



The Holocaust and Wales – Episode 4: Liberation and Loss

Transcript

Morris Brodie: November 1944. Herman Rothman, a German-Jewish refugee, has joined the British Army and crossed the English Channel into Nazi-occupied Europe. He arrives at Ostend, in Belgium.

Herman Rothman: Almost immediately we were divebombed [...] I heard planes coming over, German planes, and starting to divebomb the, the railway station or somewhere [...] the shock of it was so immense [...] I can't tell you. And I said, well, that's war. That is war. What I've experienced there was theatre, compared with, with that is war.

Morris Brodie: April 1945. The Western Allied forces have entered Germany. Welshman William Richard Williams, at the time a captain in the 8th British Army Corps, is tasked with investigating reports of a camp run by the Nazi SS near the town of Bergen.

William Williams: The first indication we had of things not going quite right was when we got up the River Aller – this is where we come to Belsen [...] We went [...] through the gate into the camp proper and it was something which, a sight that I will never forget. [...] It was just a series of barbed wire, high barbed wire fences [...] There were bundles [...] it looked like rags but turned out to be dead inmates [...] There were inmates [...] hanging on the wires, fallen beside it, grotesque positions, and just...you just had to pick your way through them. Two were walking and came towards us, and the SS, my escort, just shot them.

Morris Brodie: As restrictions on enemy aliens were gradually lifted, many German and Austrian refugees decided to fight back at the Nazis by enlisting in the British armed forces. Once the Allies began to liberate German-held territory in 1944 and 1945, the horrific fate of those Jews left behind became clear.



I'm Morris Brodie, historian at Aberystwyth University. In this final episode of The Holocaust and Wales, we look at tales of liberation, and of loss. We hear how Jewish refugees came to Wales to train as they prepared to liberate Continental Europe. We listen to Welsh servicemen who witnessed the horrors of the concentration camps. And we learn about survivors who managed to live through one of the darkest periods in human history and ultimately find a home in Wales.

Initially, enemy aliens were barred from serving in the regular British armed forces. They were only allowed to join an auxiliary unit, known as the Pioneer Corps. The Pioneer Corps performed non-combatant tasks, like trench-digging, bridge building, and clearing roads. Herbert Anderson was an Austrian Jew who came to Britain in February 1939. He was classified as a 'friendly alien' at the outbreak of war, which meant he avoided internment. He joined the Pioneer Corps in early 1940 and was initially stationed in Kent.

Herbert Anderson: By the end of that week, we must have been about 200 *friendly aliens*. I would think the percentage was as follows: Germany 60%, Austria 25%, other nationals 15%. Denomination wise, it must have been: Jewish 70%, non-Jewish 30% [...] This little refugee army, which grew to a total figure of, I think, 5,000 in the course of that year, 1940.

Morris Brodie: Because it was a non-combatant unit, some aliens were unhappy at being restricted to the Pioneer Corps. George Lane, originally from Hungary, had been accepted to join the Grenadiers, but the Home Office found out and ordered his deportation as a friendly alien, since Hungary was not then involved in the war. This order was rescinded, but...

George Lane: I was not allowed to join the Grenadiers, I was only allowed to join the Alien Pioneer Corps, which made me so angry that I nearly exploded with fury. And for nearly a year, I was using a pick and a shovel, doing navy work for the army. I quickly became a sergeant and had a most extraordinary section of mostly German Jews, who were very highly educated people. And there we were, you know, using a pick and a shovel.

Morris Brodie: Herbert Anderson's unit, the 87th Pioneer Corps, was soon transferred to Pembrokeshire.



Herbert Anderson: There was a little village called Angle nearby, where we went to the local pub in the evening, but that wasn't the purpose of our being there. We had to help [...] the Royal Artillery [...] at Manorbier. That's quite a well-known name in the history of the RAF because it is used as a place where there is target shooting [...] an RAF plane would drag a target behind, and the artillery would have to shoot it down. And what we had to do was to help the artillery. Carrying ammunition. Always some secondary jobs.

Morris Brodie: Colin Anson, originally from Berlin, also joined the 87th Pioneer Corps in South Wales.

Colin Anson: And we landed up in a charming place in South Wales called Dre-fach Felindre, quartered in an old woollen mill. And we used to go out on sundry pioneer corps duties there, again, what had originally been intended – laying mines, laying wire, various things, but another rather charming development was that a band and orchestra were established [...] this 87th Company band and orchestra who used from then on to travel about in South Wales, giving concerts and playing up for dances [...] in, well over the whole of the western part of South Wales, which was great fun, and which was doubly agreeable for the members of this band and orchestra because we were excused general duties and parade since we tended to be out rather late.

