

Jewish GIs and Their Dog-Tags

By: AKIVA MALES



My Father's Dog-Tag¹

In May of 2012, my wife and I visited my parents in Cleveland, Ohio to help celebrate my father's birthday. As we all drove to a nearby park, I glanced at his keys in the ignition and noticed an item I had not seen for a few years—the dog-tag on his key ring.

During the Korean War, my father served in the US Air Force for four years (1951–1955). I grew up enthralled by the stories of his two years spent in Texas followed by another two years just outside Anchorage, Alaska.

As a boy, I was particularly interested in one detail of my father's dog-tag, the letter "H" impressed on the tag's lower right-hand corner. That "H" stood for "Hebrew," the religious classification assigned to Jewish servicemen at that time.

¹ I am greatly indebted to The Army Historical Foundation, and the office of the US Army's Chief Chaplain for answering many of my queries relating to the history of dog-tags and religious affiliation; Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter as well as *Hakirah's* editorial staff for their important comments on an earlier version of this article; and last but not least, my father, Mr. U.H. Males, for his invaluable editing assistance.

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As my interest in halakhah and US history increased, I learned that this simple “H” had been a source of great concern to many brave Jewish GIs during World War II.

History of the US Dog-Tag

“Dog-tags” are the nickname for the government-issued identification tags worn by all members of the US Armed Forces.² Although dog-tags have become somewhat fashionable in popular culture, their intended use is rather grim—to ensure that the needs of seriously wounded soldiers are met, and that the remains of fallen soldiers are properly identified.

Surprisingly, the US did not begin issuing official identification tags to its troops until 1906. Prior to that time, the matter of identifying and providing vital information was left up to each individual soldier.³ In 1916, the US Army amended its previous regulations

² Some maintain that the nickname stems from the identification tags commonly worn by people’s pet dogs. Others credit this nickname to the publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst. See <http://www.ehow.com/about_5212441_army-tags-called-dog-tags_html> for the following theory:

The informal name for the ID tags used by soldiers, “dog-tag,” was coined by William Randolph Hearst in 1936. Hearst used the term in print as a reaction to the news that the Social Security Administration was contemplating the use of such ID tags as means of identification for employees. As a staunch opponent of President Roosevelt, Hearst intended to undermine the campaign by lambasting this idea. The tags were never actually issued, but the name stuck and has been used to refer to the military ID tags ever since.

³ There are numerous US Civil War (1861–1865) accounts of both Union and Confederate soldiers pinning hand-written identification notes to their clothing before marching into battle. Private entrepreneurs soon realized that soldiers wanted forms of identification, and various ID medallions and pins were made to order for those soldiers who could afford to do so. It is little wonder that it is estimated that close to 42% of Civil War casualties were never properly identified. See “A Short History of Identification Tags” by Captain Richard W. Wooley, originally printed

and required that each serviceman be issued two identification tags. This way, in the event of a GI being killed in action, one tag would stay with and identify the body, while the other would be removed and delivered to the office charged with keeping track of records and burials. These two identification tags were to be worn by US servicemen at all times.

The vital information stamped on dog-tags evolved over time.⁴ For the purpose of this article, we focus on US dog-tags issued between the years 1941 and 1952. All those tags contained the following personal information:

- 1) name
- 2) serial/service number⁵
- 3) date of most recent tetanus shots⁶
- 4) blood type
- 5) single letter denoting the serviceman's religious affiliation

Until 1952, the following letters were used to describe the religious affiliation of a US serviceman:

- P = Protestant
- C = Catholic

in the *Quartermaster Professional Bulletin*, December 1988. The article is available online at:

<http://www.qmfound.com/short_history_of_identification_tags.htm>.

⁴ For example, in the early years of WWII the name and address of a serviceman's next-of-kin was also included.

⁵ In 1969, the US stopped using serial/service numbers for military record keeping and began using soldiers' Social Security numbers instead. With identity theft becoming quite common in recent years, the military's casual use of soldiers' Social Security numbers has become a cause of growing concern. See these two news stories about US servicemen/women and identity theft: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/technology/07identity.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all> and <<http://www.stripes.com/news/jag-attorney-wants-to-prevent-pow-identity-theft-1.4804>>.

