly affected him. When I first saw him he was walking round armed with a pistol. This was highly irregular for we chaplains, by our very calling, were non-combatants and prohibited from carrying weapons. He made some reference to self-protection in case he met with resistance which, in my view, was highly unlikely and I had to instruct him to dispose of the pistol which he did. Except for this lapse, he did splendid work, making himself indispensable to the medical and military staff.<sup>15</sup>

The war had not ended, and although the fighting had moved on, the countryside was potentially hostile. A British Army driver was beaten up in

<sup>13</sup> Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 14, 16–18, 27–9.

<sup>14</sup> *JC*, 4 May 1945, 1, 8, 9; Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 16–17, 132.

<sup>15</sup> Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 12.

a village on the night of Friday/Saturday 20/21 April by German civilians.<sup>16</sup> In the six desperate days before Levy arrived, Hardman had been venturing into the countryside to bring food, including shooting a deer. Much was achieved at gunpoint, even by chaplains, including some of the American chaplains.

By Sunday 22 April, when Levy arrived, the authorities were beginning to assume more effective control, to the point of expressing anxiety for Hardman and prohibiting any food other than that which they supplied themselves being brought into the camp. Hardman had served in Britain for two years and in Europe for some five months. Levy had served for two years in Britain, three years in North Africa, and more than six months in Europe, for much of his foreign service as the Senior Jewish Chaplain in both theatres. While remaining independently minded he had absorbed the ways of the military, and arriving after a week probably did not realize why in the desperate first days even a fellow chaplain might “lapse” into needing to be armed. Had Levy done so, he would have omitted this detail and this criticism from his memoir; his book on his experiences in North Africa exercises discretion about the identities of some of the locally recruited Palestinian chaplains whose efforts he considered seriously deficient.<sup>17</sup>

Levy wrote that after a protracted stay at the camp the strain became evident to such an extent that Hardman was advised to leave and serve in a quieter area within the Zone of Occupation, and that he was posted to Lübeck where he continued with dedication to look after a group of Jews who had been found there.<sup>18</sup> Despite the reference to a protracted stay in the camp this paragraph is located at an early point in Levy’s narrative, creating the impression that Hardman departed quite soon after Levy’s arrival. This was not the case; Hardman officiated at Shavuot, which fell on 18 and 19 May, and his narrative refers to two home leaves during his period in the camp. It also refers to his having been busy in his office when the man to whom he gave his *tefillin* approached him, implying that the early days of improvisation had given way to some degree of stability, as was indeed the case.<sup>19</sup>

There was a continuing tension between Hardman and Levy’s human-

<sup>16</sup> Battle Log of 8 Corps, Rhine to Baltic, sheets 147/148, 21 April 1945, 1115 hours, Royal Army Chaplains’ Museum, Shrivenham, Oxfordshire.

<sup>17</sup> Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 48, 50; Isaac Levy, *Now I Can Tell: Middle Eastern Memories* (Kettering, Northants: Dalkeith Press, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 18; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 232 n. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 79–83.

itarian activities at Belsen and their responsibilities as chaplains to British troops. Levy wrote that while the commander at Belsen was all sympathy, Levy had to fight it out with the military government authorities. “My opinion of the latter is beyond description. It could not be lower. I am sure that the throw outs of the army have been given jobs in this department. And we expect to govern Germany with such people . . .”<sup>20</sup> Writing to his wife on 9 May 1945 Levy recorded a meeting with the brigadier at Main Army headquarters. Levy had brought proposals about Belsen Camp, which had been placed before a special meeting of heads of departments, at which he had received no satisfaction. What the proposals entailed is not known, but they must have involved a humanitarian welfare programme:

On the contrary after the meeting he [the brigadier] saw me privately and informed me in no uncertain terms that my first duty lay towards the men of the army “that was what I was paid for” and that though humanity was involved at the camps, I was not to devote all my time to them. I explained that we are only two chaplains and that one is there all the time and I have to help and there is much to do but he was adamant.<sup>21</sup>

Bureaucracies do not easily accommodate individualists, the war had not ended, and chaplains were seeking to extend and prioritize their responsibilities from British soldiers to foreign civilian co-religionists, some from enemy countries.

This was an issue, for there were complaints – presumably from soldiers, although from whom we do not know – that the Jewish chaplains had not been seen and had not “been doing their stuff” lately. On 1 June 1945 Levy issued in response a circular letter to all ranks of the Jewish faith. He explained that there were only two Jewish chaplains in the Second Army area and one serving with the British increment of the Canadian Army. When the chaplains arrived at Belsen concentration camp they had found some 20,000–25,000 Jews there. “Their condition was too appalling to bear description.” So the chaplains had devoted their attention to them. Levy invited the troops to contact any groups of Jews whom they might find, send him their names and details, and send him comforts which they could spare, which he would distribute.<sup>22</sup> He returned from leave on 5 July 1945 to a pile of hundreds of letters, including a complaint from a

<sup>20</sup> Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 55, 95, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Snape, *The Royal Army Chaplains’ Department 1796–1953: Clergy under Fire* (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2008), 345, 408 nn. 27, 28.

soldier that Levy's last circular was an "insult to the troops" (perhaps his letter was seen as patronizing) and letters from abroad seeking to trace relatives, and no typist to help him with them.<sup>23</sup>

During his home leave Levy spoke on Tuesday 26 June at a meeting of the Central British Fund for Jewish Relief and Rehabilitation in London.<sup>24</sup> On Sunday 1 July he addressed a Zionist youth rally there. He described conditions in Belsen. Polish Jews were being victimized and deprived of food by their non-Jewish compatriots. There were 30,000–40,000 Jews in the British provinces of occupation with nowhere to go. Yet there was a living Hebrew spirit among the young men and women. Levy feared to return to Belsen as he had nothing to give them and feared their final despair, with some threatening suicide if they could not go to Palestine. That was the one place on earth where they could reorientate their life and commence afresh, but its gates were shut in their faces.<sup>25</sup> All this Levy said publicly while still a serving chaplain.

