

Adding Branches to a Tree

Genealogical study is addictive, explains one researcher, because, from long-lost relatives to forgotten history, you never know what you will find.

By **Hillel Kuttler**

Holocaust victims in my family? Impossible—not with all four grandparents and their siblings born in the United States between 1903 and 1914. Not with *their* parents sailing to New York as children and as young adults, most brought over by my great-great-grandparents. Everyone had abandoned Europe with decades to spare. All were safe. ♡ A dead Israeli soldier and a victim of terrorism in my family? None of my cousins there had suffered such losses.

Mormons in my family? Hardly.

Several months into an intensive genealogical exploration, facts continue to emerge to refute such assumptions. The new truth has enriched my consciousness and brought order to my place in the world.

Every week it seems I have big news to share with my preteen sons, Yossi and Gil: discovering a red-bearded Vilna rabbi who would have been their great-great-great-great-grandfather, finding relatives who are actors and artists, filling entire branches of my family tree with people who settled in England and in France.



Mishpocho An early-20th-century photograph of the Frishman family.

SOMETIMES, I FEEL AS IF I AM LEAVING a cave, heading down an overgrown path and searching for the next steppingstone. I encounter strangers and linger a bit to listen to each person's story, and they point the way ahead.

Every name and branch regrafted to the tree yields gratification. I have welcomed such elders as Solomon Alkovitzki, Kayla Hirshovitz, Shimon Frishman and Chaya Wolson—all dead for 65 to 100 years—to my family, when, in fact, they are the ones who had included me in theirs. Newly dis-

covered relatives send photographs. I search their eyes for a resemblance to my own, pondering whether they, too, wonder much about me.

When my high school classmates, Steve and Linda, e-mailed to me photos they took of Fannie and Morris Eisen's and Charles and Molly Slavin's gravestones, I clicked them open, exclaiming each time, "Hi, Great-grandma and Great-grandpa!" I felt an excitement similar to my experience four years ago when I organized our class reunion and had to reconcile 42-year-

old faces with the 17-year-olds I had known.

Each genealogical fact constitutes a valuable thread in my effort to re-stitch, section by section, a family quilt neglected for generations. I am motivated by a passion for history, intense curiosity and a journalist's impulse to dig for the truth. Primarily, though, personal and parental obligations push me to investigate my roots.

This is the ultimate bar mitzva gift I can present to my sons, and they to theirs.

I feel my mishnaic namesake—Hillel—prodding and nudging: If you don't do it, who will? With uncles and aunts in their eighties and nineties, I face a time crunch: If not now, when?

I am compelled to plumb their memory banks before the people and stories that they alone can reveal are lost forever. "If you have no family connection, you're like a tree without roots," Sarah Sollel, widow of my cousin Meir who lives in Haifa, recently said.

Perfect. I will telephone anyone and search any Web site. I have exhausted 10 long-distance calling cards speaking to cemetery officials, funeral directors and gravestone makers; relatives I love and others I had never heard of; someone who knows someone who knows someone.

My very first call was to a second

cousin once removed whom I found in Denver. The man evinced apathy at my mission and resentment at the Sunday afternoon intrusion. "Is there a point?" he snapped. Asked about his upbringing, he revealed that he "grew up with two parents."

ENCOUNTERS WITH EVERYONE ELSE have been positive. Interviewees have shared their time, patiently imparted information and shown none of the identity-theft-era paranoia that outsiders' questions about birthdates, first names, last names and places of birth generally induce.

While I have solved some mysteries, many are stubbornly resistant. Others offer hope and challenge.

My cousin Elaine Bender told me about cousins from Israel, Shoshana and Gila, having visited in the 1960s.

"Could it be?" I asked her. "I thought that everyone on my father's side came to the United States." I prodded her for more: their surnames, married names, hometowns. She had none.

Suddenly, she did: an old telephone book with the name Gila Yerach Glat-ter, but an outdated number. I typed Glat-ter in the online directory for Be-zeq, Israel's national telecommunications provider, hoping for a hit. Success: Yerachmiel and Gila Glat-ter, now living in Bnei Brak.

I called immediately. Gila heard the name "Elaine" and gasped. She remarked that her late father, David Hirshovitz, "was always saying, 'Kuttler, Kuttler, Kuttler,'" and urging her to look up the family when she visited America.

I heard their story for the first time: David had made *aliya* at age 20 in 1933

You can't see **ISRAEL** from a tour bus.
You've got to **breathe it, eat it, hike it,
dance it, sing it,
live it, love it.**

FPO 4c
pu 209 pg 20

Young Judeaea.
LIFETIME OF CONNECTION.

For more information on all of our programs,
visit us at www.youngjudeaea.org
or call 800.725.0612.

Debbie Cohen dcohen@youngjudeaea.org 310.709.8016


THE 100TH YOUTH MOVEMENT OF HADASSAH 1909-2009

100

YOUNG JUDAEA

ISRAEL PHARM

Save up to 70%
on top-quality prescription drugs!



