Caught in the Middle:Jewish Soldiers in American War Fiction

Karol Jaroszewski
Faculty of Languages, University of Gdansk
Stanislawa Wyspianskiego 17/60, 81-435 Poland
Email: k-and-k@o2.pl

Abstract This article examines the way in which Jewish soldiers are portrayed in American war fiction, on the basis of four texts by authors William Wharton, Winston Groom, Philip Roth and Norman Mailer. It depicts the situation in which Jewish soldiers find themselves, their fears, convictions and objections, and the prejudice they face. It also shows the scale of complexity with which this issue is presented, depending on the work and author.
Key words Jewishness; army; misplacement; duty; equality

Minorities in literature are a delicate issue. It is never easy to fully grasp or communicate the dynamics of their functioning without offending anybody, striking a patronizing chord, or falling into clichés and stereotypes. War fiction makes this matter even more complicated. Here we face a combination of fear, tiredness, monotony, madness, loathing and grief, with such in-depth issues as race, religion, rejection, a sense of belonging, as well a sensation of being caught in between, not entirely secure in one's position. Such, in my view, is the case of Jewish soldiers in American war fiction. Their struggle is one with their enemy, their brothers in arms, and frequently with themselves, their views, their incapacity to adapt, their uncertain footing. In this article I would like to focus on four texts, which show the diversity in which Jewish soldiers can be depicted. Some examples may pose as simpler, more easily defined, others as more complex, yet all have one thing in common—they provide us with an image of conflict within conflict, a confinement within confinement in circumstances that are always hostile.

Stanley Shutzer, one of the protagonists of William Wharton's "A Midnight Clear", is a member of an Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon, deployed in the Ardennes in the winter of 1944, just days before the famous German counter offensive. The unit is comprised mostly of particularly gifted and intelligent young men, participants in the ASTP (Army Specialised Training Program)—a short-lived

college education program for soldiers and recruits. They take up their post in an old abandoned mansion and begin patrolling missions. Sometime after their arrival they encounter the Germans, however, no fight ensues. Instead both sides toss snowballs, build snowmen and exchange Christmas gifts. Finally, owing to Shutzer's translation, the Americans find out that the Germans want to surrender, and both sides come up with an elaborate plan to make it look like the Germans surrendered in battle, so as to save their families back home from repercussions. Unfortunately the plan fails miserably and Shutzer dies on the way to Headquarters.

Shutzer's Jewishness could at first be considered stereotypical, given the circumstances. He is the only one among the protagonists who calls the Germans Nazis, and throughout the greater part of the novel his strong anti-German sentiments are highlighted, as opposed to the somewhat anti-war approach of the entire squad. As Will Knot, the main protagonist remarks "He's the only one of us fighting the war on purpose" (117).[1] This of course stems from Shutzer's absolute conviction as to the fate of the European Jews, something that the other members of the squad still find doubtful: "'You really believe that shit, Stan? You really think the Nazis are killing Jews?' 'I *know* it. It's hard for a goy like you to believe, but I *know*. I have relatives who were there. These Nazis are bloodthirsty monsters (...)'" (118). As we can see Shutzer knows why he fights, but he also perceives and stresses the differences and inequalities in the U.S. Army, calling Knot a goy as opposed to himself, and remarking "'You can't have brown eyes and be an officer'" (154). He thus realises his position - being caught between his mortal enemies, the Germans, and the system behind the army in which he has to serve. However, when the Americans realise that the Germans in their vicinity act somewhat strangely, it is Shutzer who first begins to make out their intentions "'If those Nazis were going to kill me, they already had their chance. I figure they're dogging it the way we are (...)'" (118). Ironically, he is the one who enables any communication between the German and American soldiers, as he speaks Yiddish, a language spoken by the Jewish Diaspora around the world, which was developed to a large extent from German. Thus, it appears that culturally Shutzer has more in common with the Germans than with the Americans. Thanks to him both sides develop their mutual plan of the German surrender. Just before the tragic finale we can see a shift in Shutzer's character. He drinks and smokes with the rest of his unit and the Germans, he stays behind with the German unit to give the cease-fire signal, which makes it obvious that he believes in the success of the entire plan and trusts the enemy soldiers. Tragically, when "Mother" Wilkins, the only member of the American unit who was not informed of the deal, begins to shoot at the Germans to "save" his squad, Shutzer becomes one of the first casualties. He is wounded by the German commander, an event he himself deems ironic: "'Me, the one guy who wants

to fight these Nazi bastards gets the million-dollar wound. Isn't it that way?'" (197). Shutzer dies on the way back, pulled behind a jeep, fastened to a wounded German soldier, who dies with him, forming a final symbolic bond between mortal enemies.