Many survivors were desperate to recapture their humanity by marrying and starting families. In the first year after liberation there were numerous weddings at Belsen, sometimes six or more in a day and fifty or more in a week. During 1946 there were 1,070 weddings. By 1948 a thousand Jewish babies had been born in Belsen, posing a huge challenge to resources.<sup>26</sup> Some survivors had previously been married and, convinced that their spouses had perished, wished to remarry. Levy wrote to the London Beth Din for guidance on solemnizing such marriages. The reply came that no marriages were to be solemnized until a complete list of survivors had been obtained. "How long, O Lord, how long?", Levy thought.<sup>27</sup> The London Beth Din had long stood for the rigorous application of Jewish law. This assertion of its authority failed to recognize the desperation of survivors to recreate their lives and the impossibility of obtaining a complete list of survivors within the whole of the vast former Nazi empire, much now under Russian control, throughout which survivors were scattered. In July 1945 Levy requested a ruling from the same Beth Din about Jewish chaplains conducting marriages of soldiers to Jewish

23 LL, 5 July 1945.

24 The Wiener Holocaust Library, London, HA, MF Doc. 52, 1/10/A.

25 JC, 6 July 1945, 8.

26 Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945–1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 149–51, 243.

27 Levy quoted in Joanne Reilly et al., eds., *Belsen in History and Memory* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), 239–40.



survivors. He sometimes sought to discourage these as they could be based on sympathy rather than lasting affection. Again missing the point, the London Beth Din responded that there was no objection if the conducting Jewish chaplain was satisfied that there was no objection to the marriage in Jewish law.<sup>28</sup>

From an early stage, Levy sought help widely. He flew, doubtless on military transport, to Paris to contact the Joint Distribution Committee and representatives of the Jewish Agency, and wrote to the Jewish Agency reporting on the position in Belsen. The Jewish Agency served as the nexus between the Zionist Organization and world Jewry, so this initiative must have been a potential provocation to the British authorities. Whether they knew of it, and of what Levy may have achieved, we do not know. He sought the help of relief teams including that of Dr. Solomon Schonfeld (on whom more shortly) with its mobile “Synagogue Ambulance”, and wrote to the American commandant at Buchenwald.<sup>29</sup> Armies in the field generally lead a hermetically sealed existence, so reaching out to the Americans was also a creative initiative.

As well as pressing the army for more relief workers,<sup>30</sup> Levy put forward to the authorities in April or May 1945 a scheme for the formation of a Jewish transit camp for Eastern Europeans who did not desire to return to their countries of origin, ideally at a site near Hanover close to an excellent agricultural school where youth could be trained for work on the land. This can only have been in the hope that, as a group of survivors semi-permanently encamped in the British Zone with nowhere to go, they might in view of their sufferings eventually be able to depart for Palestine. This proposal would have completely contradicted British policy, and was not accepted.<sup>31</sup> In June Levy arranged for the opening of a school at Belsen for the children, with prayers and religious instruction. In October he was still organizing the collection of clothes through the clothing campaign of the Federation of Jewish Relief Organizations.<sup>32</sup> Levy later said that Jewish soldiers in the army who had witnessed the condition of the camp’s

<sup>28</sup> London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter, LMA), ACC/3400/02/05/041 (London Beth Din: Chaplaincy Services).

<sup>29</sup> Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 33, 34, 39; Wiener Holocaust Library, HA, MF Doc. 52, 1/10/6A.

<sup>30</sup> Wiener Holocaust Library, HA, MF Doc. 52, 1/10/6A.

<sup>31</sup> Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 33, 34, 39.

<sup>32</sup> LMA, ACC/3121/C/11/007/03/D/016 (JCRA [Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad] re Germany, etc.), letters from Levy, 9 May 1945 to Jewish Agency, 30 May 1945 to Jewish Refugee Committee; General Secretary of Federation of Jewish Relief Organizations, letter to JC, n.d.; Jane Leveson, Friends Relief Service, report 6 June 1945.

inmates after liberation felt a strengthening of their Jewish identity “because they were our brothers”. Having been under the impression that all Jews had been exterminated, it was inspiring to find “hundreds who had survived . . . [because] you had a feeling . . . Israel lives”.<sup>33</sup>

From the outset Hardman and Levy attempted to list the names of survivors, including two thousand men in the upper camp and nine hundred women who desired to go to Palestine. Levy collected letters from survivors to relatives around the world and arranged for them to be despatched: those to people in Britain and Europe through Jewish organizations in the U.K., those for Palestine through the Jewish Agency and those for the U.S.A. through the World Jewish Congress. One letter to Switzerland happened to be intercepted by military intelligence, resulting in Levy receiving a severe reprimand for contravening security regulations.<sup>34</sup>

Talks to officers and appeals in circular letters to troops in Germany sometimes produced supplies for the survivors, including many provisions sent from people in the town of Preston in Lancashire where an officer who lived there initiated an appeal. On leave in London after two months commuting between Belsen and army headquarters, Levy spent most of his time pleading the cause of Belsen’s inmates with the High Commissioner for Refugees, Anglo-Jewish leaders, the Zionist Federation, and Dr Chaim Weizmann, but achieved little. In Germany he tried to convince the military authorities that Jewish German DPs (Displaced Persons) should be treated separately from other German civilians, and that Jews such as Poles and Hungarians should not be transferred to the same camps as other nationals of those countries who were awaiting repatriation, but both conflicted with official policy. He tried unsuccessfully to arrange transport to repatriate some four hundred Hungarian Jews. Levy had more success in advocating the need to prioritize reuniting families and the complete registration of all DPs. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) undertook this immense task, and a central information control was established for the whole of the British Zone. In Belsen Levy found himself in the unenviable position of trying to act as a mediator between the

<sup>33</sup> Levy quoted in Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2005), 202, 269 nn. 69, 70.