⁶ The military stopped including this piece of information in the early 1960s. I was unable to find an official reason for this change in military policy.

H = Hebrew (Jewish)⁷

The first four items of personal and medical information were obviously vital for a soldier who was no longer able to speak for himself. A serviceman's religious affiliation was included on his dog-tags so the US military could ensure that in the event of death, the wearer's religious needs might be properly met. If a soldier had no religious preference, no letter would have appeared at all.

Jewish GIs and World War II

During World War II, approximately 550,000 self-identified Jews served in the US Armed Forces.⁸ As per US military regulations, each of those Jewish soldiers/sailors/marines/airmen would have been issued dog-tags with the letter "H" stamped on them. While being identified as Jews may not have been a concern for those fighting the Japanese in the Pacific Theater, that one simple letter could have meant the difference between life and death for Jewish GIs serving in the European Theater. After all, during WWII, the Nazis were on a maniacal campaign to murder all Jews. As such, Jewish American soldiers had good reason to fear being taken prisoner by Nazi forces and identified as being Jewish.⁹

⁷ After 1952, the letter "J" was used instead of "H" on the dog-tags of Jewish US servicemen. (A member of my synagogue recently showed me his grandfather's WWII-era dog-tag with a "J" stamped on it. I cannot explain how any dog-tags from that period ended up with a "J" on them, rather than the regulation "H".) Also in 1952, the Army introduced the letter "X" to designate other religious affiliations not covered under Protestant/Catholic/Jewish faith groups, and the letter "Y" for those who did not have a religious preference. In November of 1962, the Army stopped using religious codes, and decided that a soldier's religion was to be fully spelled out on dog-tags. Since then, the word "Jewish" appears on the dog-tags of all US soldiers/sailors/marines/ airmen choosing to identify themselves as Jews.

⁸ <http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/about/07/jewish_soldiers.asp.>

⁹ There are numerous reports of Jewish American prisoners of war who were singled out by the Nazis for execution or slave labor. See for exam-

Jewish GIs, fearful of being identified as such by their Nazi captors, were left with the following options:

- 1) Have no letter of religious preference stamped on their dog-tags.
- 2) Make the “H” stamped on their dog-tags illegible.
- 3) Discard their dog-tags completely prior to being taken captive.
- 4) Have a letter signifying a different religious preference stamped on their dog-tags.

In the course of researching this topic, I discovered that during WWII, all four of these options were, in fact, employed by Jewish GIs. Of the many veterans’ testimonies I have come across, I have chosen to include the following four.

In a letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, dated June 22, 1994, Paul Lippman of Hoboken, New Jersey wrote:

... Many Jewish G.I.’s omitted from their dog-tags the indication that their religious identity was Jewish for the prudent reason that in the event of falling into German hands, their lives would be at greater risk if they were identifiable as Jewish ... As a combat veteran I know that my dog-tags and those of many of my Jewish companions were religiously anonymous.¹⁰

In a 1999 *San Diego Jewish Press–Heritage* article about WWII-era Jewish US prisoners of war, several soldiers’ experiences are reported. Seymour Brenner was

ple “Soldiers and Slaves” by Roger Cohen (2005) about the awful experiences of hundreds of Jewish US POWs whom the Nazis sent to a slave labor camp named Berga in Eastern Germany.

¹⁰ <<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/22/opinion/1-in-world-war-ii-many-jewish-gi-s-left-religion-off-dog-tags-470333.html>>. In his letter, Mr. Lippman uses this fact to explain why there are fewer Stars of David for fallen Jewish GIs in US military cemeteries in Europe than there ought to be.

... a field medic when he was captured in France after being knocked unconscious by an artillery blast. A quick thinking non-Jewish member of his unit broke Brenner's dog-tag in half, burying in the snow the part which had the "H" for his religion engraved upon it. When their capturers asked why Brenner's dog-tags were broken, the buddy said it was because they had been engraved with the wrong blood type and were expected to be replaced.

