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Local woman believes she has royal lineage

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HIGH POINT

Growing up, Shirene Gentry never questioned her adoptive parents about her personal backstory.

They didn't tell her much. She knew she'd been born in Iran and that her parents had adopted her as an infant, and that was enough for her.

"I was told that my biological father was Iranian and my mother was French," the 55-year-old High Point woman says. "I was told I had a twin brother, but that he and my mother both died during childbirth. And I was told my father died in an earthquake."

Gentry had always accepted the thinly detailed story as fact, because — well, because why wouldn't she?

"As a child, you don't question what your parents say," she explains, "because you think you're getting the truth."

Years later, after her parents died only eight weeks apart in 2001, Gentry began learning the intriguing truth of her heritage — rather, some of that truth — one puzzle piece at a time, following a long, winding paper trail she hadn't even known existed.

The paper trail would lead her on a mysterious journey through old, faded photographs, tattered newspaper clippings, dubious documents and myriad dust-covered secrets that finally were being exposed. It would lead her to the United Kingdom, where a man now in his 90s — an Iranian national whom she believes knows the truth about her biological parents — either could not or would not divulge their identities. It would lead her through a minefield of murky misrepresentations, of subtle untruths and outright lies, and of what often felt like a conspiracy to prevent her from discovering the truth.

Ultimately, the trail would lead Gentry to a place of surprising peace, despite its failure to give her the definitive answer she has



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Shirene Gentry of High Point looks through old photographs and documents she found in her adoptive parents' apartment. The paper trail has led her to believe she may be an illegitimate daughter of the deposed Shah of Iran.



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Left: This is the earliest photo Shirene Gentry has of herself, taken in Iran when she was perhaps 1 or 2 months old. According to information written on the back of the photo, she's being held by a woman named Sonia, who is identified as the baby's nanny. **Right:** This photograph featuring American Maj. Gen. Eugene Salet, left, with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, right, plays a crucial role in Shirene Gentry's belief that the Shah is her father. The photo accompanied a letter from Salet to Gentry's adoptive mother, in which he suggested she not let her child (Gentry) see the photo because it might "create a trauma."

sought for so long. Surrounded by smoke — but no smoking gun — Gentry concedes that what she believes in her heart to be true may not necessarily be true,

but it's enough for her. "Circumstantially, I think I know what happened and know who my biological identity is, and I no longer need to prove it," she

says. "I have what I have, and I know what I know, and I believe what I believe."

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ROYAL

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

And what does she believe?

She believes she is an illegitimate daughter of the late Mohammad Reza Pahlavi — the once-powerful, eventually deposed Shah of Iran.

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Shirene Lee Hritzko Gentry was born in Iran (sometimes still referred to as Persia) on Oct. 11, 1962. Soon after, she was adopted by Col. Daniel Hritzko — a highly decorated career military man who was assigned to Tehran as commanding officer of the Army's 64th Engineering Battalion — and his wife, Diane.

The facts get hazy after that.

What Gentry does know, however, is that the story her adoptive mother had always told her — the twin brother and mother who died in childbirth, the father who died in an earthquake — was a lie. What she doesn't know is why — why was her origin shrouded in such secrecy for so long?

Gentry's first hint that something was amiss with her backstory came, ironically enough, on her birthday — Oct. 11, 2000 — when her mother called in a panic from her home in Lynchburg, Virginia. She had just received a call from a man in Iran who seemed desperate to locate Gentry and find out if her life had turned out well.

"Prior to that phone call, I assumed anyone associated with my past had died, that I was the only one left," Gentry explains. "Then when she called, my immediate thought was, who would be trying to find me if everyone had died? That was my first red flag that things were not lining up."

At that time, both of Gentry's parents were in poor health and battling dementia, though her mother's condition was not quite as severe. Gentry, the couple's only child, had placed her father in a nursing facility and was trying to find a place for her mother, too. So a few months later, when her mother fell and was hospitalized with a broken hip, Gentry took the opportunity to go to her parents' apartment — without her mother's knowledge — and begin cleaning some things out. It was in a guest room, crammed full of boxes and trash bags from floor to ceiling, that Gentry began finding the pieces of her past.

