

The Salt Lake Tribune

Mormon church blocks whistle-blower's access to baptism data

Faith says move to help prevent mischief-makers from offering names of Holocaust victims.



By Derek P. Jensen The Salt Lake Tribune

• March 9, 2012 11:55 am

This is an archived article that was published on sltrib.com in 2012, and information in the article may be outdated. It is provided only for personal research purposes and may not be reprinted.

A technological crackdown, telegraphed by Mormon leaders, has effectively blocked the pre-eminent whistle-blower of controversial proxy baptisms from accessing the LDS Church's database that chronicles so-called baptisms for the dead.

LDS officials defend the move, saying it helps prevent overzealous Mormons and mischief-makers from violating church policy by submitting the names of prominent Jewish figures, such as Anne Frank and Daniel Pearl, both

discovered on the baptism rolls in recent weeks.

But the decision to suspend the New FamilySearch accounts of anyone searching for Jewish Holocaust victims or celebrities also freezes out Utah researcher Helen Radkey, whose baptism discoveries have embarrassed the LDS Church for decades.

"I have been effectively stopped," says Radkey, who shared a log-in screen shot, taken at Salt Lake City's Main Library last week, that reveals a red box reading: "Your account has been locked temporarily. Please try again later."

Radkey, who surreptitiously uses the account information of Mormon confidants, says the recent names she uncovered — and the swift backlash the news stirred — "shook church officials." Besides Frank, Gandhi and Pearl, the slain Wall Street Journal reporter, Radkey revealed that the deceased parents of famed Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal had been baptized by proxy in Mormon temples.

"Obviously, they have been very concerned about the data that has been coming out and said, 'We have do something about it,' " Radkey says, adding "of course" they are targeting me.

Asked whether the new restriction is directed at Radkey, LDS Church spokesman Michael Purdy released the following statement:

"The church is committed to preventing the misguided practice of submitting the names of Holocaust victims and prominent individuals for proxy baptism. In addition to reiterating its policy to members, the church has implemented a new technological barrier to prevent abuse of the New FamilySearch system. Anyone trying to access names that have been restricted will have their account suspended and be required to contact FamilySearch to establish their family relationship in order to have their access reinstated. Abuse of the system will result in the permanent loss of database access."

Jewish genealogist Gary Mokotoff was quick to criticize the database clampdown.

"The church has just done a very foolish thing," he writes in an email. "They are implying they have something to hide."

Although the new system may block a watchdog, it also is expected to help the church live up to its agreement with Jewish groups by excluding Holocaust victims from proxy baptisms.

Now, those names will trip the new censors, so FamilySearch users can neither input nor search for such names, unless they are family. Even so, the church concedes no system is foolproof.

Mormon leaders have strongly condemned proxy baptisms for Holocaust victims, Catholic saints and celebrities. A letter last week from LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson and his counselors, to be read over pulpits and

posted on bulletin boards in every Mormon meetinghouse, says violators could lose their access to the church's genealogical data or even their good standing in the faith.

LDS baptisms for the dead involve living people being immersed in water on behalf of dead relatives and others. Mormons believe it is their spiritual duty to do these temple rituals, which they believe allows those in the hereafter to either accept or reject the ordinance.

Radkey takes umbrage at the notion she ever submitted sensitive names herself, calling the suggestion "way out of line."

"I am a researcher, whose work has been proven to be accurate and reliable, particularly in recent years," she writes by email. "The inference that I enter names into the Mormon system, which I never have, usually comes from a Utah mind-set that would 'kill the messenger,' rather than deal with the results of my work."

What's more, Radkey insists, the latest string of names — generating the new rule — came from journalists' requests, not a personal witch hunt.

"I didn't even intend for all this to happen," she says. "I was busy on the [Mitt] Romney [family] tree, and that was going to be it. These latest discoveries were absolutely not planned. And also, as far as Mormon-Jewish controversies are

going, I consider that a hopeless case."

djensen@sltrib.com

Tribune reporter Peggy Fletcher Stack contributed to this story. —

Access denied

Pledging a crackdown on Mormons who submit the names of Jewish Holocaust victims or celebrities for proxy baptism, the LDS Church has acted. Now, anyone trying to enter or search for those sensitive names in the New FamilySearch system will have their accounts suspended until they prove a legitimate family connection. The move comes on the heels of embarrassing proxy baptism discoveries, unveiled in recent weeks by researcher Helen Radkey.



