

JEWISH SOLDIERS ON THE ISONZO FRONT

JEWISH SOLDIERS OF THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN ARMY ON THE ISONZO FRONT

The First World War (1914–1918) drew no fewer than 36 countries into the conflict, involving people of numerous nationalities, languages and religious backgrounds. The bloody battles along the Isonzo (Soča) River between 1915 and 1917 thus bore a distinctly multinational and multireligious character. Among the soldiers of both the Austro-Hungarian and Italian armies were Jews. The army of the predominantly Catholic Habsburg Monarchy was regarded as the most ethnically diverse military force in Europe at the time. Like the Italian and French armies, it also included Jewish officers in its ranks—something that could by no means be taken for granted; Germany, Austria-Hungary's ally, admitted Jewish officers into its formations only in 1914. Emperor Franz Joseph I regarded the Jews as among his most loyal subjects, while Austro-Hungarian Jews themselves often described the Emperor as a “bulwark of tolerance.”

Since Roman times, Jewish tradition has held that a member of the Jewish community is anyone born to a Jewish mother. Children of Jewish fathers were not considered Jewish unless they converted. This principle is still recognised by many Jewish communities today. The Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century brought a crisis of identity for Jews in Western and Central Europe. Many Jews, particularly those serving in the military, abandoned older traditional understandings of Jewish identity and embarked upon a path of emancipation and assimilation.

By the beginning of the First World War, only two Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Army had attained the rank of general; during the war, three more Jewish officers became generals. Among them, Major General Maximilian Maendl von Bughardt (1860–1929) distinguished himself on the Isonzo Front. He commanded the 21st Landsturm Brigade and later the 21st Mountain Brigade. For his courage in the defence of the Gorizia bridgehead, he was raised to the nobility in 1916 and promoted to major general a year later.

Colonel Otto Grossmann (1873–1942) of the 14th Mountain Brigade was also of Jewish origin. His unit was already fighting on the Karst Plateau in the summer of 1915. Despite his wartime service, Grossmann's life ended during the Holocaust in Theresienstadt, the concentration camp and ghetto that the Nazis presented as a camp for “privileged” prisoners.

On Pentecost Sunday, 23 May 1915, Italy declared war on its former ally and Italian troops crossed the state border with Austria-Hungary. A front line approximately 600 kilometres long was established, stretching from the Austro-Italian-Swiss tripoint near Mount Ortler to the Adriatic. Its southernmost section, and the one most suitable for offensive operations, became known after the Isonzo River as the Isonzo Front. A new battlefield thus opened in the south-west of the Monarchy, extending for more than ninety kilometres and shaping the lives of the population and the landscape along the Isonzo for 885 days, or twenty-nine months, from Mount Rombon through the Tolmin and Gorizia regions and across the Karst Plateau to the sea. For tactical reasons, Austro-Hungarian units evacuated Friuli, the Brda Hills and part of the Upper Soča Valley. At the beginning of hostilities, the Italian Army advanced cautiously and occupied the territory abandoned by Austro-Hungarian forces. During the fighting on the Isonzo Front, the Italians launched eleven offensives,

seeking to advance through the Vipava Valley towards the heart of the Monarchy and across the Karst towards Trieste. Despite appalling losses, they failed to penetrate deeply into Austro-Hungarian territory. Estimates of casualties during the long months of fighting range from one million men put out of action to 350,000 soldiers killed on both sides. The only major Italian success was the capture of Gorizia during the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo on 9 August 1916. The defenders then withdrew to reserve defensive positions along the line Vodice – Sveta Gora – Škabrijel – Sveta Katarina – Rožna Dolina – St Mark's Hill – the Vrtojba-Bilje Hills – Miren Castle – the Karst Plateau.

The attacking forces were commanded by the Chief of the Italian General Staff, General Count Luigi Cadorna, while the defenders consisted of the Austro-Hungarian Fifth Army under General Svetozar Boroević von Bojna. The war developed into positional warfare, characterised by trenches, caverns and bloody assaults. The civilian population also suffered severely and was forced to leave its homes and become refugees. Just as it appeared that the defenders were running short of manpower and matériel, combined Austro-Hungarian and German forces broke through on 24 October 1917 in what became known as the Miracle of Caporetto, or the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo. By early November 1917, they had pushed the Italians back to the Piave River, where the front stabilised and remained essentially unchanged until the end of the First World War.

