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Jewish soldier calls treatment in German army inhospitable

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BERLIN—When David Meyer asked whether he would be able to keep kosher and go on leave for the Jewish High Holy Days while serving in the German army, the head of the recruiting board accused him of holding up the proceedings.

And the situation only worsened after the 19-year-old joined his unit in the army, known as the Bundeswehr.

Not only was no kosher or vegetarian food available, World War II helmets and photographs adorned some offices, and Meyer was punished when he asked to be excused from attending a Christian service.

"I really believed that the generational change had done away with Nazi attitudes and that the Bundeswehr could not afford such things to happen," he says. "But after the events of the past two months, my trust in the Bundeswehr has reached rock bottom."

Meyer's experience offers a personal lens on the recent neo-Nazi scandals that have rocked the German army.

Some 160 neo-Nazi events were reported in 1997 in the German army, according to a parliamentary army ombudsman. Among them:

*Several amateur videos appeared, filmed by German soldiers, showing other soldiers demonstrating pro-Nazi actions, including shouts of "Heil Hitler."

*A German magazine reported that recruits in army barracks regularly celebrate Hitler's birthday.

*A 21-year-old who just completed his army service, Christian Krause, told a German tabloid in December that soldiers routinely made comments such as "the Jews must be gassed."

Krause also claimed it was easy in his unit to order right-wing propaganda material printed in Denmark and said some soldiers with whom he served were involved in other right-wing activities. German Defense Ministry officials have confirmed that a well-known neo-Nazi, Manfred Roeder, delivered a lecture at a German army officers training school in 1995.

With the support of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the ministry has launched an investigation into neo-Nazism in the army. After conducting an internal investigation into Krause's charges, the ministry said it had found that only a few soldiers out of those it interviewed backed up his claims. The ministry has also maligned Krause for not coming forward sooner.

Opposition politicians have charged that the government, through its attacks on Krause, is trying to discourage other soldiers from reporting neo-Nazi incidents.

For Meyer, the situation peaked when he asked for leave to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and an officer told him that he should throw the application away.

"I was so furious about the way he talked because I could have been told in a friendly way," Meyer says.

In response, his father, Hans, wrote a letter to the defense minister, asking him to grant "those minimum rights that a German of Jewish belief is entitled to."

While army officials investigated the matter, David Meyer was summoned to two interrogations in which he was told to consider the future career of his superiors and retract his accusations.

The ministry's investigation into the matter showed that the local recruiting office had never passed on the directive that accommodations should be made to help Meyer practice his Judaism.