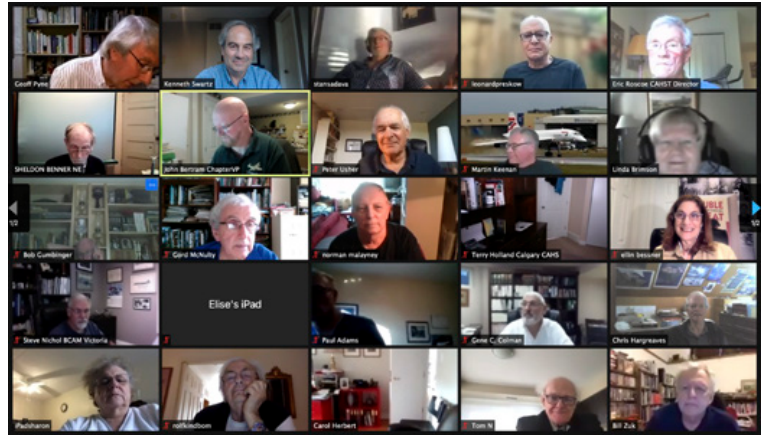




Guest speaker  
Ellin Bessner.



CAHS Toronto Zoom Meeting, June 10, 2021.

# Hidden Heroes: Canadian Jewish Airmen in WWII

CAHS Toronto Chapter Meeting June 10, 2021  
Presentation by Ellin Bessner, journalist, professor  
Report by Gord McNulty

Forty members and guests of the Toronto Chapter and CAHS National enjoyed a Zoom presentation outlining the story of aviators featured in Ellin Bessner's book, *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military and World War II*. Ellin's fascinating, interactive presentation engaged the audience. It was the second time the Chapter has hosted a speaker on this important but relatively little known aspect of the Second World War. In February, 2015, author David S. New discussed his book, *An Ordinary Hero*, outlining the story of David Goldberg, DFC, who achieved fame as a

Spitfire pilot in Europe and rose to the rank of Group Captain in the RCAF. (See *Flypast*, Vol. 49, No. 5, March 2015)

Ellin ([EllinBessner.com](http://EllinBessner.com)) was introduced by Chapter Director Ken Swartz. On Nov. 11, 2020, the National Post wrote a cover story by Ellin about a fallen Canadian Jewish airman buried at a war cemetery in Europe. The grave carried a cross rather than a Star of David. The book described the challenges of changing markers to reflect the religion of the airman. Ken, as a young Jewish aviation enthusiast growing up in Vancouver, first became aware of aviation through reading "boy's books" about airmen like Douglas Bader and making aircraft models. He realized the Jewish experience was different when he was admonished for making German aircraft marked with swastikas. Ken's mother was born in Berlin the same year that Hitler came to power.

Fortunately, Ken's grandfather moved the family to England before the war. Ken's mother spent the war enduring the Blitz. As an enthusiast, Ken's knowledge of wartime aviators was limited to the Polish squadrons, the Czech and Free French squadrons serving in the RAF, as well as the Norwegians, New Zealanders and Australians training in Canada. But he wasn't very aware of Jewish aviators, aside from his uncle. Ken knew that Buzz Beurling left Canada and was killed on his way to Israel to fight for the Israeli Air Force, but there was a real gap in his knowledge of a story that hasn't until recently been well documented.

Ellin is a Canadian journalist based in Toronto. Born in Montreal, she graduated with a degree in journalism and political science from Carleton University. Her career as a journalist took her around Canada and around the world, for CTV News and CBC News, and also stringing for the Globe and Mail, the Canadian Press and others. She was a foreign correspondent based in Rome, Italy, during the 1990s. Aside from reporting on the Vatican, the Mafia, Italian food, fashion, and opera ---- and of course, Italian soccer --- Ellin also covered several brutal civil wars in Africa. She's interviewed Prince Phillip and the Dalai Lama. She was a business anchor for many years at Report on Business Television, now BNN. Ellin has taught hundreds of budding young journalists, as a professor at Centennial College

journalism school, and before that, at Seneca College and Ryerson University.

Ellin spent six years in research and travel for *Double Threat*, interviewing more than 300 veterans and their families, to tell the untold stories of how and why Canada's Jewish community sent 17,000 men and women in uniform to help defeat Hitler and the Axis. Her highly recommended book tells a story that has never been comprehensively presented before.

