

# A JEWISH MILITARY COLLECTION

## JONATHAN FISHBURN ON MILITARIA AND THE HISTORY OF JEWISH SERVICEMEN

A while back, a friend asked me to find a prayer book used by British Jewish soldiers in the First World War. I found one, and showed him several other booklets issued by the Chief Rabbi for serving soldiers and sailors as well as the British Jewry Book of Honour, a massive tome attesting to the service and sacrifice of Jewish soldiers in the First World War. He was hooked, and now, six years later, his rather innocuous initial request led to amassing a cache of over 400 varied documents and ephemera focussing on Jews in the military since 1814. I am just putting the finishing touches on a catalogue of these items (which is the first extensive catalogue of this type of material that I am aware of) as he's decided to change his collecting focus and asked me to sell his collection – one that would be almost impossible to replicate today.

I have always tried to focus on unusual and interesting Jewish ephemera and my friend's enthusiasm and interest gave me the impetus to pursue a wide range of Jewish militaria. My earliest piece is a volume of the European Magazine at the time of the Peninsular War 1814 containing the translation of two services praying for the welfare and success of British soldiers - one service is from Bevis Marks, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue (still standing in all its glory) and the other is from the Ashkenazi Great Synagogue (which no longer exists). There are a few items I never managed to find, but would have dearly wanted including Rabbi Solomon Hirschel's Sermon of Thanksgiving 'for the success of His Majesty's Fleet .. off Trafalgar, 5th December 1805' preached at the Great Synagogue, London; and the order of service for British soldiers in the American War of Independence in 1776.

So what constitutes a 'Jewish Military collection'? Until the 18th century, European Jews were not allowed to participate in large swathes of public life, however, with the advent of emancipation, Jews became integrated into the wider society, where they were both expected to and greatly aspired to play their part in their host societies. Jews demonstrated their patriotism by serving in army and by praying for the welfare of their armies in synagogues. This collection includes

prayers for British soldiers in the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, the Boer War, the First World War and also includes tiny prayer books and history books for the use of soldiers so they could be secreted away into little pockets in a soldier's uniform. There are postcards for sending home, including some photographic cards showing soldiers participating in the Seder night (Passover Eve) fully decked out in German uniform. There are extraordinary prints showing artists' impressions of prayers for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, during the Franco- Prussian War.



The material in this collection is rare as it was not published commercially and given its ephemeral nature makes it less likely to survive and less likely to be acquired by institutions at the time. Some of the items are very poignant, for example, the *Prayer Book for Jewish Sailors and Soldiers* starts with a prayer for sailors and soldiers on active service followed by a **Prayer Before a Battle in Hebrew and English** – “Our Father in Heaven, be with us at this hour! Lead us through victory to peace...” and there are prayers for the sick and wounded.

Amongst my favourites are Colonel Wahab's *Notes on the Jews Serving in the Bombay Army. Translated into Marathi .....* Bombay, 1879. In the English introduction it quotes the Voice of Jacob, a London Jewish newspaper from 1845 saying that there were many 'Beni- Israels' in the Bombay army and that they were well behaved and good soldiers.'

A Haggadah (service for Passover) that was produced for soldiers in the British Army in the Boer War is probably the first Haggadah ever produced for soldiers. Some copies (unfortunately not mine) contain the following printed letter:

.... It occurs to me that my brethren who are fighting in South Africa may ..... desire to gather together in their respective encampments on the 13th April, the eve of Passover. I take the liberty therefore of enclosing a copy of a shortened form in English of Passover Eve Service.... Let me at the same time offer ..... best wishes for the health and safety of all in the Queen's service. May the approaching festival whether it appeals to them as Passover or Easter, bring the elation of victory..... Alfred Louis Cohen.

Amongst my favourite items are a book dedicated to German Jewish Fighter pilots and a small packet of photographs published in Berlin during WW1. The photos include Jewish chaplains on active service and one memorable photo is of a prayer book pierced by the bullet that saved the life of the soldier who had it in his pocket!

What intrigues me is that sometimes different types of materials were produced for different armies or the emphasis was sometimes different depending on the country. For example, the Jewish Welfare Board in America, founded 3 days after America entered the First World War, produced many postcards for soldiers to send back home. There are also quite a few German Jewish military postcards but there are very few English ones.

I always wondered why there seemed to be more items produced for German Jewish soldiers than British ones during the First World War and it was explained to me that there were twice as many Jewish chaplains in the German army (30 as opposed to 15). British Jewry is more centralised and much of the material was issued by the Chief Rabbi's Office. I found very little French material and after much hunting found a prayer book for French Jewish soldiers and a couple of pamphlets.

