

“SEEKING KIN”

Helping the lost and the lonely find each other and themselves

BY HILLEL KUTTLER

LAST WEEK JENNIE WORKMAN MILNE, who resides in the coastal town of Inverallochy, Scotland, settled on the charcoal-knit dress, gray hat and royal-blue shoes she'd wear on Yom Kippur three days later. She planned to make the one-hour drive to Aberdeen to attend the *Ne'ilah* service at the synagogue there so she could hear the shofar's blast for the first time. She'd never been in a synagogue. Milne learned only last year that her mother and grandmother were Jewish.

She's embraced her new Jewish identity. Ahead of the visit, a powerful anticipation gripped her.

"It actually brings me joy to connect like this and to be able to go to the Yom Kippur service," she said on the Sunday after Rosh Hashanah.

"I've always had a love for the Jewish people, the Jewish nation," she continued. "It's very personal, very real. It's become part of my history."



Jennie Milne's story, like many others, have become part of my history, too.

Four years ago, I launched a syndicated column with the JTA, called "Seeking Kin." The goal in each of the column's installments is to relate a deeply human tale about someone in the global Jewish community who is searching for a long-lost relative, friend, classmate, neighbor, army buddy and the like.

Through in-depth interviews, research and context about the relevant place and era, I aim to inform readers about why the bond of family or friendship was so important to a particular person that he or she wants to reconnect after a decades-long chasm.

Ideally, an article's publication helps solve the mystery when a reader discerns a detail—someone's name, an occupation, a hometown, even a physical trait—and lets me know about it. Better yet, the article sometimes comes wrapped in a metaphorical ribbon when the search ends successfully before publication.

Many people I've interviewed for "Seeking Kin" exude pain. A few have cried during our conversations. The terrible ordeals and raw emotions they related are heartbreaking...my heart, I mean.

I remember many of these hurt souls by name, like Zipora Saar, an Israeli *moshav* resident who reads literature through most nights because she's afraid to fall asleep and relive in her dreams the abuse she endured as a 10-year-old in Romania during the Holocaust. And Hervé Cohen, a young Parisian, pleading to ascertain the fate of the father he never knew after his parents' divorce, if only to be able to recite *Kaddish* in his memory. Or Toronto's Sara Cohen, who was rescued during the Nazi occupation by a Christian family in her native Greece.

Think finding someone fixes things?

"I DETERMINED DEFINITELY WHAT BECAME OF THE DESCENDANTS OF SAAR'S RELATIVE WHO'D LEFT FOR AMERICA IN 1902."

Hardly. A successful search consistently brings gratitude, but not always happiness.

I determined definitively what became of the descendants of Saar's relative who'd left for America in 1902: The last one had died, leaving no children, while the trails of others vanished. For Hervé Cohen, I learned in 2014 that his father Yehuda lived as a vagrant in Brooklyn, died alone in 2009 and was buried in a Jewish cemetery in New York. For Sara Cohen, I arranged for her to receive a long-lost diploma from the Salonika school she attended—nice, but hardly a replacement for an incinerated family.

It takes a village of good people to help others. David Kornhauser and Mendy Rosenberg of the *Chesed Shel Emes* nonprofit burial organization in Brooklyn proved beyond a doubt that Hervé Cohen's father had died and where they interred him. A reader in Israel saw my

article on the Salonika school, carefully read the attached list of students and identified her cousin, Sara Cohen.

Some stories involve utter joy and absolute despair, like that of Mordechai Eldar, of Herzliya, Israel. On his 13th birthday, on Simchat Torah in 1944, he was nearly killed in an Auschwitz gas chamber until a last-second miracle occurred. The story has not yet found any of the other people reprieved with him that day.

Perhaps, though, someone he's seeking will step forward tomorrow. "Seeking Kin" articles from several years ago brought me e-mails twice this summer from a subject's long-lost relatives. The Internet enables these delayed, unexpected rewards—no less valuable than the more immediate ones.

Requests sometimes come out of the blue, from the most unexpected places.