The lie may have saved Brenner's life. Unaware that he was a Jew, the Germans decided to use his training as a medic to treat fellow prisoners at Stalag 5-A, which they reached after a 14-day forced march 'without food or water'.¹¹

Earlier in that same article, the author writes of Sam Kimbarow, who

... threw away his US Army dog-tags identifying him as a Jew before he was captured by German soldiers during World War II's famous Battle of the Bulge. Later, at a camp for prisoners of war, he was in the middle of a crowd when a German officer asked if there were any Jews among the prisoners. About five American soldiers stepped forward, but Kimbarow was not among them. He watched as they were led away to uncertain futures.

Kimbarow added,

... "What we did was to deny our mothers and fathers," he said. "It was a terrible mental thing." ... He recalled that "a guy wrote a letter in a Jewish newspaper that he still has nightmares because one of the other (Jewish) guys met him years later and told him "you walked away and let me take it." Those who were separated went through hell; most of them died in the camp. And those of us who survived had a tremendous guilt feeling . . ."

¹¹ <http://www.jewishlightseeing.com/usa/california/san_diego/veterans_administration/19990423-world_war_ii_pows.htm>.

Lastly, in an online group for WWII veterans, I found the following comment from one aging soldier who was told of an incident that had occurred in his friend's unit:

... Early in 1943 the Army came up with a bright idea. They were sending troops to England and getting ready for the invasions of Sicily and Italy. They wanted to insure that if a Jewish soldier were captured, the Germans would not know he was Jewish by looking at his dog-tags. So they issued a bunch of dog-tags to Jewish soldiers where they had changed the letter H (for Hebrew) to an over-sized letter P [for Protestant] ... ^{12, 13}

As we have seen, Jewish American GIs had good reason to fear being recognized as Jews by their Nazi captors. Accordingly, many took various steps to conceal the Jewish identities which their US Army-regulation dog-tags would have given away.¹⁴

At this point we must ask: Did any of these methods of concealing their Jewish backgrounds pose halakhic concerns?

¹² <<http://www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com/engforum/index.php?s=069ff09d597af3393a43cb3e7fce4880&showtopic=6938&st=25>>.

¹³ This last account is of an official effort to have Jewish GIs list a religion other than their own on their dog-tags. There is no way to know how many Jewish GIs may have chosen this course of action on their own. According to one account, during the build-up to the first Gulf War the US Defense Department may have tried something similar for Jewish troops stationed in Saudi Arabia. See the chapter entitled "Protestant B, Not" in Debra Darvick's *This Jewish Life* (David Crumm Media, Canton, MI, 2012, pages 135-8). I thank Rabbi Raphael Davidovich of Cleveland, OH for bringing this source to my attention.

¹⁴ A number of reports indicate that Jewish US servicemen currently serving in the Middle East are taking similar steps. In October of 2007, US Army Chaplain Shlomo Shulman wrote:

How many Jewish soldiers are stationed in Iraq? It's difficult to get an accurate count because they often avoid designating their "faith group" in military databases, especially once they find out they'll be deployed to an Arab country. They may not want the word "Jewish" printed on their ID necklaces (dog-tags). If they're captured in Iraq or Afghanistan, what kind of treatment could they expect?

Full article is available at: <<http://www.aish.com/jw/s/48923202.html>>.

The Search for Halakhic Precedent

Unfortunately, any student of Jewish history is well aware that the matter of concealing one's Jewish identity in the face of persecution is part of our people's collective narrative. Halakhic literature deals extensively with the circumstances under which one must forfeit his/her life rather than renounce one's Jewish faith.

Based on Talmudic and early rabbinic rulings, the following guidelines are found in *Shulḥan Arukh / Rema*:¹⁵

אסור לאדם לומר שהוא עובד כוכבים כדי שלא יהרגוהו. אבל אם כדי שלא יכירוהו שהוא יהודי משנה מלבושו בשעת הגזרה, מותר כיון שאינו אומר שהוא עובד כוכבים. הגה: ואפילו לובש כלאים. ואף על גב דאסור לומר שהוא עובד כוכבים, מ"מ יוכל לומר להם לשון דמשתמע לתרי אפין, והעובדי כוכבים יבינו שהוא אומר שהוא עובד כוכבים והוא יכוין לדבר אחר. וכן אם יוכל להטעותם, שהם סוברים שהוא עובד כוכבים, שרי . . .

