

Jews and Japanese, the Non-White Partners: Reflections about Joseph Trumpeldor's Captivity in Japan and Japanese Americans Who Served in the U.S. Army 442nd Regimental Combat Team

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*"Are Jews white?" is another way of asking, "Are Jews safe, in this unknown future that is to come?" To some, it seems unthinkable that they would not be. To others, it seems unthinkable that they would.*¹

The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) was widely perceived as a racial conflict. To provide an example, it "lead the American Jews to identify themselves with non-white and non-Christian Japanese who were seen as a racially distinctive group. They evidently saw the issue of race differently from other Americans".²

However, as many as close to 33,000 Russian Jews served in the Russian Army which fought against Japan during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Oppressed and discriminated minority, the Jews lost 3,000 lives in battlefields while 1,739 Jews had been captured and turned into prisoners-of-war interned in Japan. The war has generated the first recorded collective Jewish presence on Japanese soil, but the issue remains unexplored and underestimated.³

Joseph Trumpeldor, a symbolic warrior, Jewish self-defense hero, readily viewed as a Zionist pioneer, who died aged 40 in 1920 in Tel Hai in Britain-ruled Palestine, is known to have said moments before passing away during his last battle, possibly in Russian: "It is good to die for our country". Having joined "Hunter's detachment" of the Russian army

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¹ Green, E. "Are Jews White?" *The Atlantic*. Dec. 6, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/are-jews-white/509453/> (Accessed on Nov. 8, 2017).

² See Muraoka, M. *Jews and the Russo-Japanese War: The Triangular Relationship between Jewish POWs, Japan and Jacob H.Schiff*. Ph.D. Thesis, Brandeis University, February 2014. See also Sugarman, M. *Under the Heel of Bushido. Last Voices of Jewish POWs of the Japanese in the Second World War*. London/Portland, Or.: Valentine Mitchell, 2014, p.5.

³ For relevant World War II issues, see Sugarman, M. *Under the Heel of Bushido*.

during the Russo-Japanese War, one of the most dangerous duties, Trumpeldor lost his left arm but volunteered to continue fighting. A war hero of Jewish descent, not eligible to be promoted, Trumpeldor was appointed a platoon commander. A brave and skillful soldier, Trumpeldor was nevertheless captured along with thousands of his comrades-in-arms and spent about a year in Japanese captivity. Very little is known about this formative period of Trumpeldor's life when he was destined to share a bitter fortune with fellow Jews.

A highly debated issue among Jews of all possible political convictions, Trumpeldor's deeds were critically reviewed in Japan by two Jewish authors, Dani Nehushtai, a vigorous anti-war activist residing in Japan, and Eli Cohen, a former Israeli Ambassador in Japan (2004-2007).⁴ Typical as it is, the two authors represent conflicting positions, characteristically reflected in radically divergent perceptions of Trumpeldor's last words. While Dani Nehushtai attaches no value to dying for one's country, Eli Cohen, on the contrary, praises the deed.

The author suggests a different interpretation based on a comparative analysis of Trumpeldor's early views, expressed in an *Appeal* addressed to Tsar Nicholas II which Trumpeldor had arguably composed in captivity, and an intrinsically similar passionate endeavor of those Japanese Americans who during World War II struggled to regain civil rights by means of sacrificing their lives in battle.

The author offers a full translation into Japanese of Trumpeldor's *Appeal* to the Tsar, paying due respect to the land where it was born and to which it belongs.⁵



Ambassador Eli Cohen
(2004-2007)



Joseph Trumpeldor



Dani Nehushtai

4 Cohen, Eli. *Kuni-no Tame-ni Shinu Koto-ha Yoi Koto Da* (in Japanese: It is Good to Die for One's Country). Tokyo: Nisshin Hodo Publ., 2014. Nehushtai, D. *Kuni-no Tame-ni Shinu-noha Subarashii?* (in Japanese: Is It Good to Die for One's Country?). Tokyo: Kobunken Publ., 2016.

