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New Model For Soldiers In Germany

By ROGER COHEN

Correction Appended

RENDSBURG, Germany, May 8— Germany renamed a base today after a soldier in Hitler's army who disobeyed orders, saved hundreds of Jews and was executed by the Nazis for his acts.

The honoring of Anton Schmid, an army sergeant whose conscience was moved by the suffering of Jews in the Vilnius ghetto, appeared particularly significant because his name replaced that of an army general, Gunther Rudel, who fought in two world wars and had been held up as a hero and example in the first decades after World War II.

Many Germans have long clung to the notion that Nazi atrocities were not the work of the army but of Hitler's elite SS and fanatical death squads. A government decision to strip a Wehrmacht general's name from a base and, for the first time, identify a military institution with a soldier who saved Jews is deeply significant.

"We are not free to choose our history, but we can choose the examples we take from that history," said Rudolf Scharping, the defense minister, a Social Democrat. "Too many bowed to the threats and temptations of the dictator, and too few found the strength to resist. But Sgt. Anton Schmid did resist."

Born in Vienna and drafted into the German army after the Anschluss of 1938, Sergeant Schmid found himself stationed near Vilnius, in the fall of 1941. The Germans had entered Lithuania not long before. There he witnessed the herding of Jews into two ghettos and the shooting of thousands of them in nearby Ponary.

In a letter to his wife, Stefi, Sergeant Schmid described his horror at the sight of this mass murder and of "children being beaten on the way." He went on: "You know how it is with my soft heart. I could not think and had to help them."

This courageous assistance involved the saving of more than 250 Jews whom Sergeant Schmid managed to hide and the supplying of materiel and forged papers to the Jewish underground.

Arrested in January 1942, and summarily tried before a Nazi military court on Feb. 25, Anton Schmid was executed on April 13. His death, Mr. Scharping said today, should be an example to a modern German army committed to freedom and truth -- "an army in a democracy and for that democracy."

Mr. Scharping chose to deliver his message to young recruits on the 55th anniversary of Germany's unconditional surrender, a humiliation that was the prelude to the slow construction of an entirely different postwar army.

But it has taken 55 years to honor the example of Sergeant Schmid, who is relatively little known, and the decision today was by no means welcomed by everybody. A former commander of the base, Baron Hans von Falkenhausen, refused to attend the ceremony to protest the removal of General Rudel's name.

"In two world wars, General Rudel served the Fatherland in outstanding ways," he said in a letter to Mr. Scharping, adding that he respected Sergeant Schmid but could not accept the removal of the name that had stood on this barracks in northern Germany for the last 35 years as "an example to hundreds of officers."

General Rudel was a prominent figure in the organization of Germany's air defenses and was never linked to any atrocities in his military actions. But in August 1942, he agreed to become an "honorary judge" of the People's Courts of the Third Reich, vehicles for the administering of Hitler's brutal whims.

Fritz Stern, the American historian of Germany, was invited today to be the honorary speaker at the ceremony and he described those so-called courts as an "absolute perversion of justice and decency."

Condemning General Rudel in unusually vehement terms, he said there could be no "honorable link to the hangman, only entanglement in abhorrent ways."

He added, "With what ease was honor sullied at that time."

Mr. Scharping said it was only recently discovered what role General Rudel played in the courts, particularly in the sentencing to death of thousands of people after the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler in July 1944.

"At that point, I made the decision myself that a change of name was necessary," he said. "The model for the modern German army must be the likes of Sergeant Schmid. It is possible that the names of other barracks will be changed by the end of 2001."

The minister's determination is certain to meet further resistance. An exhibition last year, "The German Army and Genocide," was bitterly contested because it sought to illustrate how completely the Wehrmacht was a tool of the Nazis even if the access of ordinary soldiers to Hitler's designs was limited.

It was an illustration of how extraordinarily rare acts such as Sergeant Schmid's were that in its first honoring of such a soldier, the German government found itself obliged to select an Austrian.

Relations between Berlin and Vienna have been strained by Germany's strong support for sanctions against an Austrian government that includes the rightist party of Jorg Haider. The Austrian ambassador attended today's ceremony despite sanctions that stipulate that such envoys should only be received at "official level."

If Sergeant Schmid's acts were enormously rare, he evidently saw nothing extraordinary in them. "I merely behaved as a human being," he said in his last letter to his wife.

In her book, "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil," Hannah Arendt singled

out the example of Sergeant Schmid as illustrating the lesson that "under conditions of terror, most people will comply but some people will not." She continued, "Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation."

Photo: The sign says Sergeant Schmid Barracks, and the soldier it honors was executed for rescuing Jews in Vilnius. (Associated Press) Map of Germany shows location of Rendsburg: A barracks in Rendsburg was renamed to reflect a new outlook.

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