



Gen. Frederick C. Knefler

Indiana's Great Civil War

IT WAS a crisp November day, with the sun's rays already beginning to lengthen. The rumbling of cannon could be heard to the right of the Union lines, for the conflict that was to go down in history as the Battle of Chattanooga was already some days old. Drawn up in the valley below Missionary Ridge, which rose 500 feet above the plain, were the Union Forces, with Indiana's now famous 79th and 86th regiments in the very center of the line.

The bugles trumpeted the charge and the two Indiana regiments leaped into action, clambering over the breastworks at the foot of the ridge, and overwhelming the Rebel defenders.

The Indiana soldiers paused only momentarily and then in what turned out to be one of those brilliant but wholly spontaneous moves which often change the course of history, the commanding officer urged his men over the rifle pits, up the steep side of the ridge, directly into the face of a murderous fire from the top of the ridge.

Leading that charge was Col. Frederick Knefler, later Brigadier General Knefler, who six years before had been inscribed in the minutes of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation. The inscription, easily legible today, read: "A petition . . . by Fred Knefler through A. Dessar to be admitted as a member balloted for and elected."

The story of missionary Ridge is written across the well-thumbed history books of the nation, but the story of the Jewish General who led the charge, one of the most famous battles in the war annals of this nation, is recounted only in a few, barely-known pages in unused and strictly local books and in worn newspaper clippings.

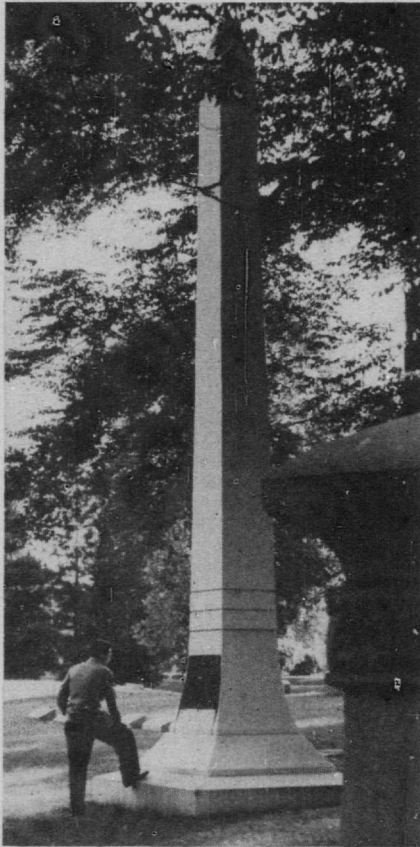
And even here, Gen. Knefler is with one or two exceptions not referred to as a Jew, but on the contrary in the obituary notice in the Indianapolis News for June 15, 1901, the day following his death, he is said to have "become a believer in Christianity though that was not in the line of his early training." This is not in accordance with the known fact. Gen. Knefler never became a member of any church.

"The storming of the ridge by our troops was one of the greatest miracles of military history," said Secretary of War Stanton, describing the action led by Col. Knefler. Later General Ulysses S. Grant, then President of the United States, told John C. New, prominent Indianian that "he remembered Knefler as the first field officer who reached the top of Missionary Ridge." New said that Grant had told him that Col. Knefler exceeded his orders and had been told only to take the rifle pits guarding the approach to the ridge. Grant is said to have recalled Col. Knefler telling him, according to New, that "it was safer for my troops to go to the top of the hill than it was to stop at the bottom."

Another account terms the charge "one of the most brilliant and daring exploits of the Civil War."

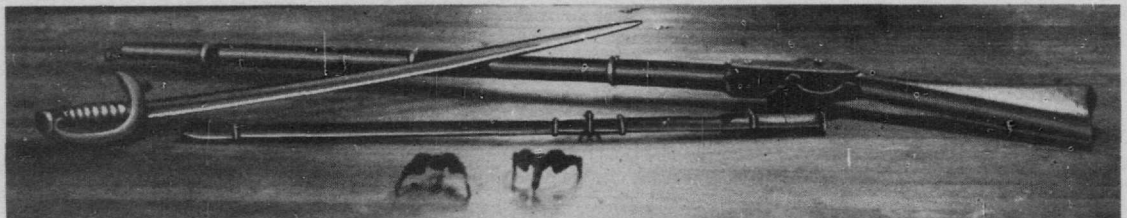
The minutes of the third and fourth meetings of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation of Dec. 21, 1856 and on Jan. 4, 1857, provide the only written record of Gen. Knefler's connection with the Jewish community. At the time of the general's death, the editorial in the Indianapolis News declared, incorrectly as is now known, ". . . he never identified himself with any church . . ." The minutes of the Jan. 4, 1857 meeting provide the following sentence: "A subscription for \$5.00 was signed by Dr. N. Knefler and \$5.00 by Fred Knefler to the burial ground fund of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation Cemetery." At another point in the earlier minutes of the Congregation Fred Knefler is listed as a member, but after his name is appended, probably added at a later date, the word "suspended."

