

The Diary of Miriam Hanania

by Batya Untershatz

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My friend told me about the diary when I invited her to my Jerusalem apartment for tea one evening. She had bought it in an antique shop in Amsterdam, Holland. It was the diary of a young girl written in 1938 and 1939. The girl must have been Jewish, she said, because there was Hebrew writing in one portion of the book. Would I help her find its owner?

The similarity between this story and the famous diary of Anne Frank, the Dutch teenager who died at Bergen Belsen concentration camp, made me shudder. Of course, I would help her.

My friend brought the book to me a few nights later. It was a leather-bound diary showing the wear of a book that was now nearly 50 years old. I opened it to look for clues about its owner and found it was not the kind of diary written by Anne Frank, which was a young girl's reflections on her life while hiding from the Germans. Instead, it was a collection of dedications written by the girl's friends to her. There were inscriptions in Dutch, French, and German and one sentence in Hebrew. All the entries were dated 1938 or 1939 in the Belgian city of Antwerpen.

The owner's name was Miriam, but after going through the book, page by page, I had found no reference to her family name. No great obstacle. If the girl survived the Holocaust, she was undoubtedly married; therefore, it still would be difficult to locate her by her family name.

I am the director of the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives. For the past 16 years, my job has been locating people. I started to apply my skills to find the Miriam of the diary.

First, it was my hope that if Miriam survived the Holocaust, she, or some of her friends who wrote in the diary, immigrated to Israel. More than 500,000 survivors came to my country after the State of Israel was born.

Each article was signed by a friend of Miriam, most of whom were girls. I chose the only two names that were boys, Joseph Tannenbaum and Shmuel Schnitzer. Checking my records for persons named Joseph Tannenbaum living in Israel, I found three with that name. None were of the age that would have made them teenagers in 1939. I turned to the name Shmuel Schnitzer. There were five listed, but the profile of one made me feel he was the most likely. I called his home, and his wife gave me his business telephone number. It turned out he was the editor-in-chief of *Ma'ariv*, one of the largest daily newspapers in Israel. When he answered the telephone, I identified myself and asked him if he lived in Antwerpen before the War. He said, "Yes." I was convinced I had found the right person.

The next day in his office, I showed him the diary and his signature as a young

boy. He excitedly leafed through the pages. He told me the diary was about the interest he and his friends had in going to Palestine and fighting for freedom and possibly sacrificing their lives for their ideals. Joseph Tannenbaum, he said, was killed on his way to Palestine.

“Do you know who owned this diary about the girl named Miriam?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

I persisted. He could not remember. I was insistent. “Look through the book again. Maybe you will see something that will make you remember.”

Suddenly, Schnitzer exclaimed, “Kiki! Look, some of my friends dedicated their story to Kiki. I now remember that was Miriam’s nickname. Her name was Miriam Hanania!”

I now had Miriam’s full name.

Schnitzer now recalled that Miriam married a Jewish boy, came to Palestine, and settled in the Haifa area. I asked him for Miriam Hanania’s married name.

Once again, he said, “I don’t remember.”

“I won’t leave this office until you do remember,” I said. He leafed through the book a number of times until he shouted, “Goldener! Yes, her married name is Goldener!” [Note: To protect the privacy of the family, the name has been changed.—Ed.]

I was close to the completion of my adventure. Returning to my office, I looked for a Goldener family in the Haifa area. There was none. How was this possible? Schnitzer was so sure he had the right name. My experience in dealing with persons searching for friends or relatives made me realize that maybe he did not give me the exact married name of Miriam.

I checked other variations of Goldener and found a Miriam Geldman who was exactly the age of the person I was looking for. She lived in Givatayim.

I called her apartment excitedly. A man answered. “May I speak to Miriam Geldman?” I asked. There was a long pause at the other end. “Who is this?” the man queried. I identified myself and asked again, “May I speak to Miriam Geldman?” Again, a long pause at the other end.

“I am afraid that is not possible,” the man said. “You see, we have just returned from her funeral.”

I was stunned. Her husband wanted to know what it was all about. I explained about the diary, and he said he would be interested in meeting me and seeing the book. I waited until the end of *shiva*, the seven days of mourning, before going to his home.

There I showed him the diary. He cried and then told me about his wife and many of the persons in the book. He was so grateful for the book that a short time later I received a silver dish inscribed, “With appreciation to Batya from Miriam Hanania Geldman, of blessed memory.”

Batya Unterschatz, while director of the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives, developed an international reputation for her ability to locate persons living in Israel or their descendants. She was born in Vilnius, Lithuania to parents that both were Litvaks. She studied languages at Vilnius University and graduated with an MA degree in linguistics. In 1971, she immigrated to Israel and shortly thereafter joined the Jewish Agency's Search Bureau for Missing Relatives. She has helped thousands of people find lost family and friends. In 2002 Batya retired and the Bureau was closed. She still does research professionally when not enjoying her three children and 16 grandchildren.