

Discovering the Footprints of Past Generations

In Israel there is a handful of genealogical detectives, and the demand for their work is tremendous. As the last witnesses are passing on, families are searching feverishly for their loved ones. The footprints usually lead to Poland.

KAROLINA PRZEWROCKA from Tel Aviv

In the Krakow telephone directory under the letter "H," up until 1939, there appeared the entry "Hojtasz Karol, owner of Zielona 14 tailor shop," and a telephone number.

Today, 80 years later, that directory would certainly have reached the archives were it not for the request received by the Jewish Genealogy & Family Heritage Center of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The request was sent from the Pomorza region by R., who is searching for her aunt Teresa, rumored to be still alive and residing in Israel. Was my father Jewish? asks R. Who were the other family members? R. is full of uncertainty, seeking answers. Employees of the Jewish Genealogical Center begin to activate their connections.

A few moments later Gidi Poraz, at home in a small moshav in southern Israel, receives an email from the institute and eagerly gets to work. Within a few days he has learned that not only Ms. R is searching for Teresa, and that the matter is more complicated than it first appears.

Kav HaDorot - The Chain of Generations

"Detective. Call me a detective, a historical detective. Or an ancestry detective. Don't write 'researcher' or 'genealogist.' In my opinion, neither of those terms encompasses all the subjects I deal with," says Gidi Poraz.

So what *does* he actually deal with? "In a family's connection to its history. I am not looking for people who have died, and I don't concentrate on origins. By knowing the family's history, I make conclusions about its living members and create contact among them. Then I begin to receive invitations to family meetings."

Gidi Poraz, 67, has a shock of gray curls and the gaze of a man on a mission. An engineer by profession, he worked for many years in well-known IT companies in Israel and the United States. Until seven years ago he had an orderly life as an expert with a secure contract, private insurance, and gifts on the holidays.

Today he lives in Bizzaron seemingly far from the limelight, but his whole life seems to have taken on color. In the course of a few years he has managed to locate over 15,000 people, and has constructed several hundred family trees.

There is much demand for his work, and every day inquiries reach him through the website entitled *Kav HaDorot*.

Who are those making the inquiries? They are people in search of their roots. Children who, at the last moment before the death of a parent, feverishly sort through the family documents in order to save facts from oblivion. Holocaust survivors who know of their families only what remains from childhood memories, which are so fickle.

Poraz works tirelessly. At present he has before him 14 cases, some of them pro bono, for holocaust survivors. When he is working, he forgets his private life. He is constantly documenting. Acquaintances who encounter him in archives, libraries, or cemeteries, sometimes joke that "Gidi is omnipresent." He doesn't miss a panel discussion, takes part in online genealogical forums, and is a member of several associations. He answers emails early in the morning, during lunch, and at night. His work seems to have become his whole life, and living in this way - a passion.

His sources of information are many: in archives, cities, moshavim, kibbutzim, and retirement homes. He is in a hurry, because he knows that time is short and those who can share information with him will soon be taking their leave. In his heart, he knows that only by hurrying can he atone for a completely different failure.

The Secret from Teheran

He patiently gathers scraps of information about R and her Aunt Teresa, piecing them together to form a whole. Examines databases in local archives - in a wink, as befits an IT expert. He discovers that in the past, members of the family had searched for one another, without results.

He comes across a page of testimony in the Yad Vashem archives, in which a person named Karol Hoitach is mentioned. At Yad Vashem there are some 2.6 million such pages. Gidi Poraz returns to them frequently and is always amazed that this is the total number of names that have been preserved out of the 6 million holocaust victims.

At this point, he is almost certain that Hoitach is the father of Teresa, for whom R is searching. From the page he learns that Hoitach fled from Krakow to the Soviet Union, leaving behind a wife named Hale and two daughters, Teresa and Elsa. After the war the three women reached Israel and lived here until their death. Teresa, in contradiction to the information that R had received, died in 1997. They passed away without learning their father's fate.

Karol vanished without a trace in the Soviet Union.

On a Facebook page for genealogists Gidi writes that he is searching for Karol Hoitach. Despite being somewhat distorted due to the Hebrew script, the name sounds familiar to one of the researchers. She finds pictures from a Catholic cemetery in Teheran. Although the name on the headstone sounds different, she sends Gidi a photograph.

The photograph raises questions. How is it that a cross appears on the grave of a Jewish tailor?

When the complete list of all those buried in Teheran is found, it is transferred to the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv. In a Catholic cemetery in Iran among nearly two thousand Poles, many Polish Jews were also laid to rest. It is possible that the families of many of them do not know, to this day, where their loved ones are buried.

The headstone in Teheran sheds no light on the circumstances of Karol Hoitach's death in 1942. It might be assumed that he joined General Anders' Army in 1941 and with it left the Soviet Union. But he did not survive his wanderings. Like many soldiers and civilians who went "with Anders," he dropped out along the way. Did he die of exhaustion? Of an infectious disease? At this point Gidi's job comes to an end, as always happens when a search runs into the resistance of dusty history.

But he would complete his mission. Karol Hoitach would lead Gidi to more distant family members. Before long R would receive details about her cousin, the grandson of Karol Hoitach, who had been located across the ocean in the United States. They have since established contact.