5 See the appendix of this article.



The author also offers a revised for publication text of his recorded oral presentation prepared for an international conference entitled “From Port Arthur to Tel Hai: Joseph Trumpeldor and Japan,” which celebrated 110 years since the return of Trumpeldor from Japan to Russia and was held in Tel Hai College, Israel, in May 2015.⁶ Adhering to the spirit of an oral presentation for a conference, the author primarily intends to challenge readers’ imagination, offering an outline deserving further analytical elaboration.

The period of Trumpeldor’s captivity in Japan seems to have been either largely ignored or treated retrospectively from the point of view of Trumpeldor’s post-captivity deeds and endeavors. Thus, it is most common to reasonably observe that Trumpeldor must have found himself among hundreds of Jews for the first time precisely during his captivity in Japan, which has arguably served to awaken his Jewish identity and fill it with a radically new content. Given the centrality of Trumpeldor’s image as that of a hero whose last words glorify death for one’s Motherland, Trumpeldor’s captivity in Japan might even extend as far as towards identifying some of the roots of Trumpeldor’s last declaration of creed in his alleged acquaintance with Japan’s patriotic rhetoric. To be specific, in a unique monograph published in Kiev in 2012, exclusively dedicated to Trumpeldor, the editors single out a plausible impact of Hirose Takeo, Japan’s designated “*Gun-shin*” (軍神), military deity, hero of the Russo-Japanese war who served as Japan’s Naval Attaché before the Russo-Japanese war broke out and resided in St. Petersburg for several years. Hirose perished in a marine battle near Port-Arthur fortress in March 1904 and was buried with military honors by the Russians. The monograph editors claim that

6 http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/upload/_FILE_1432016459.pdf (Accessed on December 1, 2017).

Trumpeldor might have learned that Captain Hirose had admired a military code principle of “*Shichishou Houkoku*” (七生報國) which can be translated as offering “seven lives for the Motherland”.⁷

The editors also point out that during his stay in Crimea in 1919, Joseph Trumpeldor must have frequently visited Artillery Bay in Sevastopol from where ships sailed off to Palestine and where in 2002 a monument to Russian Navy Admiral, Vladimir Kornilov, was erected. Admiral Kornilov is a celebrated hero of the Crimean War of 1853-1856 who oversaw the defense of a Russian port of Sevastopol, starting from September 1854, and perished a month later, his last words having, allegedly, been: “I am happy to die for the Motherland”. These words are inscribed on Kornilov’s monument erected in Sevastopol in 2002. The editors assume that Trumpeldor might have been familiar with Kornilov’s heroic demise.⁸

Incidentally, there are many variations interpreting the Admiral’s last words. Thus, some sources refer to the following last phrase: “God bless Russia and the Tsar, save Sevastopol and the fleet”.⁹ In fact, it was probably Tsar Nicholas I who, reportedly, rephrased the Admiral’s last words, thus paving a way for the mainstream interpretation. In a letter addressed to Admiral’s widow, the Tsar wrote as follows referring to Kornilov’s death: “He spoke: I am happy to die for the Motherland. Russia will not forget these words, and your children inherit the name honored in the history of Russian Navy”.¹⁰

However, we have serious reasons to believe that Trumpeldor had initially praised sacrificing one’s life for the benefit of Motherland in his own *Appeal* addressing the Tsar and compiled in 1905 while in captivity. In that context, Trumpeldor’s last words might be viewed as a part of his own early rhetoric.

The *Appeal* was signed by 130 Jewish Pows, which corresponds to about a quarter of the Jewish internees of Hamadera internment camp, who, according to David Belotserkovsky, Trumpeldor’s close comrade-in-arms and biographer, had delegated Trumpeldor the right to make use of it as Trumpeldor could find appropriate in the future.¹¹ The *Appeal* was printed in Russian in a newspaper the Jewish POWs were allowed to regularly

7 Legkodukh, I., Losev, D. *Iosif Trumpeldor. Geholutz. Novyi Put’* (in Russian). Feodosiya/Moscow: Koktebel’ Publ., 2012, pp.205-207.

