

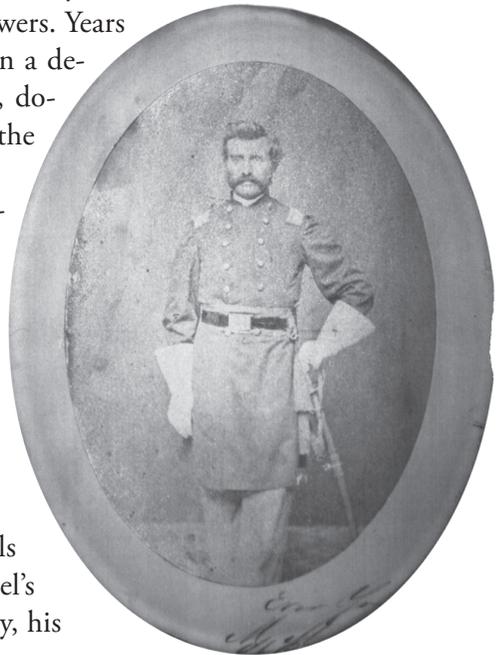
## Remembering Colonel Marcus M. Spiegel, A Jewish Civil War Colonel

JEAN POWERS SOMAN

In commemoration of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, I wrote this essay, specifically, to honor the memory of my great-great grandfather, Colonel Marcus M. Spiegel, a German-Jewish immigrant who became one of the highest-ranking Jewish officers in the Union Army. Tragically, he was killed during this fratricidal conflict.

From the battlefields, Spiegel wrote more than one hundred detailed and eloquent letters to his family and friends. Fortunately his wife, Caroline, preserved these letters and mounted them in a leather album, which was passed down in my family from mother to daughter for five generations. As a child, I was intrigued by this old, leather album, perched high on a shelf in the closet of my mother, Caroline Frances Alschuler Powers. Years later, I would spend more than a decade transcribing these letters, doing research, and writing on the life of my heroic ancestor.

After completing a manuscript, I spent a few more years working with Civil War historian Frank L. Byrne on a book containing biographical and background information and, more important, Spiegel's letters. These letters are historic eyewitness accounts that describe the trials and tribulations of war, Spiegel's love for America and his family, his views on politics and religion, and, perhaps most interesting, his evolution into an ardent



*Colonel Marcus Spiegel*  
(Courtesy Jean Powers Soman)

abolitionist. Jacob Rader Marcus, historian of American Jewish history and the founding director of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, wrote the foreword for the book.<sup>1</sup>

Spiegel was born in the Hessian city of Abenheim on 8 December 1829, the eldest son of Rabbi Moses and Regina Spiegel. Antisemitism was increasing in the German lands during the 1840s, and life was very difficult for the Jews. In 1846, his parents and siblings journeyed across the ocean to new lives and greater freedom in America. Spiegel, a well-educated and idealistic young man, remained behind and fought for liberal reforms in the Revolution of 1848. When the revolution failed, he sought refuge in America, where, in 1849, he was reunited with his family in New York City. After a short time in New



*Caroline Spiegel*

(Courtesy Jean Powers Soman)

York, the adventurous young man who spoke little English travelled to Chicago, where his sister Sarah, lived with her husband, Michael Greenebaum, who was also her first cousin. Like many other immigrants, Spiegel, with the help of his relatives, was outfitted as a peddler and sent to Ohio to sell his wares. While in Ohio, he fell in love with the beautiful Caroline Frances Hamlin, daughter of Stephen and Elizabeth Hamlin, respected members of the Stark County, Ohio, Quaker community. Spiegel, the son of a Reform rabbi, and Caroline were married by a justice of the peace in Ohio in 1853. Shortly after, the newlyweds moved to Chicago, where he worked as a clerk in a dry-goods emporium and Caroline studied the Jewish religion. On 21 August 1853 she converted to Judaism—likely the first person in Chicago to do so.

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Spiegel helped to organize the Hebrew Benevolent Society in Chicago and served as its president.

The young couple returned to Ohio to start a family. When the Civil War erupted in 1861, Spiegel, his wife and their three children were living in the village of Millersburg, Ohio, where he had gone into business as a merchant. He decided for patriotic reasons—as well as some economic concerns—to join the Union Army. Fervently believing that it was his duty to fight for the United States of America, he volunteered in late 1861 as a soldier in the 67th Ohio Volunteer Infantry.

