

Communities Linked by Tragedy – Remembering Aberfan

by Laura Henley Harrison, JHAW/CHIC Project Manager

21 October 2021 marks the 55th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster when coal tip number seven collapsed catastrophically, killing 144 people in the Welsh mining village of Aberfan in Merthyr Tydfil. Pantglas Junior School was directly in the path of the deluge, and out of the 144 lives lost that day, 116 of them were children. Among the rubble they found a small clock which had stopped at exactly 9.13am, and last week our valley communities held a minute's silence to remember those who lost their lives 55 years ago.

One of our recent oral history interviews brought my thoughts back to Aberfan again this month and highlighted how during times of great tragedy our communities pull closer together. In the days following the disaster, emergency services and volunteers from across south Wales worked around the clock to locate survivors.

Among the volunteers was Ellis Pruchnie, who was Company Director of Pearl Paints which was based at Treforest Industrial Estate. He was also the chairman of AJEX (The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women). Ellis's son Michael was recently interviewed by the Jewish History Association of South Wales, and he recounts a childhood memory of his father returning home from Aberfan after trying to locate survivors:

"The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women was a very close-knit group obviously of ex-military people. It was a way in which they kept together and devoted a lot of time and energy not just to the [Jewish] community, but also to different groups outside Judaism.

In fact, in 1966 during the Aberfan disaster, my father took up ten ex-servicemen to Aberfan and they worked there for two days. They weren't asked, they just went and did it, and this was the nature of the group...that disaster affected all ten of the men, most of whom had been in the Second World War or other fighting scenarios and I certainly remember my father and one of the others coming to our house, stripping off... all their clothes were rotten from all the digging and both men were just in tears because they didn't save anybody."



*Ellis Pruchnie (seated) and his son Michael Pruchnie.
The photograph was taken in the office of Pearl Paints in
Treforest in 1989.*

Image courtesy of Michael Pruchnie.

Oral history projects build up a picture of our past in layers. We see historical events through local eyes, and these stories can only be told for a finite amount of time.

To emphasise the importance of capturing stories before they vanish, we should remember Benjamin Hamilton, a prominent member of the Merthyr Jewish Community at the time of the Aberfan disaster. He was the Honorary Secretary of the Merthyr Hebrew Congregation, a well-respected local solicitor, and the coroner in charge of the Aberfan inquest. He had to visit the site of the school and determine the cause of death for all the victims, which was cited on the death certificates as asphyxia and multiple injuries. As he continued reading through the names, the father of one of the children disagreed with his findings, stating “No, Sir, buried alive by the National Coal Board”.

This information is well documented by the press who were present at the meetings, but this would not describe Benjamin’s personal feelings about what he experienced, and how he had

to reconcile his work as a coroner with the overwhelming grief and anger of the local community. Benjamin Hamilton died in April 1979, and his memories of this event would have been lost forever if he had not been interviewed in an oral history project by David Jacobs in 1977. His words are now held in the archives of St Fagans National Museum of History and give us his very personal insight into a very public tragedy. Our project proudly builds on the work of those historians who came before us.

We must always remember that recording oral history is an ongoing endeavour. As history unfolds around us, we never know when we might capture an important fragment of the past. Over the next year, I will share a new story every month which has been uncovered during our current oral history project. I look forward to looking back together.