

Morley Ornstein, a navigator with Bomber Command, is said to have been shot by German civilians when his plane came down over Germany in 1945. Morley Wolfe, who was at school with him, remembers a handsome boy with a sense of humour

Fitting memorial for RAF Lancaster hero, 75 years on

Mark Bridge History Correspondent

The cross on the grave of a Jewish Lancaster bomber navigator has been replaced with a Star of David after an author discovered the error.

Noted for his “pep” and patriotism, Morley Ornstein was one of 50,000 Canadians who served with Bomber Command. He was a navigator with the RAF’s 101 squadron when his aircraft was shot down over Bremen.

Although Ornstein had declared himself to be Jewish in his air force attestation papers, his grave was marked with a cross by the war grave authorities. The author Ellin Bessner has since worked with a historian and a 92-year-old childhood friend of the airman to corroborate his background.

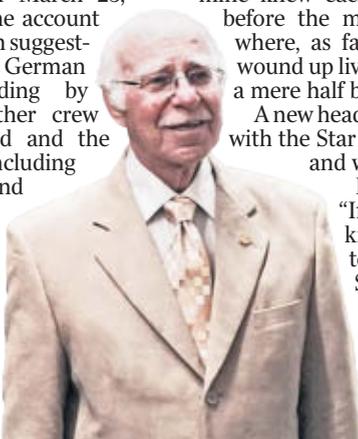
When Ornstein applied to join the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1942, aged 18, he listed his religion as Hebrew. Some Jews withheld their religion in official records, fearing their treatment if they were captured by the Nazis.

Recruiters observed that he was athletic, smart, “very keen to fly” and a “nice type of chap” with “plenty [of] drive and pep”. Reflecting the suspicion that sometimes greeted Jews, they added: “Boy quite assimilated and loyal.”

Flying on bombing missions for five months out of RAF Ludford Magna in Lincolnshire, Ornstein was said by his pilot, Reg Paterson, to have been a superb navigator. Paterson, who died three years ago, recalled evenings out in Grimsby when the airmen, assembled at midnight to return to base, would be ordered by their squadron leader (“the Squire”) to form up smartly and sing *On Ilkla Moor Baht ’at*.

The precise circumstances of Ornstein’s death, on March 23, 1945, are unclear. One account given by local children suggested that he was shot by German civilians after landing by parachute. Three other crew members were killed and the remaining three, including Paterson, survived and were taken prisoner.

No one spotted the error at Ornstein’s grave until Professor Bessner, an expert on Canadian Jewish service personnel, viewed it online. She had been told of Ornstein’s service by



Morley Wolfe, QC, a schoolmate and family friend of the airman’s, and Murray Rubin, head of the alumni association at his school in Toronto.

Professor Bessner enlisted the help of Martin Sugarman, a British historian and archivist for the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women, to apply to have the cross on Ornstein’s headstone at Becklingen War Cemetery in Lower Saxony replaced with the Star of David.

Mr Sugarman and other volunteers have contributed years of research to have the star added to about 100 war graves. Although Ornstein declared himself Jewish, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission said, postwar officials based decisions on religious symbols solely on correspondence with next of kin. Their letters to Ornstein’s family in the 1950s were not answered because his parents had moved, so the cross was used by default.

Part of the case for change was a letter from Mr Wolfe, the 92-year-old family friend of Ornstein’s who brought his name to Professor Bessner’s attention. Mr Wolfe, a lawyer, told the War Graves Commission that Ornstein’s father, Ben, a carpet salesman, often took the Wolfe family for rides in his car in the 1940s. “Both my parents spoke Yiddish, and I certainly have a clear recollection of Morley’s parents conversing with mine, on occasion, in Yiddish, obviously indicative of Morley’s background,” he wrote.

“Morley attended the same high school as I, Harbord Collegiate Institute, half a dozen years ahead of me. My recall of him as a person reflects a handsome young man with a nice sense of humour — something I recall about his dad as well. I believe his mother and mine knew each other in Winnipeg before the move east to Toronto where, as fate would have it, we wound up living on the same street a mere half block apart.”

A new headstone has been carved with the Star of David for Ornstein and will go up shortly.

Professor Bessner said: “If this happened to my kid I would want people to know who he was.” She and Mr Sugarman believe that correcting such errors is important in highlighting the contribution of Jewish servicemen and women.

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