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“To work with Jews, not for Jews”: a Christian relief worker in the aftermath of the Holocaust*

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On 15 April 1945 Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was liberated. In the following weeks, remaining sites in the Nazi concentration camp system were uncovered, and, on 8 May, the Second World War finally came to an end in Europe (VE Day). As recent histories contend, however, the Holocaust did not end when the concentration camps were liberated and victory was declared by the Allied liberators.¹ Although the West had known of the Nazi mass murder of Jews since at least 1942,² encountering survivors in the immediate aftermath enabled some non-Jews to gain awareness, to an extent, of the realities of Nazi persecution. They also began to consider the implications of this knowledge for Jewish/non-Jewish relations. One such person was Alison Wood, a Quaker and member of the Jewish Relief Unit (JRU) who, in 1946, arrived at Belsen as Personnel Officer for the Unit’s operations in the British Occupation Zone of Germany.

As a relief worker, and as a Christian in a Jewish organization, Alison Wood’s life history evidences some of the first interactions between Jews who survived the Holocaust and those who approached them after liberation. Close study of her experiences illustrates a detailed picture of how one ordinary relief worker engaged with survivors in the aftermath of

1 Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 3rd edn. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 297; David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933–49* (London: Pan Books, 2017), xl; Dan Stone, *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* (London: Pelican, 2023), xxiii.

2 Michael Fleming, “Knowledge in Britain of the Holocaust during the Second World War”, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust*, ed. Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 115.

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the Holocaust, her motivations for doing so, and the impact on her own Christianity in response.

Following liberation, Jews traced surviving relatives, testified to their experiences, rebuilt communities in Displaced Person (DP) camps, confronted postwar antisemitism, and pursued a settled home.³ In an extensive literature, historians have studied postwar Jewish lives, tracing the challenges and opportunities that faced survivors of the Holocaust.⁴ Central to these histories is the intention to take seriously the agency of the survivors themselves: to understand their dynamic, diverse, and complicated self-understanding and daily lives from their own standpoints and not – as non-Jewish liberators’ accounts sometimes represented them – as passive victims. Zeev Mankowitz described this historiographical turn as the effort to approach survivors as “subjects, rather than as objects of history”.⁵

Historians have also pointed out that the geographical, political, and social boundaries of postwar occupied Germany offered opportunity for Jewish and non-Jewish interaction within a “historic triangle” of relations between survivors, occupiers, and Germans.⁶ Atina Grossmann uncovered “the ways in which Jews, Germans, and (especially American) occupiers variously claimed, contested, and negotiated their identities as victims, victors, or survivors, and understood – in quite different ways

3 See respectively Dan Stone, *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after World War II and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Avinoam J. Patt and Michael Berkowitz, eds., *“We are Here”: New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010); Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Avinoam J. Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2009).

4 Zeev W. Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945–1950* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002); Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Margaret Myers Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945–1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

5 Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope*, 3.

6 Frank Stern, “The Historic Triangle: Occupiers, Germans, and Jews in Postwar Germany”, in *West Germany under Construction: Politics, Society, and Culture in the Adenauer Era*, ed. Robert G. Moeller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 200; Myers Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors*, 5.

– their encounters with one another.”⁷ The relationships between Jews, Germans, and occupiers were complex, as Grossmann and others have set out. But these interactions are rarely discussed for the impact they may have had on occupiers’ own personal and religious lives, including in the context of Christian-Jewish relations.

Some of the first non-Jews to observe the continuing challenges for Jews after liberation, as well as witness the rebuilding of Jewish life, were, like Alison Wood, members of relief organizations sent to occupied Germany to work with Displaced Persons. Christian-Jewish interactions in postwar relief work, however, have not previously been examined in the extensive historiography of relief.

Organizational histories of the principal relief agencies have focused on the planning and politics, both internal and external, of their work.⁸ The establishment of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in 1943 led postwar commentators, and subsequent historians, to note the internationalization of relief work.⁹ G. Daniel Cohen has argued that its creation “marked the end of the ‘charitable phase’ of modern humanitarianism” because the smaller relief agencies became “subservient” to military and international agencies.¹⁰ A few months after the end of the war UNRRA had more than three hundred teams in the field, and by the end of 1945 it was responsible for more than 700,000 DPs in Germany alone.¹¹ However, despite UNRRA’s vast scope in postwar Europe, other scholars have stressed the continued relevance of smaller relief organizations of older and often religious origin, which remained operational in the field even as UNRRA expanded, and which became ‘a cornerstone’ of relief work.¹²

Moreover, scholarship that focuses on the organizational and the

7 Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*, 9.

8 Roger C. Wilson, *Quaker Relief: An Account of the relief Work of the Society of Friends, 1940–1948* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952); Norman Bentwich, *They found Refuge: An Account of British Jewry’s Work for Victims of Nazi Oppression* (London: Cresset Press, 1956); Hagit Lavsky, “British Jewry and the Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany: The Jewish Relief Unit, 1945–1950”, *Journal of Holocaust Education* 4:1 (1995): 29–40; Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (London: Routledge, 1998), 118–44.

9 Grace Fox, “The Origins of UNRRA”, *Political Science Quarterly* 65:4 (1950): 584.

10 G. Daniel Cohen, “Between Relief and Politics: Refugee Humanitarianism in Occupied Germany, 1945–1946”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 43:3 (2008): 438–9.

11 Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe’s Displaced Persons, 1945–1951* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 46–7, 60.

12 Matthew Frank, “Working for the Germans: British Voluntary Societies and the German Refugee Crisis, 1945–50”, *Historical Research*, 82:215 (2009): 158.

political aspects of relief can obscure the realities of exactly how relief was administered by individuals in local contexts, and how it was experienced personally by both relief workers and DPs themselves. An alternative approach, which searches for "the intimate history of relief work", can reveal the motivations and guiding principles which lay behind relief.¹³ It can also trace in more detail how relief workers engaged with DPs on a daily basis, and what they learned from such experiences.

Some historians have attempted more detailed studies of relief work through the personal experiences of its protagonists, rather than through broader questions of politics and policy.¹⁴ Focusing in on relief workers' motivations and experiences enables a closer understanding of how they approached the lived experiences of DPs. Johannes-Dieter Steinert has studied how relief workers "perceived" both survivors and the nature of their own work, but his most detailed case-studies – Jane Levenson of the Friends Relief Service and Helen Bamber of the JRU – were both Jewish.¹⁵ How Levenson and Bamber's Christian colleagues "perceived" survivors who were Jewish, and understood the particular challenges faced by Jews in this period, remains unexplored.

This article provides a micro-historical case-study of Bamber's colleague, Alison Wood, a British Christian relief worker in the JRU. Like other micro-histories, it aims to illuminate a previously forgotten aspect

13 Rose Holmes, "A Moral Business: British Quaker Work with Refugees from Fascism, 1933–39" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Sussex, 2013), 6.

14 Jo Reilly, "Cleaner, Carer and Occasional Dance Partner? Writing Women back into the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen", in *Belsen in History and Memory*, ed. Reilly et al. (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 149–61; Neil Belton, *The Good Listener, Helen Bamber: A Life against Cruelty* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998); Paul Weindling, "'For the Love of Christ': Strategies of International Catholic Relief and the Allied Occupation of Germany, 1945–1948", *Journal of Contemporary History* 43:3 (2008): 477–92; Jennifer Carson, "The Friends Relief Service – Faith into Action: Humanitarian Assistance to Displaced Persons Camps in Germany, 1945–1948" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 2009); Fiona Reid and Sharif Gernie, "The Friends Relief Service and Displaced People in Europe after the Second World War, 1945–48", *Quaker Studies* 17:2 (2013): 223–43.