In March 1862, at the Battle of Kernstown, Virginia, Spiegel and his regiment fought against the famous Confederate general, Stonewall Jackson. Some excerpts from Spiegel's original letters provide insight into his emotions and values. For a comprehensive understanding of Colonel Marcus M. Spiegel, all of the letters in the book should be read.

July 27—1862

My lovely and good Wife!

...May God protect you and the children and grant us happy days after our unhappy and distracted country may safely be rescued from the vile hands of traitors and Rebels, a work for which I am willing to fight, so that my children may enjoy as we dit [sic], previous to the breaking out of this accursed Rebellion, “a happy and united Country” God grant that enough strong arms and willing hearts may be found in the loyal States to do this.

Ever your true

Marcus<sup>2</sup>



Headquarters 67th Reg't

August 5, 1862

My Dear Wife and Children:

I have received your several letters almost daily and I can assure you that nothing could give me more joy and true happiness than these letters do to me in the field.... If you ever had an idea of how a fair young lady of twenty contemplates, the day previous to her wedding, the happiness of her approaching nuptials you have an idea of how I now feel in the contemplation of the pleasure it will afford me to lead the 67th regiment into battle; which in all probability I will do today. My dear Wife, I feel serious but proud. I feel adequate for the occasion. I sincerely hope that when you read this you may feel as composed as I do. I know and feel that a kind and all-wise Providence will direct all things for good. I feel as though we shall come out of the contest victorious, and if anything does happen to me, I am only offering a small sacrifice for my beloved country, which always so generous and kind, had opened her arms to receive the down-trodden of other nations.

Give my love to our dear children and to all friends. I am called to headquarters. Good-by. May God protect you, is the fervent prayer of

Your true and loving husband

M.M. Spiegel<sup>3</sup>



Suffolk Va Sept. 1/62

My dear good wife!

...I met today a Lieutenant Biroker [?], a Yehuday from Alzei, who shed tears when he heard my name. He and his father were great friends of my dear father. He told me that the 25th of this month is Rosh Hashonah and the

4th [of] next month Yom Cipur [sic]. He says there is a Synagogue [sic] in Norfolk 12 miles from here. I shall go at all events. You and the children must keep both; keep the children out of School the 25 and 26 and 3rd and 4th for my sake and let us pray to the Lord God of Israel for the deliverance of this once happy Country and the Peaceful enjoyment of our family Circle at the End of this unhappy War. God Bless you all.<sup>4</sup>

In November 1862, Spiegel changed regiments and joined the newly organized 120th Ohio Volunteer Infantry (OVI), which would be involved in the vitally important Union effort to capture the rebel fortress of Vicksburg, Mississippi, strategically located on bluffs high above the Mississippi River. While in Cincinnati, he attended a service at the synagogue and heard a sermon by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, one of the main architects of Reform Judaism in America. Spiegel wrote the following description:

On Board St.[Steamer] Ft. Wayne

Nov 22/62

My dear good wife!

...I spend this forenoon (Shabbath [sic]) by being in Dr. Wise's School [Synagogue] and hearing a very good Sermon by the Doctor. I think I was a devout Israelite; a beauty full [sic] service, good singing and good service and fine Sermon.<sup>5</sup>

On 17 December 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant issued the infamous General Orders Number 11, expelling the Jews as a class from the territory under his command. Numerous historians have expressed the belief that Grant issued this order because he was upset with the illegal trade in cotton, which he felt was interfering with the war effort. Grant became irate after his father, Jesse, had been involved in a bad business deal with some Jewish merchants from Cincinnati; he then issued this unjust order and "expelled the Jews as a class." Although cotton smugglers came from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds, the Jews became the scapegoat. Fortunately, President Abraham Lincoln

revoked this antisemitic order on 4 January 1863. Nothing in any of Spiegel's letters indicates that he knew about the order. During most of the brief time that the order was in effect, Spiegel was with his regiment aboard the USS Key West (No. 2) on the Mississippi River.

