



**A memorial tombstone bearing the Star of David for Isidor Katzenstein.** Family members David (right), Wendy, and Jesse Hefter were present as Sergeant Major Maik Föllmer unveiled the monument in Saint-Quentin, France. (© Uwe Zucchi)

## "Look around you: You are all guardians of memory."

Volksbund Continues "Operation Levi" Honoring Jewish Soldiers of World War I in Saint-Quentin and Maissemy

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**“It's a Great Miracle to Be Here” — It was nothing short of a miracle for Jesse Hefter to stand beside the newly unveiled tombstone bearing the Star of David in honor of his great-uncle, Isidor Katzenstein. Despite battling a rare form of cancer, Hefter made the journey from the United States to attend the ceremony. In the French communities of Maissemy and Saint-Quentin, the German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V.*) continues its effort to replace the crosses marking the graves of Jewish soldiers with memorials bearing the Star of David.**

That same day in Riga, the Volksbund commemorated the Holocaust, which also claimed the lives of two of Isidor Katzenstein's sisters. Through “Operation Levi,” the organization is drawing attention both to the experiences of Jewish soldiers during the First World War and to the fate of their families during the years of persecution and murder.

## **Just eighteen days later, the war ended**

Isidor was just 18 years old when he died of severe wounds while a prisoner of war on October 24, 1918. Eighteen days later, the First World War came to an end. His family only learned of his life and fate relatively recently. That so much more is now known about the young soldier on this sunny morning in France's Aisne region is thanks to the painstaking research of Stefan Schweitzer.

A lawyer and historian from Bonn, Schweitzer has meticulously documented the stories of First World War soldiers who died in France. Jesse Hefter (Boston, MA, US), his brother David, and David's wife, Wendy (Baltimore, MD, US), expressed their heartfelt gratitude for his work. The German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V.*) has also benefited greatly from his dedicated volunteer efforts.

## **He succumbed to his wounds after six days in a military hospital**

A native of Wehrda, near Marburg (north of Frankfurt am Main), Isidor Katzenstein served as a private in Reserve Infantry Regiment No. 71 of the 22nd Reserve Division. Severely wounded on October 18 in the Cambrai–Saint-Quentin sector, he was treated at a French field hospital in Cugny.

“The 1907 Hague Convention on Land Warfare required all belligerent nations to provide medical care to wounded prisoners of war without regard to nationality,” explained Schweitzer.



The field hospital at Cugny, equipped with an operating theater, radiology facilities, and sterilization equipment, was used alternately by German and French forces as the front lines shifted.

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One of the temporary cemeteries at Cugny, photographed in 1917.

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French authorities initially buried the 18-year-old in a temporary cemetery in Cugny. After the war, French military authorities reinterred the German dead from 98 communities throughout the region at the military cemetery in Saint-Quentin, where more than 8,200 soldiers are buried today.

The three family members brought a treasured family photograph showing the parents, Jacob and Betty, with their three sons and three daughters. Isidor died in military service. His older brother, Julius, also served in the German military but survived the First World War and returned home.



Photograph of the Katzenstein family, who lived in Wehrda, Hesse, near Marburg. © Uwe Zucchi

Standing at his great-uncle's grave, David Hefter remarked that Isidor represents a life sacrificed for his country, while Julius symbolizes continuity. In 1939, Julius escaped Germany with his family, departing by ship from Hamburg. Among those on board was nine-year-old Ruth, the future mother of Jesse and David Hefter (and two other siblings). Since then, the family has grown and includes great-great-great-grandchildren.

Sacrifice alone is not enough, David Hefter continued. What matters most is continuity and the passing of values from one generation to the next. "The greatest legacy is what continues to live on after us."

## Hidden and Saved

That legacy also includes preserving the memory of the other Katzenstein siblings. Adolf died in childhood. Regina was interned with her two children, Betty and Arthur, at the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands under

false identities. She had obtained forged identity papers, enabling all three to secure their release from the camp.

They went into hiding with the Dutch underground in Rotterdam, survived the war, and, after its end, emigrated to the United States via Sweden. Their story has been preserved in the archives of the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem, said Jesse Hefter.

