
Jews in the International Brigades

Over 7,000 Jews from 54 countries fought in Spanish Civil War

By ALBERT PRAGO

PARIS was the main relay station for anti-fascists on their way to Spain 1936-1938. It took Bobrus Nisenbaum about five months to get to Paris from Warsaw. Bobrus was one of many volunteers coming from Eastern Europe who encountered special difficulties getting out of their own country in the first place and then in travelling across Europe to France. As a Jew, Bobrus had additional compelling reasons for risking imprisonment and even death for the opportunity to take up arms in

the International Brigades to fight against fascism.

Since the war in Spain that began in July, 1936 was a war of fascism against democracy, the participation of Jews in the International Brigades takes on a very special and added significance.

Fascism against democracy? The fascists would have had us believe otherwise. "Our war is not a Spanish civil war, it is a war of western civilization against the Jews of the entire world. The Jews want to destroy the Christians who, according to them, 'came from the devil.'" So explained General Queipo de Llano in a radio broadcast Oct. 10, 1936, almost three months after he and the other fascist generals headed by Francisco Franco had rebelled against the Spanish Republic.

A war "against the Jews of the entire world . . . ?" From many tragic experiences some people have learned not to ignore or underestimate the power of such demagogy. Anti-Semitism was a potent weapon, an integral part of the Nazi-fascist catechism, one major feature of which equated

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Jews and Communists. Recall that just before the betrayal at Munich the German press was screaming that "Prague was the 'Jewish center' of the world, that it was governed by the 'Russian Bolsheviks,' that the 'International capitalists' (also Jewish) had collaborated in this curious enterprise . . ." (Vincent Sheean, *Not Peace But a Sword*, p. 222)

This absurdity was believed by Germans and by the 'Sudeten' Germans in Czechoslovakia, who also were led to believe that photographs of Spanish women and children killed by German bombs were of Germans killed by Czechoslovak bombs. And that the "Spanish Republic was a Jewish Communist attempt to conquer Europe for Bolshevism" (*Ibid.*). Had not Hitler proclaimed repeatedly that "the British, French and Americans were dishonest profiteers and warmongers dominated by Jews?" (*Ibid.*)

A campaign against the Jews—of the entire world—in Nazi logic was equivalent to fighting Communists, and vice versa. To argue that the war in Spain was one of fascism versus communism means missing one of the distinguishing characteristics of Nazi-fascism: anti-Semitism.

The International Brigades became the vehicle through which Jews could offer the first *organized armed resistance* to European fascism. Their combatant role in Spain proved that they could fight well, and that as early as 1936 they were actively resisting fascism. Not all went passively to the concentration camps and crematoria.

There are scores of books in many languages about the war in Spain, including many about the International Brigades. Some make the barest reference, two lines or so, to

Jews in Spain. There is only one book on the Jews in the IB, written in Yiddish by the Polish-French Jew, David Diamant, published in Warsaw in 1967, and also a work, unfortunately not available in this country, by Joseph Toch, an Austrian Jew. There have been many articles in periodicals and some pamphlets written, mainly in Yiddish, Hebrew and Slav languages, that deal with some aspects of the Jews in the IB. I know of no book or pamphlet written in English which deals with this important matter. This silence of 40 years in the English-speaking world is strange.

How many Jews were there in the Brigades?

Estimates of the total number of volunteers vary from 40,000 to 45,000 men and women from 53 countries. Estimates of the number of Jews range from 7,000 to 10,000; not less than 15.5% and perhaps as much as 17.5% of the Brigaders were Jewish. (Estimates are derived from statistics provided by several scholars including Alberto Fernandez, a Spanish Catholic, in "Judíos en la Guerra de Espana," published in Madrid in *Tiempo de Historia*, Sept., 1975—while Franco was still alive! Fernandez asserts that 22 to 25% of the Brigaders were Jews!)

There were Jews from European, Asian, African, North and South American countries; the majority came from Eastern Europe, France and the United States. Fernandez article contains the following table as constructed by Toch:

Poland	2,250
U.S.A.	1,250
France	1,043
Great Britain	214
Palestine	267

To this Toch added 1,095 coming from Hungary, Austria, Czecho-

slovakia, Yugoslavia, Canada, Italy, Scandinavia and Germany; 1,602 from 40 other countries and 53 from the Soviet Union, making a total of 7,758.

Several sources (Diamant, Toch, Fernandez and the Soviet-published *International Solidarity with the Spanish Republic*, 1975) assert that there were 5,000 Poles. Of that number 2,250 or 45% were Jews, according to Toch, Diamant and Fernandez.

While Toch offers the number of 267 Palestinian Jews,* Fernandez presents evidence that there were as many as 400 while Diamant—relying on a census presented by the editor of a Yiddish periodical published in France 1936-38—concludes that there were not less than 500.

