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### Review:

*Ben Helfgott: The Story of One of the Boys*, Michael Freedland  
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*Ben Helfgott: The Story of One of the Boys*, Michael Freedland (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2018), ISBN 978-1-910-38315-5, pp. 216, £20.

The man whose vita is recounted in this volume is a household name in Britain far beyond the Anglo-Jewish community. Ben Helfgott, a Holocaust survivor and former entrepreneur, has dedicated decades of his life to Holocaust education and the wellbeing of other survivors. He has been prominently involved in charitable work over the past fifty years, starting with his involvement in the '45 Aid Society created to support Holocaust survivors who had come to Britain after the war. He has received numerous awards, including a knighthood for services to Holocaust remembrance and education in the summer of 2018.

Michael Freedland, who passed away in October 2018, not long after the publication of this biography, appropriately states that Helfgott has “crammed more than seems humanly possible into his eighty-eight years” (p. xi), not least given that for many years he also pursued a career as an Olympic athlete, competing as a weightlifter for Britain on two occasions (in Melbourne in 1956 and in Rome in 1960). Helfgott’s numerous honorary roles, honours, awards, and distinctions are conveniently listed at the end of the volume (pp. 197–200). It includes service on important bodies such as the organization World Jewish Relief (beginning in 1965 when it was still the Central British Fund), the Wiener Library (from 1978 onwards), the Board of Deputies of British Jews (from 1982 onwards), the World Confederation of Holocaust Survivor Organizations (from 1998 onwards) and the Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission (since 2013), to name only his most prominent roles. He has also been a supporter of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies for many years, and the author of this review feels obliged to disclose that he has the honour and pleasure of collaborating with Ben Helfgott in this context.

The biography focuses briefly on Helfgott’s childhood. Born in the autumn of 1929, Helfgott grew up in Piotrków, a provincial capital in western Poland, and belonged to a generation educated in Polish state schools where Polish was the language of instruction. To this day, Helfgott remains fluent in the language and treasures the Polish literary canon. Forced to leave school by the war and occupation, he acquired much of the relevant knowledge under his own steam and he has

continued to be an avid reader throughout his life. His fluency in Polish and the resourcefulness of his father proved crucial assets in facilitating Helfgott's survival of the German occupation. Only he and his sister Mala survived its horrors, and the death of his father, his mother, and his younger sister left an indelible mark. Helfgott survived because he was able to work in a glass factory and because of his sang-froid and his ability to build trust in the most difficult of circumstances. From Piotrków, he was deported to Buchenwald and from there, at the very end of the war, to Theresienstadt, where he was liberated. He had narrowly escaped death on more than one occasion during the war but actually found himself in the greatest immediate danger after returning to his native Piotrków in 1945, when he and a cousin were almost executed by rogue Polish policemen (pp. 91–2).

After a short stay in Prague he was selected to be sent to the United Kingdom, where he became one of "The Boys", a group of Jewish adolescent men and women initially housed in the English countryside for a few months and actively supported in their transition to adulthood. He was reunited with his sister Mala in 1947 and soon became a central figure among the young Holocaust survivors in Britain. Helfgott tenaciously made up for the education he had missed due to the occupation and was eventually admitted to the University of Southampton (where he was also awarded an honorary doctorate in 2006). Readers will appreciate the information provided in this book on the initiatives and institutions which generally helped make Helfgott's and the other Boys' and Girls' postwar lives in Britain a story of progressive integration and continued mutual bonding. The Primrose Jewish Youth Club managed by Paul Mayer, known as Yogi, is a case in point (pp. 119–28). Helfgott's sense of aspiration evidently thrived in this setting, allowing him to shape the activities of a charity like the '45 Aid Society. Having read most of Helfgott's addresses to the annual gatherings of this society (alongside two other addresses, one of them is documented in the appendix, pp. 187–95), I was struck by the fact that Helfgott defined its tasks from the outset in terms of mutual support and of giving something back to the country which had offered them shelter after the war.

Roughly half the book deals with Helfgott's survival during the Holocaust, his commitment to Holocaust education, and his work on behalf of Holocaust survivors around the world, which form the best-known aspects of his life story. The biography's most important and original contribution lies in its account of his career as a sportsman, his

presence in the British and international public sphere, his family life, and his personality. The voices of those closest to him resonate throughout the volume, offering the reader a remarkable encounter.

Freedland is, however, profoundly at odds with one of the driving forces integral to Helfgott's motivation, his dedication to reconciliation. Freedman describes it as "bizarre" (p. 182) and, by implication, pathological, suggesting it would probably take a psychiatrist to understand Helfgott's unceasing commitment to a dialogue with Poles and Germans in particular (p. 21). Alongside an evident lack of copy-editing, this reluctance genuinely to engage with a crucial factor shaping the worldview of the personality whose life he has chosen to narrate or, for that matter, his native language may help explain the rather staggering number of errors in the book, as does the fact that Freedland has relied almost exclusively on recorded interviews with Helfgott and his family, fellow survivors, friends, and colleagues. He claims, for instance, that 300,000 (rather than the actual three million) Polish Jews lost their lives during the German occupation (p. 20). Częstochowa – one of Poland's largest and best known cities – is repeatedly rendered as "Czechochowa". Stanisław Musiał (1938–2004), an intellectual who played a crucial part in Polish-Catholic endeavours in the field of Christian–Jewish reconciliation, is introduced as Stanislaw Mufia (p. 185). Buchenwald is translated as "Birch Wood" (p. 70). One can only speculate as to why it should be necessary to translate the name of this concentration camp in the first place, but the correct translation would be "Beech Wood". In Buchenwald, Helfgott was forced to work in a munitions factory where, we are told, he carried "cinders" (pp. 77, 79). This seems an odd thing to be doing in an ammunition factory and one cannot help noticing the similarity between the word "cinder" and the German term for detonator (*Zünder*). Chełmno, one of the extermination sites during the Holocaust, is introduced as Chelmo, and one of the principal architects of the Holocaust, Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942), as Rynard Heydrich (both p. 170). The author quotes Helfgott's sister as saying "Oh look, a murzy" and explains that "murzy is Polish for black", when in fact the word is *murzyn* (p. 104). Claude Lanzmann (1925–2018), the French director of the landmark Holocaust documentary *Shoah*, is renamed Landesmann (p. 108). Helfgott was selected to join the British Olympic team not nine (p. 140) but eleven years after the end of the Holocaust. Witold Sobków was not the "deputy head of mission at the London Polish embassy" (p. 179), he was the ambassador. I could go on and the book is marred by numerous other less significant and

equally avoidable errors, all of them reflecting an astonishing reluctance to engage fully with the background of a personality as extraordinary and inspiring as Ben Helfgott.

*François Guesnet*