## **Two Sisters Murdered at Auschwitz**

The sisters Selma and Meta were murdered at Auschwitz. Their parents died in Wehrda before the Holocaust began.



Wendy Hefter wears a family heirloom around her neck—one that has since been passed on to one of Julius Katzenstein's great-great-great-granddaughters.

## **“No One Must Be Forgotten”**

Not everyone has a family to preserve their memory, Shalom Lamm told the approximately 30 people gathered for the ceremony. “Look around you: you are all guardians of memory.”



No one, he emphasized, should ever be forgotten. The historian with Operation Benjamin urged those present, “Through your actions, ensure that every person is remembered truthfully.”

Like the German War Graves Commission's Operation Levi, the U.S.-based Operation Benjamin is dedicated to ensuring that Jewish soldiers are buried beneath the correct grave markers.



Laurie Bilger of Operation Benjamin welcomed each Jewish soldier “home”, echoing the traditional inscription found on Jewish gravestones.

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Patricia Hammond and Matt Redman—pictured here with a 1915 harp guitar—provided musical accompaniment for the German War Graves Commission during the replacement of the grave markers in Maissemy and Saint-Quentin.

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The 1918 Yiddish song “Oy Dorn Dorn” and the 1913 classic “There’s a Long, Long Trail A-Winding” are among the selections in their repertoire. The collection of songs is titled “Songs That Won the War.”

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## **Seven Memorial Steles, One Rosette**

Seven new memorial steles bearing the Star of David now mark the graves of Bruno Jacob, Salo Krebs, Albert Neuberger, Leo Roos, Siegfried Simon, Alfred Haendler, and Isidor Katzenstein at the German military cemetery in Saint-Quentin. A Star of David rosette has also been added to the memorial plaque for the mass grave in honor of Norbert Reiss.

The previous day, the German War Graves Commission, together with guests from the United States, unveiled ten new Star of David steles at the German military cemetery in Maissemy. Three additional names on the mass grave memorial were likewise identified with Star of David rosettes.



Alexis Grandin, Deputy Mayor of Saint-Quentin, places a memorial stone on one of the newly installed steles before Dirk Backen (left), Secretary General of the German War Graves Commission, follows suit.

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Sabine and Stefan Schweitzer (right), together with Carole Novy (left), head of the German War Graves Commission's office in France, and Alexandre de Bordelius, the Commission's Country Representative for France.

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Overcome with emotion, Jesse Hefter (right) said he felt compelled to sing, rather than simply recite, the final Kaddish of the day. His voice rang out loudly and powerfully across the cemetery.

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An 11-year-old girl in Israel collected the small stones that were placed beside the Star of David rosette in memory of Norbert Reiss.

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## A Final Salute

New to this year's ceremony was the "Final Salute" at each grave, offered after words of remembrance and welcome, and following the recitation of the Kaddish for each fallen soldier. As the gathering ended and the crowd began to disperse, three attendees personally thanked Captain Jens Schrader for this military tribute: a member of Operation Benjamin, a teenager from the local Jewish community, and Jesse Hefter.





Captain Jens Schrader (right) received the participants' gratitude at the conclusion of the ceremony.

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The Saint-Quentin German Military Cemetery has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2023. Emperor Wilhelm II. helped finance the memorial seen in the background with his own private funds and attended its dedication during the war, alongside French representatives.

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- About the international commemorations marking the 110th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme: Commemorating the Somme: “Here, the War Never Falls Completely Silent” Hand in Hand: 110 Years After the Battle of the Somme
- About the commemoration of Holocaust victims in Riga: One of the Darkest Chapters in German History



- About Operation Levi: Operation Levi, an initiative of the German War Graves Commission, has been supported by the Alfred Landecker Foundation since 2026.

## **About the German War Graves Commission**

The German War Graves Commission is a nonprofit organization that, on behalf of the German federal government, locates, recovers, and provides dignified burials for German war dead abroad. More than 5,500 remains were recovered and reinterred last year alone. The Commission maintains war graves in 45 countries and provides support to surviving family members. Through its youth and educational programs, it reaches nearly 50,000 people each year. Its work depends heavily on membership contributions and charitable donations.