

Martin Monath

Martin Monath

A Jewish Resistance Fighter
Among Nazi Soldiers

Nathaniel Flakin

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1

Introduction

1.1. Almost Like a Tarantino Movie

It is late 1943 in Brittany in north-western France. For three years the population has been suffering under the Nazis' increasingly brutal occupation regime. In the city of Brest, however, there are astounding scenes of fraternization: Young French workers and equally young German soldiers greet each other with raised fists.¹ An illegal newspaper reports from Kerhuon, ten kilometers from Brest: "On August 6, German soldiers marched through the city and sang the Internationale," the anthem of the revolutionary workers' movement.² Between 25 and 50 German soldiers from the Brest garrison had organized themselves into illegal internationalist cells.³ They obtained identification cards and weapons for the French *résistance*. They felt so confident that they began to ignore the basic rules of conspiracy. They met in groups of ten. "It was madness," recalled their comrade André Calvès, decades later.⁴

At the end of the First World War, millions of German soldiers were infected with socialist ideas. They marched through Germany's streets with rifles and red flags, demanding a republic based on workers' councils. In contrast, the Wehrmacht, the German army of the Second World War, appears monolithic – fanatical down to the last man. This widespread perception makes it fascinating to see dozens of soldiers from the Brest garrison organized in the spirit of socialist revolution. Their enthusiasm – which quickly led to exuberance – cost them their lives. On October 6, 1943, ten (or perhaps 17) of them were shot, together with French activists.⁵ The files from the *Reichskriegsgericht* (Reich Court Martial) cannot be found.⁶ Yet

the judges surely wondered: Where had the young *Landser* (soldiers) gotten such strange ideas?

These soldiers were guided by a strategic vision: The war would lead to a German and European revolution, similar to what happened in 1918–19. This was the perspective in the newspaper *Arbeiter und Soldat* (German: *Worker and Soldier*), whose first issue appeared in July 1943. In Brest, the 23-year-old postman Robert Cruau, a local official of the Internationalist Workers Party (POI), distributed the newspaper to German soldiers. Yet Cruau did not write the articles himself. The newspaper was inspired by Leon Trotsky, the exiled leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International. By this time, however, Trotsky had been buried under the soil of Coyoacán, Mexico, for more than three years. The political leader of this illegal newspaper and conspiratorial network of German soldiers was a 31-year-old Berliner living in a house in the 14th arrondissement (district) of Paris. His comrades knew him as “Viktor.”

In his free time, Viktor attended classical music concerts in Paris. His housemate asked if it bothered him – as a Jew – to be surrounded by Nazi officers. “I don’t see them at all,” Viktor replied, “I only hear Beethoven.”⁷ Imagining Viktor in a Parisian concert hall, one involuntarily thinks of the climax of the film *Inglourious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino. But unlike Eli Roth’s *Bärenjude* and his fictitious comrades, Viktor didn’t want to fight against the Nazis with a bomb. He was aiming for a revolutionary uprising of the working masses.

Viktor’s appearance must have seemed like a cliché from an anti-semitic fever dream: Slender build, high forehead, hooked nose, wide ears and such shabby clothes that friends later recalled him as a “sort of predecessor of today’s hippies.”⁸ Viktor was poor but well educated: He studied mathematics, composed music, wrote plays, and also worked on a farm for a year to learn about agriculture, while lecturing on Marxist theory. He was rootless, without a native land. He lived where he could serve the revolution. He had taken on the task of subverting the Wehrmacht because his native tongue was German. As an adult, he additionally taught himself Hebrew, Polish, and French. Learning a new language is like a “second birth,” he wrote enthusiastically to his brother.⁹

Viktor was a revolutionary. For years he fought for a mixture of Jewish nationalism and utopian socialism as a leader of the Zionist youth movement. But shortly before the outbreak of the war, he became an internationalist communist. Soon he was elected a leading member of the Fourth International in Europe. Viktor stood up for the rights of the Jews – but also for the rights of ordinary German soldiers whom he hoped to win over for the cause of revolution. When he was arrested and tortured by the French police, they asked him if he was Jewish. His answer: “I’m proud of it.”¹⁰ At 31, he was executed – twice.

