

Fort Lee woman, 70, reconnects with family, meets cousin for the first time

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Blair with Ehrlich, a resident of Israel who tracked Blair down and flew in from Tel Aviv to meet her.

FORT LEE — After Gilda Blair's father died more than 15 years ago, she thought she had no living relatives except her children. But then came the call from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Tova Ehrlich, a first cousin in Israel, was looking for her.

"Who's Tova Ehrlich?" the longtime Fort Lee resident asked herself. "It's 11 o'clock at night and the museum is calling me? ... I almost fell out of bed."

On Sunday evening, some eight months after that unexpected call, Blair greeted Ehrlich at Newark Liberty International Airport.

Though this trip is the first in-person meeting for the cousins, now in their mid- to late 70s, their first exchange actually dates back more than a quarter-century.

Around 1988, Ehrlich wrote to her cousin after her uncle — Blair's father — passed along his daughter's address in America. Blair wrote back. But then she moved, and a second letter from Ehrlich never reached her. As life got busy, Blair soon forgot about the exchange.

Fast forward to this decade. Unbeknownst to Ehrlich, another long-lost cousin in Israel had hired a genealogist to track her down. After that reunion, Ehrlich wondered if the same man could locate Blair.

She knew only two things: that she and Blair shared the same maiden name, Lasocki, and that at the time of their last correspondence, her cousin had assumed her first husband's surname of Alfert. (Blair changed her name again after remarrying in the late 1980s.) Ehrlich gave the genealogist the letter from her cousin, dated July 1988.

With little else to go on, Gideon Poraz began the search and reached out to an acquaintance at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Curator Teresa Pollin said Poraz, who by then had a hunch that Blair had remarried, asked if she could locate a Gilda Blair. After a day or two of searching public phone directories, including dialing a few wrong numbers, Pollin managed to reach the right person — to Blair's delight.

Other than her grown children, Blair said, "I really had no relatives until this woman came into my life." As she reached over to grasp her cousin's hand, their eyes connected, and both smiled warmly as they sat on the living room couch, recounting the tale.

Ehrlich said she was so nervous about meeting Blair that she had butterflies in her stomach and had trouble sleeping a week before the trip.



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Gilda Blair of Fort Lee displaying photos of the father of her long-lost cousin, Tova Ehrlich, and of a younger Tova with Gilda's father.

"I did it without much thinking," she said about booking the flight.

Asked why she took the trouble to search for a cousin she barely knew, Ehrlich, who will turn 80 in August, said there comes a time when one starts thinking about family. Like Blair, she has no other known surviving relatives from her father's side. (Their fathers' six other siblings died during the Holocaust, they said.)

After Ehrlich's cousin from her mother's side tracked her down, she thought, "Perhaps, this is the time."

Craving for hot dogs

The cousins are still getting to know each other, but already, similarities in their personalities are evident. Both women are expressive, often gesturing with their hands as they speak. And though only Ehrlich sports a red hairdo these days, Blair said she, too, had dyed her hair red once.

The cousins, giddy as two schoolgirls as they shared their story, say they also possess the same sense of humor and tend to laugh at the same things.

But where Blair takes pains to eat healthy, Ehrlich likes her potatoes and bread. Fresh off a roughly 12-hour flight from Tel Aviv, Ehrlich — who remembered her love affair with American hot dogs during a trip to the West Coast years before — told Blair of her craving her first night in town.

As luck would have it, Blair, a resident of Horizon House, lives across from Hiram's Roadstand — Fort Lee's legendary hot dog and burger joint.

Since Sunday, the two have gone on a New York City bus-and-walking tour and plan to catch a matinee of "The Phantom of the Opera" this afternoon. They plan also to meet up with Blair's grown children sometime before Ehrlich flies out on March 24.

And come October, it will be Blair's turn to cross the Atlantic Ocean to visit her cousin's home — and, she hopes, Ehrlich's two daughters, six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

"I have to meet this family that I never thought I had," Blair said.