



ALONE NO MORE

Menachem Bodner, who at the age of 4 was a survivor of Auschwitz, has discovered his identity and a photograph of his real parents, thanks to the efforts of a dedicated genealogist.

BY JOEL REBIBO



I was sure that Ayana KimRon wouldn't want to speak to me. She'd told her story — that of a genealogist who helped a Mengele twin adopted at age 4 discover his identity — to a number of major news outlets and would have no interest, or energy, to tell it again to *Hamodia*. But I was wrong.

"I very much want *Hamodia* to write about this," she said, when I finally tracked her down. "This is an audience that is very important to me to reach out to."

In listening to her, it became clear that the story isn't just about *how* she helped an elderly Israeli, Menachem Bodner, discover his real name and connect to first cousins in California, but *why*. Why she spent more than



Menachem Bodner wasn't always sure he wanted to uncover his past.

2,500 hours helping a total stranger discover family connections, when Bodner himself wasn't sure he wanted to find out the truth about his past.

Menachem Bodner, whose real name turned out to be Elias Gottesman, was a month shy of his fourth birthday when he was rounded up with his family in a ghetto in Zakarpattia, then under Hungarian rule, and brought to Auschwitz. He and his identical twin Jenö (pronounced Yeno) were selected by Mengele for his heinous experiments which, ironically, may have saved his life.

"Other children that age were sent to the crematorium," says KimRon. "But the children in Mengele's program were given food, because he needed them. Sometimes he

would even give them sweets.”

This child, at four and a half, an Auschwitz survivor with a number on his arm, was spotted at the camp after the war by Moshe Bodner, who had come in search of his wife and child, only to discover that they hadn't survived.

Bodner, who lived in the nearby town of Oświęcim, brought Menachem to his large apartment and cared for him. “I'm not sure who saved who,” reflects KimRon. “The fact that he took this boy in helped him rehabilitate himself. He had someone else to worry about. Many people who left the camps quickly married and established families.”

Bodner also took in two sisters and gave them a room to sleep in. He married one of them, who had babysat young Menachem, and it was a foregone conclusion that they would adopt him.

THE POWER OF CONNECTEDNESS

KimRon isn't a survivor herself, nor does she have any direct, personal connection to the Holocaust. But years ago, as a successful Israeli telecom specialist living alone in Australia and then Canada, she learned a lesson about the importance of connectedness — to friends, but especially to family — that changed her life.

“I had been sent to Montreal to handle a big project that covered all of North America,” she recalled. “The work was challenging and stimulating, but I was alone, with no friends or family. Then the winter came, and it was bitter cold, like nothing I'd experienced in Israel or Australia.

“I was sitting one night, totally miserable, thinking, ‘I'm all alone in the world.’ No friends or family at hand. No one with a shared history, no one to make small talk with. Suddenly you realize how important family is, how important it is to feel connected to your roots.”

She took comfort in visualizing her family tree, mentally tracing her connection to parents, grandparents, cousins and so on. She went deeper, discovering a connection to prominent Rabbanim of previous generations.

The journey backward also led to a journey inward. She began to wonder who and what she was. “Am I more Israeli or more Jewish?” asked this *sabra*'t whose father helped drain swamps in Chadera before the state's founding. “In Israel, I'm an Israeli, but abroad it isn't so clear. Am I Israeli, Australian? Every time I moved, I took on another adopted identity.

“I knew my family's roots, but I didn't know who I was, what I was.”

These questions led her to take a time-out. She packed up a shipping container with all her worldly possessions, planning to have them sent back to Australia — but only after she spent three months in Israel to recharge her batteries. After those three months, she realized that she didn't have the strength for another sojourn abroad and ordered the “Australian” lift sent home to Israel.

“This was in 2005,” she recalls. “And I can say that, after 10 years in Israel, my Jewish identity has become a lot stronger. This is my place, this is where my ancestors are buried.”