In the 1970s, his childhood friend Paul Ehrlich tried to collect testimonies about Viktor. This work is like a “jigsaw puzzle,” he wrote, “because each person only remembers a small piece.”¹¹ Today, several decades later, the problem is significantly more complicated. Using as much information as is ever likely to be available, this book presents a reconstruction of this short life in the service of revolution.

1.2. *In the Jungle of Pseudonyms*

The historian Wolfgang Abendroth wrote about Richard Müller, the leading figure of the Revolutionary Stewards during the German November Revolution: “Then all traces of him are lost to history.”¹² With Viktor, we have the opposite problem: The circumstances of his death are fairly well documented but the further we try to follow his revolutionary career backwards, the blurrier the traces become. Even his real name was hard to ascertain – a result of so much of his life spent underground. More than 30 years after his death, Viktor’s comrade Ernest Mandel praised his courage: “He was far from impressed by the Germans. [...] He already had long experience of clandestine activities.”¹³

Many names have been passed down for Viktor. The Thalmanns, who shared a house with him in Paris in 1943–4, ended their recollections of him with the sentence: “Viktor’s real name was: Paul Wittlin.”¹⁴ But that was neither his first nor his last name. In the biography of Ernest Mandel, as in other sources, we find a different spelling: “Paul Widelin.”¹⁵ In two obituaries published in the US Trotskyist newspaper *The Militant* in 1946, he was called “Martin

Widelin.”¹⁶ One of these articles was a translation from the French Trotskyist paper *La Verité*, except there he was called “Marcel Widelin.”¹⁷ Rudolf Segall, who was active with Viktor in the early 1930s, named him in a 2006 interview: “Martin Monat.”¹⁸ This name has been used more consistently in recent years.¹⁹

Since 2016 there has been a commemorative stone (*Stolperstein*) in front of the Muskauer Straße 24 in the Berlin neighborhood of Kreuzberg. The inscription reads: “Martin Monath, born 1912.”²⁰ However, no official records can be found under that name.²¹ Only under yet another name was he known to the Berlin authorities – we will return to this question later. For now we can say: Viktor was born as Martin Ludwig Monath in 1913.²² In this work, we will use the name that Viktor himself used at each stage of his life: first Martin, then Monte, then Viktor.

2

A Jewish Boy from Berlin

2.1. *“Robbed of the joys of childhood”: Youth*

Martin Ludwig Monath, born on January 5, 1913 in Berlin, was a child of war and revolution. At one and a half, he would not have remembered the outbreak of the First World War and the collapse of the Socialist International. Still, he must have had vague memories of the growing hunger of the war years. Martin was five and a half when a wave of insurrections toppled Kaiser Wilhelm II. On that day even the right-wing Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann was forced to proclaim: “The old and the rotten has collapsed! [...] Long live the new!” The young Martin must have absorbed a central tenet of Marxism: Every political regime is historical, even transient. Or as Bertolt Brecht put it later: “What is certain is not certain. Things will not stay as they are.”¹

We have hardly any sources about Martin’s youth, but we know a lot about his generation. The communist Paul Frölich described this generation in a eulogy for his comrade Heinz Behrendt, who was born a year after Martin:

This generation [...] was robbed of the joys of childhood. They grew up starving, surrounded by grief and fear. [...] This generation went through school and youth as Germany was shaken by severe social and political crises, as inflation and the great economic crisis robbed and uprooted entire classes, millions and millions were unemployed for years and all of society fell into marasmus [undernourishment]. [...] When they finished school, they joined the army of the unemployed by the hundreds of thousands. [...] This was the curse that struck these young people: They were

condemned to idleness and the desolation of their souls. The hopelessness of this life mocked them year in and year out.²

