

MIRIAM SURA Ehrenberg, later Wanda Maria, comes of age (from left): Aged 4-5; 12-13; 30; 45; 65. (Photos: 4-5, Jan Alejnik; 12-13, 30 & 45, Foto-Atelier; 65: Studio Foto Kofecki)

My heritage, your heritage and our heritage



A story of lost family, desperate searches, trails that went cold and ultimate reunification

• PAMELA PELED

‘Memories can be beautiful,” croons Babs, “and yet, / What’s too painful to remember, / We simply choose to forget.” But sometimes even Barbra Streisand gets it wrong. Moshe Ehrenberg, a retired ophthalmologist now living in Jerusalem, has had to recalibrate some childhood memories deliberately skewered by his parents, to shield him from a truth too terrible to reveal.

Ehrenberg recalls that while growing up in Brooklyn a relative from California regularly turned up to visit. Moshe was young; he didn’t chat much to the tall, elegantly dressed uncle with the gentle demeanor who passed through their home en route to somewhere else, looking preoccupied. He was headed, so the story went, for Israel. In the fifties and sixties there were no direct flights from Los Angeles to Tel Aviv; Uncle Gedalya grabbed the opportunity to spend time with his brother in New York.

But Gedalya Ehrenberg actually never landed in the just-born Jewish state; this smokescreen hid a truth too brutal for a little boy to grasp. Gedalya was bound for Poland, the country of his birth. And not because he hankered for Warsaw’s bright lights. Ehrenberg’s native land held only one attraction for him: it was where his young daughter had gone missing.

In 1945, when Gen. George Patton’s Third Army liberated Dachau, Gedalya was 38 years old. He weighed 32 kilograms. His wife and three of his children had been murdered in Auschwitz; one of his four brothers had disappeared, another was killed by the Nazis. All that remained of his once-thriving family was brother Abraham Ehrenberg; the two survived Dachau together.

But Gedalya clung to a glimmer of hope. Prior to the war he had somehow managed to hand over his baby daughter to Aleksander Paprota, a Polish Gentile, together with a whopping sum of money.

“Keep her safe for me,” implored the father, “and if I survive I will come back for her.”

(I interrupt this account with a personal aside: Last night, during bedtime for my grandchildren, I told my daughter this story. Miriam Sura was three when her father deposited her for safekeeping. We looked at our babies playing happily in their bath, and our minds simply blanked. We have grown up on Holocaust horrors; we know the inconceivable facts. And

yet we know nothing. What did Gedalya pack for his Miriam, in her little suitcase? Her favorite doll, her toothbrush? A warm sweater for Polish winters? How did he say goodbye; did he return for a very last kiss? Where did he go from the Polish man’s home; how did he put foot in front of foot? Was his wife, Chana, still alive? Did she scream, did she hug her remaining sons? Did the siblings know that their sister was safe? Did they know that they were soon to die? How do we wrap our minds around words that reverberate with agony?... I, for one, don’t know.)

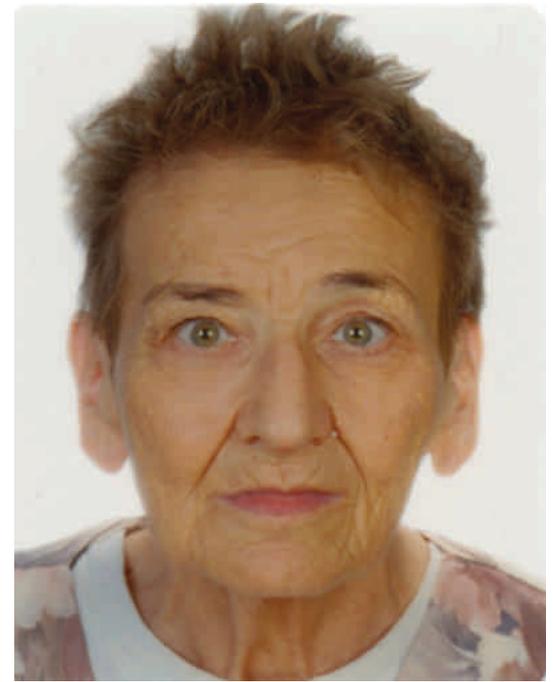
Horror piled on horror in those dark years: just prior to handing over Miriam, Gedalya had been attacked in his piece goods store in the little town of Zakrzówek, after the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939. A marauding band of soldiers ransacked the shop, stole everything in sight, and just for the hell of it shot Gedalya, who was hiding in the attic. Miraculously, he recovered, just in time to be sent to a concentration camp. Fearing the worst, he was determined that at least one of his children would live. The only way was to pass her off as a Christian, living in a Christian home.

