

Making the Connection

by Avi Engel

As I sit on a plane returning home from Vienna to Los Angeles, I reflect on the remarkable events that have occurred this past year. Twice this year I have been blessed to stand at the gravesites of my ancestors and observe their *yarzheits* (anniversary of death). This past May, I first joined with some 50 relatives, most of whom I had never known of until recently, in Queens, New York. We had gathered to recognize our common ancestor, my maternal great-grandfather, Tuvia Yaacov Aufrichtig, z"l, who had died of an apparent heart attack in 1903 in New York where he had come to visit his son, Samuel. Then yesterday, October 27, 2003, in Vienna, I stood in front of the *ohel* (mausoleum) where my paternal great-grandfather's brother, Rabbi Yosef Engel, z"l, is buried. I was joined by Hersh Wolf Friedman of Monsey, New York, who only three weeks earlier had published a *sefer* (religious text) of Rabbi Yosef Engel's writings on the Torah. Each story is remarkable in its own way, but the common threads of both experiences were formed early in my life.

My parents, Ben, z"l, and Mala (nee Kneitel), were both survivors of the Shoah. Both were from Galicia and met in the ghetto during the war. My father lost both parents and three of his four siblings. One of his brothers, Simon, was studying in Belgium when Hitler invaded Poland. Simon became an RAF bomber pilot and survived the war. My mother watched the Nazis take away her mother, Rachel (nee Aufrichtig), and all four siblings. Her father, Elazar, left Poland on the last boat to New York where he lived throughout the war.

Growing up in Los Angeles, my world view was based on a belief that much of the world was comprised of European Jews who had survived the Holocaust and suffered many losses. Last week I visited the Friedman family in Monsey, New York. Mr. Friedman accompanied me to Vienna for reasons that will soon become apparent. His wife, Chavi, was inquiring about my family history, and when I began to describe my childhood years, she sensed all the loss I felt and said, "You must have felt cut off." She hit the nail on the head.

Even though I had my parents, the sensations I experienced seemed, at times, like those I would imagine an orphan might have. For me, the joy of a larger family was replaced by the pain and sadness of my parents' losses and, by extension, my own. Four years ago, my family was invited to the wedding of Charles Wachsburg, the son of my father's second cousin, Lulek. Although Charles and his fiancée, Allison, are from Montreal, they were getting married in Los Angeles. My father had maintained contact with Lulek over the years and, consequently, my wife,

children and I, along with my mother, were included in a small and intimate wedding.

Over the years, I had experienced an interest in exploring my roots, but it became stronger after my father died in 1993. These fleeting interests were sparked by my encounter with Izo Engel at Charles' wedding. Izo is a second cousin from Minnesota whom I had never known existed before the wedding. He described some of the genealogical research he had done and promised to send me a copy of the family tree he had created. I offered my assistance. The startling news I heard from him was that our great-grandfather's brother, Rabbi Yosef Engel, was buried in Vienna, where he had died in 1919.

I was amazed because I was not aware of any ancestors before my father's generation whose graves existed. I had assumed they were either slaughtered during the war, or, if they had died before the war, their gravestones were plowed under or used for roads. I jotted down this information on a card and noted to myself that I wanted

to visit Vienna some day. I have carried the card in my wallet since the wedding. One can imagine how it felt to take a good long look at that card as I stood by Yosef Engel's grave this past Monday.

My research began in earnest after I received Izo Engel's family tree. I had heard about the JewishGen website and from it explored the Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland) database.

JRI-Poland had a list of the births of my great-grandfather, Shrnuel, and all his siblings, including Yosef. An entry for the marriage of their parents, Yehuda and Leah (nee Stieglitz), was also part of the index. I contacted Ted Gostin, a local genealogist whose advertisement had appeared in a local Jewish community paper and met him at the Mormon Family History Center from which I emerged not only with the records listed on the JRI-Poland site, but also the birth records of Leah Stieglitz and all her siblings.

Ted taught me to scroll back on the microfiche rolls in anticipation of finding previous generations that are on the rolls but whose names are not yet indexed. Remarkably, in early 2003, after a couple of years of sifting through this information and reviewing approbations in a variety of religious texts, a cousin (from New York) and I determined that my daughter, Anna, attends high school with her sixth cousin, Melissa Stieglitz!

I was ecstatic about these discoveries, but also yearned for more information about living relatives about whom I might not know. I traveled to New York and met two cousins who were born in Poland, Joseph Engel and Efraim Klausfeld. I had seen each of them on several occasions over the years. They could provide a window

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into life in Poland and might tell me more about the extended family. As I sat with Efraim Klausfeld, he completed a telephone conversation and followed it with, "That was your cousin, Helena. We talk all the time." I had never heard about Helena so I was flabbergasted by the news. Soon thereafter I was in contact with several newly found relatives that I learned about through Efraim and Helena.

I decided to come to New York again a few months later to continue my search and to meet some of my extended family. It was Succot 2000. During that visit, Joseph Engel introduced me to Hersh Wolf Friedman, a Belzer hasid who was interested in the scholarly work of Rabbi Yosef Engel. Mr. Friedman was in the process of compiling some of Engel's work on the Torah in a fashion different than had been done before. I knew from my father that Yosef Engel's work on Talmud is still studied in yeshivas throughout the world. Mr. Friedman believed that illuminating his work would excite the world of religious Jewry and rekindle an interest in Rabbi Engel's work. In some ways, Friedman was more enthusiastic about my family than some of the relatives I was meeting. I was disappointed to find that not everyone shared my excitement and many of the new relationships cooled rather quickly. I was still looking for a deeper connection.

