

# Our Elusive Ancestors

by Boris Feldblyum

We genealogists often wonder why the results of research in Eastern Europe do not always meet our expectations; at times more questions than answers are found. As we collect documents, we sometimes end up with two towns of origin, three birth years, four given names—all for one individual. The challenges faced by a Jewish family historian are almost always multiplied by the fact that his or her ancestors lived through wars, pogroms, revolutions and emigration. Frequently, the result of our efforts is a collection of contradictory names, dates and places. Sometimes, there is little or nothing at all.

Once, when I attempted to determine mathematically the probability of finding an ancestral record in the Old Country, the results always hovered in the 10–30 percent range. Since most of us do not wish to reconcile ourselves to just one chance in ten to find a document that we want to exist, I tried hard and am still working to develop an all-encompassing research strategy.

I rarely have the opportunity to advance my own family history research, since I do it mostly for others. On the other hand, this puts me in the position of being emotionally detached from the people behind the data and, thus, perhaps better able to evaluate and sort out the facts. Experience suggests to me that we are more prone to follow false leads and come to false conclusions when we look for our grandfather's roots. When it comes to researching in the Old Country, the emotional excitement and urge to find something sometimes become an impediment to success. For example, a surprisingly large number of genealogists initiate projects overseas before exhausting all sources of information readily available in the countries to which their relatives emigrated—information that could help enormously in the long run.

Recently, a researcher (with tickets to Lithuania and Belarus in hand!) asked me to check ship arrival records in the National Archives in Washington, DC. She knew that the family name, Goodman, may have been Gurevitz or Kopilowitz when the family lived in Lapun (now Leipunia), Lithuania. According to their U.S. Petitions for Naturalization, the three brothers in question (Irwin, born in 1898; Nathaniel, 1892; and David, 1889) were all born in Vilna and all came on the same ship, the *Fatherland*, on September 14, 1902.

Finding the ship records (the *Vaderland*, not the *Fatherland*, arrived on September 8, not September 14) was easy enough, but there was not a single Goodman/Gutman or Gurevitz/Gurwitz/Horowitz among them. The one Kopilewits, age 28, was from Ukraine. I reviewed the records again, this time looking for anyone from Vilna, on the assumption that the family in question may have

traveled with relatives or friends—information that sometimes can be useful later. Finding no one from Vilna on that ship, I decided to look for any group of passengers with three children. In a minute I saw the right record: Israel, age 3; Nachum, age 8; and David, age 11. Two more children and a woman named Feiga Karpas were also listed in that group. The place of origin was neither Lapun nor Vilna; in fact, it was practically illegible, but it ended with *szyszki*, a Polish suffix that is consistent with an origin in Vilna guberniya.

It was obvious that I had found the three brothers, although neither the town nor the family name matched what the researcher “knew.” The researcher’s subsequent letter to me confirmed my educated guess: “There is absolutely no doubt that the person you identified on the boat manifest is my great-grandmother after whom I was named.”

In addition to immigrant ship arrival records, Russian business directories of the late 1800s and early 1900s, *Vsia Rossiya*, are another valuable but under-utilized source of information. Their relevance to a genealogical search, sometimes doubted by others, is more than clear to me, as illustrated by the following case.

I was looking for all Bregman entries in Pinsk and Baranovichi, both towns in Belarus. More than a dozen Bregmans are listed in the four editions of the *Vsia Rossiya* available in the U.S. Library of Congress. The name appeared in Baranovichi and Pinsk, as well as in several additional towns; remarkably, all seemed to be related. Several Bregmans had the same given name, Leizer, but with different patronymics; several had the same

type of business or occupation. One, Gershon Bregman, was listed in Razvodovo, Novogrudok district in 1902 while in the 1911 directory he appeared in Baranovichi, also in Novogrudok district. The information found in the business directories clearly suggested that the records for all of Novogrudok district should be searched; the family apparently lived in more than just the two towns known to my client. In addition, two different Leizer Bregmans who lived in Pinsk and Zhitomir (in Volhyn guberniya, Ukraine) were engaged in the same type of business. This strongly suggests that the two may have been related; the search probably should be expanded beyond Belarus.

