

THE 1941 BOMBER CRASH ON ASHDOWN FOREST

THE STORY OF MORTON COHEN – THE AIRMAN WHO SURVIVED

On the morning of Thursday, 31 July 1941, during the Second World War, a Wellington bomber of 142 Squadron, Bomber Command, based at RAF Binbrook in Lincolnshire, crashed in flames on the southern slopes of Ashdown Forest on return from a raid on Cologne. Flying on one engine in very poor visibility the captain, Flight Sergeant Harry Vidler, had been attempting a crash landing. All six airmen on board the plane were killed. The site of the crash is now marked by the Airman's Grave.

In a previous article in Ashdown Forest News I wrote about new insights about the crash contained in a letter written by Sgt. Morton "Paddy" Cohen to Vidler's widow, Kitty, that have transformed our understanding of how the crash happened and why.

Cohen, a wireless operator/air gunner who was 24 years old at the time of the crash, had been a regular member of Vidler's Wellington aircrew as front gunner but missed the final fateful flight. He visited the crash site soon afterwards, and his ensuing letter to Kitty Vidler provides an authoritative explanation of the crash that only a long-standing member of the aircrew could give.

But Cohen is a highly interesting figure for another reason: he was an Irish Jew who fought for Britain during the Second World War as a member of the Royal Air Force.

What follows is a profile that draws on recent research into his family background and service with the RAF.

Origins and Heritage

Morton Cohen was born in Cork, Ireland, on 5 May 1917. He was the son of Lewis Cohen, a draper born in Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire, in March 1874, and Rose Harmel, who was born in Dublin to a father who was also from Lithuania and also a draper. Both families are recorded in the 1911 Irish census as Jewish. Lewis and Rose married in Cork in 1903 and they proceeded to have thirteen children; Morton was their ninth child.

The Cohen household was part of the small Jewish community in Cork that formed in the latter part of the 19th century as Jews fled increasing persecution in the Russia Empire following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 and the enactment of the notoriously anti-semitic 'May Laws' of 1882. The increasingly restrictive and hostile environment in the Pale of Settlement, within which most Russian Jews were confined, combined with worsening economic conditions, drove a massive surge in emigration to western Europe and the United States from the mid 1890s onwards. Many of those Jews who settled in Cork, including Morton's father Lewis, had emigrated from a single *shtetl* (small town) called Okmeyan (today's Akmenė), which was situated within the Pale in north-west Lithuania. Although the



Sgt. Morton 'Paddy' Cohen
(Photo courtesy of
Mrs Gill Vidler)

predominant religion of the local population that had persecuted the Lithuanian Jews was Catholic, it seems that the Jewish community in Cork, numbering several hundred by the end of the century, was able to live in Roman Catholic Ireland mostly in peace and without fear. Here they could set up businesses, particularly in the local clothing industry, and strive to prosper.

In July 1905, soon after birth of his and Rose's first child, Rachel, Lewis Cohen, a Russian by birth, became a naturalised British subject. Qualifying on the basis of having resided in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland for five of the previous eight years, he swore allegiance to the Crown. But concern about Jewish immigration into the UK at this time was widespread. The following month the Aliens Act was passed, whose principal aim was to stem what was perceived to be

a flood of destitute Ashkenazi Jews from eastern Europe that had been arriving into the UK. Against this background it is perhaps reflective of the Cohens' desire to assimilate themselves into their new environment that most of their children – who were all born in Cork – were henceforth given recognisably British forenames, such as Mabel, Michael, Henry and Percy.

Enlistment with the Royal Air Force

We don't know anything about Morton's childhood or upbringing, but we do know that in January 1937, when he was 19 years of age, he enlisted with the Royal Air Force Voluntary Reserve (RAFVR), which had just begun recruiting young men of between 18 and 25 years for *ab initio* part-time training as pilots, air observers and wireless operators/air gunners as part of Britain's urgent expansion of its air force in response to the threat posed to the country by Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler.