In Dachau the young father hung on to his memories of Miriam through the months and hellish years; her smiling



No one knows how Gedalya, emaciated, penniless and hardly able to walk, made it back to Zakrzówek to claim his baby

POLAND-BOUND: Gedalya Erenberg, aged about 40 (pictured in Stuttgart, Germany, 1947). (Abraham Ehrenberg)



face, her tumbling curls. He drove himself not to die, he steeled himself to beat starvation... always imagining how he would wrap his arms around his little girl and build a new world for the two of them one blessed day.

On April 29, 1945, that day finally dawned.

No one knows how Gedalya, emaciated, penniless and hardly able to walk, made it back to Zakrzówek to claim his baby. Somehow he got there. He climbed up the steps. He rang the bell. The door must have swung open, but his heart slammed closed. Little Miriam Sura had disappeared.

I think of Gedalya standing on the doorstep, and being given the news: Soon after the first deportations Paprota had shipped Miriam to Warsaw; no records were kept. The little child, who would then have been about five, was gone without a trace.

I think again of Gedalya, under a gray Polish sky, standing alone with his memories and dashed dreams. Did he wish, hearing the dreadful news, that he too had died? Where did he go, after leaving that cursed place? Who comforted him?

Somehow Gedalya got it together to sue Paprota in court. From transcripts of the case, available in a local museum, we know that the Pole sent the child on to Warsaw soon after he took her in; no one has ever unraveled the definitive sequence of events. It appears that since everyone in the little town of Zakrzówek knew each other, and knew that Paprota was childless, he feared someone would put two and two together

and come up with a traitor. A woman trader, who shuttled between Zakrzówek and Warsaw with butter, cream and eggs, offered to care for the little girl; at this point, Gedalya's search stopped. There was no more information.

What we do know is that the Ehrenberg brothers made it to America – another painful irony.

In 1927 their father, Emanuel, a modest tailor in Poland, had traveled to New York and made a small fortune. He soon sent tickets for passages for his whole family to immigrate to the US, but on the day of departure his wife, Chaya Sura, slipped down the staircase boarding the ship. Chaya Sura, a religious woman of valor, took that as a warning from Heaven not to leave Poland. Emanuel, frustrated and unhappy, rejoined his wife and sons and set up a bakery that sons Gedalya and Abraham helped manage.

Two terrible decades later the boys made it to the *Goldene Medina*; if their mother hadn't slipped, how different their lives would have been.

The brothers both married survivors, with shocking stories of their own. Abraham had two sons; including Moshe, who was not told the terrible truth. Gedalya's second wife, Bella, had been brutalized in the camps; she was unable to bear children. Gedalya, gutted and desperate, spent the rest of his life searching for his baby. With zero clues it was a fruitless quest; he crisscrossed Poland time after time in vain. In 1969 Gedalya died a broken man, the ache to hug a child of his own unassuaged.

MEANWHILE, FOR all those years, as Gedalya was taking trains and talking to strangers – (“Maybe you remember a little Miriam Sura, a gorgeous bright child, living with Paprota for some weeks...?”) – the girl herself was alive and well, and searching for her daddy.

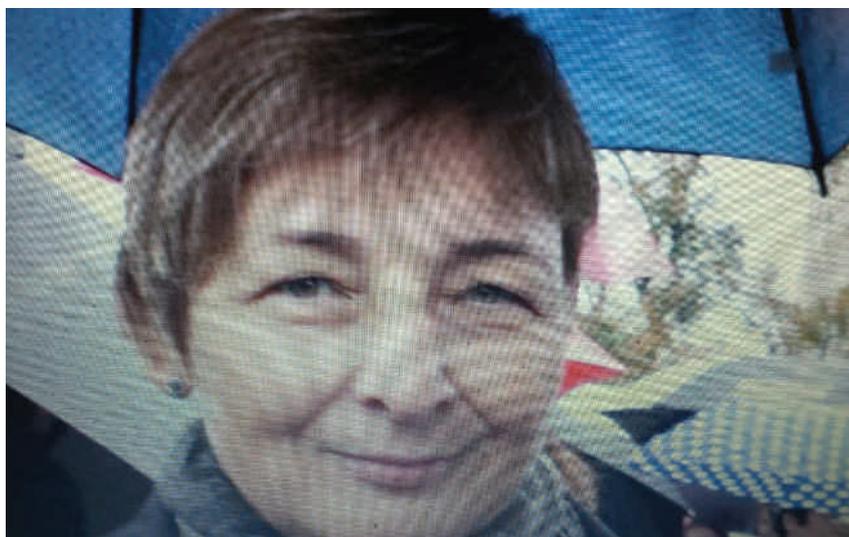
She vaguely remembered being put on a train, where an unknown woman had said, “Call me ‘Aunt.’” The two were probably bound for Warsaw; but at Łuków station German soldiers stopped the train. “Auntie” was terrified of dying for the crime of hiding a Jewish child; she scribbled a note, hung it on the little girl's neck, and left her to her fate.

