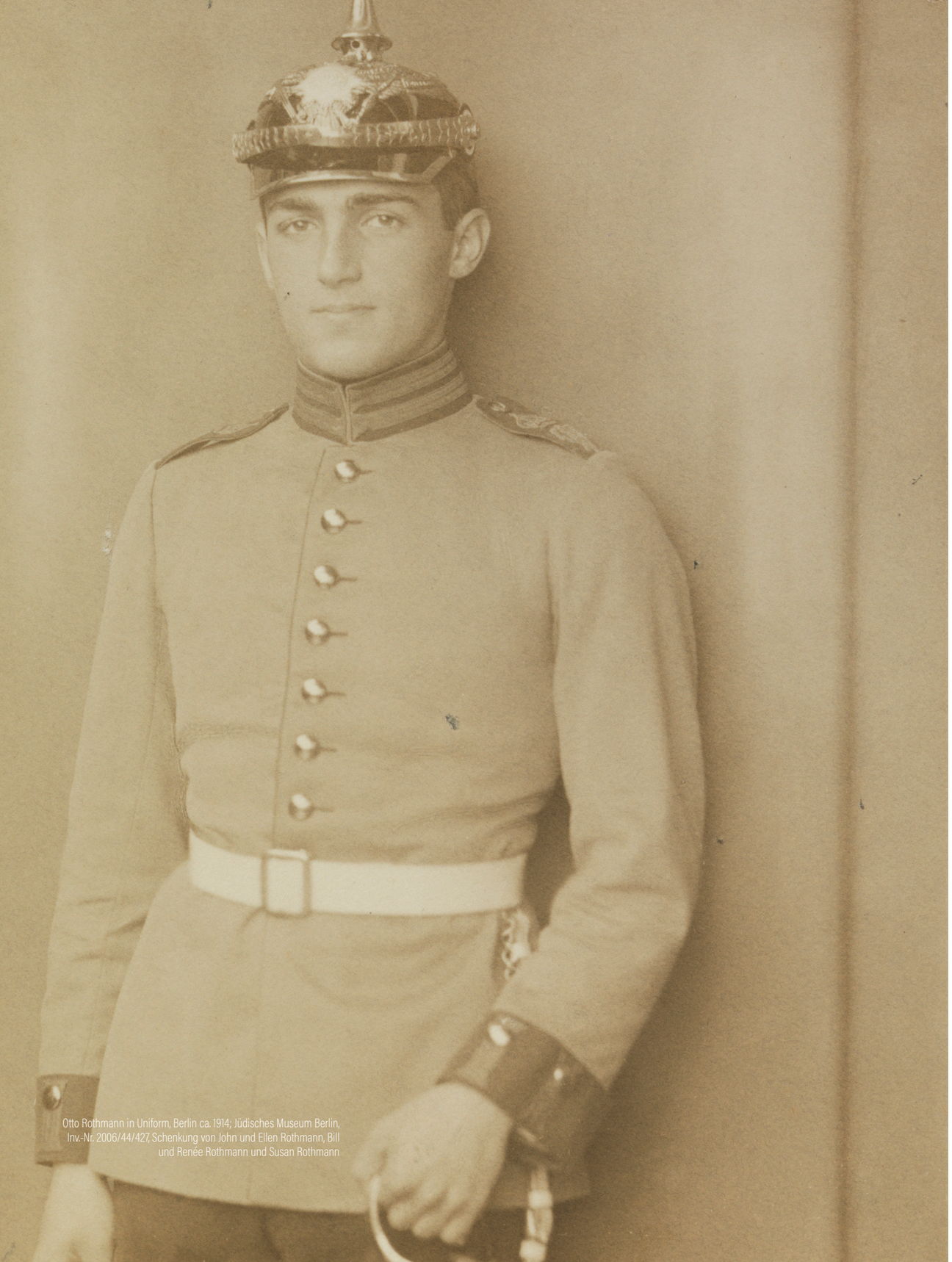

Otto Rothmann in Uniform, Berlin ca. 1914; Jüdisches Museum Berlin, Inv.-Nr. 2006/44/427, Schenkung von John und Ellen Rothmann, Bill und Renée Rothmann und Susan Rothmann

IN THE SHADOW OF THE IRON CROSS

Jewish Soldiers Who Fought Under the German Flag in the First World War

SEBAHATTIN ÇELEBİ

In the summer heat of 1914, the streets of Germany were drunk with something difficult to name. As the Emperor's proclamation of mobilisation rang through the air, crowds roared and young men jostled one another in the long lines of volunteers. Among them, thousands of Jews — men who felt themselves German before anything else. University graduates, merchants, musicians, students. The time had come to prove their loyalty to the fatherland not with words, but with their blood.

Over the course of the war, approximately one hundred thousand German Jews joined those ranks. Seventy thousand served on the front lines. Twelve thousand did not return. What remained, in the end, were the stories of these men — names that found their way into neither monument nor textbook.

The Fervour of Volunteers and the Weight of What It Cost

In the war's first weeks, twelve thousand Jews enlisted without waiting to be called. In August 1914, the Federation of German Jews helped establish something that had never existed within the German army: military chaplains serving in the field — the Feldrabbiners. Eighty-one rabbis volunteered. The first seven began their service that September. Among them was Leo Baeck, who would become one of the most profound architects of Jewish thought in the decades that followed.

The war itself proved nothing like the gleaming victories propaganda had promised. In the mud-choked trenches of the Western Front, in the freezing winters of the East, these soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder with ordinary German conscripts. Bullets did not ask about faith.

The Iron Crosses on Their Chests

Over the course of the war, eighteen thousand German Jews were awarded the Iron Cross; one thousand of those were first class — the highest distinction. Many names have since been forgotten, yet some stories survive as testament to an almost incomprehensible courage.

Wilhelm Frankl was the first pilot in the German air force to receive the Pour le Mérite — the highest military honour the Empire could bestow. He was of Jewish descent, and in those years that detail was noted by neither those who presented the award nor those who wrote about it; for in that time, the question of the fatherland made no distinctions, at least not openly.

Fritz Beckhardt claimed seventeen aerial victories. He wore the Iron Cross first and second class, and then the Royal House Order of Hohenzollern. The German Emperor personally congratulated him twice.

Letters from the Front: The Quietest Witnesses of the War

By 1917, German soldiers were sending six million letters a day and receiving eight and a half million in return. Most of these letters were never written to be read a second time. Some passed from hand to hand before the writer ever reached the front. Some were found in uniform pockets, torn by bullets.

A letter written by a young soldier named Gerhard Henschel to his family offered a quietly tender portrait of the camaraderie of those days. Describing the men sharing his billet, he wrote:

"Our room looks splendid — two Christians, and the rest of us a minyan!"

In pressing the Yiddish word for a quorum of ten — minyan — into that single sentence, Henschel captured, with his own particular wit, a truth about war: when the war counted its men, it saw not their faith but their place in the line. Yet Henschel himself was killed on the Eastern Front a year after writing those words. He was twenty-one years old.

Hans Blumenthal enlisted in Berlin at seventeen. After completing his training in Belgium, he served in an ambulance unit, carrying the wounded from the field. Years later, his son Ralph would recount what his father had passed on to him: that comradeship — between Jewish and non-Jewish soldiers alike — was what kept a man alive, in every sense.

Judenzählung: The Counting of a Dignity

In the autumn of 1916, the War Ministry ordered a census of all Jewish soldiers in the German army. The official pretext was carefully worded, but everyone knew the truth: there were whispers that Jews