Ellin was especially pleased to see numerous friends at the virtual meeting, including Ottawa Chapter member Peter Usher, an expert on Canadian Jews in the RCAF. He's written a book, *Joey Jacobson's War*, about his family's service in the war, that Ellin highly recommended. Nine members of Ellin's family served in the war. Most were in the air force, a kind of what she described as a "Jewish secret weapon of the RCAF and RAF." *Double Threat* was published in 2018, is available at all the major retailers and libraries and is an ebook as well. Ellin's writing also appears in another book, *Northern Lights*, a Canadian Jewish history, produced last summer. It was written by the Canadian Jewish News for its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Ellin wrote the chapter on the military contributions of Canada's Jews from the Plains of Abraham until today, including Afghanistan.

Ellin's family included Group Captain Abe Lief, her grandfather's cousin. Lief was in charge of aircraft equipment and movement in Canada during the war. He remained in the RCAF and, Ellin said, had a part in events leading to cancellation of the Avro Arrow. Jack Brovender, brother-in-law of Ellin's grandfather, was killed in England training on a Wellington. Originally from Timmins, he is buried in England. Three brothers of Ellin's grandfather --- Joe, Hyman and Max Lief --- all served in the military. Ellin dedicated her book to her uncle Leo Guttman, of Montreal. A ground crew member, he served in England and then continental Europe. The air force flew Austers on photo reconnaissance before and after bombing operations and Leo repaired the wheels of the vulnerable, often-damaged light aircraft.

Ellin's father-in-law, Irving Friedlan, was a professional soccer player in Montreal before he went overseas with the RCAF. He didn't discuss the war too much, joking that he slept through the Blitz.

Two years ago, on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, Ellin was on the beaches of Normandy with a group of Canadi-

ans for the commemoration. This year, she wrote an article in her newsletter about two Jewish Canadians who received flags from the Juno Beach Centre.

Ellin showed a short vintage film clip describing the role of the air force during the invasion, showing the destruction of German coastal batteries and defences by Allied bombers. It was the first time Bomber Command flew in close support of ground troops, with considerable success. The air force flew a protective role during the early landings, as fighters swarmed over the beaches and shipping lanes amid negligible opposition from the

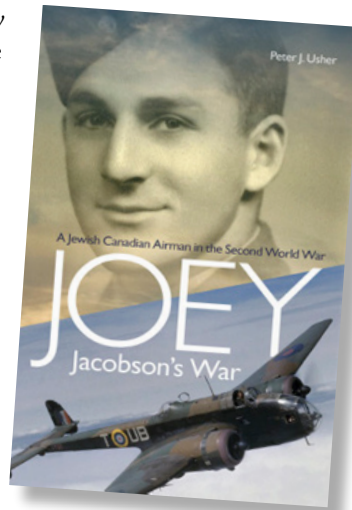
Germans. Typhoon fighter-bombers were devastating for enemy troops. Coastal Command monitored Dutch and trans-Atlantic ports for any U-boats and surface ships that might harass Allied shipping. Beaufighters destroyed enemy ships to keep the German navy at home.

Ellin noted Jewish aviators flew on all of the famous Allied aircraft that ensured air superiority on D-Day. She noted the Allies flew 14,000 sorties in 24 hours on D-Day, while the Luftwaffe could manage only 319. The RCAF had 15 squadrons flying with Bomber Command, 18 with the Second Tactical Air Force, four with Coastal Command and two in the air defence of Britain, for a total of 39 squadrons. The RCAF had 30,000 men and women in Canadian units, while 24,000 served with British and other Allied forces; 1,000 Canadian aircraft flew on D-Day. Seven were shot down and listed as missing or they crashed due to damage.

Members of the Jewish faith served as Canada's bomber, fighter and transport pilots, navigators, wireless operators, air gunners and bomb aimers. In fact, nearly 6,000 Jewish personnel served in the RCAF during the war, while 165 others joined the RAF. Those numbers represented about three per cent

of Canada's Jewish population of 168,000 at the time. More than 17,000 served in total, or about 40 per cent of all eligible men. That was the same percentage as non-Jewish Canadians who served. Ellin's research discredited the notion among some people that Jews didn't fight, didn't carry their weight or preferred cushy jobs.

The wartime experience of Canada's Jewish personnel was unique. They had to overcome anti-Jewish sentiment when they enlisted and then the greater peril of trying to survive in Nazi territory, if captured, than was faced by non-Jewish personnel. Ellin called it a "double threat." In 1947, the Canadian Jewish Congress calculated that more than 10,000 Jews served in the Canadian Army, nearly 6,000 in the RCAF and 596 in the Navy. (The navy said none as it was rare that



CAHS Ottawa member Peter Usher wrote *Joey Jacobson's War*.