8 Ibid., p.207.

9 See “Kak Admiral Otdal Zhizn’ za Rissiyu” (In Russian: How Admiral Sacrificed His Life for the Sake of Russia), *Aif*, February 13, 2016 (Accessed through www.integrum.ru on November 10, 2017).

10 Ibid., p.149.

11 Legkodukh, I., Losev, D. *Iosif Trumpeldor. Geholutz. Novyi Put’*, p.149.

issue in both Russian and Yiddish, called "The Jewish Life" (*Der Yudesher Lebn//Evreiskaya Zhizn'*), on September 15, 1905. The full text had been introduced by Prof. Ber Kotlerman (Bar-Ilan University, Israel) in a monograph he edited, entitled "Mizreh" and published in 2009.¹²

This passionate petition to the Tsar is written in the name of Jewish defenders of the Port Arthur fortress. Depicting enormous hardships of Jewish existence in Russia, such as residing in limited areas defined by the notorious "Pale of Settlement", no equal access to education and farming, apparent absence of civil rights, the *Appeal* nonetheless declares that the Jewish POWs had gladly sacrificed their lives for the adored Tsar and their beloved Motherland as a matter of honorable duty. Referring to a wide-spread hatred and contempt the Jews encountered, the *Appeal* nevertheless expresses unquestioned loyalty of the Jews at large to the Tsar personally and Russia as their Motherland, declaring:

"When dying, our comrades entrusted us to plead Your Majesty to grant equal rights to the Jews in Russia. Our gaping wounds give us the courage to supplicate together with our unforgettable comrades."¹³

According to Belotserkovsky, the *Appeal* had been written by Trumpeldor himself, causing violent disputes and disagreements among the Jewish POWs. Some of them were afraid to sign the petition fearing repressions in the future, often terrified by the very fact of its appearance. Belotserkovsky mentions that Trumpeldor had decided to compose the *Appeal*, reacting to rumors that Jews who participated in the war could become eligible to reside beyond the "Pale of Settlement", saying angrily: "Is that all ? Is it worth having fought for ? No, this is not acceptable !".¹⁴

It is worth mentioning that in the wake of the *Appeal's* publication, from October 19 through October 29 of 1905, as many as 690 "pogroms" (collective violence directed against Jews) in more than 660 towns and villages of the Russian Empire had occurred, resulting in deaths of about 4,000 Jews and leaving behind close to 10,000 wounded.¹⁵

Recalling his personal reflections during the war about October 1905 "pogroms" in Rus-

12 Ber Kotlerman, ed. *Mizrekh: Jewish Studies in the Far East [I]*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009, pp.187-188.

13 For abridged translation of the *Appeal* into English, see Kotlerman, Ber. "Between Loyalty to the Empire and National Self-Consciousness: Joseph Trumpeldor among Jewish Russian POWs in Japan (1905)". *Asia Japan Journal* 9 (2006).

14 Legkoduikh, I., Losev, D. *Iosif Trumpeldor. Geholutz. Novyi Put*, p.149.

15 Ibid., p.33.

sia, formerly Russian Army General, Mikhail Grulev, a Jewish convert to Christianity who during the Russo-Japanese War served as the 11th Pskov Regiment commander, wrote as follows: "I was seized by a deathly depression which lasted several weeks. Apathy I could not get rid of took me over. Inside of my heart, a kind of alienation from myself and surrounding environment occurred".¹⁶

Returning to the *Appeal*, I should emphasize that this document diverts our critical attention to Trumpeldor's captivity in Japan as possessing its own inherent value. In fact, this peculiar search has resulted in identifying some extraordinary features which demonstrate Trumpeldor's contribution towards the spread of universal values, far surpassing his Jewish ethnicity.

Some serious reasons have served to preclude researchers from elaborating a fair estimate of Trumpeldor's creativity during the period of internment in Japan. First, I should mention difficulties arising from identifying and comprehending original documents written in the Japanese and Russian languages. Another impediment to be indicated has to do with a noticeable lack of relative scholarly achievements in the former Soviet Union and Russia, where the Russo-Japanese War POWs issue has been consistently viewed with a sense of national disgrace. As many as about 72,000 Russian POWs had been interned in Japan, of whom over 22,000 were interned in Hamadera camp, the largest facility of its kind, where Trumpeldor along with about 500 Jews remained in captivity. Besides, in Japan there is an unfortunate tendency to disregard Russia's multiethnic composition, which in its turn continues to produce a negative effect on Russian studies as a whole, including the Russo-Japanese war research.

