

# Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight



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## From One War to the Next: Antisemitism in the U.S. Military as Experienced by One Jewish Family

Recollections from American soldiers who served in World War I and II often include witnessing, experiencing, or even propagating antisemitism. Antisemitic actions and rhetoric were directed both towards fellow servicemen and European Jews. But attitudes towards Jews in the American military changed between the two conflicts. One family's collection of war-time correspondence in the archives of the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center shows a father and son having distinctly different encounters with other American soldiers during the two World Wars.

For the Gorfinkle family of Boston, interactions with non-Jewish servicemen often included subtle or overt prejudice against the Jewish people. The motivation for antisemitism was quite different in the First and Second World Wars, and this change over time was reflected in letters home to family and friends. Bernard Gorfinkle (1889–1973) was first deployed in the Mexican Expedition that the United States undertook in 1916 against Revolutionary leader Pancho Villa, and he then served in the European theater in World War I. Bernard stayed close to his Jewish comrades in wartime, writing home often about their religious services, social gatherings, military successes and failures, and shared grief at Jewish losses.

Bernard rarely wrote home about antisemitic experiences among the troops. During the First World War, the most persistent anti-Jewish prejudice in the military was the accusation that Jewish men were cowardly and tried to evade service. Such assumptions about Jewish cowardice were long-standing tropes imported to the United States from across Europe, where many countries barred Jewish men from military service or advancement. Jewish men who were already established in the American military were less bombarded by claims of Jewish weakness, unsuitability for army life, or accusations of malingering. But discussions of those Jews unable to pass muster continued.<sup>1</sup>

Captain Bernard Gorfinkle's pass issued by the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, established after World War I ended.





Above: Bernard Gorfinkle (left) and another soldier pictured with a World War I Jewish gravestone.  
 Right: A letter and envelope dated January 9, 1917, from Bernard Gorfinkle in France to his sister Ida in Boston.

Jan. 9th-17  
France

Hallo Ida:

Am anxiously awaiting yours and Mother's arrival on the 10 o'clock train from Boston, as I just received your Oct 3rd letter telling me of your coming. However, don't you think you had better wait until the war is over?

Your letter was among the big bunch of delayed mail. Was terribly sorry I did not get a chance to say good-bye, but I told you the reasons.

Did you get my letter a few weeks ago?

You want to spruce up on your French. I have some sort of an idea that you know it; maybe I will be some frog leg speakers when I return.

That's a good idea about your again studying short-hand, etc. If the store goes , what can't you get a government job of some sort, to help out.

Whooh? Didn't I laugh to myself when I read of Mark's possibility of being on guard of the Atlantic Ocean or Deer Island. I bet he would rather be in France. Is he entitled to have a star hung out for him? Have you got one stuck up for me?

Tell the Oppenheims that I am going to write, but have been confounded busy.

What can I ship you from France. Don't hesitate. Is Men Cohen sore on me?

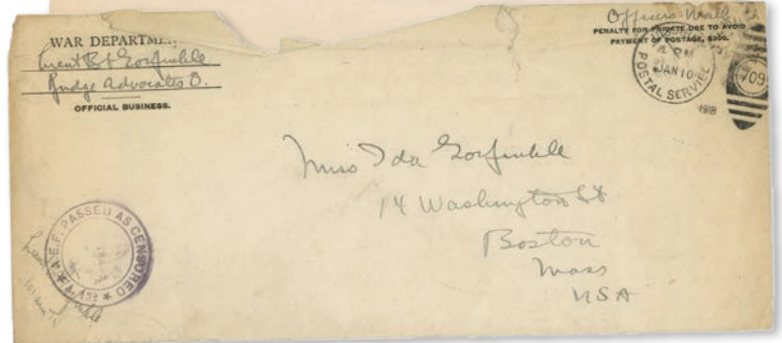
Did you give the \$50.00 check from Cohen to Mark to deposit in the bank? I hope Mark is not allowing my few dollars to be idle.

Am writing home today, how be all?

Best of love, and write more often,

Ben.

Regards to the pedlars, individually and as a bunch if it will help business any.



When Bernard did communicate about his comrades' antisemitism, he wrote in broken Yiddish, to keep his profile low and under the radar of military censors. Bernard eventually advanced and received an appointment as a Summary Court Officer. Acting as a judge in military cases in his camp gave him a position of real power. Explaining this promotion to his brother, he added, "Yoi vill ich einreibben day goyem,"<sup>2</sup> meaning he would rub his new position in the faces of his non-Jewish comrades. This small hint of tension revealed the antisemitism in the ranks, and that Bernard Gorfinkle felt the need to prove himself as a Jew in Uncle Sam's Army.