One of the few survivors, Ezekiel Pikar, unfolded a unique history when we met in Haifa in Dec., 1978. He showed me the cherished documents that bore witness to his tale. In the 1930s he had been sent by the Haganah to England to study flying. Not long after he obtained his pilot's license, the Spanish civil war erupted. Pikar volunteered and served as a combat pilot in the famous Andre Malraux squadron. Upon its disbandment, he volunteered to fight the Japanese in China, but was dissuaded by a Haganah colleague. Returning to Palestine, he entered the Palmach, striking arm of the Haganah.

According to a study made by Zvi Loker ("Balkan Jewish Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War," *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, London, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1976) there were at least 34 Jewish

* The group with which I crossed the snow-covered Pyrenees in March, 1937 included two Palestinian Jews of whose fate I have no knowledge.

volunteers from Yugoslavia and 17 from Bulgaria.**

It is likely that many of the German volunteers were Jews. A notable personality was Friedl Kassovitz, commander of the 3rd company, 10th Battalion of the XIV Brigade, killed at Navalperal on July 4, 1937. Kassovitz was one of the lawyers who had defended Ernst Thaelmann, the German Communist leader whose trial early in the Hitler terror became a *cause celebre* throughout the international left.

A few of the Italian Brigaders were Jews. The best known was the political commissar of the famous 5th Regiment, Comandante Carlos, alias for Vittorio Vidali.

Ascertaining the national origin of some of the Jewish volunteers is difficult. For example, over 4,000 of the Polish volunteers had been living in exile. Many Jews from Poland and from Eastern Europe had been living in exile in France, Belgium and elsewhere. The units to which they were attached were often haphazardly decided upon. In the Chapayev Battalion there were 21 nationalities including: 20 Palestinian Jews, 25 Polish, 4 German, 4 Austrian, 2 Swiss, 2 Scandinavian, 1 Dutch and 3 Czech Jews (according to Fernandez). Some Bulgarian Jews, who were in self-imposed exile finding refuge in the Soviet Union, composed part of the Russian contingent.

Among the outstanding Soviet Jews were: Gen. G. M. Stern, adviser for the Spanish high command; Gen. Iakov Vladimirovich Smushkevich

** The number of Yugoslav Jews was calculated by Marko Peric (alias for Velimir Drechsler) in his account of the Yugoslav Jews in the Spanish war. The Bulgarian figure was supplied—to Peric—by Isak Moshhev.

(Gen. "Douglas" in Spain), who served as senior adviser in the air force, helped direct air battles over Madrid and was honored by Indalecio Prieto (Cabinet minister); Arthur Stacewski (of Polish origin), who was an economic adviser to the Republican government; Gen. Kleber (the famous Lazar Stern) and Abraham Abrahamson, killed at Brunete, the first person from Odessa to be named Hero of the Soviet Union.

Of 420 British dead (listed in an appendix of William Rust's *Britons in Spain*, International Publishers, Jan., 1939) 5.2% have obviously Jewish names. Undoubtedly the percentage of Jews was higher and the 214 figure given by Toch—or 10.7% of the approximately 2,000 volunteers—may be reasonable. The only mention of Jews in Rust's book is: "There were very many Irishmen and not a few Jews, and they both made very good fighters." Rust notes that the "first men to organize a group of volunteers was initiated by Sam Masters and Nat Cohen, two East London garment workers [both Jews—A.P.] who were cycling in France at the time of the revolt, and immediately hurried across the frontier to Barcelona where they founded the 'Tom Mann Centuria'." That was months before the call for the formation of the International Brigades. One of the outstanding British Jews was Major George Nathan, whose death at Brunete was lamented by his men and by many officers of the Brigades who had come to love and respect this extraordinarily brave and kind man. Among the Irish volunteers was Sammy Lee, a Jew killed in the fighting at Jarama, Feb., 1937.

Many of the Jews who came from England, Canada, France and the United States did not identify as

Jews. They went to Spain as internationalists, as humanists, as anti-fascists, as communists—and while they may not have denied their Jewish heritage, they did not go to Spain identifying as Jews. This is particularly true for the American Jews.

The exact number of American Jews is not known. Robert Rosenstone in *Crusade of the Left* (Pegasus, New York, 1969) culled apparent Jewish surnames from a list of 1,800 and concludes that 30% of all American volunteers were Jews. From a similar, independent study I have made of some 2,000 names I can support Rosenstone's estimate of 30%. Therefore the total number of American Jews is probably between 900 and 1,110.

After sifting the evidence and taking into account the many difficulties involved in this census, the estimate that about 16% of all the Brigaders were Jews seems reasonable.

Even before the formation of the International Brigades, the first members of which arrived in Spain in Oct., 1936, there were a number of volunteers. The very first were those foreigners who were present in Spain at the time of the fascist uprising in July, 1936. Some were political refugees, as was Emanuel Mink (about whose heroic odyssey I have written: see *JEWISH CURRENTS*, Feb., 1977.) Others were members of athletic groups, mostly from several European countries, present in Barcelona to participate in the Workers' Olympiad being held in protest against the World Olympics scheduled for August in Hitler's Berlin. Many of these anti-fascist athletes volunteered to fight immediately after the fascist outbreak.