<sup>34</sup> Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 17, 19–22, 42–3.

Central Committee and the authorities. He experienced only one incident throughout his military service of antisemitism, from a Methodist chaplain.<sup>35</sup>

Professor Earl G. Harrison had been appointed in June 1945 by the U.S. State Department and with the sanction of President Truman to tour the DP camps in order to assess the situation of Jews in Europe. When he visited Belsen, Levy’s evidence to him directly contradicted British policy:

I well recall my own impassioned remarks addressed particularly to the role which the free nations played in the early days of the Nazi regime when, by barring entry to refugees, they had contributed directly to the enormous losses that Jewry had sustained. I urged Mr Harrison to use his high office to facilitate the emigration of Jewish D.P.s to the countries of their choice and especially to Palestine. If he failed to do so he would denigrate the validity of those immortal words composed by Emma Lazarus which so aptly described the Jews concentrated in Bergen Belsen and which are inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty.<sup>36</sup>

At the initiative of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and of the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad (JCRA) the possibility arose of the appointment of an Advisory Officer on Jewish Affairs to the Army Chief of Staff, such as existed in the United States Army. After many years abroad, Levy declined to be considered for the appointment, which in the event was not made.<sup>37</sup>

While Hardman’s narrative is essentially pastoral, Levy’s is essentially organizational. The senior in rank, although only two years older, with long experience of leading a disparate group of chaplains in North Africa and then in Europe, Levy wrote of his engagement with the army, the Senior Jewish Chaplain in London, and various authorities and officials, his efforts to obtain the services of more chaplains, and the work of the relief organizations.<sup>38</sup> Hardman barely acknowledged Levy’s role; Levy paid tribute to Hardman’s in the very early days but to some extent marginalized it afterwards. Serving in Europe before entering Belsen they seem to have related well to each other. Conditions in Belsen seem to have put that relationship under stress.

35 Ibid., respectively 58–63, 87, 64–8, 69–71, 84–5.

36 Ibid., 71–2.

37 Ibid., 102–5; Wiener Holocaust Library, HA, MF Doc. 52, 1/10/15/D.

38 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 17, 27–30, 92; Reilly, *Belsen in History*, 238–42.

### Other chaplains

Levy wrote at the end of April to his local superior, the Assistant Chaplain-General (ACG). With only two Jewish chaplains in the Second Army, he was seeking at least two more, one for each of camps 1 and 2, as well as Jewish relief workers. During May he received a message from the ACG to the effect that the Army Chief of Staff had seen him in Belsen and was conscious that he needed help: how many additional chaplains did he require? Deeply touched by the ACG's solicitude, Levy immediately replied that at least five would be needed. The War Office duly requested SJC Israel Brodie to select suitable candidates.<sup>39</sup> Brodie wrote to Levy on 3 May to say that this was in hand and that the JCRA had a team of lay workers ready to leave, awaiting only an official authorization. Levy replied on 6 May welcoming the imminent arrival of army chaplains Elton and Richards, whom he hoped had been instructed to report to him on arrival and to work under his direction. "I must confess that never before have I felt so alone in my work. Your long absence from the office has forced me to rely entirely on my own resources and the periodic word from your clerk, able though he is, has left me in complete darkness as to our future in this theatre."<sup>40</sup> This may be read as a crisis of religious faith or a crisis of resources. Throughout his military service Levy exercised administrative ability, and in this context I prefer the latter interpretation.

Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz was also given authorization to send four chaplains to work in the DP camps. The Chief Rabbi's Religious Emergency Council (CRREC) identified three who were willing to go: Rabbis Schlomo Baumgarten, Dr. E. Munk, and Moshe Vilensky. They accompanied a Jewish Relief Team of twelve people which together with a mobile synagogue-ambulance, two ambulances, and army lorries loaded with supplies departed in June; a fourth chaplain, Reverend Avraham Greenbaum, followed.<sup>41</sup> By 19 May the last survivors in camp 1 had been evacuated to the hospital in camp 2 or elsewhere, and on 21 May amid some ceremony all the huts in camp 1 had been burned down.<sup>42</sup> Given the magnitude of the crisis, perhaps Hertz should have sought authorization for more chaplains. But to the authorities four or five probably seemed a

39 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 29–30.

40 *Ibid.*, 21, 25–31, 36; Reilly, *Belsen in History*, 238–42.

41 Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 93; JC, 6 July 1945, 5; 20 July 1945, 15; 17 Aug. 1945, 5.

42 National Army Museum, London (hereafter, NAM), 1994-09-30, 7; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 124.

large number, and with many ministers already serving as chaplains Hertz had only a limited pool of potential appointees.<sup>43</sup> There were unordained but religiously learned people, including German refugees serving in the Pioneer Corps, but in Britain chaplaincy was thought of in terms of ordained ministers.