Lieutenant Billy Kahn, the protagonist of Winston Groom's "Better Times than These" is an officer in the U.S. Air Cavalry, serving a tour of duty in Vietnam. He commands an infantry company and takes part in a series of jungle battles, until several of his men rape and murder two women, Viet Cong prisoners of war. Kahn is summoned before a military court and is charged with neglecting his duties, with respect to the prisoners in his custody. As he testifies his company is nearly wiped out when their positions are overrun by the North Vietnamese Army. Kahn blames his superior, Lt. Colonel Patch, for his men's fate, and threatens him with an investigation board. Patch, in order to get him out of the way, offers to have him reassigned and sends him back United States.

The key issues connected with the character of Billy Kahn are those of misplacement, debt and duty. He feels misplaced at home as a teenager, in a neighbourhood where there are no other Jews. He is misplaced in Vietnam, when he has to testify before the court while his men and friend, Lieutenant William Holden, acting commander of his company, get slaughtered by the enemy. He initially feels misplaced back home, assigned to a temporary base before he can get his discharge from the army. The issue of debt is connected with the way in which he believes he is perceived by others, as one of those who "killed Christ." He believes that it was the need to pay this debt that forced his parents to put Christmas ornaments on their house, when their neighbours said it was their turn. He himself, attributing his failures to this debt of Jewishness, tries to pay it by joining the football team at school, and later by joining the army. He believes it his duty to kill the North Vietnamese, hoping that if it be fulfilled, it will pay his debt to the society, washing him of his people's "original sin." However, when the army, represented by Patch, and the society, represented by the passengers on his flight back to the United States turn away from him, he realises that his duty is not towards the society, and his true debt has little to do with his identity. After spending time in his new temporary unit, being suspended in a void on uncertainty, he realises that he must do as much as he can for his comrades, those dead and those still alive and still in combat. He contacts the families of his dead friends, and at the end it is suggested that he is planning to take action against his former superior, by contacting a congressman, a father of one of his former subordinates. Kahn was a geologist in his earlier civilian life, and this profession seems to be of symbolic significance, as he uncovers the layers of his assumed identities to reach the fundamental truth, that his duties are not connected with race and what prejudices anyone might have towards it, but with friendship and

loyalty towards his comrades.

A different and more complex image of Jews in the U.S. armed forces, stressing certain delicate issues for the Jewish community, is presented by Jewish writers Philip Roth and Norman Mailer. I want to begin with the characters featuring in Roth's short story "Defender of the Faith". The main protagonists are sergeant Nathan Marx, an experienced non-commissioned officer, who fought in Europe between 1944 and 1945, and private Sheldon Grossbart, a trainee in the outfit to which Marx is assigned. The title of the story suggests a defence of religious traditions, codes of conduct, and it is Grossbart who begins to speak of tradition, when he asks that he and his friends, two other Jewish G.I.'s, be allowed to attend church services on Friday night, during their regular barracks' cleaning duties. When Marx asks if they were not allowed to do so before Grossbart reveals the real problem "'It's the other guys in the barracks.' He leaned toward me. 'They say we're goofing off. But we're not. That's when Jews go to services, Friday night. We have to.' 'Then go.' 'But the other guys make accusations. They have no right.'" (118). [2] It is the first instance when Grossbart asks for special treatment on account of his Jewishness. He not only wants to be relieved from his duties, but he also wants protection from the other men in the unit. What is more, from the beginning, Grossbart tries to work on the sergeant's sense of identity, and is successful: "'You can stay and scrub floors or you can go to shul-' The smile swam in again. (...). 'You mean church, Sergeant.' 'I mean Shul Grossbart!'(...) I turned and saw Grossbart's dark frame fleeing back to the barracks, racing to tell his Jewish friends that they were right - that, like Karl and Harpo, I was one of them" (119). From this moment on, regardless of his dislike for Grossbart, Marx defends him, seemingly defending Jewish faith and customs. He makes excuses for Grossbart in front of his superior officer, claiming that the private is an orthodox Jew, whom he is not, judging by his tactless behaviour during the services, when he drinks alcohol and says "'Let the goyim clean the floors'" (122). It is all because of the illusion that Grossbart evokes in Marx, an illusion of himself from the past. He remembers his grandmother, her kind words and her mercifulness, whenever he did something wrong. These memories keep filling Marx with a sense of guilt whenever he argues with Grossbart. The Private also works on that sense of guilt, whenever Marx does something against his will: "'Why are you persecuting me, Sergeant? (...) I've run into this before,' he said, 'but never from my own! (...) They say Hitler himself was half a Jew. Hearing you, I wouldn't doubt it.'" (134-135). The sergeant comes to realise Grossbart's true nature when the latter uses his influences to prevent being sent to combat, and does nothing of the sort to help his friends from the unit. Marx loses his patience and gets the Private transferred back to his combat unit. This leads to their final argument:

