Jack Yufe, a Jew Whose Twin Was a Nazi, Dies at 82

By WILLIAM GRIMES  NOV. 13, 2015

One day in 1954, Jack Yufe, a store owner from Southern California, stepped off a train in Essen, West Germany, and began searching the crowd at the station. He was looking for someone he had not since he was a baby, 21 years earlier.


The German stranger, Oskar Stöhr, was his identical twin, born with him in Trinidad in 1933 but taken by their mother to Germany that year when her relationship with their father, Josef Yufe, unraveled.

Raised apart, with virtually no contact, the brothers lived drastically different lives. Jack spent his childhood in Trinidad and Venezuela, served in the Israeli Navy, worked on a kibbutz and, following his father to the San Diego area as a young man, ran a variety store in San Ysidro.

Oskar grew up in a small town in the Sudetenland. He was raised as a Roman Catholic, joined the Hitler Youth and, after the war, worked as a coal miner and a welder in the Ruhr, where he married and had two children.
In 1979 their wildly disparate experiences earned them admission into a pioneering study at the University of Minnesota devised to understand the relative importance of nature versus nurture in human development by studying twins separated at birth and reared by different families. The bizarre list of their shared traits and tics made them celebrities, the subject of the 1995 German documentary film “Oskar and Jack” and an endless source of fascination for journalists intrigued by shared behavior that, it seemed, could be attributed only to genetic inheritance. How else to explain why both twins scratched their heads with their ring finger, or why they both thought it was funny to sneak up on strangers and sneeze loudly?

“Jack and Oskar clearly have the greatest differences in background I have ever seen among identical twins reared apart,” Thomas J. Bouchard Jr., the director of the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart, told The New York Times Magazine in 1979. “No question about it. Their differences are overwhelming: different religions, different languages, different qualities of child rearing.”

Mr. Yufe died on Monday in San Diego. He was 82. His daughter Anita Yufe said the cause was complications of stomach cancer.

Jack Yufe was born on Jan. 16, 1933, in Port of Spain, Trinidad, where his father had emigrated in 1929 from Romania.

On the voyage over, he fell in love with a fellow passenger, a German woman named Elizabeth Stöhr, known as Liesel. Two years later the couple had a daughter, Sonja, and two years after that they had twin boys. Jack, known as Jackie, was named for the boxer Jack Sharkey; Oskar, known as Ossi, for one of Liesel’s relatives.

Six months after the twins were born, Liesel, fed up with Josef’s womanizing and heavy drinking, ended the relationship. She scooped up Sonja and the more sensitive, fussy Oskar and returned to Germany. There her mother, who changed Oskar’s last name, had him baptized a Catholic and inherited parental duties when Liesel took a job as a nursemaid in Milan.

A strict Catholic and a harsh disciplinarian, Liesel’s mother made it clear to Oskar, when he asked her to explain what a Jew was, that he was never to repeat the word again. In school, when his principal asked him what sort of a name Yufe
was — his sister had kept their last name — he replied that it was French, with an accent, pronounced yoo-FAY. Toward the end of the war, like most German children, he joined the Hitler Youth.

Jack, meanwhile, experienced his own brand of isolation, being Jewish (although secular) and white in predominantly black and Indian Trinidad, where the main religions were Christianity and Hinduism. At 7, he was told that he had a twin brother in Germany. Jack and Oskar both later said that during the war they had been haunted by the idea that they might one day meet on the battlefield, with one killing the other.

After the war, Liesel wrote to Josef asking for help and proposing a family reconciliation. But Josef, who had married a winner of the Miss Trinidad contest in the meantime, did not respond. Jack sent care packages of sugar and other island products.

At 13, Jack joined the Sea Scouts, an entry point for boys who wanted to join the British Navy. “I had to be very pro-British,” he told Professor Segal. “In my mind, being a Sea Scout lessened the importance of having a German mother.”

Instead, encouraged by an aunt in Venezuela who had survived the concentration camps, he went to Israel, where he worked on a kibbutz, served as a flagship sergeant in the Israeli Navy and married an American, Ona Hirsch, who urged him to make contact with his German family.

That marriage ended in divorce. In addition to his daughter Anita, known as Ani, Mr. Yufe, who lived in Bonita, Calif., is survived by his wife, Ruth Vega; his daughters Rehova Reader, known as Hovi, and Devra Gregory; a son, Kenneth; two stepchildren, René and Enrique Vega; two half sisters, Natasha and Paula; a half brother, Peter; four grandchildren; and one great-granddaughter.

The 1954 reunion was awkward. Oskar spoke almost no English at the time. Jack relied on Yiddish and an interpreter to bridge the gap. Because Liesel had remarried, to a man with neo-Nazi views, Oskar told his brother to take the name tags off his luggage and hide his Jewish identity. After a week, they parted ways with a cool handshake.
“We could not renew a love that was never there to begin with,” he told Professor Segal. “My twin was a stranger to me.”

In 1979, Ona read an article in People magazine about the Minnesota Twin Family Study and encouraged her husband to volunteer, along with his brother. The two families had stayed in touch, minimally, with holiday postcards. This was an opportunity to develop a real relationship.

When Jack met Oskar at the airport in Minneapolis, he once again found himself looking in a mirror. Both men had short, neatly trimmed mustaches and rectangular wire-rim eyeglasses, rounded at the corners. They both wore blue shirts with epaulets and military-style pockets. Their receding hairlines matched.

Over the next 20 years, until Oskar’s death in 1997, the brothers visited each other and took vacations together, while submitting to the weeklong battery of physical and psychological tests administered by the study. Professor Bouchard immediately noticed that both brothers had the same gait and the same way of sitting in chairs. Their family members, over the years, picked up on other things.

Both men loved butter and spicy food. Both flushed the toilet before and after using it. Both read the endings of books first. Both wrapped tape around pens and pencils to get a better grip. Both spoke at precisely the same rate, despite their different languages.

“I always thought that I picked up my nervous habits, like fidgeting with other people’s rubber bands and paper clips from my father. He’s the same way,” Jack said.

“We were all fascinated,” his daughter Ani said in a telephone interview. “They were very competitive, always trying to one-up each other, like finding the best hotel on a vacation.” They learned to avoid certain topics, like the war or religion.

Over time, they inched toward something like a brotherly relationship.

“The warmth came when they bonded over practical jokes,” Ani said. On a trip to Trinidad, while the two were riding in a taxi, Jack spotted an old friend and told Oskar to jump out and give him a big greeting. “A minute later, Jack got out of the taxi and the man said, ‘Oh, Lord, it’s two Jackies.’”
It was almost the truth. Speaking to Professor Segal, Jack recalled a strange remark that Oskar made to him: “If we had been switched, I would have been the Jew, and you would have been the Nazi.”

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