

The Participation of Jews in the Allied Armies*

Lucien Steinberg

It has become customary to say and to repeat that it is difficult to write about the part played by Jews in the underground movements, because of the lack of exact documents concerning their direct role. If we set out to study the part played by Jews in the regular Allied forces, the documentary difficulties are even greater. The reasons for this are clear. First of all, in not one of the armies of the democratic countries fighting the Third Reich were the Jews treated separately. There were no specifically Jewish units apart from the special case of the Yishuv in Eretz Yisrael, and even here a number of hindrances had to be overcome before all-Jewish units were formed.

We do not propose to analyse the part played by those Jews who, as citizens of the free countries, were mobilised normally and regularly as were all other citizens. We shall confine ourselves to the study of those cases where the role of the Jews was voluntary — from whatever motivation. This leads us to consider on broad lines the situation only of the "free forces" that were set up in both Britain and the Soviet Union by the governments or other authorities of countries occupied by the Third Reich. At the same time, for reasons to be given below, we must on occasion go beyond this framework.

The armies raised in Britain and in the Soviet Union — the Eastern and the Western powers — are the two principal parts of our subject. Research has already been started in Israel into the part played in the free forces raised in the Soviet Union, that is, the Czechoslovak and the Polish armies under the command of General Berling. The presence in Israel of many of the men of these armies undoubtedly helped in this. When speaking of the Czechoslovak and Polish armies raised in the Soviet Union, it has to be emphasised at the outset that many of them had not lived in happy circumstances. The nucleus of the Czechoslovak armies were the survivors of the Czechoslovak Legion that had been formed in Poland before September 1, 1939 and had been caught up in the Polish disaster of the same month.

It is worth mentioning that the first man of that Legion to fall in battle was a Jew — Dr. Grunbaum.

Incidentally, a matter that is often forgotten is the fact that in some of the occupied countries the first of the resisters to be executed were Jews. That was the case in France, Greece and the Low Countries. But while in the execution of resisters it is understandable that in pursuance of their general policy the conquerors would, particularly in the beginning, single out Jews as the victims, in the matter we are discussing it was purely chance or, if you prefer, a tragic privilege. In the archives of the great institution that is our host I have found a considerable number of testimonies by Jews who fought in the Czechoslovak Army in the Soviet Union. The percentage of Jews in that army was very large, especially in the beginning, when it was nearly half of the total. Apart from the Jews who had been able to escape to the Soviet Union before that country entered the war (or had earlier found refuge in Poland or had in small numbers succeeded in escaping from the Nisko concentration camp), there was also a small stream of Jews who managed to cross from Czechoslovakia to Russia during the war itself. I myself know two prisoners from Theresienstadt who got to Russia.

The Ma'arakhot publishing house is preparing an anthology on the role played by Jewish soldiers in the different armies of the world. It had not yet appeared while I was preparing this lecture, but I was privileged to read part of the manuscript and I take this opportunity of expressing my thanks to Col. Gershon Rivlin, Director of the publishing house, and to Lt.-Col. Mordechai Kaplan, editor of the work, for their courtesies. It contains an important chapter on the Jews in the Svoboda Brigade (named for its commander, General Ludvik Svoboda). It should not be forgotten that the very fact of their joining this Czechoslovak brigade in the Soviet Union gave them a considerable sense of dignity, as was the case also with the Poles who joined the Anders and the Berling armies.

It has to be said at the same time that these men — including the Jews among them — were not always welcomed on Soviet soil. The soldiers in the Czech and the Slovak legions, for example, were considered prisoners-of-war and the civilians were often regarded as a suspect element. The experiences of some of them in the Soviet Far North are too well known for it to be necessary for me to say more about them. With regard to the Jews in the

Polish territories occupied by the Soviet Union in September 1939 we have evidence that they are indebted to the Soviet Union for not much more than staying alive.