The Palestinian "Hapoel" was one such sports association, almost all

of whose members joined the Popular Militia and took part in the fighting in Barcelona in July, 1936. Jacques Penczyna, a political refugee, along with 13 Jewish companions, founded the first "Thaelmann" Centuria in Barcelona (not to be confused with the German Thaelmann Battalion formed subsequently in Madrid.) According to a correspondent in a French Yiddish newspaper, they referred to themselves as the "Jewish Thaelmann group."

There was an American group of athletes, headed by Alfred "Chick" Chakin, a physical training instructor at the City College of New York.* Chakin, a Jew, returned to the United States that summer, but came back the following year to fight and die in Spain.

Throughout the months of Aug. and Sept., 1936, individuals and small groups made their way to Spain to offer their bodies and minds in the service of the Republic. Among those early volunteers was a group of Jews including a Leon Baum who arrived in Spain on Aug. 8, was immediately involved in the fighting and was killed at Irun. Baum was the first Jewish hero of the Spanish war to be immortalized in articles, song and poetry, including a poem by the famous Soviet Yiddish writer, Itzik Feffer, entitled "A Song About Leon Baum." Accompanying Baum was Joseph Epstein, wounded shortly after his integration into a fighting unit. He returned to France, where he later served as a partisan leader. He was captured and shot by the Nazis.

Once the Brigades were formed, through the initiative of the Com-

* Chakin was one of two City College faculty and 11 alumni and students killed in Spain; 11 of the 13 were Jews.

munist parties of several countries, men and women mainly from Europe hastened to join. For some—the French, Belgian, English, Swiss, Scandinavians, and exiles living in those countries—the journey presented no serious hazard. There were no obstacles in leaving their country and none, initially, in entering Spain. It was otherwise for those coming from Central and Eastern Europe, from countries already under the yoke of fascism or groaning under authoritarian reactionary regimes.

During the Inquisition in Spain, Jews were maligned, persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and murdered and, toward the close of the 15th century, driven into exile. In this 20th century, Jews, facing incredible dangers, were making their tortuous way to aid the Spanish people to defend their newly-won democracy!

The volunteers who undertook the journey from Poland were exposed to a multitude of hazards. Everyone knew of the official ukase that stripped these anti-fascists of their citizenship rights and even of their nationality. The underground was hard put to manage the trip for hundreds of volunteers to get out of Poland and then through Czechoslovakia, Austria and Switzerland to France as the final point of departure before proceeding to Spain. The distinction of taking the longest time to get from Warsaw to Paris belongs to the Polish Jew, Bobrus Nissenbaum. He was imprisoned in Czechoslovakia; he fumed for 10 weeks in a provincial prison near the Austro-Swiss border; he slept on park benches (during the winter) in the Prater-Park, Vienna; all in all it took Bobrus five painful months to reach Paris. From there friendly hands guided him to the south of France

GALLO'S INTRODUCTION TO GINA MEDEM'S PAMPHLET

IT was during the first days of the arrival of the volunteers in Albacete. I remember him still, as if it were yesterday: a young man with a swarthy, roundish face which immediately inspired sympathy. He was a Jew who came to see me as one of the first *responsables* in the organization of the International Brigades. He spoke in the name of the first group of 15 Jews, divided into small units, at the head of which he was proudly marching through the streets of Albacete. He asked me that the Jews be organized into some one formation of our Brigades.

"We wish to show," he said, with accents filled with sincerity and passion, "we wish to prove what we Jews are capable of. The fascists everywhere accuse us of being cowards. We will show to the world that we know how to conduct ourselves as heroes."

I understood very well the feelings and the political reasons of this comrade; and I immediately declared myself of the same opinion. With Andre Marty, the moving spirit of our Brigades, in agreement, I authorized him to issue a call to all Jews that may have been in the other formations to create a fine and strong Jewish unit. He departed with a glow in his eyes and joy in his heart. I believe that he now felt a little like the avenger of all the calumnies hurled against his brothers and his race (sic).

Unfortunately this beautiful dream could not be realized. Language difficulties and lack of time prevented us, and this comrade marched to the front at the head of the 15 whom he had recruited and led from Paris. But his face remained engraved in my memory.

I arrived in Madrid a week after he did. I intended to see him again immediately. He had fallen like a hero in the first battles of University City.

My dear, brave Jewish comrade, you are the one who appeared in my mind when, a few weeks ago, I was speaking with Com. Gina Medem, who was looking for material on the Jews in our Brigades. Then I felt that we, volunteers of liberty, owed an immense debt to the Jewish heroes who have written magnificent pages in all our Brigades. Unhappily they were not able to fight together, united in one Jewish formation. But we, soldiers of all the Brigades and of all the nationalities, we must gather together the magnificent examples of self-sacrifice and heroism of the Jewish soldiers to present them for the admiration of the world, as was the desire of the Jewish comrade who was among the first to fall in the epic defense of Madrid.