Another example of the type of treasure that exists in the West is a book I chanced upon long after the “Bregman case” had been completed. This book is entitled *Reference Book on St. Petersburg Merchants and Persons of Other Classes who Received Certificates of the First and Second Guild Merchants between November 1, 1894, and February 1, 1895*. Right there, on page 10, the entry read:

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*“We genealogists often wonder why the results of research in Eastern Europe do not always meet our expectations”*

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## Our Elusive Ancestors: A Case Study

I saw the light. It came during a talk by Israeli professor Dov Levin, author of the soon-to-appear *Pinkas Hakehillot Lithuania* and other books on the history and culture of Lithuanian Jewry. Levin told the audience about his grandfather, a rabbi in a small Lithuanian shtetl, who was once imprisoned for not registering his sons in an attempt to save them from the military draft. Suddenly I realized that in Levin's story lay the solution to a problem I had encountered on a research project I had just finished and—perhaps, to many other problems that I and other researchers have confronted.

Shortly before attending Levin's lecture, I had completed work on the "Lewinsohn case." The Lewinsohn/Lewinson/Levinson family lived in Yurburg (now Jurbarkas), Lithuania. A considerable number of Jewish records from Jurbarkas have survived. It should have been easy to research this family, but, to my amazement, the records included almost no data on the Lewinsohns. Given this lack of data, it was all the more puzzling that the signature of Izrael Levinson (my client's great-grandfather) appeared on one of the revision lists (*reviskie skazki*) as a census taker—but there was no information on those lists, either on the man himself or his family. (Several records on members of the extended family were found, however, in the police files.)

At the researcher's request, I commissioned a professional photographer in Lithuania to travel to Jurbarkas. He brought back several photos of Levinson tombstones, Izrael Levinson's among them. That photograph convinced my client that this was the "right" Izrael Levinson. If this were the case, why was there practically no information in the revision lists on either Izrael Levinson or his immediate family?

Dov Levin had provided a logical explanation: Izrael Levinson "forgot" about his own family when he was working on the census.

"Bregman, Leizar Movshovich, age 73, hereditary honorary citizen of the Jewish religion, merchant since 1869. Resident of the town of Grodno. Works as a contractor in Grodno. Owns two stone houses in Grodno. Wife, Khasia-Sara resides with him."

Obviously, one cannot reasonably expect to find every family name in *Vsia Rossiya* (or any other single source available in the West), but it is unwise to dismiss it out-of-hand. If nothing else, the business information in *Vsia Rossiya* is very likely to be accurate—unlike much of the data recorded in metrical (vital) or immigration records.

Much genealogical research is based on recollections. ("I remember crossing the border on the second night of Shavuot in 1919," or "Of course, Uncle Charlie was born in 1875, haven't you seen his tombstone?") Even when



Gravesite of Izrael Levinson in Jurbarkas, Lithuania.

family members are relatively young and perfectly healthy, memory can and does play tricks. I have always known that my wife, Tamara, was named after her father's sister, born in 1938 and killed by the Germans in the Kovno ghetto. I have always assumed this information to be accurate. However, when my father-in-law asked me recently to find his and his sister's birth records, he mentioned for the first time that the girl's full name was Chava Tamara. When the records arrived, it was his turn to be surprised. The only name indicated on the record was Chava, and the birth year (1939) was different from what he "knew." Obviously, had I requested a record for a girl named Tamara, the answer would have come back, "No such record found."

So how can logic and system be introduced into this strange yet exciting hobby of collecting ancestors? No single answer will work for everyone. My experience tells me that the research of many genealogists suffers not so much from lack of names and dates, but from failure to analyze properly (and with a cool head!) the information they already have. Family historians need to study the history and geography of the areas they research and to

learn (at least on a rudimentary level) the languages of the lands of their ancestors. It is true that the "wide search" approach is more time consuming, emotionally taxing and expensive, but the benefits can be immeasurable as illustrated by a recent letter: "The big news for me was that my Menzhinsky (spelled Menchinsky in the new records) family lived in Gorbashany, a town which I never heard of. I would have never found them if you hadn't convinced me to research the entire region."