However, for all those — including their families — who were permitted to join the army very considerable social and personal advantage accrued. Moreover, the fact that the army was not one of the Soviet Union's seemed to many of them a sort of guarantee against the arbitrary treatment from which they had previously often suffered. I cannot say much about the Jewish soldiers in Berling's Polish army. But I can point to a number of articles written by the late Prof. Bernard (Berl) Mark, who was Director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, and also the research by his wife, Esther Mark, on the subject of the Jewish fighters who were decorated for bravery. I am not well enough acquainted with the material on this matter that has been published in Israel, but apart from the Ma'arakhot collection already mentioned I should like to note another collection that is being prepared by the Association of Jewish War Veterans of World War II together with Yad Vashem. I believe that its editor, Prof. Mushkat, will analyse all these matters in detail. A similar comment applies to the Jewish fighters in the Anders Army. I surely do not have to mention here the fact that when that army was transferred from the Soviet Union to the Middle East many of its Jews joined the ranks of the Yishuv in Eretz Yisrael, and in the succeeding years played a great part in the struggle for national independence of the State of Israel.

Having begun to speak of the Anders Army, I arrive at the second part of my lecture — the forces of the West, if indeed this expression has any meaning. It is true that that army joined other Polish forces which from 1939-1940 were raised first in France and then in the Middle East and Britain.

As is known, there was a large number of Jewish soldiers in all units of the Polish Army. Also remembered is the regrettable happening in 1944. I refer to the antisemitic outbreak in Polish units in Britain that led to a wave of desertions by Jewish soldiers who asked to be transferred to the British Army or to the Jewish Brigade (which had already been established in principle). The fact that the existence of Auschwitz was by then already known to the public undoubtedly brought the Jewish soldiers to the firm resolve no longer to

tolerate discrimination for being Jews when they were fighting for democracy and when they were in an outstandingly democratic country (at least in their eyes).

This was echoed widely in the British Press, particularly when the Polish military police arrested some of the "deserters" and were about to have them court-martialed. The Polish authorities were forced to retreat from their intentions under pressure from the British newspapers, statements in the House of Commons and apparently (though we have no written evidence of this) pressure from the British Government itself. The "guilty" were only formally charged and then the charges were withdrawn, and all the Jewish soldiers were allowed to leave the Polish Army and join British units. I do not know how many took advantage of this. Apparently not many, judging by the situation in France. There, as we shall see later, non-French Jews were given the opportunity of joining the French Army, but a considerable number of Polish Jews preferred to join the Polish Army organised on French soil by the Polish Government-in-Exile in Angers. These Jews showed themselves as Polish Jews, thinking thereby to demonstrate their loyalty to their community and themselves. Nazi propaganda seized on this and exploited it to the full. There is a thick file, prepared by one of the departments of Section VII of the RSHA with radio monitor reports and newspaper cuttings about this matter. It would be interesting to examine the German broadcasts in Polish in this connection.

With regard to the Czechoslovak Army in the West, I should mention that it was first recruited in France from refugees already in that country and later joined by other refugees recruited in the Middle East (including Eretz Yisrael), particularly Slovak miners. There were nearly a thousand Jews — a considerable portion of the total. After the defeat of the French Army in 1940, a large number of the Czechs succeeded in reaching Britain, while others who remained in France found their way in course of time to the Underground movement. Among the latter was a number of Jews who played an important role. This, however, is outside my subject. Other Czechoslovak army units had a higher percentage of Jews. I refer to units made up in Eretz Yisrael which fought at Tobruk. A Czechoslovak writer speaks of the difficulties

created by the Jewish Agency for the Czechoslovak recruiting services when the latter tried to recruit Jews for the Czech units.

In my opinion, the Jewish Agency's arguments were completely understandable and even justified. At that time the Yishuv was not very large and it was hard for it to agree to its sons serving in armies over which it did not have even any indirect supervision.

Concerning France we have a somewhat richer bibliography as well as some documents, though not many. I permit myself to draw attention to the appendix to this lecture. I had the opportunity of dealing with this matter at first hand and I have set out my conclusions in two studies noted in the appendix.

A Jewish Agency memorandum of 1943 mentions that 40,000 non-French Jews volunteered for the French Army in September-October 1939. Despite my efforts, I have not succeeded in checking the accuracy of this figure, which seems to me to be exaggerated. They joined special units — the 21st, 22nd and 23rd foreign volunteer infantry battalions. Other units were attached to the Foreign Legion, such as the famous Half-Brigade No.13 and the foreign infantry battalions Nos 11 and 12.

