

IRON CROSS and STAR OF DAVID

Jewish Soldiers in German Armies

Introduction:

Subject of my book is the History of Jewish Soldiers in German Armies, beginning with the Emancipation till the World Wars – the History of German Jews, taking active part in the Armies of the different Duchies, in the Army of the Kaiserreich and the Weimarer Republik, as well as in the Wars of the 19th century, in World War I, fighting for Germany and many of them losing their life.

Their History is not only an important part of German Jewish History, but it also shows the perpetual striving for Jewish-German Integration, which determined their life in Germany after the French Revolution when the Jews became citizens with equal rights.

It was not only the Integration of Jewish Soldiers within the Army, but it gave them the opportunity to be recognized by German society through their Military Service.

The strong link between Military Service and Integration was recognized as such from the beginning of Jewish Emancipation in Germany; therefore they claimed the right to fight for their “Fatherland” as their civil rights existed initially on paper only.

The History of Jewish Soldiers in German Armies is documenting the time after the Creation of the Kaiserreich, as a time full of tension between absolute willingness of German Jews to integrate but on the other side of a steadily growing Antisemitism, in a society marked by Prussian Militarism.

This development was interrupted only a short time in World War I and culminated in persecution, expulsion from their country and the Genocide.

The years after WW I, the Weimarer Republik was marked by the fight of the Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten (organization of Jewish war veterans in Germany) against antisemitic campaigns of parties of the extreme Right, becoming more and more powerful. In the Reichswehr, counting 100.000 men were only very few Jewish Soldiers.

In the time after 1933, when the Nazis came into power, the former Jewish Soldiers, having fought for Germany like their forefathers, did now face the fate of humiliation, persecution and being murdered.

The last chapter describes the tradition of nurturing the memory of Jewish soldiers in World War I, that started soon after establishing the Bundeswehr and it describes as well the History of the few Jewish soldiers serving in the Bundeswehr. As a conclusion of the History of Jewish soldiers in the armies of France, Austro-Hungary, Italy and Rumania, it shows many things in common, but even more the differences between German and the Armies of other European countries.

1. Time of Emancipation – early History of Emancipation

So – how did the History of Jewish Soldiers in German Armies start?

In the last decennies of the 18th and the first of the 19th century the situation of the Jews in the German duchies began to improve.

In the 18th century the Jews living in the different European countries were considered as inferior citizens, a kind of 2nd class citizens. In Prussia King Frederic the Great generally exerted religious tolerance. With the Jews he showed intolerance and even reactionism, as far as their civil rights were concerned. Frederic divided the Jews into 6 categories, classes. Only the privileged from the first class were de facto citizens. To these privileged people belonged for ex. the families of the Itzigs an Ephraims, court bankers, entrepreneurs an jewelers. The famous philosopher Moses Mendelssohn started as a 6th class Jew, which meant to be practically without any rights. Only in 1763 because of his reputation he became a Jew of the 3rd class and he got the license to get married. Practically no Jew in Prussia and the other German states was recognized as a citizen with equal rights, so the question of joining military service or even a military career was not relevant.

Thus there are very few traces of Jewish soldiers in the Prussian army of the 18th century, it can not be excluded, however, that in the Wars of Frederic the Great, such as the Siebenjähriger Krieg, there were Jews in the Prussian army. It is very likely, that those, who served as officers, were baptized, like for ex. Konstantin Nathanel of Salomon, who was promoted to general in 1760 because of his bravery. His son too, served as an officer in the Prussian army.

What was the reason to improve the situation of the Jews in Europe and especially here in the German states?

The first step towards a political change was the Toleranzpatent, promulgated by the Emperor Joseph II. in Vienna. The real breakthrough came however with the French revolution. In 1791 the French Jews got the full civil rights. Not only the resolutions of the French National Assembly, but the advance of the troops of Emperor Napoleon in Europe brought the civilian equality to the Jews in the German States, being occupied by Napoleon.

2. Wars of Liberation

From now on German Jews served in the French troops as in the Armies of the Rheinbundstaaten, the German territories under French influence, like for ex. in the Bavarian army.

In Prussia, the State Chancellor, Duke of Hardenberg, managed to establish the nearly complete civilian equality for the Prussian Jews. The Edict of 1812 made it possible to acquire the Civil Rights, but excluding the right to enter civil service and with restrictions in the military service. As a result of this progress the Prussian Jews identified themselves with the State giving them at least a broader legal equality.