Furthermore, cultural heritage of POWs has been widely regarded as peripheral, despite the existence of a considerable volume of related literature, while the first major international conference devoted to this issue was held as recently as in 2010 in Cambridge.¹⁷ Finally, reviewing the negative factors, I should also mention Eurocentrism which is still vocal and influential in Jewish studies at large and stands in need of being overruled and revised.

On May 13, 2015, Japan's National Broadcasting Corporation TV station (NHK) offered a program devoted to those Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II

16 Grulev, M. *Zapiski generala-evreia* (in Russian: Notes of a Jewish General). Moscow: Giperboreya, 2007. Quoted from online version. http://statehistory.ru/books/13/M_V_Grulyev_Zapiski-general-a-evreya/13 (Accessed on Nov. 10, 2017).

17 See Carr, G., Mytum, H. *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War. Creativity Behind Barbed Wire*. Routledge: 2012.

in California, particularly those who had joined the 442nd Regimental Combat Team of the US Army and fought in Europe.¹⁸

This theme is not new. Back in 1990, Gordon Nakagawa, then Associate Professor at California State University, while discussing the issue of forced evacuation and internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans and the problem of Japanese Americans' loyalty to the United States, resorted to a discourse of "breaking silence vs. keeping silence".¹⁹ Jews would eagerly recognize a familiar environment, listening to the following recollection of his arrival in the camp by one of the internees, as quoted by Nakagawa: "As I got off the bus late that afternoon, I asked my mother, "What are we doing here with all these Japanese?" She answered, "Shhh, you are one, too." I had to deny this; I learned in school that I was an American".²⁰

The racial hatred background may be identified in the text of a letter addressed to the War Department, written in 1943, by Lieutenant General John DeWitt who was charged with implementing Executive Order 9066, the Presidential Decree authorizing evacuation and internment:

"The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become "Americanized", the racial strains are undiluted...It, therefore, follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies of Japanese extraction, are at large today. There are indications that these are organized and ready for concerted action at a favorable opportunity".²¹

The NHK TV program's timeliness was primarily rooted in the fact that many of those Japanese Americans who "kept silence" have at long last begun to recall and relate. The program revolves around the issue of military behavior of those interned Japanese Americans who were, for the most part, mobilized to serve in the US Army 442nd Regimental Combat Team that consisted of 14,000 infantrymen. This unit was dispatched to Europe and charged with the most dangerous assignments. While it has received the largest num-

18 "Nisei" たちの戦争：日系陣の部隊の記録. クローズアップ現代 No.3650. 2015年5月13日放送、NHK. <http://www.nhk.or.jp/gendai/articles/3650/1.html> (Accessed on Dec.1, 2017).

19 Nakagawa, G. "What Are We Doing Here With All These Japanese ? Subject-Constitution and Strategies of Discursive Closure Represented in Stories of Japanese American Internment". *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Fall 1990, pp.388-402.

20 Ibid., p.388.

21 Ibid., p.390.

ber of medals and orders in the US Army history, more than 4,000 enlisted men had been killed or wounded, which exceeds average indicator three times. Those remaining alive are over 90 years old and what they relate is filled with suffering and a sense of injustice and humiliation. Mr. Shigu Doi still could not sleep at night, while Mr. Masao Kadota recalled that the reason why young Japanese Americans had been eager to fight in the US Army was rooted solely in a desire to prove their loyalty to the United States. Apparently, Mr. Kadota's statement implies the will to regain constitutional rights the Japanese Americans had been illegally stripped off.²²

Furthermore, reminiscent as it is of Monty Noam Penkower's monograph entitled "The Jews Were Expendable. Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust".²³ Yasuko Takezawa, Kyoto University Professor, who served as a commentator for the NHK program, had to bitterly admit that Japanese Americans who had served in the US Army 442nd Regimental Combat Team were in fact "expendable".

