

Evelyn Friedlander, Aviva bat Miriam v'David, 22 June 1940–2 October 2019

Jonathan Magonet

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Evelyn Friedlander, née Philipp, was born in London during an air-raid to German refugee parents. A gifted pianist as a child, she studied at the Royal College of Music (1958–1961). She has described her early years and her relationship with Germany in her 1996 autobiography *Ich will nach Hause, aber ich war noch nie da: eine jüdische Frau sucht ihr verborgenes Erbe*.¹

Evelyn met her husband, Rabbi Albert Hoschander Friedlander, at a World Union for Progressive Judaism conference in Scotland in 1959 and



Figure 1 Evelyn Friedlander interviewed by Frank Dabba Smith during the Albert Friedlander conference. Photograph by Alexandra Senfft.

they married in 1961. As a 'rabbi's wife', she fulfilled the many tasks of supporting Albert in his congregational career in the USA and UK. At a memorial service for Evelyn, Edward Gold, a close friend of the family throughout their time at Westminster Synagogue, noted her extensive work in the synagogue, including organising fundraising activities. She helped conduct services and occasionally gave an address. 'She did everything quietly and modestly in an efficient way so that many members did not know and indeed it became almost taken for granted. This was a veritable rabbinic partnership.' But she also fully shared with Albert his broader work as a renowned international Jewish historian, theologian and teacher, as well as supporting his role as Director of Studies and later as Dean of Leo Baeck College. During Albert's time as editor of *European Judaism*, she was the mainstay for decades of the journal,² as well as contributing book reviews and editing an issue on themes related to women and Judaism.³ She participated fully in his extensive activities as a leading figure in postwar German–Jewish reconciliation and interfaith dialogue. For this they were jointly awarded in 1993 Germany's highest honour, the Cross of Merit.

Beginning in the 1980s she began to develop her own scholarly projects. Travelling in southern Germany, she discovered some *Genizot*, collections of Hebrew documents that traditionally could not be destroyed as they contained the name of God, so were simply stored. She recognised that these papers had to be preserved and catalogued. Describing her contribution to this and related work in the International Survey of Jewish Monuments, Dr Samuel Gruber wrote:

She was an activist, scholar, editor, curator and much else. For decades she was energetically and innovatively engaged in the documentation of Jewish material culture in Germany and England, resulting in several important exhibitions and publications. As head of the Hidden Legacy Foundation from 1990 to 2000, she organized the study of Jewish life and culture in small communities and helped recover and research lost *genizot* from synagogues in villages in Germany culminating in the Foundation's exhibitions and publication of *Genizah – 'Hidden Legacies of the German Village Jews'* (1992). This was followed by *Mappot ... blessed be he who comes* (1997) the bilingual comprehensive catalogue of an exhibition of Torah binders.

The historian Dr Helen Fry, who worked with Evelyn on *The Jews of Devon and Cornwall* (2000),⁴ writes about the importance of her heritage work.

Evelyn was passionate about Jewish history and heritage, in particular Anglo-Jewish synagogues and their Judaica. Under the auspices of her

charitable trust, the Hidden Legacy Foundation, she worked with me on cataloguing the rare silver Judaica and textiles from the eighteenth-century synagogues of Devon and Cornwall. These precious artefacts had not previously been catalogued. Plymouth and Exeter, as the two oldest Ashkenazi synagogues in the English-speaking world, had original artefacts dating back to the foundation of the communities in the 1720s. This exciting discovery led to an exhibition entitled 'The Jews of Devon and Cornwall' funded by the Hidden Legacy Foundation. It was shown for several months at a time at the major museums in the South-West: Penzance and Falmouth in 2000 and Exeter, Barnstaple and Plymouth in 2001. In addition to local involvement of the Jewish communities, it brought together several heritage partners and individuals: the Jewish Museum in London, Rabbi Frank Dabba Smith, Keith Pearce of Penzance, the Brotherton Library (Leeds), Dr Anthony Joseph of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain and the Susser Archive. This was a community project ahead of its time because Evelyn understood the importance of recording this Jewish heritage before it was lost and at a time when communities had not been engaged in it themselves. Her work in this field brought Jewish heritage to the wider public (both Jewish and non-Jewish) for education and understanding of Judaism. For over a decade, Evelyn continued this specific work across London and the UK to catalogue as much synagogue heritage as possible, often in places where synagogues have since closed. In that sense she was, again, ahead of her time. Her work convinced and educated Jewish communities of the importance of saving their heritage and caring for their precious textiles and ceremonial silver. She was really inspired and happy in this work.⁵

