

Finding My Family by Menucha Chana Levin

For many years I was intrigued about my family history. After consulting my Aunt Ray, my mother's oldest sister who shared my interest, I compiled a basic family tree dating back to the year 1820 in the Lithuanian shtetl of Ponedel.

When my cousin Harriet from South Africa came to visit us in Israel, I told her about the family tree. Shortly after returning home to Cape Town, she was contacted by a distant relative named Philip Stodel, who was also interested in our family history. When Harriet mentioned my family tree, he sent me a copy of the family tree he had compiled, far more detailed than mine. It was fascinating to see that we have many unknown relatives scattered around the world from Canada to Australia. Then the name of one family in particular caught my eye. Malka Vainik and her husband had seven children, all with Hebrew names. When I pointed this out to my own children, they exclaimed, "They live right across the street!"

Even more amazing, Malka was in the same writing group I attended and her twin girls were in my daughter Shani's kindergarten class. It was fascinating to reconnect our families after so many years, sharing stories and even noticing a physical resemblance between one of Malka's sons and my nephew Raffi.

Eventually I wrote a novel *The Youngest Bride* based on my family history which a few years later was translated into Hebrew. Soon afterwards I received an email from a man named Yisroel Brown in Rechovot, an American whose Israeli wife had read the Hebrew version of my book. They thought we might be related, based on the actual names and places mentioned in it. It turned out that we were indeed related through my maternal grandmother Frayda Schmit Firer. If I'd thought Philip's family tree had been impressive, Yisroel's took my breath away. He had detailed lists of names, places and connections dating back to the late 1700's like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. And he helped solve an old mystery about a distant relative of ours named Rochel.

Years before, when we still living in South Africa, a woman from Venice, California visited our home and said an old friend of hers named Rochel was trying to get in touch with us, her relatives in Cape Town. She mentioned that Rochel was planning to relocate from California to Texas where her son was a musician.

We were intrigued to find out more about this long-lost relative and wrote to her right away. But, to our disappointment, we never received a reply.

Years later, while piecing together our family tree, I made an attempt to find Rochel. I even put ads in the Jewish newspapers in Texas but never heard back from anyone. The problem was that I didn't know Rochel's married name. I even wrote to my mother's cousin Janie in Eretz Yisrael but she didn't remember it.

Now, many years later, upon meeting Yisroel, I asked him if he had heard about Rochel. He knew her whole story! She did relocate to Texas where her son was a musician in the Houston Symphony Orchestra. After a few years, she decided to move back to her family's original home in Rhode Island. She passed away there and was buried in the Smith/Schmit family plot in the Jewish cemetery in the city of Providence.

That missing piece of the family jigsaw puzzle had finally been found!

Having discovered relatives who were frum seemed like a miracle. We grew close to our new cousin Shana, a highly intelligent seminary girl, and invited her often for Shabbos. A couple of years later, we were delighted to attend her wedding in Jerusalem and meet her parents and grandparents who flew in from the United States for the *simcha*.

Realizing I'd discovered so much about my maternal relatives, I began to wonder about my father's family as I know almost nothing about them. He had managed to escape from Lithuania three weeks before World War II began but his parents *hy'd*, unable to get visas, were tragically murdered by the Nazis. Though he kept his only photograph of them in a decorative frame in the living room, my father found it too painful to tell us anything about them. All I knew is that he named me after my unknown grandmother Menucha who had come from Riga, Latvia.

Recently, through an online group called Lithuania and Latvia Jewish descendants, I emailed someone named Ian Levine in London. As our last names were similar I thought we might be distantly related. It turned out that we were but ironically not on my father's side. Ian's grandmother's maiden name – Firer - was the same as my mother's! So Ian and I are distant cousins via my maternal grandfather Moshe. Within one incredible day, Ian sent me some old family photos including one of my great-grandparents, Helman Elia (Eliash) Firer and Hoda Leah.

That photo looked familiar so I emailed it to my sister Frieda, now living in Jerusalem. She also recognized it as a copy of the same photo she had on her wall! She took the frame off the photo and discovered that our Aunt Ray had written on the back of it that these were our great-grandparents and their little granddaughter Rochele.



**My great-grandparents Helman Elia (Eliash) Firer, his wife Hoda Leah
and their little granddaughter Rochele.**

Then I remembered my Aunt Ray telling me about one branch of the family forced to leave their Lithuanian shtetl during World War One and relocated to the town of Nizhni Novgorad in Russia. The Lithuanian government suspected the Jews of the shtetls of aiding the Germans in 1915 so made them move to Russia. Ironically this forced relocation saved them from the Nazis in Lithuania during the Holocaust.

My aunt always sounded sad when she told me they had written many letters to their cousins in Russia but never received a reply. The tragic reason would unfold after miraculously discovering these lost relatives more than a century later.

When my aunts Ray and Jean were married, they sent a copy of their wedding photos to their cousins in Nizhni Novgorad. At the time contact between the communist Soviet Union and western countries such as South Africa was strictly forbidden. Because of the letters, my great-uncle Mottel, already an elderly man, was arrested by the Russian authorities, severely beaten and unfortunately died of his injuries soon afterwards.



Great-Uncle Mottel Firer, who was a teacher, and the brother of my grandfather, Moshe.

I have since received emails from some of Mottel's descendants still living in Russia and in Israel who were as pleased as I am to discover new-found family members and to share fascinating stories:

Dear Menucha,

Shalom! My name is Vita Firer, I am the granddaughter of Mottel Firer, the brother of your grandfather Moshe. I was born in 1945 in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia and I came to Israel with my family in 1991. Now I live in Bat Yam. I am the youngest from three sisters; my oldest sister's name is Hoda Leah, like your mother's name, she still lives in Russia. I am so happy to have new relatives and I think there are a lot of things to tell each other in the future, I hope.

Best wishes, Vita

Although unaware of the existence of my Russian relatives, I had felt strangely drawn to stories about Jews forced to live under communism but reconnected to their Yiddishkeit.

Then I met my second cousin Stanislav (Shmuel) during his brief visit to Israel to attend a friend's wedding. Born in Nizhni Novgorad, Russia, his family relocated to Germany when he was nine years old. Now married with three young children, he belongs to the frum kehilla in Berlin, teaching in the day school and learning in the kollel established by the Lauder foundation whose rosh kollel and several other kollel members are Americans. Shmuel's English is excellent, so we were able to communicate perfectly with each other.

We had arranged to meet at the Central Bus Station after he'd gone shopping for gifts in Geula for his family. He apologized for being late and keeping me waiting.

"It's taken more than a century for our families to reconnect so what is fifteen minutes?" I asked.

Shlomo believes that the tefillos of his zeides and bobbas helped him, his brother and some cousins find their way from atheistic communism to a complete Torah life. Sharing family stories, our mutual ancestors are surely rejoicing in Shamayim.

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