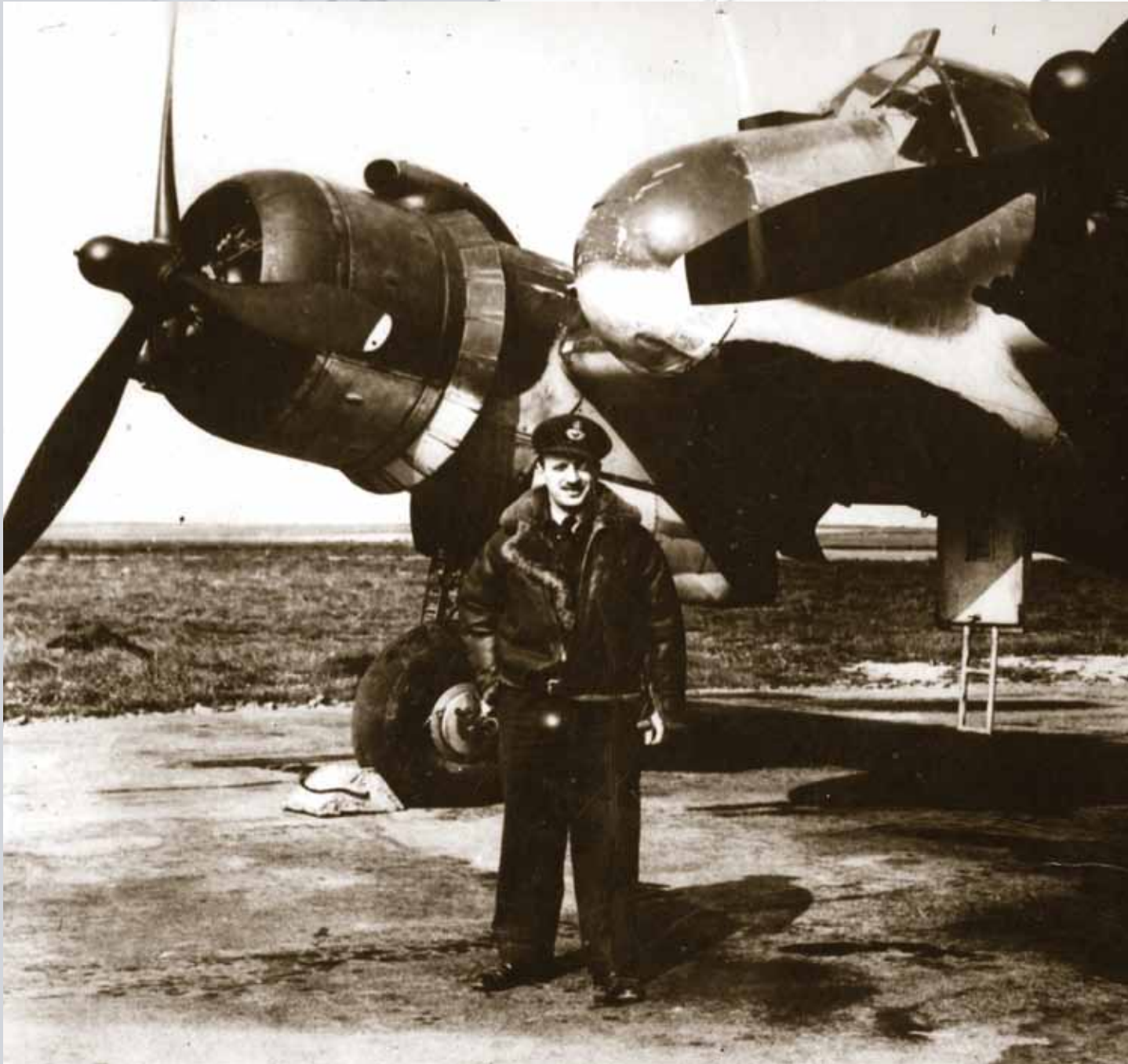




Double Threat

Canadian Jews, the



Military and World War II

Ellin Bessner



In June, just after the ceremonies commemorating the 75th anniversary of D-Day, the Canadian government officially recognized the contribution of the country's tiny Jewish community to helping defeat Hitler in WWII. A motion in the House of Commons was introduced to thank the Jewish war veterans for their sacrifice. It is an acknowledgement that was decades overdue.



LEFT: Montreal's Sydney Shulemson became the most highly decorated Canadian Jewish airman in World War 2, winning a Distinguished Service Order and a Distinguished Flying Cross. (PHOTO COURTESY ALEX DWORKIN CANADIAN JEWISH ARCHIVES)

“Canada’s nearly 17,000 Jewish soldiers faced something unique: they were not only standing beside Britain against the dark forces of Nazism and dictatorship, but also were fighting to rescue their own people from the Holocaust.”