Speaking of the desire to prove loyalty, expressed by Masao Kadota, which borders on the issue of testing one's racial worth, it is compelling to note that Trumpeldor's military behavior was remarkably consistent. Thus, while serving in the Zionist Mule Corp. for the British, Trumpeldor, according to Harvey Sarnier, "thrived on danger..and it was almost as if Trumpeldor had a death wish as he often placed himself in dangerous situations challenging death. In his letters, Trumpeldor makes repetitious comments about seeking death and dying for one's country which almost creates the impression that dying for one's country was his ultimate objective. Trumpeldor...was determined to prove that Jews were not cowards and that they could be good soldiers. To do this, he unnecessarily exposed himself to danger".²⁴ A British Army officer recorded an occasion when Trumpeldor "was wounded by a bullet in the right shoulder but carried on with his duties and refused to go to the hospital," which of course reminds us of his behavior in Port Arthur.²⁵ Sarnier fairly observes that "for Trumpeldor honor meant everything. He pleaded with the men to realize that they were fighting to establish respect for the Jews as soldiers", and also meaningfully observes that Trumpeldor "tried to instill in them a sense that they were fighting

22 For an interesting relevant assessment of minorities' loyalty issue, see Eisenberg, E.M. *The First to Cry Down Injustice? Western Jews and Japanese Removal during World War II*. Lexington Books, 2008.

23 Penkower, Monty Noam. *The Jews Were Expendable. Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

24 Sarnier, H. *The Jews of Gallipoli*. Cathedral City: Brunswick Press, 2000, p.40.

25 Ibid.

for a Jewish homeland”.²⁶

Returning to the *Appeal*, arguably composed by Trumpeldor during his captivity, we cannot fail to identify some similar fundamental features involving Japanese Americans, despite noticeable background differences.²⁷ Similarities stretch out far beyond the limits of military service issues and embrace such essential and profound problematics as racial and ethnic discrimination. Indeed, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, if we recall and review Lieutenant General John DeWitt’s derogatory racist remarks, exemplify extension of the very attitude of “hatred” and “contempt” which Trumpeldor had vividly referred to, in effect making Trumpeldor’s *Appeal* directly applicable to history of the Japanese people who had uniquely endured a sheer horror of atomic bombings.

Susumu Itoh was one of those Japanese Americans who had liberated the Nazi “Dachau” concentration camp in May of 1945. Observing the horrible sight, Mr. Itoh could not help thinking of his family interned in California and could not help relating his own fate to that of “Dachau” inmates, feeling disgusted with what racism was capable of, yet unaware as he was of the horror of atomic bombings which, in no small extent, treated the Japanese people as merely racially inferior guinea pigs. Despite a multitude of related differences, including the ‘victimizer vs. the victimized’ dichotomy applicable to Japanese role in World War II, Trumpeldor’s *Appeal* to the Tsar might turn out being one of many secure bridges in terms of reaching a mutual understanding between the Jews and the Japanese at large.

Trumpeldor’s *Appeal* has also been an early example of Jewish politics. In the context of absence of a comprehensive conceptual framework, it can be viewed as an illuminating case study reflecting a complicated web of combined interests and aspirations of the early 20th century Jewish Diaspora.²⁸



Mr. Susumu Itoh

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For a well-illustrated relevant comparative review, see Saruya, K., Shino, T. *Igai-na Kaihousha* (in Japanese: Unexpected Liberators). Tokyo, 1995.

²⁸ For a relevant research proposal, see Sandler, S. “Towards a Conceptional Framework of World Jewish Politics: State, Nation and Diaspora in a Jewish Foreign Policy”. *Israel Affairs*,

Hopefully, at the very least, a review of Trumpeldor's captivity in Japan will assist in breaking through Eurocentric orientation of Jewish studies and reevaluating the Jewish presence and cultural heritage in East Asia.

