

A JEW AMONG THE INDIANS

by

MEL MARKS



THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB • 1983

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FOREWORD

"EVEN WHILST America was a forest where the red man roamed over his vast hunting ground in pursuit of a scanty livelihood by the chase, the Israelite penetrated into the distant wilds and left his memento in the wigwam of the savage. Last year, we think it was, among the Pawnees of the West, that some *tefillin* (Jewish prayer amulets used in morning prayers) were discovered in the possession of an Indian, and several would-be antiquarians were sore puzzled to decipher the strange relic of ancient days, as they thought it; when perhaps it was lost by a traveling son of Israel, or stolen from him by his rude neighbors, or it may be that it was the only thing he had left when he breathed his last amidst savage hordes, far away from the home of his early childhood, far from the places where the God of Jacob is invoked in the assembly of his adorers."

"But assume what you may, you will still have the conviction that "the son of the weary foot" had been there on the plains where the buffalo's hoof makes the soil ring with his measured tread, before civilization had ventured to plant her standard by the banks of the silent Platte or the remote Arkansas, and before the fierce and silent Indian had cause to dread the advance of the honey-bee and the sure-following foot of the white intruder. And now behold where you find the men of Jacob! Go where you will, you will see them . . ."

"What Can Be Done," *The Occident*,
American Jewish Archives, Vol. X, No. 9,
December, 1852, pp. 418-19.

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IT WAS a day the two small Shlesinger children would never forget. It had been a warm afternoon in Cleveland, and their father had taken them to see Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, starring none other than the great pony express rider and buffalo hunter himself, and featuring the celebrated rifle shot, Miss Annie Oakley. There were cowboys—racing, lassoing wild horses and riding bucking broncos. There was a musical military drill by the Fifth Royal Irish Lancers as well as some amazing feats of horsemanship by soldiers of the Sixth U.S. Cavalry.¹

And, of course, there were Indians—Indians doing war dances in full head-dress, or racing on their western bronco ponies. There were Indians with warpaint on their faces attacking the Deadwood Mail Coach and being repulsed by Buffalo Bill and the cowboys, or Indians attacking a prairie emigrant train crossing the plains and again being turned back by Buffalo Bill and the cowboys.²

Never had the two children, the little girl, Lillian, and her younger brother, Louis, seen anything equal to it.³ Nothing in the show, however, excited them more than the battles between the cowboys and the Indians; for regularly at bedtime their father, Sigmund, in his soft, even voice would come into their bedroom and tell them stories about the very same Buffalo Bill, and about Wild Bill Hickok and General George Forsyth and the battles that raged on the plains between the Indians and the white men. How those stories had thrilled them. And now the two children had actually seen with their own eyes the re-enactment of their father's bedtime tales.⁴

When the performance was over, the father had taken his children from their special box seats to the tent that Buffalo Bill and the cowboys used as a dressing area. They watched as their father and the buffalo hunter, a tall man with long, flowing white hair and a narrow white goatee, shook hands and embraced. After the two men had finished talking, the father took the children to the tent where the Indians stayed, some of whom had actually fought the white settlers thirty years earlier on the plains of Kansas and Colorado. The Indians made sweeping gestures with their arms and the father was more excited than the children had ever seen him before. It frightened them, just a bit. But then their father smiled and everyone shook hands, and the children were happy to see that their father and the Indians were friends.⁵

The year that Buffalo Bill came to Cleveland was 1897. The man who knew and talked so easily with the great buffalo hunter and the Indians was

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then in his middle forties, a small, dapper somewhat self-effacing man. His name was Sigmund Shlesinger, and he made his living as a tobacco wholesaler.