According to Frölich, only a few from this generation could rise above this cruel fate – namely the revolutionaries, “who found the strength to rebel against this lot, to give their lives a meaning by dedicating them to the struggle for a meaningful world.”³

Despite the lack of sources, we can reconstruct the following about Martin’s childhood: In 1904, Baruch Monath moved from Ternopil (then in Austria-Hungary, now in Ukraine) to Berlin, together with his wife Emilie (née Türkischer).⁴ Baruch had been born in 1876 to parents who had married in a synagogue, which would later cause problems for their descendants.⁵ Baruch and Emilie opened a shop in a middle-class Jewish neighborhood in Berlin, and before long had children. Their daughter Charlotte (Lotte) was born on August 2, 1904.⁶ Two sons followed: Martin Ludwig on January 5, 1913, and Karl Artur on August 12, 1915 (see Figure 1).⁷ The Monath family was stateless, at least after a certain point.⁸ They probably lost a country of citizenship with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. In a court document, the father was described as a “foreigner (Galician).”⁹ The Registry Office of Treptow-Köpenick confirmed that it is in possession of Monath’s birth certificate but refused to release it over several months of correspondence.¹⁰

How does a personality form that is willing to voluntarily fight the murder apparatus of the Nazis, and even to laugh in the faces of its henchmen? Martin’s childhood was marked by suffering and death. In 1918, his mother Emilie died – in the years after the First World War, up to 50 million people fell victim to the Spanish flu, twice as many as in the war itself. Baruch Monath remarried but Martin’s first stepmother, Sarah, died in childbirth just one year later.¹¹ Martin’s second stepmother – Betty Monath, née Braun¹² – was “very bad” and beat her two stepsons “black and blue.”¹³ Martin hated this “domineering person [...] with all his heart.”¹⁴ On June 28, 1924, when Martin was eleven, his stepmother gave birth to his half-brother Walter.¹⁵

Shortly before her death, his mother Emilie wrote a letter to her 12-year-old daughter Lotte. “Take good care of your brothers, because your father is very weak.” Lotte took this wish to heart.¹⁶ Little Martin

A Jewish Boy from Berlin



Figure 1 Martin with his little brother Karl
– a child of war and revolution.

Photographer unknown, from the private archive
of Naomi Baitner.

became defiant, with a burning conviction that one has to rebel against unjust authorities.

Bernhard Monath (a German version of the father's name) ran a shop for men's attire in the Kreuzberg neighborhood, "a small clothing store for proletarian customers," as Ehrlich recalled: "His father lived in constant fear of burglars, and [Martin] often had to sleep in the shop, sometimes with me keeping him company. We talked all night and engaged all kinds of tomfoolery."¹⁷

This shop, at Skalitzer Straße 122 in Kreuzberg, was mentioned in the Berlin Address Directory for the first time in 1904. It remained there, or one door down, until 1930.¹⁸ Originally the family must

have lived in the back of the shop. A separate home address is listed for the first time in 1915, first at Parkstraße 2 in Treptow¹⁹ and from 1917 at Muskauer Straße 24 in Kreuzberg. Ehrlich spoke of “conditions of poverty,” but the family also had a certain stability. The store remained in the same spot for at least 24 years – through wars, crises, and revolutions. But even in good times, the life of the petty bourgeois is plagued by constant uncertainty. Martin must have felt a deep aversion to the world of Jewish merchants. His alienation from his father’s lifestyle might have been a source of the passion that later drove Martin as a revolutionary – first in the struggle for a new life for the Jews, then in the struggle for a new life for all people.