Foundation of Kokushikan University, which celebrated 100th anniversary in 2017, dates back to the decision of its founders to build a learning institution next to the grave of Katsura Taro, Japan's Prime Minister during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05. Back in 2004, Kokushikan University held an International Symposium dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the war, which featured participation of Prof. Ben-Ami Shillony (Hebrew University, Israel) whose presentation was devoted to Jewish perceptions of the war. That presentation has launched an ongoing Jewish Asian studies project focusing on the Jewish POWs presence in Japan during the Russo-Japanese war, which, in cooperation with Prof. Ber Kotlerman of Bar-Ilan University was initially conducted from April of 2012 through March of 2013.²⁹

2004, 10: 1-2, pp.301-312.

29 See Zinberg, Y. "Elul v Iaponii. Poseschenie mogil soratnikov Trumpeldora" (Elul in Japan: Visiting the Graves of Trumpeldor's Comrades-in-Arms). (In Russian) *Zametki po Evreiskoi Istorii*, No. 9 (168), September 2013. <http://berkovich-zametki.com/2013/Zametki/Nomer9/Zinberg1.php> (Accessed on December 1, 2017).

Appendix

全ロシアの君主たる皇帝陛下へ

先にポート・アーサー要塞防衛に就きたるユダヤ人兵士の請願書

皇帝陛下！先にポートアーサーの防衛に就き、陛下への愛と崇拝の念に溢れる我らユダヤ人兵士一同は、我らの言葉に耳をお貸し頂きたく懇願する次第です！

他の同士らと共に、我らは嬉々としてポート・アーサーの防衛にあたりました。黙々と要塞に自らの血を流し、忘れえぬ我が兄弟らは、黙々と要塞に命を落としていきました。崇拝する君主と大切な祖国に対する我らの義務には、これらの生命と流血が求められることを、我々は承知しています。我々全員が、ポート・アーサー防衛のため骨を埋めることが必要ならば、それを厭うものではありません。のみならず、ロシアからは、我らとともにすべての損失を心から悼み、全力をもって我々を励まし、我らが責務を果たすことを期待している五百万のユダヤ人が、我々を見つめております。これらのユダヤ人がロシアにおいて諸権利を得ていないことも承知しておりました。無権利状態の厳しさは、我々が身をもって知るところであります。われわれは、ごく限られた地域にしか居住できず、貧窮のあまりに居住地域を離れた場合には、狩り出され、屈辱的な形で、護衛をつけられ、居住地に連れ戻されました。

子供を学校に通わせる機会もほとんど与えられませんでした。学校へのユダヤ人の受け入れが著しく制限されていたからです。ほぼどの地域においても、土地の利用は許されず、農業に従事したいと思っても、そうすることはできませんでした。我々が大事と考えていることも行うことができず、蔑みのうちに方々の土地を追われ、学びの光を閉ざされ、軽蔑され、憎まれ、あたかもペスト患者のように扱われてきました。しかし我々が、陛下と祖国を全霊をもって愛してまいりましたことは、天なる主もご覧になっておられると思います。我が同志らは、息絶えながら、ロシアにあるユダヤ人の諸権利を賜りますよう、皇帝陛下にお願いするようにと遺言いたしました。我らの傷は疼き、忘れられぬ我らの同志たちの祈りを共にする勇気を、奮い起こさせてくれます。皇帝陛下の大いなる慈悲の心を知る我らは、ロシアに居住するすべての民族が享受する権利を、ロシアに住むすべてのユダヤ人に賜りますようお願い申し上げる機会を求めてまいりました。

あまねくものに慈悲深き皇帝陛下に申し上げます。陛下が我々を護り、慈悲の光を注いでくださることを信じております。ご慈悲のあらんことを、大いなる期待をもって、伏してお待ち申し上げます。あまねくものに慈悲深き皇帝陛下、我らの祈りを聞き届けられ、ご慈悲を賜りますよう。³⁰

30 Translated from Russian by Okabayashi Kumi.



Jewish POWs editing the "Der Yudesher Lebn" newspaper issued in both Russian and Yiddish. Russian POWs internment camp, Takaishi, Barrack No. 42. Joseph Trumpeldor sitting fourth from right (1905).