It is forbidden for a Jew to declare that he is an idolater, so that he will not be killed. However, in times of religious persecution, one is permitted to change his clothing so that he will not be recognized as a Jew, since he has not declared that he is an idolater. [Rema]: He is even permitted to wear clothing containing forbidden mixtures of wool and linen. Even though it is forbidden for a Jew to clearly state that he is an idolater, it is permitted for him to make an ambiguous statement that can be understood in more than one way, so that the idolaters will think that the Jew declared himself to be an idolater—when in fact, the Jew meant something else. Similarly, if he is able to deceive them, so that they believe he is an idolater, it is permitted.

What seems to emerge from the *Shulḥan Arukh* and *Rema* is that during times of religious persecution, a Jew cannot openly declare him/herself to be an idolater, even if such a declaration would be life-saving. To save his/her life, however, a Jew can make use of any

¹⁵ *Yoreh De'ah* 157:2.

number of subterfuges so that others will incorrectly believe that he/she is in fact an idolater.

How would this ruling of the *Shulḥan Arukh / Rema* affect a GI's ability to conceal the "H" on his dog-tags identifying him as a Jew? Above, we suggested four methods employed by WWII-era Jewish GIs to conceal their Jewish identity. It seems clear that options 1, 2 and 3 would pose absolutely no halakhic concerns. After all, a Jewish GI who employed any of those three options never openly declared himself to be a member of a different religious community. He would have only concealed his true Jewish identity—something expressly permitted by the *Shulḥan Arukh / Rema*—thereby leaving it up to the enemy to assume he was part of the overwhelming non-Jewish majority of American soldiers.

What about option number four? Would there have been any halakhic issues for a WWII-era Jewish GI who chose to have a "P" for Protestant or "C" for Catholic stamped on his dog-tags instead of the "H"? Would such action be tantamount to a Jew openly declaring that he is an idolater—which *Shulḥan Arukh / Rema* clearly forbade?¹⁶

Responsa from the Holocaust

To answer this question, we turn to a tragic repository of halakhic guidance that was compiled at the time WWII-era Jewish GIs faced their dog-tag dilemma.

While serving as a rabbinic leader to the Jews of the Kovno Ghetto (Kaunas, Lithuania), Rabbi Ephraim Oshry (1914–2003) was presented with numerous heartbreaking questions of Jewish law.¹⁷ During the dark years of the Holocaust, he recorded and hid brief notes of the halakhic questions he received and the answers he

¹⁶ The matter of whether or not Christianity (in any/all of its many forms) is classified as idolatrous in the eyes of Halakhah is quite complex. For simplicity's sake, this article classifies all forms of Christianity as idolatrous, so far as **this** ruling of the *Shulḥan Arukh / Rema* is concerned.

¹⁷ It is a strong testament to the religious will of the Jewish people that such concern for Halakhah was shown under such terrible circumstances.

provided. Following the liberation of the ghetto in August of 1944, Rabbi Oshry recovered and expanded his notes, and soon began publishing his set of Holocaust-era responsa entitled *She'eilot u-Teshuvot mi-Ma'amakim*.¹⁸ A condensed English-language version was later published as *Responsa from the Holocaust* (Judaica Press, Inc. (New York) 2001).

While no record exists of any Jewish GI turning to Rabbi Oshry for halakhic guidance on this matter, one of Rabbi Oshry's responsa seems to resolve the above-mentioned dog-tag question. Here is the question Rabbi Oshry received, and the answer he provided, as condensed, translated, and printed in *Responsa from the Holocaust*:¹⁹

#58: May a Jewish Man Write the Letters R.C. (Roman Catholic) in His Passport?

Question: Among the imprisoned Jews in the Kovno Ghetto were German Jews who had been exiled by the Hitler regime. Among them was a Jewish man who possessed a German passport issued before the outbreak of the war, and whose name was absolutely not Jewish.