In addition, I believe that research also benefits when it is conducted not only "deeply" but "widely," especially when one studies families and events going back a century or more. That is why it is important, in my view, to copy and keep all pages of the *Vaderland* (or any other) arrival manifests; one might discover later that a great-grandmother's cousin traveled on the same ship. It also is worth remembering that 1,000 Jewish residents living in a single Lithuanian town a hundred years ago comprised roughly 100 families, which in turn meant that a large percentage of the residents must have been first, second and third cousins. That is why it makes sense to collect and periodically review information on all Bregmans from anywhere in Russia. That is why one must ask himself constantly, "Do I know all there is to know about the times and places of my interest?" Quite often I hear statements such as, "My family left Zlodeevka around 1890, so I am not interested in researching post-1890 records." This approach is fine—as long as all pre-1890

documents have survived, are kept in impeccable order and include the information that supports our family lore. When one of these conditions is not met, frustration and impatience may prevent a researcher from realizing that the shortest path to success may be far from straight. In this hypothetical situation, one should ask: Did every single family member, to the last person, leave that hard-to-pronounce shtetl in 1890? Do I know of the cousins who shared the same ancestors and who stayed behind, or what is known to me of the family members who remained in the Old Country and, possibly, left a better paper trail than the one I am working with?

It is easy to see that each of these answers is a question in itself, leading to other series of answers and questions that can divert a researcher in a seemingly unrelated direction with no end in sight. Perhaps they will lead nowhere. On the other hand, they may lead to discovery of a family branch with a shoebox full of treasures, or even a fully foliated family tree. Success comes to those who can think critically, keep an open mind and conduct a search with the clear understanding that the outcome may not precisely fit prior expectations.

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## *The First How-To Book on Holocaust Research* **How to Document Victims and Locate Survivors of the Holocaust**

by Gary Mokotoff

To this day, 50 years after the Holocaust, thousands of people are still searching for information about the fate of their relatives and friends during this tragic period. To this day, people who believe loved ones survived the Holocaust have been unable to find them because they are unfamiliar with the resources available to locate people.

### **It tells you the sources**

This 208-page book, which is the first "how-to" book of Holocaust research, identifies:

- the principal sources of information about Holocaust victims and survivors
- the major repositories in the world that have this information and how to contact them. Specific major resources are highlighted, such as yizkor books (Holocaust memorial books), Pages of Testimony and the massive collection of data at the International Tracing Service.

### **It teaches you the basics, step-by-step**

This book first teaches you the basics of Holocaust research; it then takes you step-by-step through the various ways of locating information about Holocaust victims and survivors. It is all written for the average person, not the scholar.

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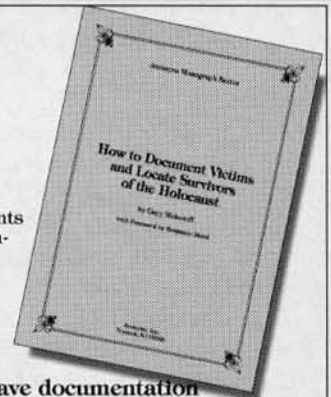
The book contains 24 documents of Holocaust-related documentation such as Auschwitz prisoner registration forms, French deportation lists, Bergen Belsen death lists, and Jewish Agency survivor lists.

### **More than 4,000 towns have documentation**

Those towns that have published yizkor books are identified. There is a list of more than 4,000 towns for which there is documentation at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the principal repository of Holocaust information.

### **Written by an expert**

The author, Gary Mokotoff, is one of the foremost Jewish genealogists in the world. He is publisher of *Avotaynu*, the *International Review of Jewish Genealogy* and past president of the Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies. Mr. Mokotoff has spent 15 years conducting Holocaust research on his family, the Mokotow family, and has identified more than 250 family members murdered during the Holocaust.



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