

Purim and Passover in Goebbels' Castle

- by [Michael Rugel](#)
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Jewish Services at Schloss Rheydt from Yank: The Army Weekly, April 12, 1945. Note: Other sources identify this photo as a different service from either March 3rd or March 18th

Corporal Sidney Talmud of Brooklyn was marching through Germany with the 38th Signal Construction Battalion in 1945 when he was given a rare opportunity. He was asked to prepare a Jewish meal for a unique Passover service at Schloss Rheydt, the Renaissance-era palace in Mönchengladbach. The palace had been granted as a vacation home to Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels was a native of the area and the palace had been made available to him as a guest house to be used as his disposal. Though Schloss Rheydt was centuries old and associated with various noble families, to the Americans it was "Goebbels' Castle." Using it provided a great opportunity to flip the propaganda script on Goebbels and show the Germans that things had changed as their country was becoming occupied by the Allies. Goebbels had played the key role in creating an environment that allowed for the attempted destruction of Europe's Jews. The irony of observing holidays commemorating the liberation of the Jewish people in a palace intended as a tribute to Goebbels was lost on no one.

By early March, the Americans had already seized the palace and immediately recognized it as a useful place for both practical and symbolic reasons. G.I.s had been sleeping and eating meals there. In news reports, soldiers described a beautiful building with each room decorated with the Goebbels family seal. Men who'd grown used to the hardship of wartime service reveled in the luxury of the castle. But it was the fact that they were showing up the Nazis that was the sweetest. There may have been no better way to do this than holding Jewish services.

The first Jewish service at Schloss Rheydt was for Purim. The service was conducted on March 8th, a week after the holiday. [JTA](#) reported the service "was attended by front-line troops who were too busy fighting last week to pause for the traditional observances."

Chaplain Manuel Poliakoff and his men draped a Jewish Welfare Board flag with the star of David over a table. The Jewish chaplain's symbol hangs on a flag in the window. Below the windows, the G.I.s left the German flag with the large swastika in the center—visible for all to see. Seeing the Nazi flag is initially jarring. But on top of the swastika they placed the ark and Torah. The symbolism was clear. What had once been home to the Nazis was now home to Jewish celebration and triumph over those who sought the destruction of the Jews.

In *Yank: The Army Weekly* magazine, Cpl. Howard Katzander wrote that Chaplain Poliakoff assisted by Pfc. Armolda [Arnold] Reich and Cpl. Martin Willen "raised their voices in an ancient Hebrew hymn of jubilation sung at Purim to celebrate the deliverance of the Jews from an earlier Hitler—Hamen of Persia, who long held the Hebrew in captivity in Biblical Times." Others would also note the similarities between Hitler and Haman.

A non-Jewish soldier, Captain Frederic E. Pamp, jr. attended the service and described the pleasure he derived: "It was a satisfying experience, as I have ever had in my life, to hear the Hebrew service sung in the Great Hall of Goebbels' own chateau. Whatever else this war may have been fought for, you men of Jewish ancestry in our army can know that you are the symbols of American power on the side of justice, mercy, and equality."

Passover came three weeks later. Again, it was time to turn Goebbels' castle into a house of Jewish worship. Being at Schloss Reydt with 300 Jewish soldiers in 1945 was a cause for celebration that perfectly complemented the message of Passover. As Hitler had become the modern Haman at Purim, a few weeks later he was the modern Pharaoh.

Sidney Talmud was placed in charge of the food. He recalled the experience in an essay written decades later:



Sidney Talmud

In the middle of March, 1945, I was approached by Lt. Shubow, our Jewish chaplain. He planned to conduct Passover services, and since I was the only Jewish cook in the battalion, would I supervise the food arrangements.

The next two weeks were hectic. We had been moving through Germany and finally stopped at München Gladbach. I solicited all canned goods from our Jewish soldiers and they responded generously. Since army kitchens worked primarily with frozen, canned, and dehydrated foods, I passed the word to our scroungers that I needed fresh potatoes. I soon had a truckload.

Erev Pesach came and our chaplain directed our convoy several miles to an imposing building called "Schloss Reydt." This was Goebbels' castle. Directly off the veranda, where I set up two gasoline camp-stoves, was a gigantic banquet room that would easily accommodate the 300 GIs I would feed. On one wall was a picture of Hitler and one of my buddies had scrawled "Kaput" across it. For the next two or three hours I was too busy to deal with emotions. They came later. While I was frying latkes a fellow came by and inquired what I was doing. I offered him some pancakes while I explained our presence. Evidently the latkes agreed with him. He kept eating them and asking me lots of questions and that night his story flew across the Atlantic cable, and my parents were interviewed by Time and the papers, and WEVD, and they planted trees for me in Israel, and my mother, rest her soul, discovered that I had lied to her. I wasn't having a great time in Paris after all. However, as mothers will, she forgave me.

When all the latkes were fried and eaten, I joined my comrades in the Passover songs. We had seen the atrocities and now we were savoring some small measure of vengeance and victory.

The Associated Press story that Talmud references above was picked up by [many newspapers](#) in both Yiddish and English. It quoted Chaplain Joseph Shubow: "This is indeed retribution. When this little monkey Goebbels decreed the burning of the synagogues seven years ago he little imagined that we would one day eat potato pancakes in his own home."

Talmud summed up his feelings this way: "...there wasn't a seder [since] I recall when I didn't for an ephemeral moment envision Hitler's portrait with 'Kaput' scrawled across it and a tray of sizzling latkes just removed from the hot oil. And when the youngest completes his Four Questions and the company responds 'Avadim Hayenu,' I still get the sense of having been there."