

SUMMARY

Jews in Estonian War of Independence

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In the ranks of the Estonian army representatives of many nations took part in the Estonian War of Independence, mostly as volunteers. It is well known that Baltic-German, Ingrian, Swedish, Finnish and Danish voluntary units (regiments, battalions and independent companies) participated in the War of Independence, but in the Estonian People's Army - as Estonian armed forces were called at that time - served also Russians, Latvians, Tartars, Poles, Jews and combatants of other nationalities.

Although there were as many Jews as Danes or Swedes in the Estonian army, Estonian Jews were not interested in setting up an independent unit but rather served like Estonians in many units and all arms of service. Besides, Latvian Jews served also in the Northern-Latvian Brigade and Russian Jews in the North-Western Army.

It has been established that at least 178 Jewish men participated in the Estonian War of Independence; 68 of them were volunteers and the rest were mobilised into the Estonian army. Most of the Jews were from Tallinn, 120 altogether: 48 volunteered and 72 were mobilised. Pärnu ranked second: one volunteer and 8 mobilised. Other counties had each given 1 to 6 Jews. The smallest number was from Saaremaa: only one volunteer. Apart from that at least one Jewish private individual, a female doctor Pesja Abeshaus worked in the military hospital. As Jews served in scattered Estonian military units, to our knowledge they had no field rabbi.

The Jews lost at least 3 men in the War of Independence (including one in the battlefield), but there is no data about the injured.

After the War of Independence, the Jews who had participated in the war founded a Jewish War Veterans Association, with at least 89 members, of whom there is more information preserved. Most of the Jews served as volunteers in the Tallinn Schoolchildren's Battalion.

The share of Jewish medical personnel was remarkable: besides the above mentioned female doctor at least 13 more doctors, 2 dentists, 3 pharmacists, 8 medical assistants (including several medical students) and at least 4 medical orderlies.

As two thirds of the Jews who participated in the War of Independence lived in Tallinn, most of them joined units formed in the capital - apart from the abovementioned Tallinn Schoolchildren's Battalion also the 1st Cavalry Regiment, 1st Artillery Regiment, the Broad-gauge Armoured Train No 1 and the 1st Infantry Regiment. But Jews served also in the 5th, 6th and 7th Infantry Regiment, Armoured Train Reserve Battalion, and Armoured Train Division Squadron, Sakala Partisan Regiment, 3rd Artillery Regiment and probably also in other units. At least two Jews served in the Navy.

Apart from these Jews quite a few Russian but also Estonian Jews served in the White Russians' North-Western Army. According to an estimate as many as in Estonian units. Some of the Jews who had served in the North-Western Army stayed after the war in Estonia, very few of them served in the Estonian army but their exact number has never been identified.

There was only one known Jewish troop officer in the Estonian Armed Forces, Ensign Richard Friedman (Tallinn Schoolchildren's Battalion) but 2 military officials, 1 sergeant major, 2 senior NCOs, 1 junior NCO and several corporals.

Among the recipients of the Cross of Liberty is junior NCO Boris Kofkin, an Estonian-born Jew, who was awarded with the Cross of Liberty II/3 (for bravery). Lieutenant Colonel Arnold Hinnom writes in his book of memoirs *Suur Heitlus* that at least one more Jew doctor was nominated for the Cross of Liberty.

Today, 83 years after the end of the War of Independence, it is questionable whether any Jewish veterans of the War of Independence are still alive. Fifteen years ago I met in Israel, Tel-Aviv, painter Abram Hasak, a former voluntary private from the Tallinn Schoolchildren's Battalion who in honour of the visit of doctor Vello Salo and myself wore with pride the Commemorative Medal of the Estonian War of Independence. By today, he - most probably the last Jewish veteran of the War of Independence - has passed away.

Before the re-establishment of Israel in 1948 Jews were not considered much of warriors. It is interesting to discover that Estonian citizens of Jewish origin made a significant contribution to the foundation of the Republic of Estonia in our War of Independence.