15 Johannes-Dieter Steinert, "British Relief Teams in Belsen Concentration Camp: Emergency Relief and the Perception of Survivors", *Holocaust Studies* 12:1–2 (2006): 69; Johannes-Dieter Steinert, "Jewish Survivors, Displaced Persons and Germans in British Eyes" in *Survivors of Nazi Persecution in Europe after the Second World War: Landscapes after Battle*, ed. David Cesarani et al., 2 vols (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010), vol. I, 19; Johannes-Dieter Steinert, "British and American Voluntary Organizations in Liberated Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp: An Unknown Story", in *The Jews, the Holocaust, and the Public: The Legacies of David Cesarani*, ed. Larissa Allwork and Rachel Pistol (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 200.

of a larger history: a person, aspect, or period in time can shed light on a broader process of change.¹⁶ It is necessarily limited in what it can reveal of the examples of other non-Jews who worked in Jewish settings in relief missions and beyond in postwar Europe. Wood's experience is one study in a wider story of Anglo-American Christians and their encounters with Holocaust survivors.¹⁷ But the value of this "particularity", as John Roth argued, is to apply in Holocaust studies greater complexity to existing historical assumptions.¹⁸ In this particular case, Alison Wood has not featured in the histories of postwar relief work among Jews. Her experiences shed light on the otherwise underappreciated experiences of women in this work, as well as on the nature of Jewish/non-Jewish interactions in the DP camps.

The JRU was formed in 1943, a branch of the newly established Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad (JCRA). Several hundred people volunteered to serve, joining its efforts "in preparing for the reconstruction of Jewish life and in finding ways and means to rescue our brethren from their tragic position and bring to an end the agony of their homelessness."¹⁹ The first team sent abroad travelled to Egypt in February 1944 and served there and later in Italy. In June 1945, a team was sent to Holland and Belgium, and a second arrived at Celle, near Belsen. In August the Holland team was dispatched to Belsen, where another soon joined them.²⁰ By the summer of 1946, there were ninety-two JRU workers in Germany, a large proportion based at the former Wehrmacht Barracks at Belsen, which became the centre of the Jewish DP community in the British zone.²¹

The JRU has received scant attention from historians. Neither Norman Bentwich's official history of the JRU nor Hagit Lavsky's overview of

16 Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, eds., *Microhistories of the Holocaust* (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

17 This article is derived from my "Liberators, Occupiers, Witnesses: Christian Encounters with Holocaust Survivors in Post-War Occupied Germany" (Ph.D. thesis, University College London, 2023), which examined Christian army chaplains, relief workers, occupation officials, and Zionist activists for what they reveal of Jewish/non-Jewish relations in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

18 John K. Roth, "Equality, Neutrality, Particularity: Perspectives on Women and the Holocaust", in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, ed. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 14, 19.

19 Norman Bentwich, *Aspects of Jewish Relief* (London: Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad, 1944), 7.

20 The Wiener Holocaust Library, London (hereafter, WL), Docs. 1232/1, "Skeleton History of JCRA".

21 Lavsky, "British Jewry", 32.

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1 Alison Wood with her nephew,
c. 1949. Reproduced with permission of
her family

the organization offered much detail about the JRU's relief workers themselves—their personal motivations, their experiences on the ground, or the ways they interacted and engaged with DPs.²² As a consequence, Lavsky could declare that “the volunteers represented the variety of English Jews”, with no acknowledgement of the presence of non-Jewish workers among the teams and, in the case of Alison Wood, at the very centre of the organization.²³ Wood, who joined the JRU soon after its creation, travelled to Germany in early 1946, and spent just under a year as the personnel officer in the JRU's headquarters at Eilshausen.

This article is organized around three questions. First, why did a Christian volunteer for postwar relief work, and why specifically did she want to work for a Jewish organization? Second, what was the nature of Wood's work in Germany, and how did she interact with Jewish colleagues in the JRU and with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust? Third, how did this experience of working with Jews impact her own Christianity?

I argue that Wood's life history offers insight into how a Christian experienced postwar relief work, and how through such work they encountered Jews. Aged thirty-three when she went to Germany, Wood

22 Bentwich, *They Found Refuge*, 127–63. Roxzann Moore (Royal Holloway, University of London) is writing a thesis on the JRU which will address this gap.

23 Lavsky, “British Jewry”, 32.

sat between the Church of England of her upbringing and her increased contact with Quakerism. Relief work provided an opportunity to work consciously as a Christian. Her Christianity motivated her to work specifically with Jews as a way of responding to what she perceived as the Christian responsibility for antisemitism. Relief work brought Wood to places in occupied Germany where she encountered Jewish survivors. She negotiated her daily experiences distinctly as a woman, enjoying close friendship with female colleagues. Interreligious kinship between women placed Wood in situations where she could more clearly witness the issues impacting Jews' daily lives following their liberation. Finally, Wood found her own Christianity impacted. She articulated her approach to relief work as the intention to work not "for" Jews but "with" Jews. In her later life, her local, practical contributions to Christian-Jewish relations in Britain reflected, as far as can be told from the evidence, the personal solidarity which had characterized her experience of postwar relief.

In the autumn of 1943, Alison Wood applied to join the newly formed JCRA. At the outset, as she later remembered in her memoir, it was not clear whether, as a non-Jew, she would be accepted as a volunteer in this Jewish organization.²⁴ Wood's personnel file indicates that the recruitment process involved an added level of attention to determine her suitability. Whether by her own volition or by the request of the JCRA, she wrote a two-page document which gives insight into her explanation of her motives.

First, Wood highlighted her experience: six years' social work in London, including two years living and working in a settlement in Camberwell, and two years working with child victims of sexual assault in Islington and Finsbury. In 1937, "more and more conscious that the political situation in Europe was becoming acute", Wood took a position that would enable her to work directly with the growing movement to support the victims of Nazi discriminatory laws against Jews, as a case-worker for the Prague Committee of the Quaker-run Friends Service Council (FSC).²⁵

Wood's memoir recalls the journey which had led her to activism in the refugee movement. In the early 1930s, having been raised in a Church of England home, she gravitated to the local Society of Friends in Hertfordshire. At the same time she was becoming aware of events

24 Alison Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail a-Winding: My Memories* (Alison Wood, 2011), 69.

25 WL, 1407/23/3/2, "Personal Details and Qualifications".

in Europe: "I was of course more and more concerned with what was happening in Germany after the tremendous pro-Nazi vote that Hitler had received in recent elections. I had also read in translation parts of Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*. I knew what his determination was regarding the Jews."²⁶ Knowledge acquired later about the Nazi rise to power may have influenced her recollections of the 1930s seventy years later. However, her future colleague in the JRU and lifelong friend Helen Bamber (whose relationship with Wood will be considered later) also remembered the significance *Mein Kampf* held for her growing awareness of Nazi attitudes to Jews. Bamber's father, himself involved in the 1930s refugee movement, read sections to her in the evening.²⁷

Experience made the consequences of Nazi policy on the Jews clearer to Wood later in the decade. Travelling by boat to Ireland for a holiday with her mother, Wood encountered a group of musicians waiting on the quayside. Talking with them, she discovered that they were an orchestra from Prague, and that many of them were Jewish: "That could only mean when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia (which he had always said that he was going to do), that these Jewish musicians would lose their jobs and be refused permission to play or to teach anywhere in that region of Europe, and also be refused permission to emigrate."²⁸ It is not clear how extensive a realization of Hitler's plans for the future of Czech Jewry was evident to Wood that day on the quayside, but coming from a family of musicians herself, it was nevertheless clearly a formative encounter. She referred to it not just in her memoir, but in a separate interview about her life included as an appendix to her memoir, and in a community event held in the style of the BBC's "Desert Island Discs", reflecting on her life story in 2011, eighteen months before her death.²⁹

It was by the end of her trip to Ireland that Wood had made her decision to speak to the Quakers about her future, and the opportunity was presented to her to work with the Prague Committee. At Friends House,

[I] found about ten people who knew me, all gathered in one of the small rooms. They invited me to sit down with them and said that they would like to use their usual way of tackling a problem, by keeping quite silent until any person felt that they had something to contribute to the

²⁶ Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 64.