Grant would attempt to make amends to the Jews during his presidency. For example, he appointed Jews to high government positions and helped the plight of Jews in Romania. A number of years ago it was discovered that in 1870, Hamlin Spiegel, the eldest son of Marcus and Caroline, was recommended by President Grant to an appointment as a cadet at West Point. He never attended, probably because he was too young. Simon Wolf, a prominent Washington attorney and cousin of Marcus Spiegel and General Edward Saloman, had written letters to Grant requesting that Hamlin be appointed a cadet.<sup>6</sup>

Well-respected by his men and superior officers, Spiegel was promoted to colonel of the 120<sup>th</sup> OVI on 18 February 1863. In America, he was able to rise in rank from captain to colonel in a little over a year. Jews in German lands during this time were not permitted to become officers in the military at all.

Soon after his promotion to colonel, Spiegel delivered this patriotic and emotional address to his regiment:

February 22, 1863, Youngs Point, Louisiana.

I have to day been informed that some soldiers of this Regiment have, at different times, expressed sentiments disloyal and unbecoming a soldier of the Union Army ... saying that if the Regiment should ever have to go into another engagement, not half of the men would fire a gun for this d----d abolition war, & c. When I heard it I thought it almost impossible, that any soldier of the gallant 120<sup>th</sup> Regiment which so nobly stood up at the battles of Vicksburg and Post Arkansas, to defend the old *flag*, where every heart swelled with pride; when they saw the stars and stripes first planted by the 120<sup>th</sup>, wave so proudly, ... could make use of language disgraceful to the Regiment, disloyal to the country, and productive of evil only to the good cause, for which we are enlisted.... What ever is wrong will in time, by the American people, be righted. Ours is the proud position of maintaining the worldwide and noble reputation of the American Volunteer Soldier,

who stands classed with the most intelligent and brave in the known world—our's [sic] is the patriotic position of restoring the grand and sublime American Union—tranquility, peace and happiness to our bleeding country—knowing and appreciating our position none but the most loyal and high-minded thoughts and expressions can emanate from our hearts and lips.— Men! For God's, your country's, your friends at home, your own and my sake, do not, either by thoughts, expressions or willful actions, disgrace yourselves. Stand by the Government right or wrong. You may now do an unsoldier-like act, which, by *excited men at home may be approved*, but rest assured it will ere long come sweeping like an avalanche [on] your own good name and leave you in shame and disgust over your own acts of violating your soldier's oath. While you are in the service, be soldiers in every sense of the word, so that when in private life, you can ever be respected and honorable citizens.<sup>7</sup>

These excerpts are from letters he wrote during the Vicksburg Campaign:

Milliken's Bend, La., March 22, 1863

...The loss I sustained of my noble Company, the gallant boys that fell by my side are still as then warmly lamented and ever will be cherished green in my memory until life ceases.

Since that time, my love, I have seen and learned much. I have seen men dying of disease and mangled by the weapons of death; I have seen them wounded and seen their wounds being dressed, limbs amputated and bullets extracted. I have seen and experienced hunger, hardships and privations; I have with delight and honor welcomed the deafening roar of the Cannons by Land and Water as a signal of the commencement of hostilities. I have witnessed hostile Armies arraigned again [sic] each other, the charge of Infantry at the death-outpouring Artillery, the Bayonet charge and repel, Cavelery [sic] hunting men down like beasts, forts fall and towns refuse, the ferociousness of Gunboats and the sturdy resistance of Forts. I have learned to see all of it coolly

[sic] and with ready presence of mind and yet through all this the Grand Architeck [sic] of the Universe has preserved me, the good father and God of Israel has favored me with his gracious kindness of being a loving husband to a good wife and a kind father to my beloved children and a trusty Son and Brother to the best mother and kindest of Sisters and Brothers and an appreciative recipient of the many acts of kindness by my host of truest of friends. Have we, my dear, not all reasons to be ever thankful to that allwise [sic] and kind providence.

While seeing all of this I have been steadily gaining in friends, influence and position. Thank God I can leave my children a legacy which will inspire them to hold up their heads and walk uprightly through the world and that is "a reputation as a Soldier and Patriot." I have always done my duty and if God spares my health I always will and I know my love you will feel satisfied with me.<sup>8</sup>



Headquarters O.V.I.  
Camp McClernand  
Millikens Bend La.