From 2004 until 2015, Evelyn was chair of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust and director of its museum, which housed 1,564 Torah scrolls and 400 Torah binders from Bohemia and Moravia that were collected in Prague during the war and subsequently came to London in 1964 to be housed at Westminster Synagogue.⁶ Those beyond repair serve as public memorials to the communities that were destroyed; those that could be repaired have gone out on permanent loan around the world to be used for services in congregations to underscore the continuity of Jewish life. Reflecting on this, Evelyn wrote:

As soon as I saw the scrolls, I knew that I wanted to be a part of the Trust. In those early days the racks of scrolls lay as if in a morgue and no one could view them without weeping. And yet my immediate response was that the work of the Trust was the most perfect response to the Holocaust I had ever encountered. Yes, it had come out of the Holocaust but something positive and practical had emerged from that terrible history. In their quiet way the scrolls are a living proof of survival and continuity.

Evelyn broadcasted regularly on the BBC World Service and Nord Deutschland Rundfunk, reflecting on the weekly Torah reading and relating it to contemporary issues. The following is an extract from a radio broadcast delivered on Nord Deutschland Rundfunk on 12 February 2016.

2015 was the fiftieth anniversary of the heroic march from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama, led by Martin Luther King, Jr. The march lasted five days and by the end 25,000 people took part. They participated for equal justice for blacks and whites. My late husband, Albert Friedlander, took part then and it was an episode in his life of which he was very proud.

My daughters are very interested in family history and family tree research and are always looking for interesting material. A short time ago one of my daughters researched a memoir that was reported at that time and published in 2010. The female author marched at the time in the fourth row near my husband. Naturally many memories came to me on reading this.

1965 was a very different time. White people who came to Alabama to participate were not welcome and were often attacked. Albert told me that he only felt safe when he found himself in a black neighbourhood. On the evening before the march he stayed in a black home and shared his bed with a Catholic priest and a Methodist.

This weekend we read from Exodus, chapters 25–27 in which God explains how the tabernacle and the ark were to be built. God says: 'You should make for me a sanctuary so that I may live amongst you'. The Hebrew word for 'sanctuary' is *mikdash* and it means a 'holy space'.

It seems to me that the many people of all skin colours and faiths who came spontaneously to Selma to fight against a cruel injustice, did precisely that. Did they not make a sanctuary in which God could dwell?

God also said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites that they should make a sacrifice for Me from those who volunteer to do so'. The people who came together then in Selma to help an oppressed minority delivered their greatest gift in risking their safety or even sacrificed their lives.

At that time, we lived in New York where Albert worked as Rabbinic Chaplain to Jewish students at Columbia University. I can remember precisely when we saw the news on the television. We saw in a report that people were being beaten when they tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma in order to march. Albert wanted to go at once to Selma with a student group to help. I was very pregnant, but agreed, although I had great fear for Albert's safety.

For all those who participated it was an unforgettable, life-changing experience. They wrote about it in the record of their life. It was a unique historical moment in which people showed their best side. They really understood what God desired from them.

If only such moments occurred more often.

Evelyn returns to the theme of justice in the epilogue to her autobiography.

The famous book by Andre Schwarz-Bart 'The Last of the Just' is based on an old Jewish legend about the 36 *Tsadikim* or 'righteous'. On them depends the fate of the world ... That righteous people enable the world to survive must also apply today – the world cannot exist without righteousness. And that must also apply to a country.

I am in Germany almost every month, work on projects and find friends whom I can believe in. Nevertheless, I have to ask myself how this land could stand in the Nazi period. Were there really 36 righteous then? The great majority were those who said nothing, who looked on apathetically when my family were deported, taken away and murdered.

But slowly, over the years, I gathered for myself righteous people of today. For example, people of the resistance. In Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem, there is the Street of the Righteous Among the Nations who are honoured. But I have to find my own 36 righteous to become convinced. And I confess: I am still on the search.

Nevertheless: I must still hope. And that brings me always back again to Germany.⁷

Evelyn and Albert Friedlander are survived by their three daughters, Ariel, Michal and Noam.

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Notes

1. Evelyn Friedlander, *Ich will nach Hause, aber ich war noch nie da: eine jüdische Frau sucht ihr verborgenes Erbe* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1996).
2. Editorial, *European Judaism* 49, no. 2 (Autumn 2016), 2.
3. *European Judaism* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1981).
4. Marina Sassenberg, 'The Jews of Cornwall Revisited', trans. Evelyn Friedlander, *European Judaism* 45, no. 2 (Autumn 2012), 139–146.
5. Helen Fry, personal communication.
6. The commemoration was marked by an address by Jonathan Wittenberg. 'Fifty Years since the Czech Scrolls Came to the Westminster Synagogue', *European Judaism* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 131–134.
7. Friedlander, *Ich will nach Hause*, 191.