

## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE RIGHTEOUS CONVERT

### ERNST BARON VON MANSTEIN

By: Eleanor Maor Michael

"Ben Avraham learns to be a Jew."  
Yehuda Amichai "To the True Convert"

He was born into an old family of Prussian nobility in 1869, in Domersleben, in the Kingdom of Prussia, when Wilhelm I of the House of Hohenzollern was King. He was raised on tales of the coronation, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, in January 1871, when Wilhelm I was proclaimed Emperor following Germany's victory over France in the Franco-Prussian war. And he was expected to serve his Kaiser, and rise to the rank of officer, as his ancestors had done, in the Reich's glorious Imperial Army in the Germany unified under the iron fist of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

But Ernst Albert Emil Baron von Manstein did not want to spend his entire life in the military. He loved nature. He was musical and artistic. He played the violin and painted. He traveled to Strasbourg and studied art history.

Even when he did join the military in 1890, at the age of 21, and served in the 9th Infantry Division of the Royal Bavarian Regiment, he did so on his own terms. Ernst von Manstein joined the regimental orchestra as a musician. He did not stay long.

While stationed in Wurzburg, in Lower Franconia, the young nobleman got acquainted with Judaism. He was inspired. He found a teacher and a mentor and, abandoning his aristocratic family's military tradition, began the spiritual journey, which would lead him to a life of a "Ger Tzedek," a righteous convert, and ultimately death as a Jew.

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Jews have lived in Wurzburg since the 12th century. They found refuge there when plundering, pillaging and slaughtering crusaders, religious zealots and bands of ruffians, waged holy war in the Rhineland, around Mainz, on their way to Jerusalem.

A time of calm and prosperity began for the Jews under Frederick I, the Holy Roman Emperor known as Barbarossa. They were permitted to settle and buy land and by a decree of Bishop Siegfried bury their dead in a designated plot of land on his vast terrain. A synagogue was built and then a school. Over time

Wurzburg became an influential center of Jewish learning, attracting great rabbis and distinguished scholars of Torah and Talmud.

But the golden age for the Jews of Wurzburg came to an abrupt end in 1350 with the arrival of the deadly bubonic plague, when tolerance and acceptance gave way to persecution, destruction and massacre. The Jews, accused of poisoning the wells, were expelled. Those who survived fled across the Main River and settled in Heidingsfeld.

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Margarete and Johann Bezold, innkeepers in Heidingsfeld, still a village surrounded by vineyards in the 19th century, adopted a little orphan girl born December 2, 1850 in Unterlangenstadt nearby. They named her Franziska and raised her in their Catholic faith. Nicknamed Fanni, the sensitive young woman, a gifted writer, was attracted by the Jewish lifestyle and traditions of her orthodox Jewish neighbors and friends. She felt a profound kinship to Judaism; in fact, she imagined that she had been born to Jewish parents. Along the path to her own formal conversion Franziska met Ernst von Manstein, a learned convert to Judaism who took the name Abraham. The two married on November 28, 1892. Abraham was 23; Franziska was his senior by nineteen years.

Disowned by his family, Der Baron, as he was soon called, found employment in Wurzburg's municipal schools where he taught drawing and music, as well as in the Jewish elementary school, founded in 1856, and the Israelitische Lehrerbildungsanstalt (ILBA), founded in 1864. So great was the need to train Jewish teachers that not one but two teachers' seminary schools were established around the same time and in close proximity to each other. The younger students began at the Praeparandenschule in Hoechberg and it is there, in 1928, that Der Baron became my father's beloved teacher.

By all accounts the pair lived a life of strict adherence to the laws of Orthodox Judaism. Fanni kept a kosher home. Abraham Ernst von Manstein, never without head covering, prayed in the "Mazzehaus" prayer house, a converted Passover matzeh bakery, three times a day. He was deeply involved in the affairs of the Jewish community and soon joined the governing board.