Three brothers of Ellin's grandfather - Joe, Hyman and Max - Lief all served in the military.



they accepted Jews, especially in the officer ranks). Another 2,000 may not have listed their religion on their attestation papers. Counting service in the Merchant Marine, the total is around 18,000 or 19,000 Jews who served.

Why did they go? Ellin noted RCAF service was purely voluntary, so those who enlisted were motivated to fight fascism and serve King and country for Canada. By 1939, Jews were increasingly anxious to save their people from the persecution that would ultimately lead to the holocaust. The RCAF wanted recruits who were good students, especially in math and science. That was the case with Leon Kagna, DFC, of Edmonton. He always wanted to fly and enlisted after hearing disturbing reports about the treatment of Jews in Europe. F/O Bill Novick, DFC, of Montreal, wanted to join the RCAF because he regarded it as a more elegant and sophisticated service than the Army (as long as you could survive bombing operations over Germany.) Novick, who was among the veterans honored at the Juno Beach

commemoration two years ago, flew with a Halifax bomber crew that attacked bridges and a gun emplacement north of Caan on D-Day. An ear, nose and



F/O Henry William "Bill" Novick in England, age 20. He received a DFC while flying Halifax's with 433 "Porcupine" Sqn. In 1948, he travelled to the Middle East to fly Boeing B-17s and Curtiss C-46s during Israel's War of Independence.



Dr. Bill Novick, DFC with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Juno Beach, June 6, 2019. Photo Dan Novick.

throat doctor, Novick retired this past year and is still as sharp as ever at age 97. He felt enormous satisfaction after the war when he read the comments of a German panzer commander who was outraged that he couldn't get his tanks onto the beach because the bridge that Novick bombed had been destroyed. Others, like Nathan "Sonny" Isaacs of Toronto, didn't want to sleep in a trench --- they wanted a bed. He survived 33 operations over Europe as a navigator.

Bill Zelikovitz served first in Ferry Command then to Transport Command, where he trained to drop paratroopers on D-Day. At midnight on June 6, he was drop co-ordinator, jump co-ordinator and radar operator aboard a Dakota that dropped what was called sticks of paratroopers behind enemy lines to sabotage strategic infrastructure. When he returned to base, he was told many of the men he dropped landed in the wrong place and had been captured or killed. Zelikovitz vomited after the grim news, as he was sure he had studied the terrain and knew where the paratroopers were supposed to land. Sydney Shulemson, DSO, DFC, of Montreal, was



Flt. Lt. Sydney Shulemson, DSO, DFC, of Montreal flew Beaufighters with 404 Squadron out of Wick, Scotland. He was the most highly decorated Jewish-Canadian serviceman of the Second World War.

Canada's most highly decorated serviceman in the war. An ace, he shot down seven German aircraft and sank 12 or 13 German ships. He flew with Coastal Command, 404 Squadron, out of Wick, Scotland before D-Day. On June 6, he flew Beaufighters to keep the English Channel clear of enemy ships. He was also credited with disabling several German destroyers off Brittany during the battle.

Israel (Al) Hoffman, of 407 Squadron, flew reconnaissance operations in Wellingtons on D-Day. Two aircraft from the squadron were sent out to keep the area safe for Allied ships and watch for U-boats. They were fitted with "dustbins" --- powerful Leigh search lights that were effective in spotting submarines quickly. One of the two aircraft did not return. A PhD in chemistry, Dr. Hoffman died at Ottawa in 2010.

Shortly after flying in D-Day, Joseph Bodnoff, of Ottawa, was in action with Coastal Command, 162 Squadron, on North Sea operations. He won the Distinguished Flying Medal for his service on June 24, 1944 when he spotted a German submarine as a crewman on a Canso flown by Flt Lt



Fl/Sgt Bodnoff (lower right) was a Wireless Operator Air Gunner on the 162 Sqn. PBV-5A Canso piloted by Flt/Lt David Hornell that sunk U-1225 north of Scotland on June 24, 1944.

David Hornell. Bodnoff was a gunner in the port side blister when he observed U-1225 just as their patrol was about to end. The eight-man crew attacked and sank the submarine but were shot down and crashed into the freezing water. They had only one dinghy to survive a 72-hour ordeal. Hornell, blinded and exhausted, died. He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his heroic efforts. Bodnoff provided medical treatment that helped to save the crew.