As life for the ghetto prisoners grew more difficult, with new decrees appearing daily, this Jewish man decided to escape, hoping that he would be able to hide among the gentiles, since his appearance and name concealed his Jewish identity. He asked the following question: In order to complete the deception, he would have to write in his passport the letters "R.C." to show that the bearer of the passport was a Roman Catholic. Thus anyone inspecting his passport would be convinced that it was the passport of someone gentile by birth. Since adding these two letters might appear to be admitting or confessing to

¹⁸ All volumes were published in New York. Volume I was published in 1959, Volume II in 1963, Volume III in 1968, Volume IV in 1975, and Volume V in 1979.

¹⁹ Rabbi Oshry's original Hebrew responsum can be found in *She'eilot u-Teshuvot mi-Ma'amakim* 5:3.

a deity other than the G-d of the Jews, he wanted to make sure it was permissible.

Response: I ruled that he might write the two letters R.C. for, even though non-Jews would think they mean that he is a Roman Catholic, he was free to have in mind the Hebrew meaning of the two letters. It was irrelevant how non-Jews would construe those letters.

Not surprisingly, this short translated answer does not do justice to the nearly thirteen pages of complex argumentation and reasoning Rabbi Oshry recorded before answering the question he was asked.

After going through Rabbi Oshry's original Hebrew response to this question,²⁰ I would summarize his final answer as follows:

In his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*,²¹ Rambam teaches:

והמצוה התשיעית היא שצונו לקדש השם והוא אמרו (ויקרא כב, לב) ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל ... ואע"פ שבא עלינו מכריח גובר יבקש ממנו לכפור בו יתעלה לא נשמע ממנו אבל נמסור עצמנו למיתה ולא נתעהו לחשוב שכפרנו ואע"פ שלבנו מאמין בו יתעלה.

The ninth *mitzvah* is that we are commanded to sanctify G-d's name. As He stated (Leviticus 22:32), "that I may be sanctified amidst the Jewish people" ... and even if a powerful oppressor were to come upon us and ask us to deny our exalted G-d, we may not listen to him. Instead, we must submit ourselves to death, and not deceive him to think that we have denied [the Exalted One]—even if we still believe in Him in our hearts.

Rabbi Oshry wonders how Rema could have issued a ruling which clearly contradicts that which Rambam had ruled before him. If Rambam ruled that a Jew must forfeit his/her life rather than make a statement that would fool his persecutors into thinking he had renounced Judaism and accepted idolatry, how could Rema

²⁰ I thank Rabbi Barry Nussbaum of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for studying this responsum with me during Hurricane Sandy on October 29–30, 2012.

²¹ Positive Commandment #9.

rule that making such a statement was permissible—so long as it was ambiguous?!

Rabbi Oshry answers that there are two types of deceptive statements one can make: A) a deceptive statement which has but one meaning, and B) a deceptive statement which can be understood in more than one way. Accordingly, Rambam and Rema are in perfect agreement. Under no circumstance could a Jew faced with the threat of death or apostasy save his/her life by making the first type of deceptive statement. However, both Rambam and Rema agree that one could save his/her life by making the second type of deceptive statement, that is, an ambiguous one.

That being the case, Rabbi Oshry wondered what Rema was adding with his next statement of:

וכן אם יוכל להטעותם, שהם סוברים שהוא עובד כוכבים, שרי . . .

Similarly, if he is able to deceive them, so that they believe he is an idolater, it is permitted ...

In his previous statement, Rema had already ruled that one could save his/her life using an ambiguous deceptive statement. That being the case, what was Rema adding in his subsequent ruling? This second statement of Rema prompted Rabbi Oshry to develop a novel idea regarding the permissibility of saving one's life via a statement which indicated apostasy.

According to Rabbi Oshry, until this last ruling of Rema, the discussion in the *Shulḥan Arukh* / *Rema* regarding which verbal statements a Jew could make in order to save his/her life, were limited to scenarios where the Jew's persecutor knew that he/she was, in fact, a Jew. One recognized as a Jew, and given the awful choice of death or apostasy, had extremely limited options. Renouncing his/her Jewish faith outright and accepting an idolatrous one—even while remaining a loyal Jew at heart—was clearly forbidden. The only halakhic option for a Jew in such a scenario was to offer an ambiguous statement—one that his/her persecutors would understand as apostasy, while carrying a very different meaning for the Jew who uttered it.