In time the von Mansteins bought a house on Keesburg Street 13, a pastoral part of town today called Keesburg-Garden City. Abraham was a passionate lover of nature. He raised bees and tended to his large garden's fruit trees, in particular apple trees. He was a quiet, introverted man but he liked to host musical soirees in his home and enjoyed playing chamber music with other Jewish musicians. And then, after a long period of peace, on June 28, 1914, a hot Sunday, war broke out.

War meant excitement and adventure for the 550,000 Jews of Germany. Serving the Fatherland was an opportunity to show one's patriotism. Young Jewish men volunteered in great numbers. 100,000 Jews enlisted in the army, navy and air force of Kaiser Wilhelm II's German Empire, among them two teachers from Hoechberg. But unlike World War II, when 230 Royal Air Force Lancaster bombers all but razed

Wurzburg to the ground in 17 terrifying minutes on March 16, 1945, the Great War was not fought on German soil.

While soldiers fell in the bloody battles of Verdun, Somme, Marne and Gallipoli, their families at home suffered food shortages and hunger. Civilians endured great physical and emotional strain. There are photographs in museums of women dishing out hot soup from carts they lugged through town, of women knitting warm woolen socks to send to soldiers on the front, of women street-car drivers and factory workers.

Soldiers returned home missing limbs, maimed, scarred and shell-shocked. The Jewish hospital built in Wurzburg in 1885 was filled to capacity. Jewish social welfare charitable organizations charged with supporting war widows and destitute orphans could barely keep up. The need was great. Bereavement took its toll. Among the 12,000 Jewish soldiers who lost their lives, 38 were from Wurzburg and 14 were students of the Israelitische Praeparanden School, the Jewish teachers' seminary, in the community of Hoechberg nearby.

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My father, Harry Obermayer (later Maor), aged fourteen, arrived in Hoechberg in 1928. It was suggested that given his aptitude he deepen his studies and train to become a teacher of religion. The boarding school, a three-story house with many windows and a red slate roof, on Sonnemann Street 15, today houses the museum of Jewish Life in Hoechberg. The exhibits cover three hundred years of Jewish presence in Hoechberg. There are historical accounts of its cemetery and synagogue built in 1721. Sepia colored photographs of teachers adorn the walls.

My father would have entered the building through the wide archway and found his place among the other eighty boys in one of the dormitories next to the music room on the third floor. He studied Torah, rabbinic literature, Talmud, Jewish history, Jewish law, ethics and Hasidic philosophy. He became fluent in Hebrew. He learned cantorial music, and Der Baron Abraham Ernst von Manstein was one of his teachers. (There were twelve teachers at the school at that time.)

Daily life at the school revolved around Jewish law and customs. You studied, you prayed, you sang. Shabbat was kept, of course, and Jewish holidays were celebrated. But soccer, and the competition with clubs from the nearby municipal schools such as the Freie Turnerschaft Schweinfurt or the Wurzbürger Kickers played a most important role. Given the intense study schedule, lunch breaks were cut short in favor of kicking the ball around a little. We have a photo of my father and his soccer teammates. He is standing tall and smiling broadly. He was the goalie that day in a game against the ILBA of Wurzburg team. And although those boys were older and bigger, the Israelitische Praeparanden School beat them one-nil, he liked to boast.

But then Harry discovered Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx and could no longer maintain his religious faith. Against the counsel of his headmaster Selig Steinhäuser, my father simply left. In the book the historian Dr. Roland Flade wrote about the Hoechberg Jews and the Israelitische Praeparandenschule, he quotes

from an interview with Simon Berlinger, one of my father's classmates: "Although 70 years have passed since, I cannot forget the moment Harry told me of his decision during a quiet, intimate conversation. I was devastated and deeply depressed and could not comprehend that such a 'fine fellow' would undertake such a step. After fifteen years of difficult inner struggles, I confess to have come to the same decision." Der Baron, aged 61 at that time, always seeking to support and advance gifted students, must have tried to deter him. My father returned to Munich, his hometown. It was 1930 and the world, in the grips of the Great Depression, was about to change forever.