S/L Phil (Fenster) Foster, a farmer from Saskatchewan, took creative steps to overcome prejudicial attitudes in the RCAF that favoured predominately British, Protestant, white recruits to the detriment of Jewish young men. Phil changed his name to Foster, a more Anglo-sounding name, and grew a moustache in order to be accepted by the RCAF in 1943. He was already a pilot and a businessman when the war broke out and was motivated to “kill Hitler himself.” But it was taking him so long to get into the RCAF that he finally went overseas on a cattle boat and got an audition to show the RAF he could fly. He was accepted and flew Blenheims in Coastal Command and was shot down over Norway.

Morley Ornstein, of Toronto, enlisted with the RCAF when he was 20. A bomber navigator, he flew 29 bombing operations over five months only to be shot down in March 1945 by flak enroute to Bremen. Ornstein parachuted from his aircraft before it crashed, but he landed in a tree where he was shot by the Germans. He was buried under a cross in a German cemetery for 75 years. It took about 10 months of sleuthing before research established that he was Jewish. A 92-year-old close friend and neighbour of Morley, who was Jewish, wrote a beautiful letter to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission that provided overwhelming evidence to change the cross and place a Hebrew inscription on the tombstone. Morley had signed his paybook in Hebrew and it was sent home to Canada, so it's hard to explain how

1.



1. Morley Ornstein of Windsor, Ont.
2. Crash site of navigator Morley Ornstein's 101 Sqn Lancaster, LL755, (SR-U) near Bremen, Germany. Photo Veterans Affairs Canada.
3. F/O Morley Ornstein's new headstone awaiting installation in Becklingen War Cemetery, Nov. 2020.



the Hebrew signature was overlooked. Signing Hebrew in a paybook was courageous, but also very dangerous.

It could cause trouble not only if the person was captured, but also even when he signed up in view of widespread anti-Semitism in Canada and in the military.

Benny Yellin, of Montreal, was also in RAF 101 Squadron. A special operator, he enlisted on account of what he called his great interest in helping ending the war due to the persecution of his race. He also had great confidence in himself. He needed that, considering the attitude of a medical officer, who interviewed a non-Jewish recruit described by the officer as “physically excellent, mentally quiet, co-operative, well-mannered, confident...not showing any of the usual super salesmanship of the Jew.” As Ellin stated,

that offensive language “leaps off the page 80 years later.” Alex Balinson, of Hamilton, died at Malta in a 1942 air raid. A young, strapping guy, he also had to face anti-Semitism from recruiting offices who saw him as “rather pushy” and “rather rough” because of his background.

Ellin described the Jewish airmen of 101 Squadron as “hidden heroes.” Benny Yellin, for one, spoke decent German. The squadron carried secret radar, known as the cigar, with two antennas for radio countermeasures. It required personnel who could speak German, to understand what German operators were saying, and jam the message with other German commands to confuse the pilots. Twenty-four Lancasters from 101 squadron put this deceptive ruse into play by trying to explain to the Germans that the D-Day landings would be at Pas-de-Calais instead of where the invasion took place. It was called the Battle of the Ether, where special operators saved countless Allied lives by sending signals in German. This squadron, which flew 2,477 sorties from Ludford Magna, was known to the Germans and had the highest casualties of any RAF squadron. A total of 1,176 crew were killed and 178 were prisoners of war.

Rose Goodman, the only Jewish woman officer in the RCAF killed in the war (and the only Jewish woman in uniform killed in the war), was an adjutant at RCAF Claresholm, Alberta, home of No. 5 Service Flying Training School. It's hard to believe now, but in another example of anti-Semitism, her wartime attestation papers referenced her attractiveness, her religion and included a credit check of her father to determine how wealthy he was. She died in an RCAF Cessna Crane crash in the area in 1943.

As for the Battle of Britain, in which Canada sent more than 100 aviators to England, Ellin estimated about 34 to 40 were Jewish men. However, only one Jewish Canadian name appears on the Battle of Britain monument in London in Fern. That's F/L William Henry Nelson, DFC, the first Jewish DFC recipient in Canada. He was born to immigrant parents in Montreal and worked at the Fairchild aircraft plant in Longueuil. He took flying lessons and in 1936, at 19, tried to enlist in what was a feeble RCAF at time. He wasn't suc-



Special Operator F/O Ben Yellin failed to return when Lancaster LL774 raided Duisberg on Oct. 15, 1944. Photo Yellin family.