I urged the author that she compile into one pamphlet the finest episodes of the participation of the Jews in our Brigades. That she has done in a magnificent way, and with love and passion. Thus this pamphlet was born, which I recommend to the reader and to all the friends of liberty and progress.

LUIGI GALLO, Inspector General of the International Brigades.

and over the Pyrenees. In Spain Bobrus had several weeks of intensive training, was sent to the front as a soldier in the Palafox Battalion of the Dombrowski Brigade, and was killed in action.

To Josef Rubinstein of Warsaw goes another distinction. A member of the Maccabee Jewish sports organization and an active Communist, he became well known in Polish prisons both for the frequency with which he appeared in them as well as his indomitable will. He spent seven months in the notorious Kartuz-Bereza prison. There he, and other anti-fascists, kept on top of the news about Spain, including the study of a map of Spain smuggled in and zealously guarded by the inmates. Almost immediately after his release, Rubinstein made his way across Europe with the aid of the underground and reached Spain in June, 1937. He became a machine gunner, and served as editor of *Forward*, a Yiddish newspaper issued with the aid of a Yiddish typewriter donated by a French Jewish correspondent. Joseph was killed in the fighting in the Aragon.

Gina Medem, Jewish correspondent for the left-wing daily *Morgen Freiheit* in New York, relates some especially poignant stories centering on family relationships. Yosef Toth and his son were at the Jarama front, where the fascists made several desperate attacks to cut the Madrid-Valencia lifeline. It was costly to both sides and for Toth it meant the death of his beloved son.

The importance of the role played by Jews in the IB was not lost upon some of the leaders. An illustrative episode early in the history of the Brigades is recorded in the preface

to Gina Medem's Spanish pamphlet, *The Jewish Volunteers of Liberty*, written by Luigi Gallo (alias for Luigi Longo), Inspector General of the International Brigades. The preface is an historic document that warrants careful reading. The following is my translation from the Spanish edition published in Oct. or Nov., 1937 in Madrid under the auspices of the Commissariat of the International Brigades (See Box adjoining).

Gallo's warmth in his glowing tribute to the Jewish volunteers is self-evident. There is no doubt that language barriers and the pressure of events made it difficult for the leaders to effectuate the creation of an all-embracing Jewish unit. It is well to recall that when the young Jewish comrade of whom Gallo writes (both Fernandez and Diamant claim that he was Albert Nehumi Weis, or Weitz, a Polish Jew living in exile in Paris before going to Spain) made the request, the time was Oct. or Nov., 1936. Apparently there was no time then to call into existence a Jewish fighting unit. And one year later, Oct., 1937, when Gallo was writing the preface to Medem's work—was it still not propitious or feasible? The fascists were gaining everywhere, in Spain and in Europe. In Spain the military situation was not improving. To that and other difficulties one must add the factor that most Jews—especially those coming from the English-speaking nations—did not identify as Jews, did not speak Yiddish and would have little desire to be incorporated into a Yiddish-speaking unit. Still, one regretfully notes that no attempt was made to ascertain the wishes of the Jews in all the Brigades. ■

(To be concluded)

Jews in the International Brigades: 2

Botwin Company Volunteers— Symbol of Jewish Resistance

By **ALBERT PRAGO**

A DRIVING force of Jewish consciousness did exist, particularly in Paris, the meeting place of the founders and leaders of the International Brigades. "The progressive Jewish movement in Paris was in continual contact," notes David Diamant (p. 193), "with the Jewish fighters in Spain. In the second half of 1937, after a year of experience in the struggle, the leadership of the Jewish Communists in France drew the conclusion that the participation of Jewish volunteers in the struggle of the Spanish people and their heroic deeds must receive an organizational expression in the form of an independent Jewish company the perspective of which would be to be transformed into a battalion. . . . About July-August, 1937 a discussion took place in the decision-making body [of the I.B.] in Paris. . . . Early in the fall of 1937 the Paris progressive movement sent to Albacete one of its leaders, Jacques Kaminski, who reached an understanding with the general staff of the International Brigades and also with the Jewish military leaders. Dua-Bogen and Kaminski visited several areas where there were large numbers of Jewish soldiers and arranged gatherings at which they placed the question of a Jewish unit. The Polish leaders of

the Dombrowskis did everything they could to carry out this project."

The Dombrowski Brigade leaders announced the formation of the Botwin Company, a Jewish unit, on Dec. 12, 1937, only two months after Gallo had explained why it was, unfortunately, so difficult to establish a separate unit. The order of the day which formally announced the establishment of the Botwin Company of the XIII, or Dombrowski, Brigade was co-signed by the Commander Jean Barwinski and the Political Commissar, Stanislaw Matuszczak: "Among the volunteers of the International Brigades and very particularly in the Dombrowski Brigade, the Jewish volunteers have always distinguished themselves by their valor, their combat spirit and their fidelity to the cause. In order to signalize the number and importance of the Jewish volunteers of the Dombrowski, in order to honor the memory of the Jewish combatants killed in the cause of freedom, we designate the 2nd company of the heroic Palafox Battalion as a Jewish company with the name of Naftali Botwin."

