An especially rewarding moment in the course of my career in journalism was witnessing the closing of a circle. In Chave Heftler’s house in Jerusalem, surrounded by documents bearing silent testimony, the circle was closed; all that is left to do is to shed an emotional tear.

Today, for the first time in over six decades, she can finally express her heartfelt gratitude to her true mother, who at age twenty-seven ran frantically, pushing a baby carriage before her, and approached a young Polish woman, pleading with her to save her baby daughter. “I did not merit to know my mother, but I am full of gratitude to my mother, who gave her life so that I might live,” says Chave.

Suddenly, Chave adds another sentence that leaves me frozen in place for a long moment: “I am so grateful to you, too. Write that in your article, please. Your writing began a chain of events, and your previous article led me to some wonderful people who helped me. The chain of events you began enabled me to learn who I really am.”

Chave is referring to an article first published five years ago in the pages of Hamodia, titled “Who Am I?” I’ll give a brief summary of the story, stopping at the point where events took a providential twist. Those of you who are familiar with the story, as well as those who are reading it for the first time, will undoubtedly be amazed by the Divine Hand evident in the way events unfolded.

The saga begins with the birth of an infant girl to unknown parents somewhere in Poland during World War II.

After the war ended, the Vaad Hatzalah of Agudath Israel, as well as individuals acting independently, began the effort to save Jewish children who had been secreted away with Poles. This proved to be a daunting task since the children usually were undocumented, and many Polish families, often under the guidance of the Roman Catholic Church, refused to give them up or to come forth with any information about them.
Someone told the group about a Jewish infant who had been entrusted to a Polish family, and they succeeded in tracking down that family. At first the group tried convincing the Polish family to return the child to her people, but the wife adamantly refused. “I promised her mother that I would return the child to no one other than her,” she insisted. The volunteers eventually resorted to bribing a housemaid to leave a window unlocked, and late that night they absconded with the small child, who they had wrapped in a blanket.

“That is the only memory I have of my Polish home — leaving it.”

So begins Chave Heftler’s story. She has turned over this recollection thousands of times in her mind’s eye, clearly trying to coax out another shard of memory from the thick fog that covers those years: A small child, bundled up, sits in a quickly moving horse-drawn wagon, blackness surrounding her as they speed through the night. This is how the fragment of memory begins and ends.

A photograph exists of Chave as a young girl, perhaps four years old, standing in a group of children near a bus, just after being smuggled past the Polish border near Cieszyn on the Czechoslovakian frontier.

After stops in Prague, and in Barbizon, France, the group of children eventually arrived in Fublaines, France. There they were taken to a Jewish orphanage under the auspices of Agudath Israel, which had been founded after the war for young survivors who were left without family. The orphanage directors, Dr. and Mrs. Josipovitz, treated the children with love and warmth, trying to return to them a vestige of what had been cruelly torn from them during the war years.

“I was later told that I arrived at the orphanage with a tag on my dress that identified me as Eva Margules,” Chave recounts. Everyone at the orphanage called the little girl, the youngest among the survivor children, by the diminutive “Chaveleh.”

The orphanage was populated by children of varying ages, all of whom had been rescued from the flames and ashes of the Holocaust. Some had experienced the horrors of the camps; others had been hidden away by their parents with non-Jewish families and had been spirited out of Poland at the war’s end. Their new routine allowed them to return to life and to begin to recover from the shadow of horror that had been hovering over them for the previous few years. Many of the children anxiously awaited word of parents or family who would come to collect them, to take them home; others knew that this was not to be as they had witnessed their parents’ murder. Then there was little Chaveleh, who had known her parents only in infancy and did not know what to wait for.

There, in the orphanage, Chave sought a mother’s love, and she found a maternal figure in Handa Stark, the Josipovitzes’ daughter. Chave responded to the love Handa lavished on her and the other children.

“I was told that I fell ill during my stay at the orphanage, and that I had to be hospitalized, that I cried and told Handa I didn’t want to lose her like I lost my mother. Handa accompanied me to the hospital and stayed with me until I was completely well. She would not let a girl who had lost her mother go through the trauma of separation once again.”