Sturmabteilung (SA) Nazi paramilitary thugs wearing brown shirts and swastika armbands roamed freely through the streets of Germany. The weekly publication "Der Stuermer" promoted virulent anti-Semitic hatred. There were random acts of vandalism and brutal violence. Riots. The Great Depression strained the financial resources of the Israelitische Praeparandenschule in Hoechberg, which was in need of impossibly costly repairs. The decision was made to close its doors in 1931 and the remaining teachers and students merged with the ILBA in Wurzburg. (The house on Bibra Street served as dormitories and instruction took place in another building on Sandberger Street.) In June 1933 my father was arrested, tried and imprisoned for speaking up at a National Socialist assembly in Munich. He had ignored the sign forbidding entrance to Jews. On his release he immediately left for Palestine.

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By 1892, when Ernst Baron von Manstein converted to Judaism, left his regimental orchestra, became estranged from his family and stayed in Wurzburg as a modestly paid teacher, his nephew, Fritz Erich Georg Eduard von Manstein, was five years old. They have never met, certainly they were worlds apart, but still, this nephew would come to play a decisive role in his uncle's life. The boy, called Erich, was the tenth son of a Prussian aristocratic family of generals, and when his parents died, Der Baron's brother, Lieutenant General Georg von Manstein and his wife, Hedwig, a childless couple, adopted him. Both his adoptive and natural fathers as well as both grandfathers were highly decorated military officers and generals. Paul von Hindenburg, Generalfeldmarschall and President of Germany, was his uncle. Erich von Manstein followed in the footsteps of his formidable ancestors. During the First World War he fought both on the Eastern and Western fronts. He helped in the secret effort to re-arm Germany in violation of the Versailles agreement, and in September 1939, he followed Hitler's orders as chief of staff of the Army Group South during the invasion of Poland. He made a name for himself as a brilliant strategist, masterminding the invasion of France in 1940. He heaped military honors and glory unto himself until the catastrophic battle of Stalingrad when he fell out with Hitler over the conduct of the war. Still, Erich von Manstein is considered the Wehrmacht's greatest commander of the war, attaining the rank of General Field Marshall, surpassing all the von Mansteins who came before him by far.

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As soon as Hitler came to power in January 1933, the systematic persecution of the Jews began. The consequences of the seemingly never-ending measures against the Jews took immediate and dramatic

effect. Jewish businesses were boycotted. All Jewish professionals lost their jobs overnight, including civil servants, judges, attorneys, doctors, nurses, academics and teachers. When Der Baron, Abraham Ernst von Manstein, was dismissed from his position at Wurzburg's municipal school, his only remaining employment was at the Jewish schools.

New rules and decrees appeared and were implemented with increasing speed. Jews were forced to liquidate their businesses and transfer their property at ridiculously low prices to Aryan Germans. Jews lost their basic civil rights. They lost their citizenship. Students were prohibited from obtaining university degrees; they were banned from parks; their radios and bicycles were confiscated. Many lost their homes. The Jews were destitute.

For a while, Jews of all ages and walks of life in Wurzburg could still find a Kosher meal with the von Mansteins, whose welcoming home, orchard, and well tended garden provided refuge from the mounting dangers. One such child was Ludwig Pfeuffer, who grew up to be known as Yehuda Amichai, Israel's greatest poet. He was twelve years old in 1936 when the von Mansteins offered him food and shelter prior to his emigration to Palestine with his parents.

And then, on November 9 1938, Kristallnacht, Jewish men were snatched up on the street and incarcerated, Jewish stores were looted, shop windows shattered, cemeteries ransacked, tombstones desecrated and fires raged in all of Germany's synagogues simultaneously until they burnt to the ground.

