

MY SOUL HAS FOUND ITS HOME

by Shirley Gindler-Price

Out of the 95,000 US Occupation babies born in Germany shortly after WWII, there were approximately 5000 of us, post WWII Afro-German children, so-called Negro mulatto babies, better known as German 'Brown Babies.' Born to German women and African-American soldiers, the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany) deemed that we formed a special group, presenting a human and racial problem of a special nature. Our national and cultural heritage [and perhaps even our religious birthright] were seen to be in direct contrast to our skin color.

Born in Nuremberg Germany, my mutti and I eventually moved to Ansbach, where at the age of two, I would be given up for adoption. As it was with so many other post WWII German 'Brown Babies,' I was adopted by an African American military couple stationed in Germany.

My loving parents, Baptist Christians, were not very religious. I don't ever recall going to church with them. In-between tours of duty, when we would visit with my mother's family, that is when going to church became an issue. "That baby needs church," my grandmother would fuss. My mother eventually relented and allowed me to go to church with her.

Dressed in Sunday's finest (courtesy of my grandmother), off to church we went. Having never been in a church before, I didn't know what to expect. When I walked through the doors, I felt frightened. There was something about the energy that made me feel uneasy; I began to cry. My grandmother laid my head on her lap, and as I softly wept, I felt lonely; I began to wail. Frustrated that she could not console me, my grandmother left church early and took me home. Amusingly, she never again made an issue of my going to church.

In my 40s, I'd finally arrived at a point where I was prepared to deal with my adoption. No more denial. No more feeling guilty for the need to know my origins.

Although there was no indication on my birth certificate that my mother or I was Jewish, from my research, I knew my surname 'Gindler' was considered to be of Russian Jewish origin. Now it was time to explore my Jewish heritage as well.

As I read my very first book on Judaism, it was like a light switched on in me. The rituals and customs seemed oddly familiar. When I finished the book, I knew my soul had found what it had been longing for: Its spiritual home.

I immediately began an Intro to Judaism class. During that same time, I also located my birth mother. Sadly, a few weeks after locating her,



"In search of my mother's garden, I found my own." ~Alice Walker

my adoptive mother passed away. I shared what was happening with the class rabbi. He wanted me to share my unfolding story with the class, but I couldn't. The incredible joy and then the devastating sorrow was almost too much to bare. Almost. It was my study of Judaism and Jewish mourning practices that kept me from falling completely apart.

My birth mother and a male half-sibling had emigrated from Germany to the US around 1965-66. They had been living in Brooklyn for some 35+ years when I located them. A Holocaust survivor; my birth-mother had not been in a concentration camp. She survived by doing whatever she needed to do to live, and that seemed to include denying being Jewish.

When I visited with her and told her that I had embraced Judaism, she exclaimed in her strong German accent, "Vhy would you vant to be a Jew?! My aunt researched and found there ist no Jewish blood for 1200 years!" When I told my sponsoring rabbi about her and what she said, he wittily said, "Who says that but a crazy Jew."

Interestingly, when she and I were alone and seated at her dining room table, she whispered to me that the candle holders on the table were for Shabbat. I told her that I had noticed them. She smiled. She then whispered, "I have a menorah. Do you want to see it?" Of course," I whispered too, even though there was no one else in the room but us. She then scampered over to a closet, dug deep in the back and hauled out a huge, beautiful heirloom-looking menorah. She held it up proudly and seemed quite thrilled to share her secret with me. As we, mother and daughter looked into each other's eyes, there was an unspoken understanding; we were Jews. And I sensed, at least for a moment, that my mutti was proud. She was proud of me and proud to be Jewish.

I finished my Intro class and found a wonderful Rabbi to sponsor my conversion. I eventually became a member of his synagogue. However, navigating through the Jewish community was

not easy. I was beyond happy to have found my way back to my religious roots. However, it had never occurred to me that some people would not be glad to see me; not welcome me because of my brown skin.

Throughout the years, I've developed wonderful friendships with Jews of all colors, and I will cherish them forever. I've also been subject to racism, prejudice, rude and insensitive behavior in the Jewish community. Some Jews assume that I'm not Jewish because I'm not white. Some, even after hearing my story, still question my Jewishness or insist that I'm only half Jewish even though I've converted as well. And then there are others who just don't understand that I don't want their attention; that I didn't want to have to write this essay.

Some years ago, while attending a multiracial Jewish retreat, I shared my experiences as a Jewish woman of color. I explained that I had wonderful friends who invited me to Jewish events, but having grown tired of looking into cold, unfriendly faces and treated as an intruder, I was often reluctant to go. I was then asked a question: "Given the negative experiences you've had in the Jewish community, why do you stay?"

I smiled with the realization that after sharing the personal details of my life experiences, this person still didn't get it. She could not grasp that I could no more turn my back on being Jewish than she could. She didn't understand that unlike my mutti, who out of fear and perhaps even shame, felt the need to hide being a Jew; I cherished my Jewish heritage. When I walk into my synagogue, and the service begins, a sense of peace comes over me. When my voice blends with my choir mates and the entire congregation sways and sings Avinu Malkenu, and we are all moved to tears, a sense of belonging envelopes me. I finally know who I am and where I belong. I told the person, "Leaving is not an option; my soul has found its home."

Shirley Gindler-Price lives in Mt Airy, Philadelphia, PA with her husband of 40+ years, four adult children, a son-in-law, and one very special granddaughter. She is the owner of the website MochaJuden.com and the FaceBook page United Colors of Judaism; both serve to illuminate the multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural aspects of the global Jewish community. She is the founding president of the Black German Cultural Society, an organization that offers support and resources to post WWII German-born, US occupation children survivors and their families (afrogermans.us). She is also a former president of the Jewish Multiracial Network. Shirley is a member of and sings in the choir of Congregation Beth Or. She is surviving breast cancer. B"H.