So quite a number of Jewish volunteers went with enthusiasm to war against Napoleon; they were all very well rated by their supervisors, were promoted and got decorations. In the Liberation-Wars against Napoleon 1813-15 seven hundred and thirty one Jewish soldiers fought with the Prussian army. Presumably more than 500 were volunteers. The others were regular conscripts. 82 got the Iron Cross, one got the highest decoration, the Pour le Mérite and 23 were promoted to officers. These facts and numbers compared to the total of 731 show, how successfully and enthusiastically

cally Prussian Jews fought for their country. One of these officers was the youngest son of Moses Mendelssohn, Nathan Mendelssohn, he was promoted lieutenant.

After 1815, when Napoleon was finally defeated, Jewish integration and civil equality got a setback. As a result of the Vienna Congress there was a reorganisation of the European state system. At the Congress they discussed about equal rights for Jews and the reactionary party outnumbered the others. The civil rights from the Hardenberg Edict were repelled by most of the States of the newly created Staatenbund or simply not put into practice.

King Friedrich Wilhelm III. had promised the volunteers of 1813, that after the end of the war they could claim to be accepted as civil servants. This promise was not hold as far as the Jewish volunteers were concerned.

3. Wars of Liberation to the Revolution of 1848

In 1825 only 190 Jewish soldiers served in the Prussian army. When in 1827 at a census, they found out an under-representation of Jewish soldiers, a decree stipulated that Jewish and gentile recruits should be treated equally. After that decree their number grew slowly: in 1834 there were 354 Jewish soldiers in the Prussian army, in 1834 three hundred ninety four and in 1843 four hundred and twenty five.

Obviously the army was now ready to accept Jewish soldiers without prejudice. They all were judged very well by their supervisors. Although there was a stop for promotion from 1822, several soldiers were promoted to sergeants. Two Liberation War volunteers got the licence as Landwehr – Offizier (the Landwehr was a kind of National Guard and the Landwehr - officers were regarded as 2nd class officers). Here we have to point out the Jews promoted to officers during the wars of Liberation. The officer-corps, dominated by the aristocracy, were of course against all officers, that didn't belong to the aristocracy, and especially against the Jewish officers. In the years following the end of the war they were treated in a way, that they were forced to resign. Only one officer remained in the army and was promoted. About this officer, Meno Burg, I'll talk later on.

In 1845 the Conscription for Jews was extended all over the Prussian Kingdom. All Prussian Jews supported this decision, as it was clear that equality could be reached in the Prussian Military State only through military service.

Despite some discriminations concerning their promotion Jewish soldiers had reached quite a lot. They were accepted as conscripts and regularly promoted to sergeants. Some of those former sergeants got after leaving the army at least minor positions in the civil service. Due to their excellent performance in the Army they had thus stopped the impending exclusion.

The law of 1847 approached the Jewish legal position to the general civil rights. All Jews were now able to get public functions, at least in some restricted way and also without having served in the army.

The situation of the Jewish soldiers however did not improve completely. They were still not allowed to become officers. The only exceptions were the two Landwehrofiziere, mentioned above. Meno Burg, in the Liberation War artillery lieutenant, was promoted up to major. He was the only officer being promoted after the wars of liberation and the only Jewish staff-officer in the Prussian army during the 19th century. Meno Burg did not convert to christian faith despite the numerous humiliations and discriminations he had suffered during his military service. He had a strong bond to-

wards Judaism and as an eager member of the Jewish congregation of Berlin, he even acted as its chairman for many years. He often frequented the old synagogue in the Heidereuthergasse, and went there on Shabbat or the High Holydays in uniform to the Thora. Proud being Jewish, he felt as well as a Prussian and German. August 26, 1853 Meno Burg died of the Cholera after coming back from a journey. 60.000 people came to his funeral, in those times Berlin had 400.000 inhabitants. His grave is in the cemetery of Schönhauser Allee. Meno Burg always wished that Jews could have positions as civil servants or army officers, but this never occurred. Until WW I no Jew keeping his faith became a commissioned officer except of medical officers.

4. From the Revolution of 48 to the Establishing of the Kaiserreich

The Revolution of 1848 brought again some progress in terms of legal status of the Prussian Jews. In Chapter 5 of the new Prussian Constitution it was stipulated the following: "Civil rights are independent from any religious terms."

Although in autumn of 1848 some Jewish military doctors were appointed as officers, these rights were later restricted by additional laws or just ignored by the authorities. As the ruling class had won over the Revolution, the civil rights progresses were not annulled, but simply not put into practice. Jewish people were not allowed to become school or university teachers, judges, public prosecutors, higher civil servants or army officers. In a Christian state the authorities didn't accept a Jewish supervisor giving orders to christian citizens.