According to testimony of post-war court proceedings, when eight former members of the Wurzburg SA were brought to trial, names and addresses of Jewish citizens were handed out so that the "Judenaktion" pogrom could be carried out systematically. Fanni and Abraham Ernst von Mansteins' house was marked for vandalism and looting along with those of his Jewish neighbors. The perpetrators, as many as a dozen at a time, stormed through the houses demanding foreign currency and letters from abroad and destroyed everything in their wake. Der Baron's collection of rare and precious violins was confiscated. The judge, trying Nazi-era crimes in 1949, handed one defendant a sentence of six months detention we learn, and the other seven were free to go.

But after the brutality of that night Der Baron and Fanni were never the same again, their housekeeper would tell my father many years later. The night those assailants violated their space, their privacy, she said, was the beginning of their end. He looked forlorn, she remembered, and scared. On Friday evenings Der Baron would draw the curtains shut, the housekeeper added, for fear the candles lit to welcome the Sabbath would be cause for renewed hostility and violence.

My father had come to Wurzburg in the mid 1950s to revisit his past, to remember and reminisce. He may have heard rumors somewhere, improbable stories about his teacher. That Ernst Baron von Manstein volunteered to be deported with the others, for example, that he showed up with them on Platz'scher Garten on Hindenburg Street 2, his prayer shawl draped over his shoulders, and that in the end he recanted his Judaism.

By the mid 1930s it would be some forty years that all ties between Abraham von Manstein and his aristocratic Prussian family had been severed. And yet, because of his famous name and celebrated nephew the Wurzburg Gestapo kept tabs and a watchful eye on him. The Nazi racial laws were complicated and over the next several years confusion about how to treat him grew. A Jew was defined as belonging to the "Jewish race" by virtue of his ancestry. The so-called "Jewish race" not the Jewish religion was seen as defiling the "pure Aryan race." What about converts? Was the convert Abraham Ernst Baron von Manstein to be persecuted as a Jew or not? Was he an Aryan required by law to use the "Heil Hitler" greeting or specifically forbidden from doing so as a Jew? What about identification papers? Were they required or not to add "Israel" and "Sarah" to their names? Gestapo File 6908 kept in the National Archive of Wurzburg contains extensive correspondence between the local Gestapo office and the "Office of Racial Policy of the Nazi Party" responsible for such questions in Berlin.

We learn that Ernst and Franziska von Manstein were summoned to the Gestapo offices on Ludwig Street 2 for questioning in March 1939, a few short months after Kristallnacht to clarify things for the Gestapo. We know they dutifully appeared but we don't know what their state of mind was. They would have brought the documents required of them. They admitted to being "Aryan" by birth but insisted on being Jews, on having chosen the Jewish religion and its laws. Der Baron may have tried to reason. Had he not lost his employment because he was Jewish? And was not his house targeted during Kristallnacht? His beloved musical instruments forcefully taken from him? Perhaps he argued. We learn from a letter signed by the Wurzburg Gestapo commissioner Michael Voelkel that his behavior was considered challenging and provocative. He was warned and threatened with detainment. Following the meeting, Abraham Ernst von Manstein was classified as "Deutschbluetiger Arier juedischen Glaubens," Aryan with German blood and Jewish Religion. Neither he nor Fanni were counted as Jews in the massive Nazi census of May 17, 1939.

We do not know at what point Der Baron and Fanni began to seriously consider leaving Germany. The house on Keesburg Street with its beautiful garden had to be sold. And then Fanni suffered a mental breakdown. On September 8, 1939, just shy of her 89th birthday, she was admitted into the "Heil and Pflegeanstalt," a psychiatric hospital in Werneck, a short bus ride north of Wurzburg. Some two months later, on November 24, 1939 obviously expecting Fanni's imminent return, Abraham applied for passports. They would emigrate to Palestine. Gestapo file 6908 contains information on what happened next. While their application was initially accepted the request was blocked until April 1940, when it was determined that the charges for Fanni's hospitalization would be paid by her insurance. By the time the exit permit was obtained it was impossible to leave.

