

Raising The Dead
By
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The southwest corner of my kitchen looks like an immigrant receiving station for the ghosts of my paternal ancestors. Scotch-taped to the walls in front of and next to my computer are different versions of different family trees, different spellings of the same names, various dates, addresses, and short biographies of what the dead did for a living and where they did it, over a hundred years ago. A well-worn map of Brooklyn has come to show a grid of neighborhoods where dozens of Mazurkewicz descendants lived and worked. All of this data is somehow marked by yellow highlighting, red stars, question marks, or multiple underlinings. Papers with handwritten facts and figures are placed next to typewritten pages with neater, clearer, and more extensive pieces of information. These pages eventually get written on also and yet another piece of paper replaces the one under it. And none of them gets thrown away for fear of having missed some iota of information.

These pages are titled, as well. For instance, "Who Are They?", and "Potential Siblings", along with a table showing which document is had for each of the aunts and uncles, their dates of birth, how their names were spelled back then, who their godparents were, and which spelling of their parents' names is on the document. Yellow sticky notes are also part of the wall art, and anything nearby that has a flat top or will hold papers quickly becomes a depository for a mound of information. I've even enlisted one of my music stands to showcase whatever piece of paper holds the important facts du jour.

Summoning ghosts from their final resting place is not easy, nor is raising the dead. And Polish ghosts present particular challenges, what with all the same-sounding vowels, like Z and C, and endings like ski or sky, and wicz or witz, and a W being pronounced like a V. I mean, one misplaced letter, a whole new name can make! But summoning ghosts and raising the dead my cousins and I have been trying to do nevertheless. And before I forget how one piece of information led to another, I thought I would just put down - on yet several more pieces of paper - the evolution of the knowledge that has been gathered, how and when information was obtained, and how connections among these pieces of information were made.

It began in March 2007, with a website created and maintained by one of my cousins, containing a modest number of documents, like a Social Security Death Index for each departed aunt and uncle. It also had a smattering of photographs of the Elders, in particular, one of our grandfather, which took my breath away when I first saw it, because I had never before seen a photograph of my grandfather! That was soon followed by more documents about our own parents, e.g., birth, marriage, or death records and names of cousins' siblings,

spouses, nieces and nephews.

Keep in mind that most of us had not been in contact with each other for over forty years. But within a very short period of time, several cousins were located and contacted, and the developing family website drew us together, eventually leading to a first-cousins' reunion! Each cousin related whatever story, fact, or supposition they had. Every one of us who knew something contributed to this pool of ever-growing information. Whether it was with whom grandpa lived, names, dates, places, or funny stories, each of us told what we knew. The information my own mother had given me about my grandfather's family proved invaluable over time. She knew he had seven brothers and one sister, and she knew the names of two of his brothers but she did not remember the name of his sister.

And so the data started to come in - well, trickle in, maybe, but trickle in it did. By April 07, I had requested and received confirmed information from the cemetery where my grandfather was buried, giving the exact date of his interment, and the Block, Row, and Grave Number in which he was buried. And a roughed-out "Descendants of Moses Mazurkiewicz" family tree was now in the making (Moses is the Americanized version of my grandfather's first name). After just a brief period of time, that tree was in full bloom, with both the living and the dead "present" and accounted for. And the photo gallery grew to include hundreds of photographs of this current generation and our children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews.

By drawing upon the information contained in the Ancestry.com databases, a list of census data from 1910, 1920, and 1930 was compiled, complete with the names and addresses of possible relatives in all of the boroughs of New York, as well as in New Jersey, and Westchester. Over time, information obtained from draft registration forms, acquired as a result of additional searches, when combined with this census data, yielded hints as to who may be who.

A memory of one of my Dad's cousins, someone with whom my parents socialized, kept nagging at me. In August, by using Ancestry phone directory listings, I came across a person with his name. I dialed the phone number that was given in the listing. As it turned out, the person I phoned was not that particular relative I remembered, but he was a relative nevertheless! He was the son of another of my grandfather's brothers. He graciously and kindly told me the names of his parents; by doing so, he corroborated information we had found in a 1920 census and on a WW2 draft registration form. Since I had so much more to ask him, I politely asked if I could mail some questions to him - maybe he would have some further information. He kindly said "yes." I felt that something promising was on the horizon: we had discovered yet another of my grandfather's brothers. So, I wrote out my letter of questions, mailed it, and waited for a reply.