Morris Brodie: For Herman Rothman, who had lived at Gwrych Castle in Abergele in the early part of the war, maintaining his Jewish identity in the army was important. Herman joined the Royal West Kent Regiment in 1944.

Herman Rothman: As I was a religious Jew, I had my tefillin with me [...] You know, which you put on. I always had these with me. And a small tallis [...] And I took this always with me [...] because to me, that was important, that I maintain [...] my religion. My belief in God did not, was not shaken in any way and [...] I think to a certain extent [...] if you believe in God, that you, that you have got somebody to fall back on and to do and to pray, and that perhaps is also a lift which [...] is nec...natural, which, it's important to you [...] to sustain, to be alive and to want to be...to, to not to give in.



Morris Brodie: Other soldiers had to shun their Jewish heritage for the cause. In 1942, a unit of commandos was created, composed almost entirely of German-speaking Jewish refugees. They were to carry out operations behind enemy lines, and as such needed to keep their identities a secret. George Lane was involved in the recruitment of what became known as X Troop, whose base was in the foothills of Eryri/Snowdonia. He was charged with finding suitable billets for the troops.

George Lane: So I went to Harlech. And I went straight to the police station, I explained that I had a commando troop and I had to find billets for them. And they said 'Oh, there are plenty of empty rooms, don't you worry, it's a perfectly easy matter, come with us.' You see, and so with Constable Jones, I went all over Harlech, he knocked on the door. He said, 'Mrs. Jones, listen to the captain.' So I explained, you know. Mrs. Jones then said 'How much they're going to pay?' So I said, 'Well, the War Office gives us two pounds allowance for that.' 'Two pounds a week? Out of the question, go away!' So then Constable Jones intervened and said, 'Well, you've got to have them, you've got an empty room, and you should be proud of it, that you're going to have a commando or two.' So we found billets for the lot of them. But I had a really sleepless night, because I thought these women are going to be perfectly ghastly to my chaps, and I had no idea what to do. Well, I needn't have worried. I walked down the main street, the day after my chaps arrived, and these women came out of their houses and they said, 'Captain, why didn't you tell us they were not English? We would have had them for nothing.'

Morris Brodie: Alison Williams lived in Aberdyfi in Gwynedd. Her family housed two X Troop commandos during the war. One of them was Kurt Meyer, who took the pseudonym Peter Moody. She remembers his time in the village.

Alison Williams: He was a very gentle chap, very tall [...] very, very clever. And actually, he and my father, you see, they'd be working all day, or whatever, then they'd come back to the house. Now then, just bear in mind, we didn't have electricity, so it was only gas or candles. And then they'd be [...] playing draughts then [...] and they'd be at it [...] until about two o'clock in the morning. And my mother would say, 'Well, Moody bach, you need to go, because you'll be on...on duty before long,' you know. But he was, 'Mr Evans, I'm determined to beat you at this game.' He never did.

Morris Brodie: Colin Anson joined X Troop after becoming bored with life in the Pioneer Corps. He remembers his time at Aberdyfi as much more rigorous.



Colin Anson: The training obviously was very interesting [...] ours was perhaps more angled towards the intelligence side [...] With expeditions to north Wales, the Snowdonia area, for mountain climbing training, rock climbing training [...] even if you only, perhaps, were going to have an intelligence lecture or compass reading practice, map reading, or what have you, you'd first double up a mountain in order to do it, and then double down again, and round the other side when you had finished. So, we were brought up to and kept at a certain stage of fitness.

Morris Brodie: Eventually, training finished, and refugees were thrust into action in Europe. For those X Troop commandos operating behind enemy lines, capture was a very serious matter. In 1942, Hitler secretly issued the Commando Order, stating that all Allied commandos captured by the Germans were to be shot without trial. George Lane was captured following a reconnaissance mission near Calais in May 1944. He managed to convince his captors that he was a lost navy casualty, disguising his Hungarian roots by putting on his best Welsh accent.

George Lane: They were just very unpleasant. Telling me every five minutes that I'm going to be shot or hanged, because it was obvious that I was a saboteur. And although the interrogator spoke better English than I did, I managed to get away with it by pretending to be a Welshman. And I went on talking like a Welshman all that time, you know, and because you see we did all our training in north Wales, and it was, I wasn't deaf in those days, it was much more in my ear. I don't know what I sound like now because I'm too deaf. But then, it sounded alright and they did not detect my Hungarian accent.

Morris Brodie: The Allies may have been closing in on German-held territory, but for Jews trapped in these countries, life was becoming unimaginably grim. Eva Klein, who moved to Cardiff after the war, was a Hungarian Jew coerced into becoming a forced labourer by the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators. She and her family were initially moved to the Debrecen Ghetto, and in 1944 were forced aboard a train to Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. The railway line, however, was bombed, and the train was redirected to Austria.