A Belgian journalist who writes a column on people shown in well-known photographs asked me to help identify Holocaust survivors in one image. They are shown in a photograph taken on April 13, 1945, of a train whose occupants had just been freed en route from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp to Theresienstadt.

A woman in a kerchief is holding the hands of a little girl as they walk up a hill, with the train in the background. The image was snapped in Farsleben, Germany, by an American soldier of a unit that had just been informed of the train's being abandoned there.

I had previously written about Frank Towers, an elderly American soldier who searched for those who'd survived the same train, which he and others had helped liberate. I contacted him and Matt Bozell, a New York teacher who'd researched the train episode. He connected me to Bruria Falik, a New York

resident who as a girl was on the train with 13 other relatives.

Falik examined the photograph closely and concluded that the woman was Shlima Spitzer, her aunt, grasping the hand of one of her daughters. After liberation, Falik said, her aunt settled in Brooklyn and got remarried to a rabbi named Lichtenstein.

Falik said that a telltale sign of her aunt's identity was the kerchief Spitzer wore, which Falik said was of the style worn by women from the Belz and Skver movements of chasidism. Falik said that those movements were prominent in Kenderes, Hungary, where the observant family lived before the Holocaust.

Jennie Milne, 47, learned recently of the many Holocaust victims in her own family back in Zolochiv, Poland. She continues to dig for information and hopes to find living Jewish relatives, too.

Milne grew up in England under circumstances that would crush most others: a beloved father who died when she was 10, abuse by her mother and stepfather, several divorces, multiple moves, inconsistent schooling.

As a teenager, Milne made sure to keep herself on the right track. She read the Bible and, she said, "found, through the Hebrew Scriptures, that G-d was a G-d of love and mercy." She married and has raised nine children, giving several of them Biblical names.

When her mother, Elizabeth, was dying of cancer last year, Milne harked back to Elizabeth's claims many years earlier that she was Jewish. Milne never knew if the statements were true, and Elizabeth knew only that her adoptive mother had said Elizabeth's birth mother might have been Jewish. Milne doggedly pursued the truth through research. "Lord, if there's a way

FALIK EXAMINED THE PHOTOGRAPH CLOSELY AND CONCLUDED THAT THE WOMAN WAS SHLIMA SPITZER, HER AUNT, GRASPING THE HAND OF ONE OF HER DAUGHTERS.

you can show that we're Jewish, can you reveal it?" she said she prayed one day earlier this year.

Less than 24 hours later, Michael Tobias, a Jewish resident of Glasgow, Scotland, who is an expert genealogist, unearthed documents that established Milne's Jewish identity all through the maternal line back to her great-grandmother.

It's as if, she said, a door has opened. She thought of her mother and whispered, "Mom, you were right all along."

Discovering that she's Jewish has "enriched my life in ways I hadn't expected," Milne said. A Bible reading that mentioned "the Israelites" hit close to home, Milne said, and "I was thinking: That's my history."

In recent weeks, Milne has e-mailed me regularly to ask about Jewish terms and

holidays. On Fridays, a simple "Shabbat Shalom" greeting awaits me in my email. A few days after Rosh Hashanah, she asked about the shofar. She wanted to hear it, but how?

Yom Kippur, the following week, presented one last opportunity until next summer. I found the Aberdeen synagogue's website. I also explained about the Kol Nidre service and sent a link to a gorgeous rendition sung by Chazan Yitzhak Meir Helfgot, accompanied in the studio by nonpareil violinist Itzhak Perlman.

Throughout that Friday afternoon as I worked, I played that Kol Nidre—probably two hours' worth of eight-minute increments. As I shuffled around the pots and pans while preparing dinner, a Perlman instrumental note froze me in a rare, deep spiritual moment at home. The woman in faraway Scotland who looked to me for some Jewish kinship had unwittingly steered that spiritual moment my way.

Which goes to show that while I try to tell compelling stories in "Seeking Kin" that help people I don't know reconnect to their loved ones, I'm the recipient of greater largesse than they might ever suspect. □

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