In October, another cousin obtained grandpa's death certificate, and that gave us the all-important names of his parents: Ignatz and Valeria, which were also listed on his marriage record, which was obtained some time later. That gave us two documents which confirmed the names of our great-grandparents. By November, another very likely brother of Moses was found - a tailor who worked at the exact same location where another brother worked as a tailor. And we also had the census for both of these brothers, from which we knew the names of their wives and children.

Census and draft registration forms for Moses and likely brothers of Moses, indicated addresses which were in the same section of Brooklyn. So it was highly probable that the church in which baptisms and marriages took place would be located in this general area. We already had records from a Roman Catholic Church in Brooklyn, indicating that some of our aunts and uncles had been baptized there. Therefore, it seemed likely that if more documents could be obtained from that church, we would gain further information about relatives which would then enable us to find potential connections between and among family members. Two additional baptismal records were requested and received a short time later, and it now became possible to make an important speculation about one of the godparents. From these baptismal records, we learned the name of one of our aunt's godfather and an Ancestry search of ship manifests then yielded information about a person with this name, who arrived in this country in 1895. Nothing definitive enough for us to be able to say with certainty that this was another brother of Moses, but he was very likely a relative.

A small but very important thing like knowing the first names of Moses' parents, helped in the process of identifying other brothers and family members of Moses, when additional baptismal and marriage records were obtained in December, from that same church. Included in these documents were baptismal records, confirmation names and dates, and marriage records - not only for some of our own parents, but also for two of our grandfather's brothers, naming their parents, and giving us further confirmed documentation of our great-grandparents' names. These documents also introduced yet other possible relatives. Armed with this information, it was now possible to create a tree of the "Descendants of Ignatz Mazurkiewicz", with Ignatz and Valeria at the head, and their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren descending from them!

An odd thing occurred while I was searching for ship manifests. I missed an important link, which would eventually come back into focus, a month later. I came across a 1912 ship manifest for a young man and woman, leaving their father, Ignatz, in Russia and arriving in New York. This sparked my interest, because in the church documents, these two names had been listed as godparents for various children of Moses' brothers, and we still didn't know the name of that one sister. So I wondered if this might be a find. The dead may very well have played a trick on me (more likely, I was just a sloppy researcher at that point); whichever may be the case, I mistakenly thought I had all the pages

to this ship manifest; however, I did not. It would not be until a month later that the all-important page, telling us to whom these two siblings were going, was found. They were going to their brother, our grandfather, to an address that we knew for certain was his, since he listed it on his WW1 draft registration form. Eureka! We found another brother and that one sister.

By mid-December, I had not heard from the relative I spoke with in August. I wrote to him again and enclosed the family tree this time, showing all the information we had to date. Some time after mailing this letter, I phoned him again. This time, he spoke very openly about his childhood and his father and remembered the name of another brother of his father and Moses. He also told me about his own children and grandchildren and that he thought his son would also be interested in our family project. This family tree was getting larger.

I was still determined to find my Dad's cousin, the one I remembered from my own childhood. So I referred to some church documents that we had, which listed his confirmation name and I searched phone listings again. I found a listing for a person with his middle initial. I phoned and discovered that it was, in fact, the person I had remembered. He then confirmed all the information we had about his father and gave me some other pieces of information about his immediate family. Now we were aware of even more family members; relatives to contact and tell about our family website.

So now, for me, this was no longer just an academic, internet search for names and dates; it became a human encounter, it took on a very personal feel, because these people were part of my extended family. I found and was talking with, most likely, the last two remaining nephews of our grandfather. I heard their voices and familiar inflections, and their similar sense of humor came through in those conversations. They were both ninety-one year old men, who didn't know very much about their fathers' family, but were willing to tell me what they did know.

When this sojourn began, the only facts that we knew were the names of our own parents, of our immediate family members, and of our grandparents, along with some additional bits and pieces of information. To date, we have accumulated DEFINITE names and birth dates for six of the seven brothers of Moses, their spouses, their children, godparents of their children, and even the names of some of the in-laws! And it is very likely that we have also identified the seventh brother. In some ways, we're getting to know our family for the first time.

Questions still remain, some things are still unknown, but the frustrations of dead-end searches have certainly been lifted a bit. And now, the family trees hang on the wall of my immigrant receiving station for my dead ancestors. Long live my dead, I say. Long live my dead.

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