A delegation from Agudath Israel of America’s Vaad Hatzalah traveled to Fublaines to visit the orphanage and look after the welfare of the children. The delegation included Mr. Louis J. Septimus; Mr. Maurice Enright, whom the children called “The Chocolate Man” because he always had chocolates for them; and most importantly for Chave, Mr. Leo Gartenberg.

Mr. and Mrs. Gartenberg, successful hotel owners, were childless. The Gartenbergs asked to adopt Chave and another war orphan, a boy named Yankel. The legal adoption proceedings, however, would prove to be most
challenging as the French government had allowed the children into France with the understanding that they would remain there and become French citizens.

So the Gartenbergs called upon the services of Dr. Muller, a Parisian Jewish lawyer, who threw himself into the task of overcoming all the bureaucratic obstacles placed in their path.

Chave reaches for the adoption papers that Dr. Muller so painstakingly prepared. Several of the documents are refusal letters, explaining that adoption was impossible. The thick packet of correspondence led to higher authorities who eventually agreed to make an exception for Chave and Yankele, children who had been left alone in the world. The children’s adoption was formalized, and they received their travel documents from the American embassy in Paris.

The American press was in an uproar. The first war orphans were arriving stateside! The photograph of Gertrude Gartenberg holding little Chave in her arms, with little Yankele clutching her elbow, was splashed across the front pages of major American newspapers. Chave shows me the photograph in a newspaper clipping she found in her mother’s drawer.

She senses my unasked question and explains how a child with no identity could grow to be so confident, with such a strong sense of identity. “I grew up in a wonderful family. They gave me absolutely everything,” Chave says, her eyes glistening as she describes a happy childhood. “I now had my wonderful parents, as well as a grandmother, aunts and uncles and cousins, and they all showered me with love and affection.”

When Chave was ten years old, she found the aforementioned newspaper clipping in her mother’s bureau drawer. It had appeared on the front page of the New York Daily Mirror. The photo suggested nothing unusual; she recognized her mother and realized that the children were Yankele and herself. It was the caption beneath the photo that she did not understand. “First War Orphans Arrive in America,” it read. Chave looked at the photo in the drawer again, and then read the caption again. Suddenly, different phrases she’d heard over the years began to make sense. Her childish curiosity had led her to a discovery, shattering her placid innocence.

“Mommy, is it true? Am I adopted?” she found the courage to ask her mother. Chave looks at me to emphasize the emotional current her words had carried. “My mother looked at me, and a look of deep pain spread across her face,” Chave continues, her face reflecting what her mother had expressed all those decades ago.

“You are my daughter and always will be! I love you with all my heart, and I always will!” her mother answered, gathering Chave up in her arms and planting a warm kiss on her forehead.

“You are my daughter and always will be!” This unequivocal answer put a lid on Chave’s quest for her lost identity for many years to come.

“I loved my parents dearly and could not bear to cause them any pain,” Chave explains, “and so it was only after their passing that I began searching for my roots, and there the story begins.”

Chave married and made aliyah to Israel with her husband, Rabbi Yaakov Heftler, and their six children. Wanting to dedicate herself to helping those in need, she studied nursing and served as a nurse for more than twenty years at Jerusalem’s Shaarei Zedek and Hadassah-Ein Kerem hospitals.

When Chave’s parents passed away, her repressed need to seek out her roots surfaced. She began her search for the identity of a baby who had been born somewhere, sometime, to murdered parents who had left a remnant and a remembrance in this world — a girl who was now the grandparent and great-grandparent of new generations of proud, upstanding Jews.

Her efforts included posting a detailed letter to The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation Genealogy Project at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland. Lauder, heir to the Estée Lauder cosmetics fortune, had established this organization to assist Holocaust survivors to find information about their past.

Foundation researchers Yale J. Reisner and Ania Przybyszewska Drozd exerted great effort to help Chave, starting with scraps of information she provided in her letter, such as the detail of the tag with the name Eva Margules affixed to her clothing when she arrived at the
Sometimes Chave was struck by the thought that perhaps it was Heaven’s will that she not discover more about her past... Still, it is human nature to long to know one’s roots.