It may seem strange that Irishmen who came from a state that had adopted neutrality during the Second World War served in the RAF. But in practice recruitment into the RAF was at least tolerated by the governments of the Irish Free State and (from 1937) its successor, Éire. As a result southern Ireland became a major source of aircrew for the RAF. In the late 1930s as part of a recruiting drive the RAF even placed adverts for trainee airmen in Irish newspapers, and offered monetary incentives and the prospect of rapid advancement to airman pilot and a commissioned rank. During the war over 15,000 Irish people, including a large number from Éire, volunteered to serve with the RAF; 1,300 became casualties. No less than three posthumous Victoria Crosses were awarded to Irish RAF pilots, including the RAF's first VC of



The Arrival of Jewish Emigrants to England

(Date before 1906, artist unknown)

(Image: Wikipedia Commons)

the war for Flying Officer Donald Garland from Wicklow. The first RAF bomber pilot to be shot down and killed in 1939 was Willie Murphy from Cork, while his navigator, Larry Slattery, from County Tipperary, became the longest-serving 'British' POW of the war. The co-pilot of the last RAF bomber to be shot down over Germany, in May 1945, Sgt. W. Mackay, who was killed, was Irish too. In all, some 250 men from neutral, independent Ireland died serving with RAF Bomber Command. As a reviewer in the *Irish Independent* wrote in 2012: "*Irish neutrality in World War Two was a most extraordinary thing*".

In Morton's case it seems likely – as will be discussed below – that he, his parents and the rest of his family migrated from Ireland to England during the 1920s. If so, the impulse to contribute to the British war effort by enlisting with our armed forces in the late 1930s must have been all the more compelling.

The Holocaust

But there may have been another reason for Morton Cohen to volunteer for the RAF. Given his Jewish heritage, and a father, maternal grandfather and probably other relatives who had fled anti-semitic persecution in the Russian Empire, one might wonder whether the ever-increasing victimisation of Nazi Germany's Jewish citizens during the 1930s might have given him extra motivation to enlist. It is of note that later, in June 1941, when Cohen was taking part in bombing operations over Germany as a member of Harry Vidler's crew, the Lithuanian city of Kovno (today's Kaunas) in whose province the two shtetls of Morton's father and maternal grandfather lay, was the site of a deadly pogrom conducted by local far-right militants with Nazi encouragement; 3,500 were killed.

The same month, as Nazi armed forces swept through eastern Europe as part of *Operation Barbarossa* – the German invasion of the Soviet Union – Lithuania quickly became a major centre of the Holocaust. Mobile killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*, followed the invading force and with the active participation of Lithuanian collaborators murdered over 140,000 people, mostly Jews, in the five months from 22 June to 25 November 1941.

Those Jews who remained in rural north-west Lithuania where Morton's father and maternal grandfather had been born did not escape the terror. In early August 1941 – just days after Harry Vidler and crew lost their lives on Ashdown Forest – the entire Jewish populations of Okmeyan (Akmenė), the shtetl where Morton's father had been born, and of Pikeliai, the birthplace of Morton's maternal grandfather, Michael Harmel, were murdered. Along with Jewish inhabitants of other shtetls, they had been force-marched to the nearby town of Mazheik (Mažeikiai). The men were made to dig burial pits in nearby woods, and on 3 August gunned to death. On 9 August the women and children, who had been temporarily imprisoned



The memorial at the entrance to the burial site at Mazeikiai, Lithuania, where the mass murder of 4,000 Jews from the town and the surrounding district took place in August 1941. (Image: Gilda and Bob Kurtzman)

out of town, were brought to the site. The women were ordered to undress, and in groups of ten taken to the edges of the pits and shot. The children were thrown into a long ditch and also shot. Many were buried alive. It is striking that while the first victims of this massacre, Jewish men from Mažeikiai, were executed by German soldiers, the vast majority of the executions, while directed by German officers, were carried out by Lithuanian nationalist partisans, who were virulently anti-semitic Nazi sympathisers and collaborators from the local area. The antagonism of the non-Jewish population towards Jews was such that, according to one account, they even brought food, vodka and beer to sustain the killers while they carried out these dreadful acts. A memorial at the site today commemorates the murder of 4,000 Jewish men, women and children.

The full extent of the Holocaust was not fully documented until after the war. Over the three-year German occupation 95 per cent of Lithuania's Jewish population was murdered. One wonders whether the members of the Cohen and Harmel families in Ireland and England might already have had some intimation of the horror that had taken place in their former homeland.

