

Ellin Bessner, *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II* (Toronto: New Jewish Press, 2018), 358 pp., ISBN: 978-1988326047.

Peter Usher, *Joey Jacobson's War: A Jewish Airman in the Second World War* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2018), 414 pp., ISBN: 978-1771123426.

This pair of new books delves into the war experiences of Jewish soldiers during World War II, providing many new insights into the Canadian Jewish community's involvement in the war. This is a subject that has not been covered in great depth, and these two books are a welcome addition to the historiography. Combined, *Joey Jacobson's War: A Jewish Airman in the Second World War* by Peter J. Usher, and *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military and World War II* by Ellin Bessner, explore what it meant to be a Jewish Canadian soldier, deepening our understanding of the Jewish community's wartime service.

The first of these books, *Joey Jacobson's War*, takes a micro view by focusing on one particular soldier. The author, Peter Usher, a second cousin of Joey's, became interested in his story after another cousin wrote a book in response to the infamous 1992 Canadian documentary series *The Valour and the Horror*, particularly the episode on bomber crews in World War II entitled "Death by Moonlight: Bomber Command." Beginning with conversations with Joey's surviving siblings, and after being entrusted with Joey's daily diary and letters from his best friend in 2004, Usher decided to write a book. He eventually uncovered a trove of documents, including letters to and from family and friends, and Joey's daily personal and operational diaries, both of which were brought back to Canada via family friends without passing through the censor. If it had been exposed to the censor's scissors, the account would have been much the poorer for it. Thankfully, the letters and diaries came back to his family intact, and as a result we see Joey's thoughts on the war, but also his development into a thoughtful, committed, and passionate young man.

The book's opening section focuses on Joey's early life as the son of Percy and May Jacobs in Montreal, through his early years, and his somewhat intemperate years at McGill in which he was a celebrated athlete and the only Jewish student on the university football team. Later, in one of his letters, Joey would acknowledge that he skated through university by relying on his athletic ability and natural intelligence, and did not take his education as seriously as he should have. This section also covers Joey's enlistment in 1940 in the Royal Canadian Air Force as an air observer, a role which combined navigation and responsibility for aiming a plane's bombs. It details his early training, including an escapade in Saskatchewan that got him confined to

barracks, along with the rest of his training in England. The next three sections explore in detail Joey's wartime service as a member of the Air Force, charting his further training in England, his posting to 106 Squadron in Coningsby, and the more than 50 sorties Joey flew. Usher does an excellent job in these sections of not only exploring Joey's life and what it was like to be an airman during the Second World War, but also of explaining Bomber Command, its strategy, and its failings.

Usher shows Joey's growth from a callow young man in the first section to a man who is thoughtful, intelligent, and determined to make something of himself once the war is over. The author clearly demonstrates the impact the war had on Joey and how it changed his outlook. Joey's potent critiques, in his letters to family and friends, of the bombing campaign, and the seeming lack of care by the leaders of it for the aircrews, demonstrate his innate understanding of tactics and strategy, and how the air bombing campaign was poorly run in the initial stages of the war. Usher provides an intriguing portrait of a young man just coming into his own, which makes the last section all the more poignant. This is the section that details the crash in the Netherlands on January 28, 1942 that took Joey's life, as well as recounting the aftermath of his death. The remembrances of his family and friends, and the description of the funeral that the townspeople of Lichtenvoorde, Holland gave to the then-unknown aircrew are especially moving.

However, this section also reveals the book's major flaw. This is the one part of the book where a few women's voices are heard. Throughout the rest of *Joey Jacobson's War*, despite the lengthy quotes from letters written by Joey, his father, and his male friends, there are hardly any from women. This is something that Usher even notes is the case at the beginning: "As readers will divine, these are men's letters. Women are spoken of, but rarely speak for themselves, mainly because so few of their letters have survived." (xii) As anyone who does women's history can tell you, lack of sources is the biggest issue when trying to fill out the historical record to include the voices of women. The belief that women's papers contained nothing of importance has meant that the vast majority were thrown away. However, this does not mean that none exist. Leaving out what letters are available does a disservice to Joey's and his family's story. Usher indicates that at least some letters from the women in Joey's life exist, and are excluded because of Usher's desire to leave out "the mundane, along with the family news and gossip." He does this though he acknowledges such information is important to maintaining a connection with home and to maintain a soldier's morale. (xii) If the book purports to be about 'Joey Jacobson's War' then these are details that shaped his understanding of, and thoughts on the war, and should have been included, however few and far between such letters were.