In his quiet way he had become, over the years, a pillar of the Cleveland Jewish community. He gave his time and money freely, as a member of the Hungarian Aid Society, of B'nai B'rith and of the Knights of Pithias. He was a vice-president of his Temple and one of the organizers of the Cleveland Hebrew Relief Society, the Hebrew Free Loan Association, the Educational Alliance and the Federation of Jewish Charities. Every community has its Sigmund Shlesingers; so to the casual observer, he was just another prosperous, philanthropic Jewish man, working tirelessly to help the less fortunate. And that he was. But there was also a big difference. To General George A. Forsyth and a small band of Indian scouts, Sigmund Shlesinger—or Slinger as they called him then—was a hero of one of the most violent Indian battles ever to occur on the Western plains—the battle, September 17, 1868, on the Arickaree Fork of the Republican river, just west of the Kansas line and 17 road miles below Wray, Yuma County, Colorado.

It took place between a band of 50 Indian scouts, commanded by then Brevet Colonel George Forsyth, and a rampaging horde of Cheyenne, Ogallala Sioux, Arapahoes, Kiowas and Comanches, led by the great Cheyenne warrior, Chief Roman Nose—over one thousand Indians in all.

The battle on the Arickaree Fork was later re-named the Battle of Beecher Island in memory of Lieutenant Frederick Beecher, a nephew of Henry Ward Beecher, because it was during the fierce assault on the scouts by Roman Nose and his forces that Lieutenant Beecher, Third U.S. Infantry, was killed.

The battle was vitally important because it was one of a few key Indian campaigns which broke the spirit of collaborating, warring tribes, forcing them eventually to accept the reservation system. Forsyth had taken a long, enlightened view of the Indian problem and of his role as a soldier doing battle with them. It was his hope that the fighting would somehow be justified, that the day would come when the Indians would eventually accept the white settler and the hated Iron Horse and become integrated into the white man's world.⁶

This is the story of one Jew, Sigmund Shlesinger, and of his own very special confrontation with the Indians. It begins with Shlesinger's arrival in

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American from Hungary in 1864. He was 14 years old. It was during the waning days of the Civil War, and the young immigrant's main concern was how to earn a living in New York. It was simply beyond all probability that he would one day come face to face with Indians, not to mention being pinned-down and under siege for nine days by over one thousand of them.

But destiny had something special in mind for the young man. From his home in New York, where he had a job as a horse car conductor, he was hired as a clerk by a merchant in Leavenworth, Kansas, and so begins the first step toward his ultimate confrontation with Chief Roman Nose. Shlesinger stayed with the merchant for about a year but soon became restless. The job was not leading him anywhere, and besides there were other communities in Kansas more in keeping with his adventurous spirit and commercial ambitions. So Shlesinger began drifting, first to Johnson City, or Fort Riley, Kansas, which was then the farthest point the Union Pacific tracks had reached. He continued moving farther West, along the surveyed route of the tracks; for he had heard that there were opportunities to make money trading with the railroad workers. As new track was laid, new communities sprang up almost overnight along the roadbed; and these bustling, transient communities offered great commercial potential.

Shlesinger was able to find various kinds of temporary employment — as a clothing store clerk, bartender, cook, waiter, mule herder, and as a shoveler for the railroad. It was during this period, while following the construction of the railroad, that he met Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill Hickok. He admired both men. In his later years he described Hickok as being “one of the finest gentlemen I met on the plains.”⁷

In the summer of 1868, Shlesinger fell on hard times. There was nowhere to turn for help because he had none of the family connections of the German Jew. Out of money and hungry, he went from army camp to army camp in search of work. During this time, he learned that Colonel George Forsyth, at Fort Hays, Kansas, was pulling together a company of experienced frontiersmen to serve as scouts against the Indians.

The Indian problem had become serious. With the building of the Union Pacific after the Civil War, relations between the white settlers and the Indians had become strained to the breaking point. The Indians sabotaged construction of the railroad and tried to chase away the white settlers. They attacked small communities, killing the men and terrorizing the women and children. To add to the problem, the Indians had come into possession

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of firearms during the Civil War, and had become proficient in their use. The Army realized, as a result, that the Indians had now become fearsome adversaries who had to be contained.