The law of the equality of religions from 1869 in the Norddeutsche Bund (a confederation of states preceding the Kaiserreich) did not change anything. Under chancellor Bismarck Jews were not allowed to get a position in Foreign Affairs, in the State administration, the Prussian Public Prosecutor's Office or in the Army. This practice continued under the Rule of Emperor Wilhelm II. .

In the war of 1866 against Austria it is said, that 1025 Jewish soldiers had fought for Prussia, but the real number was apparently much higher. As a comparison: In the Austrian Army there were at the same time 20.000 Jewish soldiers.

In the German-French War of 1870/71 the numbers of Jews in the German troops was estimated from 4.700 to 12.000. . But we have exact numbers of deaths, wounded and decorated soldiers: 473 were wounded or have died; 373 were decorated with the Iron Cross. Even if the lower number of 4.700 soldiers is true, it shows that the Jewish population had the same proportion of soldiers as the gentile majority. Jewish soldiers fought in the War of 1870/71 with the same patriotism as their other comrades. In this war Jewish soldiers were promoted to reserve officers as they had been promoted in the Wars of Liberation. Only were few could continue a career after the war as a commissioned officer, those few served in the Bavarian Army and got promoted up to lieutenant colonel, none of them in the Prussian Army.

5. From the Establishing of the Kaiserreich till WW I

Although equal rights in the Army appeared to be so very near, the hope did not come true. The last decades of the 19th century were marked by a growing Anti-Semitism. Starting a career in the Army was strongly linked to religion.

In the year 1907 the Army of the Kaiserreich had a total of 33.607 officers and civil servants in the rank of an officer, among them only 16 Jews; all 16 served in the Ba-

varian Army. The proof that this discrimination was only linked to religion, was the story of the so called Einjährig-Freiwillige. The Einjährig-Freiwillige were in general graduates from the superior schools, serving in the Army for only on year and gaining the right to be promoted to reserve officers. Since 1880 none of the 30.000 Jewish Einjährig-Freiwillige became reserve officer, of those 1.500 soldiers, who had converted, 300 were promoted to reserve officer.

Max Warburg, a very influential banker of the Kaiserreich and the Weimarer Republik tried in the 1880's as an Einjährig-Freiwilliger to become reserve officer in a Bavarian Cavallery Regiment. He applied and did the examinations, but was finally turned down by the officers of his Regiment (in those days the officers of the regiment had the final right to decide about the acceptance of an officers candidate).

Walter Rathenau, a famous captain of industry, later in the Weimarer Republik Minister of Foreign Affairs, tried as well as an Einjährig-Freiwilliger to become reserve officer. He joined the most elitarian Regiment in the imperial Army, the Garde-Kürassierregiment in Berlin, a unit formed only by members of the Prussian nobility. He applied and got prepared for the officers examination, but was also refused by the officers of this unit. This refusal was very hard for him, because the status of reserve officer meant a very high prestige in the Kaiserreich. "One of the most miserable moments in my life", as he wrote 1911 in his essay "State and Judaism.

At this point I would like again to make a comparison to the Bavarian Army and the other European Armies. At the eve of WW I there was none Jewish officer in the Prussian Army, but 46 reserve officers and 42 Landwehroffiziere, some of them staff officers in the Bavarian Army. This shows, that the Bavarian Army was more liberal than the Prussian. In the Austro-Hungarian army there were 2179 Jewish officers up to the rank of field marshal, 500 in Italy and 720 officers in the French army despite the negative effects of the Dreyfus-Affair. These figures show the discrimination of Jewish soldiers in German armies, especially in the Prussian army.

Nevertheless at the wake of WW I all German Jews were full of Patriotism. There were no religious boundaries any more. All Jewish congregations called their members to join the army as volunteers. Many of them did so, as it seemed that the complete integration was again very near. 10.000 German Jews were volunteers at the beginning of the war, a total of 100.000 Jews served during WW 1 in the German Army and 77.000 of them were fighting at the frontline, 19.000 were promoted, 30.000 got decorations, 12.000 Jewish soldiers lost their life. The youngest, Eugen Scheyer from Königsberg, was not quite 15 years old when he enrolled as a volunteer, one of the oldest was Ludwig Stern, who had been promoted reserve officer in 1871 during the German-French War. Dr. Ludwig Frank, a famous politician and member of the Reichstag, the German parlament, was one of the first volunteers in 1914; he died on the battlefield only three weeks after near Lunéville.

