

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

# The Jews Who Fought for Nazi Germany

Traitors or survivors, cowards or brave men—fools or wise heeders of Jewish parables on the sanctity of each individual life?

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**W**HAT WAS THE SAFEST PLACE FOR A JEW IN HITLER'S GERMANY? A cellar or an attic? A forest? At home with a well-connected Aryan spouse? The answer was in Hitler's military—in the Wehrmacht, the Kriegsmarine, or the Luftwaffe—at least until the tide of war turned and all three began to suffer staggering losses. Some said the Luftwaffe was the best bet because Goering protected his own. Whichever branch, wearing a uniform was like slipping into a coat of armor, or invisibility.

I made this astonishing discovery while delving into the literature of the war and the Nazi occupation of France for my novel, *Paris Never Leaves You*. According to *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers* by Bryan Mark Rigg, thousands of full Jews and more than a hundred-thousand part-Jews joined the military of the Third Reich. The stories of these men and of the psychological as well as the physical hazards they endured altered the book I had originally set out to write.

Some of the Jewish men who fought in Hitler's military had been drafted. Others were patriots whose fathers, grandfathers, and uncles had served in the Imperial

Army in WWI, and dutifully enlisted. One survivor described himself as a German first and a Jew second. Jewish allegiance to Germany in the early days of the Third Reich is one of the great unrequited love stories of history.

Many of these Jews believed the Nuremburg racial laws and the rising tide of anti-Semitism did not apply to them. They were not *Ostjuden*, whom they perceived as uneducated and superstitious. German Jews were cultured. They were patriotic. Many could trace their roots in Germany back for generations. One officer who served in the Waffen-SS was the descendant of Jews who had fled the Inquisition and settled in Germany four centuries earlier. Some German Jews even tried to halt the influx of their co-religionists fleeing the persecution and pogroms of Eastern Europe for fear that the presence of these unassimilated Jews would undermine their own social standing.

But to Hitler, a Jew was a Jew. It didn't matter where he came from, how well-educated he was, what he wore, how, or even if he worshipped. In April 1940, the directive came down to purge the military of all Jewish blood. Jews and part-Jews — *Mischlinge* to the Nazis, *Mampe* among themselves (after a cocktail popular in Berlin at the time that was half-sweet and half-bitter) were told to turn themselves in. Many did. Some commanding officers told their Jewish soldiers to remain quiet and go on as they were. The officers wanted their best and most experienced men for the imminent invasions of Western and Northern Europe. World conquest trumped racial purity. One gentile lieutenant, a member of the Nazi Party and the SA, who tried, unsuccessfully, to save one of his half-Jewish soldiers, was incredulous that the Wehrmacht would drum a man with an Iron Cross out of its ranks.

A few Jewish soldiers who were forced to leave were thrown farewell parties and sent off by their colleagues with the wistful comment that the departing soldier was a lucky so-and-so to be getting out of it. One such soldier who was envied by his colleagues took a darker view of matters. He had a fairly good idea of the future he faced with roundups, work camps and concentration camps. The dire consequences of some confessions of Jewish blood were more immediate. One commanding officer, infuriated at having his ranks sullied and himself

hoodwinked, took out his service pistol and shot the offending Jewish soldier dead on the spot.

Other Jewish men falsified their papers. But forged documents still left the problem of the telltale circumcision. Living in constant terror of exposure, many were ready with a story of a childhood infection that resulted in the removal of a foreskin. Others, when told to pull their foreskins back during physical inspections, pretended to with a sleight of hand. A Wehrmacht veteran who managed to pass muster during barracks checks was found out by a French prostitute while on leave in Paris. He believed she never turned him in because they were both “outcasts.”

How did those Jewish men rationalize serving a regime that was out to destroy them and their families? How did they justify masquerading as Aryans? The second question is easier to answer than the first. Most of them, especially those who were only part Jewish, didn't feel as if they were masquerading at all. Even those whose Jewish parent had remained Jewish had often been brought up as Christians. They did not identify as Jewish. They knew nothing of Jewish practice or observance, custom or law. They had married gentiles and were raising their own children as Christians.

For many of them the discovery of Jewish blood came as a shock, and not a pleasant one. It would be easy to raise the cry of self-hating Jew, but discovering an unexpected persona can unsettle the most grounded or decent human being—especially when the penalty for this uninvited guest could be death. A half-Jewish officer, whose maternal grandparents had converted to Christianity for economic and social reasons and baptized their daughter, learned about his Jewish ancestry only at the age of 18 when his mother confessed. He felt as if his entire world had been turned upside down. Previously confident of himself and his heritage, he suddenly felt like a member of an inferior species.

Some of the disgruntled applied for special dispensation. Hitler could make anyone an Aryan by fiat. He did just that with the *Mischlinges* Field Marshal Erhard Milch, General der Flieger Helmuth Wilberg, and others who had proved their military value. One photograph of Wilberg shows him resplendent in uniform with no fewer than 12 medals pinned to his proud Aryan, formerly half-Jewish, chest. Nonetheless, despite Wilberg's altered religious status, he insisted that he fought not for the Fuehrer, but for Fatherland and Volk. The distinction was a common refrain among Hitler's Jewish military men, and some Aryans as well.

But what of the Jews who served in Hitler's military and not only identified as Jewish but remained observant? Many of them, like another Waffen-SS officer, continued to say prayers and observe other rituals secretly in the barracks or, more desperately, on the battlefield. How did they justify fighting for a regime that was taking away their rights, murdering their families, and labeling them subhuman?