Major General Philip Sheridan in command of the Department of the Missouri at Fort Harker, Kansas decided that Indian scouts should be pressed into immediate service to seek out and engage marauding Indians. To command such a complement was exactly what Brevet Colonel Forsyth wanted. With the war over, there were few line commands available to competent professional soldiers, and rather than continuing as a staff officer Forsyth immediately volunteered to Sheridan to head up the command.

In August, 1868, Forsyth received the following directive from the Department of the Missouri:

Colonel, the general commanding directs that you, without delay, employ fifty (50) first-class, hardy frontiersmen to be used as scouts against the hostile Indians, to be commanded by yourself, with Lieutenant Beecher, Third Infantry, your subordinate. You can enter into such articles of agreement with these men as will compel obedience.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant.

(Signed) Colonel J. Schyler Crosby,
Acting Adjutant General¹⁸

Forsyth's knowledge of the Indian was admittedly limited, but what knowledge he had gained he summarized in this way:

First, that they were shrewd, crafty, treacherous and brave. Secondly, that they were able warriors in that they took no unnecessary risks, attacked generally from ambush and never in an open field unless in overwhelming numbers. Thirdly, that they were savages in all that word implies, gave no quarter, and defeat at their hands meant annihilation, either in the field, or by torture at the stake.

Sheridan wanted Forsyth to start scouting as quickly as possible, so the colonel wasted no time in assembling his command. He immediately signed up 30 scouts at Fort Harker, and then another 19 at Fort Hays. There were now 49 tough, hardy men, all of whom had previously fought the Indians. Many of the scouts had served in the Civil War and had then settled in the West when the war ended. They had ample reasons to want to do battle with the Indians.

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When Sigmund Shlesinger appeared at Fort Hays in response to the news that a scout detail was being formed, the command was ready to march. Since Forsyth was anxious to have his full complement of men without further delay, Shlesinger was taken on, reluctantly, at the 50th man, only to complete the detail.

Soldier-historian, General James B. Fry, gave this account of Forsyth's reaction to Shlesinger:

Shlesinger seemed to be inferior, in all respects unfit for service; a Jew, small with narrow shoulders, sunken chest, quiet manner and pipey voice, and little knowledge of firearms or horsemanship; he was indeed unpromising as a son of Mars, and after forty-nine scouts had been obtained, was accepted only that he might be counted on the rolls to make up the fifty, and thus enable the expedition to start.¹⁰

The scouts were an organized company, fully outfitted and ready for the field five days from the time Forsyth received his directive from the adjutant general. Each scout was equipped with a Spencer repeating rifle, a colt revolver, 140 rounds of rifle ammunition and 30 rounds of revolver ammunition. In addition, each scout carried seven days' of cooked rations in his haversack.

On August 29, Sheridan ordered Forsyth to move across the headwaters of the Solomon River to Beaver Creek, and then to follow the creek northwest to Fort Wallace, Kansas. Immediately, Forsyth led his company out of Fort Hays for the Solomon, leaving civilization behind them. The scouts picked up the trail to Fort Wallace, but during the first day's ride Shlesinger, not being used to horse or saddle, had his share of problems—a raw backside, continually shifting equipment and a cramped bridle arm. Every muscle in his body ached. When the party reached its first night's camp, Shlesinger was exhausted, too tired to eat. All he could think of was sleep, but it was not to be. He was immediately detailed for guard duty. However, with each succeeding day on the trail, the young immigrant gradually became more accustomed to his mount, and by the time the scouts reached Fort Wallace, eight days later, Shlesinger had become a seasoned horseman.

Shlesinger was not well accepted by most of the scouts. Because of his lack of experience, his youth and his fragile build, he was either coolly disregarded or else the subject of derision. Being Jewish did not help matters.

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He handled the ridicule by detaching himself from it, and went about his duties. Only two scouts, however, treated him warmly and with good fellowship. They were Jack Stillwell and Jack Peate, young men around Shlesinger's age.

