



# נפלאות הבר'אה

## “Zaidy’s Band”

Editor: Sam. Eisikovits

[Eisikovits1@gmail.com](mailto:Eisikovits1@gmail.com)

Just Released: Likutei Shmuel – Sefer Bereishis

A treasury of insights, parables, and stories for the Shabbos table

Looking to enrich your Shabbos table with meaningful content? "Likutei Shmuel" is a carefully curated collection of the very best from recent Torah leaflets and weekly publications. It brings together inspiring divrei Torah, thought-provoking parables, captivating stories, and uplifting messages — all selected and edited with precision by Rabbi Shmuel Eisikovits.

Whether for personal learning or for sharing at the table, in shul, or with friends, this sefer offers a wealth of material that's engaging, accessible, and spiritually nourishing.



Volume One: Bereishis



Rich, varied content for every parsha



Ideal for family use, educators, and public speakers  
Currently only in Hebrew



Affordable price 60 IS available now



Order here:

<https://dash.bookpod.co.il/product/2231>

# 1.5 million Jews took up arms against the Nazis. One was this author's grandfather

Journalist Aron Heller's quest to learn about his grandfather's military service leads him to a wider view of Jews' contributions in World War II and the establishment of Israel

By **RENEE GHERT-ZAND**

Mervin (Mickey) Heller returned home to Toronto, Canada, from Europe in September 1944. From that point on, he refused to say anything about his service as a Royal Canadian Air Force navigator during World War II. No matter how hard people — including his family — tried to coax him into opening up about his experiences, Heller stayed mum.

As Heller was about to turn 90 in 2011, his grandson, Israeli journalist Aron Heller, thought his Zaidy (Yiddish for grandfather) might be willing to finally talk about where he was and what he did during the war. He was wrong; seven decades later, Mickey Heller still wasn't ready to share.

However, the senior Heller was more than happy to talk about his friends' and comrades' experiences in WWII. This gave his grandson enough leads to follow to eventually write the newly published "Zaidy's Band: The Untold Stories of a Jewish Band of Brothers in World War II."

"He wouldn't talk... He wouldn't give me access to [his] records. There was a real reticence there. So, he became more like a vehicle for the story than the story itself. That's why it's not a memoir. Instead, it's a narrative of this larger theme of Jews in World War II and [foreign

volunteers] in the establishment of the State of Israel. My grandfather is the connecting tissue, because through him, I can tell the story,” Heller said as he showed this reporter around the recently-opened Museum of the Jewish Soldier in World War II in Latrun, just off the main highway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

The museum, with its tech-driven interactive installations and historical artifacts, pays tribute to the 1.5 million Jewish men and women who fought with the Allied forces in World War II. A third served in the US military, another third in the Soviet army, and a final third with the armed forces of various other countries, especially those of Great Britain. Others fought against the Nazis and the Axis powers as partisans and members of underground organizations. In total, 250,000 of these Jewish combatants were killed in the line of duty.

The museum also tells the story of the *Mahal* soldiers, the 4,800 volunteers from 59 countries who came to Israel to fight in the 1947-1949 War of Independence. One hundred and twenty-three of these *Mahalniks* were killed fighting to establish the Jewish state, including 11 of the 300 Canadians who volunteered.

Many of them — Jewish and non-Jewish — were World War II veterans, whose hard-won skills and expertise were invaluable to the war effort against the Palestinian militias and the surrounding Arab nations’ armies. Significantly, up to 90 percent of the fledgling Israel Air Force’s pilots were foreigners.

Mickey Heller was happy to have returned to Toronto in one piece and to marry his sweetheart, Eunice Book.

“My Zaidy had no interest in joining [the Mahal] ranks. World War II was more than enough for him,” wrote Heller.

Nonetheless, a spotlight is shone on the foreign volunteers both in Heller’s book and at the museum to raise awareness about their dedication and sacrifice.

“Mahal is unknown even here in Israel. People don’t know about their huge contribution. [First Israeli prime minister David] Ben Gurion himself said that he didn’t know if we would have won the war without these guys,” Heller said.

Heller became involved with the museum as he worked on his book and museum founders who identified and documented the stories of Jewish World War II soldiers reached out to him. By virtue of his research and reporting, he was able to contribute names and accounts of Jewish Canadians. Some were his Zaidy’s old friends and neighbors, while others were fellow Jewish military members he met during the war.

Heller learned that 40% of military-age Canadian Jewish men served, and that roughly 45,000 Canadians (450 of them Jews) died fighting in the war, with more than one-third of them having served in the RCAF.

### **His grandfather’s request**

Heller’s work on “Zaidy’s Band” began after his grandfather asked him to use his journalistic skills to investigate what happened to a fellow Jewish Torontonian named Wilf Canter, whom he had met while crossing the Atlantic to fight in the war. He said Canter was a Spitfire pilot who was shot down over Germany, was a prisoner of war, and eventually made his way to Israel around 1948 to fight in the War of Independence.

