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Philippe JÉHIN, *Rapp, le sabreur de Napoléon*. Préface de Jean TULARD, Strasbourg (La Nuée Bleue) 1999, 286 S.

This is an accessible life of one of Napoleon's more impressive generals. Jean Rapp (1771–1821) was an Alsatian who in 1788 joined the regiment of the Chasseurs des Cévennes as an ordinary trooper. He benefited from the disruption of the Revolution both to gain experience and to win promotion. In 1793 Rapp reached the grade of Maréchal des logis in the Army of the Moselle. A convinced republican, Rapp minimised the problems of the revolutionary forces, as with a letter he sent to his parents from Frickenfeld on 18 June 1793: ›Le soldat grille d'envie de poursuivre les tyrans. Il est bien nourri et bien payé. Le pain est incomparable et l'armée ne manque de rien.‹ Rapp himself became a brave officer who risked and received numerous wounds. He accompanied Desaix to Egypt, an episode given appropriate cover in this book. A sense of Rapp's exuberance can be glimpsed in his letter to his parents on 9 May 1800: ›Je ne crois pas que les meilleurs connaisseurs de l'Ancien Testament connaissent mieux l'Egypte que notre armée et en particulier que les troupes commandées par le général Desaix. Nous étions d'une part jusqu'à la mer Rouge et d'autre part en Libye et aux frontières d'Ethiopie et continuellement de bataille en bataille. Les habitants de ce pays ont fini par nous aimer‹, the last a highly questionable judgement.

Rapp followed Desaix to Marengo and after the general's death became aide de camp to Napoleon. In 1801 he was charged with raising the Mamelukes of the Guard and in 1803 promoted to Général de Brigade. Having played a role in the fall of Ulm from where he wrote ›enfin leur armée d'Allemagne n'existe plus‹, Rapp was a hero at Austerlitz, where he personally captured Prince Reppin. Rapp's role was celebrated in a painting by Gérard now at Versailles and also in the bas-relief of the Arc de Triomphe. After serving at Jena, Rapp was appointed Governor of Danzig. In 1809 he played an important role at Aspern-Essling. In the 1812 campaign, Rapp was wounded at Borodino and the Beresina. Subsequently besieged in Danzig, Rapp was imprisoned in the Ukraine until 1814. In 1815 he supported Napoleon and was given command of the Army of the Rhine, a weak force designed to protect Alsace. Rapp was criticised for the state of his army and the conduct of his command, but his resources were limited. On the river Souffel, north of Strasbourg, on 28 June, Rapp's troops clashed with Austrian and Württemberg forces. Rapp fought well and drove his opponents off the battlefield, killing 2000 opponents for the loss of 700 French troops. Rapp, however, lacked the means to exploit his victory, not less because he was heavily outnumbered and Napoleon had already been defeated. Rapp's proposal for an armistice was rejected, and on 8 July he drove the Austrians back again. On 22 July a truce was concluded for Alsace, Rapp, himself, after a disgrace of two years, gained the favour of Louis XVIII. He did not receive the military command he sought, but in 1819 was made a peer and in 1820 became Chamberlain, a dignified court office. He died of cancer in 1821. A public monument erected in Colmar in 1856, representing Rapp in the breach at Danzig, was destroyed in 1940 and reconstructed after World War two. Jéhin's workmanlike biography is a work of pietas not analysis. It lacks a bibliography and is clearly written for a popular audience, but is a good read that throws considerable light on an interesting General.

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