

## **Words of Remembrance – The Beginning of “Operation Levi”**

**Warmeriville, France**

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**by Dirk Backen**

**Secretary General of the German War Graves Commission**

(Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e. V.)

Dear Rabbi Schacter,

Dear Rabbi Balla,

Dear Members of the Levi Family,

Honorable and Distinguished Guests,

In December 2023 the German War Graves Commission (Volksbund) disinterred an American Jewish soldier of WW II, who had died in June 1944 in a German field hospital after serious wounding in Normandy. This American hero had been buried in a mass grave together with numerous German soldiers for 79 years before he came home. Home to his nation; home to his fallen comrades; home to his faith. Buried last June in Coleville-sur-Mer, the US war cemetery at Omaha Beach, with full military honors and in presence of family members and friends, his headstone eventually now bears the Star of David.

The aforementioned case of identifying Lieutenant Nathan B. Baskind goes back to an initiative by Operation Benjamin, an American Jewish charity organisation who works on war graves where Jewish soldiers are buried mistakenly under a Latin cross. Driven by admirable religious inspiration and the sense of deeply felt humanity, Operation Benjamin became a valuable partner for the Volksbund not only in the Baskind case but far beyond what I could have imagined in those early days of our friendship.

The Baskind case had ignited a flame deep inside of my soul and I cannot but admit today that I have rarely done more important and emotionally lasting things in my life than to find and bury this American hero.

When it comes to terms like country, honor and heroes the German history becomes complex and difficult. The massive war crimes and as we call it “the break of culture” by the Nazis have cast a heavy shadow on my country, especially when we remember the Holocaust which ended luckily 80 years ago but having killed over 6 million Jews in Europe. Thinking of Jews almost immediately focusses us on the time between 1933 and 1945. However, this is only a part of the whole truth when we go back in recent German history, even if it is the overwhelmingly dominant part of it.

Just 4 weeks after the disinterment of Nathan B. Baskind in Normandy I followed an invitation of the university of Reims in the beautiful Champagne region in Northern France. I took part in a lively discussion with students about remembrance and reconciliation. Of course, travelling so far away from our headquarters in Kassel, central Germany, I took the chance to visit some of the surrounding German war cemeteries of the First World War. Just a few months before 24 German war cemeteries as part of a group of 139 multinational war cemeteries of WW I were declared as UNESCO world heritage. So, my staff took me among other locations to this cemetery here in Warmériville. It might

not look impressive to you and that is on purpose. Our WW I cemeteries are following a very modest approach. Please keep in mind that WW I had almost completely devastated Northern France in a terrible trench war and after the peace treaty of Versailles in 1919 it seems like a miracle to me that the French allowed German war cemeteries at all.

Thus, on Monday, January 22, 2024, I entered this cemetery with my colleagues and immediately spotted the well-known Jewish headstones. So many thoughts were lingering through my mind. Jews were the victims of the Holocaust; I had learned all of this at school; I had visited concentration camps; I had visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC; and I had been at Yad Vashem. But how did these headstones fit into my own perception of German Jewdom, of "Beit Israel"?

These German Jewish soldiers were fighting for Germany. They were patriots and had followed the call to arms in August 1914 by the tens of thousands. These fallen soldiers were not victims in the same sense as the Jews the Germans had murdered in Auschwitz or Buchenwald. There were even military rabbis in the German army. We estimate that over 100,000 Jews fought in WW I and about 12,000 of them paid the ultimate price, not counting the veterans with permanent wounds, the loss of limbs or injuries of their mental health.

1914, in principle all Jews had the same rights as anybody in Germany, however, antisemitism was a widespread virus at that time, not only in Germany. You rarely found a Jewish officer or a Jewish judge in Germany. Nevertheless, after the German unification in 1871 the Jewish population in Germany even grew. However, their growth was also due to immigration from Eastern Europe. The Jewish population emigrated from there and the Prussian eastern provinces not only as a result of severe poverty and the poor economic situation, but also in response to anti-Jewish riots from the 1880s onwards. By 1910, around 70,000 Jews had immigrated to the entire German Empire from Eastern Europe. Most of them settled in the large cities of Prussia, Saxony and Bavaria.