²⁷ Belton, *Good Listener*, 37.

²⁸ Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 64–5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 206–7; "Desert Island Discs with Alison Wood", 2011, recording, author's collection.

discussion or the problem. Considering I wasn't a Quaker, I felt this was incredibly generous. As the silence and prayer continued, the consensus which was emerging was that if you do it we will support you, and help in any way we can. So the die was cast. I gave in my notice the next day.³⁰

It was perhaps an unconventional job interview, but such a scene indicates what lay behind Quaker involvement in refugee activism, and indeed was at the heart of Wood's engagement with Jewish relief from the beginning – not simply humanitarian charity but also an expression of faith.

In the few scholarly treatments of Quaker relief and refugee work it is accepted that Quaker relief was “an expression of Christian commitment” and embodied “faith into action”,³¹ although the extent of theology's influence on day-to-day relief work has been questioned.³² Wood's recollections, however, speak of the practical implications of Quaker theology, of the ways in which Christian principles directly impacted a person of faith's decision to participate in refugee activism. Specifically, relief work could serve as tangible expression of Quaker “concern”.

Looking back on the war years in his 1949 Swarthmore Lecture, the most prominent public talk in the Quaker calendar, the General Secretary of the Friends Relief Service (FRS), Roger Wilson, was able to encapsulate the sense of theological mission in Quaker relief work. While he acknowledged the necessity of “competent organization” in relief work, he also emphasized the importance of the religious basis of that work: “not the authority of individuals and groups or even of committees, but the *concern* of individuals and groups to serve under the authority of God.”³³ After all, the FRS was not simply a stand-alone relief organization but rooted in a Christian denomination, and its relief work was, in Wilson's view, an extension of its original function of the worship of God: “While, therefore, the primary purpose of the Society is Worship, with its emphasis on *being*, as the underlying experience from which right *doing* naturally follows, there are occasions on which corporate doing is laid upon members as a result of a sense of ‘concern’ developing through corporate and mutually dependent Worship of God.”³⁴ In this understanding, practical relief work was a direct living out of the worship

30 Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 65–6.

31 Reid and Gernie, “Friends Relief Service”, 223; Carson, “Friends Relief Service”.

32 Holmes, “Moral Business”, 3.

33 Roger Wilson, *Authority, Leadership and Concern: A Study in Motive and Administration in Quaker Relief Work* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), 65.

34 *Ibid.*, 12.

of God in the real world of need. This sense of need was discerned though "concern" for individuals.

Concern, Wilson argued, was more than "merely a strong desire", a personal motivation. It was a divinely inspired and oriented purpose, not a "spirit" of charity, but something led by "the Spirit" of God which worked in the individual Christian, equipping them to help others as an expression of their relationship with God. The discernment of this concern was not solely the purview of the individual either: "if his concern is shared and adopted by the Meeting, then the Meeting knows, as a matter of inward experience, that here is something which the Lord would have done."³⁵ Wood's description of the collective silence out of which her role became clear is the nearest she could come to illustrating the discernment of concern in a Quaker Meeting. Her religious principles, and her participation in a Christian community, both gave her a route into relief work and inspired and confirmed her commitment to it.

The Prague Committee which Wood joined had been established by the FSC in the late 1930s to oversee relief and refugee work in Czechoslovakia. A small office was set up in Prague, and a Friends caseworker was appointed to interview and process claims by refugees.³⁶ By June 1939, Wood was handling all casework herself, operating from the heart of the British refugee movement, Bloomsbury House, and working closely with one of the leading figures in the movement, Bertha Bracey.³⁷ Wood's work involved processing correspondence from Czech refugees, receiving information about their relatives still stuck in Prague, and relaying this information to her colleagues there.³⁸ She particularly helped a group of mixed Jewish/non-Jewish families whom the Quakers took on when Christian and Jewish organizations apparently could not agree on responsibility.³⁹

The reality of how Nazi racial laws were being felt by Czech Jews became most evident to Wood when her family sponsored a young Jewish man to escape from Prague, Rudolf Peter Heller, who went by the name Peter but to the Wood family was known as Rudi. In her "Desert Island Discs" recording, Wood said that as a family they were motivated by the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Friends Library, London (hereafter FL), Friends Service Council (hereafter FSC), E1/6/2, letter, 24 May 1939.

³⁷ FL, FSC, E1/5/1, letter, 18 July 1940. On Bertha Bracey, see Sybil Oldfield, *Women Humanitarians: "Doers of the Word": A Biographical Dictionary of British Women active between 1900–1950* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 28.

³⁸ FL, E1/6/3, letter, 27 July 1939.

³⁹ Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 66, 207–8.

thought that “if we could save one life that surely might be just worthwhile doing.”⁴⁰ It was Wood who went to meet Peter’s train when it arrived at Liverpool Street Station, London, recognizing him before he saw her, and hailing him with an outstretched hand. Peter’s widow recalled that Peter “often spoke of that handshake and the warmth of her greeting”, and the families remained close friends for the rest of their lives.⁴¹

When Wood submitted her application to join the JCRA in 1943, she not only justified her application on the basis of these practical experiences with the FSC, but also referred to her Christianity as one of her principal inspirations: “It is my very great wish to be associated with the planning of Post-War relief – not only as a vague philanthropist but because I find myself drawn to give this kind of expression to my love of people and to my conviction that only through work done together can new trust and respect for personality grow up between the nations and creeds. I believe that the Christian responsibility for Antisemitism [sic] is so heavy, that I feel especially glad that I might have an opportunity of specializing in this branch of relief.”⁴²

Wood’s motivation for joining the JCRA in the first place came not from a detached sense of charity to help anyone in need, but was far more specific. At this middle point of the war, as news was filtering through of the mass murder of the Jews of Europe, she responded to what she identified as the Christian “responsibility for” antisemitism with a recognition of her own part to play in the necessity of Christian cooperation with Jews in postwar relief. She envisioned this partnership as an “expression” of love. As she later put it in her memoir and “Desert Island Discs”, “I was very interested to work with Jews, not only for Jews”, affirming a conviction of the importance not just of any kind of relief work, but of working alongside Jews on equal terms.⁴³

Wood was not the only non-Jew to work with the JCRA, and others applied but were turned down, hinting at something of the unusual level of trust with which the committee eventually accepted Wood. In January 1946, Robert Bailie filled in an application form following nine months’ service in Germany with the British Army. He was accepted, and was employed by the JCRA as a driver until August 1949. Interestingly, the two references Bailie provided came from Christian clergy from his home

40 “Desert Island Discs”.

