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**200 years of migration to England**

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EXPERIENCES OF A JEWISH CHAPLAIN ON THE  
WESTERN-FRONT (1915—1918).\*

By Rev. MICHAEL ADLER, D.S.O.

DURING the recent Great War, for the first time in Anglo-Jewish history, Jewish Chaplains formed part of the British Army on active service. The demand for Jewish Chaplains to live at the front with their men became apparent in the early days of the War, in order to minister to "the large Jewish Community serving in the field," as Field-Marshal Lord French described them in one of his despatches. My work at home as a Territorial Chaplain soon proved to me that opportunities for valuable service in the war area would present themselves, if the necessary arrangements for proceeding abroad could be made. I therefore suggested that I should transfer my activities to France. This raised many difficulties, as the authorities at the War Office could find no precedent for a Jewish Chaplain being attached to an Army in the Field. Through the kind offices of the late Sir Charles Henry, Bart., M.P., however, it was decided that I should be allowed to pay a visit to the troops in order to ascertain whether there was any scope for religious work among the Jewish soldiers scattered in all parts of the front. The Chaplain-General, the Right Rev. Bishop Taylor-Smith, C.V.O., had previously shown his interest in my work by attending one of the Chanukah Military Services, and in many other ways, and now proved himself most helpful. When the question of my Chaplain's badge was considered, he readily approved of my proposal that the "Magen David" should be adopted in place of the customary Chaplains' badge.

Upon landing at Havre in January, 1915, the spirit of cordial helpfulness which marked our future relations throughout displayed itself immediately, when the Principal Chaplain of the British Expeditionary Force, the Rev. Dr. J. M. Simms, C.M.G., met me at the dock and accompanied me to report my arrival at Base Headquarters.

On board the ship I had met Lieut. Ernest Polack, who was thus the first Jewish officer on active service whom I encountered, and it was with great sorrow that in July, 1916, I learnt of his death in action.

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On emerging from Base Headquarters, a soldier saluted me and asked if I was the Jewish Chaplain—as he had noticed the "Magen David" I was wearing. This badge, from the first hour of my landing, thus proved itself of the utmost value in drawing the attention of our men—and I later on had one fixed on the bonnet of my car.

A brief look round Havre with its hospitals, depots and camps scattered over a large area soon brought me face to face with what was going to prove a serious difficulty unless rapidly overcome. It was evident that the transport question had to be solved without delay, as I could not cover the ground by using the local trams or jumping on a motor lorry. With the Army authorities I could do nothing at this stage, but on the second day of my arrival, the friendly relations between the Y.M.C.A. and myself began, which continued both towards myself and all the other Chaplains during the whole period of the War. Mr. Pilkington, in charge of the office at Havre, lent me a small Ford car driven by a young curate, with whom I had many a pleasant conversation. The first service I held in France was in a Y.M.C.A. Hut at Harfleur Reinforcement Camp on Friday evening, January 29th, which date, I believe, also marks the opening of the first Y.M.C.A. hut in this great camp. Nominal rolls of Jews in the area had been obtained, notices were published in Base Orders, and invitations sent to all officers and men in Havre, with successful results.

My second service was held in the local Synagogue at Havre, the community taking considerable interest in this first gathering of Jewish soldiers. It was naturally part of my programme to get into close touch with the French Jews wherever possible, as I could not give personal attention to the Bases and the Front Areas single-handed. It was necessary to make arrangements with the local French communities to look after the religious interests of the Jewish soldiers in their areas and to arrange for burials, and this I proceeded to do in Havre, Rouen, Paris, Versailles and Boulogne. I must especially allude to the keen personal interest taken in the local British-Jewish soldiers by the authorities of the Rouen Congregation, headed by their President, M. Fernand Lang. Both to myself and to the other Chaplains stationed in Rouen they on all occasions extended the utmost kindness and helpful assistance. In Boulogne, the Rev. M. Weill, and in Havre, the venerable Rev. M. Cahen, proved themselves warm-hearted friends of the Jewish soldier.

On my first arrival at Rouen a surprise awaited me, as the Principal Chaplain showed me a letter from the Army Council in which it was laid down that I "was not to venture beyond the lines of communication on the chance of meeting with the adherents of my Faith." Dr. Simms at once expressed his agreement that this would limit my powers of usefulness to a considerable degree, and, through his kind intervention, I shortly afterwards received permission to visit G.H.Q., then at St. Omer, and made the acquaintance of the principal authorities there. The foundations of my future work were thus successfully laid.

During my first visit to the B.E.F. I went to Paris, where I came into close contact with the late Grand Rabbin M. Alfred Lévy, as I had a scheme to provide the Jewish soldiers in France with *Motzas* for the coming Passover. It was arranged that a local Jewish society should take the matter in hand as they were doing the same for the French Army. The expenses were raised in England, and I supplied a list of some 1,200 men to whom the food was to be forwarded. Unfortunately, the French Committee did not carry out my instructions, but sent the supplies to the main depot at Havre in a number of large crates. There they remained for a considerable time unopened, as I learnt to my annoyance later, when I received an official letter about three months after Passover, asking me what I wished to be done with the special food that was awaiting distribution! No further attempt was made to supply *Motzas* to soldiers in the Field until after the Armistice, when the Chief Rabbi was able to forward large supplies to France.

On my return to London, I presented a report to the War Office, which resulted in my being informed that I could return to the Front for as long a period as necessary. I paid a second round of visits to nearly all the same areas, before taking up my residence in St. Omer, near G.H.Q., in a billet situated in a narrow street close to the Mairie, which was known as "Burlington Arcade" or the "Dardanelles." From here I organised a series of services along the whole front, which, in those days, extended from Ypres in the north to Bethune in the south, and was occupied by the First and Second Armies, and also kept in touch with the widely-scattered camps and medical units of the forward districts.

With the help of Dr. Simms and G.H.Q., a motor car was placed at my disposal, which was certainly an exceptional privilege, but, naturally, was indispensable for my work over the huge area under my charge.