As Levy recorded, the utility of these chaplains varied totally. Reverend Isaac Richards was an army chaplain. Born in 1913 and married, he was the minister of Bolton Hebrew Congregation. Commissioned on 8 May 1944, he served in Eastern Command in the U.K. and then from 8 May 1945 until 14 October 1946 in Germany.<sup>44</sup> Levy wrote that he did a superb job throughout the period of his stay in Germany, was dedicated to the task, and proved a most reliable and loyal colleague.<sup>45</sup>

Chaplains became involved in the continuing welfare of detainees. To relieve the pressure on Belsen attempts were made to transfer detainees to other camps. Many Polish Jews refused to return to Poland and were therefore initially categorized as stateless. On 24 May 1945 Richards, the Polish Rabbi Goldfinger, Jane Leveson and Elizabeth Dearden of the Friends Relief Service, and others accompanied a party of 1,127 of these Polish Jews who were among the fitter survivors on a journey of twenty-two hours from Belsen to a camp for stateless people at Lingen near the Dutch border. The camp already held some three thousand Russians, two thousand Poles, and others. Richards and Goldfinger conducted religious services there every Sabbath evening and morning, distributed clothing and gifts from soldiers, and conducted the funeral and *shiva* of a woman who died. Richards and Leveson conducted classes for people to learn English, and Major Grellan, in command at Lingen, applied to the Red Cross for them to be temporarily seconded to work there. A report by Richards and Leveson was highly critical of the facilities at Lingen. Leslie Hardman recorded that the inmates were terrified of being sent back to their homes and refused to go, and that a chaplain (Richards) reported that conditions at Lingen were worse than at Belsen. Levy went there for four days to find out conditions for himself and reported that they were “appallingly inadequate”. In a front-page article headed “Sufferers Still

43 Interestingly, in 1946 the Polish Army sought out Rabbi Leon Thorne, who had survived in hiding, to serve as a chaplain; Leon Thorne, *It Will Yet Be Heard: A Polish Rabbi's Witness of the Shoah and Survival*, eds. Daniel H. Magilow and Emmanuel Thorne (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 204–17.

44 JC, 12 May 1944, 11; Richards's Army Chaplaincy Card, Royal Army Chaplains' Museum.

45 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 31.

Suffer. Jewish Victims of Official Bungling”, the *Jewish Chronicle* quoted at length from a letter by Richards about the unsatisfactory conditions at Lingen. Richards and Leveson visited a site at Diepholz in the vicinity of Osnabruck, to which this group of Jews was then sent, which also proved ill-equipped to receive them. At Lingen and Diepholtz as well as at Belsen itself, the inmates “organized” by theft and looting from the countryside food additional to that which was provided. Eventually the group was returned to Belsen, a decision in which Richards in particular seems to have been influential.<sup>46</sup>

Born in 1911 in Hungary, Reverend Michael Elton was married and was the minister of the Finsbury Park Synagogue in London. Commissioned as an army chaplain on 31 October 1944, he served in the south of England and then from 8 May 1945 in Germany, including with Jewish Relief Units, arriving at Belsen around 30 June 1945.<sup>47</sup> Levy wrote that he displayed disproportionate attention to the Hungarian Jews, and that Levy had to convince him that his duty was to be impartial and that all were to be treated with equal concern. There were two major groupings of Hungarian Jews: the ultra-Orthodox and the Neologs, whose practices were analogous to Conservatism in the U.S. Whether these Hungarians were of one or both groups is not clear. In due course Levy transferred Elton from Belsen to Braunschweig, formerly a subcamp of Neuengamme concentration camp 70 kilometres from Belsen, where a group of survivors had assembled.<sup>48</sup>

The three civilian chaplains sent by the CRREC arrived in the uniform of the JCRA, and Levy wrote that to impose military discipline on them was therefore impossible. Rabbi Dr. E. Munk, the rabbi of an ultra-Orthodox congregation, Golders Green Beth Hamedrash in London (colloquially and eponymously known as “Munks”), was officially sent on behalf of the Orthodox and then anti-Zionist Aggudah movement. He was, Levy wrote, a genuine, hard-working man whom Levy posted to a group of survivors in Celle in Hanover, where “with typical ‘Yekkish’ precision he became an

46 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 30–31, 49, 50–53; Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 88–9; IWM 17636; Reilly, *Belsen in History*, 240–41; Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 84; Wiener Holocaust Library, 1232/3/5 (JCRA and Jewish Relief Unit re Bergen Belsen: Transport of first party of Stateless Jews from Belsen Camp to Lingen); Captain I. Richards, C.F., and Jane Leveson, Friends Relief Service and JCRA, report, n.d.; LMA, ACC/3121/C/11/007/03/D/016 (JCRA re Germany, etc.), excerpts from report by Jane Leveson, 25 June 1945; JC, 15 June 1945, 1, 9.

47 Reilly, *Belsen: Liberation*, 125; Elton’s Army Chaplaincy Card, Royal Army Chaplains’ Museum.

48 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 30–32, 88–9; JC, 3 Nov. 1944, 9.

excellent organiser”. Written in the same section of his book about the “organization” of food by foraging, stealing, and looting, this may mean that Munk proved adept at those essentials of survival – theft and black marketeering – which after the war flourished everywhere including in the camps. As conditions improved there was a considerable influx of DPs into Munk’s camp. Munk supervised the compilation of a comprehensive list of all of the inmates by nationality, name, date of birth, and town of origin.<sup>49</sup>

Rabbi Shlomo Baumgarten was a Dayan (judge) of the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations (the Adath). A Hasid whose side curls were with difficulty concealed under his cap, he did not fit in easily and caused uproar in his relations with the inmates of the upper camp at Belsen. He succeeded in prevailing on the Royal Engineers to build a mikvah (ritual bath) under his supervision, and decreed that no marriages were to be performed until it was completed, to enable brides to undertake the ritual immersion prescribed by Jewish law. Levy surmised that among people reawakening to life some would have treated this with disdain and others with derision.<sup>50</sup>