About this time, my mother told me of a relative who had moved to Los Angeles from New York to take a teaching position. I just did not know at the time she told me how I would meet him. Standing next to a young man in a market one day in spring 2001, I glanced down and saw his name on his check as he was paying the cashier. I had seen him in shul on several occasions, but we had never met. I said, "Excuse me for being so forward, but I think we're related." His name was Hillel Aufrichtig, the same last name as my grandmother, Rachel. How many Aufrichtigs could there be in the world? It took only a couple of minutes of comparing notes to establish the link. Soon thereafter I met his father Abraham, who was visiting from New York.

Abraham told me of the website www.aufrichtigs.com developed by Ronny Roberts of London, England. I contacted Ronny immediately. He is descended from the Aufrichtig family, but we could not establish a link between our respective branches. Nevertheless, being the devoted and passionate genealogist that he is, Ronny included a link at his site for the Gloguv Aufrichtigs, named for the town where most of my mother's ancestors lived. He also put me in contact with several cousins in New York and Florida. They were amazed to hear the news of their Los Angeles cousins.

Each time I called my mother with an update of my research, I had goose bumps from the excitement. The most unbelievable bit of information was provided by my cousin, Joe Rich, who reported that my mother's grandfather, Tuvia Yaacov Aufrichtig, z"l, had come to New York in 1903 in order to visit his son, Shrnuel. Tuvia had died



Author in front of the ohel (mausoleum) of Rabbi Yosef Engel in Vienna, Austria.

unexpectedly and was buried in Queens.

I had never expected to find relatives on my mother's side, because I thought she had accounted for all of them. I had previously met my mother's first cousins, the siblings Max, Teddy and Maggie. They were the children of my maternal grandmother Rachel's brother, Nathan. I was quite proud that Max's son, Marv Alpert, the best-known sports announcer in America, was my cousin. Never mind that I had never met him. What I did not know was that in addition to Rachel and Nathan, they had three other siblings, each with many generations of offspring.

The events of September 11, 2001, put a huge damper on my investigation into family. My son, Adrian, commented on how I seemed to have lost my enthusiasm for genealogical research. Like many others, I now lived with concerns and fears that superseded the kind of personal pursuit in which I was engaged. Nevertheless, when my wife, daughter and I decided to vacation in New York in January 2003, I contacted Joe Rich again. I wanted to visit Tuvia Yaacov Aufrichtig's grave. My middle name is Tuvia. I was named after my mother's brother who was killed in the Holocaust, but I had never known after whom my uncle had been named. Joe put me in contact with David Aubrey, a cousin who had discovered the grave. On a freezing, snowy day in January 2003, I met David at the Union Field cemetery. It was the first time we had met; I also met Joe Rich for the first time later

that day. I sensed their and my immediate feelings of affinity, heightened no doubt by the discovery that Tuvia Yaacov 100th yarzheit would fall on Sunday, May 15, 2003. Immediately upon my return to Los Angeles, e-mails flew all over the world as we decided to honor the memory of our ancestor, Tuvia Yaacov Aufrichtig. Some 50 people met at the cemetery on a glorious spring day. Ronny Roberts came from England just to see the faces and meet the people he had included on his Gloguv Aufrichtigs link. Joe Rich spoke eloquently for all of us when he said:

It is remarkable that today we have gathered from far and wide to pay tribute to the memory of Tuvia Yaacov Aufrichtig. Today marks exactly 100 years to the day (the 16th of Iyar on the Jewish calendar) of his passing. How many individuals who have walked this earth are remembered by family members 100 years after their passing? Perhaps exceptional rabbis and leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln. Our ancestor is in very good company. Today, we have all taken a major step forward in visiting this site, reconnecting with family members we do not often see, and meeting other relatives for the very first time. Imagine!

Imagine, indeed.

My son and I had breakfast with Joe Rich twice last week before boarding the bus for Monsey, New York, where we spent Shabbat with the Friedmans and the Belz community. I had never been in a Hasidic community before, but they all knew who Rabbi Yosef Engel was, and they were so incredibly happy to meet his brother's

descendants. Mr. Friedman and I left for Vienna Sunday night to be at Yosef Engel's grave on his yarzheit. He is buried in an ohel, a structure large enough to accommodate my six-and-a-half-foot frame. It also means that his grave is protected from the elements. We recited psalms and left *k'vitelech* (personal requests like those people leave at the Kotel) and the newly published writings of Rabbi Yosef Engel, z"l, on *Sefer Bereshit*, the first book of the Torah. Hersh Wolf Friedman, who is not a relative, had described to me how he imagined the blood of Rabbi Yosef Engel flowing through me. Now I understand what he means.

I was not raised religious, but have become a modern Orthodox Jew as an adult. So many things had to come together so that all that events I have described could occur. I am thankful to all the people who have helped and encouraged me, especially my wife, Loretta. Most of all, though, I am grateful to G-d for the family I have been blessed with. One thing is for certain. I most definitely do not feel cut off anymore.

Avi Engel, the only member of his immediate family born in the United States, recalls being told on many occasions as a child that he was the only family member that could be the president. He is a psychotherapist and credits many of his abilities to understand people to his experiences growing up as the child of Holocaust survivors. He lives in Los Angeles.