Miriam had only the vaguest of recollections of what happened next.

Her adoptive parents, Jan and Kazimiera Alejnik, filled in some scant details later. It appears that as the “aunt” abandoned the child in the carriage, a German soldier aimed his gun at the girl to shoot her dead. Miriam jumped up (she vaguely remembered), and threw her arms around his neck; disarmed by the youngster's trust, the soldier deposited her with a station official. The tiny child, who had already survived so many uprootings, carried the hastily scribbled card: “MY NAME IS MARYSIA DOBRZYNSKA AND I AM UNBAPTIZED.”

“Unbaptized” was a secret code – Poles would have realized that Marysia was Jewish, while the nuance might escape prowling Germans.

The details are sketchy: It appears that after the German officer (was he an officer? was he a German?)



(Left) EWA PACEK, Miriam's daughter, aged 48. (Joanna Pacek)

ERYK PACEK, Miriam's grandson, aged 20. (Ewa Pacek)

lifted Miriam off the train, the Polish station keeper immediately realized the tiny child was Jewish. Hurriedly, she destroyed the card with the damning details, and took the dazed and disorientated Miriam to a church orphanage on December 10, 1942. There her name was promptly changed, probably for her own protection.

Miriam Sura Ehrenberg became Wanda Maria, and then Wanda Maria Alejnik after her adoption, a month later. Alejnik became Wojciekiewicz when Miriam married her husband; Gedalya's search for a Miriam Sura became an impossible dream.

Wanda Maria (at last!) had a happy childhood; her new dad was a photographer, and there are lots of pictures of a smiling youngster, growing up in a loving home. She was close to her adoptive brother, adored her new parents, and thrived in the security of a family that didn't deposit her with anyone else.

She knew she wasn't born into the family she had grown to love, but she had no recollection of anyone else. She was so young when her world had fallen apart; in addition, her eyesight was severely compromised. As a baby she saw only blurred outlines of loving faces surrounding her; all memories were bleached from her brain.

She felt secure as an Alejnik; all was good.

And then, when she was 12, tragedy struck again. Both Jan and Kazimiera died within months of each other; Wanda/Miriam was homeless again.

This time was slightly less traumatic: her adoptive aunt took her in, and she was embraced into another warm family; her grandparents lavished her with love, and finally all was well.

Wanda, as she was universally known, married and raised a family in Poznan. Today her daughter Ewa, who lives in the small town of Pobjedziska just nearby, has four children of her own; son Piotr has a daughter, two sons, and two grandchildren.

Yet, as she diapered her kids and cooked her trademark onion soup and potato pancakes, Wanda always wondered: Where had that fateful train to Warsaw come from, and why was she on it?

She remembered not speaking good Polish when she was adopted, but she didn't know her native tongue was Yiddish.

On this super-scant evidence she hired private detectives and trawled the countryside; every trail ran cold. In a Hollywood movie she and Gedalya would have collided at a railway siding; a crescendo of mood music and a tear-jerking embrace before father and daughter walked into the sunset with decades to discuss.

But Poland is not Hollywood.

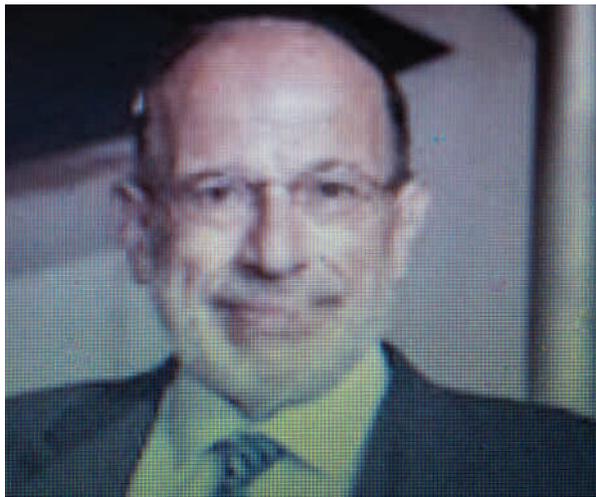
Wanda couldn't prove that she was Jewish, but, given the year of her adoption and what was going on in Europe at the time, she suspected that Jewish blood was the key to her blurry past.