Some believed they could save their families by serving. One *Mischlinge* told of going to a Gestapo jail to help his Jewish father only to learn that the man had been sent to Dachau. He then volunteered in the Wehrmacht hoping it would help his father's plight. It didn't. Two brothers, whose gentile father had divorced their Jewish mother when the racial laws were promulgated, made a point of wearing their uniforms when they visited her. She was nonetheless sent to a camp.

Some salved their consciences with self-delusion. Nazi ideology was one thing, but surely their fellow soldiers who wore the same uniform, had the same needs and fears, instincts and feelings, must have an essentially human heart beating beneath that uniform. Surely they would not mistreat and murder their fellow soldiers' mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandparents. The Waffen-SS officer whose family went back 400 years in Germany called his comrades the best anyone could want in war—though, he added, if they'd known he had Jewish blood they would have strung him up from the nearest tree.

A few, especially on the Russian front, would claim later that while they served in Hitler's army, they helped save the lives of other Jews in lands where they fought

and conquered. An Orthodox Jewish Wehrmacht lieutenant told of giving secret passes to Jews who'd been rounded up by the SS in Lithuania, Latvia, and Russia, and food to starving Jewish children in a Russian village. Years later, when he met another Orthodox Wehrmacht officer at a conference in Bonn, they agreed that they'd done more for Jews by staying in the military than had those who'd fled the country before the war. Who among us who wasn't there can say they didn't? Perhaps the answer to their moral quandary lies in another question. What else could they have done? Refusing to serve, trading in their father's or grandfather's Iron Cross for their own yellow star would have sent one more member of the family to Auschwitz. A Wehrmacht lieutenant maintains that he always felt Jewish inside, but military service was the only hope for survival. Another veteran felt certain that God guided him into the military to save his life. When asked why God did not save 6 million others, he replied that the Almighty's actions cannot always be understood.

Anecdotal testimony, however, suggests that most of the men who served in Hitler's military lost their faith during the war, if they'd ever had it. As one soldier put it, after his face had been sprayed with the brains of a comrade, he decided God did not exist.

Another force that encouraged men to serve was the culture in which they had been raised. In 19th- and early-20th-century Germany, obedience ranked high on the list of virtues. Reverence for the head of the family, the rabbi, the teacher, the kaiser had been instilled in them since boyhood. Individuality was neither encouraged nor valued. Often, it was not tolerated. One *Mischlinge* naval officer was educated at a strict Prussian school and punished by his father on the rare occasions when he didn't excel there.

Though fighting for the Fuehrer often didn't save family members or the soldier himself—the odds of surviving the Russian front weren't much better than those of surviving Hitler's concentration camps—it did provide some less tangible compensations. For a man who feared for his loved ones—many did not know where their families were or what had become of them—the unit in which he

served could be a surrogate family. In a world where institutions were crumbling, the military represented perhaps the last bastion of stability and cohesion. Like the Waffen-SS officer above, many felt strong bonds with the men they fought beside, suffered with, and relied on, despite the knowledge that those same trusted comrades might have turned on them had they known of their Jewish blood. One Navy captain, who believed a man is duty bound to serve his country, felt such a strong bond with his former comrades that after the war he attended veterans reunions.

Another painful, perhaps unanswerable question arises: Did those men who served know of the camps? Clearly many of them did. Witness the claims that they were trying to save their relatives or themselves from that fate. But knowing of the existence of the camps was not the same as grasping the reality of mass murder. Around the world, people with more access to information than military personnel concerned with immediate survival could not imagine a nation would set out to systematically murder millions of its own citizens. One officer, who later moved to Canada, joined a synagogue, and was circumcised at the age of 40, spoke for many when he said rumors of the facts were too outrageous to be believed.

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Still another reason for a Jew to serve was rooted in the religion for which he was persecuted. Perhaps only observant Jews could verbalize it, but the less observant and those who didn't identify as Jews knew it instinctively. A rabbinical parable tells of two men in the desert who have only enough water to save one of them. If they share it, both will die. Halacha mandates that one's own life takes priority. The man with the water must drink it.

After the war, the Jewish men who had fought for Hitler had to wrestle with the cost of their survival. Some did not find it too high. They went on to good careers, loving wives, and happy children. Among them were a founder of a German publishing house, a successful Berlin businessman, and a NASA engineer.

Some wrestled with their pasts. One half-Jew speaks of being an outcast, misunderstood by both Germans and Jews. Others, like the man who moved to Canada, tried to reclaim the Jewishness his Jewish mother had denied him. Another veteran declared himself a lucky bastard to have survived, but admitted to years of traumatic memories.

Occasionally irony intruded. After the war, one *Mischlinge* Wehrmacht soldier, perhaps in atonement for his service, immigrated to Israel to fight for its independence. To the Nazis, he had been a Jew because his father was. To the Israelis, he was a gentile because his mother was a Christian, and Jewish law traces religion through the mother: He could fight for the new state but not be a member of its people.

Heartbreak, however, was a more common fate. Many of the men who had served in Hitler's military were met with fury and ostracism. An officer, hoping to put his past behind him by emigrating to South America, asked a Berlin rabbi for help, but when the rabbi found out about his military service, he turned his back on the "Jew killer." Another was told by his aunt in Palestine that it would have been better if he'd died in a camp, as millions of their co-religionists had.

Then there are those who cannot speak of the cost of their choices. Many of them perished on the Russian front or in other hellholes of the war. Though I have unearthed no statistics, I don't think it's unreasonable to suspect that more than a few ended as suicides.

It would be easy from the distance of close to a century to condemn those Jews who fought for a bestial regime sworn to exterminate the Jewish people. Certainly many of their contemporaries did. But for those of us who were not there, Hillel the Elder's words serve as a warning. Do not judge your fellow human beings until you have stood in their shoes.

Ellen Feldman, a 2009 Guggenheim Fellow, is the author of the novel *Paris Never Leaves You*.

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