

Religious Life of Jewish Refugees in Wales

ACTIVITIES FOR LEARNERS

ACTIVITY 1

a) Look at the two images relating to Jewish religious practice and read the accompanying information.

Cheder:



[Swansea Beth Hamedrash cheder sessions 1908-1909.](#)

Image: Swansea Hebrew Congregation.

Religion was an important part of life for many Jewish refugees in Wales. Many attended synagogues.

Many children attended *cheder* – a Jewish school, in which children are taught Judaism and the Hebrew language (typically for primary-aged children and outside normal school hours).

Kashrut, kosher, schochet:



[Photograph of the Krotosky brothers in their butcher shop in City Road, Cardiff, 1984.](#)

Image courtesy of Philip Kaye.

Jewish dietary laws (***kashrut***) are rooted in religion. They specify what foods Jews can or cannot eat and how the food must be prepared both before it reaches the home and within it.

Food that is permitted is known as ***kosher***. Any meat must be prepared by a ***schochet*** (a ritual slaughterer). Pork and shellfish are forbidden, as is mixing meat and milk.

Generally, the more Orthodox a person’s background, the more closely observed these rules are.

Many refugees in Wales struggled to keep *kosher*, especially if they lived far away from large towns or cities with an existing Jewish population. Ellen Davis, from an Orthodox Jewish family in Hesse, Germany, was unaware that the chips she loved so much from her local fish and chips shop in Swansea were made using pork fat, and therefore not *kosher*. In her book, *Kerry's Children: A Jewish Childhood in Nazi Germany and Growing up in South Wales*, she writes:

“Around the corner from our house stood a very well-known [sic] fish-and-chip shop called ‘The Windsor’. Living in a *Kosher* Jewish family, it was forbidden to eat anything that was not cooked at home. It never occurred to me that that these tasty chips [...] were cooked in lard. Not that I would have known what lard was. I had always known that anything to do with a pig was taboo, how was I to know that the chips were forbidden food for me. I just enjoyed them.”¹

b) Discuss in pairs or small groups:

- What do you know about Jewish religious practices, e.g., attending synagogue, religious schooling, and dietary laws?

c) Communicate the main discussion points to the whole class.

ACTIVITY 2

Look at the images of the popular Welsh dishes and, working in pairs, discuss if the dishes are *kosher* or non-*kosher* (see **ACTIVITY 1** for what makes a dish *kosher*/non-*kosher*). Write your replies on the information sheet and then discuss your answers as a class.

Welsh cakes:



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[Welsh Cakes.](#)

Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Welsh faggots:

¹ Ellen Davis, *Kerry's Children: A Jewish Childhood in Nazi Germany and Growing up in South Wales* (Bridgend: Seren, 2004), p. 61.



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[Faggots from Felinfoel.](#)

Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Glamorgan sausages:



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[Glamorgan sausage.](#)

Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Cawl with Caerphilly cheese:



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[Cawl Cymreig.](#)

Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Conwy mussels:



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[Cooked mussels.](#)

Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Fish and chips:



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[Fish and chips.](#)

Image: Wikimedia Commons.

ACTIVITY 3

a) Read the short biographies of Herman Rothman and Julius Weil, Jewish refugees, who fled to Britain on Kindertransport in 1939, and the information about children’s religious life at Gwrych Castle.

Herman Rothman was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1924 to Polish Jewish parents. He arrived in Britain as a refugee on the Kindertransport in August 1939 and went to the *Hachsharah* (agricultural training centre) at Gwrych Castle, Abergele. He later joined the British Army, serving in Western Europe, and was the first person to translate Hitler’s will after it was discovered hidden in the shoulder pad of a leading Nazi. He later became a lawyer in London.

At **Gwrych Castle**, refugee children studied Hebrew and the Torah and learnt about Palestine to prepare themselves for a life in ‘Eretz Yisrael’ (the land of Israel). One teacher noted that their aim was to “give the whole *Hachsharah* the atmosphere of a Jewish ‘Home’, and above all, to deepen the religious feeling, so that it should become a real and active force”.

Julius Weil was born in Dortmund, Germany in 1925. He lived in Köln with his parents and younger brother Arnold until 1938. On 9-10 November that year, his school was destroyed in the *Kristallnacht* pogrom. Julius’s headmaster successfully organised to get the whole school transferred to London. Julius was on the first Kindertransport train to leave the country. He never saw his parents or brother again. With the outbreak of war, Julius was sent to Bedford, where he was billeted with a non-Jewish family. In 1956, Julius was invited to go and work at the Standard Box and Carton Company, in Pentrebach, near Merthyr Tydfil. He died in February 2021.

b) Listen to [Herman’s](#) and [Julius’s](#) testimonies describing their religious life in Wales.

Oral History Transcripts

Herman Rothman on religious services at Gwrych Castle:

It was a...an Orthodox religious establishment. Everybody – every member could read, of course, fluent Hebrew, and we conducted the services – very, very lovely services. And they...they thought I had a fairly good – they discovered I had a fairly good voice, and very often I was taken to lead the services there, which I found...I found uplifted, if that's the right word.

Julius Weil on religious observance and kosher food:

Well, it for, for, for, for the majority—I mean we were, we weren't, not all the boys were Orthodox so to speak. [Pause.] And, although in the hostel everything was very Orthodox, not only, not only food wise, but also in every, every in life; there were prayers in the morning, there were prayers in the evening, there were prayers after meals. Saying grace after meals. But not all the boys were brought up in that way really. But one thing which was important of course was—you know what kosher is?

Kosher food? Which is important or was important. And, [pause] it was strange for anyone who was used to having everything kosher, to be in a non-Jewish home and not being able to partake. [Here, Julius is talking about when he was billeted with a non-Jewish family in Bedford.]

But the, the people who sponsored us, which were the communities I mentioned before, arranged to have food, kosher food sent down.

c) Working individually or in pairs, answer the following questions:

- How important was religion to Jewish refugees in Wales?
- Why might religion be important for refugees fleeing to a new country?
- Why should we respect the religion of other people?

ACTIVITY 4

Write a short paragraph (150-200 words) about something that is important to you, something that you enjoy, or provides stability for you, or gives your life structure and meaning, e.g., a belief system, a hobby, a relationship, or a regular event.

Consider how you would feel if you were suddenly transported somewhere where you could not engage with these things. Do you know anyone to whom this has happened?