

So Close And Yet So Far Away

First cousins, separated by the Holocaust and its aftermath, discover they've been living in the same town for years.

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Jackie Gartenberg and his wife, Tinky, above, during a recent reunion here of the Gartenberg and Pomeranz clans. At right: The fathers of Jehoshua Pomeranz and Jackie Gartenberg with Jehoshua's mother, Anna, in prewar Poland.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHLOMO POMERANZ



During the war, a Polish woman hid Jehoshua, Sara, Jackie and Anna, and they lived in hiding together for about a year.

Exactly what happened after liberation is unclear. But somehow Jackie got separated from his aunt and cousins and ended up

in an orphanage in Barbizon, France.

In 1946, he wrote a letter to his aunt and cousins, asking whether his father was still alive. He also wanted to know about the welfare of the woman who had saved them. Jackie never received a response. But Sara, who now lives in Buffalo, had kept

the letter, which was signed "Kuba." This was the last link; proof that they were indeed cousins.

Jackie was later adopted by Leo and Devora Gartenberg, who owned the Pioneer Country Club in the Catskills. They brought him to America in 1947. Jackie married his wife, Tinky, and they began a new life in Monsey, which was the closest Jewish community to the family hotel.

Meanwhile, Jehoshua and his sister returned to Radom with their mother, who tried her best to earn a living there. In 1952, they immigrated to New York. Jehoshua went to Yeshiva University, married Miriam and began a family. Yet he continued to search for his cousin, Kuba. "I called everyone in the New York phone book that had a J. or K. Pomeranz name," he says.

In 1965, Jehoshua got a job as an electrical engineer at IBM and the family moved to Monsey, which was close to IBM's headquarters. During his frequent business travels to Europe, he would look up the local Pomeranzes in hope of finding Kuba. "All this time, he was just a mile away from me," says Jehoshua. "Who knew?"

In addition to gaining a first cousin and a trove of new relatives, Jackie and his family also discovered their new "elevated" status as kohanim. The halachic ramifications of being a kohen are significant. For example, a kohen cannot marry a divorcee and must steer clear of cemeteries and other areas of defilement. After consulting with their rabbi, the very next day, Jackie's grandson, who was in Israel at the time, duchened [recited the priestly blessing] for the first time. He also went to visit Jehoshua Pomeranz and his family.

"It's been a very emotional experience," Pomeranz says. "I'm not quite sure I've adjusted to reality yet. When I finally see Jackie, I think it's going to hit me." ■

Jehoshua Pomeranz and Jackie Gartenberg lived in the same Monsey community for more than three decades. Their kids attended the same school. And way back when, their wives played in the same bowling league. But only recently did they discover that they are first cousins — and that Gartenberg is a kohen (a member of the priestly tribe). The ironic twist? They still haven't met. That's because it was Pomeranz's recent aliyah — and the newspaper article chronicling it — that brought them together.

At the end of December, Pomeranz made aliyah with Nefesh B'Nefesh. His wife, Miriam, remained in Monsey for a few extra weeks to finish packing up the house. "The Power Above had a certain agenda," she says. "Nothing happens by chance." Before Jehoshua left, a reporter at The Journal News interviewed the couple about their upcoming move.

Meanwhile, across town, Tinky Gartenberg, Jackie's wife, read the article with interest. Her husband had been adopted; his last name had originally been Pomerantz (he spelled it with a "t"). Although Pomeranz is a fairly common name, Tinky was stunned to discover that Jehoshua Pomeranz had been born in Radom, a large city in Poland known for manufacturing leather, and the place where her husband had grown up. Could they be related?

Years earlier, when the two wives were on the bowling league, Tinky had asked Miriam if it was possible that their husbands were related. "Is your husband a kohen?" Miriam asked. If their husbands' fathers had been brothers, they would both be of the priestly tribe. "No," Tinky replied. And that was that.

But both men were around the same age and from Radom, the Polish city known to have no children survivors. It was much too much of a coincidence, Tinky thought. So she and her husband called up Miriam, and they arranged to meet that evening.

Five hours of tape-recorded, impassioned talk later, and they were certain. "His father and my father were brothers," says Jackie. "You can't get any closer than that."

The telling signs? Jackie was known as "Kuba" in Poland. He remembered his father, Pesach, as being "tall with wavy, blond hair" and working with mattresses in the ghetto. Jehoshua's older sister, Sara Joseph, confirmed this description by sending an old photo of their fathers standing at either side of Sara and Jehoshua's mother, Anna, who had scratched out her face because she didn't like her expression.

As the pieces of the puzzle clicked together, Jackie suddenly recalled a memory from decades earlier. "I was 7 years old in a Jewish orphanage in Barbizon, France, and someone asked, 'Who here is a kohen?'" he remembers. "I raised my hand and shouted, 'I am a kohen.' But someone shouted back, 'Sit down, little boy.'"