"They had all of this paperwork, but none of it was organized," she says. "I would find documents in the bottom of a trash bag, so I couldn't assume the bags were trash — I had to sift through everything. Eventually, I



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Shirene Hritzko Gentry went to live with her adoptive parents, Daniel and Diane Hritzko, when she was 7 months old. Now, she says, it's clear her parents did not tell her the truth about her biological parents.



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As these photos show, High Point's Shirene Gentry (right) bears a striking resemblance to the late Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, who was the twin sister of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Could that resemblance be because Gentry is the Shah's daughter?

began to put it together in an organized fashion."

Working in fits and starts, most of it after her parents had already died, it would take Gentry years to piece together the paper trail her parents had left for her. And as she began following the trail, it has also taken her years to come to peace with where the trail was leading her.

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Exhibit A — the most important piece of evidence Gentry possesses — is a letter written to her mother by Maj. Gen. Eugene Salet, a close friend of the Hritzkos when Daniel was stationed in Tehran. The letter is dated April 29, 1964 — when Gentry was 18 months old and still living in Iran with her adoptive parents — and enclosed with the letter was a wrinkled black-and-white photograph of Salet posing with the Shah and another Iranian official.

What caught Gentry's attention was a peculiar comment Salet made in the letter about Gentry's mother not letting her baby girl see the photo because it "might create a trauma." Gentry believes the comment refers to the powerful emotional attachment that develops between an infant and a parent when they spend a significant amount of time together.

"If I had never been around the Shah, then showing me a photograph of him would mean nothing — it would just be like any other photograph," Gentry says.

"But that sentence combined with the photo tells me I was in the Shah's presence. I don't know what happened while I was in his presence, but it tells me that I was. To me, that is the strongest evidence that I think I'm his. And why would I even be in the Shah's presence unless I was his child?"

Furthermore, Gentry being in the Shah's presence as an infant would help explain a seven-month gap she cannot account for in trying to piece together her timeline. She speculates that during the gap — from her birth in October 1962 to Mother's Day weekend in May 1963, when she went to live with her adoptive parents — she could've been living in the Shah's palace.

The Shah had five children by three wives, but much has been made of his playboy reputation during his 37-year reign, and Gentry is by no means the first person to suggest she could be an illegitimate child of the Iranian leader. In a 2003 newspaper article about a Florida man claiming the Shah was his father, an aide to Reza Pahlavi — the Shah's



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Shirene Gentry has organized a notebook full of photographs and documents related to her adoption in Iran — a paper trail that tells a far different story from the one her adoptive parents had told her for decades.



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Whenever Shirene Gentry shows friends this photo of the Shah's son, Reza Pahlavi, as a teenager, left, they say it looks like her son, Austin, right, when he was around the same age.

son and Crown Prince of Iran — stated that "more than 20 people claim to be related." And that was 15 years ago.

An email sent this week to the Crown Prince's website requesting comment for this story went unanswered.

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According to Gentry's research, multiple stories exist as to how she actually ended up with her adoptive parents.

For example, among the paperwork she discovered is a document from the Tehran School of Social Work, which states that Gentry "had been deposited at the Women's Hospital since birth. She had been there six months and no one had claimed her." The document further stated that a social worker had conducted an "exhaustive search" for the parents, but when that failed, the child was declared an orphan and then given to the Hritzkos for adoption.

That explanation conflicts, however, with the recollection of Habib Rezazad, an old family friend Gentry was able to track down in the United Kingdom. Gentry's paper trail indicates Rezazad, an Iranian national now in his 90s, probably helped arrange her adoption. When she visited him at his home several years ago, he told Gentry her father was a high-ranking Iranian official and her mother was a

very young American woman, but he would not elaborate on their identities.

"It doesn't matter the life you've had," he cryptically told her over and over. "All that matters is your life now."