Half-Brigade No. 13 was sent to the Narvik front in Northern Norway. Following its evacuation to Britain, on the eve of the occupation of Paris, it was one of the first units to join General de Gaulle when he made his famous call of June 18, 1940. Speaking of Half-Brigade No. 13, it was by mere chance that we learned that "Lieutenant Clarence," whom General de Gaulle named a Companion of the Order of the Liberation and whose real name was Gustave Camerini, was actually an anti-Fascist Italian Jew who continued his struggle in France.

It should be noted that the Order of the Liberation is a very select one. There are only a little over one thousand Companions, a large number of whom were given the honour posthumously or were killed in battle after they received the decoration. During the budget debate in the French Parliament in October 1967, it was stated that fewer than half of the Companions of the Order of the Liberation were still alive. Of the 1,000 Companions I succeeded in identifying at least fifty Jews from their given names — admittedly an

unreliable method — and from personal knowledge, since obviously there is no mention of their origins in the official documents.

In Half-Brigade No. 13 of the Foreign Legion alone (which itself was named Companion of the Order of the Liberation) I found, apart from Clarence-Camerini, four Jewish Companions of the Order: Sergeant Herman Eckstein, Lance-Corporal Andre Damman, Lieutenant Jean Simon and Lieutenant Georges Ungermann. Of the other Companions of the Order who were of Jewish origin (the list in the appendix does not claim to be entirely accurate or complete), I shall here mention only a few — not because they are worthier than the others but because it would be fatiguing to go through the whole list. The fact that these men were named Companions of the Order of the Liberation is in itself decisive proof of their special merit.

I must, however, mention President Rene Cassin, who played a part of the highest importance as advisor to General de Gaulle and member of his Government, first in Britain and then in Algiers. Never did Rene Cassin forget that he was a Jew and that that imposed a special responsibility on him. He was heart and soul devoted to the Jewish cause, particularly in North Africa, where he worked for the reinstatement of the Cremieux Decree — that is, the restoration of French citizenship to the Algerian Jews. He was also instrumental in the renewal, during the war itself, of the educational and cultural network of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in the Mediterranean area. Close to General de Gaulle were also Gaston Palewski and Joseph and Marie Hackin, who were members of de Gaulle's General Staff and who were posthumously named Companions of the Order.

In the Air Force, particularly in the Normandie-Nieman formation famous for its achievements, we find three Jewish Companions of the Order, two of whom fell in battle — Jean de Tedesco and Albert Litolff. The third, Constantin Feldzer, is still alive. Another Jew, Major Jean Guedj (nom de guerre Maurice), who also fell in battle, was one of the heroes of the Free French Air Force.

Captain Victor Mirkin, head of the 3rd Bureau of the 1st Free French Division, who was killed in the Vosges Mountains and was a Companion of the Order of

the Liberation, was notable from our point of view for his having joined the Free French in Eretz Yisrael. He was an enthusiastic Zionist.

I have spoken at length about the Companions of the Order of the Liberation only in order to make my subject more clear. Actually there were thousands of Jewish volunteers and they are all to be honoured, since they all first had to find their way to Free France in spite of the dangers involved — difficulties that were not trivial. In this connection we may note words attributed to General de Gaulle, which he has never denied. It was some time in 1940 that he expressed his regret and astonishment at the fact that most of those who joined him were Jews.

After the liberation of North Africa, particularly Algiers, in 1942, the Jews of that region waged a struggle of special character. I would mention incidentally, though it does not come within my subject, that 400 Jews of Algiers played a decisive part in that great city's surrender without a fight.

The Vichy Government had expelled the North African Jews, especially those of Algeria, from the French Army, but when Algiers was liberated the Jews insisted on the reinstatement of their rights as French citizens, especially on their being allowed back into military service. Admittedly, they had to struggle for many months for the restoration of those rights and they won out only after General de Gaulle assumed complete authority, that is in the autumn of 1943. It was then and only then that the Jews of Algeria regained their full rights as French citizens in the military sphere. This is not to say that they always met with full understanding in the army. When the officers of the Vichy African forces finally decided, by a great majority, to join the Free French forces, they certainly did not abandon their most unfriendly attitude towards the Jews. Nevertheless, it may be taken that generally speaking the problem was solved.

It should like to mention three distinguished figures who played a notable military part among the Free French.

