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200 years of migration to England

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At the end of June, 1915, the Chief Rabbi paid a visit to France, when he had an interview with Sir John French, then in command of the Army, and dined at the house of Lieut.-General Sir Neville Macready, the Adjutant-General. From both of these distinguished soldiers, we heard words of commendation of the services rendered in the battle-field by men of the Jewish faith. After a service in the Soldiers' Club at St. Omer, I escorted Dr. Hertz to the Front areas where we visited Ypres a month after the great battle in which the enemy had first used gas in their attacks, and also to the stricken area south of Bethune, where we held a service in the square of Mazingarbe, well known to all soldiers who have been in the line in the Loos and Vermelles sectors. As the shells of the enemy were exploding quite near to us, I was very glad when the car took us safely out of this dangerous zone.

On our way to visit Ypres, we halted for lunch at a Casualty Clearing Station. This was situated in the famous Trappist Monastery of Mont-des-Cats, which stands at the top of a hill behind Bailleul, prominent for many miles round. From this building one could see clearly the ruins of Ypres and the whole line as far as Bethune. As we entered the gates and sent in our names through the sentry, we were met by Lieut.-Col. W. P. Peake, R.A.M.C., and the Chaplain, the Rev. Mr. Tate. We were received most hospitably, and the Chaplain, who had been trained in a Scottish school of theology, on learning that we were Jews, addressed us in Hebrew words of welcome. As I afterwards lived at this Monastery for some months, I learnt that Mr. Tate possessed a sound knowledge of the Hebrew language. I remember on the first visit that we examined the admission and discharge books of the C.C.S. to see if there were any Jewish patients there, and found a man by the name of Cohen entered as a member of the Church of England. We visited him and learnt that he was not a Jew, much to the surprise of Dr. Hertz. I had already come across several soldiers bearing the names of Cohen, Levy, Isaacs and Solomons who were Christians—a fact which put me on my guard against accepting any man as a Jew unless I was absolutely certain that he belonged to the Faith. A day's motor run from St. Omer took us to Rouen where the Chief Rabbi preached to a large congregation, after which we were entertained by the President, M. Lang. The visit closed with a service in Boulogne.

Arrangements were made in November, 1917, for the Chief Rabbi to pay a second visit to the Front; but, owing to unforeseen circumstances, this trip had to be abandoned at the last moment.

My work now developed by my deciding to leave G.H.Q. in order to live at the Mont-des-Cats Monastery—much nearer to the trenches. I wrote to Col. Peake asking him if he could find accommodation for me among his Mess, and he replied that "he would gladly do so if I would follow the doctrine of the Rechabites of the Bible." I replied that I was willing to do this as far as the custom of dwelling in a tent was concerned, but I could not bind myself to the other law of the Rechabites in regard to beverages. Until the Battle of Loos in September, I lived in a tent in the monks' garden, using as my office the bedroom of the Colonel—whose personal kindness to me, and to the Rev. V. G. Simmons, C.F., who succeeded me, will never be forgotten. My stay at this centre for many months was full of interest, for it was here that, at the invitation of the Colonel, I delivered two addresses to the officers and men of the unit at the Sunday afternoon services. I also held services here, in a room full of crucifixes, for the Jewish soldiers of Canadian and Imperial Divisions encamped round the hill.

A series of talks which I gave to the men of the C.C.S., dealing with the religion and history of the Jews, created considerable interest. I had already delivered similar addresses in Y.M.C.A. huts in Rouen, and later, when at Achiet-le-Grand, six lectures to crowded audiences were successfully given.

From Mont-des-Cats I was able to supervise the whole of the front line of the two Armies which were then in France, with occasional runs to the Bases when necessity arose. Shortly after I had taken up my residence in this forward area, I received a letter from a Chaplain, the Rev. Mr. Williams, sending me a nominal roll of Jews of the 17th Division to which he was attached. This act of courtesy led me to visit him in his billet at Reninghelst, near Poperinghe, where I lunched with a group of Chaplains of different denominations, and was asked to recite the Hebrew "Grace at Meals." Here I learnt that no objection would be taken at any Divisional Headquarters to my receiving these lists of Jews. These returns were therefore obtained two or three times a year, a privilege which was conceded to Jewish Chaplains alone, and of enormous help in the organisation of our work. Before a service could be conducted, arrangements were made through the Divisional Headquarters for the time and place, which would be any day of the week and any hour convenient for the men. Secret information was given concerning the location of troops and when they were not actually in the front line on duty. At G.H.Q. I was allowed to visit the O.B. (Order of

Battle) department and learn all necessary for my work. Staff officers were amused at seeing me write down the information about troops and movements in Hebrew, and the hope was expressed that no German understanding this language would capture my note-books. Orders were issued about the services in the Divisional Orders and a postcard was sent by me to every officer and man giving him details of the meetings, and these cards were distributed by the Divisional Headquarters. Notices of the services were placarded in Y.M.C.A. huts, and thus attracted the attention of stray soldiers. Their devotion to Judaism was exemplified by the eagerness of the men to attend these services under the most difficult conditions and frequently after long journeys, and the form of service I originated was based upon the Soldiers' Prayer Book, a work which was very greatly treasured by the men. Of this book, which I compiled in August, 1914, and the Chief Rabbi enlarged later, over 100,000 copies have been printed, and it has been used by the Army in all parts of the world. It has also served as a model for the American Military Prayer Book. A part of our service was in English, with familiar passages in Hebrew, as we desired to enlist the interest of those men who had no knowledge of the sacred tongue. Many a soldier whom I personally asked to come to the services informed me that he did not wish to attend, as he knew no Hebrew; but, upon my urging him not to absent himself, most of them presented themselves and never failed to come a second time. It was interesting to observe that the knowledge of Hebrew seemed better among soldiers from the large provincial cities than among London men—a difference which one could easily detect during the course of a service, and especially in the singing of hymns like *Adon Olam* and the *Yigdal*, which formed part of every ritual.

We held these services in all kinds of places—often in the open air and in Y.M.C.A. or Church Army huts; sometimes in barns or in ruined buildings destroyed by the enemy's shells, or in billets set apart for our convenience. On one occasion during the Somme battles of 1916, when visiting a R.A.F. balloon unit in Fricourt Wood, the C.O. ordered us to shelter in an old German dug-out as it was not safe where we were standing. In the village of Morlancourt, near Albert, an old disused church was utilised by me for a service; many a village town hall (or *Mairie*) witnessed a Jewish gathering for worship; on one occasion the 56th London Division Headquarters ordered a marquee to be specially erected for a service in the middle