When the command reached Fort Wallace, Forsyth received word that the Indians were on the warpath. They had attacked a freighter train near the fort, leaving two freighters dead. The scouts assembled quickly and rode after the Indians, but by the following day had lost the trail. Nevertheless, they continued on their mission, and within a few days had picked up the trail of a few Indian horses, thanks to head scout Sharp Glover, himself an Indian. As they followed the trail it gradually became wider until eventually it was broad and well-trampled with hoof-tracks. Still, no one in the command had seen an Indian.

Continuing their traveling, the scouts now noticed that the hoof-tracks had suddenly become fewer, as if riders were dropping off from time to time from the main body of horsemen. Scout Glover concluded that the Indians had seen the scouts, were aware that they were being followed, and were observing, from cover, every move the scouts made.

The scouts continued following what by now was an ever-narrowing trail, which finally led them into the middle fork of the Republican River, the Arickaree fork. It was ominously quiet. Despite his misgivings, Forsyth was determined to engage any war party, no matter how outnumbered his scouts might be. Whatever the cost, the enormous damage being done to the settlers had to stop.

The evening of September 16, the scouts made camp on the grassy banks of the river, in a large meadow which tapered gently down to the edge of the water. Close to the bank was a small, sandy island, a sandbar. On the scouts' opposite flank was a bluff overlooking the meadow where they camped.

After their horses were tied down and guards posted, the scouts ate a little of their dwindling food supply and then retired for the night. They had come about 150 miles since leaving Fort Wallace, but despite their weariness had slept uneasily. The utter stillness of the night was menacing, and the quiet, coupled with the suspicious absence of Indians since they left the fort, carried only grim promises for the frontiersmen. Each man felt the presence of Indians somewhere close-by in the Colorado darkness.

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Their apprehension proved to be justified. As dawn broke on September 17, Shlesinger was awakened by someone shouting, "Indians!" The word "Indian" came down on him like a death blow; he felt his head reeling. He had never been more frightened. Indians, perhaps a dozen of them, were stampeding the scouts' horses. Moments later, Shlesinger looked up and saw on the horizon an army of Indians, over one thousand of them, thundering toward him, their ponies in full gallop, their lances festooned with brightly colored streamers.

Now the Indians came closer, their rifle fire coming from all directions. Shlesinger heard Forsyth, in desperation, give the command to fall back to the sandbar. Scrambling furiously, the scouts clawed their way onto the sandy island while the colonel, barking out directions, strategically positioned the scouts for battle. The frontiersmen now began digging frantically in the sand with their hands, trying to fashion shelter pits deep enough for protection. Suddenly, Shlesinger heard the colonel cry out in pain. Forsyth had taken a bullet in the left knee, another in his right thigh. Meanwhile, the attack continued for what seemed to Shlesinger like hours. In truth, however, the assault was over quickly. His hands shaking, the young immigrant had managed to fire off several rounds at the attackers, and felt surprised at his outward calm in the crisis.

The first assault over, the Indians now withdrew to prepare for another charge. During the attack, the scouts sustained costly casualties. Lieutenant Beecher was killed.¹¹ Acting surgeon J. H. Mooers was shot in the head, a wound which would prove fatal three days later. In addition, all the scouts' horses were killed. Forsyth, despite being wounded, was still able to command.

Later in the morning, as expected, the Indians returned. By now, the initial shock of the first attack had worn off, and Shlesinger and the others, from their shelter pits, were able to draw their beads on the Indians and hold them off with careful sharpshooting.

Fate had surely decreed a confrontation between Shlesinger and Roman Nose, and now it was at hand. From his shelter pit, Shlesinger saw the Indian leader. There was no mistaking him. Riding defiantly at high speed, back and forth in front of his warriors, was the great Cheyenne fighter, an Indian of gigantic stature, mounted on a magnificent chestnut horse, and naked except for a bright sash around his waist, the mocassins on his feet and a war bonnet so ornate it dazzled the eye. His face was streaked with

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war paint, and as he rode, fully exposed to the scouts, he waved his arms in a frenzy, shouting encouragement to his warriors, taunting the scouts, defying death; while behind him, strangely, came the martial notes of an artillery bugle.¹² Then suddenly, almost as though he expected it to happen, the great chief's horse reared and mighty Roman Nose went down, a victim of a scout's bullet.

