

## A Methodist "Rabbi" in Reims: Passover, 1945

First Methodist Church  
Monticello, Arkansas  
11 February, 1956

Upon the request of [Hebrew Union College Professor] Dr. Sheldon H. Blank, I am relating a most precious experience which occurred in Reims, France, on Wednesday evening, March 28, 1945:

During the war, in the combat zone, it was my duty and high privilege to serve as a Hebrew Chaplain. We had no Jewish Chaplains in my area at this time. Hence the Friday evening services were held by me in the Chapel tent, wherever situated, and many of the Army personnel never did realize that I was not a Rabbi in uniform. I wore the customary robe with a prayer shawl and a black skull cap. The services were ordinarily conducted in English, although there were occasions upon which I did laboriously start them with carefully rehearsed Hebrew. The Jews always ran away from me [prayed far more rapidly in Hebrew than I could] and I continued in English while those with a facility for Hebrew neglected to check my faulty speech.

The war had progressed into Germany, and Reims was a free city, free from bombings by the Nazis, and free for a fairly normal resumption of civilian life. The Jews in and about Reims, together with those who had been in hiding for years, yearned for the Pesah [Passover] again. Investigation was made of the possibilities and everything was favorable to a degree. It was possible to hold the meeting, or preliminary, in the synagogue. To find a place large enough to seat and feed the number expected was very much of a problem. It was assumed that several hundred might wish to eat the Passover. Plans were made accordingly. But the idea grew apace. A thousand sent word they wished to honor this occasion again after the many years of absence. This changed the plans. Two thousand, and three thousand, and more requested permission to attend. Finally, it was necessary to secure the use of a gymnasium where three thousand could be seated at one time. And then provision was made for the overflow, or second group, to be served. Accordingly, two ceremonies were planned.

It was my privilege as an acting Jewish Chaplain to be a guest and I was considered the "youngest competent" and allowed to ask the hallowed question: "Wherefore is this night distinguished from all other nights?" According to the custom, special dishes and utensils were used. The one thing that impressed me most was the sublime bit of irony wherein the plates were from the German "Teller" mines, and the cups and bowls were stamped from the aluminum wings of downed German aircraft. The knives, forks, and spoons were flown in from New York, direct from a factory. Our service manual was a paper-backed publication from England. It was the *Passover Haggadah* in a revised English translation, 7th edition, printed in parallel columns of English and Hebrew. It had been arranged by H. Meiliz and was published by M. L. Cailingold of 6, Old Montague Street, E. 1. London, 5705 [1945]. At that time I was presented with a little booklet, *The Jewish Holidays*, a Jewish Welfare Board Publication, and also a copy of *A History of the Jewish People* by [Max] Margolis and [Alexander] Marx. These were in recognition of my services to the Jewish soldiery and my sympathy for the Jewish refugees it was my duty and pleasure to succor from time to time.

This is not an embroidered account, but is simply factual. There were many other matters that could be related that were in a minor vein, but time has dimmed some memories. Suffice it to be said that partaking of the Passover in Reims on March 28, 1945, with that great assembly of devout Jews was a most high point of my experience.

ROLAND E. DARROW  
Minister

#### CONVERSION RECORDS REQUESTED FOR THE ARCHIVES

Members of the rabbinate are invited to deposit with the American Jewish Archives records of non-Jews converted to Judaism, or copies of such records. Material of this type is an important source for the study of American Jewish history.