41 Jill Heller, a.k.a Rudi: *The Life of Rudolf Peter Heller* (Jill Heller, 2014), 24–7.

42 WL, 1407/23/3/2, “Personal Details”.

43 Wood, *There’s a Long, Long Trail*, 69.

in Dorking in Surrey.⁴⁴ Applications from other Christians proved less successful. Although Kathleen Kirke applied to the JCRA with similar attitudes to Alison Wood, writing of her "interest and sympathy" for the Jewish people following the reports of "the fate of European Jewry", and her experience in a group of Christians and Jews in Reading which sought to "combat anti-semitism and foster understanding between Christians and Jews", objections were raised which were not about Wood. The selection committee concluded that despite her "outstanding Jewish knowledge", Kirke had "no qualities which justify" the unusual case for accepting a non-Jew into the committee's work.⁴⁵

Wood's statement of her qualifications, however, clearly satisfied the JCRA, for in November 1943 she joined just before it moved to what would be its home at Endsleigh Place in central London, not far from Bloomsbury House, where Wood had previously worked. The JCRA's official history recorded that the new office was "repaired and decorated" by a committee of volunteers, but in Wood's recollection she was the first to arrive there on a Sunday morning and found "on every door, on every cupboard and on every shelf a stick-on picture of St Mary", the only sign of the office's former life as a nunnery.⁴⁶ "I knew", she wrote, "this would not be a good beginning for any use of the house by a Jewish committee, so I began laboriously peeling them off."⁴⁷ Wood's awareness of the uniqueness of her position as a Christian in a Jewish organization was clearly in evidence from the start, and it was a beginning indicative of the role Wood came to play in the life of the JCRA.

For the remaining period of the war, Wood was the first point of contact for the hundreds of Jews who volunteered for the unit.⁴⁸ From February 1944 she began attending meetings of the executive committee.⁴⁹ She helped to organize the training and information for new recruits, including reaching out to various non-Jewish British welfare organizations, such as the Red Cross and Toynbee Hall, to ask them for their assistance in training volunteers.⁵⁰

44 WL, 1407/1/4/2, "Robert Bailie".

45 WL, 1407/13/3/1-8, "Kathleen Kirke".

46 WL, 1232/1, "Skeleton History of JCRA"; Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 70.

47 Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 70.

48 *Ibid.*, 74.

49 WL, 1232/1, JCRA Minutes.

50 WL, Rose Henriques Collection (hereafter HA), HA2/5/5/60-71, Alison Wood to the Red Cross, Oxford House Settlement, and Toynbee Hall, 1945.

Wood also maintained correspondence with the first JRU teams sent out into the field from 1944. This enabled her not only to gather crucial information and knowledge about the operation of relief work, but also to prepare the Unit – and herself – for the bigger tasks of relief which awaited at the cessation of conflict. For example, in a letter to Phyllis Gerson, the leader of the JRU team which had begun work in North Africa and by this point was in Italy, Wood wrote: “I am very interested in the systems of tracing people, and of repatriation and registration, and I should be grateful if you would let us know how you work these and other problems out. I think the moment is coming when there should be some uniformity so that information coming from the various parts on the Continent can be coordinated more easily. I should also be glad if you would send me copies of any forms, index cards etc. you are using.”⁵¹ This letter was dated 15 May 1945. Her interest in the process of tracing, identifying, and locating surviving relatives of the survivors and DPs reflects that by then, a week after VE Day, Wood was becoming increasingly keen to leave the office in London and apply her organizational skills and knowledge in the field.

Wood had already filled out the customary application form completed by JRU volunteers before being assigned to a team heading abroad. In it she provided her personal details and those of her next of kin, and listed her experiences in first aid and “child welfare”. She stated that she could speak “a little” German, that she could not speak Yiddish but that she was prepared to learn it. The form asked if she was willing to work anywhere, to which she wrote “yes” but expressed her preference for Germany or Austria. The form was signed and dated 26 April 1945, which indicates that Wood confirmed her wish to work for the Unit abroad just eleven days after British and Canadian personnel entered Bergen-Belsen and assumed control of its liberation.⁵²

A week later, Erica Lunzer, a member of the JRU team by then working in Holland, wrote to Wood of the situation there: “At Eindhoven on Sunday we went to the Camp where the people had just arrived from Buchenwald. They are just not human any more. A young girl, cousin of mine was here from concentration camp a day [sic]. Her legs are waterridden. She cannot smile, just look with large unseeing eyes. She is strong and will recover, not many can. Thank God food may be taken into Northern Holland by the Dutch Red Cross. May be it will be in time.” Lunzer concluded her letter

51 WL, 1367/5/2, Wood to Phyllis Gerson, 15 May 1945.

52 WL, 1407/22/3/1, “Alison Wood”.

directly with a plea to Wood: “Pack up and come, Your [sic] are needed.”⁵³ At the beginning of June, Lunzer repeated her request: “I loved your Belsen letter, and wish to goodness you could get out here. The Dutch need you as badly”.⁵⁴ Although the Belsen letter to which Lunzer referred does not appear to have survived, it is reasonable – considering the timetable of Wood’s application form, and the letters to Gerson and from Lunzer – to infer that the revelations of Belsen spurred Wood’s determination to put her longstanding principles into effect and to begin the practical work of relief to which she had felt called seven years before, as she sat in silence with her fellow Quakers.

In the aftermath of Belsen’s liberation, Wood looked for a practical “expression to my love of people”.⁵⁵ She found the opportunity to negotiate these initial motives in the British zone of Germany. The JCRA’s “news flash” reported at the end of June that they hoped Alison Wood would go out into the field “in about 2 or 3 months’ time”.⁵⁶ It took a few more months until this hope could be fulfilled, but in February 1946 Wood left the UK for Germany. There, she encountered the continuing challenges facing Jews following their liberation.

There are relatively few surviving documents to detail Wood’s day-to-day experiences from when she left the JRU’s London office to work in the British zone of occupied Germany. She shared little with her friends and relatives,⁵⁷ and her memoir, written sixty-five years later, suggested that in the preceding years she had suppressed some of her own memories.⁵⁸ From the records of the JRU it is possible, however, to piece together an impression of the sort of work that Wood undertook. Like others who engaged with survivors such as reliefworkers and army chaplains,⁵⁹ Wood emphasized the importance of listening, and of encounters with survivors as individuals. She also found meaning in working closely alongside a female friend and colleague.

53 WL, HA 15/2/10/8-9, Erica Lunzer to Wood, 2 May 1945.

54 WL, HA 15/2/10/12, Lunzer to Wood, 3 June 1945.

55 WL, 1407/23/3/2, “Personal Details”.

56 WL, HA 5-6/8/23/9-10, “News Flashes”, 25 June 1945.

57 Interview with Jill Heller, widow of Peter Heller, 23 April 2021; interview with nephew of Alison Wood, 27 April 2021.

58 Wood, *There’s a Long, Long, Trail*, 81.

59 Robert Thompson, ““The true physicians here are the padres”: British Christian Army Chaplains and the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen”, *The English Historical Review* 138:593 (2023): 841–70.

Wood's arrival in Germany in February 1946 came at a time of transition for Jewish DPs in the British zone. Although the DP camp at Belsen remained reliant on support from UNRRA and the JRU, as well as the British authorities, its identity as a Jewish community was becoming more pronounced, as training facilities developed, families formed, and cultural and leisure activities expanded.⁶⁰ Conditions, though improving, were still, a year on from liberation, stark. In March the JRU reported positively on the standard of care in the Glynn Hughes Hospital – so-named after the British brigadier who had led the medical relief effort following Belsen's liberation – although there were still thirty-five weekly admissions versus twenty-five discharges. New facilities were sought for the long-term TB patients who had been occupying hospital beds “for many months”.⁶¹

In preparing for the establishment at Belsen of a separate DP camp for Jewish DPs, JRU workers urgently requested the JCRA to send more personnel. In reports from Belsen in November 1945, the head of the JRU team there, Jack Brass, expressed concern that if the JRU was to run a Jewish camp it desperately needed more help from a Jewish organization, not from UNRRA, which, Brass argued, “with good intentions and full of International Brotherhood which sounds so nice”, did not understand why Jewish and non-Jewish Poles should be kept separate.⁶² In this context of expanding the scope of the JRU's work in Germany, organization was essential, and it was for this reason that, finally, Leonard Cohen, the JCRA's Chairman, reported to UNRRA that Wood, “who has acted as the Committee's personnel Secretary for the last two years and has been concerned in the recruiting, training and processing of its Relief Workers, is now being transferred to work in Germany as personnel Officer. She will deal with the internal administration of the Unit.”⁶³

By this point, Wood was well prepared for the work that awaited her in Germany. In addition to having been at the heart of the JRU's operation for almost three years, hiring volunteers, training, and gathering information on issues such as tracing the missing, Wood had, ever since the JRU teams began entering Europe earlier in the year, received a regular stream of correspondence from colleagues. These letters detailed the nature of their work, conditions in the camps, and information about the DPs themselves. Lunzer, who made occasional visits to Jewish camps in

60 Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 141.