Nearly 17,000 Canadians of Jewish faith served in the war, or about 10 per cent of the wartime population. Close to 450 were killed. About 80 were taken prisoner. Hundreds won bravery medals for their efforts. Yet, until now, while Canada had recognized the unique contributions of Indigenous, Chinese-Canadians, Black Canadians and other minority groups to the war effort, there had never been anything done to acknowledge the Jewish story.

Ellin Bessner’s new book *“Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military and World War II”*, published by the University of Toronto Press, tells the story of how and why they fought not only for freedom and democracy, but to save the Jewish people from Hitler’s Final Solution. And how they faced great personal risk, should they be captured and their Jewish faith become known.

Bessner interviewed over 300 veterans and their families, and her book depicts some of the most famous Canadians: including comedians Johnny Per and Frank Shuster, Hollywood game show host Monty Hall, Senators David Croll and Jack Marshall, “Love Story” director Arthur Hiller, actor Lloyd Bochner, comedian David Steinberg, Tip Top Tailors clothing mogul Ben Dunkelman, and lawyer Eddie Goodman.

Seventy-five years ago, on July 8, 1944, a Canadian artillery soldier George Meltz was badly wounded near Caen, France.



ABOVE RIGHT: Toronto comedians Frank Shuster (bottom left) and Johnny Wayne (bottom right) enlisted in the Canadian Army in 1941, and performed at home and overseas. (COURTESY LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA/DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE FONDSD/132839)

He was taken to a Canadian Army hospital, where he died of his wounds. The Toronto bombardier was twenty-five years old and had just recently married a British girl in London. Meltz’s parents had immigrated to Canada from Lithuania, to flee the religious persecution of Jews there.

Meltz’s grieving widow, Trudy, then 20, had some special words engraved on her husband’s tombstone in the Bény-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery near Juno Beach, in France. The epitaph is below the Star of David:

DEEPLY MOURNED BY HIS WIFE AND FAMILY
HE DIED SO JEWRY
SHALL SUFFER NO MORE

Like George Meltz, more than a million Canadians served in World War II. But among them, Canada’s nearly 17,000 Jewish soldiers faced something unique: they were not only standing beside Britain against the dark forces of Nazism and dictatorship, but also were fighting to rescue their own people from the Holocaust.

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“While some Jewish men changed their names, or lied about their religions on their enlistment forms, the majority did not.”

Canadian Jews who donned a uniform in World War II came of age in a land where being Jewish meant facing antisemitism in personal and professional spheres. Some had been attacked by local gangs while swimming at Plage Laval, a popular summer spot north of Montreal, others while playing baseball at Toronto’s Christie Pits. They lived in a country where some companies would not hire Jews, where there were quotas limiting the number of Jews enrolled in some university faculties, and where Jews were restricted from joining some private clubs. Canada’s government was turning away thousands of Jewish refugees trying to outrun Europe’s repressive racial laws, including the passengers on the doomed ship the MS St. Louis, in May 1939.

Yet at sundown on September 13, 1939, there was little doubt what the Jewish community would do now that Canada was officially at war. As the Jewish population streamed into synagogues to mark Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), rabbis addressed their congregants with rousing speeches that mixed patriotism with historical memory.

“Should Hitlerism win, the world will be plunged into utter darkness, in which case the Jews will be the greatest losers,” said Rabbi Arthur Feldman at Temple Anshe Sholom in Hamilton. He told his flock the war was “the greatest hour of Jewish destiny in all our history rich in grim crises.”

In Toronto, the New Year speech by Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath of Holy Blossom Temple received coverage in the *Globe and Mail*: “We of the household of Israel who have been so singularly blessed within this Empire, must do all in our power, with might and main and means and men, to help God to fulfill his ancient promise to bless those who bless us.”

For Canada’s approximately one hundred and sixty-five thousand Jews, (about 1.5 % of the wartime population) the declaration of war set in motion a massive mobilization effort.

Nearly 40 per cent of the eligible Jewish male population of Canada would join the military, a figure only slightly lower than the government’s post-war official data showing that 41.15 per cent of all eligible Canadian men between 18-45 years served.

While some Jewish men changed their names, or lied about their religions on their enlistment forms, the majority did not. Being Jewish would lead to fistfights for Toronto’s Murray



Jacobs outside the barracks while in training during the war, but he steadfastly refused to hide his religion. “First of all, if you’re not proud of who you are, you shouldn’t be there. That’s what this was all about,” insisted Jacobs, who served as a sergeant with the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, in Normandy, and throughout Western Europe.