The mention of the subscription for the burial ground is interesting because it connects with another fact which probably indicates the first time General Knefler can specifically be said to have drifted away from Judaism. This is an entry in the records of Crown Hill Cemetery, in 1868, showing the purchase by Gen. Knefler of a



Knefler Monument in Crown Hill

(below) Musket, sabre and spurs of Gen. Knefler



Jewish General

plot of ground for the burial of his son, Fred Knefler, Jr. Later in 1901 Gen. Knefler at his own express wish was buried beside his son.

When and why Gen. Knefler became estranged from Judaism is not ascertainable. Of big stature, well-built and weighing in later years over 200 pounds, but at this stage of life, a fine specimen of young manhood, Gen. Knefler had arrived in the United States when either sixteen or seventeen years old, brought by his father Dr. Nathan Knefler, in 1849 or 1850, with both dates given in various accounts. Dr. Nathan Knefler was a charter member of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, one of the leading physicians of early Indiana history, and according to the account in the State Medical Society records, he "clung with great tenacity to Moses and the Prophets."

Gen. Knefler's father died in Shelbyville, Ky., at the home of another son, the same year, that Gen. Knefler married a Miss Zerelda Collings, described only by the phrase "a native of Kentucky." What religion Miss Collings professed is not known, but doubtless she was not a Jewess. There were three children, all sons and although they are known to have been alive in 1876 according to "Sketches of Prominent Citizens of 1876" by John H. B. Nowland, the Crown Hill records show a Fred Knefler, Jr., as buried there in 1868, nine years previous. Whether there is an inaccuracy here, or whether there were four children, one having died while a youngster, cannot be learned. Yet Miss Ann Frazier, who now lives at the Propylaeum, and who at one time was a neighbor of the Kneflers on East Washington street, lists the names of the three children as Fred, Daniel and Karl.

It can be fairly definitely established that Gen. Knefler after his return from the war, never associated himself with the Indianapolis Jewish community, although he lived to be one of the outstanding men of the city. Isidore Feibleman recalls that his father, Charles B. Feibleman, was a good friend of Gen. Knefler's, but most people living today, including some who were in the family, never knew he was Jewish. His brother, Charles Knefler, however, was a pious member of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, and Rabbi Morris M. Feuerlicht who conducted his funeral, can remember him well as regularly in attendance at services.

Returning to Indianapolis Gen. Knefler became one of the leading attorneys of the growing community, and held public offices, having been appointed Commissioner of Pensions by three succeeding presidents. But his principal civic contribution, and the one task which he seems to have regarded as his life's work, was the building of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. Gen. Knefler was president of the Board of Regents, having taken over when the project was about to be given up, and can be said to 'have been largely responsible for the completion of the memorial as it stands today, the second tallest in the United States. He supervised the construction closely and his life, ended after a lingering illness of seven years, can be said to have been prolonged by his all-consuming desire to see the work finished. He died shortly before the arrival of the bronze doors from Germany signalized the end of the work.

What happened to Mrs. Knefler and the remaining children is not known. Very few people are living today who even remember Gen. Knefler, and the memory of just one or two goes back to his first marriage.

As it is, it was Gen. Knefler's second marriage which provided the high point of his later life, because the girl he brought from

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Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument built while Gen. Knefler was President of the Board of Regents

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CIVIL WAR GENERAL

(Continued from page 5)

Vienna to become his second wife, a pert, vivacious, striking beauty, after his death married Charles R. Williams, the publisher of the Indianapolis News, and the story of the Knefler family then intermingles with the names of the leading families of the city.

The girl was Bertha Rose, and pretty definitely was Gen. Knefler's niece. She rapidly became a star in society circles of the late nineteenth century, swishing through the drawing rooms of the city and state's most famous families, and captivating the hearts of all the men. She most definitely was Jewish, but never associated with the Jewish community and even denied her Jewishness. Rabbi Feuerlicht and others point out that she was a member of the Freethinkers of that time.

Gen. Knefler's second marriage brought him no children, but his wife's niece and nephew, Ernest and Rose White, orphaned children of Mrs. Knefler's sister of Cincinnati, were adopted and won their step-father's affection and deep love. Many Jewish people now living were well acquainted with Ernest Knefler who died in 1929, a leading citizen of the city. In 1933, probably as specified in his will he caused to be erected the statue in Crown Hill, shown on page 4, to his step-father's memory, and having placed on it the inscription "Erected by his adopted son in a delayed expression of affection for him and gratitude to him for the opportunities which his generous interest made possible."

The girl, Rose, who was seventeen when her step-father died, went to live with her aunt and step-mother when she married the publisher of the News, and later herself married Edgar Josephson, and now resides in Passaic, N. J. A letter from her dated August 27 of this year states: "So far as I know he (Gen. Knefler) had no religious affiliations."

After Gen. Knefler's death and possibly even before, Mrs. Knefler took active part in the work of the First Christian Church here, and her marriage to Mr. Williams took place in the Knefler home, conducted by a Presbyterian minister. Mr. Williams was no doubt a close friend of the General's, for he was one of the few people specifically asked to be present at the reading of the letter the day following the General's death in which he stated his wishes for a simple funeral.

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