



I'm Jewish? Family secret hidden from the Nazis

'Suddenly you are taking on thousands of years of painful history'

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STUART LAIDLAW
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Imagine this.

You've got a new job and the local paper is doing a story about you. When the reporter calls for the interview, he informs you that – despite being raised Catholic – you are, in fact, Jewish.

And your relatives died in the Holocaust.

That's what happened to Madeline Albright a decade ago shortly after she was named the first female secretary of state for the U.S. The revelation shook her to her core.

"Suddenly you are taking on thousands of years of history, thousands of years of painful history," says Barbara Kessel, author of *Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover Their Jewish Roots*, who is in Toronto this week for Holocaust Education Week.

Albright's discovery led her, six months later, to the Old Jewish Cemetery of Prague and the Pinkas Synagogue, where the names of her paternal grandparents, Olga and Arnost Korbek, are listed among 77,000 Czech and Slovak victims of the Holocaust.

Like many Jews unaware of their history, Albright's had been lost in the escape from the Holocaust.

Parents hid children with non-Jewish families, and never returned to collect them after the war.

Others left Europe and denied their Jewish heritage as a way to escape anti-Semitism. Even in North America, where they were supposedly safe, their fear was so great that they could



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

"I really wanted this to be in their voice," says Suddenly Jewish author Barbara Kessel of those she interviewed. (Nov. 6, 2008)

In preparation for writing her book, Suddenly Jewish, Barbara Kessel took out a simple ad in The New York Times Book Review and on several websites. These are some of the responses she received:

"I was born in Poland, raised Catholic, immigrated to the U.S. in '59 at age 7, and learned at 22 (the night before my Roman Catholic wedding) that both my parents were Holocaust survivors and that all of our family is Jewish."

never admit to being Jewish.

That's journalist Kati Marton's story. While working on an article about the Holocaust, she interviewed an elderly couple who had survived Auschwitz – when suddenly they told her they had known Marton's maternal grandparents in the camp.

They didn't survive.

Marton, like many others, was at first angry that her parents had kept this from her. But she soon came to accept that for many who had survived, it was impossible to shake the belief it could one day be dangerous again to be Jewish.

"My parents must have thought they were protecting us," Marton recalls in the book.

She had come to Albright's defence when her story was met with skepticism and indignation by people across the United States, many of whom doubted it was possible for someone to be so unaware of her own family history.

"How could she not know?" asks Kessel, summing up the reaction of many.

Perhaps more disturbingly, some people reacted by saying they "knew" Albright was Jewish, Kessel says.

Albright's story got Kessel wondering about others who discovered late in life they were Jewish. She took out a small notice in *The New York Times Book Review* asking for people in a similar situation.

She was flooded by responses, and eventually interviewed more than 160 people for the book, in which she reprints the interviews almost verbatim with the least amount of her own writing and interpretation she could get away with.

"I really wanted this to be in their voice," she says.

The result is a book that began with a simple oddity – people who didn't know they were Jewish suddenly finding they were – and ended as a look at identity and how we define ourselves.

Many of those interviewed abandoned whatever Christian faith they had been raised with to embrace Judaism, with some becoming leaders in the Jewish community – even rabbis.

Fourteen of those she met had converted to Judaism before they found out that, heretically, they already were Jewish. Like the others, these 14 said they always felt more like Jews than Christians, that something about their Christian lives was never a good fit.

Kessel admits that she wondered for a time if there was something mystical in such stories, or whether faith, traditions and belief systems eventually become part of our genetic codes.

More likely, she says now, the Jewish rites around diet or social outlook morphed over time into family traditions and mannerisms that echoed Judaism and made it seem a good fit once it was rediscovered.

"When we found out my family was Jewish, my wife's reaction was, 'Boy, I'm glad you're not an anti-Semite.' My first reaction was, 'I'm glad you're not!'"

"I was glad to find out I'm Jewish. I got rid of Christmas, Heaven and Hell – all in the same day!"

"Well, the world caved in. How could I go on to be a priest if I wasn't even Catholic? I abandoned everything ... Today I am an observant Jew. If you ask me what I believe, that is a complicated question."

"It awakened memories that were not even conscious," Kessel says.

While most of the people she spoke to were the children of Holocaust survivors, others were descendants of Jews who had escaped the pogroms of Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Some even traced their Jewish heritage to the Spanish Inquisition more than 500 years ago, when Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism. Despite this, many to this day secretly maintain their Jewish heritage even though they remain Catholic to the outside world.