Colonel (Hon.) David Lloyd Hart, who recently died at the age of 101 in Montreal, had proudly declared his Jewish background on the registration form when he enlisted in the Signals Corps. “I insisted on having ‘Hebrew’ on it. I said to them, ‘[If] the Jerries capture me, I want them to know I’m a Jew’.”

ABOVE RIGHT: Toronto’s Ben Dunkelman, (left) in Italy in 1944. Rejected by the Royal Canadian Navy because of his religion, Dunkelman later won a Distinguished Service Order medal for bravery in battle in Germany. Dunkelman later volunteered with the Machal fighters in Israel’s War of Independence in 1948. (COURTESY ONTARIO JEWISH ARCHIVES)

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“...it wasn’t easy for Jewish volunteers to join the Canadian forces, in certain regiments and certain branches, especially in the war’s early years.”

Nathan Dlusy wasn’t yet a naturalized British subject, since escaping from Germany just a few months before Kristallnacht. Through his father’s business connections, however, Nat successfully enlisted with the RCAF in Montreal: “Very anxious to fly. Prefers WOAG [Wireless Operator Air Gunner]. Born in Berlin. Family are Hebrew. In Berlin before coming here. Hates Nazi doctrine.”

But despite the strong motivation that sent Dlusy and others to enlist, it wasn’t easy for Jewish volunteers to join the Canadian forces, in certain regiments and certain branches, especially in the war’s early years.

Ben Dunkelman waited in vain for months to get his call back from the navy. He thought he was a good prospect. He had the right social status, being the son of the owner of Tip Top Tailors, the largest men’s suit manufacturer and retailer in Canada. His home was an estate in Toronto, Sunnybrook Farm, which boasted thirty-five acres of lawn and flower gardens. He had attended Upper Canada College, a private school for Toronto’s Protestant elite.

Dunkelman also had a schooner, which he sailed every summer on Georgian Bay. Dunkelman would eventually learn from a friend that the navy’s silence was no accident. “Many RCN officers were drawn from the exclusive yachting circles which were WASP-dominated and heavily tinged with racism,” Dunkelman writes in his memoir. He eventually joined the army, serving with distinction overseas in the Queen’s Own Rifles of Canada.

Unlike Dunkelman, Monty Hall (born Monte Halparin) was far from wealthy. The son of a Winnipeg kosher butcher, the future host of television’s *Let’s Make a Deal* game show was enrolled at the University of Manitoba, where he took training with the Canadian Officers’ Training Corps (COTC). While in military training on campus, he saw a notice that read: “Wanted. Officer recruitment in Tank Corps.” The officer in charge turned him away. “I don’t think they’re taking Jews,” Hall was told, which is why Hall wound up in the military reserve’s Entertainment Units, which launched him on his show business career.

It would take a publicity stunt by arguably the highest-profile Canadian Jew to enlist in the war, then-mayor David A. Croll of Windsor, to break down the barriers for the Jewish men in his city who wanted to enlist in the local Essex Scottish Regiment. At the start of the war, Jewish men informed Croll that a certain colonel didn’t want to take any of them. “He was furious about that,” said Croll’s daughter, Crystal Hawk. She remembers her father phoning the Windsor Star, telling them to send a photographer, and then marching down to the armoury himself to enlist, as a private. “They couldn’t refuse.”

RIGHT: Five Olfman brothers from Kamsack, Saskatchewan. Left to right: Abe, Royal Canadian Dental Corps; Jack, RCAF; Solomon “Shia” (killed 1942) with the artillery; Maurice and Hymie, both RCAF. (COURTESY ONTARIO JEWISH ARCHIVES)



Canadian Jews fought in all the major battles, from Hong Kong, to Ortona, and Dunkirk to D-Day. Some of the most brave would have Jewish War Heroes comic books published about them.

One issue portrayed the most highly decorated Canadian Jew of World War II: Flight Lieutenant Sydney Shulemson, who won the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) in 1944, which is the medal just below a Victoria Cross, and, went on to win a DFC in 1945.

Shulemson, the son of a Montreal dry cleaner, served with a Royal Canadian Air Force Coastal Command squadron strategically based in northeastern Scotland. Five hundred kilometres across the North Sea was Norway—its high-walled fjords perfect hiding places for German merchant ships carrying valuable cargo to the Reich. He shot down a German flying boat on his very first operational mission in 1943.

The citation for his DSO praised him for displaying “inspiring leadership, great skill and courage.” He won it at the controls of a Beaufighter, leading a dozen Allied fighter planes. They sank a minesweeper and damaged four other German vessels while under intense fire from shore-based anti-aircraft batteries and Messerschmitt pilots. Shulemson is credited with sinking at least a dozen enemy ships, although he maintained it was a lucky thirteen. 🍁



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