

1918 War Letters: Deception To Protect the Family, A World War I Case Study

“It all over now and thank God for that. Now is time enough to tell you the truth. I’ve told you all falsehoods for such a long time that I feel that I must confess to the truth, now that I am alive, and we are victorious.”

So wrote Lt. Jacob Kahn a Jewish doctor serving with the American Expeditionary Forces in France to his sister in Chicago on November 12, 1918. Jews made up 4 to 5 percent of the American forces.^{1 2} The percentage of Jewish men who fought in WWI surpassed that of their numbers in the general population where they comprised just 3.3 percent.³ Volunteering for the fight became a way to prove and improve ones place in the American mosaic.⁴

Lt. Kahn’s father, Moses, fled Russia in 1881. The family settled in South Chicago; Moses opened a business in the largely immigrant and first-generation neighborhood. There, he served as the first president of the Orthodox Congregation Bikur Cholim.⁵ Kahn’s family having immigrated before the 1924 anti-immigrant legislation was welcomed in the United States. The family lived for decades in what would become a neighborhood of extended family, cousins, and in-laws.

It is likely that Doctor Kahn had never been away from his parents before military service. Even when he attended Northwestern Medical School, an hour’s ride from home, he continued to live in his parent’s home. After graduation, he accepted an internship at Chicago’s Michael Reese Hospital.

When the U.S. entered the war in 1917, Kahn enlisted. Indeed, he so wanted to serve that he volunteered in Boston, as the Chicago contingent had filled its medical quota (almost 8,000 Jews served in the Medical Corp).⁶ Kahn served with the 303rd Field Artillery Regiment.⁷

In the days before instant communication by mobile phones and the Internet, letters from men in the training camps and on the battlefields provided the glue necessary to maintain family connections, transmit news of daily occurrences, and educate family members about life in the military.

Letters from soldiers confronted two censors, one being the military. Dr. Kahn wrote to his niece, "I dare say that you or your mother have not received all of my mail. A great deal of it gets lost in the chief censor's office."⁸ But the correspondence faced another censor as well; the men themselves shaped their narratives. Often, soldiers tried to protect and reassure their families of their safety. Letters reflected what the authors wanted their audience to believe, not always the reality of the situation. The storyteller often fashioned the narrative to fit the intended reader's perceived fears. Therefore, war letters can be unreliable sources.⁹

However, as case studies, the letters can be illuminating windows into family life. A century after they were written, these letters push the reader to question what may be distorted or left unsaid. Throughout his time in the military, Kahn kept up a steady correspondence with his Chicago family. All who could be recruited, wrote. Kahn's

known correspondents included his parents, his sister, Ray; Ray's teenage daughter, Leah; and his sister-in-law, Bessie.

Kahn wrote as many as three versions of his experiences which he tailored to his different correspondents. He wrote so many versions of the same events that, as he confessed to his sister-in-law, "I had one awful time trying to keep my stories straight at home, for I would forget the contents of one letter before I wrote another, and in but few of them did I tell the truth, and to tell the falsehoods I told and get away with it is remarkable."¹⁰

Why the different versions? In the letters sent to his parents, Kahn remained perpetually well and never in harm's way. He did not want them to worry. To his young niece, he wrote of the many interesting things he saw and always thanked her for her thoughtful gifts, especially gum. To his sister-in-law and sister, he wrote the closest to the truth, confiding at the end of the war that he was "surprised" that family did not question his stories."¹¹ The doctor's letters tell more about his priorities and transformation than about the war itself. When read chronologically, they show progression from writing about the personal to writing about what he observed.

Dr. Kahn's first military experience began in May of 1918 when, before heading overseas, he was sent to Camp Greenleaf in Georgia, the army's training camp for medical officers.¹² Kahn's letters from Georgia give the reader a clue to his concerns. In these letters, Kahn focused on four main themes: his assertion of wellbeing to reassure

family members, descriptions of his activities, concern for the health of those at home, and yearning for letters from home.

From the letters the reader is able to puzzle out the questions asked by relatives at home. Before movies and television's *M.A.S.H.* brought depictions of military doctors into our homes, Kahn sought to describe his living conditions to his family. To his sister, Kahn explained what it was to "live out of a trunk."