**FPO 4c
pu 209 pg 63**

• We guarantee secure ordering and quality drugs at significant savings.
Visit: www.israelpharm.com
Email: info@israelpharm.com
Call Toll-Free: 1-866-456-3768
Fax Toll-Free: 1-866-544-8993

All medications approved by
The Israel Ministry of Health

Cultural Currents
December 20–27, 2009

A Western Caribbean Cruise
Relax • Refresh • Re-energize and
Reflect in a Jewish learning community



**NEW FPO 4c
PDF on disk**

Orlando America Line

Abrahamic Religions • Ancient Judaism
Jewish Intellectual History • Medical Ethics
Jewish-Christian Relations
Middle East • Tikkun

Cruise prices start at \$999 per person (pp),
\$499 conference fee (20+ hours of events);
and taxes & gratuities are \$137 pp.

www.InSightCruises.com/Currents
650-717-5665

from Bolnik, Lithuania, just east of Wilkomir, where my Kuttler and Wolson ancestors had lived. David was the only one in his family to emigrate. His parents, Zvi Aharon and Kayla; his brothers, Efrayim and Yehezkel; and his sister, Batya, were all killed in the Holocaust. His brother, Yonah, sur-

this, but..." I began. I told her that my cousin in New York heard that Batsheva had moved to Neveh Zuf, but subsequently died of cancer. I wanted to find her children, whose names I did not know.

Gila had a friend in that settlement who referred me to Rachel Shinover.

Primarily, parental obligations push me to investigate my roots; this is the ultimate bar mitzva gift to my sons.

vived the Riga ghetto and Stutthof, but Yonah's small children, Lea and Shalom, were killed in the Kovno ghetto. Yonah's son Zvi, born after the war, now lives in Israel. Zvi was a refusnik: Because he is a rocket scientist, he could not leave until the Soviet regime fell.

Gila and I don't know *how* we are related, just that we are. She provided the names of her three children and 13 grandchildren.

What about her sister?

"Shoshana was just in the States," Gila said, "raising money for a playground being established in Eli in memory of her son, Roi Klein, *zikbrone le-vrakha*."

I nearly dropped the receiver. Roi Klein was a relative? The major-turned-legend in the Second Lebanon War who dived onto a grenade to save the men in his Golani battalion? The one upon whose freshly dug grave with the identifying wooden stick my sons and I unwittingly stood while attending a Mount Herzl funeral of another soldier one sweltering August day?

I called Gila a few weeks later. I was searching for the children of Batsheva Yunger, this time on my mother's side. An old entry in my Grandma Rozzie's telephone book showed Batsheva living at 5 Aluf Simhoni Street. Gila resides at No. 1. Maybe they knew one another.

"Gila, you're not going to believe

"Batsheva was a close neighbor, like a sister. She so much wanted a family," Shinover said. "She was an only child, and her parents lost everyone to the Holocaust. If she had known you were a relative, she'd have come to the United States to see you."

Shinover filled me in on Batsheva's children: Two are married with 12 kids between them; one is an art student; the youngest, the only boy, serves in the Army; a daughter died at 26 shortly before Batsheva did. I called two of my "new" cousins, Yehudit and Ilanit.

SO IT GOES: LEADS, HARD INFORMATION, online searches, phone calls. I learn as I progress, and vice versa: that the Social Security Death Index lists people's last state of residence and their date of passing; how to search British Telecommunication's Web site for phone numbers; where to browse the work of fellow genealogists on JewishGen.org; how to find testimonies on Yad Vashem's database of Holocaust victims.

Most effective are simple conversations. They have revealed that I have American *yichus* thanks to cousins who married the cousins of a Hungarian immigrant named Emmanuel Goldenberg (better known as actor Edward G. Robinson) and of pianist Murray Perahia, and cousins who married sons of diet doctor Nathan

Some cousins on my mother's side are *kohanim* and, on my father's side, are *levi'im*.

Relatives fought for the United States in both world wars.

Two young cousins in England died in road accidents.

My Grandma Ceil, who died when I was 5, was born not in the Bronx, but in Kiev.

Christine and I regularly exchange e-mails and information. We haven't discussed religion, but we have a mutual comfort level. I am glad to have her in the family. I invited her and many other newly discovered kin to Yossi's bar mitzva.

GENEALOGY IS ADDICTIVE BECAUSE mysteries linger that I will devote the rest of my life to unlocking. How was Israel's second chief Ashkenazic rabbi, Isser Yehuda Unterman, related to my Great-grandpa Isaac? Who were my Great-great-grandfather Yaakov Kuttler's 12 siblings and what became of them? Were Morris Eisen's three sisters and brother killed in the Holocaust 40 years after he and his brother Joseph left Lodz for America—and what were their names? How about the entire Rosenblum clan of nearby Pabyanice, and what of Batsheva Yunger and Roi Klein—where do I graft their names on my tree?

I take solace in having redeemed 31 Holocaust victims from the dustbin of history. Each person now has a memorial and a name: a *yad* and a *shem*. Many more souls cry out for rescue.

Last April, on the eve of Yom Hashoah, my sons and I stood in our darkened kitchen. We recited the name of each martyred cousin, aunt and uncle. We displayed the newly received photographs of Zvi Aharon, Kayla, Efrayim, Yehezkel, Batva and little Lea.

A week later, on Yom Hazikaron, we lit another. **H**

BUYING OR SELLING YOUR HOME?

SHALOM HOME INC.

A NATIONAL REAL ESTATE REFERRAL SERVICE


Since 1984

Helping YOU find the right home and right connections.


With just one call, our professional Realtors will:

- They will find the right home for you
- Help you with the buying process
- Connect you with the right listings

FPO 4c
pu 209 pg 49



JOSE SAUL MARINS
REFERRAL DIRECTOR




HAIM & SHALOM
BROKERS/OWNERS, LLC

All at no cost to you!

Call us toll free: 1-800-874-2566

www.shalomhome.com

shalom@shalomhome.com



SHALOM HOME

APRIL/MAY 2009 • HADASSAH MAGAZINE