

A Remarkable Genealogical Success Story

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As I am writing this story in early January, the Torah reading for the week, Va'Yigash, describes the remarkable and moving reunion between Joseph and his brothers and father, whom he had not seen for decades. My story is about a similar reunion, about how a 90-year-old man and his 70-year-old son, who had never met each other, were united. Here is how that came about.

One of the first things I did after I became interested in genealogy and discovered JewishGen was to visit the JewishGen Family Finder (JGFF). I keyed in my mother's maiden name (a very unusual, perhaps even unique, Jewish surname), and to my amazement, I found it listed there. I contacted the researcher, whose name was completely unfamiliar to me, and he turned out to be a third cousin. To my delight, he shared with me the results of his extensive research, which went back one generation farther than my mother had known about. After that experience, I was a firm believer in the power of the JGFF and have always made a point of registering all the surnames that I am researching.

There is a branch of my father's family from Minneapolis that I have not made much progress with. My great-great grandfather had three or four daughters besides my great grandmother, and they saddled me with the misfortune of having married men with very common surnames, such as Goldman and Fox. Since I didn't know anything about their children, I had no place to start my research. My only recourse was to list them all in the JGFF and hope that some day one of their descendants would find me.

There was one spot of hope for a breakthrough. I knew something about one of the daughters, because her daughter was a favorite cousin of my grandmother's. And she had a very unusual nickname that stuck in my memory: Maydowa (a child's mispronunciation of Maydele, little girl). I knew from a tree that my mother had drawn for me many, many years ago, that this cousin had a son named Michael. I also vaguely remembered that he lived somewhere in the South. Unfortunately, his surname was also very common—for the sake of their privacy let's use the name GOLDBERG (some other details of the story have also been changed).

As luck would have it, when I was interviewing a relative in Minneapolis from a related line, he remembered that Michael GOLDBERG lived in Richmond, VA. As further luck would have it, when I searched the Internet phone book, I found only one Michael GOLDBERG in Richmond, and to complete the string of good luck, he turned out, indeed, to be my cousin! Two years ago, Daphnah and I made a research trip down the East Coast, with a stop in Richmond.

As I often do as part of my research, I recorded lots of information about the family that married into mine. Michael's father, Jerry, had died thirty years ago at the age of 70. He had a younger brother, Horace, who was born in 1909, and I recorded his name—but little other information about him.

In March, 2000, someone found my entry for the GOLDBERG family of Minneapolis in the JGFF and sent me an email message:

We are doing some research on a Horace Goldberg from Sioux City, Iowa. He attended the University of Minnesota around 1929 or so. We know that he was in Sioux City around the early 1950's. If you have any information please email us back at...

I am cautious about revealing information to strangers, and this person had not identified herself in any way. A week later I responded:

I have some information about the Goldberg family, but I do not reply with information to parties who do not identify themselves clearly and tell me what they already know.

In a message the next day, the author of the original message told me her name was Amy and that she and her sister were working on their family genealogy. She wrote:

We are trying to find our father's biological father, who is Horace Goldberg. Unfortunately, we only know a few things about him. We know that he attended the University of Minnesota and was a swimmer there. We believe that he was married for a short time to our father's biological mother.

At this point the story was beginning to sound very interesting—was there a child from a secret, early marriage? A few days later I generated a report using Family Origins and sent it along to Amy with the following message:

I have appended a report of the GOLDBERG branch that includes the Horace GOLDBERG whom I know about. There is a good chance, I think, that this is the right person... As you see, I don't have much information about Horace except for his name, date and place of birth, and the partial name of a wife whom he married on some Christmas day (year unknown)... The GOLDBERG family lived in Minneapolis later, so it is quite possible that Horace attended U. Minn.

I am in contact with my cousin Michael GOLDBERG. I will forward your email to him and see if he knows anything more. What is your address and phone number, and what is your sister's name?

I had asked before for details such as her phone number and where she lived, and I was just a little uneasy at her failure to respond to those requests.

The next day, a Sunday, saw a flurry of email back and forth between Michael and me. First I received the following answer from Michael, who was clearly quite uncomfortable with the whole line of inquiry.

Jay, I got your message. First I would not give any information until I know who is asking. Second, Horace did go to U of M but was not a swimmer, and he lived in Chicago.

I replied:

It is pretty clear that these two sisters are just getting started in genealogy and simply did not know the etiquette. I'm sure that they are on the level.

You also told me that he married someone named Lil. How long was he married to this Lil? Is it possible that he had briefly married someone else before Lil? Of course, he might not have told anyone about it.

Then Michael replied:

Jay, I do not feel comfortable with this inasmuch as I do not know who is requesting this information from you. I have no direct knowledge of my Uncle Horace in his teen and college years other than what I have told you. I only have knowledge of Uncle Horace and Aunt Lil when they lived in Chicago. They were married for over 50 years and had two children, who still live in Chicago.

Michael's message then continued with the following shocker:

I feel that at this point, I must direct you to Uncle Horace.