Relocation to England

The first record we have of Morton Cohen in England is found in the 1939 Register, a record of the civilian population of England and Wales that was taken on 29 September 1939, twenty-six days after Britain declared war on Germany. His name appears in a household at 57, Teignmouth Road, Willesden, London NW2. Four others are also listed at this address: Morton's father, Lewis, aged 65, who is recorded as a married retired clothier; an elder sister, Edna, aged 29, single, a clerk in a clothing business; a younger brother, Henry, aged 19, single, a secretary also in a clothing business; and a paid housekeeper, Fenny Roemer. Morton's occupation is recorded as "RAFVR" along with his service number, 755704. His marital status is given as single. It is unusual for a serviceman to be recorded in this register, but Morton may simply have been on leave: indeed against his name in the register the words "*Pending Recall*" are written in red.

We can only speculate how Morton came to be living in London in 1939 with his father and two of his siblings. Between the two world wars a large Jewish community had grown in north-west London which had extensive involvement in the capital's clothing industry. Quite possibly Lewis and Rose, whose father was also in the clothing business in Ireland, might have had business or family ties to it when in Ireland. Lewis and Rose are first recorded at 57 Teignmouth Road in the 1929 electoral register, along with their eldest daughter Rachel, but may well have already been in London for several years. The house seems to have been the family home for many years before and after the war. It was a substantial property on a pleasant tree-lined road and in the years running up to World War Two almost all their children are recorded there at some point. One is left with the clear impression that, probably in the early 1920s, Lewis, Rose and their family migrated from Cork to London. A number of their children then moved on elsewhere in England. For example, the eldest son, Isa, was married in Marylebone in 1935 at the age of 29 but the following year is listed in the phone book occupying a large house in Didsbury, Manchester – a city known for its large Jewish population and vibrant

clothing and textile industry. Four years later he is recorded in the 1939 Register as the general manager and director of a clothing factory. Isa died in Manchester in 1977, aged 71, and was buried in the Jewish section of the city's Southern Cemetery.

Surprisingly Morton's mother Rose is not listed in the 1939 Register at the family home in Willesden. Instead she is found at an address in Nottingham with her second eldest daughter Mabel. In 1928, when she was 20, Mabel married (in Hendon) a Jewish businessman from Nottingham, and presumably they then set up home there. The 1939 Register records "*incapacitated*" against Rose's name – a term used to identify someone who was unable to work for physical or mental reasons and so contribute to the war effort. Quite why Lewis and Rose were living apart in 1939 is a puzzle, but it is noteworthy that their marital status was recorded in both cases as married. Sadly Rose died in Nottingham in October 1943 at the age of 60 – a loss that Morton would have had to bear so soon after the deaths of his crewmates on Ashdown Forest.

Service with the RAF

We do not have a service record for Morton Cohen, but we can say that as an RAF reservist he would have gone through basic training and then trained specifically as a wireless operator/air gunner (it was the policy in the RAF for aircrew to be trained to perform both roles). He may have aspired to become a pilot, but like many others he may have had to settle, at least initially, for a rather less glamorous, though no less demanding, role in a bomber aircrew.

We do not know when Morton Cohen joined 142 Squadron at RAF Binbrook: in contrast to most other airmen who were posted to the squadron, there is no record in the squadron's operations record book of his arrival.

What we do know is that he is first mentioned in the record book in

an entry for 9 January 1941, when he was a member of Harry Vidler's Wellington aircrew on a 'cross-country' flight, a training exercise that helped prepare pilots and crews for long-distance operations over Germany. On this occasion the crew flew from Binbrook aerodrome to RAF Harwell in Oxfordshire and back. This was also Vidler's first recorded outing in one of the new Wellington bombers with which the squadron was being re-equipped over the winter of 1940/41. With Vidler and Cohen on this flight were another two men who were to become key members of Vidler's Wellington aircrew, Sergeants Wilf Brooks and Ernest Cave, observer and wireless operator/air gunner respectively. Brooks and Cave had been involved in the squadron's operations in France during 1940 as part of the RAF's Advanced Air Striking Force, and back in England later in the year following the Fall of France they crewed several times for



A Vickers Wellington Mark II in flight during the Second World War. It is identical to the one which crashed on Ashdown Forest.

Image: Imperial War Museum (CH 3027)

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Vidler after his arrival at the squadron, flying in the Fairey Battle light bomber, an obsolescent aircraft that was soon replaced by the Wellington, a far superior strategic medium bomber.

Vidler's regular aircrew quickly came together. It comprised himself (captain / first pilot); Brooks (observer – navigator and bomb aimer); Cave (1st WO/AG – wireless operator); Cohen (2nd WO/AG – front gunner); and Len Saunders (AG – rear gunner), who arrived in February. The crew was usually supplemented by a second pilot, effectively a trainee role for qualified pilots aspiring to become captains. The incumbent varied but at the time of the Ashdown crash it was Sgt. Victor Sutton. The crew liked to use nicknames for each other and in Morton Cohen's case it was 'Paddy', an obvious allusion to his Irish heritage.