What if, however, a Jew was not recognized as a Jew by his/her oppressors? What if he/she was seized and asked to state which faith community he/she belonged to? Rabbi Oshry claimed this is

precisely the case which Rema is addressing in his final statement. In such a scenario, according to Rabbi Oshry, Rema is teaching us that there is no need for ambiguity at all. If a Jew is not recognized as such, and merely asked to identify his/her religious affiliation, in order to save his/her life that Jew may overtly identify him/herself as an idolater.

In Rabbi Oshry's own words:²²

... בכדי להציל את עצמו מסכנת נפש מותר לו להטעות את הגויים שלא יכירוהו שהוא יהודי, ואינו דומה כלל למה שכתב הרמב"ם בספר המצות, דהרמב"ם אירי שיודעים בו ומכירים אותו שהוא יהודי אלא שבכדי להנצל הוא רוצה לומר שהוא עובד כוכבים היינו שהוא מתכחש לדת אבותיו, בזה אית ליה לרמב"ם שאסור, אבל היכא שהגויים אינם מכירים בו ואינם יודעים שהוא יהודי מותר לו להטעות אותם בכל טצדקי ואמצעים אפילו באמירה שהוא כאחד מהם מאז ומעולם ...

... To save himself from the threat of death it is permissible to deceive the gentiles so they will not recognize that he is a Jew. This [case] is not at all similar to [the case which] Rambam wrote of in *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*. For Rambam was dealing with a scenario in which the gentiles know him and recognize him as a Jew, and to save himself, he wants to declare that he is an idolater, i.e., that he renounces his ancestral faith. In such a case, Rambam rules that it is forbidden. However, if the gentiles do not recognize him, and are not aware that he is a Jew, he may deceive them using any trick and means, even declaring that he is no different from them [i.e., the idolaters]²³ then or ever ...

Rabbi Oshry backs up his novel approach with the opinions of several major halakhic authorities,²⁴ and concludes that there was no halakhic problem with his questioner writing the letters "R.C."

²² *She'eilot u-Teshuvot mi-Ma'amakim* 5:3, p. 49.

²³ A bit earlier in the responsum, Rabbi Oshry states explicitly that in this scenario, a Jew can claim that he is an idolater: אבל היכא שאינם יודעים ומכירים בו שהוא יהודי בזה אין איסור כלל להטעות אותם ולומר שהוא עובד כוכבים.

²⁴ *Terumat ha-Deshen* 196, Shakh to *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 157 note 17, and *Nimukei Yosef* to *Bava Kamma* (p. 40a in *Ran*).

in his passport. Since this questioner's "appearance and name concealed his Jewish identity," his would-be persecutors would have had no idea that he was Jewish. As such, he could even have come straight out and verbally declared himself to be a Roman Catholic.²⁵ Therefore, merely writing the letters "R.C." in his passport was certainly permitted.

Before ending his responsum, Rabbi Oshry offers one additional reason why writing "R.C." in his questioner's passport posed no halakhic problem. Even without his above-mentioned novel approach, Rabbi Oshry had shown that Rema and Rambam agreed that when faced with the threat of death, it was permissible for a Jew to make an ambiguous statement of apostasy. Rabbi Oshry argued that including the letters "R.C." was in fact an ambiguous declaration. To the would-be persecutor, those letters identified the passport's holder as a Roman Catholic. The passport bearer, however, could see the letters "R.C." as a transliteration of the Hebrew word רק or "rak"—as in *Devarim* 4:9 in speaking of the Divine Revelation, the Torah states:

רק ... ושמור נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים. . .