Each man in the barracks, . . . is permitted to have a small space to contain 1 cot—with blankets-- & pillow- 1 trunk and 1 traveling bag...Other than the clothes on [the] hook, nothing—absolutely nothing dare be left outside a fellow's trunk a minute. . . .¹³

In another letter, Kahn extolled the benefits of his new lifestyle and at the same time demonstrated his allegiance to his country, writing: "I am feeling very well. . . and thank God have not felt a sign of a headache. That's a great deal for me." Kahn, the son of immigrants, wrote, "If this life does nothing more for me than to cure my headaches I have the United States to bless for ever & ever."¹⁴ On the same date Kahn wrote these words lauding his newfound health, concerns at home about the war effort grew. Headlines in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* read "FOE 55 MILES FROM PARIS."¹⁵

In mid-June, just six weeks into the specialized three-month program for medical officers, Kahn's unit ordered his return. His unit left for Europe on July 16, 1918. The ship joined a large convoy of 22 ships guarded by a British armed cruiser.¹⁶ On the trip across the Atlantic Kahn encountered danger for the first time; the convoy faced

“violent” German submarine attacks.¹⁷ The same day, the *Chicago Tribune* reported a U-boat attack during a contemporaneous transatlantic crossing.¹⁸ Describing the crossing to his sister as “uneventful,”¹⁹ Kahn used this letter, like others to follow, to reassure his family that his experiences sharply differed from what they read in the local press.

The convoy safely reached England.²⁰ For Kahn, the stay in England provided the hope of connecting with family. Kahn, like many children of immigrants, had tangible relationships with family outside of the United States. In addition to family in Russia and Sweden, he had relatives not far from where his regiment camped. But the Commanding officer refused to allow any of the men to leave Camp.”²¹ Kahn promised his uncle that he would visit during his first leave.²²

In August the regiment reached its new training area not far from the French city of Clermont-Ferrand.²³ He shared the news of the regiment’s status with his family at home: “Apparently we are going to get from three to four months service with the unit while they are getting their advance training before we get any real active service at the front.”²⁴ Kahn lamented, “I wish it were sooner, as I am terribly anxious to see some of the real thing. As long as I am giving my services I would feel better if they could be used to better advantage with the boys.”²⁵ As a new National Army Division, the 76th was last in line to be issued the equipment needed for battle and therefore saw only a relatively short time in combat.

Once his regiment established camp, Kahn used a historical reference to let his family know of his location. In a letter to his sister-in-law he described the region's geography and historic importance:

Dear Bess,

We are surrounded by beautiful mountains, . . .The Battle between Caesar and the Gauls was fought here, and as an everlasting memorial they have erected a beautiful castle on the summit of the highest mountain here.²⁶

The paragraph describes the locations a specific battle. In 52 BCE the Gallic forces, defeated Julius Caesar's Roman Republic Army near Clermont-Ferrand. The historical reference in the letter assumed that the reader had an understanding of history and the availability of reference books.²⁷ Therefore, with a little research the family in Chicago knew exactly where Kahn resided.

In this beautiful region, far from the front, it was Kahn's responsibility to teach and supervise the detachment. He wrote of his fellow officers, "We have a very sociable and bright set of officers in this Regiment."²⁸ The only physician on duty, he directed a medical detachment of twelve men responsible for the health of 450 men. In his infirmary he treated the ill, wounded and injured.

Kahn wrote: "We are so far from the battle fields that we don't even know that there is such a thing as War going on."²⁹ As the regiment's doctor, Kahn did not have much to do. He told his sister-in-law, "I am having a good time here, and living the life of ease. . . I enjoy the work most immensely."³⁰ He reported to his sister: "Food is plentiful

and we get anything we want.”³¹ As they were far from danger, there is no reason to believe that Kahn’s account is too far off the mark.

