

# ‘Finding out their names meant everything to me’

Judge Rinder tells *Francine Wolfisz* about discovering how the Holocaust and mental illness impacted his family on *Who Do You Think You Are?*

**T**here are innumerable privileges to being a so-called ‘celebrity’, but this was a total gift,” reflects television personality Judge Rinder, who delves into his family history for this week’s episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*

The 40-year-old star, whose full name is Robert Rinder, signed up to discover more about his maternal grandfather, Morris Malenicky and great-grandfather, Israel Medalyer.

At the heart of his story is his 94-year-old maternal grandmother, Lottie, who he describes as “very much at the quiet centre of our family”.

While her husband Morris survived the Holocaust, little is known of her father Israel, except rumours he was “damaged in the war”.

Turning his attention first to Morris, Rinder tells me he knew his grandfather was the only one still alive after the war, while his parents, four sisters and brother were all killed at Treblinka. However, Rinder knew very little about what Morris had actually experienced.

“When you are the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, it informs just about everything,” explains Rinder, whose mother Angela is chair of the 45 Aid Society. “I’ve always been very interested and very aware, but like lots of grandchildren of survivors, they never tell their story in one coherent narrative.”

Travelling to his birthplace, in Piotrkow, Poland, Rinder is shown a collection of documents that finally cast light on his grandfather’s hidden past.

In an amazing series of coincidences, Rinder meets historian Netanel Yecheili, who tells him that not only did Morris’ family rent their apartment from his family, who owned the block, but their grandfathers were good friends as children.

Then, when he is presented with Morris’ birth certificate, Rinder notices the date is 11th February, the very same date as his visit and what would have been his grandfather’s 95th birthday. “It was a complete surprise, genuinely unbelievable,” says Rinder. “To be sitting in the very place where he was born on his 95th birthday was incredible.”

He is also given a newspaper article detailing the names of Morris’ parents and siblings, which was written before the war. For Rinder, saying the names out loud for the first time was a deeply poignant moment.



**Robert Rinder (right) delves into the past of his great-grandfather Israel Medalyer (left), and his grandfather Morris Malenicky (above with wife Lottie)**



“We all know the significance of memory and saying the name of

a person, but to be there in the place they had been and then to also get descriptions was very moving. The material described my great-grandfather as a little man who was always running about – well if you were to draft two lines about my grandfather, that would be him! It was proper human history. It breathed *ruach* into these people who had previously been nothing but a name. And before that, not even a name.”

While Morris’ family were taken to Treblinka, he was sent to a glass factory in Piotrkow, before going to Buchenwald, Germany and then a sub-camp, Schlieben.

There he meets Sir Ben Helfgott, who knew Morris well and describes to Rinder for the first time how his grandfather looked physically when he arrived at the camp.

“I had absolutely no idea Ben was coming or that my grandfather was sent to Schlieben. I knew he had been in a camp, but I only knew it as Buchenwald. Sometimes stories would come out, often when you least expected



them. For example, he would say, ‘never push yourself forward’ and then tell me about how he once pushed into a line where the work that people were conscripted into looked easier.

“But it turned out they were working with noxious chemicals. He was discovered and horribly beaten, but that was only the underlying luck of his survival, because while he was forced into harder work, it didn’t include working with these chemicals.”

Following the war, up to 1,000 Theresienstadt orphans were given the chance to go to the UK. The first group were taken to Lake Windermere and included Morris, who Rinder discovers, lied about his age to match the criteria for entry.

However, as a man who “adored this country and loved the rule of law”, Morris was troubled enough to set the record straight when he married Lottie a few years later.

Turning his attention to Israel, Rinder reveals his family had always thought he may have suffered from shell shock, having served in the First World War. But he discovers that Israel served at home and never saw active service. His death certificate reveals however, that he died at Friern Barnet Hospital, a mental health facility.

As more information emerges, Rinder learns that his great-grandfather had probably suffered from what is known today as post-traumatic stress disorder, having been caught up in Russian military violence against revolutionaries during his childhood.

Discovering a close relative had mental health issues was “a genuine, dark shock to everybody”.

Rinder adds: “It was a secret that one might say was laced with shame. My grandma could never speak of it because it was considered such an appalling affliction. It’s made me want to be part of the conversation, to do what I can to help remove the stigma of mental illness.”

Reflecting over his experience, Rinder says he feels “more connected” to his grandmother, Lottie, and his wider family.

“The gift of this experience isn’t just mine. My mum and auntie grew up with a Holocaust survivor father with no context, no idea where he came from, where he lived, or what his family were like. To be able to tell them was extraordinary, and enormously important to them.”

◆ **Who Do You Think You Are? airs on Mondays, 9pm, BBC One.**