Naftali Botwin was the young Jewish Communist known to all radicals in Poland for his martyr's role. He had assassinated a police provoc-

ateur, was captured immediately and summarily executed in 1925. When a socialist Poland was created after World War II, a street in Warsaw as well as other memorials were named after Botwin. A popular song about him was on the lips of Jewish radicals even in the United States. The verse is cited in Diamant's work (and Morris and Ruth Berlind, who spent many hours translating sections of Diamant's book for me, still remember the music and sang it for me.)

The order of the day originally was presented to the aforesaid officers by a Comrade Mietek. It was in Yiddish and was subsequently translated into Spanish and Polish. (Diamant reprints a photostat of the Yiddish order of the day, p. 235.) After the two officers had signed the order, Mietek returned to the trenches to inform his men, who were so proudly adding to the long history of bravery of the Jewish people.

The company, of about 200 men, was formed at Tardadientes just 100 meters from the enemy trenches. The company had already distinguished itself for it had fought on the Extremadura front and in the Aragon. It was in combat at Sierra Quemada, Sierra Caballs, and Lérida, and was one of the first in the memorable crossing of the Ebro.

One of the organizers of the company was Gershon Dua-Bogen, one of the principal leaders of the Communist movement in Poland. He had worked with the Polish volunteers in overcoming the great difficulties in going from Poland to Spain and had helped organize the Dombrowski Brigade. He helped set up the first Yiddish newspaper published in Spain, *Freiheits Kemfer*, with the

assistance of Parisian-Jewish comrades from the *Nouvelle Presse*.

At the founding meeting of the Botwin Company, Gershon told the Jewish volunteers: "You symbolize in your Company the courageous struggle of the thousands of Jewish militiamen in Spain. You represent to the Jewish masses the most noble and heroic in the antifascist struggle. You bear the name of the young Jewish hero, Botwin. You must safeguard Botwin's name and carry high the banner of the Jewish Company." (*Folks-Stimme*, Warsaw, Feb. 10, 1953, translated by Sid Resnick, *Morning Freiheit* March 18, 1973.)

After the Six-Day War in Israel, during the wave of anti-Semitism that swept Poland, the memorials to Botwin were unceremoniously obliterated. Botwin became a no-name, non-existent, no longer a highly respected folk hero. Steve Nelson, currently National Commander of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, told me that when he met with the Polish UN delegate, he asked him why the Botwin name had been removed from memorials. The diplomat had never heard of him! *Sic transit gloria*. . . ! The bureaucracy in Lodz similarly changed the name of a workers' cooperative which had borne the name of Gershon Dua-Bogen for 20 years.

The post-war Polish government had honored all Polish veterans of Spain. That is, until 1968, when the Jewish veterans were to pay a costly price for disagreeing with their government's policy in the Mideast. They were expelled from the Communist Party, dismissed from jobs, and upon fleeing the intolerable situation by leaving the country, they were deprived of their disability, social security and other pensions. (Ironically, Poles who had lived in

the U.S.A. and returned to Poland, still enjoy their U.S.A. social security and other pension rights. They are, after all, *rights*.) No government, however, can strip the Polish Jewish veterans of Spain and of the resistance movement of their many honors.

This past December, while in Tel Aviv, I spoke with several of these emigrants. One of them, Misha Skorupinski, complained bitterly that on leaving Poland he, and similar emigrants, were compelled to sign a document renouncing their Polish citizenship. The Polish government therefore is legally, but not morally, absolved from continuing pension payments. Skorupinski it should be noted, was an early volunteer in Spain, one of the leading figures in the formation of the Botwin company, and was wounded several times; captured on the last day before the official withdrawal of the International Brigades, he spent three harrowing years in Franco prisons.

Not all Botwins were Jews. "They included a German who thumbed his nose at his Nazi father by fighting with Jews as comrades. A Greek Botwinist maintained that Jews and Greeks should fight side by side because Western civilization was the child of Greek and Jewish parents. An Italian enrolled, some non-Jewish Poles, and depending on the authority you cite—there were one or two Arabs out of the total of six Arabs in the Republican forces." (David Miller, unpublished MS.; see also his "The Holocaust and Jewish Resistance" in our April, 1977 issue.)

Of the many Botwin heroes, two became generals in the Polish People's Army. Many served with distinction in the French partisans,

among them Emanuel Mink. Pinkus Kartin was one of the organizers of the Warsaw Ghetto defense. Joseph Farber was in the underground, assigned to a perilous task in the Nazi death camp at Birkenau. David Smulevitch served in the underground at Auschwitz, where he took *photographs of the crematoria in action!* The negatives were smuggled out of the camp and their publication established as definitive proof what had been described as mere propaganda. (The story is recounted in detail in Yuri Suhl's pathbreaking work, *They Fought Back*.)

