



Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

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Finis le Guerre: November 11, 1918, from the Perspective of Two World War I Jewish Soldiers

The First World War was a turning point for Jews, many of whom lived in and fought for belligerent nations. For American Jews, the events of World War I established the community's philanthropic drive to help Jews internationally.¹ The Jewish Welfare Board, organized just days after the U.S. declared war in April 1917, ensured that Rabbis were trained as army and navy chaplains and, for the first time, the military allowed leave for religious observances. On August 19, 1918, U.S. Navy Ensign Rudolph Wyner received a notice about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: "Where military necessity does not interfere, leave for men of the Jewish faith is authorized from noon September sixth to morning of September ninth and from noon September fourteenth to morning of September seventeenth. Where impracticable to grant leave arrangements should be made to allow divine services to be held wherever possible."² Rudolph was granted time to attend Rosh Hashanah services that year.

Our collections allow us to tell the stories of two American Jewish soldiers—one an immigrant from the Russian Empire and the other born in Boston—who were in France in November 1918 as World War I drew to a close. Although their experiences differed greatly, William Marcus and Bernard (Ben) Gorfinkle shared a common hope to return home to their families in Massachusetts.

Private William Marcus, 345th Infantry, 87th Division: "Be sure and bring me the head of the Kaiser"³

Wolf Shevitz was born on June 14, 1892, to Abraham and Sarah Shevitz in Bialystok, then part of the Russian Empire and now in Poland. At age 17, Wolf "Schewitz" boarded the *Lusitania* with his 11-year-old brother Leon and 8-year-old sister Etel, and arrived in New York on January 15, 1910.⁴ The siblings joined their father in Worcester, Massachusetts; their mother, Sarah, remained in Bialystok.

In Worcester, Wolf met Minnie Feldman, the love of his life. A fellow Russian immigrant, Minnie was born on June 23, 1895, in Yelisavetgrad. (The town, now in the Ukraine, recently changed its name to Kropyvnytskyi.) Wolf found work as a garment cutter, and on November 23, 1914, at age 22, he signed a Declaration of Intention renouncing his allegiance to Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia. On this document Wolf assumed a new name: William Marcus.

On June 29, 1918, William enlisted in the United States Army. He was sent to Camp Fort Dix, New Jersey, for training, along with his friend Charlie Siegel. The two remained together throughout their service in the war. William was sent overseas to England—where he reported that he found the countryside lovely, but the people less so⁵—and France, where he was stationed as a guard at the American hospital in Savenay.⁶ William was in Savenay in November 1918, when rumors of a German surrender and the end of the war came to fruition.

William and Minnie exchanged letters frequently during his time in the service. Most of their letters focused on how much they missed one another, with William providing very little information about his day-to-day experiences. On November 7, 1918, William does refer to the war's imminent end: "As you know allready [sic]

Below: William Marcus in his uniform, circa 1918. Opposite page: Undated photograph of William Marcus and Minnie Feldman, captioned "love crazy." Postcard from William Marcus to Minnie Feldman, July 6, 1918. On the back he wrote, "For God sakes so quick you forget me. I wrote you about 10 letters already and received from you only 2 letters. Write oftener remain with love your Willie." Minnie did write often, and usually expressed confusion as to why William did not receive her letters.



that every one of the german [sic] allies gave up, so we are expecting every minute for Germany to lay down her arms. And I think the time is near when we will change our correspondence for a nice personal heart to heart talk.”⁷ Although William does not share much about his wartime activities with Minnie, he does hint at the difficulties. In the same letter, William asked Minnie to give their friends, Morris and Bertha, who were new parents, “my belated congratulations . . . and my wish that their boy should grow up and mak [sic] a success in every way, but should never have to make a success as a soldier.”⁸

On November 15, four days after the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, at 11 a.m., William wrote again to Minnie, confident that he would soon be home in Worcester. “Charlie and I were celebrating the end of the war last night. The reason we did it 5 days later is that it took Charlie that time to realize and me to convince him that the war is realy [sic] over . . . Now be a good girl and wait patiently for my return.”⁹

Captain Judge Advocate Bernard Louis Gorfinkle, 26th (Yankee) Division: “Keep from Mother”¹⁰

By the time William Marcus reached Savenay, Ben Gorfinkle was already a seasoned soldier. Born on October 29, 1889, to Harris and Sarah (Milontaler) Gorfinkle in Boston, Massachusetts, Ben began his military career in 1913 when he enlisted in a Massachusetts cavalry unit and served at the Mexican border under General Pershing in 1914. A lawyer who earned his degree from Boston University’s School of Law in 1911, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the American Expeditionary Forces when the United States entered World War I. Ben eventually earned a promotion to Captain Judge Advocate in the 26th Infantry Division. Wounded twice at Verdun, he received multiple commendations and awards, including a Purple Heart,¹¹ and, in 1919, the Belgian Order of the Crown.