Still, in pre-Internet, pre-DNA testing days, with zero paperwork to go on, Miriam Sura Wanda Maria Alejnik Wojciekiewicz died without ever knowing who had given birth to her, or who her family had been. She knew nothing of her brothers, gassed in Auschwitz; or wondered if they'd thought of her as they were herded to their deaths. She knew nothing of her mama, also gassed to death, or of her father, who survived to find her, and never did. She died in 2012, embraced by her son and daughter and seven grandchildren, but clueless about her heritage.

THAT WOULD have been the end of the saga, had her daughter not done some digging.

Some years ago Ewa, now 53, felt inexplicably and undeniably drawn to the Jewish community in Poznan.

The little that she knew about her mother's background was enough for Ewa to be recognized as a Jew; she started attending synagogue and studying



DR. MOSHE EHRENBERG, nephew of Gedalya and son of Abraham, attending a Jerusalem bar mitzvah in 2019. (Photos: Courtesy Ehrenberg family)

the traditions.

Just before the coronavirus hit, she visited Israel for some weeks, and studied Torah with Yakar.

"I felt Jewish," she explains, "but I wanted to be sure."

So, in our technological world where labs can unlock secrets in seconds, Ewa did a My Heritage DNA test. This is not as easy as it sounds; in Poland the tests are expensive and not readily accessible. This didn't stop Ewa for a minute; she acquired a kit, and sent off her saliva.

Then she waited.

MEANWHILE, ACROSS the globe in New Jersey, Barbara Fox was doing DNA testing of her own. Like many American Jews she was searching for information about her ancestors; the magic of My Heritage linked her to undreamed of relatives.

Barbara is married to Morris; his father, Isak Ehrenberg, was Gedalya's first cousin. The boys had grown up together in Poland and were close before the war; it was Gedalya who introduced Isak to his second wife, Regina.

Morris's parents, like Gedalya, both lost their first families in the Holocaust. Unfathomably, it was Gedalya who was forced to dispose of the dead bodies of Isak's wife and two children; they were shot by the Nazis on the very day Isak had gone into the country to try to arrange shelter for his family.

In another twist of those terrible times Morris's sister is really his half-sister; she, too, was hidden during the war by Poles, and miraculously eventually reunited with her mother.

"Take the test, Morris," Barbara urged her husband, in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, thousands of miles from Pobjedziska, Poland.

Just over a month ago his DNA sequencing popped right up – a perfect match with Ewa Pacek and Piotr Wojciekiewicz.

"It was like a huge hole in our hearts started to heal," explains Joanna Pacek, Ewa's pretty 30-year-old daughter. "Suddenly, we could connect the dots back to our past."

Ewa heard from her newfound relatives that an even closer cousin, Moshe Ehrenberg, was living in Israel; she was not about to jeopardize that connection.

"Moshe was happy to help," she says, "so I sent a test to Jerusalem as soon as I could."

Ewa didn't factor in COVID-19, or Israel's overstretched postal service; the kit never arrived. Undeterred, she FedExed another envelope to Talpiot; Moshe, who'd been eagerly awaiting it, swabbed his buccal mucosa twice and sent the info from his inner cheeks off to My Heritage in



ABRAHAM EHRENBERG, taken April 29, 1945, at the liberation of the Dachau death camp by one of the heroic soldiers of Gen. Patton's 3rd US Army. Brothers Abraham and Gedalya were both scheduled for gassing and cremation the next day, corresponding to their barrack no. of 30.

Houston, Texas, the very next day.

Up jumped the genomes: a perfect match.

"Great news!" Moshe emailed his late uncle's granddaughter, who got her own daughter to translate the English into Polish. "We are cousins!"

The stories came tumbling out: Ewa, an artist and writer, has been a member of the Jewish community for 12 years; for the last two, serving on its board. Her two older children, both graphic designers, created beautiful glasswork for the Jewish community.

Ewa's sons, Adam and Eryk, recently visited Israel on a Taglit Birthright program, where Eryk met his girlfriend, a dancer like him. They're saving money to return in February to study dance with the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company.

Ewa is busy baking scrumptious challot each week, and planning her post-pandemic trip back to Israel to meet the family; brother Piotr hopes to come, too.

Many millennia ago God turned to Abraham and (in Genesis 22) promised to "multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies."

One can only wonder how many random saliva swabs would turn up Jewish genes, hidden for generations in bodies fleeing inquisitions, pogroms and mass murder. Maybe the biblical prophecy has already come true.

How tempting it is to imagine Gedalya Ehrenberg, somewhere on high, somehow reunited with all his loved ones, smiling down to see descendants linking up through DNA. Who knows?

But down here in the material world, one thing is clear: the Ehrenberg clan is waiting impatiently for the day when they can rip off their masks, climb onto a plane, and throw their arms around each other in a very real hug.

Finally the family, reunited at last, can make beautiful memories to last a lifetime. ■

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