Rabbi Dr. Solomon Schonfeld was the son-in-law of Chief Rabbi Hertz and the director of the CRREC, whose purpose was to provide religious amenities and to stimulate or revive religious activities. Schonfeld insisted on sending welfare parcels only to the religious element among the inmates, totally disregarding the others. At a meeting at the Board of Deputies in London he argued that the non-religious could “organize” supplies by foraging while the religious were engaged in more “godly” activities; Levy forcefully confronted “Such blatant nonsense and misrepresentation”.<sup>51</sup> On 17 August the chairman of the JCRA, Dr. Redcliffe Salaman, wrote to Rabbis Baumgarten and Vilensky cancelling Schonfeld’s instructions and stating that this had been approved by SJC Brodie. Schonfeld nevertheless persisted in his own method of distribution, discriminating in favour of the religiously observant. Tensions developed to the point of the breakdown of relationships between the CRREC and the JCRA.<sup>52</sup>

As his agent for the distribution of these amenities Schonfeld nominated Rabbi Moshe Vilensky of the Holy Law Congregation in

49 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 31, 54, 104; Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 105.

50 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 31, 79; Reilly, *Belsen in History*, 240; JC, 27 July 1945, 14.

51 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 82–3.

52 Wiener Holocaust Library, 1232/6 (Dispute between the JCRA and Dr. Schonfeld and other Rabbis who wished to act independently of the JCRA); JC, 27 July 1945, 14; 17 Aug. 1945, 5.

Prestwich, Manchester. The Chief Rabbi wrote to the army on 21 June 1945 introducing Vilensky as his representative “on a mission of general and religious welfare among Displaced Persons of the Jewish faith”. Seemingly, he did not communicate this to the Jewish Chaplaincy. When Vilensky arrived at Belsen Levy posted him to camp 2, where, as Levy wrote, “He was later to prove a liability rather than a help.”<sup>53</sup> Vilensky declined to solemnize a marriage between two survivors as the bride had not undergone the requisite ritual immersion; only when a Jewish relief worker called Mr Newman threatened to officiate at the marriage did he agree to do so, and even then on the impossible condition that the two young people would not meet for a certain period also required by tradition. In the presence of the commanding officer at Belsen, Major Jones, and others, Vilensky launched a furious attack on Levy as not being a real rabbi.<sup>54</sup> Vilensky’s integrity came into question, and he was accused of bribery and of provoking trouble among the inmates. His actions so enraged many of them that for a time he was placed under house arrest for his own safety. For a chaplain, even a civilian, this was remarkable. In response to a complaint which had been lodged against him Vilensky sent a well-written typed letter of twelve pages to the army on 7 September, alleging hostility towards him by the commanding officer.<sup>55</sup> At a meeting of the JCRA on 13 September about Vilensky it was reported that Rabbi Baumgarten had begun to show signs of Vilensky’s attitude.<sup>56</sup>

On 27 September Levy reported to Redcliffe Salaman about Vilensky. He wrote that Vilensky had never sent him a report on his activities despite being asked to do so, and had responded that he was responsible not to Levy but had direct access to the highest authorities. He had obtained army transport without consulting Levy, and had told the army that Levy had obtained it for him; was posing as the “plenipotentiary of the Chief Rabbi” and travelling around the country indulging in “political activities”; had neglected his duties at Belsen, never visiting the hospitals where “so many patients” were lying in the wards; had constantly indulged in intrigue against the officially recognized Central Jewish Committee of Belsen; had stirred up the inmates of Belsen to dissatisfaction, and as a result of inflammatory speeches was attacked by some of the inmates and ordered by the military government to remain confined to his room;

<sup>53</sup> Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 31 and n. 61.

<sup>54</sup> Wiener Holocaust Library, 1232/6.

<sup>55</sup> LMA, ACC/3121/C/11/007/03/D/016 (JCRA re Germany, etc.)

<sup>56</sup> Wiener Holocaust Library, 1232/6.



and had distributed “largesse” to officers and inmates, which could only be interpreted as attempts to bribe people to support him against his opponents. In short he had proved his unworthiness to hold so important an office. “I do most earnestly ask you to assist me to restore peace in the camp by removing him from our midst.” In a letter the same day to the vice-chairman of the JCRA, Leonard Cohen, Levy wrote that he would no longer endure the intrigues of the JCRA using Vilensky and himself for their own ends, and would not visit Belsen for as long as Vilensky remained there.<sup>57</sup> Vilensky was ultimately removed from Belsen. Even in 2015 Reverend Avraham Greenbaum, the fourth civilian chaplain to be sent to Germany in June 1945, did not wish to speak about Vilensky when I interviewed him.

Baumgarten and Vilensky were among a number of rabbis who conducted Yom Kippur services in Belsen for more than five thousand people.<sup>58</sup> At a public meeting in Britain on 1 October, Munk, Baumgarten, and Greenbaum reported on conditions for survivors in camps in Germany.<sup>59</sup> Conflicts which arose about arrangements for a meeting that Vilensky was to address on his return led to his resignation from his community.<sup>60</sup> Hardman recorded that a special rabbi was sent from England for the very religious inmates, but he became ill and returned to England.<sup>61</sup> This may have been Vilensky, whose return to England may have been euphemistically attributed to illness. If it does not refer to him or to any of the other rabbis discussed, no reference to any other “special Rabbi” has been identified.

Avraham Greenbaum was born in London in 1922 and had recently graduated from Jews’ College, the training ground for British ministers. He was working in charge of the youth section of the Bachad/B’nai Akiva youth movement at the *hachsharah* farm (where people were prepared for agricultural work in Palestine) in Thaxted in Essex when in June 1945 he received a telephone call from the Zionist leader Arie Handler offering him, officially on behalf of the religious Zionist movement Mizrachi, the final position in a group of chaplains about to be sent to Germany. Two days later, on 28 June, he was travelling to Germany on a military plane.