Isidor Springer, originally in the socialist-Zionist Hashomer Hatzair in Poland, then a member of the Belgian Communist Party, a veteran of the Botwin Company, played an important role in the "Red Orchestra," the super Soviet spy ring in Western Europe which supplied important military data about the Germans throughout most of the war. (See Leopold Trepper, *The Great Game*.) In that same "orchestra," there was Camille, alias of a Palestinian Jew. He served in the I.B., married a Frenchwoman, settled in Paris and was most helpful as a "pianist" (telegrapher, radio dispatcher) in the Red Orchestra; he was captured, tortured and "died without talking." (See Gilles Perrault, *The Red Orchestra*.)

The last commander of the Dombrowski Brigade was the Polish Jew Henryk Torunczyk, who also was a partisan in Poland. At a Paris meeting (1970 or 1971) of the International Federation of Former Resistance Fighters, the Polish General Franciszek Ksienzharczyk, a Spanish veteran and a former partisan, proposed exhuming the remains of Torunczyk, then in a Polish military cemetery, and also proposed chang-

ing the name of the Botwin Company because it smelled of Jewish nationalist-chauvinism. Both astounding motions were defeated (*Freiheit*, Jan. 24, 1974).

Some Polish Jews served in other military units: several hundred in the XIV Franco-Belgian and the XI Ernst Thaelmann Brigades, and a number in the German and Italian brigades.

For the stateless volunteers, including the Jewish component, originating from Germany, Italy and Eastern European countries, a strange fate awaited them when they recrossed the French border from Spain. Upon arrival in democratic France they were thrust into concentration camps. No government came to their aid.

Had not the Western democracies betrayed the whole Czech people to Hitler? What could a few thousand battered, stateless Spanish veterans expect? Doubtless the Jews interned in those camps were aware they carried an additional burden. It is no mystery why Jewish brigaders volunteered to fight in France and joined partisan groups especially in their native countries. The nature of the additional burdens become clear when, for example, Jewish partisans found that they had to fight the Nazi enemy on the one hand and, sometimes, vicious anti-Semites within their own partisan groups. Jewish antifascists from Eastern Europe truly were cast in a very special mold.

The record of the Americans in Spain bears favorable comparison with that of any of the international groups. Their fighting ability received the highest praise from I.B. leaders and from several military experts, including Col. Stephen

Fuqua, the American military observer. Contained within that record is the valorous contribution of the large Jewish segment.

None of the battalion's historians recorded the exploits of the Jews nor did they indicate that any of the Americans were Jews. In the two quasi-official histories of the Lincolns, both written by veterans (Edwin Rolfe and Arthur Landis) with some 30 years separating the two works, there is no mention of American Jewish participation. The low level of Jewish consciousness has persisted as though Hitlerism and the holocaust had never existed. The level of Jewish consciousness among much of the left at the time was minimal. But now, so many years after the event, with hindsight readily available, and with a clearer political perspective, an historical accounting is due.

Yet of the many hundreds of American Jewish volunteers there were those who did identify as Jews. Among them were: David Miller—who was a Zionist when he went to Spain and remained one until his recent death; Rubin Schecter, whose widow Rose commented to me that he had always been an ardent scholar of Jewish studies and had made it quite clear that his volunteering to fight in Spain derived largely from his determination, as a Jew, to fight back against Hitlerism. Wilfred Mendelson wrote to his father June 22, 1938, "Today Jews are returning welcomed by the entire Spanish people to fight the modern Inquisition, and in many cases the direct descendants of the ancient persecutions. . . . Yes, Pop, I am sure we are fighting in the best Maccabean tradition" (from *Let My People Know, the Story of Wilfred Mendelson*, by Joseph Leeds,

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1942). Mendy was killed one month later. And William Harvey, replying to a question by a *Life* reporter, said, "I know what Hitler is doing to my people." Finally, a member of Local 16 of the United Office and Professional Workers of America wrote the following to his mother from a hospital in Spain, ". . . I took up arms against the persecutors of my people—the Jews—and my class, the oppressed. I am fighting against those who establish an inquisition like that of their ideological ancestors several centuries ago, in Spain. . . ." (Morris U. Schappes quoted this in his *A Pictorial History of the Jews in the United States*, p. 228, citing *Jewish Life*, March, 1938, which had reprinted it from the mimeo Bulletin of the Council of Jewish Organizations, Local 16, UOPWA.)