After experiencing the power of connectedness, KimRon, who describes herself as intensive, dived into genealogy, at first as an avocation, and then as a full-time pursuit. Today, she is a researcher specializing in survivors, or what she calls “families in the shadow of the Holocaust.”

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FAMILY TREE

It was in this capacity that she reached out in mid-2012 to Menachem Bodner, Auschwitz prisoner No. A7733. He was convinced that his twin brother Jeno, No. A7734, was still alive and wanted help in finding him.

The first step was to find out Menachem's real name, and from there to try and reconstruct his family tree. “The Nazis destroyed a lot of documents, but many have survived,” explains KimRon. Using his inmate number to access archives such as Yad Vashem in Israel and the Holocaust Museum in Washington she learned that A7733 was Elias Gottesman and that he was born in the Hungarian village of Strojno, in the Carpathian Mountains.

Using this information, KimRon was able to track down paternal

Looking for Jolli A-7734

Jeno Gottesmann
born 1940 in Hungary
Tattoo A7734

**Do you know Jeno (Jolli)?
His twin brother wants to meet him.**

Auschwitz/Mengele survivor,
born in the Carpathians.
Whatever current name and
location, his tattooed number
is A7734.

**For any leads contact:
FamilyRoots2000@gmail.com
+972-50-7711815**

Twin Menachem (Elias)

cousins in Israel who helped her find out the fate of the twins' mother, Rozsi Gottesman, nee Berger. She survived the march of death from the Flossenbürg labor camp and returned after the war to her hometown, where she was murdered in 1946 by anti-Semitic rioters.

Menachem gradually became acquainted with the descendants of these cousins, Michael Kleinman, z"l, and Hinda Perl, nee Kleinman, z"l, holding a number of very moving reunions. “They keep close,” says KimRon.

Menachem learned from his paternal cousins that his mother had searched for him after the war. She'd received a letter from someone who was at Auschwitz until the very end, saying that at least one of her sons had survived (in addition to Jeno, a one-and-a-half-year-old brother — Josef A7735 — was taken by Mengele; KimRon speculates that, though he wasn't a twin, he was blond and had blue eyes).

Menachem's mother did everything she could to find him. While she wasn't physically capable of getting to Auschwitz, she appealed to Jewish organizations for help in reuniting with him, never relenting until the day she was killed.

Menachem also learned that his cousins in Israel had searched high and low for him, even attending a Mengele Twins conference in Yerushalayim that Menachem was at.

“This was 1985, and twins came from all over the world to hold a mock trial for Mengele. Arie Kleinman, z"l, Menachem's cousin, held

up a big sign with Menachem's name and the number on his arm. Even if he didn't recognize the name, he should have seen the number. It's likely that he passed right by and didn't notice it."

WE HAD TO CLOSE THE CIRCLE

While Menachem was desperate to contact his brother, he wasn't eager to rock the boat psychologically; he had a loving, supportive foster family, an identity that worked for him, and wasn't sure he wanted to reach back and uncover the past.

"At our first meeting, he told me that he wasn't so interested in shifting from one identity to another," KimRon recalls. "He was 72. What did he need it for? But I told him that as far as I was concerned things couldn't continue this way. I felt we had to close the circle. I told him, 'I'm starting the search, and if you want you can join me.'

"Little by little, he signed on. There were ups and downs, but I was working with a circle of advisers, including a psychologist, who encouraged me and said my instincts in this matter were good.

"Menachem later said that the reason he worked with me, and none of the others who had approached him, is because I never forced him into anything. I gave him time to digest new developments. I would tell him that we had made a contact that was getting us closer, and he would say, 'I don't believe it.' I'd say, 'That's OK, you don't have to believe it.'"

Despite Menachem's occasional resistance, KimRon pushed on, learning that Rozsi had had either a sister or an aunt named Maime who had probably immigrated to the United States in the 1920s. "Since I come from the world of computers, I understand how search algorithms work and how to maximize online databases," she noted.

