

Jewish World War II veterans get new headstones with Stars of David



By Sarah Pulliam Bailey

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Barbara Belmont and daughter Erin McCahill hold a portrait of Belmont's father at McCahill's home in Bethesda. (Eric Lee for The Washington Post)

When given the choice to put his religious identity on his metal dog tag, World War II soldier Albert Belmont did what many Jewish soldiers did at the time. His family members say he put a “P” for Protestant, out of fear of what Nazi German soldiers could do to him if he were captured.

For more than seven decades, Belmont was buried under a Latin cross, what soldiers were generally buried under unless they had “H” on their dog tag for Hebrew. In April, however, his daughter and granddaughters traveled to France to see the cross above his body replaced with a Star of David to reflect his Jewish identity.

Belmont's changed headstone is part of a larger project called Operation Benjamin, working to correct the headstones of hundreds of Jewish soldiers who died in World Wars I and II. Barbara Belmont, who lives in Alexandria, Va., and her two daughters joined six other families on a trip to Europe to participate in ceremonies for the changing of their relatives' headstones.

“In a way, it gave this very old lady closure,” said Belmont, 80. “I feel like I attended my father's funeral. It was the most wonderful feeling.”

For most of her life, Belmont knew nothing about her biological father. He had died when she was 3, and her mother never wanted to speak of him, because his death was too painful.

Albert Belmont had voluntarily enlisted as a private in the Army when he was 32, in 1944. He arrived in Europe on Nov. 1, 1944, and he was fatally shot within a month, on Nov. 30.

Barbara Belmont said she visited her father's grave at Lorraine American Cemetery 30 years ago when she was traveling for work, and she remembers not seeing many Stars of David among the gravesites. She was busy raising her two girls, so she never thought to do anything about the Latin cross above his grave.

During their recent Operation Benjamin trip, some of the other families said they shared Belmont's experience: No one in their families would talk about the soldiers who had died.

"Whenever the song 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home' was played in grade school, I would start crying," Belmont said. "I don't think I understood why this would happen."



Barbara Belmont touches the new headstone at the gravesite of her father, Albert Belmont, at Lorraine American Cemetery in Saint-Avoid, France. (Erin McCahill)

Belmont's daughter Erin McCahill said she watched as her mother took a big breath and remarked how it was probably the last time she would see her father's grave. She said she and her mother feel that his burial under a cross wasn't wrong, necessarily, but that burying him under a Star of David was closer to what was right.

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Operation Benjamin was created after Jacob Schacter, an Orthodox rabbi and professor at Yeshiva University, was leading a tour of a cemetery in Normandy, France, in 2013. While there, Schacter looked around and thought the number of Stars of David seemed low.

Shalom Lamm, the chief executive of Operation Benjamin, said it estimates that about 2.6 percent of U.S. casualties in World War II were



Erin McCahill with her sister, Jennifer Soloway, left, and mother, Barbara Belmont, at Lorraine American Cemetery. (Erin McCahill)

Jewish, and thus that there should have been about 250 headstones with Stars of David at the Normandy cemetery, not 149.

He said they picked a random soldier who had been buried at Normandy who had a Jewish-sounding last name: Benjamin Garadetsky. They dug into his family’s history and found out he was a Ukrainian immigrant who grew up in the Bronx and led a Jewish life. After two years of work with the American Battle Monuments Commission, the U.S. government agency that oversees foreign cemeteries for soldiers who died in the two World Wars, Garadetsky’s headstone was changed to a Star of David in 2018.

[\[Podcast: The story of four brothers — and of World War II — as told through their letters\]](#)

Ali Bettencourt, spokeswoman for the commission, said that it has a unique relationship with Operation Benjamin, because headstones are not changed often.

Bettencourt said that when the military was creating the World War cemeteries, the Latin cross wasn't necessarily chosen for religious reasons. It was intended, she said, to be a symbol that "someone died here for a reason." Soldiers who had been killed were buried under a Latin cross by default, but at the time, the Jewish community asked the military to bury Jewish soldiers under a Star of David. However, there were cases such as Albert Belmont's in which soldiers wanted to obscure their identity for safety purposes, or sometimes there was an administrative error, Bettencourt said.



An Operation Benjamin booklet next to a photo of Erin McCahill's grandparents at her Bethesda home. (Eric Lee for The Washington Post)

"We really truly want to get the story right," she said.

Now, Lamm said, Operation Benjamin has a relationship with the commission in which they know what pieces of evidence they need to confirm someone's Jewish identity — birth, census and bar mitzvah records, among others — and it takes about 30 days to get approval. He said the group estimates there are about 400 to 550 veterans who are incorrectly buried under a Latin cross. Thus far there have been 19 headstone changes, and corrections for 27 more are in the works.

Some people ask why the bodies aren't moved to Israel, but because the soldiers are part of a national monument, their bodies can't be moved, Lamm said.

Barbara Belmont's mother, Ruth Bohm Belmont, met Albert Belmont in the mid-1930s when she worked for him in his photography studio in Youngstown, Ohio. After they married, they moved to Kansas City, Mo., where they had Barbara's older sister in 1937 and Barbara in 1941.

Ruth Bohm Belmont was a Reform Jew who would go to synagogue on high holidays, but the family wasn't very observant. Barbara Belmont considers herself Jewish and believes in a god of some kind but doesn't belong to any institution. She said she was surprised when a rabbi from St. Louis contacted her through a request from Operation Benjamin. The group finds the closest relatives and often asks a rabbi to reach out to them.

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Belmont's mother remarried when she was 6, to a World War II veteran, and she never talked about her first husband with her daughter. When Belmont was a senior in high school, her grandmother sat her down to tell her more about her father. She told her he was a generous man, that if he had a dime in his pocket, he would give it to anyone. He gave thousands to the Red Cross, she said. They were going to talk more about him, but she died shortly after that initial conversation.

Belmont's uncle gave her a clipping from a newspaper in Syracuse, N.Y., where his family was from, that published an obituary with the title "Pvt Albert Belmont, Jewish Fund Donor, Is Killed in Action." The obituary focused on his contributions to Jewish organizations, refugee efforts and local charities.

The recent ceremony in France for her father lasted only about 15 minutes, she said.

Masonry workers had dug around the cross at his gravesite. During the ceremony, the workers took the cross and laid it down next to the Star of David. Then they picked up the Star of David and put it where the cross had been. Belmont spoke about her father, and her daughters each read a prayer. They said the Kaddish, a Jewish prayer recited at funerals.

"I haven't felt like I've had closure until now, that this has been on a continuum," Belmont said. "I probably know a sufficient amount of information where I understand who this man was. That makes me happy."



The Star of David marker prepared for Albert Belmont gravesite in France. (Erin McCahill)

