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Online Holocaust databases aid search for history

By JAMES HANNAH (Associated Press Writer)
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SPRINGFIELD, Ohio - Malka Shaham knew little about how her parents had survived the Holocaust. They didn't talk about it as she was growing up, and she didn't ask many questions.

But when she began taking care of her ailing father at her home in Israel's Negev desert during the final years of his life - when he no longer had full control of his words and thoughts - he began speaking of the Holocaust for the first time. Sometimes the revelations came during nightmares.

"In his sleep he was shouting that the Nazis were beating and degrading him," she said.

Shaham, 54, decided to try to find out everything she could about what her parents, David and Frieda Fogel, had endured in Poland during World War II. She found clues in an online database of survivors and victims of the genocide that killed approximately 6 million Jews, compiled by a Wittenberg University professor in this western Ohio city.

Such databases are becoming increasingly popular as they go online. Children and grandchildren of aging Holocaust survivors try to find long-lost relatives and fill in family history made hazy by missing records, faded memories and the fear of survivors that they will relive the horror by talking about it.

Many victims stopped looking for information in the late 1940s and '50s and tried to put the death camps, forced labor and confinement to ghettos behind them, said Steven Vitto, a researcher for the Registry of Holocaust Survivors at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

"But these questions are coming up again," Vitto said. "Survivors are getting older and starting to talk. Grandchildren are getting interested. They're asking questions they never asked before."

The museum has compiled millions of personal records. Some of the documents were supplied by Dan Kazez, the Wittenberg music professor who in 2003 founded the Czestochowa-Radomsko Area Research Group. The group locates, types and indexes records of survivors and victims of the genocide who were in Poland or left the country during the Holocaust.

Documents include survivor lists, slave labor lists, ghetto registrations, real estate indexes and census data. And there is obscure information such as a list of ditch diggers, 20 people who left a small Polish village in 1937, and the names of Polish children who arrived in Great Britain.

"We have things no one's ever seen," Kazez said. "There are huge quantities of data here. It's mind-boggling."

He collects information from state archives in Poland and the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. Over the years, 300 volunteer typists have converted records to computer files, including 2,400 digital photographs Kazez took of records at the Cincinnati archives.

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The Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem has about 12 million Holocaust-era records, primarily about those who perished. Since the material was put online in November 2004, more than 6 million people from nearly every country in the world have used the database.

"We have many stories of people finding relatives they never knew about through the database," said memorial spokesman Zvi Bernhardt.

JewishGen, a League City, Texas-based genealogical organization, has more than 1 million Holocaust records online. It averages 4,800 new registered users every month.

Since Kazez put the Poland database online Oct. 3, use of it has jumped tenfold. A recent sampling showed the most interest coming from residents of Poland, France, Israel and the United States.

Shaham discovered a list of survivors from Krakow, Poland, including her grandparents and father. She found out that both her father and grandfather were in labor camps and that her father worked as a locksmith. She found their prisoner numbers.

However, she couldn't find any labor-camp records for her aunt, doesn't know if she is alive, and is still searching for her.

"I cannot explain the excitement which overcomes me when I join fragments of information into my partial mosaic patchwork, knowing that I really have a clear proof to the fact that they were there," said Shaham, whose parents have since died.

Henry Simmons, 79, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, used the databank to dig up information on relatives.

In 1942, the Nazis took 16-year-old Simmons from his Polish village and sent him to work at a nearby rail yard. He never saw his parents again. They and his sister died at the Treblinka death camp.

After the war, Simmons returned to Poland to look for surviving relatives but didn't stay long.

"There were too many bad memories," he said. "I never spoke that much about it."

Stefanie Seltzer, president of the Philadelphia-based World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust, said many of the 54 chapters around the world are reporting a surge in interest in finding relatives.

The information is more available and as survivors get older, they want to give their children and grandchildren a greater sense of family because many survivors have few relatives, she said.

Kazez, a cellist who specializes in Jewish-inspired classical music, began building the Poland database after collecting information about his own family during a music tour of Poland in 1999.

Before he started on the project, he thought his relatives had escaped the Holocaust untouched. Now he believes hundreds of them died.

"It's my duty to do this," Kazez said. "There are a lot of people out there that are searching and just not getting the information. If they want to know if their half brother died in the Holocaust, I want them to find it."

Vitto said the purpose of the Holocaust was to wipe out the identity of a whole group of people.

"We are - name by name - building that back up," he said.

On the Net:

Czestochowa-Radomsko Area Research Group: <http://www.CRARG.org/>

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:
<http://www.ushmm.org/remembrance/registry/index.php?contentofferings/>

Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial: <http://www.yadvashem.org/>

JewishGen: <http://www.jewishgen.org/>

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