And so the files remain neatly arranged, from the adoption papers to the correspondence with the Lauder Foundation, from the photograph of a small girl in Fublaines, France, to the letter mentioning an H. Binder searching for a cousin named Eva Margules. Only one page remains blank, waiting to be filled in with a birth date, names of parents, and the full name of a little girl, now a woman, anxious for an identity.

I take leave of her, a secret hope in my heart that perhaps someone will read my article and come forth with information about Chave’s past. Will her story find its happy ending? This is the point at which the first installment of my involvement in Chave Heftler’s saga ended, still with hope of a sequel.

Now, five years later, I am once again in Chave Heftler’s home — and she has discovered her identity! A large chart spread open on her dining-room table exhibits an elaborate family tree.

During this meeting, she and I express the hope that perhaps as a result of this article, she may discover additional details. She knows her name and the names of her parents, when and where she was born, but she still hopes to learn whether she had siblings. Perhaps she may yet discover a living brother or sister.

But I am rushing ahead of the story.

Let us go back to the point where I published the first article about Chave in Hamodia.

A reader put Chave in touch with H. Binder’s relative, who regretfully informed her that neither H. Binder nor his wife, Sima, was still alive. The relative, wishing to be of further help after Chave explained the reason for her call, told her that Sima’s maiden name had been Wolberg. This vital detail ultimately led Chave to her true identity.

Simultaneously, a posting was placed on JewishGen, a Jewish genealogical website, in quest of information about the mysterious Mr. Binder. Chave was contacted by a woman named Trisher (Patricia) Wilson of Israel, a researcher who specializes in reconnecting surviving Holocaust families. Trisher uncovered in “Pages of Testimony” submitted to Yad Vashem in 1955 mention of the names Binder, Wolberg and Margules, and also the town of Dabrowa Gornicza.

After studying these “Pages of Testimony,” it dawned on Trisher that Chave might have a family connection to Sima Binder and that H. Binder had written the letter in search of a cousin on his wife’s behalf.

But Chave was still in the dark as to her own identity and the identity of her parents. Trisher encouraged her to make contact with Jeffrey Cymbler of New York and his colleague, Stanley Diamond of Montreal. Chave, perhaps tired from years of searching, perhaps satisfied with the rudimentary knowledge that she had a family of her own, did not press forward; but at Trisher’s tenacious urging, she finally picked up the telephone and called.

It’s good she made that call. Jeffrey Cymbler and Stanley Diamond are deeply involved in the indexing of Jewish vital records of Poland. Diamond is the founder and executive director of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland. With their help, information began coming in at a fast and furious pace.

A few days later Chave received an e-mail from Jeffrey Cymbler. Attached
were a copy of her parents’ marriage record and a copy of her birth record. She was now enriched not only with knowledge of her parents’ names, but also with the names of her grandparents.

Her parents’ marriage record showed that her mother’s maiden name was Guterman and that her grandmothers were sisters named Dancygier.

Trisher, through some incredible research, managed to shine a floodlight on the puzzle when she, together with Jeffrey and Stanley, succeeded in drawing up a family tree that established the connection between the Binder, Wolberg and Margules families. Chave and Sina Wolberg Binder were undoubtedly cousins, which proved to Chave with absolute certainty that it was she for whom H. Binder was looking. The team had found the missing link between Chave’s family and the Binders.

Jeffrey Cymbler encouraged Chave to call Mrs. Esther Kaminsky of Givatayim (near Tel Aviv), a woman who had spent years searching for Eva Margules, the name she thought her missing sister was using. Mrs. Kaminsky responded to Chave’s call with an invitation to her home. She told Chave what had led her to believe that her youngest sister was alive and had been hidden with a Polish family during the war.

“It all started,” said Mrs. Kaminsky, “when I met a woman who had just returned to Israel from a trip to our hometown of Dabrowa Gornicza.” The woman described a fascinating meeting with former neighbors of hers, the Bartosz family, who were known to have been friendly with Jews. They told her how they had kept a Jewish child in their home during the war years, risking their lives if they were caught. “Perhaps the little girl who was saved by the Bartosz family was your sister?” the woman suggested to Mrs. Kaminsky.