The stability did not last. Even before the global economic crisis, Bernhard Monath went bankrupt. On February 14, 1928, there was a court auction of the “Bernhard Monath Company at Skalitzer Str. 123.” According to the court records, the merchant had “already been reported to the public prosecutor’s office for fraud by two parties,” and “roughly 20 German companies have been defrauded by Monath for about 35,000 marks.” On May 13, 1930, the GmbH (limited liability company) was dissolved.²⁰ What this bankruptcy meant for Martin is unclear. From 1929, the directory listing for Bernhard Monath’s business mentions a “successor Elias Schor,” and after 1930 the business disappeared for good. An entry for Bernhard Monath at Muskauer Straße 24 can still be found in 1932, and then he appears one last time in 1935 at Mariannenstraße 49. He died in 1936, at 59, of unknown causes, and was buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Berlin. His widow Betty lived with their son Walter at Skalitzer Straße 41, where a last entry appears in 1938. According to the Memorial Book of the Federal Archive of Germany, Betty Wittlin, née Braun, emigrated to Great Britain on February 22, 1939, perhaps at the same time as her son, but was also deported to Auschwitz on March 4, 1943.²¹ Why she returned to Germany remains a mystery.

Despite his difficult childhood, Martin was a brilliant student. Paul Ehrlich, who was related to Martin via their grandparents and went to school with him “from the Sexta to the Abitur” (roughly from sixth to thirteenth grade), described him thus:

I can express my memories of [his] personality only with superlatives. He was of an unusual intelligence, always original, and he had the ability to grasp the fundamentals of problems. He was an insatiable reader, and his bag, always packed with books, was notorious in the youth movement. He read everything, but especially philosophy. I remember when he was perhaps 15 or 16, he discovered the French positivists and devoured the works of Auguste Comte (countless volumes). He dragged me to the Berlin City Library again and again to show off his new discoveries. He had an astonishing ability for abstraction, thus also an ingenious talent for mathematics. While we were still in school, he explained problems of modern mathematics to me, the meaning of which I only grasped much later. What would have become of him if he had remained alive? A revolutionary leader of the first order? Or maybe one of the great mathematicians?²²

Martin was not interested in his looks: “[He] didn’t care, really not even a little, about appearances. I wasn’t too concerned about my looks either, but compared to him I must have looked like a dandy. He was always disheveled, unkempt [...]. A kind of predecessor of the modern hippies”²³ (see Figure 2).

His little brother Karl described him similarly in a report to their sister: “He doesn’t look very good” due to his “irregular lifestyle.”²⁴ Now we can wonder what “disheveled” might mean by modern standards. On the few photos that we have, we see an orderly young man in a suit and tie, with a wristwatch and finely groomed hair. However, we can take Ehrlich at his word that these photos were the absolute exception.

Martin attended the *Gymnasium*, Germany’s advanced secondary school. The old Leibniz-Gymnasium at the Mariannenplatz was just a few blocks from his apartment and had many students of Jewish faith.²⁵ His sister Lotte later told her daughter not to copy answers at school. Uncle Martin had once let a classmate copy the solution to a math problem, and the teacher knew immediately: “Only Martin could have found this solution.”²⁶ Before graduating, the two friends Monath and Ehrlich were expelled from school together for “activities against the school authorities.”²⁷ They had to take their *Abitur* (final



Figure 2 Martin's childhood friend later recalled: "[He] didn't care, really not even a little, about appearances. [...] He was always disheveled, unkempt [...]. A kind of predecessor of the modern hippies."

Photographer unknown, from the private archive of Naomi Baitner.

exams) as outside students. No records of their graduation remain.²⁸ Around 1931–2, Martin enrolled at the Technical University (*Hochschule*), attending the math lectures of Professor Rudolf Rothe. He wanted to get a degree in engineering, but dropped out in 1933 or 1934.²⁹ This was a time when hundreds of left-wing and non-Aryan students were driven out of the university.³⁰ Unfortunately all these records are lost as well.³¹ Martin never did get a degree, even though he tried to continue his studies in Belgium and France, almost until

his death. The war and exile got in the way, and even before power was handed over to the Nazis, politics was at the center of Martin's life.

