

# Visit to France reconnects Toronto cousins

Guest Voice

By ELLIN BESSNER, Special to The Canadian Jewish News

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The grave of Canadian bombardier George Meltz lies in the peaceful Reviers cemetery, located just south of Juno Beach, at Courseulles-sur-Mer, where the Toronto soldier landed along with 14,000 Canadian troops on June 6, 1944.



**Ellin Bessner**

Meltz's tombstone bears a poignant inscription that attracted my attention during a visit to that cemetery while I was touring D-Day landing sites on holiday in France.

It reads, "He died so Jewry shall suffer no more."

We were moved, because the D-Day landings helped bring an end to the Holocaust.

## Grave of George Meltz



The only information we could find in the cemetery were two lines in a government folder at the front gate. It identified him as George Meltz, 25, of Toronto, who died July 8, 1944, and named his parents and his widow, a British war bride.

We took photos of Meltz's grave and of the inscription, and I decided to hunt down any of his family to send them the pictures of his final resting place.

An Internet search turned up a few more details, such as how he died: "Of his wounds," according to the Canadian Jewish Congress archives published in 1948.

It also named a street address in Toronto, and a brother, Jack Meltz, of 210 Montrose Ave.

Eventually, I found a listing for a George Meltz, a real estate professional in my own neighbourhood in Richmond Hill, Ont. Also, a George Meltz used to be president of my synagogue, Beit Rayim, also in Richmond Hill.

These coincidences were uncanny.

So I called.

A very surprised Meltz told me that yes, indeed, the man buried in France was his uncle.

“I was named for him,” Meltz explained. I broke out in goose bumps.

The real estate agent had never been to the grave in France and didn't know about the tombstone inscription.

He was able to add some new details to the story of the man we discovered in France.

“He was the youngest, the last of the 10 [children],” Meltz said. “He was the only one that went [to war].”

He had indeed married a British girl, as thousands of Canadian servicemen did during the war, but Meltz said no one knows what happened to the widow.

Military historians say Meltz's Royal Canadian Artillery Regiment, the 3rd Anti Tank Regiment, was likely either manning a six-pound anti-tank gun or an M10 converted Sherman tank, with two guns on it.

“My dad told me he was picked off by a sniper,” Meltz said.

Approximately 5,500 Canadian casualties from D-Day and its aftermath are buried in two large cemeteries in the area. In Meltz’s Beny-sur-Mer cemetery, as it is officially known, there are about a dozen Jewish servicemen’s graves.

I sent Meltz my photos of his uncle’s tombstone with the poignant inscription that sparked my transatlantic search.

He appreciated seeing where his ancestor is buried, even if “seeing your own name on a tombstone is really spooky.”

Sadly, for Meltz in Richmond Hill, with none of the dead soldier’s other siblings still alive, he thought there was no one left to ask about his namesake’s wartime exploits.

But Meltz won’t have to remain in the dark about his famous uncle any longer.

I was telling my story to a cousin, Judy Guttman, a Toronto elementary school teacher, who revealed that she has a friend named Isabella Meltz. Could it be?

A quick telephone call confirmed that the soldier was indeed, also her uncle.

As for the George Meltz of Richmond Hill?

He’s her first cousin, who she said has lost touch with the family and who she hasn’t seen in many years. Their fathers were George’s brothers, Sam and Jack, known as Yaacov.

“Maybe we’ll get back with George [because of this],” said Isabel, who works in a community legal clinic in Toronto.

She could show him her late uncle's official wartime military service record, some photos of him in uniform, and one with his young English wife. She also kept a treasured handkerchief that the soldier sent back home to his brothers from training in England before D-Day in 1944.

It says, "To my brothers, Good Luck."

"He was the youngest, they must have been just heartbroken," Isabel said, although she remembers the family didn't talk about it while she was growing up.

"By the time you want to ask them, it's too late – they're all gone," she said.

The family doesn't know who approved the prophetic epitaph on her uncle's tombstone, although she thinks it could have been his widow, a Trudy Lewis, of London.

The phrase was so gripping that Canadian military historian and author Eric McGeer featured it in his 2008 book *Words of Valediction and Remembrance: Canadian Epitaphs of the Second World War*.

Intrigued now, Isabel plans to write to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to find out about the mysterious epitaph.

She herself has photos of the original wooden Star of David that marked the grave for more than 60 years, until it was replaced by the newer marble slab erected after 2008, when the Canadian government began restoring all the crumbling markers in that cemetery.

Although she herself has never been to visit, for the last few years she has been lighting a yarzeit candle for her uncle.

“There’s no one else [to do it for him],” she said.

The administrator of Beit Rayim Synagogue, Fran Isaacs, says that when she heard about the amazing connections, “I got goose bumps, too.”

She plans to publish a story about the Meltz connection in the next *synagogue bulletin*, due out this fall.

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