

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)

An Agonizing Decision

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Introduction

It is well known that the advent of the Civil War caused a great divide amongst the citizens of the United States. It pitted brother against brother, relative against relative, and friend against friend. What readers may not realize is that Jews fought on both sides in this conflict, and they also found themselves beset with divided loyalties. Alfred Mordecai was one such individual who was forced to make a most difficult decision that cost him his career and alienated him from family and friends.

Sketch of Alfred's Life

Alfred Mordecai was born on January 3, 1804 in North Carolina to Jacob Mordecai and Rebecca (Becky) Mears Myers. Becky was the half sister of Jacob's first wife, Judith Myers, who died in 1796. Jacob had a total of 13 children, six from his first wife and seven from his second. Mordecai was a pioneer in education who at one time ran an academy for young women. (See **Jacob Mordecai: Pioneer In Women's Education**, The Jewish Press, September 1, 2006, page 52.

[http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19310/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_\(Part_18\).html](http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19310/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_(Part_18).html))

The Mordecais resided in the small town of Warrenton, NC when Alfred was a boy. They were the only Jews living in this town, yet they were committed to Judaism. Their home was kosher, and they observed Shabbos and the Jewish festivals.

Alfred received his early secular education from his older sisters and his father. For a time he was the only boy attending the family's boarding school. He received a well-rounded classical education that was supplemented at home with the study of the Hebrew language and other Jewish subjects. He was a precocious student, who displayed particular brilliance in mathematics. He wrote in his diary

At the age of fifteen, I was well versed in the English language and literature, in geography, and history and arithmetic, knew something of geometry and trigonometry, and had completed a great part of the Collegiate course of Latin & Greek; having read in the latter language the whole of the Iliad. I could read French fluently and write it pretty well.¹

A Distinguished Military Career

He was such an exceptional student that in 1819 at the age of 15 he was admitted to West Point and graduated at the top of his class at the age of 19!

He continued at West Point as an instructor, then supervised construction of fortifications along the Atlantic Coast and was eventually stationed in Washington, DC, as assistant to the Army Chief of Engineers. In 1836, Mordecai was appointed commander of the Frankford Arsenal in Philadelphia. That year, he married Sarah Ann Hays of that city, a niece of Rebecca Gratz.

Mordecai rose to the rank of major and, during the Mexican War, assumed command of the army's most significant arsenal, in Washington, DC. Mordecai became an assistant to the Secretary of War and to the Chief of Ordnance, wrote an excellent *Digest of Military Laws* and served on the Board of Visitors to West Point.

"It was as a member of the Ordnance Board," historian Stanley L. Falk observes, "which passed on and developed all new weapons, ammunition and ordnance equipment for the Army, that [Mordecai] made his greatest contributions."² Mordecai instituted scientific testing of munitions and new weapons systems. In 1841, he authored the first-ever ordnance manual for the US military that standardized the manufacture of weapons with interchangeable parts, a step in the evolution of American mass manufacturing. According to Falk, Mordecai also "performed important experiments with artillery and gunpowder, the results of . . . which were published in 1845 . . . and later translated into French and German." The year 1857 marked the peak of Mordecai's career. He traveled to Europe to observe the use of weaponry in the Crimean War. His report, written on his return, is considered a classic of American military science.

Falk asserts that Mordecai's work "was valued for its accuracy, its precise and systematic nature, and its immediate usefulness. It was an example and an inspiration for every other worker in the same field, and Mordecai was respected by all of them for his technical contributions no less than he was loved for his fineness of character, integrity, warmth and gentle humor."³

The Civil War

The impending outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 put Alfred in a most difficult position.

He was compelled to choose between loyalty to family and duty to his sworn oath to his country. On one hand, Alfred had exceptionally close ties with his own family who were ardent adherents of the Southern cause. His mother, sisters and brothers lived in the South. While he left the South at an early age, he often visited his family and maintained a steady correspondence with individual members. He was nurtured in the Southern tradition. Fellow West Pointers from

the South resigned their commissions and joined their Southern families and compatriots in rebellion. Robert E. Lee and others envisioned the Southern cause as justifiable, and thus solved their moral dilemma. However, for Alfred Mordecai, the situation was much more complex. His wife and children had been brought up in the North and his son had entered West Point. If Alfred would identify with the Union cause, he would satisfy his immediate family, but alienate his mother and siblings. In addition, any military action in which Major Mordecai would be involved as an experienced ordinance officer could possibly cause physical harm to one of his relatives. By the same token utilizing his expertise on behalf of the South would create a conflict in his mind, which he could not resolve.⁴

Pressure was put on Alfred by individuals from the North and the South. In January 1861, before the conflict started, North Carolina's Governor John W. Ellis urged him to resign his post and come to his native state to help the state prepare for war. Jefferson Davis, who knew Alfred well, offered him the command of the Confederate Corps of Artillery. Members of his family in the South wrote to him urging him to support the Confederacy.

His military colleagues who were loyal to the North pressured him to openly declare that he would fight for the Union. Others viewed his silence with suspicion. After all, he was a Southerner commanding the most important arsenal in the country. Indeed, at one point he was forced to answer charges by those suspicious of his Southern birth that he was involved in the secret sale of arms equipment to the South. However, he was vindicated of these charges.

Alfred found himself caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Finally, he reached the only decision that he felt that he could live with. He would not fight for the Confederacy against the North. On the other hand, under no circumstances would he take up arms against the South. "Thus, on May 2, 1861, Major Alfred Mordecai addressed this simple letter to Lt. Col. J. W. Ripley of the United States Army: I hereby tender the resignation of my commission as a Major of Ordinance in the Army of the United States and request that it may be accepted by the President."⁵

Repercussions of His Decision

Alfred's decision to sit out the war met with varied reactions. Many of his friends, both Northern and Southern, were sympathetic and understanding, although some on both sides regretted his decision to remain neutral. His relatives in the South were most unhappy with him. Some of them attributed his action to his Northern wife's influence, but Alfred strongly denied this.

Alfred's military career was now ended, and he was faced with the problem of supporting himself and his family. He was a fifty-seven year-old man who, for the first time in his life, found himself seeking employment. Despite the fact that the only trade he knew was the preparation and testing of the tools of war, he was determined to avoid any position that was even remotely related to military service. Therefore, he turned down many good

positions. He spent the war years in Philadelphia where he partially supported himself by teaching. However, the majority of the family income came from a school run by his daughters.

When faced with the most difficult decision of his life, Alfred Mordecai remained true to his principles. However, he paid a very high price for this, namely, he sacrificed his brilliant military career and lived the rest of his life as a private citizen.

Major Mordecai died on October 23, 1887 at the age of 85.

¹ Quoted in **The Last of the Jews?** by Myron Berman, University Press of America, New York, 1998, page 74.

² **Divided Loyalties in 1861: The Decision of Major Alfred Mordecai**, by Stanley L. Falk, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 48, pages 146B – 170. Available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

³ **Alfred Mordecai, Military Scientist**, <http://www.ajhs.org/publications/chapters/chapter.cfm?documentID=190>

⁴ **The Last of the Jews?** Pages 76 – 77.

⁵ Ibid., pages 78 – 79.