It is also illuminating to note that the highest ranking American, Lt.-Col. John Gates (alias for Sol Regenstreif) is a Jew; that the last commander of the Lincolns was Major Milton Wolff; the last political commissar of the Canadian battalion was the American Jew, Saul Wellman. There are the outstanding records of Capt. Leonard Lamb, political commissars Dave Doran and George Watt, battalion commander David Reiss (under whose brief command I served as interpreter on battalion staff), company commanders Aaron Lopoff, Paul Block, Larry Lustgarten, Sidney Levine, Julius Deutsch, Irving Weissman, Yale Stuart, Manny Lancer, Lawrence Cane, Jack Cooper, Harold Smith, Harry Schonberg, Dave Smith—in fact a very high proportion of section (platoon) and company com-

manders and political commissars were Jews. Irv Goff was one of the three Americans who served with Spanish guerrillas fighting behind enemy lines in some of the most daring forays of the war. And, as held true for all the volunteers, one must pay tribute to the many unsung heroes among the privates and non-commissioned officers whose deeds did not receive the publicity earned by upper echelons of the military.

Leonard Lamb, a former teacher, was an unusual officer in an unusual army. He was attached to brigade staff and was assigned a variety of responsible, hazardous duties. He guided companies into and out of front line sectors; he commanded companies at strategic moments such as the movement of Co. 1 in the historic crossing of the Ebro. He was wounded several times, the last during the first battles after the Ebro crossing.

Edwin Rolfe recorded what happened shortly after: "One day in mid-August, a familiar figure, neatly dressed in a light summer uniform, walked up to the tree under which Wolff and the other battalion officers lived and slept. Two of the older and tougher of the English battalion veterans gaped at him as he passed, paler than they had ever seen him, and moving slowly. One of the Englishmen shook his head, breathed deeply, then blew his breath out in a half-whistle. Turning to his companion, he said, still shaking his head, "Tough man, that Lamb, tough man." Wolff and the others of the battalion greeted Lamb with mingled anger and relief; the battalion could well use the veteran officer, but Lamb was so evidently in need of further rest that officers and men

alike shook their heads and told him he ought to 'get the hell back to the hospital where you belong.'

"Lamb's wound, covered with bandage, was still half-healed. He had left the hospital on a one-day leave to Barcelona and had continued to the front. If the hospital records are still preserved . . . he is still listed as a 'deserter.' Lennie was one of the older Americans: he was 26.

Wolff, veteran of almost all the campaigns from Brunete on, was one of the very few never wounded. He rose from machine-gunner in the short-lived George Washington Battalion eventually to become a battalion commander of the Lincolns and respected by everyone as skilled, resourceful and extremely courageous. Milt was 23.

Nurse Fredericka Martin has supplied data to me about the many Jews among the medical personnel. Of the 124 under the aegis of the American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy, 59 or an extraordinary 47.5% were Jews, distributed as follows: out of 29 surgeons and physicians 18 (or 19) were Jews; 3 of the 4 oral surgeons and dentists were Jews; 6 of the 16 medical technicians, physical therapists, assistants, etc.; 28 of the 48 nurses; 2 of the 22 ambulance drivers and chauffeurs; and 2 of the 5 engineers and clerks.

All the world knows of the exceptional skill and heroism of the late Dr. Edward K. Barsky, the outstanding medical figure of this group and perhaps outstanding among all the International Brigade medical personnel. (Ms Martin also notes that most of the Polish nurses and nurses' aides were Jews, as were most of the 40-plus Polish doctors. From Belgium a group of 30 women, some with

husbands already in Spain, organized by the Jewish Bund, went to Spain led by the German Jewish refugee Dr. Blanc.)

One of the first Americans to volunteer was Ben Leider, a reporter with experience as a pilot. In the defense of Madrid, the famous Malraux squadron performed miracles in aerial combat over the besieged capital. It was in one such air battle with fascist planes, overwhelmingly superior in numbers, that Leider was killed.

The Americans came from a country rich in democratic traditions, quite different from the reactionary regimes typical of Eastern European countries. The American Jews had not experienced the terror that prevailed, for example, in Poland. However, they were workers and intellectuals who had had rich experiences fighting the dreadful consequences of the Great Depression.

Most of the Jewish volunteers came from major urban centers. There, many had been involved for years in militant struggles for welfare, for Negro rights, against family evictions, for jobs and for unemployment insurance. Three of the many active in this arena were Sol Rose (killed in Spain), Sam Gonshak and Abe Osheroff (writer and producer-director of the prize-winning Spanish Civil War documentary film in 1975, *Dreams and Nightmares*). From the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, where there were so many Jewish activists, it is estimated that 66 went to Spain. Only 25 returned.

Those not involved in community affairs were active members of unions, mainly in light industry and in retail and distributive trades. There were many teachers (coming mostly from the Works Projects Adminis-

tration) along with other professionals and a considerable number of students.

All of them had learned of fascism in Europe and saw obvious signs in this country of our own brand(s) of fascism tied to an old racism and bigotry. Nor was anti-Semitism a stranger within the democracy we enjoyed. It was no historic accident that so many Jews were members of, or sympathetic to, the Communist Party and other left organizations and that they constituted such a large proportion of the volunteers.