57 Wiener Holocaust Library, HA, MF Doc. 52, 1/10/10/B, 1/10/12/B, 1/10/13/B; 1232/6; Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 31, 81–4; Reilly, *Belsen: Liberation*, 138–42.

58 JC, 28 Sept. 1945, 1.

59 JC, 5 Oct. 1945, 5.

60 JC, 23 Nov. 1945, 15; 30 Nov. 1945, 14; 7 Dec. 1945, 15.

61 IWM 17636.

He served in Hamburg, and was then given the task of conducting a group of survivors from Hamburg to Belsen.<sup>62</sup> There he accepted the role of Religious Education Officer, catering for the religious educational requirements of the Jewish communities which were being organized in the DP's camps, and inaugurating cultural and recreational interests of a religious nature.<sup>63</sup> Living in a room in Belsen, he undertook organization of the schools and educational and pastoral work, including for hospital patients, and corresponded with Rabbi Schonfeld. A kosher kitchen was established for the staff and the Jewish community, and *yeshivot* (religious study circles) sprang up overnight.<sup>64</sup>

Although a civilian, Greenbaum wore a military-style uniform and was subject to British military discipline. There were good relations with the British Army. The British Commanding Officer at Belsen, Major Birkett, was in command of all forces in the camp, including Polish and Hungarian.<sup>65</sup> Greenbaum had a pass for the entrance to the camp, which was controlled by the British Army, and could thus go in and out. On one occasion, without any previous arrangement, Birkett's orders changed and Polish soldiers were appointed to control entrance and exit to the camp. Greenbaum had not been informed and resented this having been done overnight. Confronted at the camp entrance by Polish rather than British soldiers, he refused to take their orders. In consequence he was arrested and put on a charge by the camp commander. He was court martialled and found guilty. For a chaplain, even a civilian, this too was remarkable. Speaking with a twinkle in his eye as he sentenced him to seven days' confinement to the camp, Major Murphy, an Irish judge of the court who was known to be a great friend of the British, allowed Greenbaum to decide which period of seven days, when he would not need to use transport, would suit him to be confined to camp.

62 Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 93; Wiener Holocaust Library, HA, MF Doc. 52, HA7/4-15/2 (Report on Work in Hamburg from Rev. A. Y. Greenbaum covering Monday August 6 to Sunday August 19, 29 Aug. 1945); HA7/4-15/18 (Greenbaum to Leonard Cohen recording that he attended a service in Hamburg conducted by Rev. Hardman); see also HA7/4-15/24 (A. Carlebach, report on work in Hamburg 9–19 October 1946, recording the presence of Chaplain Rev. Moshe Avraham [Morris] Jaffe, who had previously served with the British Army in Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, India, and Burma); JC, 5 Oct. 1945, 5.

63 LMA, ACC/2793/02/01/18; ACC/2793/02/01/25 (J. Weingreen, Survey of Educational Work in Bergen-Belsen July 30–September 10, 1946).

64 Reilly, *Belsen: Liberation*, 179.

65 Under the Germans, 2,400 Hungarian soldiers had been serving at Belsen; NAM, 1994-09-03, 8.

After about a year at Belsen Greenbaum became ill and was sent back to London to recover before returning to Belsen. Masha Ralski, a survivor from Lithuania, was teaching in the school in the camp, and was writing and copying out *ketubot* (marriage contracts) for weddings which were taking place there. She and Greenbaum became engaged on the festive day of Lag B’Omer in 1946 and married at the end of 1946. Greenbaum left Belsen on 9 or 10 December 1946, after some eighteen months there.<sup>66</sup> Several rabbis were also employed in Germany for varying periods between 1946 and 1949, some over the High Holydays and some for longer periods.<sup>67</sup>

At different stages and for different periods at least thirty Christian chaplains of different denominations served at Belsen. They too had to face the unique dilemma of balancing their duties to soldiers with an undefined and vaguely humanistic mission to survivors. Research into them is at an early stage.<sup>68</sup> There were also some Canadian military chaplains.<sup>69</sup> Two French priests who had been prisoners of war made their way to Belsen when they were released to help and ministered to French-speaking people in hospital.<sup>70</sup>

Captain Joseph E. Stone served at Bergen Belsen as a doctor with no. 35 Casualty Clearing Station (CCS.) He recorded that the *padres*

66 Author interview with Reverend Avraham Greenbaum, Jerusalem, 4 Jan. 2015. The information about his journey to Germany was given by Greenbaum to a third party who relayed it to me. According to the pay records of the Jewish Refugee Committee, Greenbaum was paid from 10 June 1945; left for abroad on 1 July; was on leave 16 Sept.–20 Oct. 1945, 24 Feb.–9 March, 31 Aug.–7 Sept. 1946; from 1 Jan. 1946 was paid at the rate of £300 per annum, representing £5 15s 5d (now £15.77) per week, together with a dependant’s allowance of £2 per week to his mother in London; he left employment on 30 Nov. 1946; LMA, ACC/2793/03/03/37-38 (Jewish Refugee Committee Pay Records, ledgers 152/614, 152/448, 152/449).

67 LMA, ACC/2793/03/03/37-38.

68 Alan Robinson, *Chaplains at War: The Role of Clergymen during World War II* International Library of War Studies 11 (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 173–4; Robert Thompson, “The true physicians are the *padres*: British Christian Army Chaplains and the Liberation of Bergen Belsen” (M.A. thesis, University of Southampton, 2019), 6; Thompson is pursuing his research at University College London; James Hagerty, *No Ordinary Shepherds: Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the Second World War* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2020), 256–9; researches of David Blake, curator, Royal Army Chaplains’ Museum.

