

When did I last see my father?

Adapted from a talk given by Jonathan Kay in 2006

I suppose I should say, 'When did my father last see me? It was only a few weeks before he was shot down, I was three and a half.'

So began Jonathan Kay's account of tracing his father's last moments, in his talk to Bournemouth Hebrew Congregations Adult Education meeting in the Menorah Suite.

As a boy, I knew I was a bit different, not having a father at things like sports days. I remember seeing a picture of him in uniform.

My mother remarried when I was 11 and I took my stepfather's surname. So I had a new name, a stepfather and then a little baby brother. Occasionally I wondered what happened to my father and, not wanting to upset my mother too much, did not make any enquiries. I married had two sons, Gideon and Benjamin, divorced and gave little thought to my father, except at Yizkor.

About 10 years ago at a Shul learning session in Liverpool, I heard a talk by a King David high school teacher about a recent trip he maybe 6th formers to explore the graves of 1st World War soldiers in northern Europe. As I walked home, I determined to start my quest for details of my father, his service career and his death.

Where to start?

Kenneth Holme (Ken) was born in Lancaster in 1912 and attended Lancaster Grammar school, after which he moved to Manchester to work for the Phoenix Insurance Company. He met my mother, Eileen, a great great granddaughter of Jacob Franks, one of the founders of the Manchester Jewish community. They married in 1936: he was a megayer (converted to Judaism) a year later. He joined the RAF volunteer reserve as he was aware of the impending war. I was born in 1940.

In 1942 he applied to become aircrew (against my mother's wishes as everyone knew the survival rate was so very low). He was volunteering in Balloon Command at the time.

All the aircrews were volunteers and 51% killed in action, 24% in training and accidents. Why did he make that fateful decision? His brother had been killed in Malaya - was aware of the fate of his family should Hitler invade? I will never know.

In May 1943, a navigator, he was posted to 76 Squadron which was flying Halifax bombers based at Holme on Spalding Moor, near York. He flew nine missions before the final one - he had been promoted to Flying Officer only a few days before that fateful day, August 30th, 1943. His flight was part of a massive bombing raid with some 660 aircraft taking part of which 25 failed to return. Having released their bombs, they turned towards home. They were sitting ducks.

The plane was out of control, the crew ejected, two survived. My father was not one of them - his parachute failed to open fully and got tied up with the crippled plane. The local Dutch resistance workers were quickly on the scene and smuggled the bodies to the cemetery in nearby Roermond.

My enquiries took in the RAF and one of the plane's survivors living in Australia. I never met him. I also visited the record offices in Kew to obtain my father service record.

And since then my mother and I have attended five annual Squadron reunion weekends in York, visited the RAF museum in Hendon, to see the remains of a Halifax bomber, and the aircraft museum in Elvington, Yorkshire, where I was able to sit inside a reconstructed aircraft and imagine what an

ordeal it would have been to fly for up to 10 hours, being so vulnerable to night fighter attacks, anti-aircraft fire, as well as mechanical failures and adverse weather conditions. Many of the crew were in their early 20's, some as young as 19

I visited his grave on a dull wet Sunday afternoon in 1998, when we eventually found the five graves of my father with his crew. There was the Magen David, but as Gideon and I moved closer we found to our horror that a swastika had been scrawled across the back. Since then I have returned every year in May to attend 'Freedom Day', a ceremony organised and arranged by an amazing woman Anja who, as a 22 year old led the local resistance which dragged the bodies of the to the local graveyard, knowing the Germans were superstitious and would not venture there.

I have been asked would I like my father's body to be re interred in England. My question is a very definite No. He lived and died with his crew and I'm sure he would wish to be buried alongside them. I can still go and say Kaddish over the grave and who knows whether in the future my sons or grandchildren may do the same. The most obvious reason for saying No is that it will be an insult to those brave Dutch people who then, and now, are so proud of the sacrifices made by Ken and thousands of others to free their country from the Nazi oppression.