Louis Kahn, Chief Naval Engineer, was mainly responsible for a most important invention in anti-submarine warfare, an invention that was of great value to the Free French, the British Royal and United States Navies. Later he elaborated a series of techniques for the reconstruction of harbours damaged

by enemy action. His methods, used first for the port of Algiers, proved most useful in the rapid rehabilitation of the ports of Marseilles and Toulon after their re-conquest. After retirement from the service, Louis Kahn undertook the Presidency of the Consistoire Central des Israelites de France. Louis Kahn was at one and the same time a "Jewish Frenchman" and a "French Jew" — perhaps because he always possessed a great character. He died recently.

Pierre Dreyfus-Schmitt, pre-war Mayor of Belfort, had first to escape from German captivity before he could reach the unoccupied part of France. At that time he was a Captain in the Free French forces. He had the privilege of leading the Free French division that liberated Belfort. After the liberation he returned to the mayoralty of his city, which he retained practically without interruption until his early death. He was also a Deputy in the National Assembly and Chairman of the French Section of the World Jewish Congress. Never did he see any contradiction between his attachment to Jewry as a people and his being a Frenchman.

Pierre Mendes-France, who was a Cabinet Minister and destined to become Prime Minister, served in the Free French Air Force. He used to insist on being sent on bombing missions over France since he was convinced that a French airman would take special care that only real targets were hit, not inhabited areas. All that need be said here is that not all the flyers showed such concern.

Something about the "shadow fighters," the men who were parachuted into France to maintain contact with the Underground. There are six Companions of the Order of the Liberation among them, four of whom decorated posthumously: Albert Kohan, Henri Labit, Jacques Tayar and Rene" Weill. The two survivors are Jacques Brunschwig and Ernest Gimpel.

We should not forget the British agents of the S.O.E. (Special Operations Executive) who parachuted into France, all of them volunteers. One of them, E.A. Cookridge, has begun to write accounts of their fears, some of which have already been published, including that of the young English hairdresser, Landes, who liberated the city of Bordeaux.

It is true that it is almost impossible to compare the situation of the Jews in any country with that in any other; but in Belgium it definitely was special.

For historical reasons that I am not able to analyse here only a very small minority of the about 90,000 Jews living in Belgium before May 10, 1940 — the date of the German invasion — had Belgian nationality: less than a tenth of them. This meant clearly that the part of Belgian Jewry in the Belgian army was necessarily limited. This is not because the Jews who did not have Belgian nationality held back from military service. On the contrary, from 1938 they registered in their thousands for service when needed. Some of the registers are still available. For reasons beyond their control, however, the Belgian military authorities did not avail themselves of their services until May 10, 1940. And so great was the shock of the invasion at that time that the Belgian Army was unable to absorb all the volunteers, especially those with no or very superficial training.

As is known, the Belgian army surrendered on May 28, 1940 and was taken into captivity. The highest ranking officer of Jewish origin was General Ernest Wiener. In prison he became the symbol of the spirit of resistance and so was interned in a penal camp. After the liberation — and here we see one of the most outstanding characteristics of the Belgian Jewish fighters — Ernest Wiener undertook the Presidency of the Consistoire Israelite of his country. In fact, a large number of former fighters now stand at the head of organised Belgian Jewry.

Paul Philippson, who had the rank of Captain in the Belgian Army-in-Exile, is now head of the Consistoire. Roger Levi, who had also been a Captain, is President of the Brussels Jewish community, and the Secretary-General of that community, Raymond Moos, who was a Captain in the Piron Brigade, is now President of the Brigade's War Veterans League. Jean Bloch, who served in the same brigade and who after the liberation was the first Jewish officer to be elected President of the *Federation Nationale des Officiers de Reserve Beiges*, is today *Chairman of the Centrale des Oeuvres Sociales Juives de Belgique*. Heading the old peoples' home in Brussels, which is a model for Jewish charitable institutions in Europe, is Leon Maiersdorf, who had been a non-commissioned officer in the Piron Brigade. Other officers of that brigade are now executive members of the Union of Jewish Communities (Consistoire) — Steigrad, Ratzersdorfer, Reinhold. The Chairman of the

Belgian Section of the World Jewish Congress, Alexis Goldschmidt, fought in 1940 in the "18 Day War."