In the early fall of 1918, beyond good food and beautiful scenery, Kahn wanted to celebrate the Jewish High Holidays. The Jewish Welfare Board provided services for Jewish soldiers; however, Kahn does not mention any Jewish organization or any contact with other Jewish servicemen. Instead, he wrote, “I have made arrangements to spend the Holidays with some very wealthy people here”.³² The Jewish community of Clermont-Ferrand was relatively small in 1918, consisting of maybe 30 families. It is likely that most ran merchant businesses such as clothing stores.³³

After the holidays he reported to his sister, “I met some wonderful people here. I spent the Holidays with these people, and no doubt a King could not be treated as Royal.”³⁴ A month later, Kahn again mentioned the couple, “I wrote to you, about the way I spent the Holidays, Well! These people just insist on taking up most of my spare time entertaining me and I can assure you that they do it too. I have never met such a hospitable and lovely couple. I enjoy their company a great deal.”³⁵ Unfortunately, Kahn did not use their names, and nothing else is known about his hosts. It is unclear whether he sought out local Jews, they sought out him, or a Jewish organization arranged their meeting. But it is apparent that their friendship and the chance to observe the holidays meant a great deal to him.³⁶

As the months in France wore on, the subjects of Kahn's letters changed slightly. Although he continued to be very concerned about the health of his family at home, his letters now shared observations about the French people and the war itself. In early October of 1918 he wrote of missing his nieces and nephew, then added, "Children are rarities here in France. The War being almost five years in this country the youngsters have grown up so that those of age were taken into the service, and the younger ones are now almost at the age limit."³⁷ As a doctor who attended to children in civilian life, he especially noted the lack of children in the cities around him. Like many Americans he appreciated the historic sights of Europe, but was shocked to see the effects of many years of war.

Less than three weeks before the war's end, Kahn sent guidance and encouragement to his teenage niece, Leah:

I don't want you to be angry at me for not writing you oftener, as I have been terribly busy and really did not get the chance to. . . . I've read all your letters to many of the officers here and they enjoy them as much as ever. . . . Don't you worry about geometry its easy and you can get through it easily. . . . I am having a very nice time and enjoying army life immensely.³⁸

Kahn's duties increased as his battalion prepared to move towards the front. He had less time for writing. However, camaraderie with his fellow officers grew in importance as they shared letters from home. This short excerpt reiterates two primary themes of the correspondence, interest in all matters of home life, and again, reassuring family of his wellbeing by the falsehood of "having a nice time," to making his life sound like a

vacation. Truth was never the goal of the correspondence, maintaining connections remained vital.

What he did not want his family to know was that the men of the battalion were well aware of the horrific nature of the front. Finally, on November 1st the 303rd headed for the front.

The battalion faced constant danger as enemy artillery rained down on them. Kahn described the scene: “3 days ago, they got next to us and began to raise ‘hell’ with us . . . they located our positions and made us feel it. And until the last minute they gave us a strong counter-attack with result of a mustard gas shell casualty in our battalion as a finale.”^{39, 40}

The day after the war’s final battle, Kahn sent letters to his sister and sister-in-law in Chicago, admitting his war-long deception. In these letters Kahn reveals fears that he had hidden from the family and admits that he had been lying about the degree of danger to which he’d been exposed. These are the only letters where Kahn wrote of being in harm’s way. Both letters speak to his patriotism and his belief in God. The letters, while similar in their description of the action at the front, were different in tone and emphasis. The letter to his sister is personal, concerned about their father, while the letter to his sister-in-law is literary. This is a repeat of the style of the letters Kahn sent on his arrival in France. Therefore, with two similar letters available for comparison, the reader gains additional insight into the nature of family relationships.

Nov. 12, 1918 France

Dear Sister Ray.

Each time I thought I was going I thought of the folks at home, and how my death would effect Dad. But God has been with me, and I am now about to relate the truth.

Our enemy put up a very strong counter attack (up to the last minute). At 10 a.m. yesterday our last casualty was a man struck by a mustard gas shell sent directly over our guns and closing the war.

After telling his sister-in-law that much of what she read earlier was false, he wrote the following moving words:

November 12, 1918:

Dear Sister Bess: . . . during the past 41 days I've been directly in the shadow of death. . . [we were] placed directly behind the Infantry to guard them in the trenches. . . and to our good fortune the war ended just in time to spare the lives of those that remain to hear the news of Peace."⁴¹

Parts of Kahn's letters of November 12 are problematic, as they do not match battalion history. According to the official record, Kahn's battalion was near the battlefields for ten days and saw action for the last eight days of the War, not the 41 days the letters recount.⁴² What to make of the discrepancy? They were written the day after war's end and it could have seemed like they had been under fire for much longer than possible. Also, the battalion had been away from their Beaumont billets for several weeks, including time at the artillery range. The letters are a reminder of the unreliability of war letters, even when the emotions ring true.