It is estimated that between 1939 and 1945, 250,000 patients in psychiatric institutions were murdered in the campaign called "Aktion T4" after the Tiergarten number 4 address in Berlin, which housed the Nazi agency for Hitler's "mercy killing" euthanasia program. In the years 1940 to 1941 alone 70,273 patients were killed. Their bodies were cremated. A condolence letter "explaining" the patient's sudden death and an urn containing ashes was returned to their families.

In October 1940, the hospital in Werneck was evacuated in order to house resettled Volksdeutsche, so-called "ethnic Germans" from Baltic countries, and 370 of the hospital's patients, aged and suffering from dementia, were transported to gassing installations for involuntarily euthanasia. Others, Franziska

von Manstein among them, were transferred to the "Heil und Pflegeanstalt" psychiatric hospital in Lohr, a small town on the Main river to the west, on the edge of the lovely Spessart forested mountain range. By 1945, 600 Jews, women, men and children, from the "Heil und Pflegeanstalt" hospital in Lohr had been euthanized or deported to their death in extermination camps.

Fanni died on Wednesday, March 5, 1941 in a "Heil und Pflegeanstalt" hospital in Lohr. Her death certificates states the cause of death as "Pneumonia, age-related weakness and dementia." Her last known address is listed as Hindenburg Strasse 21.

Franziska von Manstein lies buried in the Jewish cemetery of Wurzburg Division 4b, Row 3, Plot 22. Her husband, Abraham, designed the headstone. The Hebrew inscription reads: "A modest and gracious woman, Sarah, daughter of Abraham, wife of Abraham von Manstein, devoted and faithful to God, died on the 6th day of the month Adar and was buried on the 8th day of Adar 5701." And at the bottom of the gravestone the usual abbreviation for the biblical verse First Samuel 25:29 as an epitaph. "May her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life" Underneath the Hebrew text her name appears in Latin letters Franziska von Manstein, 1850 - 1941.

It's easy to imagine the confusion and alienation Der Baron must have felt as his universe crumbled around him and this unworldly, withdrawn pious man was confronted with bureaucratic harassment and unintelligible hateful chicanery. Although classified as Aryan, Der Baron paid his dues to his Jewish community organization just as he had done for the past 50 years, only now it was the Reichsvereinigung, supervised by the Gestapo, and registration was compulsory.

Der Baron was ordered to move into the cramped so-called "Judenhaus," on Domerschulstrasse 25 next to the ruin of the great synagogue, built in 1837, which was burnt down during Kristallnacht November 9, 1938. Systematic deportation of Jews from Wurzburg began in November 1941. Over the next two years a total of 2,063 men women and children were deported in eight transports to destinations in the East. Few survived and once again the Jews of Wurzburg were hunted, expelled and murdered.

On October 23, 1943, long after Fanni's death, and five months after Wurzburg was declared "Judenrein," impoverished and anguished, his health deteriorating, Der Baron reached his breaking point. On that day he simply capitulated. His formal request to leave the Jewish community had to be submitted to the Gestapo. Three months later, on Monday, January 17, 1944, Abraham Ernst Baron von Manstein, the Ger-Tzedek convert, died. He was 75 years old.

The Gestapo seized his body and according to a notice in the local newspaper Ernst Baron von Manstein was buried in Wurzburg's municipal cemetery on Friday, January 21 at 2:20 pm. It has been claimed that he was given a ceremonial funeral with full military honors and that uniformed pallbearers carried his casket, which was draped with the Nazi swastika flag. If true it would most probably have been at the behest of the local Gestapo and not on orders of his nephew Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein, who was literally fighting a losing battle in Stalingrad at that time. Was it because of his famous name? Was it a sadistic act of vengeance? Because his obstinacy and defiance had been an affront to his pure Aryan ancestry?