Bernard kept up with Jewish rituals as resolutely as he could, even when the military failed to provide him access to religious rites and observances. Before Jewish chaplains arrived in his area, Bernard worked to inform families of Jewish soldiers killed in action of the gravesites of their loved ones, and ensured they received a Star of David (instead of the standard cross) on their grave markers.<sup>3</sup> Bernard held services when his Jewish comrades died, sought out Jewish communities wherever he was stationed, and kept in touch with American Jewish organizations to help provide Jewish soldiers with the basic means to practice their faith. His determination to retain his Jewishness and keep up his religious observance is well summarized in his own words: "I sit in my little seat reading the siddur [prayer book] and reminding myself that I am a Jew yet and I

know that the Almighty is going to be with me the entire time. As yet I have not eat[en] ham or bacon and do not expect to."<sup>4</sup>

A generation later, in 1942, Bernard returned to the military to serve as New England Field Supervisor for the War Manpower Commission. His son, Herbert Gorfinkle (1923–2000), enlisted in the Army in 1943. Herbert's military experience was quite different from his father's.

Although some aspects had improved, like the services and religious observances available to Jewish enlisted men, Hebert eventually found it difficult to advance, despite his successes in each of his positions. In his early days of service, as he rose through the ranks from private to corporal, Herbert experienced little antisemitism in the training camps. He wrote to his father, "Some of the men resent Jews but I've had no trouble so far. Most of them don't think I am and at times make remarks. But when you figure the average mentality of

the American Army is that of a nine year old, one takes pity on them. My mental condition is so much higher than most of the men I can run circles around any of their conversations.”<sup>5</sup>

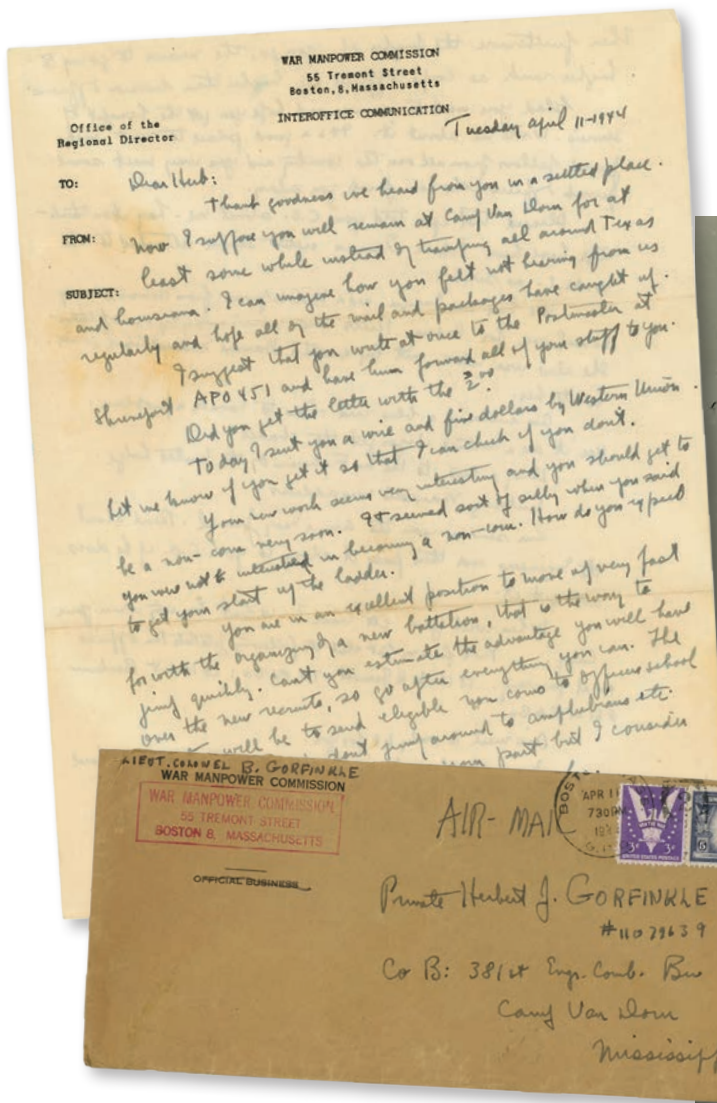
But only a few months later, he shared with his father the bad hand he was being dealt by jealous comrades and antisemites. He explained that of the seven non-commissioned officers in his platoon, “five are real Jew haters, and one partial, the other too stupid to know.” He added, “They know I’m Jewish, but they all think I’m only part due to their ignorant ideas on what a Jew is supposed to look like and act.”<sup>6</sup> And, indeed, tension surrounding Jews escalated in the military during the war.