According to military statistics and estimates, around 40,000 Jewish soldiers were killed during the First World War, including approximately one thousand officers. How many of them died on the Isonzo Front can, for the time being, only be estimated. This exhibition is an attempt to present the Jewish soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Army who fought on the territory of present-day Slovenia during the First World War.

JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN THE HABSBURG MONARCHY

Before the First World War, around 1.5 million Jews lived in Austria-Hungary, representing approximately 4.6% of the population. They were dispersed across different crown lands, including Galicia and Bukovina, and in cities such as Vienna, Budapest, Prague and Kraków. In the Monarchy's large cities, Jews were well integrated into bourgeois social life and were frequently found in responsible and respected professions as physicians, engineers, professors, civil servants and pharmacists. In Galicia, where Jews made up almost 12% of the population, there were also numerous predominantly Jewish rural settlements, known as shtetls, where Yiddish was the principal language. Jews were permitted to serve in the Austrian Army only from 1788. In 1911, there were just 109 Jews among the active officers of the Common Austro-Hungarian Army, amounting to 0.6% of the officer corps. Their number was somewhat higher among reserve officers, and proportionally highest among military physicians and in military administrative services. A higher percentage of Jewish officers served in the Hungarian Honvéd. They were least represented in the cavalry. Current estimates suggest that around 300,000 Jewish soldiers served in the Imperial and Royal armed forces between 1914 and 1918. Only the Imperial Russian Army conscripted more Jewish soldiers—around half a million. Owing to heavy officer losses during the first year of the war, the number of Jewish officers increased substantially as reservists were called up. Their above-average representation in the reserves largely reflected their higher level of education, since educated men in the Austro-Hungarian Army could serve as reserve officers.

Source: Anton Leo Hickmann, Geographisch-statistischer Taschen-Atlas von Österreich-Ungarn, Vienna/Leipzig: Kartogr. Anstalt G. Freytag & Berndt, 1910

LEGEND

Roman Catholics

Greek Catholics

Protestants

Orthodox Christians

Muslims

Distribution of the Jewish population

Cities: 2–5%; 5–10%; 10–15%; 15–25%; 25–50%; > 50%

Territory: 10–20%; 20–30%

JEWISH SOLDIERS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Greater or smaller numbers of Jewish soldiers could be found in most Austro-Hungarian regiments that fought on the Isonzo Front, with the largest numbers serving in units originating from the central and north-eastern parts of the Monarchy. “Today the 41st Regiment arrived (from Czernowitz in Bukovina, author’s note), guarding the front from Vrtojba to the Vipava River. Mostly Poles, mixed with Jews, Orthodox Christians and Protestants.” (Črniče Chronicle, 13 February 1917)

Source: Kriegsarchiv des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs, Vienna

Source: Društvo soška fronta Nova Gorica

A wooden synagogue built by Austro-Hungarian soldiers on the Doberdò Plateau in 1915.

SPIRITUAL CARE OF JEWISH SOLDIERS

A Jewish military rabbi (Feldrabbiner) was permitted to serve in the Austro-Hungarian Army only from 1875. With the outbreak of war, the need for military chaplains and rabbis increased considerably. By 1918, as many as 76 military rabbis were serving in the Austro-Hungarian Army. Among their duties was the censorship of letters from the front written in Hebrew script. The status of and respect for different religious denominations were regulated by military service rules. Alongside their basic religious mission, the army sought to ensure that religious activities fostered loyalty to the Emperor and the Monarchy and prevented possible conflicts arising from religious differences. Various state anniversaries—the Emperor’s birthday or name day, for example, and the anniversary of the Sarajevo assassination—were marked with particular solemnity. Many religious events took place immediately behind the front lines.