61 WL, 1407/1/10/5-7, “Extracts from Workers Reports, Bergen-Belsen”, March 1946.

62 WL, 1407/3/3/2, Jack Brass to Leonard Cohen, 2 Nov. 1945.

63 WL, HA 5/4/1/118, Leonard Cohen to Deputy Director General of UNRRA, 2 Oct. 1945.

Germany, wrote to Wood in May criticizing the Unit’s lack of equipment. Her pleas to Wood – that she “see that whenever possible closed cars are send [sic] abroad”, and that she has found that “Four sheets are not enough” for sleeping purposes – might seem trivial in the context of May 1945 when thousands of survivors of the camps were still dying and the JRU was yet to arrive at Belsen. However, it was essential to ensure that the Unit had the right serviceable equipment. Without a cover, for instance, their truck was “terrible in this weather. We get drenched through and to [sic] cold to speak.”⁶⁴ Poor equipment, Wood learned, could have a direct impact on the relief workers’ ability to do their job.

In September, another relief worker, Shea Abramowicz, wrote to Wood following a visit to the DP camps at Feldafing and Landsberg where the majority of DPs were Jews. Even with the relief efforts of the American Joint Distribution Committee, Abramowicz reported to Wood that “[m] any more are needed. People who can understand the problems of these Jews.”⁶⁵ Despite the challenges and the urgent need for more help from those who understood the Jewish situation and Jewish need, JRU workers in the field began to sense the emotional and symbolic significance of their work among the surviving remnant of European Jewry: “I feel that all the trouble all the waiting was worth while even to be with 5000 D.P.s on Yom Kippur, and to speak to them”, wrote Abramowitz.⁶⁶ As the first point of contact for JRU workers in the field, Wood was thus well briefed on the needs, challenges, and opportunities of Jewish relief.

These letters also speak of the trust that the JRU workers apparently placed in Wood. That they as Jews – many of them former refugees, many of them grieving for the missing and dead from their own families – expressed their personal reflections about this pressing and difficult situation to Wood, a Christian, suggests something of Wood’s own sensitivity on these issues. Jewish relief organizations may have considered those who “understood Jews”, that is, Jewish people, to support Jewish DPs best, as Abramowicz said, which suggests that there was perhaps always a limit to how much a Christian could understand of a survivor’s experience. However, that this was emphasized to Wood demonstrates some JRU recognition that in her case – consistently absorbing information from Jewish contacts – there was an effort to understand Jewish concerns too.

64 WL, HA 15/2/10/8, Lunzer to Wood, 2 May 1945.

65 WL, HA 6A/1/3/9/F, Shea Abramowicz to Wood, 17 Sept. 1945.

66 Ibid.

As the JRU's Personnel Officer, Wood was based at their headquarters at Eilshausen, where she worked closely with the Unit's newly arrived Field Director, Henry Lunzer, brother to Erica. As Wood had previously in London, in Eilshausen she immersed herself in organizing the Unit's workers. She took responsibility for the coordination of matters as diverse as clothing, equipment, transportation, inoculations, and even the Unit's radios and typewriters. She also frequently interacted with the workers themselves. This reached such a state of busyness by May 1946 that in a memorandum circulated to all Unit leaders Wood asked: "Will you please not come to H.Q. without informing us first that you intend to do so", underlining the point for emphasis.⁶⁷ This hints at one of the more important aspects of her work in Germany – the influence of her relationships with other relief workers.

Wood maintained strong working relationships with the JRU's volunteers, to the point where they often told her of their work, personal problems, and reactions to what they were witnessing and encountering. As such, she was in a unique position to encounter through them a wide range of aspects of Jewish relief. Speaking to Rudi's widow, Jill Heller, years later, Wood talked little about her own work, but she shared something of this relationship with those doing the day-to-day relief work inside the DP camps. In her friend's recollection, "Some of them [JRU workers] were so stunned that they didn't talk but she [Alison] kept on saying, 'poor souls they didn't know what to do'."⁶⁸

This picture of Wood as a listener, a pastoral point of contact for the JRU's volunteers, fits with her correspondence with workers such as Lunzer and Abramowicz. Similarly, in October 1946, Wood reported back to Cohen in London about one of their relief workers based in the French Zone: "I had a long talk with Raymond Dreyfuss. He felt the strain of work in the French Zone was too much for him".⁶⁹ Wood listened to workers' concerns in the midst of a stressful, emotionally challenging task, and made assessments on the impact on their work and on their own personal characters and situations. It suggests a close relationship and a concern for the welfare of her colleagues.

Wood's role as listener led to a lifelong friendship with the third member of her team in the Eilshausen office, Helen Balmuth, later known for her role as the founder of the Medical Foundation for the Care of

67 WL, HA 6A/2/3/6, Wood, "To all Unit Leaders", 15 May 1946.

68 Interview with Heller.

69 WL, 1407/5/6/2, Wood to Cohen, 8 Oct. 1946.

Victims of Torture and by her married name Helen Bamber. Interviewed by the *Church Times* in 2012, Bamber was asked if she found herself locked in a church who she would wish to be locked up with. A standard line for the paper’s back-cover interview, it was perhaps a somewhat obtuse question to pose to a Jew who had sat in Belsen with Jewish survivors of Nazi incarceration. Bamber replied: “There was a very wise woman – a Quaker – called Alison Wood. She came with my unit to Germany, and was older than me by 15 years. We had fascinating conversations in the dark places, and I found her faith as a Quaker inspiring. She remained my friend till she died a few weeks ago; so, if I was locked in a church, I would love to have her with me.”⁷⁰ Bamber was, in her biographer’s phrase, “The Good Listener”, a term that speaks to her own capacity for listening to survivors.⁷¹ She described how the survivors’ stories told to her in Belsen “poured from people like the ferocious process of vomiting.”⁷² Bamber’s answer to the *Church Times* was, it is reasonable to conclude, an acknowledgment that when she herself needed a listener this could be found at their Unit’s headquarters in their Personnel Officer.

The partnership between Wood and Bamber can be placed into a context of women’s kinship in social and charitable work. As others have explored, for women activists in refugee and relief work, “emotional lives” intersected with “political work”.⁷³ The historian Anne Summers has argued that in progressive causes in the first half of the twentieth century – from women’s suffrage to prewar aid for Jewish refugees – British Jewish and Christian women met “on almost equal terms”, and in their comradeship on these issues they experienced “living with difference” as a “reality”.⁷⁴ Shared experiences among women, negotiated in distinct ways as women, put female relief workers like Wood in particular circumstances that gave shape to their approach as relief workers.

Wood’s close relationship with Bamber allowed her, even at the Unit’s office, to encounter Jewish DPs and glimpse something of how they were negotiating challenges a year following liberation. Wood was working with Bamber in the Eilshausen office one day in 1946 when a young boy

70 “Interview: Helen Bamber, Therapist for Torture Victims”, *Church Times*, 28 March 2012, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2012/30-march/features/interview-helen-bamber-therapist-for-torture-victims> (accessed 27 Sept. 2021).

