

Dealing with Relationships That Are Known But Cannot Be Proven: A Case Study

by Israel Pickholtz

Many researchers, particularly those who are working on very large families or single-surname projects, reach a point where a particular relationship can be deduced, but cannot quite be proven. Naming patterns may fit and the times and places are plausible, but neither documentation nor oral testimony exists that even remotely might be considered proof. If you “know” that Reuven is the father of Shimon, do you link them as such, with a note that there is no direct evidence—or do you leave Shimon with no father, but add a note indicating that his father is almost surely Reuven?

What should the conscientious genealogist do? Record the relationship as fact, without evidence? Or leave open a question when you are certain that you “know” the answer? If left open, gaps and loose ends exist in the genealogy for no good reason. But if the relationship is recorded as fact, the risk exists that the genealogist may never re-examine the decision in light of new source material. Certainly one’s research heirs won’t think to do so. How to decide?

In evaluating each individual case, I have found it useful to ask myself the following questions:

- What kind of proof might be sufficient and how likely is it that I can get it?
- Does accepting the assumption serve a purpose?
- Does my documentation establish my assumption “beyond a reasonable doubt”?
- What other scenarios might fit, and how likely are they to be correct?
- Does any conflicting evidence exist?
- Am I engaging in any wishful thinking?
- Do any issues of *shalom bayit* (peace in the home) exist?

In addition to addressing these questions, after I have decided that I “know” something, my policy is to make linkage between two people only after I have found one additional piece of supporting evidence. The following case—and its unexpected epilogue—arises from a dilemma encountered in my work on my Pikhholz Project. The Pikhholz Project attempts to identify all Pikhholz descendants and to reconnect all the Pikhholz (and variant surnames) families.*

Is Yaakov the Son of Peretz and Perl?

The 1940 gravestone of Barney Pikhholz in the Progressive Skalater section of New York City’s Mount Zion Cemetery shows his Hebrew name as Peretz ben Yaakov. Peretz is a relatively uncommon Ashkenazic name, so it seems reasonable to think that all Pikhholz descendants with that name belonged to the same family. At the time I saw the grave (January 1999), this was my single encounter with

Y A A K O V B E R L, Eti-Jetti	name	928 267	Arabs file number
geb. P I C K H O L Z	maternal name		
Jakob u. Henia Malka	parents names	nos.	region
12.6.1883 Skalat/Polen	birth date & place	poln.	citizenship
1940/1941 v. Lemberg u. Sibir	deportiert		deported from Lwow to Siberia 1940/1941
	Kopiejsk interniert/ befreit		
1942 nach Iran	to Iran 1942		
1943 v. Iran nach Israel	Iran to Israel 1943		

Index card in the International Tracing Service Central Names Index researched at Yad Vashem which traces the route Eti-Jetti Margel took to escape to Israel

the name Peretz in any of the Pikhholz families I had researched.

Some time before JRI-Poland began working with the east Galician records in the Polish Central Archives of Historical Research (AGAD), Jacob Laor and I ordered a private search at AGAD for Pikhholz records. Among the records we ordered were birth records of the children of this Yaakov (father of sthe Barney/Peretz buried in New York) and Yaakov’s wife, Henie Malka Ginsberg—all of them in Skalat, the home of many Pikhholz families, including my own. Unfortunately, the search failed to find any indication of Yaakov’s father. Nor do other Pikhholz family members appear as *sandak* (person given the honor of holding the baby’s head during a ritual circumcision—often a grandfather) witnesses. A death record for Yaakov, which we have been unable to locate, might have shown his parents’ names. Moreover, from other evidence, I know that neither of Barney/Peretz’s two children bear names that reflect any other of Yaakov’s descendants.

Eventually we found an older couple named Peretz Pikhholz and Perl Nagler living in Skalat. They appear as grandparents on the birth records of the children of four mothers, Chaja Nesia, Basie Ruchel, Sure, and Blime. The Galician birth records show the mothers’ parents, but not the fathers’ parents, so no evidence indicates that Yaakov (or anyone else) is a son of Peretz and Perl.