By contrast, Ellin Bessner's excellent book, *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military and World War II* makes a point of ensuring women's voices are heard, with Jewish

women soldiers' stories peppered throughout the book. There is also a full chapter devoted to the approximately 280 Canadian Jewish women who enlisted in the war, though, presumably also due to a lack of sources, both in terms of archival material and women available to interview, this is the book's shortest chapter. Regardless, this is a vital addition to our knowledge of the Canadian Jewish experience of the Second World War, especially since our knowledge of women's experiences has been so lacking. Bessner does an excellent job of exploring how gender and Judaism mixed for female soldiers. Though Jewish women were a small percentage of both the total number of women who enlisted and the number of Jews who enlisted, they played an important role, helping to advance the place of women in Canada while also helping to advance the standing of Jews in Canada. Not only that, Jewish women's enlistment challenged the place of women within the Jewish community itself, and helped to make way for Jewish women to enter more public roles in their community.

On the face of it, the book seems somewhat haphazardly organized, with chapters on important battles such as Dieppe, to the place of Canadian Jews in particular branches of the armed forces, to Jewish communists in uniform. However, by the end, she has covered the entirety of the war, and detailed how Jewish identity meshed with that of being a Canadian soldier. For many, these two identities did not always combine well. For instance, she details how some Jewish soldiers were forced to give up eating kosher due to the ignorance of the armed forces to dietary needs. However, as more Jews enlisted, the introduction of Jewish chaplains – who had never been included in the armed forces' chaplaincy before – was necessary, and this helped to make being both Jewish and a soldier more compatible. For instance, this helped soldiers to receive leave for Jewish holidays, and helped them to receive food that was more in line with their usual dietary practices. Though perhaps not strictly kosher, at least the Jewish soldiers could finally eat meals that did not contain pork. Bessner also details how the increasing enlistment of Jewish men and women into the armed forces likely helped to improve the status of the Jewish community in Canada. For many soldiers, if not most, it was their first time meeting someone Jewish. She quotes from a diary written by a soldier from Quebec who had made a deep connection with a Jewish soldier while they were held as prisoners of war in Hong Kong. He wrote, "Strange. I used to despise Jews and now my best friend is a Jew. It's regrettable to see the injustice shown to this race..." (228).

Bessner's writing is crisp and clear, and especially in the chapter on the Battle of Hong Kong and the chapter on Dieppe, her descriptions are often visceral, at least partly reflecting her background as a journalist. The last chapter, "Kaddish for D-Day", is memorable though difficult to read, as she recounts how family members have remembered and honoured those who died in the war. The book pushes back against some scholars who have suggested that most Jewish soldiers did not experience much anti-Semitism. She details the discrimination such soldiers experienced both

in the enlistment process and during their time in the armed forces. The majority of the people she interviewed for the book said they experienced prejudice, revealing the difficulties Jewish soldiers faced as they tried to fulfill what many saw as both a patriotic and personal duty. The only reservation I have, and it is minor, is that it is easy to get lost in the sea of names. Remembering who each person is, in what branch they served and the details of their story, which may have been presented several chapters previously, can be difficult. However, this is also one of the book's strengths, because Bessner interviewed so many veterans and their families who had never told their stories previously. That we now have a treasure trove of information to which we have never before been privy is beyond important and will help us to fill out our understanding of Canada's and the Jewish community's war experience.

Near the end of her book, a nephew of one of the soldiers that Bessner chronicles notes, "...we're almost at the end of it, as far as any survivors of that time frame." (253) This is an important realization, and highlights part of what makes these two books so valuable. Bessner herself expresses her regret that she did not start this project sooner, and the resulting loss of so many stories that were not recorded in time. Ultimately, taken together, Usher's and Bessner's books provide us with a view of both the tree and the forest, giving us an intimate portrait of a Jewish soldier, and a broad overview of the Canadian Jewish community's wartime service, thus filling a large gap in the historiography of Canadian Jews and the Second World War.

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