Like Frank the entrepreneur Jakob Wolff was a supporter of peace and a pacifist. Because of his age he wasn't called to military service, nevertheless he persuaded the military authorities to accept him as a fighter pilot, he joined a squadron with his private fighter plane and was promoted Lieutenant in 1917.

I want to point out only a few examples for all Jewish soldiers, sergeants and officers, who showed a very high military courage, despite the antisemitic insinuations and lies. I would like to mention the captain, Dr. Leo Löwenstein, after WW I president of the "Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten" (the organisation of Jewish war

veterans), the successful fighter pilot, Lieutenant Wilhelm Frankl, who was awarded the "Pour le Mérite", the highest decoration of the Kaiserreich.

All Jews fighting in WW I were very successful soldiers, highly motivated to fight for their country and this gave them again hope for a complete integration in the army. After the beginning of the war Jewish soldiers were again promoted to reserve officers and the military leadership started to think about taking them as commissioned officers. During the war 2022 Jewish soldiers were appointed officers, 1159 were medical officers and military civil servants in the rank of officers.

A comparison to the Austro-Hungarian Army: In the war 300.000 Jewish soldiers were in the Austro-Hungarian troops, 25.000 died on the battlefield; there were 25.000 Jewish officers, many of them staff-officers and even generals.

On the Jewish cemetery of Vienna there are buried 20 generals, 40 colonels and several hundred more officers. The Austro-Hungarian Army had 76 military rabbis in the rank of captain.

The German Kaiserreich seemed to be more willing to compromise at least as far as the religious needs were concerned. The appointed approx. 30 military rabbis, the most known, Dr. Leo Baeck, wrote the "Israelite Field Prayer Book".

Since 1915 the anti-Semitism started to spread again mainly among the officers. In the officers-clubs antisemitic agitation become common and Jewish soldiers were regularly offended and called skivers. The above mentioned facts about success and bravery of Jewish soldiers showed the contrary. As a peak of antisemitic campaigns the Prussian War Minister ordered in 1916 a census concerning the Jews in the Army.

This census caused great damage, a sense of hopelessness and distrust. The band of comradeship through brotherhood in arms had been disrupted. The antisemitic atmosphere grew more and more during the war. Jewish soldiers had to cope with defamation and segregation. When it became clear, that this war would end in a national catastrophe, the right extremists started to prepare, what was later in the Weimarer Republik called "Dolchstoßlegende". This strategy of the right wing extremists painted out a vision of Jewish predominance in politics and economy, which led mainly in the last war year to a progrom-like atmosphere.

The willingness to make sacrifices and the heroic fight for their country in WW I led once more to envy, rejection and segregation towards the Jewish soldiers.

6. Weimarer Republic and Reichswehr

Many Jews saw after WW I and the end of the Kaiserreich their future in the new democratic Germany. During the time of revolution and political renewal they took an active part in Germany's reorganisation.

The right wing extremists however were looking of a scapegoat for the defeat and concentrated their hate towards the Jewish population. Their successes were denied and even worse the Jewish war veterans were called skivers.

As a consequence the above mentioned Dr. Leo Löwenstein initiated the "Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten". Together with the Centralverein (the largest Jewish organisation) the Reichsbund tried to inform the population by the means of leaflets, books and demonstrations. All that proved the heroic fight of the Jewish soldiers and was to antagonise the campaigns of the antisemitic agitators. "Der Schild" (Magen),

the official paper of the Reichsbund and a book, published in 1932 "Die jüdischen Gefallenen", a list of 10.154 Jewish soldiers who died on the battlefield, played an important role in this struggle.

The right wing extremists called out meanwhile for the death of Jews and Democrats. The murderers of Walter Rathenau, the Foreign Minister of the Weimarer Republik and these of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg came all from the right wing organisations. Their brutal propaganda spread in the Reichswehr and the antisemitic agitation within the troops got a frightening extent.

Bernhard Weiß, the Vicepresident of the Berlin police, captain in WW I, who belonged to the highest decorated Jewish officers, was one of the heroic fighters against the Berlin Nazis under the leadership of Joseph Göbbels; he faced the Nazis until the end. 1933 he could escape the SA troops in the last minute and after a long odyssey through Europe he reached London, where he died in 1951.

