



Gidi Poraz in Haifa, Poraz uncovered documents in his efforts to find all the heirs to a Lodz building. Credit: Rami Shllush

The Art of Amateur Genealogy: Historical Detectives Dig Dirt-free Under Jewish Family Trees

Greater access to archival sources online is encouraging more people, both amateurs and pros, to seek solutions to previously uncrackable family mysteries

By Ofer Aderet | HAARETZ | Apr 18, 2017

A decade ago, [Gidi Poraz](#), an electrical engineer from Moshav Bitzron, learned that he was one of the heirs to a property in the Polish city of Lodz. "It's a palace that my great-grandfather built, located on the city's main street," he told Haaretz. "It was assessed at \$12 million." In the Polish land registry files, Poraz found the records of the building, proving its connection to his family, but then he discovered he still had a long way to go until early retirement. "The Poles require that you produce all the heirs to a property, as well as prove that the ones who disappeared during the Holocaust are no longer alive," he explained.

For Poraz, who is 68, the search for the heirs to the family property in Lodz opened the gates to the fascinating world of genealogy. "Within less than a month, I had located a 90-year-old cousin of my mother's in Holon [a suburb of Tel Aviv]. She had grown up with my mother in that building in Lodz, but whereas my mother was stuck in the ghetto, she managed to escape and get to Mandatory Palestine," related Poraz. After the war, the two women lived "very nearby each other, one in Holon, the other in Tel Aviv, each of them believing the other had perished. They didn't even bother to search".

The struggle for the property is still stuck in a court in Poland, but as a result of the case Poraz, for his part, embarked on a new path. He left high-tech and established an investigation firm, a bit different from the usual sort, called Kav HaDorot, meaning "generational line".

"Today I am a full-time historical detective," he said, showing off his new tools: marriage, birth and death certificates, population registries, Yizkor books (memoirs about communities destroyed in the Holocaust), old newspaper clippings, testimonies, documents stored at Yad Vashem, yellowing photographs and more. "I don't believe there is anyone," he says, "who did not leave traces behind. You just have to know how to look for them".

Nili Goldman 63, a graphic designer from Ramat Gan, was also smitten by the charms of historical sleuthing in the wake of family research. Her father once told her an exotic story centered on a relative who “went to Peru, married an Indian woman and had 17 children.” A few years ago, she decided to see if she could learn whether there was any truth to the tale and began to collect scraps of information based on relatives’ memories and notations on pictures that had long been in storage.

At the end of an exhausting journey, most of it carried out via the screen of her home computer, Goldman succeeded in tracking down the traces of the relative who had wandered to faraway Peru. A photo of his tombstone that she found states that the man was born in 1909 in Atachi, in Bessarabia, and died in 1980 in Trujillo, Peru. The information Goldman managed to gather confirms that he did indeed have 17 children – but from two different wives and to that this day the two families are feuding.

Goldman maintained her day job in graphics, but in recent years she is also earning a living from solving historical mysteries at Poraz’s company. Thus far the two have tracked down more than 17,000 family members for their clients and have updated more than 400 family trees. “You have to invest a lot of time and patience in the search,” she says, but adds that, in addition to method, “you also need intuition and luck”.



Nili Goldman Credit: Motti Milrod

The list of their successes is impressive, including many stories that one can see being made into books or films. One saga came to them in an email Poraz received in 2012 from a social worker at Amcha (a non-profit organization that provides mental health and social support services for Holocaust survivors in Israel) on behalf of Rachel Sha’anan, a Holocaust survivor in Haifa. “She knows very little about herself,” the social worker wrote. “She has few details and meager memories about her past and today she wants to know who she is. What can be done to help her”?

‘I can’t pin down memories’

The riddle posed to Poraz was full of black holes. “I don’t remember any sequence of things. I have associations of memories I can’t pin down as to time and place,” said Sha’anan. The details she was able to provide indicated that she had been born Rachel Warszawski in 1941 in Lodz to a mother named Sarah. She did not know her father’s name. As World War II raged, her mother was arrested and Rachel was sent to a convent, where she was raised as a Christian.

In 1950, when she was 9, she immigrated to Israel. Sha’anan remembered a man named Gershon Korman, who accompanied her on the ship on the way to Israel, but when they arrived he handed her over to a different family and from there she was sent to boarding schools. All her life she believed that Korman was her adoptive father.

The search for her roots went through the Zionist Archive in Jerusalem, the Yad Vashem archive, the databases of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Germany, Israeli telephone directories and also the places where many mysteries of this sort are resolved – gravestones and burial society archives.

Ultimately, Poraz succeeded in drawing up Rachel’s full family tree. It turned out that Korman was Rachel Sha’anan’s biological father. When the war was over, he believed he had lost not only his wife, Sarah, but also their daughter, Rachel, and he started a new family. While he himself was on his way to Israel, however, Korman received a message that Rachel had been located in a convent in Germany. He left everything and helped her get to Israel but instead of raising her together with his new family, he sent her to boarding school.



Family of Rachel Sha’anan, with her mother standing, in their home in Poland in 1928. Credit: Courtesy

Sha'an'an died three years ago. Thanks to Poraz's research, her children were able to write on her tombstone the names of both her parents, with whom she did not spend her childhood.