Kahn ended his November 12th letter to his sister-in-law, with “my address remains unchanged. Keep on writing.” All who could hold a pen established another link to home.

Conclusion:

What can we take away from Kahn’s letters? War letters, like all correspondence, reflected what the authors wanted their correspondents to know. They are not histories or even diaries, but writing meant to provide a link between a soldier and a child, wife, parent, sibling, or friend at home. The content of letters varied from correspondent to correspondent, but for the soldiers overseas and the family at home it was the act of receiving a letter that was important. Therefore, the power of a letter lay not in its contents but in its reassurance that the link remained intact. Although every soldier had an individual story to tell and all faced different obstacles, their letters shared a universal theme: the quest for news of family always remained urgent.

For a historian, war letters play a different role. Soldiers’ letters provide a layer of descriptions and emotions on the bare bones of military histories. Beyond dates and maps, letters can indicate feelings and practices, even if they contain unreliable information. As primary documents they must be questioned and placed in context. An author’s divergence from the truth forces the historian to delve in to the other sources to confirm or reject content.

World War I was a watershed moment that reverberated long after the armistice.

To Kahn and other veterans, 11 November became a holy day. On the 11th of November at 11:00 AM, Kahn always stopped to call his niece, Leah, his teenage correspondent. He started the tradition at the armistice in 1918 and continued it until his death in 1959. For Lieutenant Jacob V. Kahn, the war and family connections remained intertwined.

¹200,000 to 250,000 men. Julian Leavitt, "American Jews in the World War." *The American Jewish Year Book* 21 (1919): 141-55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23601015>. Accessed 8/22/17. Not all Jews self-identified.

²3,500 died. Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 212.

³Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 212. A few good books such as *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants During The First World War*, by Christopher M. Sterba (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 and *With Their Bare Hands: General Pershing, The 79th Division, and the Battle for Montgaucon*, by Gene Fax, (Great Britain: Osprey Publishing, 2017) discuss the experiences of American Jews in the military during the war; however, they do not reference Jewish doctors in the AEF's Medical Corp. For comparison with World War Two see: Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed A Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁴ Gene Fax, *With Their Bare Hands: General Pershing, The 79th Division, and the Battle for Montgaucon*, (Great Britain: Osprey Publishing, 2017) 64.

⁵ For images and brief history see: "To Rescue Falling Stars," *Chicago Sun-Times* (September 28, 1997).

⁶ Julian Leavitt, "American Jews in the World War." *The American Jewish Year Book* 21 (1919): 143 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23601015>. Accessed 8/22/17.

⁷ The Division (minus its Medical Corps, that trained in Georgia) formed and trained in Massachusetts at Camp Devens, a recently created post that first opened its doors in September 1917, after the United States entered the war.

⁸ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Leah Greenwald, November 19, 1918. In possession of author

⁹Deborah Dash Moore, email to author October 3, 2017. Jessica Cooperman, email to author, October 4, 2017.

¹⁰ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Bessie Kahn, November 12, 1918. In possession of author.

¹¹ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Bessie Kahn, November 12, 1918. In possession of author.

¹² There were training camps in all corners of the country with military names including: Devens (Massachusetts), Funston (Kansas), Grant (Illinois), Upton (New York), Frémont (California), Logan (Texas), and Wheeler (Georgia). For additional letters from Jewish soldiers see: special war columns in the Jewish press including Chicago's *Sentinel* and the *American Israelite*. Collections containing letters are archived at the Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives and the American Jewish Historian Society.

¹³ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, May 30, 1918. In possession of author.

¹⁴ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, May 30, 1918 .

¹⁵ *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago) May 30, 1918.

¹⁶ For more about the *H.M.S. Berwick* see: <http://www.berwick-cittaslow.org.uk/hmsberwick.html> accessed on July 24, 2017.

¹⁷ *The G.P.F Book: Regimental History of the Three Hundred and Third Field Artillery* (unknown publisher, and date, circa 1921) 24. In 1917 Germany commenced "unlimited submarine warfare." Their aim was to cut off supplies to England and France by closing the Atlantic

corridor. This would, in their evaluation, also stop the possibility of American troops' reaching the war zone. The Allies did not have the technology to locate submarines in sufficient numbers to prevent attacks. Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011) 247-248.

