

Religious life of Jewish refugees in Wales

Teachers' Notes

This lesson looks at the religious life of Jewish refugees in Wales.

Topic 1: Attending synagogue and cheder.

Religion was an important part of life for many Jewish refugees in Wales. Many attended synagogues or *cheder* (religious schooling). Child refugees Ellen Davis and Erwin Kestenbaum attended the Goat Street Synagogue in Swansea (Erwin had his bar mitzvah there) before it was destroyed during the Swansea Blitz in 1941.

Topic 2: Kosher food.

Jewish dietary laws, rooted in religion, specify which foods Jews can or cannot eat. The laws also specify how the food is prepared both before it reaches the home and within it. Generally, the more Orthodox a person's background, the more closely observed these rules are.

Students will hear oral history testimonies from two Kindertransport refugees – one describing religious services at Gwrych Castle and one about religious observance in their temporary hostel.

Curriculum links

Key Stage 3

History, Literacy skills

Lesson Plan

LEARNING AIMS:

- To learn about the religious life of Jewish refugees in Wales.
- To understand the importance of religion in the everyday life of refugees.
- To understand the importance of tolerance and empathy in an open, democratic society.

RESOURCES/EQUIPMENT REQUIRED:

- Copies of student worksheet.
- Transcript of the audio extracts.¹

STARTER

On the board, display two images relating to Jewish religious practice, together with the following words:

cheder

Image of a religious class

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/1103786>

kashrut, kosher, schochet

Image of Krotosky butchers

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/1151746>

Ask students what the words mean? What do they relate to?

Ask students what they know about Jewish religious practices, e.g., attending synagogue, religious schooling, and dietary laws.

Explain the meaning of the words written on the board:

Cheder: A Jewish school in which children are taught Judaism and the Hebrew language (typically for primary aged children and outside normal school hours).

Jewish dietary laws (**kashrut**) govern the food which Jewish people are allowed to eat. Food that is permitted is known as **kosher**. Pork and shellfish are forbidden, as is mixing meat and milk. Any meat must be prepared by a **schochet** (a ritual slaughterer).

DEVELOPMENT

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

¹ We added the transcripts of the audio clips, which you may choose to share with your students if you think they would be helpful. The transcripts are in English and Welsh whilst the clips are English only.

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.”²

Ask students to look at the images of the popular Welsh dishes and, working in pairs, discuss if the dishes are kosher or non-kosher. They should write their replies on the worksheets and then discuss their answers as a class **(TASK 1)**.

Correct answers are given below with explanation as to why a certain dish is not kosher.

1. Welsh cakes: KOSHER
2. Welsh meatballs: NOT KOSHER – these contain pork mince, which is forbidden under *kashrut*.
3. Glamorgan sausages: KOSHER – these sausages contain no meat, although the cheese used must be certified *kosher* (some cheeses use an enzyme, rennet, from an animal’s stomach to set the cheese and therefore are not kosher because they mix milk with ‘meat’ in the process of making the cheese).
4. Cawl with Caerphilly cheese: NOT KOSHER – mixing meat and dairy (including cheese or butter) is forbidden under *kashrut*
5. Conwy mussels: NOT KOSHER – shellfish is forbidden under *kashrut*.
6. Fish and chips: KOSHER as long as they are not cooked in lard (pig fat).
Interesting fact: fish and chips were first introduced to the UK by Jewish migrants in the nineteenth century.

MAIN

Ask the students to first read short biographies of Herman Rothman and Julius Weil, Jewish refugees, who fled to Britain on Kindertransport in 1939, and information about Gwrych Castle, and then listen to [Herman's](#) and [Julius's](#) testimonies describing their religious life in Wales.

Working in pairs or individually, students should answer the following questions on their worksheet **(TASK 2)**:

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

² Ellen Davis, *Kerry's Children: A Jewish Childhood in Nazi Germany and Growing up in South Wales* (Bridgend: Seren, 2004), p. 61.

PLENARY

Ask the students to write a short paragraph (150-200 words) about something that is important to them, something that they enjoy, or provides stability for them, or gives their life structure and meaning, e.g., a belief system, a hobby, a relationship, a regular event. How would they feel if they were suddenly transported somewhere where they could not engage with these things? Do they know anyone this has happened to? **(TASK 3)**.

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.