71 Belton, *Good Listener*.

72 “Helen Bamber” in Reilly, *Belsen in History and Memory*, 209.

73 Holmes, “Moral Business”, 31.

74 Anne Summers, *Christian and Jewish Women in Britain, 1880–1940: Living with Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3, 8.

turned up on their doorstep “in a state of collapse”. “He had walked from Hungary to north-west Germany”, Wood recalled in her memoir.⁷⁵ She and Bamber quickly realized that he was too ill to be moved. When Wood managed to get a doctor to see him, the doctor advised that the boy had gangrene and that his boots, apparently worn throughout his long walk across Germany, had to be removed. Wood and Bamber cut the boots off themselves and “[u]nbeknown to any authority, we kept him for nearly two weeks, feeding him, bathing and creaming his legs day and night.”⁷⁶ Through such incidents, the two women could absorb something of the survivor’s experiences. These were clearly not recorded in detail, but the boy’s boots that were the cause of his gangrene could become symbolic of his journey from the east to a Jewish DP community.

Wood’s work in Germany covered a range of activities. Leaving her desk in Eilshausen, she toured different centres and represented the JRU at British zone-wide meetings when Henry Lunzer could not, on one occasion reading his report detailing the current situation at Belsen.⁷⁷ When on leave in London in April 1946 she reported on “the situation in the field” at the JCRA’s executive committee, and she regularly visited Belsen, the principal site of the JRU’s work in the British Zone.⁷⁸ In her memoir, she remembered arranging circumcisions for babies born to DP parents. This involved hiring an official circumcisor from the UK, liaising with the Foreign Office to arrange for his visas to and from Germany, and organizing his transport from the airport to Belsen.⁷⁹ It was a diverse workload in which Wood worked not only with her fellow relief workers, but also interacted with Jewish DPs and advocated on their behalf.

Wood was particularly affected by meeting Hans Hirsch, who arrived aged nineteen. Hirsch had survived Auschwitz, and Wood spent at least six months attempting to obtain a British visa so that he could be reunited with his father in the UK. She took a close interest in Hans’s welfare and future. She wrote to the authorities to process his visa claim; visited his father when she was on leave in London; from “tinkering about with one or other of our lorries” and “feeding him up”, she liaised closely with Bamber

⁷⁵ Wood, *There’s a Long, Long Trail*, 83.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ WL, 1407/2/2/6, Wood to Hanne Bernhard-Rath, 11 July 1946; 1407/3/2/2, Bernhard-Rath to Cohen, 24 June 1946; The National Archives (hereafter NA), FO 1052/290, “Voluntary Societies Advisory Council”, 13 March 1946.

⁷⁸ WL, HA 22/1/1, Executive Committee Minutes, 9 April 1946; WL, 1407/2/2/6.

⁷⁹ Wood, *There’s a Long, Long Trail*, 84–5.

and found him work with the unit. Wood said that "we are feeding him and mothering him besides preparing him to go over [to the UK]".⁸⁰ Wood's own use of the gendered language of "mothering" could illustrate again something of the "intersection of emotional lives and political work" in women's experience of relief work.⁸¹ Perhaps it was a conscious effort to use her personal interaction with DPs, though articulated in traditional language, as a tool to lobby for survivors' training and employment, family reunion, and permanent future refuge.

Returning to Mankowitz's question as to whether DPs are framed as "subjects, rather than objects",⁸² though Wood spent considerable time working on Hans's case, her correspondence could appear somewhat detached. For example, a character reference she wrote for Hans read: "This boy has been working for us for about 9 weeks during which time we have found him quite honest. He works well at jobs he is given." It was not particularly warm or fulsome in its praise, yet a degree of formal detachment might be expected in a letter of this kind. The important point was made next: "I have met and discussed his future with his father and I am satisfied that it is for the boy's benefit that he should go to England and rejoin the one remaining member of his family."⁸³

Wood was sufficiently invested in Hans's welfare that she visited his father during her own period of leave. A visa was not granted Hans until August 1947, by which time Wood had left Eilshausen.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that during her time with Hans he was not a nameless recipient of relief but a person whom Wood "mothered", and for whom care meant not just the provision of food and work, but also persistent support in obtaining a route out of Germany and to a more secure future with his surviving family.

Missing in this correspondence is Hans's voice. It is difficult therefore to make substantive conclusions as to how Jewish DPs themselves, and indeed Wood's colleagues, reacted to the presence of a Christian at the centre of the JRU. For the rest of her life, Wood kept a metal star of David, apparently made for her by a young survivor.⁸⁵ Perhaps it was Hans, the tinkerer, who constructed it; perhaps it was the work of another DP whom

80 WL, 1407/11/1/1-14, "Hans Hirsch".

81 Holmes, "Moral Business", 31.

82 Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope*, 3.

83 WL, 1407/11/1/5, Wood, "To whom it may concern", 4 June 1946.

84 WL, 1407/11/1/29, Home Office to the Jewish Refugee Committee, 25 Aug. 1947.

85 Interview with Wood's nephew.

Wood befriended. Either way, it suggests the possibility of prolonged relationships with some of the survivors she met.

In her memoir, Wood remembered that: “[t]he people I saw and the people I talked to, against their will very often, were able to accept that I was a gentile and a Christian, and the tact I found in myself or the tact to do things that would not be hurtful. I never went to Belsen for a celebration, I never talked about Christianity unless I was asked to.”⁸⁶ The DPs knew that Wood was a Christian. The comment “against their will” suggests that some may have been uncomfortable with her presence in the JRU. However, Wood’s additional remark that Belsen was not for her a “celebration” indicates a degree of nuanced reflection on the circumstances. During her time with the Unit in Germany, a letter was sent to all relief workers from the Chairman of the Council of British Societies for Relief Abroad (COBSRA), Richard Law MP, which concluded: “You are indeed responding nobly to that message given nearly 2,000 years ago:— ‘Go, and do thou likewise’.”⁸⁷ This conscious use of Christian imagery and language is referring to Jesus’s Parable of the Good Samaritan as recounted in Luke’s Gospel, 10:37. For Law, postwar relief workers – and he seemed unthinkingly to include Jewish relief workers here – exemplified a Christian interpretation of the teachings of Jesus. Wood, however, suggested that her work with Jews in occupied Germany was not a redemptive or self-congratulatory experience. It was neither an opportunity to force her own faith and beliefs on those she met, nor a justification of herself as a “Good Samaritan”. It was perhaps because of her self-awareness of her delicate position that Wood was popular among her colleagues. Henry Lunzer later described her as “a very very warm lady”, and another JRU worker remembered that “I befriended her very much, she was a very special lady.”⁸⁸

Despite her colleagues’ respect, Wood spent just less than a year in Germany, leaving in November 1946, and resigning from the JRU in January 1947. In her memoir, she concluded vaguely that “the committee in London and people in Germany suddenly felt that they wanted to have a completely Jewish set-up.”⁸⁹ The context behind her departure was more

86 Wood, *There’s a Long, Long Trail*, 81.

87 WL, 1407/9/4/3, Richard Law to all relief workers, 26 Sept. 1946.

88 Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Oral History Division of the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, interviews with Henry Lunzer and Hanna Landau, 1993. I am grateful to Dr Verity Steele for helping me to locate these interviews.