We know from 142 Squadron's operations record book that Cohen went on to take part in all thirteen of Vidler's cross-country training flights in the new Wellingtons. He would also have flown on many other training flights skippered by Vidler such as practice bombing runs and night flying exercises where details of the crew members were not usually recorded. In addition, when he was not flying Cohen would have received ground training, and there were many lectures to attend on practical and operational subjects, which especially took place when the bombers were grounded (which they often were) owing to bad weather or the 'unserviceability' of the airfield, which only had grass runways. (Sgt. Brooks was one of those who gave such talks.)

It was from this period that we have our only photograph of Morton Cohen. Taken in February 1941, he is shown with Harry Vidler and the rest of the crew standing next to their Wellington at a snowy RAF Binbrook.

In May 1941 Harry Vidler and his crew began bombing operations, attacking mostly targets in north-west Germany, particularly in the Ruhr – Germany's industrial heartland – and in the adjacent Rhineland. Cohen took part in all but the last one, the raid on Cologne on 30/31 July which ended in the fatal crash on Ashdown Forest. On this, the crew's thirteenth sortie, he was replaced by a recent recruit to the squadron, Sgt. Stan Hathaway, who was taking part in his first bombing operation.

Three weeks after the crash, Cohen left 142 squadron. An entry in its operations record book for 22 August 1941 tells us that he was a member of one of two crews that reported to No. 15 Operational Training Unit at RAF Harwell "*pending posting overseas*", which in his case was to the Middle East. Cohen is listed as "1st W.Op/AG", which suggests he had been promoted. It



Captain Harry Vidler standing outside a Wellington bomber with his crew at a snowy RAF Binbrook, Lincolnshire, in February 1941. Left to right: Sgt. Len Saunders, F/Sgt. Vidler, F/Sgt Ernest Cave, Sgt. Morton Cohen, Sgt. Wilf Brooks.
(Photo courtesy of Mrs Gill Vidler)

seems reasonable to presume that it was his imminent departure from the squadron that had led to his absence from the final fatal sortie.

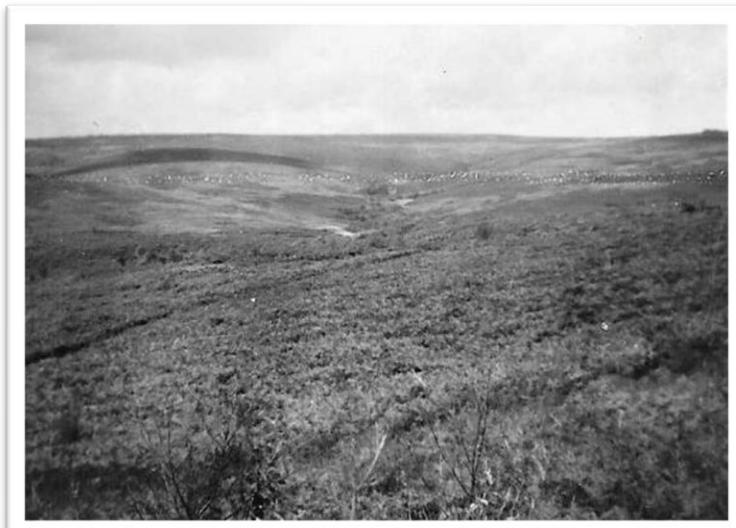
Investigation of the Bomber Crash

Five days before this, on Sunday 17 August, Cohen visited the site of the crash on Ashdown Forest where two and a half weeks previously his former crewmates had died. The following day he wrote to Kitty Vidler describing in detail what he had found out (the letter was sent from 78 Blythe Road, Hammersmith rather than his parents' house in Willesden where he was recorded in 1939). Just five days earlier, on 12 August, Kitty had given birth to her and her late husband's first and only child, Harry Richard Vidler, and the grieving widow was now faced with a very troubling, uncertain future. In his letter Cohen clearly sought to provide Kitty with information about the crash that would bring her clarification and comfort.