After the First World War there are a number of 'Books of Honour' to record the sacrifices, and honours received by Jewish soldiers. Aside from the British Jewry Book of Honour, there was an

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Australian Jewry Book of Honour, one for Hungarian Jews, one for Bulgarian Jews during the Balkan wars 1912-1918, and the most were published in Germany, often related to the Jews of a particular town. Much of the motivation for producing these books was combating rising anti-Semitism from the Fascists who claimed that Jews were shirkers and profiteers and to demonstrate the patriotic and distinguished service of many Jewish citizens. Rev Michael Adler was motivated by this in producing the British Jewry Book of Honour.

In contrast to the very substantial and robust monument of the British Jewry Book of Honour is the extremely ephemeral cyclostyled newsletter, Magen David (Star of David), published by Congregation Ohev Shalom (a group of American Jewish Soldiers). It was initially printed in Finschhafen, New Guinea, and later in Yokahama Japan. It contained news about Jews around the world especially about the Holocaust survivors in Europe and events in Palestine. There is also the cyclostyled newsletter Kol Korea printed in Seoul in 1946 advising soldiers of the regional Sedarim (Passover Eve meals) in Seol and Pusan.

Building this collection was both fascinating and humbling – I am sure there's many a future PhD to be written out of this material – and as Adolph Tuck noted in his preface to the British Jewry Book of Honour about Jewish soldiers,

“.... The sacrifices which they have made for civilization and for freedom show that those who have been accorded equal liberties, irrespective of creed, have not been found wanting at a time their country had most need of them.”

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## TWO-GUN COHEN

of the CHINESE ARMY

A Thrilling True Story by MICHAEL O'BRIEN



**T**HE bombing of Pearl Harbor was not the beginning of World War II. Thirteen years ago Japan started out on its "inspired" mission to conquer and rule the world by taking over China. The young republic of China was weak, it had no army, it was almost defenseless. It should have been easy. It would have been easy—except for Chinese courage, and such men as Two-Gun Cohen. He stalks through the epic of China's war with Japan, a square-shouldered, powerful man with mild gray eyes and two six-shooters strapped to his hips. He was aide-camp and bodyguard to Sun-Yat-Sen, beloved first president of China.

To millions of Chinese he is General Mah-Con, the name being a typical Chinese shortening of his real name, Morris Abraham Cohen. But the name "Mah" in China is an old and honored one, so Two-Gun knows that the Chinese have paid him a very high compliment indeed.

It was General Mah-Con who bought, begged, borrowed and wheedled planes and tanks and guns, who with bare hands and sweat and tears and blood helped to whip together an army of Chinese farmers that has held off the Imperial Japanese troops for 13 years!

Talk about citizens of the world—Cohen was born in England of Jewish ancestry, is a Canadian citizen, talks with an Irish accent, and is a Chinese general!

*A Dangerous Foe*

The Japs rightly considered him a very dangerous enemy, since it was he who almost alone, built the Chinese Army. When they captured Hong Kong after Pearl Harbor they caught Two-Gun Cohen there and presently news came to China that Mah-Con had been shot.

Like Mark Twain he might have said, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." For when the liner *Gripsholm*, carrying exchange passengers from Jap prisons docked at New York in 1943, General Cohen was on board. He was 81 pounds lighter, his big frame almost a skeleton and his eyes bloodshot from starvation, but the fighting gleam was still in them.

A Canadian official who was at the dock was annoyed by questions about Cohen. "There is no such person," he sniffed. "A magazine made a crack some time ago about Canada producing two great generals—McNaughton and Cohen. Cohen must be a gag. Who ever heard of a Canadian being a general in the Chinese Army?"

"This one is," said the questioner.

The official finally went to see for himself. He came back looking very much upset, like a man who has seen a ghost.

"There is a General Cohen," he said. "He is in his cabin right now and getting ready to go and confer with the Prime Minister of Canada. He is definitely not a gag!"

*A Great Dream*

Born in the slums of London, Morris Cohen spent his childhood trying to get enough to eat. He came to Canada at the age of 16 and worked for a while at odd jobs on farms and elsewhere. At twenty he was manager of the largest real estate firm in Canada.

He met Dr. Sun-Yat-Sen, then a refugee from his native land and became fired with



GENERAL COHEN

**HELLO -**  
**JUST GOT BACK**  
AM FEELING GREAT  
WILL WRITE SOON AGAIN

Going to Camp *Merritt*



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ROME AREA ALLIED COMMAND

**JEWISH HIGH HOLY DAYS**  
SERVICES FOR ALLIED PERSONNEL  
IN THE ROME AREA  
AT THE  
**QUIRINO THEATRE**  
Corner of Via dell'Umiltà and Via delle Vergini

**ROSH HASHANAH**  
NEW YEAR

Friday Evening	7 September	1930 Hours
Saturday Morning	8 September	0900 Hours
Saturday Evening	8 September	1930 Hours
Sunday Morning	9 September	0900 Hours

**YOM KIPPUR**  
DAY OF ATONEMENT

Sunday	16 September	1900 Hours
Monday	17 September	0900 Hours