Sharp Glover identified the Indians as the Northern Cheyenne, the Ogallalah and Brule Sioux, along with a number of renegade tribes. Roman Nose was in command of all the tribes, but other tribal chiefs participated in the battle, among them Big Mouth, Tall Bull, Yellow Bear, Minnimmuck and Little Robe. After Roman Nose was killed, Minnimmuck, a younger chief, assumed command.

By nightfall of September 17, the scouts realized the gravity of their situation. They were so heavily outnumbered that survival appeared hopeless. Forsyth, now in great pain from his wounds, asked for volunteers to return to Fort Wallace for help. It was the only chance the scouts had. Shlesinger's friend, Jack Stillwell, was first to volunteer. He chose as his partner an older scout, a trapper named Pierre Trudeau, and the two set out on foot for Fort Wallace the night of September 17.

The following day, the Indians mounted another attack. But Forsyth's men hung on and managed to repulse the attack, holding their casualties to a minimum. By now, however, all food was gone and ammunition was running low. The scouts were afraid that Stillwell and Trudeau would not make it safely to Fort Wallace, so Forsyth, now growing weaker, decided the night of September 19 to dispatch two more scouts to the fort. Unfortunately, they were spotted by the Indians and forced to return. Now all their hopes for rescue depended on Stillwell and Trudeau.

It was now September 22. After managing to stave off one attack after another, the scouts had all but given up hope. They were discouraged, disorganized, hungry and thirsty. They boiled the carcasses of their dead horses, salting the flesh with gunpowder to try to make the flesh edible, but to no avail. The carcasses could not be eaten.

As the hours and days wore on, the scouts could only lie in their shelter pits, half-doing, too weak to offer any strong resistance. Forsyth was now running a high fever, and too ill to encourage his troops. However, the Indians too were having their difficulties. Roman Nose, their strong leader, was dead. There was no longer a unifying force to pull together the various

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collaborating tribes, and it cost the Indians their fighting spirit. Each successive attack lost some of its ferocity.

In the meantime, traveling only at night, Stillwell and Trudeau arrived at Fort Wallace. They had managed to get to Cheyenne Wells, the stage coach station about 30 miles from the fort. From there they rode the stage to Wallace. It had taken them five days, and during the journey they had managed to get past several parties of Indians.

The fortunes of the embattled frontiersmen suddenly changed for the better. Three days after Stillwell and Trudeau reached Fort Wallace, a troop of the 10th Cavalry under Colonel L. H. Carpenter rescued the scouts.¹³ The Indians had spotted the Carpenter relief party before Forsyth, but by this time the Indians were too demoralized to offer any resistance. The battle on the Arickaree fork was over. The bedraggled scouts had survived nine days of bitter siege. Nearly half of the complement were casualties—5 killed, 16 wounded. Colonel Forsyth would recover fully, but it would take nearly two years.

The scouts had one coward among them. His name was Whalen. Forsyth made this comparison between Whalen and Shlesinger:

Only one man in my command had failed me . . . he had joined the command at Fort Hays, and I was much impressed by his appearance. No one seemed to know him as he was a recent arrival at the post . . . tall, well-built, brown hair and black eyes, a flowing beard midway to his waist, well-mounted on his own horse, a good rider and with a pleasing address, he not only impressed me favorably but others as well. On our first scout from Fort Hays to Fort Wallace he spoke of several Indian engagements in the far north in which he had taken part, and so won upon me by his statements and general bearing that I thought him, for this especial service, quite invaluable. Something of a joker, he was inclined to guy and poke fun at some of the odd characters of the command and especially at a young Jew of about 19 or 20 who had enrolled just at the last moment at Fort Hays to complete the complement of 50 men. He was a short . . . rather awkward and boyish young fellow with cherry cheeks and verdant in some ways, and entirely new to campaigning, but I soon noticed his good care of his horse, his strict obedience to orders, and his evident anxiety to learn his duty and do it. Furthermore, my experience with men of his race during the Civil War, with a single exception, had strongly impressed me in their favor as being brave men and good soldiers. Imagine my surprise and astonishment, therefore, to discover that my