Questions Not Asked

His name was Spitzer. He was small, restless, and stubborn. Shlomo Posner spoke about him for a few moments as he cast back in his memory to the days before the war.

Shlomo Posner's daughters appeared in this story as if by accident, overshadowed by Spitzer. Were it not for the dog, it is possible that Gidi, Shlomo's son, would never have known that his father, a native of the city of Jaworzno, had a family in Krakow before the war. And from the reference to Spitzer he heard that the dog accompanied his father's two daughters to the bus station every day and met them there on their way home.

Gidi wondered why, in this short story of his father's, the dog was mentioned by name while his daughters were not, but he never asked their names, just as he never asked the name of his father's first wife. After hearing fragments of stories, he was silent. That was the norm then in Israel, in Polish families who had been through the Holocaust and for whom silence became the best reference to what had happened.

Only Gidi's mother, who was from the city of Lodz, spoke more. She had lost her husband and small son, but she and her daughter had survived and come to Israel.

Shlomo's story echoed that of Karol Hoitach. With the outbreak of war, Shlomo fled from Poland to the Soviet Union, where he was arrested and exiled to Siberia. Following the amnesty for Polish citizens, he reached Tashkent and from there came to Palestine.

Only here did he discover that his wife and daughters in Krakow had not survived the Holocaust. Here he met the woman who would become Gidi's mother, and with her built a new family. Gidi was born in 1948, a week before Israel's declaration of independence.



Shlomo Posner's wife
and one of his
daughters
Below: Gidi Poraz

ARCHIWUM GIDI PORAZA

Only after the death of his parents did his sister tell him that their mother's family had a house in Lodz before the war—and not in some obscure corner but on Piotrkowski Street, the main street of the city. Gidi wanted to find out if there was any chance of reclaiming it. The process was long and arduous.

Meanwhile, the additional branches in the family tree, which he had constructed for the purpose, revealed the limitations of his knowledge. He contacted archives in Poland, located rare documents, and suddenly the silent past began to be fleshed out with names, places, and dates.

Gidi was surprised to learn that in the city of Holon, next to Tel Aviv, a cousin of his mother's was living—the same cousin who, according to the stories, had died in the Holocaust. Gidi could not forgive himself that his mother lived for all those years believing that no one from her family had survived.

He is still unable to reclaim the house on Piotrkowski Street. The fruits of his labors in gathering documents and information are manifested in the family tree and its four hundred family members. His search had been an opportunity to acquire new friends—in Jerusalem, in Lodz, in Warsaw, in Washington, and everywhere there were museums, archives, and research institutions that could help in locating family members.

During this period he was approached by an elderly woman, a Holocaust survivor with no family, who asked if he could locate relations who were still alive. He was able to find several family members.



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That was when he decided to leave his job in IT and engage in searching professionally. Today he says that this was a kind of closure. At last he was able to raise the questions he had not voiced all these years, even though, sadly, he could no longer raise them with his parents.

Searching to the End

It is said that Gidi Poraz is Israel's number one historical detective.

He himself says that he has an advantage over government institutions. "I don't stop searching even if the matter appears to be a lost cause from the outset. At government institutions it is possible to request specific documents. If they are present, you can view them freely without charge. But no one will take you by the hand, no one will tell you where to continue your search in the event that nothing turns up in that particular archive. Sometimes when families are told that in a certain archive nothing has been found, they give up their search and continue to live with their sense of loss. As Poraz speaks, his words reflect his own story.

He claims there is no research that does not yield at least one relative for the searching family. He doesn't remember ever returning to a client empty handed. He thinks that because of the internet, databases, and high-speed communications, there is no situation in which no traces are unearthed, even though they may be tentative.

What does he like most about his work? The moment when he calls his client. Because Gidi calls about matters that cannot be delayed. When there is a photograph with a thumbprint, a birth certificate that has been miraculously discovered, a letter snatched from obscurity. At such moments he shivers with excitement, because since becoming a detective he has become sensitive to things that to some might seem unimportant.

In his excitement it is sometimes hard for him to put the information into words, to transition from the photograph/birth certificate/letter to the real message: that he has found them a cousin, uncle, or father-in-law. It is difficult for him to understand how sometimes on the other end of the line someone growls "All right," or "Glad to hear it," or "I'd like to take a look."

Only once has he had to call and say that there would be no meeting: to the daughter of an old woman who has been searching for her family for 70 years. He found her four cousins, but they were too elderly to understand the complicated story and agree to meet their cousin. "She had looked for them all her life, and would die without seeing them," he says in a breaking voice.

A moment later his mind is wandering elsewhere, to the documents, letters, and photographs. He shows us a few of them. Here are two girls with a white dog. A family photograph. A mother and daughter. This is his father's family from Krakow before the war. And Spitzer, the white dog whose name is known.

Gidi does not admit out loud what it is that bothers him. He will not tell you that he is tormented at night by the thought that, although he has helped thousands of people, he still cannot discover the names of his father's family.

He sinks into his reflections, sips the coffee that has gone cold. Says he has to run.

He has questions to pursue, and this time they will not go unanswered.

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