March 23, 1863

...I often wish this unfortunate war were over, and I permitted to enjoy the comfort and happiness of a comfortable home and blessings of peace in the cozy circle of my little family, but nevertheless, as much as I wish it, I do not want to see it close until the enemies of my beloved country are conquered and brought to terms. Men who are so contemptibly mean and unprincipled as to wage war against the best government in the world and trample under foot the flag that was ever ready to protect you and me and everyone who sought its protection from oppression, must be taught that, although a noble country to live in peaceably, yet it is a powerful government to rebel against. I want

to hear the first cry for peace commence at Richmond ... accompanied with a proposal to lay down their arms and acknowledge the supremacy of the government. Then and not until then, will I say peace. I have been in the service eighteen months and will stay as long as necessary (health permitting) until that end is accomplished.<sup>9</sup>



In the field near Big Black, Miss June 7/63

My dear dear wife!

It is nearly one year since I was called upon to witness the fourth birth of our beloved and blooming offspring. Well do I remember your sufferings; as if it were but a moment ago, do I remember the heroic and womanly like demeanor and the loving and confiding looks I received from you, during all your labor and the joy we both felt when the lovely and pretty Hattie was presented by my dear mother, who at one pronounced her, “the prettiest child that she has ever seen.” (words in quotes translated from German)

Allow me to congratulate you on her first “birth day”. May God our heavenly Father grant that we may live to see many many of them in peace, love and happiness, May it please God to give us many happy days with our Children, so that we may raise them an ornament to Him and an emulation to His teachings.

I would love to be with you to night; I know and feel you are just now thinking of me, but we will have to wait awhile, trusting that Vicksburg will soon fall.

With hearty prayers for your welfare and that of our beloved Children, I remain to the best and loveliest Wife in the world

A true and loving husband

Marcus

You dont [sic] know how much I love you.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, on 4 July 1863, Vicksburg surrendered to the Union Army. This monumental victory split the Confederacy; the Northern forces now controlled most of the Mississippi River. Spiegel wrote a letter praising the commanding general, Ulysses S. Grant, for this great military success. A few days after the fall of Vicksburg, Spiegel was severely wounded by friendly fire.

After spending a short time in a hospital in Mississippi, he made the difficult journey home via boat and freight train. Colonel Spiegel spent a few months at home recuperating from his wounds and then travelled to Louisiana to lead his regiment and continue fighting to win the war.

Like other soldiers in his regiment, Spiegel entered the Army primarily to fight to preserve the Union; initially, he was not in favor of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, but he became a very strong supporter. While stationed in Louisiana during the winter of 1864, he observed the horrendous conditions that slaves were forced to endure and also had the opportunity to meet many freed blacks. The following excerpts from his letters reveal his transformation into an abolitionist.

Plaquemine La. Jan. 3/64

...The most of the slaves here consider themselves and are in reality free and all the sugar raised right around here was raised by the Compensated labor System and many of the haughty and overbearing Slaveowners who one year ago declared they would sooner starve than [sic] employ a freed Negro now are mighty glad to get them.<sup>11</sup>

Plaquemine, La Jan 22/64

...Since I am here I have learned and seen more of what the horrors of Slavery was than I ever knew before and I am glad indeed that the signs of the times show, towards closing out the accursed institution... I am [in] favor of doing away with the institution of Slavery.<sup>12</sup>

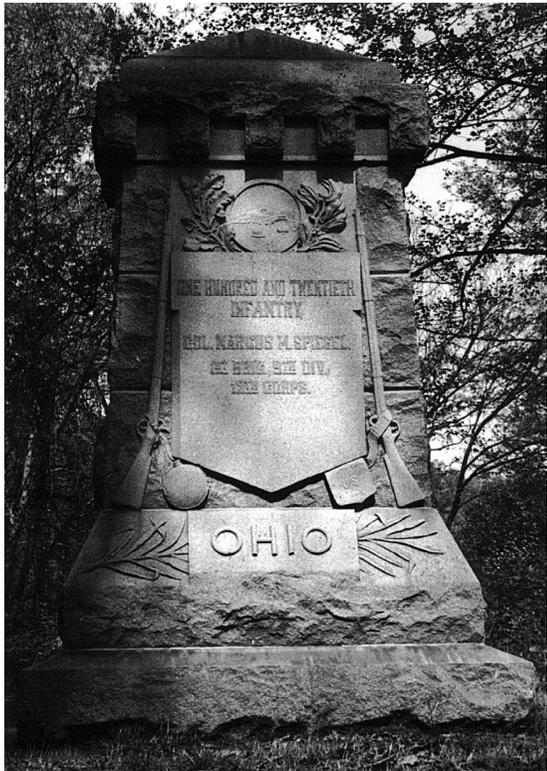
Plaquemine La Feby 12/64

...Slavery is gone up whether the War ends to day or in a year

and there is no use crying over it; it has been an awful institution. I will send you the “black code” of Louisiana some of these days and I am satisfied it will make you shudder.