The dean of Črniče, Alojzij Novak, also encountered the spiritual care provided to Jewish soldiers behind the Isonzo Front. He recorded his observations in the Črniče Chronicle:

“The 21st Landsturm Brigade has now been stationed here with me for six weeks, while in the neighbouring villages the troops change almost every week. Yesterday—Saturday—I had an unusual guest, Moses Schwarz, Feldrabbiner. We discussed many things and debated

matters of dogma, although naturally we did not reach agreement. We read the Psalms in the Hebrew original—I was curious to see how much I still remembered from my studies in Vienna and how real rabbis pronounce Hebrew. I was amazed that even from university professors I had never heard such fine pronunciation of the most subtle nuances, etc. And the chanting of the Psalms in metre—how beautiful it is! I regret that I no longer have time to devote myself to this ancient language of our Old Testament. I was pleased with the rabbi because we discussed many things concerning their customs, dogmatic views and ritual ceremonies—and he was pleased because, in the most dreadful rain, he had a roof over his head in my office for twenty-four hours. He is very strictly observant: on Saturday he neither smoked nor wrote anything, nor did he even open a letter. Only when the Sabbath ended for him at five in the evening did he write a few words in my album, accept the note with my blessing, and depart for Bilje, from where he had come to conduct a religious service for the 96 Jews—soldiers—present here. It took place in the hall on the first floor of Bolko's house.”
(26 March 1916)

SYNAGOGUES ON THE FRONT

Before the war, the only Jewish community operating within the immediate area of fighting on the Isonzo Front was in Gorizia. Jews constituted the third significant religious community in the Gorizia region. They had settled in Gorizia as early as the Middle Ages and, although never numerous, played a notable role in the life of the city. They were principally engaged in finance, trade and the liberal professions. In 1756, they built a synagogue in the former ghetto near the Church of St John. The Jewish cemetery lay outside the city in Rožna Dolina (Valdirose), although still within the municipality of Gorizia. In 1915, around 250 Jews lived in the entire region, the great majority in the provincial capital. From 1911, Rabbi Hermann Friedenthal provided spiritual care for the Gorizia Jewish community; from 1915 to 1919 he lived as a refugee in Hungary. The Gorizia synagogue shared the fate of the devastated city and was reopened in 1920. Gorizia Jews who had supported the Italian political cause before the war nevertheless served in Austro-Hungarian units during the conflict, while some crossed to the Italian side and fought as irredentists for an Italian victory. The Jewish community of Gorizia no longer exists; it was destroyed during the Second World War. Its memory is preserved by the synagogue, which was converted into a museum in 1984, and by the Jewish cemetery in Rožna Dolina near Gorizia.

Source: Synagogue Museum, Gorizia

MILITARY SYNAGOGUES BEHIND THE ISONZO FRONT

MARIBOR

Source: Synagogue Museum, Gorizia

A temporary synagogue for Jewish soldiers in Maribor, 1917.

NOVO MESTO

Source: Dolenjska Museum, Novo Mesto

A group of Jewish soldiers in an improvised synagogue in Novo Mesto.

COMMEMORATIVE BADGES

An Austro-Hungarian “Yom Kippur” commemorative badge from 1917, produced in the fourth year of the war and issued to commemorate the most important Jewish holy day—the Day of Atonement. Its design is based on the two Tablets of Moses and Hebrew abbreviations representing the opening words of each of the Ten Commandments.

A pendant bearing a Hebrew inscription, most likely once belonging to a Jewish soldier of the Austro-Hungarian Army. It was excavated by Mitja Močnik, a non-commissioned officer in the Slovenian Armed Forces and a collector of relics from the Isonzo Front. He found it in February 1993 in caverns on the western slope of Sveta Gora above Gorizia, where fierce fighting took place in 1916–1917. The Hebrew inscription on the front reads ZION; on the reverse is SHADDAI, one of the Jewish names for God.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS JEWS BEHIND THE FRONT

INSTRUCTION

Source: Archdiocesan Archives of Ljubljana, War Affairs collection

Instructions for Catholic priests concerning the burial of non-Catholic soldiers in Catholic cemeteries, issued by Bishop Anton Bonaventura Jeglič of Ljubljana on 28 August 1915.

CAPTION TO AN EXCERPT FROM THE CHRONICLE OF THE PARISH OF ČRNI VRH

Source: Parish Archives of Črni Vrh nad Idrijo, Parish Chronicle

An excerpt from the parish chronicle of Črni Vrh nad Idrijo, written during the First World War by Ivan Abram, parish priest there from 1899 to 1924. The entry records the priest’s complaint concerning the burial of the deceased Jewish soldier Julij Kohn in the local civilian cemetery.

“The cemeteries behind the mortuary and in Plešnar’s field are not consecrated, and Turks and Jews are also buried there, whereas there are no such soldiers in the proper cemetery. It is true that on 29 May 1917 a Jew, Julij Kohn, was mistakenly buried in this part of the cemetery, but the parish priest immediately demanded that he be exhumed as soon as possible and transferred to the unconsecrated cemetery behind the mortuary. This was done on 2 November 1917, and on 14 November 1917 the cemetery was reconciled once again.”