To further muddy the waters, Gentry has evidence her adoption was prearranged before she was even born. On the back of a photo of Daniel Hritzko, Gentry's mom wrote these words: "September 1962, the month Dan became a dad in Persia."

That was a month before Gentry's birth, suggesting the adoption plans were consummated in advance.

Meanwhile, a photo of Diane Hritzko has the following notation on the back: "Flew back to fulfill contract from Persia. Shirene still in Persian hospital. Nov. 1, 1962."

On that date, Gentry was about 3 weeks old. How could Diane have known her future daughter was in the hospital — and how could she have already named her — when the baby was supposedly an orphan and a search was under way for her biological parents? And what contract was she talking about? Was there some secret contract prepared for adopting the child? Or was it merely related to some sort of work she was doing in Tehran?

ROYAL

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One other fact that doesn't line up: In February, Gentry had a sample of her DNA analyzed and discovered she is 98.4 percent Persian, which goes against Rezazad's assertion that her mother was a young American.

Again, the individual pieces of the puzzle obviously do not point directly to the Shah being Gentry's father, but collectively, they raised enough red flags to make her suspicious. Photograph comparisons added to her intrigue. For years, friends have told her a photo of the Crown Prince when he was a teenager strongly resembled Gentry's oldest son, Austin, when he was about the same age. Then, when she compared a photo of the Shah's twin sister, the late Ashraf Pahlavi, to herself, the resemblance was even more striking.

So after all these years, Gentry's quest comes down to two absolutes. First, she's been lied to her whole life — that's indisputable. And second, the truth — short of the Crown Prince himself submitting to a DNA test, which seems highly unlikely — appears to be unattainable.

And at some point in her journey, Gentry decided that would have to be OK.

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A trail of lies, roadblocks and unanswered questions does not typically lead to peace. Gentry has followed one promising path after another, only to discover — often to her great frustration — that they were not paths, but dead ends.

In the past few months, though, Gentry has calmly resigned herself to the fact that she may never find the truth — and, more importantly, that she doesn't need to.

That's been an amazing journey for Gentry's husband, Joel, to watch.

"It's been a whirlwind of emotions," he says. "Shock from the complete deception of the situation



When she was still a toddler in Iran, Shirene Gentry and her adoptive mother, Diane Hritzko, far left, attended the second birthday party of a little girl named Princess Alavi (shown with her mother at far right). Now, though, she can't find any information about who Princess Alavi was.

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Shirene Gentry's quest for the truth led her to the United Kingdom, where she met Habib Rezazad, an Iranian national who apparently was instrumental in her adoption.

surrounding her adoption, curiosity for the truth, utter frustration with obstacles and lies told to detour and derail her quest, an insatiable appetite to discover her true identity, and the peace that comes with celebrating not the destination, but the

journey that has taken her there."

Gentry, a woman of strong Christian faith, plans to write a book about identity in Christ — "Identity Unveiled: Daughter of the King of Kings" — that will incorporate her quest to find the truth. It's



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Shirene Gentry, at age 16 months, is pictured with her nanny in Iran, a woman named Sonia.

that faith, she says, that ultimately has given her peace.

"Being a person of very strong and foundational faith, I know

where my true identity lies," she says, "so I don't need to keep pursuing this."

She's even found gratitude for the details

that once frustrated her: For her biological father and mother, whoever they are, who chose not to raise her, but also chose not to abort her, either. For the individuals who made her adoption possible. For her adoptive parents, who had never wanted a child but ultimately changed their minds. And for her God, whom she believes orchestrated it all.

"I'm at such peace now, because I can look back and see that God's sovereign hand has had a place in every detail of my life," she says.

"My story is just like anyone else's, in the sense that everyone's got a story, and sometimes the inner chapters get messy and they're frustrating and things don't go as planned. I'm at peace, though. If any of those details at the beginning of my life had not played out the way they did, I wouldn't be here now, so I'm thankful for it all."

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