Among those outstanding in the Normandy fighting two in particular may be mentioned — the brothers Jean-Claude and Etienne Heilpern. The latter now teaches at the Universite Libre de Bruxelles. Their father was a Lieutenant-Colonel on the Belgian General Staff.

Gilbert Kirschen, now a lawyer in Brussels, was a Captain in a parachute unit and carried out a number of missions over Holland. The four Zucker brothers all served at the same time. Joe was a Staff Major, Sylvain was in the Piron Brigade and Jacques and Eddy were in the Force Publique of the Congo. Claude Bloch, brother of the Jean already mentioned, also served in the Piron Brigade. It was a Jew, Benjamin Pincus, who was the first officer of that brigade to fall in Normandy. Other Jews died in battle, among them Flying Officer Henri Goldsmit and Flying Officer Oberneck, who were both in the Belgian unit of the British Royal Air Force. Commander Pelz was lost at sea with the British submarine that he commanded.

Among other Jewish officers in the Belgian Army we may mention Major Robert Hirsch, commander of an artillery unit; Guy Pentchin; the brothers Weill and the lawyer Jules Wolff in Intelligence; Prof. Milliband, who rendered important service to the Royal Navy; Prof. Felix Oppenheim, who helped the U.S. Army; Dr. Gol and Dr. Patkas, medical officers in the Piron Brigade; the Brodski brothers, one a parachutist, the other in the Navy, and there were many others.

Heading the Belgian B'nai B'rith organisation is Advocate Raymond Abrahams, who was a Captain in the Belgian forces in Britain. President of the Ligue Beige des Droits de l'Homme is Georges Aronstein, who was a Captain on the General Staff.

There were many Jewish women in the Belgian women's units in Britain. They included Genevieve Pentchin, who later became a judge in Brussels and a member of the European Commission for the Rights of Man in Strasbourg; Marthe Tenzer; the sisters, Françoise Bloch (a Major in the Belgian WAAF) and Elisabeth Errera.

I must ask you to pardon this detailing of names, which might appear boring. But it has to be emphasised that we are speaking on the one hand of a small community and on the other hand of a time, 1940, when the great majority of the Jewish fighters were not in Britain. They reached that country only after passing through occupied Belgium, occupied France, the non-occupied (Vichy) part of France until that too was occupied, the Pyrenees, and Spain. They were, so to speak, in detention camps; and many of them escaped from German captivity before they could get to London.

I regret that I cannot agree with Mr. Camille Gutt, who was Prime Minister and Minister of Defence in the Belgian Government-in-Exile in London. Mr. Gutt, who although a Protestant is of Jewish origin, stated (in an interview I had with him) that he did not know if there were Jews in the Belgian forces in Britain, or if there were, how many. According to him they were just Belgian soldiers — and that's that. That is true, but, as we have seen, I have nevertheless succeeded in finding the names of some of them.

Contrary to the basic rules of rhetoric I must conclude my modest lecture with an expression of regret, once more, about the paucity of sources, whether written testimonies or in print. Having expressed this regret, we have to decide whether any progress in the matter is possible in spite of the handicaps.

It may be argued that the problem itself, the question of Jewish fighters in the Allied armies, is an imaginary problem, a matter of no importance. After all, it was just in this area that the Jews were equal citizens. Without trying to analyse this view — to some extent I have analysed it in my lecture — I should like to say that after having made full use of the indirect sources, for example the statistics (if they exist) of soldiers who applied for leave of absence for the Jewish High Holy Days (which provides only numerical estimates of doubtful value), there remains only another kind of method. I refer to oral history, as it is being done, I believe, at the Hebrew University.

In our field this method will give results. It should be widely applied, especially in Western Europe, for, as far as I am aware, in Israel a large number of testimonies have been recorded from Jews in the armies of Central and Eastern Europe but nothing similar has been done in connection with the

armies of Western Europe for the simple reason that there is only a comparatively small number of people of that group to be found in Israel. I hope, therefore, that studies of this kind will be undertaken in France, Belgium, the Low Countries, and Northern Europe. And if such study is carried out in close cooperation with the great scientific institutions of Israel, then those who do it will have our blessing.

Source: *Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1971, pp. 379-391