89 Wood, *There’s a Long, Long Trail*, 85.

complicated. The suddenness came at the same time as the resignation of Henry Lunzer as Field Director. Joanne Reilly has outlined how Lunzer, keen to cooperate with the American Joint Distribution Committee, sympathetic to DPs' increasing Zionism, and intent on maintaining his own integrity as Field Director – all this as the movement of Jewish DPs from Poland to Germany and illegal immigration to Palestine was intensifying, something with which Lunzer was perhaps involved – became increasingly at odds with the JCRA's leadership in London.⁹⁰ The latter, represented by Leonard Cohen, a "committed non-Zionist", insisted that the JRU in the field stay out of politics.⁹¹ The JCRA's fear of mixing relief work with the inevitable politics of the changing situation in Germany led to Lunzer's dismissal.

By virtue of her close working relationship with Lunzer, Wood was implicated. She was offered an alternative position in the US Zone, conveniently a less volatile place politically for a relief worker with potentially Zionist sympathies, but she refused.⁹² Despite this, the JCRA informed UNRRA of her resignation along with Lunzer's.⁹³ The issue dragged on into January 1947 as both Lunzer and Wood continued to defend themselves to Cohen and the Board of Deputies of British Jews.⁹⁴ Inevitably, Helen Bamber, who had worked closely with Lunzer and Wood in Eilshausen, also left the JRU in January.⁹⁵

It was a messy end, "sooner than I wanted", Wood later remembered.⁹⁶ But a measure of the appreciation of their fellow field-workers came almost immediately after their departures. In November 1946, a note went out from Eilshausen addressed "To all JRU members in Germany": "As you will by now know, our Field Director for eleven months, Henry Lunzer, has resigned and is returning to London this week . . . We feel sure that all JRU members will want to combine in showing appreciation and gratitude for the way he has worked for our cause, and to Alison Wood who is also leaving the Unit, for the very real contribution, devotion and enthusiasm which she has brought to our work." It proposed that the Unit "inscribe Henry's name in the Golden Book of the JNF [Jewish National

90 WL, MF 27/24/129, Henry Lunzer, Central British Fund copy, 20 Jan. 1947.

91 Reilly, Belsen, 139.

92 WL, HA 21/4/2/21, Cohen to Wood, 27 Dec. 1946.

93 NA, FO 1052/362/2, "Report on Voluntary Agencies in the British Zone", Nov. 1946.

94 London Metropolitan Archives, ACC/3121/C11/7/3/D/15, Wood to Cohen, 15 Nov. 1946; Henry Lunzer to Selig Brodetsky, president of the Board of Deputies, 20 Jan. 1947.

95 Belton, *Good Listener*, 113.

96 Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 85.

Fund]” and “plant a grove of trees in Palestine in Alison’s name.”⁹⁷ It was perhaps appropriate that the JRU field-workers should provide an overtly Zionist recognition of Wood’s work in Germany alongside Lunzer’s.

In the short period she spent in Eilshausen, Wood immersed herself in the work of the Unit. As Personnel Officer she focused on supporting her colleagues in their often personally emotive work in the DP camps, and through them she met survivors. From the evidence of these encounters, it is clear that Wood witnessed the specific ways in which Jewish DPs negotiated living conditions a year following liberation, and in responding, she advocated for the individual. Through this experience, Wood did not lose sight of her inspiration as a Christian, her Christianity being well known to those she worked with. Yet, she maintained a sensitivity which made her a popular member of the team. This apparent thoughtfulness shaped how she reflected, as a Christian, on what she had experienced in Germany.

Alison Wood had few opportunities to express in detail the impact her experiences in Germany had on her Christian faith. Nevertheless, postwar relief work encouraged a process of reflection and inspired a commitment to a more sensitive Christian approach to Jews.

In her application for the JRU, Wood had said that she was motivated to participate in postwar Jewish relief effort partly because she believed that “only through work done together can new trust and respect for personality grow up between the nations and creeds.”⁹⁸ Part of her motivation, then, in responding to wartime antisemitism, was the urge to create the conditions for more positive relations between Christians and Jews. Working with the JRU in Germany, Wood’s “conversations in the dark places” – as Bamber described them – allowed her to begin to do this.⁹⁹ These conversations inspired Wood to a lifelong commitment to Christian-Jewish relations.

Wood later stated in her memoir that her first interest in Jewish affairs went back to her childhood. Her father spent much of his time studying the life of Moses. He took his daughter with him to church, and Wood remembered:

In the litany there used to be a group of prayers, not every Sunday, about once a month, you asked God to help you or defend you from murder,

97 WL, 1407/15/6/19, “To all JRU members in Germany”, 12 Nov. 1946.

98 WL, 1407/23/3/2, “Personal Details”.

99 “Interview: Helen Bamber”.

from sudden death, from Jews and infidels and other tribes without the law. It's not there now, it's been gone for a very long time. Once I came home from church saying "Who are they?" but nobody could or would tell me. Eventually Father said "Those are the people Moses looked after." That made no sense to me, if Moses was good why did I have to ask God to defend me against Moses's children?¹⁰⁰

Wood's childhood sense of injustice at Christian attitudes to Jews was brought closer to home when she met Jewish refugees in the 1930s and in her work with the Friends supporting Czech Jewish refugees to Britain.

Working at the heart of British refugee aid in the 1930s and 1940s brought her into contact with the Methodist minister the Reverend W. W. Simpson, a key figure in the founding of the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) in 1942. At the time of the CCJ's founding, Simpson was General Secretary of the Christian Council for Refugees and worked in Bloomsbury House, the same building where Wood was working with the Germany Emergency Committee. Wood later claimed that the CCJ was set up out of conversations she had with Simpson in Bloomsbury House or, as she put it, "Bill Simpson and I started it on the stairs."¹⁰¹ There are competing accounts of when and where the CCJ began.¹⁰² Nevertheless, Simpson himself said that it was born from the "cooperation" established, and resulting "discussions", in Bloomsbury House.¹⁰³ It is interesting that a year after Simpson and others founded the CCJ, Wood followed their Bloomsbury House conversations by joining the JRU, a decision she claimed was her response to the wartime antisemitism to which Simpson had responded by founding the CCJ.

Wood remained a loyal supporter of the CCJ for the rest of her life. She was a member of her local branch, and in later life became a good friend of the Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue. She was, for several years, a regular participant in annual Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations, telling her story to local schoolchildren. Although these tellings were unrecorded, in sharing with schoolchildren her work with the Quakers and the JRU Wood wanted to emphasize to them the fact

¹⁰⁰ Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 206.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁰² Marcus Braybrooke, *Children of One God: A History of the Council of Christians and Jews* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1991), 10.

¹⁰³ W. W. Simpson, "Jewish-Christian Relations since the Inception of the Council of Christians and Jews", *Transactions and Miscellanies (Jewish Historical Society of England)* 28 (1981-2): 91.

of her Christianity: "Sometimes it was quite useful to say why a Christian Gentile wanted to do that sort of work."¹⁰⁴

In 2006, ahead of its sixty-fifth anniversary, the CCJ awarded this ordinary relief worker a founders' medal. As one of only fifteen known people in the UK who had supported the Council since its founding in 1942, Wood was honoured at Lambeth Palace by Lady Jakobovits, the widow of Chief Rabbi Jakobovits, for being, in the words of the medal's citation, a "pioneer of reconciliation, dedicated to dialogue".¹⁰⁵ Wood was so respected by her friends in the local Jewish community that her memorial service in 2011 took place in Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue where a mixed Christian and Jewish congregation heard the words of both the Psalms and St. John's Gospel, a Jewish prayer, and a Trinitarian blessing. The eulogy was given by Helen Bamber, an appropriate testimony to her respect for Wood and her relationship with Judaism, of the "conversations" which helped to inspire her resulting commitment to Christian-Jewish relations.¹⁰⁶

For someone who was clearly committed to Christian-Jewish relations over a lifetime, and even prior to her employment with the JCRA, it is reasonable to ask how much specific impact Wood's experience in Germany had on her approach. Perhaps Wood would have been motivated to support interfaith relations through the CCJ whether or not she had joined her JRU colleagues in the field in 1946. Her later reflections on her experience should be read bearing in mind the potential problems with relying on autobiographical accounts. However, piecing together her personal narrative with other evidence written, oral, and material, it is reasonable to conclude that Wood's encounters in the aftermath of the Holocaust held substantive significance in clarifying her commitment to Jewish issues.

