

Home Weekend

The lost branch of the family tree, found after the Holocaust

Octogenarian Tamara Berkowitz has spent most of her time believing her family was killed in the Holocaust. Painstaking research uncovered a different reality.

By Ofer Aderet | Jun. 14, 2013 | 10:59 AM

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Tamara Berkowitz sits in her small house on Kibbutz Nir David in the Beit She'an Valley, tears in her eyes. "I was so lonely my entire life. Suddenly I find out I have such a large family. Not large – enormous!" she says. "It has made me very emotional."

Her tears, however, are not tears of joy. "It's a terribly sad story. I think about them, about how we could have met. It's hard to describe," says Berkowitz, 85. Her husband, Moshe, 98, sits beside her. They survived the Holocaust separately, only meeting in Moscow in 1949, and have been together ever since. They immigrated to Israel in 1959 and made their home at Nir David. "When we arrived, I had a very large family," says Moshe, "and everyone greeted us warmly. But Tamara had no one. She never found any relatives."

The couple had three children: Daniel, Dina and Hagit. Daniel was killed in the Yom Kippur War, in 1973. Dina lives in the United States and Hagit lives in Israel. Six grandchildren and one great-grandchild are now Tamara's only source of joy.

In recent months, Tamara discovered a family secret hidden for 72 years – ever since she saw her parents for the last time, in 1941, when she was 12. With tragic timing, it emerged that the girl who lost her parents in the Holocaust and survived World War II on her own, convinced that her entire family had been murdered, was in fact not the last member of her family.

During the war, dozens of her relatives lived in the United States, including grandparents with children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Tamara never knew of their existence. If only she had known she had a large family in the United States, her life could have been very different.

Gidi Poraz, formerly in high-tech and currently a family-history detective, is the man responsible for getting to the bottom of Tamara's family saga. Research he did last year revealed what many others had failed to discover: He burrowed into archives in Israel and the United States, until he had the material to reconstruct Tamara's lost family tree. The results, though, presented him with a dilemma. "How do you tell her about her grandparents, who never looked for her after the war because they were convinced that she, their granddaughter, had been killed in the Holocaust along with her parents? How do you tell her that, in the 1950s, she could have let them know that she'd given birth to a daughter, Dina, their great-granddaughter?"

Poraz became acquainted with Tamara Berkowitz last year, after Dina decided to contact him. "I've been looking for my mother's family for many years, to no avail. I'd be very grateful if you could help me. It would be wonderful were this to happen while my mother is still alive," Dina wrote.

Whispered secrets

Dina based her letter to Poraz on some vague memories that Tamara had of her childhood in eastern Belarus. "When I was little, the house thrummed with whispered secrets," Tamara recalls. "I had no idea what it was all about. One day, my mother got a letter and started to cry. When I asked what was wrong, she showed me a picture of a beautiful little boy dressed in elegant clothes. She told me the boy was her nephew, her sister's child.

"My mother showed me another picture, this one of my grandmother and grandfather, and my mother's two sisters," she adds. "They were all dressed so beautifully. I remember thinking how pretty their shoes were. My grandmother was wearing a long, gauzy shawl. To me, they appeared to be very wealthy."

In addition to letters and photographs, Tamara's family also received packages. In some vague way, Tamara understood that she had relatives in the United States, but her parents never divulged any details.

The historical research Poraz volunteered revealed the true story behind Tamara's childhood recollections. For many long months, he studied population registries, and marriage, death and citizenship records in American archives. He also checked manifests of trans-Atlantic ships and searched through old newspapers for death announcements.

His findings constitute the history of a Jewish family in the Soviet Union, some of whose members immigrated to the United States in the 20th century and whose descendants are alive to this day, and some of whom remained in Europe and were murdered by the Nazis. Of the latter, only one – the teenage Tamara – survived, immigrated to Israel, and had a family. All the while, she was convinced she was the last remnant of her extended family.

The other story starts in 1913, when Tamara's maternal grandfather, Yitzhak Sufirov, left Belorussia for the United States in search of economic opportunity. Nine years later, in 1922, he was joined by his wife, Feiga (Tamara's grandmother), and three of their children: Avraham, Liza and Sonia (Tamara's uncle and aunts). The eldest daughter, Hannah (Tamara's mother), was left behind in the town of Mstsislaw, with her husband, Yoel, and their infant daughter, Nina.

Posing as a Russian orphan

Tamara was born six years later, in 1928. Her father refused to follow his wife's family to the United States. "My father didn't want to abandon our orchard of fruit trees," says Tamara. "This orchard ended up killing them."

In 1941, when the Nazis invaded Belorussia, the family was forced to flee. "We traveled 900 kilometers on foot, but the Germans caught up with us and brought us back to the town, a week after the aktion [the roundup and deportation of Jews]. We heard about rapes and other horrible things," she says.

On October 15, 1941, when all the Jews who'd survived the aktion were ordered to assemble, her father told her to run, and in so doing, he saved her life. "I asked him, 'Where am I supposed to go?' I told him I was afraid to go alone. He started to cry and told me to go. The German guard didn't look my way. That's how I was spared," she recalls. Her parents were among the 800 townspeople killed that same day.

Tamara posed as a Russian orphan in order to survive. Penniless and alone, she made her way to Moscow after the war ended. She received a technical training and worked in machine manufacturing. In 1959, she immigrated to Israel with her husband and two children. The couple's third child, Hagit, was born here.

For decades the family tried to find Tamara's relatives in the United States, without success. When Poraz received Dina's letter, he realized he had to apply methods that Tamara hadn't tried. "The breakthrough came when we discovered the grandfather's new name," he says. "He immigrated to the United States as Yitzhak Sufirov but changed his name to Isadore Schaefer. His wife, Feiga, also changed her name and in the United States went by the name Maria."

Poraz showed Tamara the many documents he'd found and used to reconstruct the family tree. "It's absolutely incredible how you can find an entire family just on the basis of a surname and the name of a town," says Tamara.

Poraz has a lot of experience in the field. "I've constructed some 400 family trees and located 13,000 people," he says, showing the document that

held the key in this case: the manifest of the S.S. Estonia, which recorded the family's journey to the United States. "Every person who boarded the ship registered his name as well as many other identifying details," says Poraz. "The manifest tells you who paid for the tickets, where the travelers came from and where they were going, who they'd left behind in the Old World, and who was waiting for them in the New World."

After discovering that the grandfather had changed the surname to Schaefer, Poraz made a chart of Jewish surnames with similar spellings and pronunciations. He assumed – correctly, as it turns out – that the name could be spelled in many different ways. "The research we did on this name alone was enough for a PhD thesis! Had I not been a yekke [a Jew of German origin, renowned for attention to detail] who insisted on opening every document and reading it himself, I would never have found the family."

Of the large family identified by Poraz, five of Tamara's first cousins are still alive, scattered all over the United States. Tamara and her family were devastated to learn that none of them was interested in forging a relationship with their only relative in Israel. "It was very disappointing, because we were so excited. But when you start a project like this, you have to be aware that this, too, is a possible outcome. You don't know the people on the other side, or the issues they may be dealing with," says Dina.

Gidi Poraz is still at work on Tamara Berkowitz's family tree. If you have further information about the family, you may contact him at poraz@bezeqint.net.