69 Mark Celinscak, *Distance from the Belsen Heap: Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 179.

70 IWM 15625 (Dearden, sound); Wiener Holocaust Library, 1232/3/3 (Col. H. W. Bird), /4 (Jane Leveson), /6 (Jane Leveson), /16 (Jewish Relief Unit), /17 (JCRA).

were the welfare officers, and did a great job of work. They brought round cigarettes and “bon-bons” which were very popular, and had to be “smart” to all the tricks of hospital patients to get an extra ration.<sup>71</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel A. M. Campbell, the commanding officer of no. 35 CCS, to which two padres, Davies and Stewart, were attached, said that “The true physicians here are the padres, as they are doing more good to the patients than anyone else”.<sup>72</sup>

There came a day at Belsen in the summer of 1945 when the doctors recorded that nobody had died that day. That date seems to have been 21 June; it was certainly after 20 June, when twenty people died.<sup>73</sup> One authoritative source on the numbers of deaths gives the last figures as being for the period from 1 to 20 June.<sup>74</sup> There were thousands of survivors. Many were traumatized, of which there was then little medical understanding or treatment. A few were able to return to their home towns but most had nowhere to go. Many of their homes lay in the east. They did not know if their homes had survived; if they had, they would probably have been occupied by other people. They had no way of getting there, or any wish to do so, and many of their home countries now lay under Soviet domination. Some of the survivors were evacuated to Sweden for long-term medical recovery. Some wanted to get as far away from Europe as they could, and went to Australia, which was encouraging white immigration at minimal cost. Some managed to reach America if they had relations there who would sponsor them. Some joined clandestine escape lines on hazardous journeys to Palestine, to which almost all immigration was barred by Britain in the troubled closing years of the Palestine mandate. Some 10,000–12,000 people, mostly Polish Jews, remained at Belsen. Only when the new State of Israel came into being in May 1948 could they go there unhindered, and many did. Belsen itself became virtually a permanent town with in due course a civilian administration and a centre of Jewish culture in Germany. In April 1951 seven hundred Jews were still living there. They eventually left, and in August 1951 Belsen-Höhne, as it had become known, closed.<sup>75</sup>

71 Joseph E. Stone, “Some Impressions of Belsen Camp, written in 1945 by R.A.M.C. Captain J. E. Stone” (private collection), 3.

72 A. M. Campbell quoted in Thompson, “The true physicians are the padres”, 16, 55.

73 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 51; Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 48; NAM, 2014-12-3, including numbers of deaths up to 26 May 1945.

74 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 202.

75 Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 211; Harold Marcuse, “The Afterlife of the Camps”, in *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, ed. Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2010), 189.

### Afterword

Leslie Hardman was later billeted at Plön, a submarine base on the Baltic. He reported about Belsen on radio and in film. In September 1945 he wrote to the *Jewish Chronicle* appealing for warm clothing for the inmates for the winter.<sup>76</sup> He returned to Belsen to conduct the wedding of a couple whom he had been instrumental in reuniting.<sup>77</sup> He returned to Britain on compassionate grounds on 11 October 1945, and was attached to Northern Command until he left the army on 6 November 1946. Hardman served for many years as the minister of Hendon Synagogue in London, retiring in 1981. He and his wife had four daughters. On the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Belsen in 1995, he conducted a service of commemoration at the site of the former Ravensbrück concentration camp. In 1997 and 1999 he gave interviews, in which he said that he had joined the army as a youngster and come back as a man. Hardman was awarded the M.B.E. in 1998 for his services to Holocaust education. His wife Josi died in 2007, and he at the age of ninety-five on 6 October 2008.<sup>78</sup>

Isaac Levy spent seven months in and out of Belsen, and was still serving there in August 1945.<sup>79</sup> One Sabbath morning in Berlin he met a group of Jews, most from Theresienstadt, alongside the ruins of a synagogue and offered to get their letters to any relative anywhere in the world. The following day he collected their letters and sent them to the World Jewish Congress for onward despatch, for which he was reprimanded by the Chaplain General for contravening regulations about sending letters from non-combatants.<sup>80</sup> Levy returned to London on 30 October 1945, having been away from home in total for nearly four and a half years. He served as the minister of Hampstead Synagogue in London and later as the national director of the Jewish National Fund. From 1945 until 1966 he served as the Senior Jewish Chaplain to H.M. Forces and conducted moral leadership courses. He was awarded the O.B.E. in the Coronation Honours List in 1953 and the Territorial Decoration in 1964. Levy returned in 1953 to Belsen to participate in the dedication of the International Memorial on the site of the former camp 1 where the mass graves were located. In 1969, speaking at a Holocaust Remembrance Award Ceremony, he described what he saw

76 JC, 21 Sept. 1945, 7.

77 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 94–8.

78 IWM 17636, 19577; Reilly, *Belsen in History*, 225–33; *Daily Telegraph*, 7 Oct. 2008 (Hardman obituary); *Menorah* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 19.