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fine looking scout was an absolute failure and coward, while as for the little Jew. . . ! Well, the Indian that from dawn to dusk was incautious enough to expose any part of his person within the range of his rifle had no cause to complain of a want of marked attention on the part of that brave and active young Israelite . . . in fact, he most worthily proved himself a gallant soldier among brave men.¹⁴

In addition to praising Shlesinger for his bravery under fire, Forsyth also credited Shlesinger with the feat of scalping three Indians during the fifth day of the attack, and then again credited him for killing the coyote which served as sustenance for the pinned-down scouts.

Shlesinger kept a diary which did not come to light until 1951. It had been in the possession of his daughter, Lillian. In none of the accounts of the battle had it ever been mentioned that the young scout kept a battlefield diary, and while it adds very little to the historians' knowledge of the battle, it does give the reader an understanding of the simple courage of the young immigrant.

The diary covers the period from August 28 to September 22, 1868, and is contained in a notebook 3 ½ x 8 inches in size. The entries are concise and filled with mis-spellings. The most interesting entries begin the night before the battle:

"September 16: Seen signal fire on Hill 3 miles off in evening late.

September 17: About 12 Indians carched on us stampeedet 7 horse. 10 minute after about 600 Indians attacket us. Kilt Beecher, Culver and Wilson. Woundet 19 Man and Kilt all the horses. We was without Grubb and water all day. Dug holes in the sand with our hands.

September 18: In the night I dug my hole deeper. Cut off meat of the horses and hung it up on bushes. Indians made a charge at us at Day Brake but retreatet. Kept Shooting nearly all day they put up a White Flag. Left us at 9 O'Clock in the evening. Raind all night.

September 19: The Indians came back again. Kept sharpshooting all day. Two boys startet for Fort Wallace. Raind all night.

September 20: Dr. Moore died last night. Raining part of the Day. Snow about 1 inches thick. Indians kept sharpshooting.

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September 21: Scalpt 3 Indians which were found about 15 feet from my hole concealt in grass.

September 22: Kilt a Coyote and eat him all up."¹⁵

Shortly after the scouts were rescued, Shlesinger resigned from the command and returned to New York. He told his friends about his participation in the Beecher Island battle but no one believed him. When he produced some of his Indian battlefield relics, even a bloodstained blanket, his friends were still not convinced. In fact, one of his former friends asked, "How much did they cost?"¹⁶ Two years later, Shlesinger moved to Cleveland where his stories of the battle continued to be met with disbelief. There was no evidence at hand to corroborate his story.

Shlesinger never received credit for being in the battle until August, 1883, some 25 years later, when General Fry's article appeared. It put an end for good to the doubts about Shlesinger's exploits, for the article contained these verses which immortalized the young scout:

When the foe charged on the breastworks,
With madness and despair,
And the bravest souls were tested,
The little Jew was there.

When the weary dozed on duty
And the wounded needed care,
When another shot was called for,
The little Jew was there.

With the festering dead around them,
Shedding poison in the air,
When the crippled chieftan ordered,
The little Jew was there.¹⁷

In 1895, General Forsyth's version of the battle was published in *Harper's Magazine*. It contained the names of all the participants, further giving Shlesinger the recognition he deserved.

Two years later, Forsyth received a letter from Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston, Texas, in connection with Shlesinger. The general, then living in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, replied:

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My dear Rabbi Cohen:

In answer to your inquiry of December 7, regarding Mr. Sigmund Shlesinger, who served in my command on the Western frontier in 1867-68, and who was with me in my fight with the Sioux Indians in the Arickaree Fork, I have a high admiration of the courage and splendid pluck and endurance of young Shlesinger on the occasion mentioned . . .