When the war broke out the German Kaiser declared "I only know Germans", which encouraged especially Jews to volunteer for the army. It was their contribution in the ongoing struggle for emancipation, proving their value for the nation and showing their loyal citizenship in a time of need.

Even if the discrimination seemed to stop significantly with the outbreak of the war the political dark forces were not eliminated. Rumours spread that Jews were not fighting like the rest of the society and in 1916 the Military High Command issued an order to count the Jews in all military positions to find evidence for this allegation. Not surprisingly the result proved the opposite. There was absolutely no evidence that Jews did not perform their patriotic chores like all other Germans. However, the result was kept secret, and the rumours and prejudices survived and even grew after the war leading to further political extremism with the consequences, we all know of.

Jewish veterans fought desperately for their honor after the war and against growing propaganda and hatred. When I see Jewish headstones on our cemeteries, I do have an overwhelming feeling of saying "Sorry, we treated you badly. You fought as our brothers in arms by our side. You were sons, friends, neighbors from our hometowns. You were one of us. We never gave you the remembrance you truly deserve."

Healing that old sin of Germany has become my personal mission. Back in January, 2024, when I walked over this cemetery, I spotted from the corner of my eye a Latin cross, reading Levi Meier. Levi? That does not sound like a typical German first name, like Hans or Fritz. "Levi, that sounds Jewish! The tribe of Levi is one of the 12 tribes of Israel, traditionally descended from Levi, son of Jacob.", so far I knew...

Could it be that we falsely have a German Jewish soldier not buried properly under the Star of David? Back in our headquarters, I immediately tasked my team to look into the case. It took my best expert, Ilka Borowski, just a few minutes to find out that we had a hit. First of all, the name was wrong, it wasn't Levi Meier (Meier is a very common German last name) it was "Meyer Levi", where Meyer is not an uncommon Jewish first name. Both, the official birth and death certificate, identified him as a Jew. This made his headstone wrong, a Latin cross.

How could that happen? The first place he was buried is called Isles-sur-Suippes. After WW I had ended, the French authorities reorganised the German war cemeteries combining smaller lots with larger ones. Often the original religious symbols were lost in this course of action. Sometimes all graves just received crosses made of birchwood.

The German Reich was not allowed to operate officially in France and so the Volksbund – a private association - stepped in and slowly but steadily took over the task of taking care of the German war graves. Since then, the Volksbund has replaced hundreds of false headstones with the Star of David. However, the Twenties were already a decade where Jewish families started to emigrate from Germany because antisemitism grew stronger and stronger. The memories were by and by lost and the graves became forgotten.

We estimate that there are hundreds, even beyond one thousand, more cases out there like this one. Meyer Levi is not the only one. In a small series of events we can replace several headstones today and tomorrow between here and Bertrimoutier. I am extraordinarily grateful to Operation Benjamin who helped us to identify family members in the United States and in other nations. In the Jewish family traditions, it means something. It means something valuable. And what makes it even more valuable for me is the fact that this is just the beginning of an initiative the Volksbund has started. Operation Levi will work for justice, religious decency and for reconciliation.

Meyer Levi died on the 29th of December 1917 at the age of 25. His rank was "Landsturmmann", a private of the reserve of the 7th company, fusilier regiment no. 80. He fell as a German patriot and a Jewish citizen of my country. We are allowed to honor him today, though this does not mean to honor an aggressive warmonger that Germany was in those days. The nation loaded guilt on her shoulder, Meyer Levi can not be held accountable for this. He fought with his best of intentions.

Today we are a new generation. We have learned from history, against all odds. Oscar Wilde, the famous Irish poet, once said: "Every saint has a past, and every sinner has future." I find this very comforting. We are not defined by our past, we are defined and will be judged by what we do today, tomorrow and in the future.

I bow my head in honest and deep remembrance and I salute Meyer Levi. He is my comrade, he is my fellow citizen, he is my brother. May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.

May he rest in peace.

*"Möge er in Frieden ruhen."*

*"Alaw haschalom."*