Cohen's letter describes how he caught an early bus from London to Nutley and then visited the crash site accompanied by the village policeman, P.C. Ray Skinner, who had rushed to the scene of the tragedy and taken charge of proceedings. Skinner was able to give Cohen all the information he required to understand how and why the crash happened. His conclusion in brief was that Harry Vidler, flying with only one functioning engine, and with the other

possibly by now on fire, had attempted an emergency landing on the southern heathland of Ashdown Forest in very poor visibility and had simply misjudged the lie of the land. Cohen reassured Kitty that Harry had died instantly. He described to her what had happened subsequently, including the removal of the airmen's remains to the mortuary at RAF Kenley, and went on to list Harry's personal effects, noting in particular that a fountain pen which must have had personal significance for Kitty was not among them. Finally, he remarked that already the mother, sister and brother of the second pilot, Victor Sutton, had visited the crash site, while the sister of Stan Hathaway had written to the local vicar 'begging' for details of the crash. (It was Sutton's mother who erected a cross at the site of the crash which later developed into today's Airman's Grave.)

That Cohen took on the task of visiting the crash site as promptly as he did, and then wrote a lengthy letter full of sensitivity and compassion to Kitty arguably says something about the character of the man. One may also wonder whether he might have been so deeply shocked by the loss of his comrades that he suffered from what is now recognised in academic



The lower Misbourne valley in the 1940s, the site of the aircrash on Ashdown Forest. It shows a much more open heathland than is the case today. (Photo courtesy of John Manthorpe.)

literature as ‘survivor guilt’. Would his visit to the site of the crash and his subsequent letter to Kitty have served as a way of helping him deal with the loss of his comrades, and perhaps expiate a degree of guilt he might have felt for his own good fortune in missing their final, fateful flight? Towards the end of his letter Morton perhaps provides a clue to his state of mind when he writes: “*I must admit now that I am not tough enough for Binbrook any longer. I hear Harry’s ‘Hallo boy’ and Saunders ‘Well twerp’ all the time and I see their faces all the time, it’s very silly I know, I must be a baby at heart although I never thought it.*”

Life after the War

We have no information about Cohen’s military career after leaving 142 Squadron for his Middle East posting, and there is only scant information about his civilian life following demobilisation. But official records do show that in October 1947 he married Hilda Choinacky. Hilda was almost literally the ‘girl next door’: the Choinacky family lived across the road from Lewis and Rose’s house. Her parents were likely of eastern European Ashkenazi Jewish heritage, like Lewis and Rose, and they too were engaged in the clothing trade. Strangely, after marrying Morton Hilda continued for many years to be listed on the electoral register at her parents’ house. No record can be found of Morton with her there or anywhere else.

However, some further information about his life after the war can be gleaned from a letter that Frank Wilson, a retired RAF navigator and commercial pilot, wrote to Kitty Vidler in 1992 reporting on his efforts to find the surviving relatives of the fallen airmen in connection with the commemorative plaque he erected later that year at the Airman’s Grave. He had succeeded in tracking down Morton’s younger brother Henry in Cork. He told him that Morton was living in England, had visited him now and again, but had never disclosed his address, commenting “*...he never said, he was always rather secretive*”. Henry had last seen him ten years earlier, in 1982, when he had “*a big black beard and long hair, pulled into a sort of bun*”. Morton had wanted to stay permanently at Henry’s place (possibly prompted by retirement – he would have been 65 years old by then), but Henry – who had also served with the RAF during the war – suggested he contact them to see whether they could help him. After that they lost touch with each other.

Presumably Morton was able to make suitable arrangements back in England as he is listed in the Civil Registration Death Index as having died in March 1991 in Camberwell, south London, aged 73. We have found no obituaries or funeral notices or any other references to his death apart from this, nor anything further about his life in England following his marriage to Hilda.

It is a striking indication of Morton’s apparent reclusiveness even as far as his own family was concerned that Henry, when he spoke to Frank Wilson in 1992, was seemingly unaware that his elder brother had died in London the year before. Did the crash in 1941 make such a psychological impact on Cohen that it clouded his later life? We will never know.

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NOTE

This article first appeared in the Winter 2025 edition of Ashdown Forest News, the biannual magazine of the Society of the Friends of Ashdown Forest. Since then a few minor corrections have been made, an image added, and a list of selected sources and references appended (see below). The author may be contacted by email at enquiries@ashdownforestresearchgroup.uk

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Abbreviations

AG	Air Gunner
‘nd’	No date given / determinable.
POW	Prisoner of War
RAFVR	Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
W.Op/AG	Wireless Operator / Air Gunner