Eva Klein: When the deportations started, we were put in cattle cars, 70, 80 people in one, one bucket for that many people. It didn't matter who saw you, who didn't. But if you have to go, you have to go, and you had to do it. You could hardly stand because it was no room. People were standing on the top of each other. When we arrived [...] some dead, some alive [...] they just threw out the dead ones, and they didn't know where to go.

Morris Brodie: In Vienna, Eva and her family were forced to work clearing rubble from bombed out buildings.

Eva Klein: They were bringing in the frame from the bombs, which were in wooden frames, and we had to chop them up for firewood. That was what we did. This was my main work. And then with this firewood to fill up lorries and sacks of coals [...] We were sitting on the top of the sacks in freezing cold weather, and we had to schlep sacks of coals, 30 kilo in one sack. That was our job.

Morris Brodie: In April 1945, the British 11th Armoured Division arrived at a camp complex near the town of Bergen in Northern Germany. Bergen-Belsen was built as a prisoner-of-war camp, but over time became used as a concentration camp for tens of thousands of Jews. Conditions in the camp were hellish – starvation and typhus decimated the population. Welsh rabbi Leslie Hardman was the first Jewish pastor to enter the camp, two days after its liberation.

Leslie Hardman: It stank a hell of a...right to the high heavens. The smell was abominable. And, then suddenly move a little further, and I see the hundreds, or thousands of dead bodies. And then, in the middle of the camp, there was...higher than this room – shoes and shoes and boots, and spectacles and other bits of things, and then all the mice, and the other things were eating into the...into the leather etc. And this is how they were told to march around whilst the Nazis were in...in power, the people had to walk around the, this...this terrible scene, and should they try to turn their heads away they were beaten up by the...by the SS.

Morris Brodie: William Richard Williams, from Cardiff, was one of the first British soldiers to witness the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.



William Williams: We went further on into the camp and see these corpses lying everywhere, you didn't know whether living or dead. Most of them were dead, some were trying to walk, some were stumbling, some on hands and knees, but in the Lagers, the barbed wire around the huts, you could see that the doors were open, the stench coming out of them was fearsome. They were lying in the doorways, tried to get down the stairs and fallen and just died on the spot.

Morris Brodie: Eva Klein escaped en route to Mauthausen Concentration Camp in Upper Austria but was recaptured and send to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. The Red Army liberated the camp in May 1945.

Eva Klein: And even then, we didn't really believe it was the end of the war. They said it was, but we were still in this place. We couldn't go anywhere. We couldn't go out at all. We couldn't even go to the yard.

Morris Brodie: On entering Bergen-Belsen, the immediate tasks for the Allies, including William Richard Williams, were to arrange for food and medical care for the survivors, and to bury the dead.

William Williams: I think that one of the more horrific sights at that time was where some of the bodies couldn't be moved manually and had to be literally bulldozed along the ground into the pit. This, I think, was...I think we all believe that there should be dignity in death, and I think this was the one aspect of the clear-up which perhaps...well, it couldn't have been handled any other way, there was no human way which could have been done...done except this, but it was one of the more horrific, I think, sights of that camp.

Morris Brodie: Leslie Hardman officiated at the funerals of thousands of inmates at a time. He recited the Kaddish, a Jewish funeral prayer.

Leslie Hardman: We tried to do it for every single one. When I did the first burial, the second burial...five thousand bodies, some of the inmates came to stand by me. And they used to comfort one another. They said, 'Look, at least your brother, your sister, our



friends here, at least a religious service – what we call a Yiddish word – is being mentioned over their graves. We don't know whether our mothers and fathers are, they're probably just fertilising the ground of the Polish fields.' And most of them were burned, destroyed. So they used to comfort one another, I'd see to some kind of service.

Morris Brodie: Survivors tried to rebuild their lives as best they could. Eva Klein returned to Hungary but had no word of the fate of two of her brothers.

Eva Klein: Some people came to look for my eldest brother, whom they met in Mauthausen Gedenkstätte, and they couldn't imagine why he is not home yet. He had typhoid, and I think he died the last day of the war, or when they were liberated. But Zoltan, the other brother, he was in the Russian camps. As they said, he disappeared. He disappeared with the other few 100,000s.

Morris Brodie: Six million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. They died in concentration camps like Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. They died in death camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka. They were gassed, shot, starved, and succumbed to diseases like typhoid. They were murdered for no other reason than because they were Jews.

In this podcast, we have explored the connections between The Holocaust and Wales. We have listened to the stories of refugees who found sanctuary in Wales, and the terrors from which they fled. The Holocaust did not just happen to other people in another place and time – it is part of all of our history. By studying this history, we ensure that victims are not forgotten, and hope to prevent the horrors of the Holocaust from ever being repeated. Thank you for listening.