S/O Rose J. Goodman (age 23) from New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, was killed on Jan. 26, 1943 when Cessna Crane No. 8739 crashed eight miles SE of RCAF Claresholm, AB.

**KILLED ACCIDENTALLY:**  
Goodman, Rose Jette, SO., V30156, Solomon Goodman (father), New Glasgow, N.S. (SO. Goodman was killed January 26 when a training plane in which she was a passenger crashed near Claresholm, Alta.)

Rose Goodman's obituary in The Montreal Gazette, Feb. 2, 1943.



cessful but in 1937 he worked his way across the Atlantic in a merchant ship and was accepted by the RAF. That's when he met his British war bride, Isabel McIntyre. They were married Sept. 6, 1939, three days after Britain declared war on Germany.

Nelson was captain of the first Whitley bomber with No. 10 Squadron, flying leaflets over Germany on Sept. 8. He spent the next eight months bombing German installations in occupied Europe and flew in the Battle of Norway, for which he won his DFC. Returning from a raid on Apr. 20, 1940, he found a barrage balloon floating in a fjord and radioed back to alert other pilots about the danger of flying into the deadly balloons. After the invasion of France and evacuation of Dunkirk in June, a call went out for fighter pilots.

Nelson was picking up his DFC at Buckingham Palace on June 6 when he responded to the call and volunteered, to begin flying with the No. 74 "Tiger" Squadron at Hornchurch on July 20. Nelson destroyed five enemy aircraft and damaged two others, making him an ace. He was the highest-scoring Canadian Spitfire pilot during the Battle of Britain. Nelson was killed in action at age 23 on

Nov. 1, 1940. He was supposed to have the day off after just having a child, but tragically he went back to help his buddies and was shot down over the English Channel. His aircraft and body were never found. Nelson's parents in Montreal received a letter from him after he had been killed. "I thank God that I'll be able to help deal a blow to the regime that persecutes the Jews," he wrote.

The Canadian Jewish Congress produced a comic book about Jewish heroes. Nelson had a whole page, but generally, he didn't receive the recognition he deserved. Ellin's book helped to fill that gap, as will Peter Usher's book. Hugh Halliday, for his part, covered Nelson's story in a *CAHS Journal* article, Vol. 8, No. 2, summer 1970, describing Nelson as a man of many talents.

Some Jewish pilots proudly wore Jew-

ish insignia on their sleeves, dogtags or whatever. Gordon Steinberg of Toronto flew Hurricanes out of Alexandria, Egypt. His fighter sported an iconic Star of David on the nose. He was shot down over the Mediterranean after 92 sorties. Nearly 200 Jewish people were awarded bravery and gallantry medals during the war. Leon Kagna received his DFC in honour of 33 operations. Sydney Shulemson, unfortunately, never received a promotion from Flight Lieutenant even though he won a DFC and a DSO. He was a D-Day hero, but again the prejudice against Jews --- mainly from higher officers as opposed to fellow pilots --- was held against him.

At the end of the war, many Jewish airmen took it upon themselves to help 60,000 survivors at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. S/L Ted Aplin, who was not Jewish, and his Jewish sergeant, Stan Winfield, of Calgary, advised everyone to ask their families back home to send care packages to the liberated prisoners so they could feel free again. It was a widespread effort, and included having picnics for the Jewish orphans. Bernard Yale, an RCAF photographer from Toronto, documented the liberation of the camp and the aftermath.

Ellin answered numerous questions after her presentation. She mentioned a companion book, *Canadian Jews in World War II*, as well as stories of downed airmen who were transferred from POW camps to concentration camps. Some POWs owed their lives to righteous non-Jews who helped them survive or escape. Ken Swartz thanked Ellin on behalf of the Chapter for a remarkable and thought-provoking presentation that provided a most rewarding meeting.



A recent photograph of F/Lt. W. H. NELSON, D.F.C., young Montrealer in the Royal Air Force, who was recently reported missing. Nelson, who was a student at Strathcona Academy, is well known in this city. His mother, Mrs. F. Nelson, and a sister, Mrs. J. Lieberman, live at 4893 Cote St. Catherine road, Outremont. On the day he was reported missing, his mother received a cheerful letter from him, including snapshots of his young wife and infant son.

F/Lt. William Henry Nelson, DFC, Montreal Gazette



F/Lt. William Henry Nelson, DFC, Comic