¹⁸ <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1918/07/29/page/3/article/liner-to-u-s-has-3-u-boat-fights-during-one-trip>. Accessed July 24, 2017.

¹⁹ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, July 29, 1918. In possession of author.

²⁰ *The G.P.F Book: Regimental History of the Three Hundred and Third Field Artillery* (unknown publisher, and date, circa 1921) 24.

²¹ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, September 20, 1918. In possession of author.

²² *The G.P.F Book: Regimental History of the Three Hundred and Third Field Artillery* (unknown publisher, and date, circa 1921) 24. By the summer of 1918 American troops arrived in Europe in greater numbers: 245,000 in May, 278,000 in June, and 306,000 in July. The 303rd arrived in August toward the end of the American-European transport. David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: the First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 177.

²³ According to Paul W. Grasmehr, Reference Coordinator, Pritzker Military Museum & Library, "The 151st Field Artillery Brigade consisted of a field artillery regiment equipped with 75mm (3-inch) guns, a field artillery regiment equipped with 4.7-inch guns, the 303rd Field Artillery Regiment, armed with the French G.P.F., a 6-inch (155mm) rifles and a Trench Mortar Battery. The artillery pieces assigned to the 303rd Field Artillery Regiment, twenty-four assigned to the regiment in three eight-gun battalions, could hit targets 10.4 miles in the enemy rear areas. These targets were located by U.S. or Allied observation aircraft or balloons. The targets engaged were typically enemy supply depots, rail heads used for moving men and materials or troop concentrations moving from one sector of the front to another." Email to author June 16, 2017.

²⁴ Letter from Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, July 29, 1918. In possession of author.

²⁵ Letter from Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, August 11, 1918. In possession of author.

²⁶ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Bessie Kahn, August 18, 1918. In possession of author. The day before, Kahn wrote a similar letter to his sister "Am settled now, in southern Sunny France, where the weather is more beautiful . . . We are situated between the mountains and the scenery all around us is most beautiful." Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, August 17, 1918. In possession of author.

²⁷ It is interesting to note that this reference was only given in the letter to his sister-in-law, not repeated in a similar letter to his sister.

²⁸ Letter from Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, July 29, 1918. In possession of author.

²⁹ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald August 17, 1918. In possession of author.

³⁰ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Bessie Kahn, August 18, 1918. In possession of author.

³¹ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, August 17, 1918. In possession of author.

³² Letter, Jacob Kahn to Bessie Kahn, August 18, 1918. In possession of author.

³³ Sweets, John F., *Choices in Vichy France: The French under Nazi Occupation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 128-130. In 1942 there were seventy Jewish businesses in the region, the majority clothing related.

³⁴ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, September 20, 1918. In possession of author.

³⁵ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, October 6, 1918. In possession of author.

³⁶ I still hope to find out something about this couple and how they came to invite Lt. Kahn to spend the holidays with them. Months later, while waiting for transport home, Kahn wrote of his continuing contact with the couple from Clermont-Ferrand , “I had another letter from my friends in Clerrmont [sp]. They send me cookies and cake etc. They are wonderful people. I cannot begin to describe my feeling toward them. I don’t presume I shall ever forget them.” Letter, Lt. Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, December 28, 1918.

³⁷ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Ray Greenwald, October 6, 1918. In possession of author.

³⁸ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Leah Greenwald, October 24, 1918. In possession of author.

³⁹ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Bessie Kahn, November 12, 1918. In possession of author.

⁴⁰According to Paul W. Grasmehr, Reference Coordinator, Pritzker Military Museum & Library, Kahn “had a heavy burden on his shoulders; he was expected to perform a variety of leadership, administrative and medical tasks . . .” [to enable] “the regiment to function smoothly, so that they could perform their combat role.” Paul W. Grasmehr, Reference Coordinator, Pritzker Military Museum & Library, in email to author, September 29, 2017.

⁴¹ Letter, Jacob Kahn to Bessie Kahn, November 12, 1918. In possession of author.

⁴² “The 303d FA Regiment left its training camp on 1 Nov 1918. Enters combat operations on 2 Nov until 11 Nov. LT Kahn was not under fire for 41 days.” Leonid Kondratiuk, Director, Historical Services, The Adjutant General's Office, Massachusetts.