

Dear Enemy..



Jakob Ledermann

The Fate in War and Peace of
Two First War Fighter Pilots
who Clashed in the Air:
a German Jew and
a Frenchman

by Elimor Makevet
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Marcel Thomas

This is the story of two World War I combat flyers, who met briefly, as enemies, in the air and on the ground, and who went on to form a cordial relationship some 20 years later. Their respective service records, until their fateful encounter, were typical of thousands of other unsung heroes; like them they had volunteered to join the Army at war's outbreak, experienced years of frontline service and did not completely escape the hazards of ground warfare as both had been injured prior to volunteering again, this time for flying duty. Their combat flying careers did not earn them fame and glory and had been fairly short – perhaps an indication of the average life expectancy of newcomers to aerial warfare in 1918.

The special interest in the story of **Jakob Ledermann** and **Marcel Thomas** stems not from their combat flying service in itself, but rather from the consequences that their brief encounter had in their later lives. The post-war events related here also lend a sense of completeness to their joint story – a sense that is usually missing from accounts of particular aerial combats of World War I.

In 1924, Dr Felix Theilhaber published in Berlin a book about the Jewish flyers fighting for Germany in the World War.¹

One man portrayed with evident admiration was the teacher Jakob Ledermann, from Czempin near Poznan, who, despite anti-Semitic excesses, stood up to the most difficult tasks during the war: As a Jew excluded and passed over in promotions, as a Jew slighted in society, his dedication and self-sacrifice deserve great appreciation.²

For several years, the authors have engaged in extensive historical research with the aim of producing a revised, updated version of the German-Jewish flyers book. Theilhaber's portrayal of the proud figure of Jakob Ledermann and his account of Ledermann's last combat with his French foe, coupled with the knowledge that Ledermann emigrated to Palestine and is buried in present-day Israel, led to investigation of his story in more detail. It was found that the two WWI pilots, shot down in the same air combat, had in fact renewed their relationship in 1935 when another war was already looming. The results of these inquiries are presented here.

The circumstances of the two men in the postwar period were characteristic of the fates of many veterans, particularly those who had been disabled in the course of their service. The injuries they had both sustained in their last aerial fight would plague them

for the rest of their lives. As their letters tell us, economic hardships brought about by world events also took their toll. There are hints of the personalities and outlooks of Ledermann and Thomas in their chronicles and letters. Both were patriots

who had fought for their respective countries. Their views and attitudes in the postwar period were representative of the ideologies and historical forces that shaped that period. Both were to suffer grave disillusionment.

Thomas was a man of the left wing who was concerned by the rise of German militarism and who believed Nazi Germany would be crushed forthwith if it embarked on another war against France; he was eventually forced to endure four years of Nazi occupation.

Ledermann was a proud Jewish veteran holding National German views, who believed his wartime service and sacrifice would serve as proof of his loyalty to his country; he was eventually forced to emigrate by the Nazi regime and it was bitter irony that he found refuge in the national homeland that Zionism had secured for the Jewish People in Erez Israel.

Considering the lives of Marcel Thomas and Ledermann in parallel, both may be seen as victims of two world wars, but in

common with so many other German-Jewish refugees, the gravity of Ledermann's fate was compounded by the tragedy of the Holocaust that cost the lives of siblings and other relatives.



The cover of the 1924 edition of Dr Theilhaber's book. See Endnote 37 and Addendum 1 for further details.