That it was the Magen David, the symbol of the Jewish people, that was made for Wood during her time in Germany is a tangible reminder of the interreligious nature of her work in the British Zone. The Star of David was a constant presence in Wood's time in Germany. Every day she wore it on her uniform as a member of the JRU. Indeed, even before her embarkation for Germany, her badge was noticeable when she was wearing her uniform and led to some ambiguous reactions from other non-Jews. A

104 Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 123–4.

105 Private collection, nephew of Alison Wood.

106 "A Service of Reflection on the life of Alison Edith Wood, 1913–2011", collection Jill Heller.

fellow passenger on the London Underground, on asking her whether her "Jewish flashes" made her a part of the army, and being told that it was a civilian organization "going to work in Germany after the war", gave Wood some money and apparently said: "You're the most unsemitic [sic] looking Israelite I've come across."¹⁰⁷

Wood kept her badge for the rest of her life, eventually donating it to the Wiener Library.¹⁰⁸ That she wore the JRU star and kept both Magen Davids – one made by a Holocaust survivor, one worn by Britain's principal Jewish relief organization – speaks of her effort to work "with" Jews, not "for", as she had wished when she first joined the Unit.¹⁰⁹ However far were her own experiences from those of Jews during the years of the Holocaust, Wood recognized the significance of the Star of David on the uniforms of the JRU and expressed her solidarity with its symbolism.

In her memoir, Wood reflected on the importance of encounter. She acknowledged that in joining the JRU as a middle-class Christian, she brought her own privileges, "obstacles to reaching the people with whom I should work". Yet, she realized also that she could not "deny" or "ignore" that background either. Somehow, she had to find a way "to use them – to build bridges, to illuminate what I met, to overcome 'difference' and prejudice." How did Wood learn to overcome such difference and prejudice? "All I could do", she wrote, "was to learn what other people's lives and experiences were showing them, and then to learn to 'feel' with others so that we found grounds to share."¹¹⁰ It was in the practical experience of relief work that Wood could attempt to surmount the gap between herself and the people with whom she worked. In sharing a space with them, Wood could try to come to understand how their life experiences were felt from their own perspective. Encounter was thus key to enabling Wood to respond to what she had seen of the impact of antisemitism and displacement.

A commitment to being present alongside those with different experiences and backgrounds to her own, and learning from them, shaped the importance Wood placed on the individual. It was evidenced in her support for Peter, or Rudi, Heller, her refugee friend from Prague, her close friendship with Helen Bamber, and her prolonged effort in the case of Hans, the teenage survivor of Auschwitz.

¹⁰⁷ Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 217.

¹⁰⁸ WL, 1683/25/49.

¹⁰⁹ Wood, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, 69.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 144–5.

2 Alison Wood (right) presented by Lady Jakobovits with a CCJ founders' medal, 2006. Reproduced with permission of the Council of Christians and Jews



This personal commitment also endured. Peter never again saw the parents whom he left behind, but Wood, decades later, asked him for his parents' names. Unbeknown to Peter, she asked her nephew who was travelling to Poland to do some research in Łódź, where the Hellers had lived. Her nephew returned with a book of names of the victims of the Łódź Ghetto, in which Peter's parents' names, Artur and Irma Heller, were recorded.¹¹¹ When, at Peter's funeral in 2008, Wood stood up to give her tribute, she finished by saying: "Rudi's parents, Irma and Artur, never had a burial nor a service, no recognition of their lives when they died. I know Rudi minded about this, so, as we are saying goodbye to him, we can rectify this and say goodbye to his parents Irma and Artur, too."¹¹² Wood was hinting at her own reflection on the limitations of her help for refugees and survivors. Although she was integral to Peter's escape from Nazi persecution, she also could not forget the names of those who had been murdered, those who did not escape as Peter had.

In all of this, there is a thread of continuity spun through Wood's life experiences. From her early work with Jewish refugees before the outbreak of the war, to her application for the JCRA, to her intense motivation to work in post-war Germany, and to her later commitment to Christian-Jewish relations, all these elements of activism arose out of her first evidenced recognition of the persecution of Jews, and the failings of Christians. However, it was the opportunity to work in the Jewish Relief Unit which enabled her to share ground, as she put it, with the individual,

¹¹¹ Heller, a.k.a Rudi, 150–51.

¹¹² Ibid., 135.

and to seek to overcome difference and prejudice by giving “expression to my love of people”.¹¹³

Alison Wood’s experiences as a member of the JRU offer an example of how one Christian first responded to what she encountered of the aftermath of the Nazi persecution, mass murder, and displacement of Europe’s Jews. One person cannot be representative of the diversity of Christianity and its multilayered role in the Holocaust period, not least its complicity in the long history of antisemitism.¹¹⁴ Further research into the experiences of JRU members, and their relationships as colleagues, might offer additional layers of understanding and different perspectives to Wood’s account. Nevertheless, tracing her experiences as far as possible can demonstrate the underappreciated complexity of how Christianity was first negotiated by ordinary Christians after the Holocaust.

Re-examining relief workers for their Christianity can reveal the motives that underpinned approaches to relief work. Wood sought to put into practice Quaker concern, an intention to live out a Christian sense of responsibility to help others. Although after her experience with Czech Jewish refugees she could have continued to work in a Quaker organization, according to her reasoning at the time she chose to respond specifically to antisemitism, and this she felt she could most appropriately achieve through the JRU.

In previous studies of relief work among Jewish DPs, better-known, and Jewish, relief workers such as Helen Bamber have been, understandably, held up by historians as examples of the few people “capable of providing mental support and help” to survivors.¹¹⁵ Without substantive evidence of survivors’ own reactions to Wood’s work among them, it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions about the nature of those encounters. Just how much could she appreciate Jewish experience of the Holocaust so soon after the events? But it is striking that in conducting her day-to-day work in Germany, it was Bamber whom Wood befriended the most among her colleagues. Indeed, the kinship of women in relief work raises

¹¹³ WL, 1407/22/3/3, “Personal Details”.

¹¹⁴ Kevin Spicer, ed., *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹¹⁵ Steinert, “Jewish Survivors”, 23; Steinert, “British and American Voluntary Organizations”, 200.

the potential impact for other relief workers and in other relief agencies, such as UNRRA or the American Friends Service Committee, of teamwork and friendship in the interreligious composition of their organizations. These encounters may have shaped what Christians could learn from working alongside their Jewish colleagues, and may have encouraged a more sensitive, individual-focused approach in certain cases.

If participation in relief work could be a Christian experience, one negotiated through encounters across religious boundaries, Wood's daily work also influenced her own personal, "lived" religion.¹¹⁶ Everyday activities among Jews in postwar Germany prompted Wood to consider their meaning for her own faith. This influence was not articulated at length but it was demonstrated in her long-term commitment to local Christian-Jewish relations in Britain. Although the question of the Christian relationship with Judaism would come to occupy conversations with far-reaching implications in theology and the institutions of Christianity, for Wood it was personal and came out of her work among Holocaust survivors. It became the practical expression of her original, written motivation: it was not a sense of her own charity for, but instead her encounters with survivors, which ultimately defined her Christian response to the Holocaust.

116 Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.