

MYER'S STORY

The true story of a young lad from Leeds who went to war.

Myer Tompofski was born in Leeds in 1892.

He was the first child of Hyman and Annie, both of whom had come as Jewish immigrants from Russia in the 1880s. They came as young people looking for a better life and an escape from persecution in the land of the Tsars (Russian emperors).

We don't know much about Myer's early life except that he had four sisters and two brothers.

He grew up in the Leylands district of central Leeds, which, at the end of the 19th century, had become an area for Jewish immigrants to live. It was a poor district with small 'back-to-back' houses with no inside toilets and no bathrooms.

Myer's father was a tailor and an active member of the garment makers' trade union. The whole family lived in a small house in St Luke's Street, off North Street.

Myer probably attended St Luke's Street Elementary School and would have left full time education at the age of 13.

Like many Jews who had come from Russia to Leeds, the family was traditional but not particularly religious. They would only eat kosher food at home and were members of one of the many synagogues in Leeds at the time.

We know that Myer loved rugby league and went to matches on his days off from work. There is a photograph of him in the middle of a crowd of spectators – possibly watching Leeds Rugby Football Club and most likely on a Saturday afternoon - the Jewish sabbath when more religious Jews would certainly not go out to sports matches.

We know that in 1911 Myer was described as a 'tailor's assistant'. In Leeds at that time many people, especially Jewish immigrants, worked in the clothing industry either in big factories like those run by Montague Burton, or very small businesses often described as 'sweat shops'. Work was hard and long and pay was very small but Myer was expected to contribute to the family budget, especially as there were so many siblings to clothe and feed.

We don't know when Myer joined the army, but his letters show that he set sail for France in 1917, part of the West Yorkshire Regiment's contribution to the First World War. His letters reveal that he and all his fellow soldiers were very sea sick on that journey across the channel. It was his first time abroad and he describes the journey very vividly as you will see in the play.

Although we can't be sure, Myer's rough crossing and hard march once on dry land may be the same one as described in a war diary written by officers in his regiment. The entry was dated 8th January 1917:

'A very rough crossing was experienced and nearly every man on board was sick. On arrival at Le Havre the Battn proceeded by route march to No 1 Rest Camp, a distance of about 6 miles. A very trying march up a steep hill the whole distance. Weather very windy and wet.'

(Source: War Diary, 2/7th Leeds Rifles Battalion The Prince of Wales's Own (West Yorkshire Regiment). York Army Museum.)

Myer was a private in the Leeds Rifles Battalion and described as 'Rifleman Myer Tompofski'. We know from his letters home that he really cared about his family and always looked forward to coming back to St Luke's Street to see his mother Annie and his sisters Gertie and Mary.

His father Hyman tragically died of a lung disease early in 1918 leaving Myer, far away in the battlefields of France, as head of the family.

Myer was awarded the Military Medal (MM) in the spring of 1918. Why was he recognised for his 'bravery in the field?' We don't have all the details, just a couple of pages in his letters. It seems that he rescued a young officer who had been wounded in action.

Myer's regiment was involved in one of the last battles of the First World War, the attack on German positions starting at the Canal du Nord near the French city of Cambrai. Sadly, he was killed on the first day of that action on 27th September 1918. He was 25 years old. Again, we don't know the details but many men from the West Yorkshire Rifles and other battalions were killed or wounded on that same day.

Myer is buried with hundreds of others at the Flesquieres Hill British War Cemetery in Northern France.