Heller’s research into Canter (who was awarded a Distinguished Flying Medal by King George VI, and who survived Gestapo interrogations and nine months in Luft Stalag III, the notorious POW camp from which 80 British and Allied air officers escaped on March 24, 1944) led to four other fascinating figures and a virtually forgotten incident of Israel’s War of Independence.

After arriving in Israel on August 5, 1948, Canter became one of only five Canadian pilots with World War II experience to serve in the young IAF. He joined the 103 Squadron at Ramat David airbase and mainly flew Dakota (Douglas C-47 Skytrain) planes on supply and bombing missions.

On the night of October 24, 1948, Canter and four other crew members (two of them also Canadian) took off from Sde Dov Airport near Tel Aviv with supplies to deliver to the remote Negev desert outpost of Sdom, which was cut off from the rest of the country by Egyptian forces. Not long after taking off, the rickety plane crashed just short of the runways at the Tel Nof airbase near Rehovot. All five men aboard died. An investigation revealed that the aircraft was overworked and had not undergone proper checks and maintenance.

“Zaidy’s Band” introduces readers to the brave young men who lost their lives in this long-forgotten mission, which was merely one of numerous accidents suffered by the IAF during the war. Heller devotes a chapter to each of them, including Canter. The others are: Fred Stevenson (a non-Jewish RCAF pilot from Saskatchewan, Canada, with five years’ wartime flying experience ); Willie Fisher (a Jewish RCAF navigator from Winnipeg, Canada); Leon Lightman (a Zionist British-Jewish Royal Air Force radar and radio operator, who helped found Kibbutz Kfar HaNassi in the northern Galilee); and Michael Weimers (a German-born, British-educated, immigrant to Palestine, who wasn’t supposed to be on the flight, but hitched a ride so he could bring supplies to the Negev).

Heller told *The Times of Israel* that he was fascinated by Weimer’s unknown story. Consequently, he dug into Weimer’s biography, met his surviving family, and published a feature article about him.

“I couldn’t believe that people don’t know about this guy here [in Israel]. He was a massive factor in the 1948 war, and forgotten — wiped out of history,” Heller said.

## **'He volunteered because nobody else did'**

After documenting the Dakota's last flight and the biographies of its ill-fated crew, Heller shifts the book's focus back in time to the bravery of Jewish Canadian fighters in World War II. Among the men he highlights are Somer James and Alfred Brenner, two of the nearly 200 Canadian Jewish servicemen decorated for their heroism.

Somer, an old classmate and Hebrew school friend of Mickey Heller, opposed killing, so instead of enlisting in the military, he joined the merchant marines (formally called the Merchant Navy). The men and women of the Merchant Navy did not wear uniforms, but performed vital tasks in harsh conditions and with little pay. Their job was to ferry cargo and troops in poorly defended ships open to enemy attack. Tens of thousands of the 185,000 who served in this "4th service" died, with many of them buried at sea. It is estimated that about 90 of the 12,000 Canadians who served in the Merchant Navy were Jews.

Somer, based out of Cardiff, Wales, served on more than a dozen freighters carrying coal, wheat, and ammunition, sailing along the coasts of Europe and North Africa. On November 5, 1943, Somer was on a ship docked near Naples, Italy. German bombers attacked the ship, which was loaded with explosives, as well as a nearby munitions depot. The ship was damaged, and the dock caught fire. The craft could only be saved by maneuvering it away from the pier through complicated handling of its mooring lines.

James was the only crew member who jumped onto the burning dock to rescue the ship. It took him three hours, but he managed to save not only his ship, but also some barges that had also been hit and were aflame.

"In his video testimony, James simply said he volunteered because nobody else did," Heller wrote.

James was awarded a British Empire Medal and the Lloyd's Medal for Bravery at Sea for his brave actions.

Alfred Brenner, Mickey Heller's second cousin, was an RCAF pilot to whom King George VI awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for sinking a 5,000-ton German merchant ship off the coast of the Netherlands on February 18, 1943. Brenner and his three-man crew were on a sortie when they spotted a convoy of 12 German merchant ships accompanied by five destroyers. After scoring a direct hit, Brenner's plane absorbed enemy fire.

The pilot climbed to 2,000 feet so his radio operator could send an SOS, and then landed the aircraft on the North Sea, 30 miles from Great Yarmouth, England. The crew quickly transferred to a rescue dinghy before their plane sank — unfortunately, along with all emergency equipment and rations. The men drifted for 43 hours in freezing conditions before being picked up.

By the end of his journey writing “Zaidy's Band,” Heller found out exactly what his grandfather did in the war — but no spoilers here.

“The conclusion [I arrived at] is that it doesn't matter what you did in World War II. You did what you had to do. Whether you served, you lived, or you died... That was your contribution to that big, world-defining event that we're all still living in a shadow of,” Heller said.