

Coincidences?

By Robert Messing, Woodstock, NY

This is a story about the will to survive and fate and coincidences. The story is difficult to explain and could be considered fictitious. Except it actually happened.

This story begins with my cousin, Nina Grutz, who was born in 1920 and lived at 10 Kopernika Street in L'vov (Lemberg), Poland. Nina was the only one of my Grandmother's family to survive the Holocaust. Her experiences during World War II included spending time in the L'vov Ghetto and in the Janowska labor camp. One of her most harrowing moments was being lined up with other Jewish women in the Polish forest in front of a pit and being shot by Nazi executioners. However, even though she fell into the pit with all of the other women, by some miracle, she was not killed.

Following the war, Nina married Joseph Morecki and came to the US under the sponsorship of my grandfather. After spending a short time in the lower East Side of Manhattan, Nina, her husband Joseph, and her two daughters, Lynn and Carol, moved to California.

Carol

We now fast forward to 2014. Nina, who had been living with Carol, had recently passed away after having a happy and fulfilled life. She got great pleasure giving talks to school children and telling them about her experiences during World War II. Despite what she endured during the war, her message was always one of tolerance.

One day, while browsing in a bookstore, Carol picked up a book called "The Girl in the Green Sweater" by Kristine Chiger Keren and began leafing through it. Suddenly, she became transfixed by what she read. Among other historical details, the author was from L'vov, Poland, Nina's home town, and her address was 12 Kopernika Street. Nina and her family had lived at 10 Kopernika Street, the house next door.

Carol could not believe her eyes. Here was someone who could possibly open up a window into her mother's life before the War. Carol called me to ask if I could track down the author and see if she would be willing to talk to her.

Kristine

After surviving the Holocaust, Kristine Chiger Keren moved to the US and became a dentist in Long Island, New York. I was able to find out that she was still alive and she even had an email address. I emailed her, introduced myself, and asked her if she would speak to Carol about life in L'vov before the War. She told me that when she lived in L'vov, at 12 Kopernika Street, she was a very small girl and did not remember any of her neighbors. Unfortunately for Carol, Kristine could give her no further insights into Nina's life before the war. But my contact with her marked a pivotal point in this story.

Kristine had a fascinating and horrible tale to tell. During the war, she and her family were forced to live in the L'vov Ghetto, the same ghetto where Nina was incarcerated. When life became intolerable in the ghetto, Kristine and 21 other Jews hid in the L'vov sewer system for 14 months.

Life in those sewers was filthy and dangerous beyond imagination. There was always the terror of being discovered by the Nazis and being killed. As incredible as it sounds, a number of the

group survived the ordeal. They were assisted by a righteous Polish gentile, who risked his life for them. Today, Kristine is the last remaining survivor of the group. A movie called "In Darkness" was made in 2012 about life in the L'vov sewers. The movie was nominated for an Oscar award. At the end of one of Kristine's emails, she mentioned that she had a friend, Alicia, who was incarcerated in the Warsaw Ghetto, the place of the most heroic Jewish armed uprising against the Nazis during the War. She said her friend and her husband now lived in Woodstock, NY, where I live. I did not know Kristine's friend.

Alicia

Less than a month after my email correspondence with Kristine, I was in the Rite-Aid drug store in Woodstock waiting to get my flu shot. Behind me was a woman who was also waiting, and we started to talk. She told me she was from Warsaw and spent time in the Warsaw Ghetto. When I told her my family was from L'vov, she told me that she had friends from L'vov. It turned out that the person I was talking to, in the drug store aisle where they had Nyquil, Tylenol and Aleve, was the friend that Kristine had asked me about, one month before. I was now able to write back to Kristine and tell her that I had met her friend, in the most unusual of circumstances. Against all odds

Thinking about all these events amazes me. What are the odds that Nina's daughter, Carol, while browsing in a California bookstore in 2014, would pick up a book written by a woman named Kristine, who in 1939, lived in L'vov, Poland, next door to the house where Carol's mother, Nina lived? What are the odds that this same Kristine, in order to survive, had to live in the L'vov sewers? What are the odds that of all of the people in her family, Nina was the only one to survive? And, what are the odds that I, waiting for a flu shot in a Rite-Aid drug store, would discover that the woman standing behind me was one of the few survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto and was the woman that Kristine had asked me if I knew? As I review these stories of survival against all odds, I am amazed at the coincidences that have occurred over seven decades and across 7,000 miles.