Under these circumstances no Jewish soldiers or officers could enter the Reichswehr. The duty of the Jewish soldiers ended, when the Kaiserreich Army was dissolved and the Reichswehr with only 100.000 soldiers was established. It is not known, that a Jewish soldier had served in the Reichswehr. As a quintessence one can say, that neither the Reichswehr nor the Army of the Kaiserreich, except of the Jewish conscripts made an integration or even acceptance of the German Jews possible.

7. The Wehrmacht and the fate of Jewish Soldiers of WW I after 1933

The Nazis began immediately after getting into power to expel German Jews from their positions and offices in civil service culture, economy and from public life. The so called law of restoration of civil service, Febr. 28, 1934 served the Nazis in order to act against Jewish civil servants and soldiers in the Wehrmacht. This law stipulated, that civil servants of so called "non Arian" descent had to retire. Also in 1934 the Reichswehrminister von Blomberg ordered to restore the application of the above mentioned law for soldiers. Officers, sergeants and soldiers of "non Arian" descent were expelled from the Wehrmacht. There were exceptions only for WW I front line soldiers. When in March 1935 the conscription was reintroduced, Arian descent was the condition for entering the military service. As a result of the Reichsbürgergesetz (the racial laws, the Nuremberg laws) in September 1935 there was a categorisation into so called "Mischlinge" 1st and 2nd degree (on Jewish parent or grandparent). To this group of course also belonged people who were, referring to the Jewish Law, non Jewish; individuals, whose ancestors had become Christians, had married Christians, did not think of themselves as Jewish or did not even know of their Jewish descent. But there are evidences that some soldiers, sergeants and officers, serving in the Wehrmacht during WW II were Mischlinge of 1st and 2nd degree.

After the expulsion of the German Jews from the civil service and army followed humiliation, deprivation of rights, deportation and finally their murdering in the extermination camps.

The WW I veterans reacted quite differently to the coming into power of the Nazis. Not everyone recognised the full significance and the consequences of the Naziterror. Until 1935 the signals coming from the Nazis were still quite different. On one side there were violent clashes of the SA, boycott of Jewish shops and firms and the "Berufsverbote", on the other side in 1935 former Jewish soldiers were awarded in

Hitler's name "Ehrenkreuz für Frontkämpfer (Cross of Honour for front-line soldiers).

After the program of November 1938 there was no difference in the fate between the former front-line soldiers and other German Jews. Most of them were deported together with their families to the concentration camps and murdered by the Nazis.

8. Epilogue

The history of German Jewish soldiers ends with the extermination of the German Jewry. Jewish integration and civil emancipation appeared temporary, achieved through War and Military Service. Putting their life at risk for their country should have guaranteed the same rights as for the gentile citizens. This claim however was rarely granted by state and society.

The two German Revolutions did not fundamentally change the process of emancipation. So the History of Jewish Soldiers in German Armies is the History of a final cruel deception. Of course it is part of German History of the last two centuries; it has to be as well understood as an important part of German Jewish History and we have to keep alive the memory of German Jewish Soldiers of many generations and their struggle for appreciation and emancipation.

This tradition started with the formation of the Bundeswehr. 1935 the „Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten“ published the book „Kriegsbriefe gefallener deutscher Juden“ in the Berlin Vortrupp Publishing House. 1961 the same book was republished on behalf of the Minister for Defence, Franz Josef Strauß who later became Minister-president of Bavaria and was distributed among the Bundeswehr. Thus Franz Josef Strauß initiated a new and important part of keeping tradition in the Bundeswehr: The History of German Jewish soldiers, the appraisal of what they have done for their German Vaterland and the remembrance of their long ordeal during the Nazi period. Furthermore some Bundeswehr camps were named after highly decorated Jewish soldiers.

In this connection it has to be pointed out that the Ministry of Defence assigned the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Research Institute for Military History) to do researches about the history of German Jewish soldiers to portray them and to point out their fate. The results of these researches were opened up for the public in two exhibitions of the MGFA - within and out of the Bundeswehr. The History of German Jewish soldiers and the fate of Jewish front soldiers in World War I, as well as the History of their families during Nazi time became thus part of keeping up tradition in the Bundeswehr and is part of political education in the Army.

The situation of the very few Jewish soldiers nowadays in the Bundeswehr is pointed out as well as my efforts concerning the regulations for Jewish Holidays and Kosher Meals. Some good solutions could be found together with the according Institutions in the Bundeswehr.

Due to the Bundeswehr and its efforts to conserve this part of German-Jewish Tradition, the History of Jewish soldiers in German Armies is still alive.