

A Two-Decade Wait

Twenty years ago I heard a story about a little boy named Ben who died in a tragic accident in 1907. His heartbroken parents had no other children. Immigrants to the U.S., they returned to Europe and unfortunately perished in the Holocaust. The story could have ended there — three seemingly insignificant people lost to the ether of history — except that I heard the tale and couldn't let it rest.

After 20 years, the episode of this three-year-old pulling a pot of boiling milk over his head reunited my extended family. We had been separated since 1939 and living on four continents — but let me start from the beginning.

When I was a little girl, my grandparents would tell stories of the *alter heim*. Before I knew the word “genealogist,” I became one. I took copious notes, carefully recording the places and biographies of brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins.

I listened to the accounts about the poverty, the pogroms, the wars, and migrating to the “*goldene medinah*.” Other family members heard, too, but for them it wasn't an obsession. For me, however, it became a lifetime vocation. A name on a piece of paper was a voice from the other world crying out, begging to be remembered.

Through the decades, the tools to track these names have changed, but the goal remains the same — to gather every possible shred of data. With current technology, the family tree branches out widely over centuries, with many valuable documents and photographs. From Rabbanim to, *l'havdil*, celebrities, I have recorded them all, these cherished Jewish ancestors.

My Grandma, Fanny Korb-Padva, who passed away in 1990, came from Warsaw. In 1997 I interviewed her first cousin, Irving Rubin. It was he who first told me about Uncle Gustav Kwestel's son Ben, the child who had perished so tragically.

What made the story even more compelling was that Uncle Gustav and his wife, Aunt Lina, were first cousins. Lina's paternal aunt, Eva Rothzeig-Kwestel, was Grandma Fanny's grandmother. She was also Uncle Gustav's maternal aunt and stepmother, as Gustav's mother had passed away when he was born, and Eva then married her brother-in-law.

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Uncle Gustav and Aunt Lina had gone to live in Leipzig, Germany, where many Jews from Poland who were in the fur trade had settled, including Lina's brothers. There they raised an orphan girl and married her off, and my Kwestel relatives brought this couple to America after the war.

Correspondence with this elderly orphan and her husband revealed that Lina's brothers had survived the war. One had fled to England and one to Australia. If they had any descendants, how was I to find them? I didn't have first names, and it was almost certain they had changed the spelling of Rothzeig. Perhaps they had only daughters, in which case, whom had they married?

Twenty years of research revealed nothing. I hoped they would find me through a son or daughter with the same consuming passion as mine! I entered a page of testimony for Gustav and Lina at Yad Vashem. Then I waited ... for 20 years.

Several months ago, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, I received an email. A researcher had seen the page on Lina and was requesting information on behalf of a client. Within a day, I was on the phone with a cousin in Australia. “Twenty years,” I repeatedly said to her, my voice breaking with emotion.

On Purim, a meeting of cousins would take place in Eretz Yisrael, and shortly afterwards there would be correspondence with more members of the Rothzeig family who had managed to survive the war in Russia and whose descendants were living in Europe. The brother in England had passed on in the 1950's leaving no children. In the course of going through the documents again, we discovered the resting place of little Ben.

No photographs of Lina or her son exist, to my knowledge. We have a few fuzzy photos of Gustav from his U.S. passport application and a German document. Lina was in the Riga ghetto before her death. Gustav fled to Antwerp, but was later transported to Auschwitz. Ben was buried by the Hebrew Free Burial Society in Staten Island. It is almost certain that no family member has visited that grave since his internment more than a century ago.

I hope to find his headstone this fall. I know Gustav and Lina will be there too. They have been waiting for me for 20 years. ■