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I don't know what my father thought about the legend of the funeral, whether he believed the dramatic theatrics. The swastika flag. SS men in attendance. But I do know my father was committed to providing a proper Jewish funeral for the Ger Tzedek convert, Abraham Ernst von Manstein. The remains should be exhumed. He should be re-buried in Wurzburg's Jewish cemetery. I remember my father's tireless efforts, how long and hard he fought. I recall the inexplicable bureaucratic hurdles he encountered, the frustrations and infuriating delays. He reminded me of heroes in ancient times, Greek or Roman maybe, who came to right a wrong.

In his thoroughly researched article on Baron Ernst von Manstein, which appeared in the "Frankenland" magazine in June 2014, the historian Dr. Herbert Schott, refers to the correspondence between Dr. Harry Maor and the ZWST, Germany's Jewish Central Social Welfare Agency, on the subject of the imperative moral duty for re-burial. These letters are kept in the municipal archives in Stuttgart, I learn in Dr. Schott's footnotes. I can still hear the sound of my father's energetic typing and my father's voice reading his letters out loud to us, letters declaring Der Baron, his teacher, was a martyr.

Sixteen years after his death, Abraham Ernst Baron von Manstein's wish to be buried in Wurzburg's Jewish cemetery next to wife was fulfilled. Rabbi Dr. Isaac Emil Lichtigfeld, a tall and powerfully built man, conducted the service. It was a dignified affair. Members of the post-war Wurzburg Jewish Community were present and my father, of course. The inscription on the grave says: "Buried here is Baron Abraham Ben Abraham, a true-convert of blessed memory, converted as an adult, a righteous man, a generous man, born May 18, 1869, died as a Jew on January 17, 1944 and transferred to a Jewish grave with much honor on May 22, 1960."

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Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein's strategy to prevent absolute catastrophe in Russia was vetoed by Hitler and on March 30, 1944 he was sidelined. We will never know how this brilliant commander's last-ditch effort to turn the tide of the war would have worked. At the end of the war, von Manstein was taken prisoner by the British. He stood trial in Nuremberg in August 1946. He perpetrated the myth that the Wehrmacht as an army fought a war but did not participate in war crimes or crimes against humanity and was sentenced to 12 years. He served four and was released in 1953. Just as he had done during the between-the-wars years, he became a military advisor. Only now he assisted the West German government in re-establishing the Bundeswehr's armed forces. He died near Munich in 1973.

During the last weeks of the war, Wurzburg's war materiel factories were targeted by allied bombers. Royal Air Force firebombing was quick and thorough. The picturesque medieval half-timbered houses of the Old City burned to the ground. Magnificent baroque mansions were destroyed. The railroad station, the cathedral and the Bishop's Palace were hit and severely damaged. Photographs taken by American GIs are frightening. The old charm is gone.



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An old house in the center of Wurzburg was demolished in 1987, and as many as 1474 fragments of ancient gravestones bearing Hebrew letters were discovered among the rubble. Scholars determined they came from the site of a 12th century Jewish cemetery and cover a period of 250 years of medieval Jewish history. The spectacular find is unique and the largest of its kind worldwide. It bears witness to the existence of a thriving and prominent Jewish community.

Yehuda Amichai, Israel's most celebrated modernist poet, was invited to Wurzburg, the city of his birth, when the shards, known as the "Judensteine aus der Pleich," dusted off and catalogued, were ready to be exhibited. We have his poem, memorializing a headstone fragment in his colloquial Hebrew style, translated this way: "On my desk there is a stone with the word 'Amen' on it, /a triangular fragment of stone from a Jewish graveyard destroyed/ many generations ago. The other fragments, hundreds upon hundreds, /were scattered helter-skelter, and a great yearning, / a longing without end, fills them all:/ first name in search of family name, date of death seeks/dead man's birthplace, son's name wishes to locate/ name of father, date of birth seeks reunion with soul/ that wishes to rest in peace. And until they have found/ one another, they will not find a perfect rest. / Only this stone lies calmly on my desk and says 'Amen.'"