He had never been in action prior to our fight with the Indians and throughout the whole engagement which was one of the hardest, if not the very hardest, ever fought on the Western plains, he behaved with a great courage, cool persistence and a dogged determination that won my unstinted admiration as well as that of his comrades, many of whom had seen service throughout the War of Rebellion on one side or the other.

I can accord him no higher praise than that he was the equal in manly courage, steady and persistent devotion to duty and unswerving and tenacious pluck of any man in my command. It is a real pleasure to state this fact. I especially mention the pluck and endurance of this young son of Israel and speak of him as a worthy descendant of King David.

I am, sir, with sincere respect,

Very truly yours,
George A. Forsyth
General, U. S. Army"¹⁸

Over the years, Shlesinger corresponded with many of his old comrades. Some came to Cleveland to visit him, and he traveled around the country to visit them. The scouts had a spirit of comradeship that was quite touching, and, in fact, had formed the Beecher Island Battle Memorial Association to keep alive the memory of the little band of scouts who fought so nobly for their country.

Circa 1910, Shlesinger, then in his sixties, wrote the Association at large, describing his friendship with Jack Stillwell.

Jack and I were the only boys in the company and naturally gravitated toward each other. We were friends as soon as we met and chums before we knew each other's names. When Stillwell finally returned not long after the Carpenter rescue party arrived . . . Jack jumped from his horse and in his joy to see so many of us alive . . . permitted his tears free flow down his good honest cheeks. I kept up correspondence with him all these past years, Last year, he died. He was a big-hearted, jovial fellow, brave to a fault.

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Shlesinger, in addition, wrote of his friendship with Jack Peate:

One day a man came to my office asking for Sig Shlesinger, and introducing himself as J. J. Peate . . . You who have met Jack do not need to be told who and what Jack is. You know him to be the personification of all that is generous, kind and noble in a man, exceeded only by his better half. But to me, who had been hungering for a material manifestation of that cherished dream of long ago—to me, who had been longing to meet a comrade, face to face, he was almost an apparition. He was the first man connected with Forsyth's scouts to shake my hand in a grip of fellowship. It thrilled my whole being, and I am happy to be counted among his friends to this day, and I hope I always will be . . .

Continuing his letter to his comrades, Shlesinger wrote:

Father time exacts his toll. Our years make us susceptible to the inevitable, and when the last one will have answered the eternal call, I would love to believe that kindred souls may resume that cohesive existence of which this world may be the prelude.

He closed his letter with this maxim:

I expect to pass through the world but once; if, therefore, there be any kindness that I can show or any good thing that I can do, let me do it now for I shall not pass this way again.¹⁹

Sigmund Shlesinger, one Jew among the Indians, or, more strictly, one Jew among one thousand Indians, died in April, 1928. He was 79 years old. The leaders of the Cleveland Jewish community came to his funeral to pay their respects to the man who worked tirelessly for so many Jewish causes. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, who conducted the services, paid tribute to Shlesinger, citing him for his leadership in philanthropic activities. The Board of Trustees of his Temple, in a resolution, saluted him as a 50-year member "who labored in every cause."²⁰ His widow, Fannie, and his three children, mourned the loss of a good husband and father; and we can believe with utmost certainty—at least those of us who have that turn of mind—that as the Rabbi spoke, praising Shlesinger as a pillar of the community, the two older children, Lillian and Louis, scarcely heard a word the Rabbi

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said. For they were thinking about that day, many years before, the day they had never forgotten, when Buffalo Bill came to town and they sat in a special box seat with their father and watched the battles between the cowboys and the Indians.

One mourner attended the funeral who was a stranger to the Jews of Cleveland, and clearly looked out of place among them. He was a bent, grizzled old man in his eighties who had traveled to Cleveland from Beverly, Kansas to say farewell to a good friend and fallen comrade. He was alone now, this old man, the last surviving member of the little band of scouts who fought so bravely on the Arickaree fork. His name was Jack Peate.²¹

NOTES

¹Buffalo Bill's Wild West show appeared in Cleveland in 1897 and again in 1901. The "Programme" for the 1897 performance, which was secured from the Cleveland Historical Society, was printed specifically for the troupe's New York appearance in the same year. It is the author's assumption that the lineup of acts was substantially the same in both cities.