Some were exceedingly young. When Eslanda Robeson, accompanying her husband Paul on a visit to the American volunteers in Spain, was struck by the extremely youthful appearance of a few of the soldiers, she approached one (Maury Colow) and, thrusting a finger at him, exclaimed, "How old are you?" Colow, then 18, was one of several young Jews coming out of slum areas of Brooklyn, the lower East Side and other pockets of working class constituents and of poverty.

Students, factory workers, clerks, union organizers, teachers, writers, Communists and Young Communists, Socialists, leaders of the unemployed movement, people of diverse backgrounds and experiences were fused into an effective fighting force, bound by the common hatred of fascism. Unlike most of their European comrades, with a few exceptions they had had no military training. From the outset their bravery was superlative. But it would take some time and many, many casualties before they became magnificent soldiers equaling their more experienced comrades-in-arms.

Approximately half of the American volunteers are buried in Spanish soil. Of those who survived the vast

majority were wounded, some two or more times, some very seriously.

The American volunteers returned to very warm but little applause. A few thousands adored and honored the returning soldiers, but the mass of the population was indifferent to or ignorant of the occasion. However a very aware government did much to harass us especially through the FBI and later the SACB. (Subversive Activities Control Board).

Our problems did not compare with the more serious ones faced by our European comrades. For us there was some blacklisting, careers interrupted, in some instances never again to be resumed, and financial and psychological problems attending rehabilitation, especially for the seriously wounded.

Most of the veterans participated in the armed services and merchant marine during World War II. The Jewish component continued to maintain the same high standards of conduct set in Spain. Of the five Lincoln Brigade Veterans selected by Col. William J. Donovan to operate in the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) behind the enemy lines, four were Jews: Irving Fajans, Milton Felsen, Irving Goff and Milt Wolff (the fifth was Vincent Lossowski, a Polish American). Norman Berkowitz, Morris Breier, Larry Cane, Dan Groden, Herman Rosenstein, Bob Steck, Bill Susman, George Watt, Jesse Wallach and so many others served with distinction. Sid Kurtz, Gerald Weinberg and Sid Rosenblatt were killed in action in Europe. Cane and others were decorated for outstanding valor. A full roster of those who have served humanity remains to be compiled.

Was Luigi Longo in error when he wrote that "We, volunteers of

liberty, owed an immense debt to the Jewish heroes who have written magnificent pages in all our Brigades"? Was he wrong in urging that the story of the Jewish volunteers should be presented "for the admiration of the world" and in recommending Medem's pamphlet to "all the friends of liberty and progress"? And, how is the story to be presented "for the admiration of the world"?

Should not the full story be told of the heroism of the Jews of the International Brigades, and especially of the extraordinarily large numbers originating from Poland, the United States and France? Should not historians examine the ample evidence which refutes the peculiar interpretations of the Arendts and Bettelheims?

Two questions should be put to those who ask, with arrogance and the lack of understanding that accompanies it, "Why did 6,000,000 Jews go passively to the crematoria?": 1) Where were you at the time, and what did you do? 2) Why did so few, proportionately, Germans, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, *et al.*—all immediately victims of Hitlerism—resist, especially compared to the relatively large numbers of Jews who did?

Let us herald the fact that more Jews, proportionately, fought in Spain, where the organized armed resistance to fascism began (and in many resistance movements)—than any other minority or any other nationality in Europe! ■

*I greet my comrade
on his 80th birthday
and wish him many more
healthy ones, together
with me and his family.*

*Freedu Bogad
Los Angeles*

OUR PRIZE AWARDS

TWO prizes will be awarded at our Annual Jewish Currents Dinner on May 6 at the Roosevelt Hotel:

- The Annual Joseph Shachnow Award of \$200 to the winners of our essay contest on "Albert Einstein's Social Vision" (see contest announcement, p. 37).
- An Award (by an anonymous donor, a Life Subscriber) of \$100 for a poem published in our pages.

PRIZES DRAWN

WHEN Avon Lodge cancelled our Oct. 20-22, 1978 weekend because of our insufficient registration, we had to delay the drawing of the prizes for our raffle to an auspicious occasion. This turned out to be the Dec. 29 Annual Hanuka Office Lunch Party for the Office Volunteers, who are indispensable to our operation.

Doing the drawing was the delightful five-year-old granddaughter Marcy of our Life Subscriber and Volunteer Anne Nechemias. The prize winners were: 1st, Ida Goodisman, Brooklyn; 2nd, Bertha Lischin, Life Subscriber, Brooklyn; 3rd, Judith Wertheimer, Maplewood, N. J.; 4th, Rose Lifschitz, Bronx; 5th, Harry Noble, New York; 6th, Milton Bogad, Life Subscriber, Arcadia, Calif. and 7th, Terry Kohn, Brooklyn. To the coast-to-coast winners, congratulations!

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