Now understand me when I say I am a strong abolitionist, I mean that I am not so for party purposes but for humanity sake only, out of my own conviction, for the best Interest of the white man in the south and the black man anywheres [sic].<sup>13</sup>

Spiegel and his regiment were on the transport *City Belle* on the Red River in Louisiana when it was ambushed by rebel forces on 3 May 1864, and he was shot in the abdomen. Twenty-four hours later, on the bloody banks of the Red River, he breathed his last and was buried along the shore of the river in an unmarked grave. Joseph, his younger brother and the regiment’s sutler, was by his side when he died. Joseph was captured and remained in a Confederate prison camp in Texas until the war ended. He then returned to Chicago, where he opened the small dry-goods store that he and Marcus had planned to operate together. Eventually, after many years of hard work and ingenuity this store evolved into the Spiegel Catalogue Company.



*120th Infantry Memorial*  
(Courtesy Jean Powers Soman)

Two months after her husband’s death, Caroline gave birth to their fifth child. In February 1865, the young widow moved with her five small

children from Ohio to Chicago, to be near the Spiegel relatives. Raising her family on a modest widow's military pension, she never remarried, remained true to Judaism, and raised her children in the Chicago Jewish community. In Chicago years later, Spiegel's niece, Hannah Solomon, founded the National Council of Jewish Women with the help of her first cousin, Lizzie Spiegel Barbe, the eldest daughter of Marcus and Caroline Spiegel.

On the battlefield at Vicksburg today stands an impressive granite monument that was erected by the state of Ohio after the war to honor the soldiers of the 120th Ohio, who bravely fought to capture Vicksburg. Col. Marcus M. Spiegel's name is prominently etched on the front of the monument. This American patriot, a German-Jewish immigrant, sacrificed his life to preserve the United States and emancipate the slaves. His story of immigration, of familial devotion, of patriotism and heroism, is at once a personal story and a national story. It is part of the narrative that has shaped America and thanks to the rich legacy he etched in letters, it is a story that will never be forgotten.

*Jean Powers Soman is an author and co-editor, with Frank L. Byrne, of A Jewish Colonel in the Civil War: Marcus M. Spiegel of the Ohio Volunteers. She has been a member of the AJA's Ezra Consortium for many years and has served as the Interim Chairperson of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission Foundation. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of its successor organization, the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Foundation. She is also a lifetime member of the National Council of Jewish Women. She is married to William Soman, an attorney, and has two daughters and four grandchildren.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Most of the information and excerpts from Colonel Marcus M. Spiegel's letters in this essay are from *A Jewish Colonel in the Civil War: Marcus M. Spiegel of the Ohio Volunteers*, ed. Jean Powers Soman and Frank L. Byrne (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) (with a foreword by Jacob Rader Marcus), currently in print. It was originally published as *Your True Marcus: The Civil War Letters of a Jewish Colonel*, ed. Frank L. Byrne and Jean Powers Soman (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1985) (with a foreword by Jacob Rader Marcus.) Soman and her mother, Caroline Alschuler Powers, donated most of Spiegel's original letters and documents to the American Jewish Archives. (The letters quoted in this essay are at the American Jewish Archives, except for the letters dated 7 June 1863 and 12 February 1864, which are part of Soman's private collection in Florida. Copies of

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these two letters are held at the AJA. The letters dated 5 August 1862, address to regiment dated 22 February 1863, and 23 March 1863 were originally published in newspapers. The American Jewish Archives has copies of these three letters.)

<sup>2</sup>Soman and Byrne, eds., *A Jewish Colonel in the Civil War*, 141.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 146–147.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 180–181.

<sup>6</sup>After the publication of *Your True Marcus*, this information and accompanying copies of documents regarding Hamlin Spiegel was sent to me by historian John Y. Simon, who was the editor of Ulysses S. Grant's papers and executive director of the Ulysses S. Grant Association. I have donated copies of these documents to the American Jewish Archives.

<sup>7</sup>Soman and Byrne, eds., *A Jewish Colonel in the Civil War*, 243–244.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 257–258.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 260–261.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 315–316.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 321.