Mrs. Kaminsky soon boarded a plane to Warsaw, where she met two of the Bartosz sisters. While Mrs. Kaminsky understood that the child the Bartosz family had saved was not her sister, they did ask Mrs. Kaminsky for help in locating Eva Margules. The Bartosz sisters related how Eva went missing from their home in middle of the night, and that they had had no further information about the child they had cared for so lovingly, and at such great risk.

Mrs. Kaminsky returned to Israel with a photograph of Eva Margules, which she had received from the Bartosz sisters. She submitted an article with the basic details of the story to the Yediot Acharonot newspaper — the least she could do for the Polish sisters, then ages sixty-five and seventy-two, who longed to know the whereabouts of the child they had saved. Now, after thirteen years, her newspaper inquiry was being answered.

Genowefa, one of the Bartosz sisters, had given Mrs. Kaminsky a first-hand account of the rescue of Eva Margules, and Mrs. Kaminsky repeated it to Chave:

“On July 22, 1943, eighteen-year-old Genowefa Bartosz was returning home from work. Close to her home she heard the barking of dogs. Passersby explained that an aktzia against the Jews was taking place. Just as Genowefa was about to enter her house, a young woman pushing a baby in a carriage ran up to her. The woman was your mother, and you were in the carriage. Your mother thrust you into Genowefa’s arms, pleading, ‘She is my daughter. Her name is Eva Margules. Save at least her from death.’ From her window, Genowefa then saw your mother return to the ghetto. She heard fearful screams and gunshots. The Bartosz family called you ‘Wiesje.’ You stayed with the family for over two years and were cared for by the mother and her three daughters, who cherished you and protected you.”

Chave’s great disappointment, Mrs. Kaminsky’s phone call to Poland brought the news that Genowefa, who took Chave from her mother’s arms on that fateful day, and Genowefa’s last surviving sister were no longer alive.

Chave took the photo of the child Eva Margules from Mrs. Kaminsky and sent copies of it, along with a photo of herself taken at the orphanage in.
France, to the Israel Police Department’s forensic unit, as well as to experts in the police department in Montreal, Canada. She soon received identical answers from the authorities in Israel and the Montreal Police Department. The photos were of the same child.

Now Chave was not only sure of her true name; she also knew that she had been placed in the care of the Bartosz family in Dabrowa Gornicza. Chave continued trying to make contact with someone from her past. Genowefa’s son was tracked down, and he sent Chave a photograph of his late mother. Chave, looking at the warm and generous face of her rescuer, tried in vain to retrieve some memory from her earliest years.

The multifaceted aspects of Chave’s search for her identity have come full circle. Her family tree is astounding to behold, both for Chave and her family, as well as for all those who helped her tirelessly in her quest. Chave’s parents now have names: Avrohom ben Mordechai Yosef and Leah bas Yaakov Yosef, Hy’d.

One year ago, Rabbi Yaakov (Mel) Hefter and his wife donated a sefer Torah in memory of Chave’s birth parents and the parents who raised her.

“Look at the mantle of the sefer Torah,” Rabbi Hefter says, “and you will see the abbreviated story of my wife Chave’s life.”

Afterword: To All Who Have Read My Story

One of the things that I learned from my husband is hakaras hatov. I want to express sincere thanks to the many people who have shared my life and my quest to find my roots.

The love that my birth parents bestowed upon me by giving me away to gentiles during the war so that I was saved was truly awesome. I have hakaras hatov for the chessed and care that I received from the gentle family who nurtured me even though they were in tremendous danger from the Germans for hiding a Jewish child; hakaras hatov to the Anshei Bracha of Agudath Israel, who brought me back to my people; and to those who gave me loving care in the children’s home in Fublainez. I am also grateful to Mrs. Esther Kaminsky, who searched for me and told me about the Polish family who hid me during the war.

There are no words to describe the love and attention that my adoptive parents bestowed on me. I am privileged to have the best husband in the world, the greatest kids, the most wonderful grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We also have the zcelus of living in Eretz Yisrael. My grateful thanks to the team of Trisher, Jeffrey, and Stanley, who worked unstintingly to help me find my roots.

My greatest hakaras hatov is to Hashem, Who has showered me with His chessed and love. May He keep bestowing upon me, my family and all of Ktali Yisrael all of His blessings. Chave Hefter