But her computer skills and perseverance — "I wasn't sleeping or eating during this time" — weren't enough to turn a first name into a full-fledged identity for someone who arrived in the United States some 90 years ago.

"The task reminded me of doing due diligence in my previous jobs," she recalled. "It isn't just a matter of gathering information from every possible source but about putting it together in the right way. It takes patience, patience, patience."

That patience paid off in May of this year when 23andMe, one of the three leading DNA banks in the world, offered its help. "They read about our search and asked Menachem to donate a DNA sample," KimRon recalls. "If the system would find any match — in the hope that his twin brother had given a DNA sample in the United States — it would be their modest contribution to the project."

The search didn't lead to Jenó, but it did provide the information that ultimately



Menachem's first reaction on seeing the picture of his father, Ignatz Gottesman, *Hy"d*: "He looks so young and innocent."

produced a major find: Maime's children, who are Menachem's first cousins.

The DNA bank had supplied KimRon with an anonymous profile of someone who was a "definite match," and it was up to her to put the pieces together and identify and locate the match.

Using the few details on the anonymous profile page and searches of two American databases, Ancestry and Ellis Island, KimRon concluded that Menachem's aunt had lived in the United States as Mary.

KimRon even found her burial site on the Web and a picture of the grave itself, "with her *Yiddishe* name on it and Mary Burstein [her married name] in English."

Mary/Maime had three daughters, who still live in California.

When KimRon contacted one of them, the woman insisted that "our entire family died in the Holocaust."

"No it didn't," responded KimRon. "Your mother was Mary, and her sister Rozsi has a son in Israel."

The cousins turned out to be a fount of information about Menachem. They said that they had grown up on stories of their Aunt Rozsi, and had even named one of their daughters for her.

Mary/Maime and Rozsi were very close, but lost contact immediately at the start of World War II. Mary/Maime told her daughters that she had known something bad had happened when the letters she had sent Rozsi were sent back to the United States.

In her initial discussions with the cousins

KimRon asked whether they had a picture of Menachem's parents, Rozsi and Ignatz Gottesman. Within minutes a photograph of a young couple looking straight into the camera was being emailed, giving features to the vague memories he had of them. The resemblance between Menachem Bodner/Elias Gottesman and Rozsi is striking.

"I couldn't have shown him the picture two years ago," KimRon notes. "He needed to be ready for it. Gradually."

What was Menachem's reaction to the picture? "He's not a man of words," relates KimRon. "But he shared his impression of his father, that he looked so young and innocent, and that his mother was beautiful and well-dressed.

"A few days later I asked him how he felt, and he said he was still on Cloud Nine.

"He looks at the faces of his parents on a daily basis. I refrain from bothering him with questions because it's obvious to me that he is processing the shift in his family horizon. I have no doubt that it is emotionally draining."

Has this shift upset his relationship with his foster family, as he feared it might? "Not at all," answers KimRon. "The first place he took the picture was to his adoptive sister. Only the next day did he take it to his daughter."

Earlier this month, Menachem and KimRon held a video chat with the three cousins in California and their children and grandchildren. The cousins filled in more details about his mother — she had been a seamstress — and expressed interest in his life in Israel.

"They were sensitive and afraid to cause him pain," KimRon said. "They didn't ask anything about the Holocaust, only about what he's done in Israel."

And what are the chances of finding Jenó, whose nickname is Joly (pronounced Yoly)?

"We're not the only ones involved in this chase," she answers. "Jenó has to want to be found. He may be hesitant, as Menachem was. It takes courage and emotional stability to go through such an experience. Jenó may also have been adopted and may not be interested in shifting identities. He could be Menachem No. 2."

In the meantime, Menachem is planning a trip to the United States for a reunion with his cousins, which may well take him for another series of ups and downs on the emotional roller coaster he's been on for the past few years.

"Life is a process, always," concludes KimRon, a proud grandmother herself. "For all of us, and especially for Menachem now." ■

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