> 'You owe me an explanation!' (...) 'Sheldon you're the one who owes explanations.' (...) 'That's right, twist things around. I owe nobody nothing. I've done all I could for them. Now I think I've got the right to watch out for myself.' 'For each other we have to learn to watch out, Sheldon. You told me yourself.' 'You call this watching out for me- (...)?' 'No. For all of us.' (140)

It is here that Marx assumes his true role, as defender of the faith. However, faith in this context does not imply religion. For Marx this faith seems to be in unity, in being fair towards your own people, in remaining together in difficult times. What is more, it is unity set within certain boundaries. When the Sergeant remarks "'this is a war, Grossbart. For the time being be the same'" (136), he makes it clear that they, the Jewish soldiers, need to conform, remain united but equal to all other men in uniform, which in universal terms implies the society. This unity in conformity seems to be the real statement behind Roth's story.

Norman Mailer's "The Naked and the Dead" also depicts a clash between two Jewish soldiers, Roth and Goldstein. They are both privates, assigned to a recognisance platoon—part of a task force fighting with the Japanese on the island of Anopopei. They are the only Jews in the platoon, a situation that initially brings them together. However, they cannot fully come to terms with each other. Roth keeps complaining about everything he has encountered in the army, from the other soldiers: "They were all stupid, Roth thought. All they could think about was getting women" (59), the conditions in which they were transported to the island, to his very recruitment: "All the Army wanted you for was cannon fodder. They even made riflemen out of men like him, fathers, with poor health. He was qualified for other things, a college graduate, familiar with office work. But try and explain it to the army" (59).[3] He finds Goldstein's attitude towards the army annoying: "he was enthusiastic about almost everything to the point of being a moron" (62) and he is irritated by Goldstein's old-fashioned Jewishness with regard to political issues: "Why was it, he asked himself, that so many Jews were filled with all kinds of old wives' tales? (...) Goldstein was like an old grandfather full of mutterings and curses, certain he would die a violent death" (62). In his own conviction Roth is modern, "an agnostic," as he calls himself. His conversation with Goldstein and his own afterthoughts reveal to a large extent his attitude towards being Jewish:

> 'The Jews worry too much about themselves,' Roth said. (...) 'If we don't worry,' Goldstein said bitterly, 'no one else will.' Roth was irritated. Just because he was a Jew too, they always assumed that he felt the same way about things. It made

> him feel a little frustrated. No doubt some of his bad luck had come because he was one, but that was unfair; it wasn't as if he took an interest, it was just an accident of birth. 'Well, let's stop talking about it,' he said. (62)

The above fragment shows Roth's desire to be separated from other Jews. He treats his Jewishness as an "accident"; he feels superior with regard to other Jews due to his views and education. He goes further when he says: "'I never detected any similarities in Jews. I consider myself an American'" (477), at which point he simply discards his identity. Goldstein shatters Roth's vision of himself with a simple statement: "'When the time comes,' he said solemnly, 'they won't ask you what kind of Jew you are.'" (62). This statement, apart from evoking obvious associations with the Holocaust, signifies one simple, inescapable truth—Roth is Jewish, he is part of the nation, he is no exception. His sense of superiority, his pride at being educated, contrary to the other men in the unit, is also shattered, as he is unable to cope with the hardships of military service: "He had again the corrosive sense of failure that always dogged him. I'm no good at anything, he bleated himself. He made a stroke with the machete and the impact snapped it out of his hand. 'Ohh.' Drearily, he bent down to pick it up" (473). His weakness, self-pity, and his inability to adapt lead ultimately to his death.

Goldstein is not religious in traditional terms. He believes in "a personal God with whom he could quarrel, and whom he could certainly upbraid" (211). His Jewishness is a result of his upbringing, when his grandfather told him that "a Jew is a Jew because he suffers" (484). Setbacks make him who he is, and his entire life is marred by series of setbacks in all fields—work, which never satisfies him; education, which he feels he lacks, even marriage, though he cannot fully admit it. He clearly sees and reinforces the division between people like him and others, the "*grobe junge*" or "peasants", the "anti-Semiten", he draws a clear line between himself and the uneducated rabble that is contemptuous of him and other Jews. His actions result from three major factors—guilt, shame, and a desire to please everybody. It is guilt that forces him to go back for one of the men from the platoon, left behind after they are ambushed: "I shouldn't take any chances, Goldstein told himself. (...) But he felt a sense of guilt when everyone remained silent" (521). It is shame that brings upon an argument between him and Roth, when the latter cannot cope with a simple physical task: "he was always a little chagrined that Roth was Jewish, for he felt he would give a bad impression to the Gentiles" (478). His desire to please can be observed in his conversation with Gallagher, in fact one of his enemies in the platoon:

> Goldstein went on talking. He had some constraint, for Gallagher was the man he had hated most in the platoon. The warmth and friendliness he felt toward

> him now were perplexing. Goldstein was self-conscious when he saw himself as a Jew talking to a Gentile; then every action, every word, was dictated to a great extent by his desire to make a good impression. Although he was gratified when people liked him, part of his satisfaction came from the idea that they were liking a Jew. And so he tried to say only the things that would please Gallagher. (453)

The observations above indicate that contrary to Roth, Goldstein takes certain pride in who he is. What is more, his hard work, dutifulness and the risks he is willing to take as a member of the platoon are a sign of certain conformity, a desire to be treated on equal terms by the rest of the men in the unit. This again is contrary to the attitude presented by Roth, who wallows in self-pity, broods over his weakness, and does nothing more than talk about his equality to the other men. Goldstein's devotion also brings him back to the fundamental issue of his Jewishness. At the high point of his ordeal, when he helps to carry a wounded soldier through the jungle, he keeps repeating a phrase which he learnt as a child: "Israel is the heart of all nations" (670). He wonders what the significance of this phrase is for him, believing at one point that Wilson, the wounded soldier, could be that very "heart":

> Wilson was the object he could not release. Goldstein was bound to him by fear he did not understand. If he let him go, if he did not bring him back, then something was wrong, he would understand something terrible. The heart. If the heart died ... but he lost the sequence in the muck of his labours. They were carrying him on and on, and he would not die. His stomach had been ripped apart, he had bled and shit, wallowed through the leaden swells of fever, endured all the tortures of the rough litter, the uneven ground, and still Wilson had not died. They still carried him. There was a meaning here and Goldstein lumbered after it, his mind pumping like the absurd legs of a man chasing a train he has missed. (670-671)

When Wilson dies and his body is lost during a river-crossing, it turns out that the "meaning" Goldstein is after was made obvious to him long ago:

> But the heart could be killed and the body still alive. All the suffering of the Jews came to nothing. No sacrifices were paid, no lessons were learned. It was all thrown away, all statistics in the cruel wastes of history. All the ghettos, all the soul cripplings, all the massacres and pogroms, the gas chambers, lime kilns - all of it touched no one, all of it was lost. It was carried and carried and carried, and when it finally grew too heavy it was dropped. That was all there was to it. He

> was beyond tears, he stood beside Ridges with the stricken sensation of a man who discovers that someone he loves has died. There was nothing in him at the moment, nothing but a vague anger, a deep resentment, and the origins of a vast hopelessness. (679)

He is a Jew because he suffers. He suffers the ordeal of the march with the wounded man, and he suffers a defeat when the soldier dies and is lost. His suffering is futile and will never be remembered. However, at the end, Goldstein does receive gratification for his dedication to the unit and the other men --he survives. Unlike Roth, he is prepared to exceed the limits of his capabilities in order to prove himself, to be useful to the other men, to conform to the needs of those around him. Instead of unity in conformity, as presented in the "Defender of the Faith", what we are dealing with here could be called self-loyalty in conformity—remaining loyal to oneself and one's beliefs, and fulfilling one's duties as part of a group.

The final issue I would like to consider in this paper is the attitude towards Jews presented by the non-Jewish soldiers in the four described texts. The works differ greatly in this respect, some paying great attention to this matter, others being close to disregarding it. In the case of William Wharton's "A Midnight Clear" this attitude is neutral—Jewishness is simply not an issue. The soldiers in the platoon are all friends; they share interests and hobbies, play games together. Whenever the question of Shutzer's Jewishness comes up it is usually treated in humorous terms. For example, when the Americans set out to their final meeting with the Germans one of the soldiers, as an intended joke, tells Shutzer "'OK, you inferior-type, nick-pricked Jew, take me to our real leaders'" (187)—an instance of rough humour one can display only among friends, and of course no offence is taken. The only possible racist overtones appear in the already mentioned remark: "You can't have brown eyes and be an officer", a general yet important statement about the army, which emphasises Shutzer's difficult situation, i.e. that of a Jew trapped between two hostile forces, where his only allies are his friends from the platoon. In Winston Groom's "Better Times than These" it is only Kahn's friend, Lieutenant Holden, who initially feels ill at ease about Kahn's Jewishness. However, he does not give this matter any consideration, and he never allows himself to mention this to Kahn. Thus, the motif is not developed further. In Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith" sergeant Marx tries initially to defend Grossbart in front of captain Barrett, the company commander. Here are Barrett's views on the question of Jewish personnel:

> 'Marx, I'd fight side by side with a nigger if the fella proved to me he was a man. I pride myself,' he said, looking out the window, 'that I've got an open mind.