By the war’s end, many American GIs blamed Jews (both American and European) for dragging the United States into the conflict. These sentiments could be seen among soldiers in their platoons and in their off-duty behavior as well. Herbert sent a clipping from an army periodical that included an antisemitic diatribe from a

soldier who asked outright if the United States joined the war “solely to liberate the Jews,” and accused those placing memorial stones depicting a Star of David at the mass graves at Dachau of “trying to illustrate to the Germans that the Jews are superman and that the Star of David will replace the Swastika.”<sup>7</sup>

While Herbert struggled with anti-Jewish sentiment in his platoon, on the home front, his sister Ruth also experienced antisemitism from American military personnel. On July 4, 1944, Ruth wrote in a particularly tense account what a good time she and her two friends had been enjoying with a few “white and good-looking” sailors before a “diverting experience,” in which the sailors started harshly criticizing the Jewish people. As she and her friends had the surnames Gorfinkle, Cohen, and Greenberg, they left in a hurry.<sup>8</sup>

In April 1945, in his position as an Army photographer, Herbert arrived at Buchenwald as it was liberated by American forces. While documenting the



Left: A letter and envelope from Lieut. Col. Bernard Gorfinkle to his son, Private Herbert Gorfinkle, April 11, 1944.  
Below: Wartime photo of Herbert Gorfinkle.





Ruth Gorfinkle.

concentration camp, Herbert was exposed to the effects of the most brutal and shocking antisemitism—the likes of which his father could have never imagined. Although he rarely wrote about these experiences—despite his father urging him to share what he was seeing—Herbert reported seeing people enslaved and murdered on a colossal scale.<sup>9</sup> He was far less vague about his own disillusionment. “I always wanted the Army—always waved a flag, my hand is starting to get weak, it is drooping a little, but it is still clasping the flag.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps unable to comprehend the gravity of what his son had seen at Dachau, Bernard tried to reassure Herbert about the survival of the Jewish people. Responding to a letter Herbert wrote about the “Jewish question,” and in a rare moment of openness about antisemitism, Bernard asserted, “The older you get, the more you will learn that the Jews are a proud people and on the whole successful. This is what riles the Gentiles and they then try to take advantage of our minority in numbers.”<sup>11</sup> As Herbert’s original letter prompting this response from his father seems to have been left out of the collection, it is impossible to know if Bernard was responding to

Herbert’s own experiences with antisemitic prejudice, or the devastation he witnessed in Europe.

But Bernard’s assurances of Jewish survival imply that whatever his son had shared and whatever antisemitism he himself had experienced had not been so intense as to crush his spirit, or cause his flag-waving hand to droop, as it had Herbert’s. He philosophized, “The Jew has survived persecution for centuries and is still here, so overlook the ignorance of those who have not the brains to succeed. Prayer and respect for God should get a Jew over his toughest problems.”<sup>12</sup>

Bernard and Herbert’s joint experience, tied across the first half of the twentieth century by blood, love, and letters, shows two soldiers fighting for the same side, and always grappling with the tense relationship between their love of country and their country’s love of them. ♦

<sup>1</sup> Bernard often wrote about the number of Jewish soldiers his unit still had, how they were faring, and how many had been killed. Another soldier represented in the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center collections, William Marcus, wrote about how many Jewish men were rejected from the military and were unable to complete training. Marcus and Feldman Family Papers, P-1008, Box 1, Folder 4, letter dated July 2, 1918.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Gorfinkle, P-664, Box 1, Folder 2, letter dated September 18, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Folder 3, letter dated April 16, 1918.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Folder 1, letter written en route to El Paso, 1916.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Gorfinkle, P-904, Box 1, Folder 19, letter dated May 17, 1944.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., letter dated August 6, 1944.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Box 3, Folder 1, newspaper clipping, “The B Bag: Blow It Out Here.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, letter dated July 4, 1944.

<sup>9</sup> He mentioned, almost in passing, “the doctor who was sterilizing all the people of Europe” and “the boy whose job it was to execute 3000 people in a month.” Ibid., Box 1, Folder 20, letter dated June 20, 1945.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1945 letter with no day or month noted.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Gorfinkle, Box 3, Folder 1, letter dated July 29, 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.