Of Wolf Besser, Yiddishist and Partisan

While at Strathfield Synagogue, I had the privilege of meeting some exceptional individuals. One was Wolf Besser, a devoted Yiddishist and former partisan who regularly featured on the Sydney Jewish radio program with his outstanding Yiddish. Though he stemmed originally from a religious family (he was related to the prominent Agudat Yisrael activist, Rabbi Chatzkel Besser of New York), Wolf had been brought up as Bundist. His oldest son's bar mitzvah therefore did not comprise the conventional synagogue service but rather the recital of Yiddish readings by the bar mitzvah boy at the Folk Center. Over time, Wolf had mellowed and his second son's bar mitzvah was a conventional religious ceremony in shul and Wolf started coming regularly to Strathfield Synagogue, thereby helping to guarantee a minyan for Strathfield's aging community. One Friday night, Wolf and I both came early to shul and we started to chat about his war-time exploits as a partisan. He described how the partisans lived in the forests and attacked Nazis, taking their warm uniforms and weapons. Then he said something I remember to this day. He turned to me and said: "When I shot at a Nazi, I never missed. You know why? Because before I shot I would say, 'This bullet is for my late mother, this one for my late father, this one is for my late brother and this one is for my late young sister.'"

Rabbi Aryeh Solomon
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