79 LL, 11 Aug. 1945.

80 IWM 11572.

when he entered Belsen a few days after its liberation: “The scene which I witnessed then is as vivid now as it was then.” He wrote an article in the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1971 about the relief of Belsen. In 1985 he organized a reunion of servicemen and women of the British Liberation Army to mark the fortieth anniversary of the liberation of Belsen, and hundreds of people came from all over the country. Married for sixty-seven years to Tonie Landau, who died in 2004, Levy died on 31 March 2005 at the age of ninety-four.<sup>81</sup>

Louis Sanker arranged and officiated in May 1945 in Brussels at a Service of Praise and Thanksgiving for the Victories of the Allied Nations. After service in Europe he served in Gloucester, leaving the RAF on 30 April 1947 and later ministering to the United Hebrew Congregation in Leeds.<sup>82</sup> Isaac Richards returned to Britain on 14 October 1946 and left the army on 7 December 1946.<sup>83</sup> He settled in South Africa, and is commemorated by the Rabbi Isaac Richards Memorial Library in Durban. Michael Elton returned to Britain on 8 August 1945 with a view to a posting to the Far East. Avoiding embarkation for India in October 1945 on compassionate grounds, he embarked on 26 November 1945 for service with the Central Mediterranean Force. He arrived back in the U.K. on 9 May 1947, and was released from the army on 25 July 1947.<sup>84</sup> He served a Reform community in Scotland and as the librarian at Jews’ College. Avraham Greenbaum and his wife went to Mexico, to which members of her family had escaped, and lived there for seventeen years. They moved to London and then in 1978 to Israel. Greenbaum became the Deputy Director-General of Bar-Ilan University, and retired in 1995, passing away on 16 January 2015.<sup>85</sup>

Colonel James Johnston, an army doctor at Belsen, rose to become the head of army medical services in the rank of Major-General.<sup>86</sup> When he retired in 1985 he wrote an account of his time at Belsen, but was too ill

81 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 13, 105–11, 131–3; IWM 11572; Levy’s Army Chaplaincy Card, Royal Army Chaplains’ Museum; Induction Address 29 June 1946; Michael Greisman, *Jews in Uniform* (London: Aster Publishing, 2018), 184–5; *Menorah* 15, no. 2 (Sept. 1966): 11–14; *JC*, 17 Sept. 1971, 16; 15 April 2005, 41 (Levy obituary); *The Independent*, 19 May 2005 (Levy obituary); *Everything in the Garden: Hampstead Garden Suburb Synagogue 1934–2009* (London: United Synagogue, 2009), 11, 13.

82 RAF Museum, Colindale, London, chaplaincy box 50; Order of Service, item 17 in Fishburn Books Judaica List (October 2018); *Jewish Year Book* 1950.

83 Richards’s Army Chaplaincy Card.

84 Elton’s Army Chaplaincy Card.

85 Author interview with Greenbaum, 4 Jan. 2015 (twelve days before he died).

86 On Johnston at Belsen, see Lewis, “‘If All of the Sky were Paper’, Part 1”, 75, 79.

to deliver it at a conference at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC and died in 1988. Brigadier Hugh Llewelyn Glynn Hughes, who had been in overall medical command at Belsen, maintained close contact with many of the survivors and visited some of them in Israel. He died in 1973 at the age of eighty-one.<sup>87</sup> In his will he left instructions that should any form of service be held in his memory a special prayer for the survivors of Belsen be recited; were Reverend Isaac Levy available he hoped that he would compose and recite this prayer. At his memorial service in London on 8 January 1974, Levy’s prayer concluded: “On their [the survivors’] hearts are lovingly engraved the names of Hugh Llewelyn Glynn Hughes, his medical colleagues, and those officers and men of the Forces who, inspired by his selfless devotion, so faithfully tended the needs of suffering humanity.”<sup>88</sup> Jewish Services of Commemoration took place at Belsen, in 1995 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of its liberation<sup>89</sup> and in 2015 to mark the seventieth, and had been planned for the seventy-fifth in 2020 before the global pandemic intervened.

### In summary

In 1945 most British commentators understood Bergen Belsen in universal rather than in Jewish terms. Newsreels referred to the victims as citizens of many countries rather than to the majority of them being Jews. The gradual appreciation of the need to treat Jewish survivors differently was largely due to the efforts of the few Jewish chaplains and relief workers.<sup>90</sup> Christian chaplains too may have largely understood the Jewishness of their experience.<sup>91</sup> In an era before the concept of the Holocaust came to be recognized, the Jewish chaplains influenced the British narrative of the bestiality that was Belsen away from a multinational and towards a Jewish tragedy. Under the long shadow of Britain’s Palestine policy they had less scope than their more numerous American counterparts to influence

87 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 159, 186–8, 232 n. 7; Bernice Lerner, *All the Horrors of War: A Jewish Girl, a British Doctor and the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020). On Glynn Hughes at Belsen, see Lewis, “‘If All of the Sky were Paper’, Part 1”, 75.

88 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 135–6.

89 Henry Morris, *The AJEX Chronicles. The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women: A Brief History* (London: AJEX, 1999), 124–5.

90 Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 145, 233 n. 24.

91 Thompson, “‘The true physicians are the padres’, ch. 2.

official policy. They nevertheless succeeded in doing so in relation to the registration of survivors, the more apposite treatment of Jewish survivors, and the reunification of families.

In the unimaginable conditions of Belsen the role of the chaplains utterly transcended their normal military duties, which they hardly performed. As “rescuers in the broad sense”<sup>92</sup> it became their lot to tend the bodies and the souls of traumatized survivors, and to bring them inspiration and hope: literally to revive them, by guiding them back to life. Their experiences were extreme, extraordinary, and unprecedented: pre-empting official relief action, tending survivors, bringing in food, bearing firearms to do so, establishing the first hospital, arguing with and subverting authority, being marginalized, disciplined, placed under house arrest, court martialled, and removed from Belsen by the authorities, and both influencing and overtly contradicting and undermining official policy. The extent to which they rose to the challenges which confronted them varied, and there were uneasy relationships between some of them, to the point of one remaining unwilling seventy years later to speak about another. No British Jewish military chaplains can ever have been required to summon more resources from within themselves and from their faith than those who were called to serve at Bergen Belsen.

92 Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 93.