We have a death record for a Peretz Pikhholz that records his death on November 25, 1873, at age 53. It seems reasonable to record this Peretz as the same Peretz married to Perl Nagler. Peretz ben Yaakov was born in 1878, as was Peretz Scharf, the son of Peretz and Perl’s daughter, Bassie Ruchel. Another daughter had a son Peretz in 1891. Is this enough evidence to claim that Yaakov, the father of the Barney buried in Mount Zion Cemetery, is the son of Peretz

and Perl? Perhaps, but I felt I needed something additional, because an alternate scenario is possible. Perhaps Peretz and Perl had no sons and Yaakov was a nephew. Perhaps Peretz, having no male heir, treated Yaakov much like his own, and eventually Yaakov named a son for him. Of course, since we know nothing of Peretz's parents or siblings, this is purely conjecture. Yet this second scenario is sufficiently possible that it dictates care with the conclusion that Yaakov is, indeed, Peretz's son. We have no death record for Peretz's wife, Perl, nor do we seem to have grandchildren or great-grandchildren named for her.

Using the genealogical convention that a woman's first child was born when she was 22 and a man's when he was 25, we reached the family structure shown in Figure 1 with Peretz and Perl's four documented daughters and one probable son.

In the course of developing the Pikholtz Project, we analyzed house numbers in the towns of Skalat and Rozdol where many Pikholtz families lived. We had birth records for eight of the nine children born to Yaakov and Henie Malka. Seven of the eight births (the first in 1877) occurred in house number 418 in Skalat. The third birth of the eight is recorded as having occurred in house number 408, which I believe was a clerical error. No birth from any other Pikholtz family is in house 418 (or 408, for that matter).

One other recorded event happened in this house—Peretz's death in 1873. Whether this was Yaakov's house at the time of Peretz's death, we do not know, because Yaakov's first child was not born until 1877. In any event, certainly we may assume that Yaakov named his son after this Peretz, but as I theorized above, perhaps Yaakov was Peretz's nephew, and Peretz had no sons of his own.

Nevertheless, I considered the death of Peretz to be the "one additional piece of supporting evidence" that I require and that, although an alternative explanation is possible, no contradictory evidence is known. Given the records we had, I could not see any other record that was likely either to prove or disprove the theory that Yaakov is the son of Peretz and Perl. Although the relationship is not an absolutely proven fact, it seems true beyond a reasonable doubt. As it happens, one descendant of Peretz/Barney is a judge, who agrees that this passes the "beyond a reasonable doubt" test. I have merged the two families into one and consider the case closed—with a qualifying note in the database.

Epilogue

I participated in a field trip by the English-language section of the Israel Genealogical Society's Jerusalem Branch to Yad Vashem soon after the new International Tracing Service (ITS) name index was made available in early 2008. My first search was for the name Pikholtz; several names were listed that did not appear in the earlier ITS index. Some were totally unknown to me. One of these was Eti-Jetti Margel, daughter of Jakob and Henie Malka Pikholtz of Skalat—clearly a sister of Barney/Peretz.

It seems that Jetti had made her way to Israel via Iran in

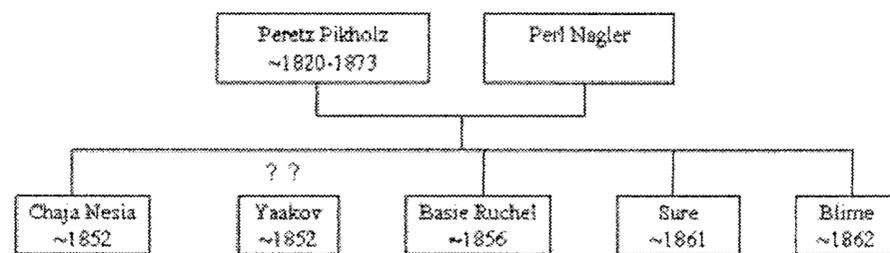


Figure 1

1943. Another card showed her inquiring about the fate of her daughter Paulina, who had been left behind in Poland. That card gave her Jerusalem address in 1946. The journey from that discovery to Jetti's 1970 Jerusalem grave was simple. The burial society gave me the name of a second daughter who survived Eti-Jetti. Finding that daughter took quite a few months, and in October 2008, I met with Jetti Pikholtz Margel's sole surviving descendant, a granddaughter, Liorit, in Jerusalem. Liorit showed me a family tree that had been made by her mother's cousin, Lucia, in Tel Aviv. That cousin was a granddaughter of Sure Pikholtz Kornberg, the daughter of Perl Pikholtz. Peretz had died so much earlier than Sure that Liorit had not known his name. Lucia knew nothing of Barney in New York or other family in the United States.

The tree showed two children of Perl—Sure and Yaakov. Not only were they siblings, they were twins. In a story where we thought there was no more evidence to be found, here was new testimony from living descendants, happily enough, advancing our conclusions to "beyond a shadow of a doubt."

Note

*See "Given Name Analysis: A Tool for Single-Surname Research and Very Large Families," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, Winter 2002.

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