It is difficult to estimate how many historical detectives are at work in Israel, but it would appear that their number is few. Though they share qualities like curiosity and an extraordinary fondness for history, they come from very different backgrounds and have very different financial expectations from their sleuthing. Some expect to earn a living in every respect, while others pursue it only as a hobby.

One in the latter group is [Doron Leitner](#), 44, from Jerusalem, who is very active on Facebook in solving family mysteries. "I've always been inquisitive and a person who asks questions, sometimes really at the level of a nudnik," he told Haaretz. "I am attracted to digging up information that had been concealed or silenced".

Leitner studied mechanical engineering in school and criminology at university level, and wound up with a job cataloguing the files of the Jewish Colonization Association. "Historical detection combines being an investigative detective who seeks information and takes nothing for granted and historical research in which it is important to know names, dates and places," he explained.



Doron Leitner pictured at Moshe Kadouri's grave Credit: Emil Saiman

Leitner started specializing in hunting down information about the dead in Israel's wars and hostile incidents, after discovering hundreds of errors in the official databases. One of the major mysteries he helped to unravel was the identification of an unknown fatality who was buried in 1951 without a tombstone at the edge of the cemetery at Sheikh Bader (today, Givat Ram), in Jerusalem.

He was presented with the mystery by residents of Moshav Beit Meir, near Jerusalem. They were trying to trace a fatality named Eliezer Kleinman, who appeared on a list of the dead from the moshav, though none of the elderly members of the community knew his story.

The path to the solution of the mystery went through the burial society records and the Historical Jewish Press archive, an online project of Tel Aviv University and the National Library, into which about 1.7 million pages of newspapers from the 18th century to the present have been scanned.

The research found that on the night of Passover, 1951, a guard at Beit Meir shot and killed an unknown person he mistakenly believed to have been an Arab infiltrator. In the dead man's pocket was a document in the name of a person called Eliezer Kleinman. Subsequently, however, it was discovered that Kleinman was still alive, so the dead man was buried anonymously. In the records, however, the deceased continued to be identified as Kleinman.

A few months after the burial, the identity of the unknown person was finally ascertained: He was Moshe Kadouri, an Iraqi-born resident of the nearby Har Tuv transit camp for new immigrants. As reported in an item in one of the old newspapers, his daughter had complained to the police that her father was missing, and in a photo album of unidentified fatalities, she recognized the man who had been killed at Beit Meir as her father.

Nonetheless, many years passed and no one bothered to engrave Kadouri's name on the tombstone or to update the database of victims of hostilities to record that it was he – and not Eliezer Kleinman – who had been killed in the incident. Thus, these two errors remained entrenched for decades. Only in the wake of Leitner's research was Kadouri's family able to visit his grave and recite the prayer for the death, 65 years after he had been buried nameless.

Ben Yehuda massacre

Another prominent figure in the band of historical detectives is [Eli Melitz](#), 62, from Haifa, who works at an adventure park in the Carmel and also supports himself by finding Israeli heirs to property abroad. His attraction to historical detection began to develop when he learned that he was a descendant of Rabbi Avraham Haim Schorr, author of a well-known book on religious law. "I love historical investigations," he said. "I love to get a mystery and dig into it".

One such story came his way three years ago. An Australian who was born in 1947 in Mandatory Palestine to a British policeman father and a Holocaust survivor mother contacted Melitz with a request for information about his father, whom he had not known. The research turned up a tragic story. It emerged that the client's father was wounded in an unusual terror attack carried out by Arab militants and British deserters on Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem on February 22, 1948, which left some 60 people dead. The father, who happened on the scene, was evacuated to Shaare Zedek Hospital for treatment, but there he was murdered by people from the paramilitary group Lehi (also known, pejoratively, as the Stern Gang), who raided the hospital seeking revenge on the British.

In the National Archive, where the personal files of British police and the daily blotter of events from that period are kept, Melitz found the names of three suspects in the revenge operation. However, when he turned to Lehi old-timers in an attempt to acquire more information, he found that "only death would loosen their tongues," as he said in a paraphrase of a line from the organization's anthem. In the end he managed to locate the last survivor from the cell that committed the murder, who said to him: "I never told my family about this. It is a secret I will take with me to the grave".

A lost photo

In recent years, family research has undergone a digital revolution, which is drawing more and more people into the field, some of whom may have been deterred until now by the thought of rummaging in archives and handling crumbling documents from the crawspace in grandma's apartment. Now, theoretically, anyone can become a historical detective.

However, it is still the case that not everything can be found on the internet. For example, there are vast amounts of information in the marriage files at the archive of the Chief Rabbinate, which still must be searched by hand.

On one of the occasions Poraz was at the Tel Aviv Rabbinate, he happened to find a real treasure, one that had great meaning for the family that had hired him. This was a photograph of Shifra Hammer, who was born in Poland in 1917 and died giving birth to one of her children in Tel Aviv in 1947. Since then all traces of her appearance had vanished.

Poraz managed to find the picture in her marriage file. When her family members were invited to the rabbinate to see it for the first time, they burst into tears at the sight of the beautiful woman looking out at them from the forgotten photo.



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