

The New York Times

May 24, 2022

Many Jewish World War II Soldiers Had Christian Burials. That's Changing.

Descendants of soldiers are holding rededication ceremonies in Europe to honor their ancestors' Jewish heritage.



A Star of David replaces a cross in a military cemetery in Luxembourg. This practice has slowly been happening across Europe since 2018. Credit...Valentin Bianchi for The New York Times



By [Liam Stack](#)

May 24, 2022

Everett Seixas, Jr., came from one of the most historically significant Jewish families in the United States.

One ancestor led the oldest synagogue in New York City during the American Revolution. Another received a famous letter from George Washington, who assured him that the rights of Jews would be respected in the new American republic.

One relative helped establish the New York Stock Exchange. Still another was the poet Emma Lazarus, whose ode to “the huddled masses yearning to breathe free” famously honored the Statue of Liberty.



Everett Seixas, Jr., who came from a prominent Jewish family in New York, was killed in the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. His remains were buried under a cross in Luxembourg for more than 75 years.
Credit... via Operation Benjamin

And then there was Mr. Seixas. Born in New York City in 1911, he graduated from Columbia Law School, enlisted in the military during the Second World War and was sent to fight the Nazis in Europe, where he was killed in the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. His remains were buried underneath a Latin cross in an American military cemetery in Luxembourg.

Jewish soldiers like Mr. Seixas were given Christian burials after the war for a variety of reasons, including bureaucratic confusion and their own decision to conceal their faith on the front lines. But for decades, this was not well known. Some family members had no idea their loved ones, buried in distant cemeteries in foreign countries, had been laid to rest beneath crosses.

But in recent years, descendants of Jewish soldiers have begun to lobby for new religious ceremonies at American military cemeteries, reciting Jewish prayers and replacing Latin crosses with Stars of David. They have been aided by [Operation Benjamin](#), a group that identifies American-Jewish soldiers from World War II, tracks down their relatives, and helps plan ceremonies.



A new Star of David to honor Mr. Seixas and his family. Credit...Valentin Bianchi for The New York Times

Last month, the group, which started organizing these services four years ago, held its first ceremonies since the start of the pandemic, reconsecrating seven graves at four cemeteries in France, Belgium and Luxembourg. The grave of Everett Seixas was one of them.

“I was not expected to be as moved as I was,” said Jonathan Nathan, 29, a relative who represented the Seixas family in Luxembourg. “I didn’t know him and I don’t know what he was like, but doing this, I felt like we had a connection.”



Jonathan Nathan represented the Seixas family at a reconsecration ceremony in Luxembourg last month. Credit...Valentin Bianchi for The New York Times

Shalom Lamm, an amateur historian, started Operation Benjamin after chatting with a friend at a party who had just returned from a visit to Normandy American Cemetery in France. The friend told Mr. Lamm he had expected to see more Stars of David among the rows of white crosses, he said. That got Mr. Lamm thinking about the lack of Jewish graves in U.S. military cemeteries across Europe.

“I am apparently a bit O.C.D. and I went home that night and I just could not sleep,” Mr. Lamm said.

After some research, he discovered that 149 of the 9,500 graves in Normandy were marked with Stars of David. But historians have estimated that roughly 2.6 percent of American casualties in the war were Jewish, which meant there should have been many more Jews buried in Normandy.

Mr. Lamm became obsessed: Where were they?

His search led to “many incorrect theories,” he said. Then he decided to find a soldier to research genealogically, selecting a random grave in Normandy marked by a Latin cross.



Operation Benjamin pays tribute to soldiers Joseph M. Sugarman Jr. and Kenneth E. Robinson, buried in the American cemetery of Neupré, near Liège, in the presence of family members. Credit...Valentin Bianchi for The New York Times

“I am almost embarrassed to say how we did this: We took a soldier whose name sounded Jewish,” Mr. Lamm said. “We said ‘Hey, Benjamin Garadetsky is buried under a cross, maybe he is Jewish.’ And lo and behold, it turned out he was Jewish.”

Mr. Lamm tracked down and contacted Mr. Garadetsky’s descendants. He learned that Mr. Garadetsky had been a Russian immigrant who lived in the Bronx before his military service, and whose parents were buried in a Jewish cemetery not far from Mr. Lamm’s home on Long Island. [Mr. Garadetsky’s grave was rededicated](#) in 2018. After that, Mr. Lamm started Operation Benjamin, naming the project after this first soldier whose background he had researched.

Since then, some two dozen ceremonies have been held at cemeteries around the world run by the American Battle Monuments Commission, which operates 26 burial grounds and 32 memorials in 20 countries and territories. Alison Bettencourt, a spokeswoman for the commission, said 123,000 people were buried in its cemeteries, with tens of thousands more honored in memorials for the missing.

Of those graves, more than 121,000 are marked by a cross and over 2,200 are marked by a Star of David, which are the only two headstone options, she said.

The burial of a soldier under the wrong religious symbol may have stemmed, in part, from the fog of war, Ms. Bettencourt said. Fallen soldiers would have typically been buried and reburied at least three times: once close to the site of their death; a second time after the war, when the military consolidated those thousands of grave sites into temporary cemeteries; and again after 1948 when the official cemeteries were founded.



A star among the crosses, in Belgium. Credit...Valentin Bianchi for The New York Times

But many Jewish soldiers also chose to pass as Christians because dog tags at the time included information on a soldier's religious background. During World War II, soldiers were given three options for the tags: 'C' for Catholic, 'P' for Protestant, and 'H' for Hebrew.

"There was a lot of concern among Jewish soldiers that if they were captured and their dog tag marked them as Jewish they would get different treatment from the Germans especially," said Ben Brands, a historian at the commission. "A decent number of Jewish soldiers concealed their Judaism not just from the enemy but also by keeping it out of their official records, and the official records are what the army had to go on if they were killed."

Some soldiers also feared the antisemitism they might face from other American soldiers.

Barbara Belmont, 80, a retired executive in Virginia, was three years old when her father, Albert, was killed in action. His dog tags identified him as a Christian. Mr. Belmont's brother later told his niece that his brother had wanted "to feel like one of the guys," she said.

"There was a lot of antisemitism and he didn't want to be 'that Jewish soldier' or whatever," she said. "He just wanted to be one of the soldiers."

Ms. Belmont had spent a lifetime trying to learn about her father, a photographer who moved his family from New York to Kansas City shortly before the war. Her mother remarried and rarely spoke about her first husband, owing in part to social norms at the time surrounding grief, Ms. Belmont said.

“In that generation, those who came back from the war, they didn’t talk about it,” she said. “The families that lost soldiers, they didn’t talk about it.”

The therapeutic approach to trauma and loss that is common today did not exist for a widow and her young children in the 1940s. Ms. Belmont did not even meet relatives on her father’s side of the family until the 1990s, when she visited his grave for the first time and saw the cross there.

Ms. Belmont, who also attended a rededication ceremony last month at Lorraine American Cemetery in France, said she felt like she was both meeting her father for the first time and saying goodbye. “I felt like I went to my father’s funeral,” she said. “That was the greatest gift you could have given me.”

She brought her daughters on the trip to Europe, where the families of the fallen soldiers all met and attended each other’s ceremonies. At each one, the group recited the Kaddish over each soldier’s grave.

Ms. Belmont said she wept each time.

“We didn’t cry just for our soldier, for my father or their grandfather,” she said. “I think everybody in the group cried for every soldier who died.”

Liam Stack is a religion correspondent on the Metro desk, covering New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. He was previously a political reporter based in New York and a Middle East correspondent based in Cairo. [@liamstack](https://twitter.com/liamstack)