

Princesses of Punjab fought for votes and Holocaust survivors

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If one were to walk into an exhibition at Kensington Palace about Indian princesses, a pendant is probably one of the things you might expect to see. But one particular jewel is not just another bit of regal bling. It tells the story of how a scion of an Indian dynasty saved entire families from the Holocaust.

The pendant belonged to the family of Ursula Hornstein, a Jewish girl who fled Germany with her family just months before the Second World War, and it was given to her by Catherine Duleep Singh, one of the last princesses of Punjab, who had sponsored the family's escape to Britain. Now, the exhibition at the palace will tell their moving story afresh.

Michael Bowles, Hornstein's youngest son, said it was an "honour and a privilege" for him and his family to be able to share their history. The exhibition, which is entitled *The Last Princesses of Punjab* and opens on March 26, covers Catherine and her sisters,



Sophia Duleep Singh and Bamba Sutherland. Members of the royal family that had ruled the Sikh Empire, they lived in exile from their ancestral home but became extraordinary figures in British society and politics.

They were all well-known to Queen Victoria, who was godmother to Sophia, and aside from Catherine's great courage in the face of the Nazi threat, they have also become heroes of the suffragette movement and the south Asian gay community.

Polly Putnam, curator of the exhibition, said: "They're fundamentally fascinating people. By focusing in on this extraordinary family, we get to touch on various aspects of history."

They were the daughters of Duleep Singh, the last maharajah of the Sikh Empire, who was deposed at the age of ten in 1848 and later exiled to Britain and Europe. Remarkable objects connected to the sisters and their immediate ancestors are being gathered together, some for the first time since



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Catherine Duleep Singh and her sisters Sophia and Bamba; Queen Victoria, below left, was godmother to Sophia; right, the pendant Catherine gave to a Jewish girl



tion features the passport of Ursula, who was then a young girl. The document is stamped with multiple swastikas. The family made it to England in 1939, where Catherine and Ursula formed a bond. The princess gave her the pendant when Ursula converted to Christianity. The jewel dates from the mid-19th century, which means it could have been a family heirloom of Catherine's.

Catherine was the guarantor not just for the Hornsteins but for other families too, and dozens of people today owe their lives to her. She died in Buckinghamshire in 1942.

Her sister Sophia, meanwhile, became a key figure in the suffragette movement and was photographed selling copies of *The Suffragette* newspaper outside Hampton Court Palace. She spoilt her 1911 census form, saying: "No vote, no census." That record and a copy of *The Suffragette* will be displayed at the exhibition.

Bamba Sutherland considered herself the heir to her family's empire and went back to live in Lahore in the 1940s. In a letter from 1948, the year after the partition of India and the end of British rule, she laid claim to the vast lands which the British originally had taken.

they were dispersed. Some, like the pendant, have never been publicly displayed before.

The jewel relates to an escape from the Holocaust, and the story begins in a doctor's surgery in Kassel, central Germany. Catherine had spent much time in the city, chiefly living with her lover Lina Schäfer. The pair of them had already helped many Jews to

escape when, in 1938, the princess had a chance encounter.

Bowles explains: "My grandmother Ilse Hornstein was in the same doctor's surgery as Catherine." When Ilse told her that her husband was facing death in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Catherine offered to be the family's guarantor for British immigration "almost immediately". The exhibi-