2.2. "From Abel to Bebel": Politicization

May 1, 1933 in Berlin. "The Day of National Labour." Hitler had been Reich Chancellor for three months. The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) had been prohibited for six weeks. The occupation of the trade union houses by the SA (the Nazis' paramilitary *Sturmabteilung*) was planned for the following day. In the morning, hundreds of thousands of people gave the Hitler Salute at a youth rally in the *Lustgarten*, where the 85-year-old Reich President Paul von Hindenburg called for "manly discipline and a spirit of sacrifice." Later, more than a million people gathered at the *Tempelhofer Feld*, with spotlights illuminating the giant swastika banners behind the tribune. In the evening, Hitler proclaimed the end of the class struggle and the beginning of Germany's *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community).³²

On this day, a guard stood watch in front of the house of the Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair (Hebrew: The Young Guard) in East Berlin. A string led up to the third floor, where a bell was attached. Above, a functionary of the group spoke about the significance of Karl Marx's ideas. In this house, the class struggle lived on, despite Hitler. After the speech, there was a revue – "From Abel to Bebel" – written by the speaker himself. Had a gang from the Hitler Youth showed up, the guard would have rung the bell and the participants would have quickly changed the subject.

The speaker's name was "Monte." The brothers Martin and Karl Monath had both become functionaries of Hashomer Hatzair, and had started referring to themselves as "Monte" and "Carlo." Rudolf Segall attended this meeting on May 1, 1933, as a boy – and he recalled the scene in an interview almost 70 years later.³³

A Trotskyist obituary for "Martin Widelin" in 1946 said that he entered the workers' movement at age 15. After "five years as an organizer amongst the Berlin youth," when Hitler came to power, "under cover of sports organizations he continued indefatigably to propagate socialism."³⁴ This is not quite accurate – every reader of

the obituary would assume this Widelin was a socialist or communist functionary. But he was in fact a Zionist.

We only know fragments about Monte's initial politicization. Ehrlich reported: "As 12 or 13-year-olds we joined the *Blau-Weiß*, then later to Kadimah, Hazofim, Hashomer Hatzair."³⁵ This sentence contains a short history of the Zionist youth movement in the Weimar Republic. The *Blau-Weiß* (German: Blue-White) was a Jewish youth movement, founded by Zionists in 1912 but committed to "general Jewish education."³⁶ Kadimah (Hebrew: Forwards) was a Zionist youth movement that in 1926 decided to devote itself to problems in the diaspora rather than the colonization of Palestine. As a result, some 150–200 Berlin members of Kadimah left and founded Hazofim (Hebrew: Scouts) with a socialist Zionist profile. In 1931, Hazofim dissolved itself and merged with another faction of Kadimah in Berlin to form the German section of Hashomer Hatzair.³⁷

"The Young Guard" was an international organization founded in Poland in 1913. By 1919, their first settlers traveled to Palestine to establish *kibbutzim* (Hebrew: gatherings, i.e. collective farms).³⁸ By the late 1920s, the group developed its own particular Marxist-Zionist ideology – its goal was a socialist Palestine on a binational, Arab-Jewish basis³⁹ – and had up to 70,000 members worldwide, including 250 in Berlin.⁴⁰ From Ehrlich's remark we can deduce that he and Monte were active in Berlin's Zionist youth movement through a series of splits and fusions, always sticking with the faction that most consistently promoted emigration to Palestine. These groups organized scouting activities, sporting and cultural events, as well as education seminars (see Figures 3 and 4). In Hashomer Hatzair, religion was frowned upon – it was in this group that Ehrlich, seduced by Monte, ate *treyf* (non-kosher food) for the first time. And it was where both of them "made the acquaintance of Marxism" for the first time. Monte served as a *madrich* (Hebrew: youth leader) in the group's Berlin *ken* (Hebrew: nest, i.e. branch).⁴¹ He also lived in a *beth chaluz* (house of pioneers) in Berlin.⁴²

What was Hashomer Hatzair's strategic project? In this period there were two movements that promised European Jews an end to their oppression: Zionism and socialism. The "socialist Zionism" of Hashomer Hatzair attempted to reconcile these opposing tendencies.