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Separated After The Holocaust, Reunited By Facebook

After 65 years, two brothers find their long-lost friend thanks to an Internet-savvy grandson.

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It was a tale of World War II: concentration camps, death marches, starvation — and Facebook.

Amid tears, laughter and hugs, three Holocaust survivors — childhood friends from the same hometown of Hajdúdorog, Hungary — reunited for the first time in 65 years in New Jersey this week. Though they have fond memories of playing on a soccer team together, their strongest bonds developed in 1945, as they were struggling to survive on a three-week death march from the Russian front to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. One of them saved the other's life.

The five Rosenfeld brothers — Jack, Marty, Joe, Max and Abie — were rounded up in Hungary in 1944 and brought to the ghetto in the neighboring town of Debrecen. Like 70 percent of Hungary's Jews, they were set on a train to Auschwitz. Somehow, they — along with their friend and neighbor Imre Mayer — were diverted to Vienna, where they were placed in a forced labor camp. It was then that they were separated: Jack and Marty were sent with Mayer to the Russian front, to dig trenches to trap oncoming tanks. Joe, Max and Abie, the youngest brothers, remained behind in Vienna.

"We were there to clean debris and pick up body pieces," said Joe Rosenfeld, now 79. The city was under constant bombing attacks from Allied forces. This work continued until 1945, when the surviving Jews were set on a death march to Mauthausen, a concentration camp over 100 miles away. "Half of the people died," said Joe. "We were starving, we had no food — once in a while we had a little dirt water. I was shot," he said, pointing to a scar on his hand.



Jack Rosenfeld, left and Amram Meir, right.



Jack, Marty and Imre Mayer were also marching to Mauthausen, from a city on the Austria-Hungary border. “We were there close to a year without heat,” said Jack. “We ate soup with worms in it.” But in March 1945 they started out on a three-week trek to the Mauthausen camp. Weakened from a year of hard labor and starvation, Mayer was struggling to continue walking. “We were without food, without water, without anything,” said Jack. “He said to me and Marty, ‘I am not going anymore,’ he sat down.” For three days, Jack and Marty carried their friend, saving his life, until they reached their destination.

“If you didn’t continue in the march,” said Mayer, who now goes by Amram Meir, the Hebraized version of his name, “then that’s it, they shot you in the head.”

When they reached Mauthausen, they encountered the Rosenfelds’ other three brothers, Joe, Max and Abie, who all managed to survive the war. In May 1945, the remaining guards at the camp rigged the barracks with dynamite, intending to ignite it when Russian or American forces got close. But the night that it was set to explode, the charges malfunctioned, saving the lives of the almost 80,000 inmates. The next day, American soldiers liberated the camp. After liberation, the families — which both had survived intact with their siblings and parents — recovered in hospitals before going their separate ways. The Rosenfelds moved to the United States, Meir immigrated to Israel and the friends lost touch completely.

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of him for 65 years,” said Jack, now 81, who previously hired investigators that were unsuccessful in tracking down his friend. Instead the hero of the day was 15-year old Michael Rosenfeld, Jack’s great-nephew and the grandson of Marty — who died in 1992. “He is a genius with the computer,” said Jack. After being set to the task by his grandmother, Michael, a sophomore at Rambam Mesivta High School in Long Island, managed to locate Meir’s niece on Facebook, the popular social networking site.

“I sent her a message and said ‘Do you have an uncle Imre Mayer?’” said Michael. The next day she responded, “Yes, I do,” providing Michael with his phone number in Toronto. And she also had to ask — “How did you find me?”

The answer is that it wasn’t easy, especially with Meir having changed his Hungarian name, but

weeks of web searching uncovered a family tree linking Meir with his niece, Ruth Szinai-Witty. “I didn’t think there was anyone else with that name,” said Michael. The Facebook exchange occurred last November, and the reunion was planned for this summer, when Meir visited his son Gadi, who lives in nearby Montclair, N.J.

“I’ve heard about these boys for years and years,” said Gadi, who was eager to hear stories from the two brothers. Gadi was also interested in what else Michael uncovered in his searching — a Swiss bank account in Meir’s father’s name.

“The Internet connects everything together,” said Michael. “Even from 65 years ago, even though he changed his name.”

And 65 years after they parted, Joe, Jack and Amram were reunited at Jack’s house in Teaneck, N.J. On a sunny Monday afternoon, surrounded by their children and grandchildren and a spread of roast beef, salads and fruit, the old friends hugged and cried as they reminisced about their childhoods and caught up on the past six decades.

“He was so excited for this,” said Lisa Rosenfeld, of her father Joe. The day was “very emotional” for him, said Joe.

Among the three of them, they have 10 children, dozens of grandchildren and a handful of great-grandchildren, many of them present for the reunion.

“The last time I saw him was in Mauthausen, I was 16,” said Meir, now 81. “They look the same. Identical.”

Said Jack of his friend: “He’s better-looking now.”

New York Facebook holocaust survivors Reuniting technology
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