

News

Telling the Jewish American story one family at a time

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MINK FAMILY

David Mink's mother, Sylvia Pseny, then 6, with her mother, Dora, in 1918, and her father, Jacob, sometime after 1920. The photo on the left is an original, while the photo on the right is a composite made after Sylvia and her mother immigrated to the U.S. in 1920.



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David Mink and Rachel Rothstein are strangers separated by 800 miles, but they've been bound together throughout their lives by the single greatest tragedy in modern Jewish history.

Some of their forebears survived the Holocaust, some did not. Some made it to America on ships, others perished in concentration camps.

Yet until the retired businessman from Philadelphia and the school teacher from Atlanta joined a nationwide digital story-sharing project, the twining threads of their families' sagas — of genocide in Poland, of escape, of new beginnings in a new land — were unknown to each other.

With [Re:collection](#), a just-launched initiative of the [National Museum of American Jewish History](#) in Philadelphia, the Mink and Rothstein narratives will be linked online with other stories, photos, documents, audio recordings and videos from what museum officials hope will be thousands of contributors. The vision: an intimate telling of the Jewish American story, one family at a time.

“In this new universe of technology, devices, and the changing landscape of how we collect memories, it's no longer about putting photos in a shoe box,” said Josh Perelman, the museum's chief curator. “It's in the cloud.”

By going to a [sign-in page](#), anyone can log in to the platform, create a free account, and upload family stories and mementos. Then they are organized into a timeline, mapped according to geographic references, arranged by theme, and tagged for sharing. The program includes privacy settings so contributors can control access to their personal postings.

“You can share that great photo of your grandma holding her brisket, but with Re:collection you can add a note about how great it smelled,” said Jennifer Isakowitz, a museum spokeswoman and digital marketing manager. “Where



CHIP FOX/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

David Mink, 70, former owner of the Sansom Street Oyster House, is adding family photos to the Re:collection project.

social media is immediate and ephemeral in recounting our daily lives, this breathes life into tradition, genealogy, and allows you tell stories of long past — or yesterday.”

Announced around the High Holy Days, which end at sundown Saturday with Yom Kippur, the project also is a way for the Smithsonian-affiliated museum to raise its profile and enhance its engagement among audiences. Annual attendance stands at about

100,000 – far less than the anticipated number when it opened in 2010. After operating at a deficit for several years, the museum has undergone [a major restructuring](#), eliminating 18 full-time staff positions and reducing weekday hours.

The idea for Re:collection took shape on a napkin, in a doodle made by former board member Ira Saligman during a meeting. Saligman, of Wayne, who died last summer when a World War II-era plane he was piloting caught fire at Allegheny County Airport, had a vision for using technology to give “continuity and connection” to Jewish families, said his sister, Laury.

“When Ira told us about it, he did it in such a funny way,” she said. “Our family was at dinner, arguing about some silly thing, like whether the soup was too hot or too cold, and he said, ‘Can everybody be quiet now, because this idea will change the course of Jews in America.’”

The museum found a technology partner in [Enwoven](#), an Oakland, Calif.-based firm that created the storytelling platform. Enwoven co-founder Niles X. Lichtenstein was inspired to develop it by the discovery of his father’s old rock and soul records four years ago. The collection – Beatles, Motown, Eagles – led the tech entrepreneur to learn more about his dad, who died when Lichtenstein was 13. He then developed an online time capsule for what he found.

The Philadelphia museum is the first such institution to adopt the technology.

Laury Saligman says she has little information about her family’s history in a town near Kiev before her ancestors immigrated to the United States, but Re:collection will help her preserve current-day history and “allow my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to know something about my life.”

For David Mink, former owner of the Sansom Street Oyster House, Re:collection is the first step in chronicling his family history online. He has uploaded two photos of his mother, Sylvia Pseny, who immigrated to America from Siedlice, Poland, in 1920. Mink discovered the pictures, along with more than 100 others, in a department store box after his mother’s death in 1994.

Among them was a snapshot of two of her cousins. On the back was a request from their father in Yiddish to send a ticket for passage to the U.S. The family was never able to travel, and was killed in the Holocaust.

“This was a story my mother kept inside her. Never talked about life in Europe or her family in Europe,” said Mink, 70. Until he opened the box, he said, he hadn’t known his mother had a sister who died of meningitis when she was 5.

In Atlanta, social studies teacher Rachel Rothstein is using Re:collection for a project in her 11th grade class in modern Jewish history.

Students at [Weber School](#) are gathering family stories on immigration, and uploading photos and other information they collect. “This is a good way for students to understand that their families are part of larger trends and places them into a larger historical context,” said Rothstein, who has added her own family pictures.

Her grandfather escaped from Poland, but the rest of his family perished in the Holocaust. Her grandmother, from Czechoslovakia, was sent to Auschwitz, where she was reunited with her sister. Both survived, and later resettled in the U.S.

That story is uploaded on Re:collection and linked to the story of Mink’s grandparents, which will eventually be connected to others.

“It’s important to tell these stories,” Mink said. “I am sure one day somebody will look at [my family history] and say, ‘Hmm, they were from Siedlice? Some of my family is from Siedlice.’ And then, who knows?”