I was stunned. Was Horace GOLDBERG really still alive!!! Michael's own father had died so long ago from heart disease that I never expected that his brother would still be alive. I wrote back to Michael:

I had not realized that he was still alive! Of course the matter should be directed to him. Can you tell me how to contact him?

While the above messages were traveling through cyberspace, there was another flurry of messages between me and Amy's sister Sara, who turned out to be the main force behind the genealogical search. I wrote:

I have investigated a little further, but in order to provide you with any further information, I need to know more about you and your genealogy. Is your father still alive? And his mother? How old are you and your sister? Where was your father born and when? Were his mother and Horace still married—or at least together—at the time?

Sara answered the same day:

Horace met a woman by the name of Helen Mann at the University of Minnesota around 1927. Helen became pregnant, Horace and Helen at some point got married, but I don't know where or when it happened. They had a son that was born in November of 1928 or 1929 (the hospital burned down and the birth certificate we think was altered). Bruce Mann (my father) was born in Aberdeen, South Dakota, to Helen and Horace Goldberg. Something happened or went wrong or something but what I can tell you is that my father at the age of 6 was left behind by his mother and her new husband. Horace disappeared. My dad found an address on Horace in Sioux City Iowa when he was about 21. But no contact was ever made. My father is still alive...

Here is part of the answer that I sent to her the next day:

I got your further message this morning, but many of the questions I asked have not been answered completely. Please reread my messages.

Since this whole matter is a little bit delicate, as you can imagine, there is probably some—or considerable—reluctance on the part of my Goldberg relatives to become involved in the investigation or to provide more information. The Horace Goldberg in that family was married for 50 years to the wife Lil in my tree, and they apparently had children whom I did not know about before. The family of your Horace Goldberg might not be ready yet to discover such a part of their family history.

Sara wrote a very warm letter in return.

Jay, I'm sorry for the bits and pieces I gave you late last night. I was excited and yet apprehensive about what to tell you and what not to, and no I'm not hiding anything... What I want to know is just some general information. I do not want to destroy good family feelings of someone's parent or grandparent.

Here she inserted many details about her extended family and told me everything she knew about her father and his parents. She continued:

I would just like to know what he looks like. I am a professional photographer and I have been told for years that I was adopted because I don't have the same looks as my siblings. I usually tell people that I am from the Goldberg side of the family and I don't mean that in a bad way. I will start my detailed search and will keep in touch and I hope you will do the same. I hope that you believe me when I tell you that I don't want to hurt the memory of your uncle(?) and his children's memory either, so let's see what we find out. OK? If you have some more questions you would like me to fill in, feel free. Thanks much.

This message confirmed to me that Amy and Sara were completely on the level, as I had thought likely from the beginning. I hoped that I would soon be able to tell her more, but I still needed to be cautious, given the sensitive nature of the story. However, I immediately sent her image files from two high-school photographs of Horace that I had scanned when I visited with his nephew Michael.

Meanwhile, I never did hear back from Michael with information on how I could contact Horace. I guess he was too shocked and upset by the whole surprising turn of events. Fortunately, my detective work on the Internet quickly turned up a phone listing for Horace (that first name is rare enough). I called Horace, and he immediately confirmed the story. He was a star athlete at the University of Minnesota, but in gymnastics rather than swimming. He had been married briefly while in college, but the bride's parents, upset at the marriage, had seized her and managed to get the marriage annulled. Her parents blocked every effort he made to see her, and he eventually gave up trying.

As it turned out, Helen was already pregnant, and a son, Bruce, was born. Horace and Bruce had never met, but I now knew that both of them were alive, one aged 90 and the other 70.

Fortunately, Horace had told his later family about this earlier marriage, so he had no problem discussing my discovery with his children (his wife, Lil, was no longer living). Horace was hesitant at first, having made peace with his separation from Helen and their

son. However, with the full support of his other children, he very quickly decided that he wanted to make contact with Bruce.

I then sent the following message to Amy's sister Sara, who had been asking me many questions about Horace:

I will answer your questions a little later, but for now there is still one piece of information you have not provided: your phone number. I want to call you and talk with you directly.

For some reason, Sara consistently avoided telling me her phone number, so I used my Internet detective skills again. At this point I knew the names of Sara's other siblings and soon located them back in South Dakota. From one of them I got Sara's phone number and also found out that Bruce and his wife were at that very time visiting with Sara in Arizona.

I now had all the necessary information and was ready to bow out. I gave Sara's phone number to Horace's son, who called Sara and made the initial contact. Then Horace himself called and spoke with his son Bruce for the first time. Shortly thereafter, Horace and his other children and their families traveled to Arizona for a most remarkable family reunion. The families all met again for Thanksgiving, and they are growing closer and closer.

In my last message to Sara, I wrote:

For me, this is the most exciting development that has come from listing myself as a researcher in the Family Finder on the JewishGen website. I cannot imagine how we would ever have connected before the Internet was available. Now I hope that some day someone from the missing branches of my family will find me that way.

There is an important lesson in this for those of you reading this story. Please register yourself with the JGFF and list every surname in your family. You never know what amazing connection will come about as a result.