JEWISH SOLDIERS – HEROES

KORNEL ABEL

Kornel Abel was born in 1881 in a suburb of Vienna. He came from a Hungarian Jewish family. His father was a merchant, and the family converted to Catholicism while Kornel was still a child. He attended various officer schools and, at the outbreak of the First World War, served as a captain on the Serbian Front. He arrived on the Isonzo Front soon after Italy declared war. In 1915–1916 he distinguished himself in fighting in the Tolmin sector with the 1st Infantry Division and on the Karst battlefield with the 17th Infantry Brigade, receiving several decorations for his service.

After the war he retired and lived in Vienna. Following the German annexation of Austria in March 1938, he found himself among the many former Jewish soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Army whose devoted service to their homeland did not protect them from Nazi persecution. All trace of Kornel Abel disappeared in 1942; he most likely died in one of the German extermination camps somewhere in the East.

As a memorial to his fighting on the Isonzo Front, he left the memoir *Karst – Ein Buch von Isonzo*, published in 1934 and available in Slovene since 2008 under the title *Kras – Knjiga o Soči*. In the book's foreword, the writer Bruno Brehm wrote:

"Kornel Abel, an officer of the former Imperial and Royal Army, which is now silent, has spoken on behalf of all the former soldiers who fell silent together with that mute army, and also on behalf of those who, in the successor states, remain silent about their past and their deeds because the Great War has become meaningless to them ..." (from Kras, knjiga o Soči, published by Društvo RAT-SLOGA, Prof. Dario Frandolič)

Source: Austrian National Library, Vienna

GUSTAV SONNEWEND

Captain Gustav Sonnewend (1885–1960), the son of a Jewish military physician, distinguished himself during the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo in the spring of 1917. He converted to Roman Catholicism in his youth and was regarded by his men as a highly popular officer. His life reflected the complex reality of the Danubian Monarchy. Born in Czernowitz in Bukovina, he spent most of his career as an officer in the Austrian Littoral. On the Isonzo Front he commanded the 4th Battalion of the 39th Landwehr Infantry Regiment, composed mainly of Viennese veterans. Captain Sonnewend fought along the Isonzo from the summer of 1916. His greatest renown came from a successful counterattack and the defence of St Mark's Hill above Šempeter near Gorizia in the first days of June 1917. "Captain Sonnewend's detachments at St Mark's near Gorizia drove the enemy from his foremost trench with a powerful assault. He left in our hands 10 officers, 500 men and 4 machine guns." (Slovenec, 4 June 1917, Austrian official report)

For his service, Captain Sonnewend received the highest decoration of the Austro-Hungarian Army, the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Maria Theresa. After the war he joined the armed forces of the new Republic of Austria and attained the rank of colonel. Following the Anschluss in 1938, the Nazis expelled him from the army because of his Jewish origins; only his high decoration from the

First World War saved him from persecution and death. By the end of the war he was therefore one of the relatively few Jewish soldiers of the Habsburg Monarchy to survive the Nazi Holocaust.

Source: Kriegsarchiv des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs, Vienna

INSTRUCTIONS OF THE ISONZO ARMY FOR THE BURIAL OF FALLEN JEWISH SOLDIERS

In 1915, the command of the Fifth Army on the Isonzo issued special regulations governing the burial of fallen soldiers, including rules for Jewish servicemen. Jewish military graves were to be arranged in a uniform manner. Instead of a stone Jewish headstone, a wooden marker approximately 20 centimetres wide and 70 centimetres high, rounded at the top, was prescribed. A Star of David was to appear in its upper section, with ten Roman numerals below, arranged in two groups and representing the Ten Commandments (I–V and VI–X). The marker was also to bear the name and rank of the deceased, his military unit and the date of death. At the bottom was to be added the inscription “may he rest in peace” or an appropriate phrase in Hebrew script.

MILITARY CEMETERIES

ROŽNA DOLINA NEAR NOVA GORICA

The Jewish community of Gorizia buried its deceased members in the Jewish cemetery at Rožna Dolina near Gorizia. Over the centuries, more than 900 Jews were buried there. Following the Italian occupation of Gorizia and the eastward movement of the front, the cemetery found itself directly on the front line in the autumn of 1916.