> Consequently, Sergeant, nobody gets special treatment here, for the good or the bad. All a man's got to do is prove himself (...)' He turned from the window and pointed a finger at me. 'You're a Jewish fella, am I right, Marx?' 'Yes, sir.' 'And I admire you because of the ribbons on your chest. I judge a man by what he shows me on the field of Battle, Sergeant (...)' (118)

Barrett speaks of equality and he tries to appear as fair and tolerant, but what he says in fact is that he would fight even alongside someone he considers inferior. What is more, the manner in which he gives his justification for the respect that he feels for Marx looks more like an attempt at convincing himself, reassuring himself in his views. Barrett expresses satisfaction whenever Marx acts against Grossbart, giving the sergeant a "mockingly indulgent smile"(126) when he admits that Grossbart is strange, and when Marx is forced to shout at the private: "'Barrett smiled at me, and I resented it'" (128). It appears that the captain's role in the story is that of a dividing factor, shattering the unity of the Jews in the unit, something that, in his own way, Marx ultimately defends. In Mailer's "The Naked and the Dead" we can see direct hostility towards both Roth and Goldstein from the men in the platoon. At critical points, when an anti-tank gun is lost during a march through the jungle, when a wounded man asks for water that he cannot receive, when the conditions of the final patrol become unbearable, they receive additional insults, such as Izzy or Yid, relating solely to the fact that they are Jewish. In a moment of fury Corporal Stanley calls Goldstein a "dumb Jew bastard" (623) shortly after having a very amiable conversation with him, leading Goldstein to a sad realization: "You can't trust any of them, he thought numbly with a certain bitter pleasure. At least this time he was certain" (623). When Gallagher hits Roth and yells "'Get up, you Jew bastard!'" (659), just moments after trying to help him on their march, Roth reaches his breaking point: "The blow, the word itself, stirred him like an electric charge. (...) It was the first time anyone had ever sworn at him that way, and it opened new vistas of failure and defeat" (659). Roth suddenly realises that Goldstein was right from the beginning—he cannot escape being Jewish in the eyes of others:

> It's ridiculous, thought Roth in the core of his brain, it's not a race, it's not a nation. If you don't believe in the religion, then why are you one? This was the prop that had collapsed, and even through his exhaustion he understood something Goldstein had always known. His own actions would be expanded from now on. People would not only dislike him, but they would make the ink a little darker on the label. (659)

It needs to be added that this hostility is not shared by all men in the unit. After the ordeal with the wounded man Goldstein befriends Ridges, the other soldier responsible for carrying the stretcher. This friendship has ironic overtones, for it reveals Goldstein's own bias: "The goy friend he got was such a goy—a peasant, an outcast himself. He *would* get somebody like that. But he was ashamed for thinking this (...). For a friend he had an illiterate, but so what? Ridges was a good man" (703). This is the second gratification that Goldstein receives. His struggle for equality through hard work and dedication earns him his life and friendship in circumstances where friends are scarce. Thus, in the end, his suffering does amount to something, and makes him one of the very few characters in the novel to achieve some victory.

As we can see above the portrait of Jewish soldiers in American war fiction differs from author to author. The protagonists of the four works mentioned in this article choose different paths. Shutzer chooses pacifism over the desire to take revenge—a choice that, ironically, leads to his death. Kahn chooses loyalty towards his friends, rather than towards the army or the society in general, thus renouncing his desire to absolve himself in the eyes his countrymen. Marx chooses to accept his responsibilities as a soldier and as a Jew. Roth chooses self-pity and tries to renounce his Jewishness, only to have the discarded label branded on him with greater force. Goldstein dedicates himself fully to his duties and remains loyal to his convictions. What these characters do share is a sense of misplacement, rejection, and of constant menace. They know that they are not treated on the same terms as the other men, and so their wars are never two-sided ones. They are caught-up in the middle, between the enemies of their country and the enemies of their nation.

Notes

1. All quotations from *A Midnight Clear see* William Wharton, *A Midnight Clear* (London: Vintage, 2001).

2. See Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978).

3. See Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).

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