²⁵ In *Hidden in Thunder* (Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem, Israel, 2007, p. 260), Dr. Esther Farbstein explains why some Holocaust-era rabbis allowed Jews to falsely claim to be Christians. In doing so, she mentions another early halakhic authority who weighed in on the matter:

The permission may also have been based on the opinion of the Rosh, who wrote that the prohibition stems from concern that this statement would be interpreted by the gentiles as conversion; when a Jew who is forced to convert says he is not Jewish, he is acknowledging their religion. After all, "he is definitely an apostate. Since they want to kill him unless he switches to their religion and becomes a gentile like them, when he says he is a gentile he is certainly acknowledging their religion and adopting their god." It may be concluded that if the gentiles do not know the person is Jewish, the statement is not a desecration of God's name and is permitted in a life-threatening emergency.

[See *Piskei ha-Rosh, Avodah Zarah*, chap. 2, section 4.]

Just ... and be greatly aware for your soul not to forget the matters ...

Since the letters “R.C.” could mean “*rak*” to the owner of the passport, Rabbi Oshry felt this case met Rema’s criteria for an ambiguous assertion of apostasy—which even Rambam would agree—that a Jew was permitted to make if threatened with death.

The Jewish GI and His Dog-Tags

It would seem that the case of a Jewish GI who wanted to stamp a letter designating a religion other than Judaism on his dog-tags is perfectly analogous to the fellow who wanted to include the letters “R.C.” in his passport.

In both cases, the bearer of such a passport / dog-tag offers no indication that he is a Jew.²⁶ For all the enemy knows, the bearer of those items is part of the overwhelming number of people who were born into the faith designated by the letters appearing in their passports and on their dog-tags. Accordingly, in both cases a Jew who feared for his life—but was not recognized as a Jew by his persecutors—could verbally claim to be a Christian.²⁷ If so, he could certainly indicate this by means of including some identifying letters on his passport/dog-tags.

²⁶ This is assuming the name on the Jewish GI’s dog-tag was not Jewish-sounding. If his name did in fact indicate he was Jewish, the permissive ruling would not apply, and he could not openly declare himself to be a member of a different faith community.

²⁷ This is an important point. After all, as per fn. 7 above, in November 1962, the US government stopped using a single letter on dog-tags to denote its wearer’s religion. Since then, one’s religious affiliation is fully spelled out. Thus, a Jewish GI no longer has the option of having an ambiguous letter stamped on his dog-tags. Should he choose to have a religion other than “Jewish” stamped on his dog-tags, the name of that religion would be fully written out in a clear manner. This would only be permitted according to Rabbi Oshry’s novel understanding of *Rema* and *Rambam* on this matter.

Furthermore, the bearer of the passport / dog-tags could have in mind that those letters designate whatever he would like them to, while his enemy assumes they signify that their owner is a member of a non-Jewish faith. This would be tantamount to making an ambiguous statement to convince one's enemies that he is an idolater. As we have seen, this is a course of action expressly permitted by Rema and even Rambam before him—as Rabbi Oshry showed in his responsum.

Conclusion

From the sources cited above, it seems clear that a Jewish soldier serving in the US military during WWII²⁸ would have had no halakhic issues in concealing his Jewish identity. Moreover, it seems clear that, according to Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, it would have been halakhically permissible for Jewish GIs (with non-Jewish sounding names)²⁹ serving in the WWII European Theater to have a letter signifying a faith other than their own stamped on their dog-tags.

I conclude with the words of one of our people's most beloved prophets. In describing the Messianic Era for which all Jews so eagerly await, Isaiah declared:³⁰

ד ... וכתתו חרבותם לאתים, וחנויותיהם למזמרות--לא-ישא גוי אֶל-גוי חרב, ולא-ילמדו עוד מלחמה.

4... and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

I am sure that in the Messianic Era, if we put our minds to it, we will be able to find an agricultural use for our soldiers' dog-tags

²⁸ This should also apply to the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

²⁹ See note 26.

³⁰ Isaiah 2:4.

as well. Until that day, however, may it be G-d's will that no member of our people ever again fear being identified as a Jew.³¹ ❧

³¹ In the course of writing this article, I discovered that Rabbi Oshry's responsum discussed herein is at odds with some of his other related responsa. I hope to treat these apparent contradictions at greater length in a future article.