²Three of the 22 acts on the Buffalo Bill "Programme" were devoted to depicting Indian attacks on white settlers.

³Sigmund and Fannie Shlesinger had three children: Lillian (Mrs. Max) Frankenger of Charleston, West Virginia; Louis Shlesinger of Cleveland, and Albert Shlesinger of Fremont, Ohio. Albert, the youngest, was not born at the time Buffalo Bill first appeared in Cleveland.

⁴Letter from Lillian Frankenger to Dr. Jacob Marcus, February 1, 1967, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶The Battle of Beecher Island had additional significance. It was only one of a few times in which Western Indians had departed from the customary tactics of sudden incursion and rapid flight by engaging, all throttles open, in a pitched battle against an organized body of white soldiers. One instance was the charge at Fort Supply, Oklahoma; another at the Cimarron-crossing on the Arkansas River, and still another at the Battle on the Little Big Horn.

⁷Merrill J. Mattes, "The Beecher Island Battlefield Diary of Sigmund Shlesinger," *The Colorado Magazine*, July, 1952. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁸General George A. Forsyth, "A Frontier Fight," *Harper's Magazine*, 1900. Reprinted in *The Beecher Island Annual*, Robert Lynam, Editor. Published by The

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Beecher Island Battle Memorial Association, Vol. V, Wray, Colorado, September, 1917.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰General James B. Fry, *Army and Navy Magazine*, April 26, 1893. Quoted by Burt A. Siegel, "The Little Jew Was There," *American Jewish Archives*, Vol XX, No. 1, April, 1968.

¹¹Frederick Beecher had served with gallantry in the Civil War. He was wounded in the knee at Gettysburg, a wound that left him permanently lame. He was well-liked and highly regarded as an officer by both Sheridan and Forsyth. However, his superiors were both aware that Beecher, in recent times, had developed a fondness for liquor, and Forsyth was somewhat apprehensive about the lieutenant. He feared that alcohol might somehow distort Beecher's judgement on such a hazardous mission, so he confronted Beecher with his concern. The lieutenant looked his colonel in the eye and replied: "Sir, from this day, John Barleycorn and I part company forever." It was a promise he kept for the few weeks he had left to live. This incident is related by Forsyth in "A Frontier Fight."

¹²During a lull in the fighting, the embattled scouts had not only heard the sound of a bugle coming from the direction of the Indians, but also heard the remark, in perfect English, "There goes the last of their horses, anyway." It was undoubtedly the voice of a white man. Herbert Myrick, in his "The Mysterious Renegade" (reprinted in *The Beecher Island Annual*), opines that the remark was made by a renegade named "Kansas" to another white renegade, the bugler, a man known as "Nibsi." Both men had lived among the Cheyenne and had the confidence of the tribe. "Kansas" was actually John Clybor, at one time a highly regarded soldier of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry, who had been captured by the Comanches and later traded to the Cheyenne. The artillery bugle had been taken by Roman Nose from a soldier in a previous battle. It was a proud possession of the chief, and he wanted the bugle sounded from time to time not only to stir his warriors but also to make sure that "Nibsi" had not left the Indians to fight with the scouts.

¹³Troop H of the 10th Cavalry, which rescued the scouts, was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel L.H. Carpenter. The troop was an all-Negro unit known as "Carpenter's Brunettes."

¹⁴Forsyth, "A Frontier Fight."

¹⁵Mattes, "Beecher Island Battlefield Diary of Sigmund Shlesinger."

¹⁶Letter from Sigmund Shlesinger to his comrades, addressed to Scout J.J. Peate, *Beecher Island Annual*.

¹⁷Fry, *The Army and Navy Magazine*.

¹⁸*American Jewish Archives*, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹⁹Letter from Shlesinger to comrades.

²⁰*Jewish Review and Observer* (Cleveland, Ohio) April 27, 1928.

²¹*Ibid.*