Military maps from the spring of 1917 show the positions of Austro-Hungarian units (blue) and Italian units (red) around the Jewish cemetery in Rožna Dolina.

Today, four Jewish soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Army who died during the fighting on the Isonzo Front are buried there:

- Franz Artner (1894–1917)
- Chaim Huppert, reserve first lieutenant of the 22nd Infantry Regiment, killed on 19 November 1915 at Podgora
- Dr Fritz Hochwald, lieutenant and medical officer of the 37th Infantry Regiment, who died on 28 October 1915 in a field military hospital at Pevma
- Dr Eduard Auersch (1890–1915), lieutenant and medical officer of the 30th Infantry Regiment, killed on 30 October 1915 at Podgora

RENČE – ŽIGONI

Several Austro-Hungarian Jewish soldiers were buried in the Austro-Hungarian military cemetery at Renče. Today, only one name remains visible on a grave marker beside a Star of David: soldier Jakob Reik, who fell on the Karst battlefield.

NEMCI

At the former Austro-Hungarian military cemetery near Nemci on the Trnovo-Banjšice Plateau, one of the few surviving grave markers bears a Star of David and records the burial of Landsturm platoon commander Josef Grünwald, who was killed at Ravnica in 1917.

ČRNIČE

At the military cemetery in Črniče, reserve lieutenant Werner Sokal of the 96th Infantry Regiment, killed on 28 August 1917, lies buried beneath a Star of David.

BRJE

In the undergrowth beside the military cemetery at Brje near Komen lies an overturned, isolated headstone bearing a Star of David. It is inscribed with the name of reserve lieutenant Leo Albrecht of the 73rd Infantry Regiment, killed on 30 January 1917. Karsai Andor of the 15th Infantry Regiment, who was killed on 9 June 1917, is also buried there.

At the military cemetery in the nearby village of Škofi stands the Jewish headstone of Karl Klempfner, a reserve lieutenant of the 15th Infantry Regiment, who died on 1 January 1916 near the hamlet of Lukatič on the Karst. Not far away, cadet Erwin Kornfeld of the 91st Infantry Regiment, who fell in 1916, is buried beneath a Star of David.

NABREŽINA / AURISINA

At the large military cemetery in Nabrežina (Aurisina), soldiers of various faiths are buried in common graves. Particularly striking is a grave marked by a cross in which two soldiers who were not Christians are buried together: the Jewish soldier Josef Zimmermann and the Bosnian soldier Osman Huskič.

ŠTANJEL

In Štanjel on the Karst, behind the former Isonzo Front, are the remains of a large Austro-Hungarian military cemetery from the First World War. Only a small number of military graves have survived. Among the surviving headstones, however, are two marked with the Star of David. One grave contains gunner Dezső Steiner, evidently a Hungarian Jew, of the 46th Infantry Regiment, who died on 19 August 1917, most likely in the local military hospital. The other contains a Russian prisoner of war of Jewish origin, Solomon Gerschow, who died on 13 May 1918.

GORJANSKO

The Austro-Hungarian military cemetery near Gorjansko on the Karst is the largest preserved military cemetery in the area of the Isonzo Front, with more than 10,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers of various nationalities buried there. The restored cemetery contains several Jewish graves, although most of their inscriptions are now illegible. One comparatively well-preserved headstone stands out: that of Corporal Goldlinger Mor.

KOMEN

At the military cemetery in Komen on the Karst stands an isolated Jewish headstone marking the grave of reserve lieutenant Schochne Horowitz of the 15th Infantry Regiment, who was killed on 1 October 1916 on the Karst battlefield.

LJUBLJANA

Before the First World War, the former Ljubljana cemetery of St Christopher (today Navje) contained a separate burial ground for members of other faiths, particularly Protestants. During the First World War, Muslims and Jews who died in Ljubljana—most of them in military hospitals—were also buried there.

KIDRIČEVO

In central Slovenia, only one surviving example of a Jewish gravestone from the First World War is known today, in Kidričevo (then Strnišče/Sternthal) near Ptuj. Among the few surviving gravestones, one bearing a Star of David stands out: it marks the grave of Isidor Lowy, who died in August 1916. During the First World War, Kidričevo was the site of a camp for Russian prisoners of war, a military hospital, a refugee camp and other rear-area institutions.

Dr Renato Podberšič