On November 4, 1918, Ben wrote his sister Bess from Verdun, “Am still here and getting darn sick of it all. Nothing to see except the same every day [sic] things which now are d--- monotonous as we crave for home. This peace is a long time coming for each day is like a year. We want to get home and that is all there is to it.”¹²

More concerning, however, was the influenza epidemic affecting Boston.¹³ “The news about Anna E.’s death sure did upset me. The general news about conditions in the States caused me more anxiety than here at the battle front. For God’s sake everybody take care of yourselves.”¹⁴

On November 11, Ben received the news he wanted:

Finis le guerre: finis le guerre— its [sic] on everybody’s lips. The Frenchmen holler it at us as we go by them and we holler it in return. Everyone has a smile, there is a feeling of released tension but does not seem true. It cannot seem possible but yet it is if the sound of gun fire which is not now heard can be taken as a sure sign. And to think that I finished the war at a celebrated place like Verdun. Have been here for some time and I can truthfully now tell you that I never expected to leave it. Of all the danger I have been in since my more than a year

here, the many long weeks at the famous Verdun¹⁵ was the worse. Now that it is over, Mother dear, I can truthfully tell you that many times I never expected to again see you and my letters have all been written with a view not to worry you more than necessary.¹⁶

Ben was competent and good at his job, and others took notice. In March 1919, Ben believed he would be home soon, but was asked to stay in France to help settle remaining legal cases. In April 1919, he was offered a position as an aide to Bernard Baruch, staff advisor to President Woodrow Wilson and member of the Paris Peace Commission. Ben remained in Paris until July 1919, first as aide to Bernard Baruch during the American Peace Commission and then at the signing of the Treaty of Versailles as an aide to President Wilson.

After the war

Minnie Feldman did wait for William, and on June 27, 1920, the couple married. William and Minnie had three sons, Joseph, Seymour, and Norman.

Bernard Gorfinkle's American Expeditionary Forces identification card, with an excerpt of the letter he sent home on November 11, 1918.

The family remained in Worcester, and prospered. William entered the manufacturing trade, eventually owning a factory that produced women's bathrobes. William died on February 22, 1978, Minnie on May 3, 1982.

Ben returned to Boston and married Freida Edinberg in 1921. He continued to practice law, and at the recommendation of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was appointed Field Supervisor of the War Manpower Commissions for New England during World War II. Ben and Freida settled in Newton, Massachusetts, and had three children, Herbert (a veteran of World War II who was present at the liberation of Buchenwald), Ruth, and Sarah. Ben died February 14, 1974.

More information on the Marcus and Feldman Family Papers is available in the collection finding aid, located online at findingaids.cjh.org.



ajhsboston.org/?pID=3482853. The Bernard Gorfinkle Papers have been digitized. For more information visit the online finding aid at digifindingaids.cjh.org/?pID=201608, or to request access to the collection, email reference@ajhsboston.org. ♦

Notes

- ¹ For more on the impact of World War I on American Jews, see Paul Berger's article on "How World War I Shaped Jewish Politics and Identity," published online in the *Forward* on June 25, 2014: forward.com/news/200509/how-world-war-i-shaped-jewish-politics-and-identit.
- ² August 19, 1918, memo from the Commandant of the Second Naval District in Newport, Rhode Island, to the personnel of the Second Naval District. From the Wyner Family Papers, P-803, box 7, folder 19.
- ³ Minnie Feldman to William Marcus, letter dated June 30, 1918. From the Marcus-Feldman Family Papers, P-1008, box 1, folder 3.
- ⁴ William Thomas Turner, the captain of the *Lusitania* on this voyage, was also captain of the ship in May 1915. While en route from New York to Liverpool, the ship was torpedoed by a German U-Boat off the coast of Ireland. Turner survived. Immigrantships.net/v12/1900v12/lusitania19100115_01.html, Immigrant Ships Transcribers Guild, accessed 11/2/2016.
- ⁵ "I didn't have a chance to see yet much of France but as far as I saw of England I didn't like that country much. The country itself is a very nice plase [*sic*], but the people and their ways I don't like." William Marcus to Minnie

- Feldman, September 13, 1918. From the Marcus and Feldman Family Papers, P-1008, box 1, folder 4.
- ⁶ William's unit was "Hospital Unit F, field hospital company, Ambulance Company No. 345, 87th Division." See Joseph H. Ford, *The Medical Department of the United States Army in the World War*, vol. II, *Administration American Expeditionary Forces* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1927), 597. Accessed 11/2/2016 at collections.nlm.nih.gov/ext/kirtasbse/14120390RX2/PDF/14120390RX2.pdf.
- ⁷ William Marcus to Minnie Feldman, November 7, 1918. From the Marcus-Feldman Family Papers, box 1, folder 4.
- ⁸ *Ibid*.
- ⁹ William Marcus to Minnie Feldman, November 15, 1918. From the Marcus-Feldman Family Papers, box 1, folder 4. William was discharged in January 1919 and worked in New York City before returning to Worcester.
- ¹⁰ Bernard Louis Gorfinkle was a prolific letter writer. In addition to sending letters home to his entire family, he also wrote personalized notes to his siblings. Letters with more graphic wartime descriptions were often sent to his brother, Mem, with the note,

- "keep from mother." The 26th Division of the U.S. Army, comprised mostly of men from New England, earned the nickname "Yankee Division." The men wore "YD" patches on their uniforms.
- ¹¹ Purple Hearts did not exist before 1932 but were retroactively presented to World War I veterans.
- ¹² Bernard Gorfinkle to Bess Gorfinkle, November 4, 1918. From the Bernard Gorfinkle Papers, P-664, Box 1, Folder 3.
- ¹³ The influenza epidemic of 1918-1919 killed approximately 45,000 people in Massachusetts. United States Department of Health and Human Services, "The Great Pandemic: Massachusetts" web.archive.org/web/20160826144531/http://www.flu.gov/pandemic/history/1918/your_state/northeast/massachusetts/index.html accessed online on 12/2/2016.
- ¹⁴ See note 12.
- ¹⁵ Gorfinkle was referring to the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, fought from September 26 to November 11, 1918.
- ¹⁶ Bernard Gorfinkle to his family, November 11, 1918. Box 1, Folder 3. See note 12.