

A Genealogical Strategy Based on Photographs

John M. Hoenig, Ph.D. describes how to track down relatives using photographs as evidence.

TO MY SURPRISE and absolute delight, I've stumbled on a research strategy that has led to the discovery of four branches of my family — and I'm hot on the trail of a possible fifth and sixth branch. My strategy is based on photographic evidence.

You may think you can dismiss this approach outright if you don't have many photographs but that would be a mistake. Part of the strategy involves increasing your inventory of pictures. I started with few photos but now have close to 900 and the collection is growing. They've proved to be critical to my research.

This strategy is especially useful for those whose family has moved many times and spread out over a wide area but it can also help those with families who haven't moved far from their origins.

My maternal grandfather's family came from Jablonow (Austria, then Poland, now Ukraine) and the vital records for this town have disappeared. Thus, I can't work forwards and backwards from old country records that do not exist. What could I do?

Early in my research, I realized I would have to start in the present and work backwards. But, tracing my Peller relatives backwards in time got me to my great-grandfather and one sibling but no farther. This is where the photos and family documents came into play.

I knew from a short, autobiographical sketch that my mother visited Peller relatives in Montclair, NJ, when she arrived in the US in 1938. They served hot apple pie with ice cream and everyone left the last mouthful on the plate to be polite. These were completely foreign ideas to my mother. I learned that the relatives owned a chain of laundry stores, had a nine-year-old son and took winter vacations in Florida. But my moth-

er neglected to mention their names. Possibly she had forgotten. I could find no Pellers in the city directory of Montclair in 1938 so I seemed stuck.

The First Breakthrough

The breakthrough came when my wife Nadine matched two photos in our collection. One was a picture of a man, woman and boy standing in front of a house. On the back, it said (in German) that they were the Rubinsteins and "he is the son-in-law of A.M. Peller". The other photo was of my mother, her father and an unknown woman. On the back was written "Mimi, Papa and American cousin, now dead, summer 1938". My wife guessed that the unknown woman in both photos was the same person. If true, their name would be Rubinstein and

they'd be American, not European, cousins. The Montclair Public Library confirmed for us that a Sam and Matilda Rubinstein lived in Montclair in 1938 and they owned Federal Cleaners. To make a long story short, I tracked down this branch of the family and learned that my great-grandfather had another sibling. I also learned about the cousins they knew, people I had not known existed.

The Strategy

Here is where the tactic of using photographs evolves into a strategy. I have gradually been able to coax out of my newfound family several hundred photographs. I ask for documents, artifacts and photos. It seems few documents were kept but almost everyone has photos. It takes a while to get them. Typically, they are buried



A photo from the author's mother's collection. On the reverse of the photo was written: "The Rubinsteins. He is the son-in-law of A.M. Peller". Were these American or European relatives?



Another photo from the author's mother's collection. On the reverse was written "Mimi, Papa, American cousin now dead, summer, 1938". Matching the American cousin with the Rubinstein woman in the photo on the right proved key to identifying and locating these relatives.

away somewhere and people don't want to bother searching for them. But, when they hear what I've been able to accomplish with photos, they get curious and eventually they go hunting for their pictures. Usually, they give me the photos they can identify but don't bother with the photos of unidentified people. This is a big problem. Those unidentified people are very important. With gentle persuasion and persistence, I get the remaining photos.

The next best thing to obtaining more photos is to obtain descriptions of your relatives. These can be found in various kinds of records: passenger manifests, naturalization papers, WWI draft registration cards and so forth. Knowing a relative's age, height, weight, hair color and identifying marks might suggest an identity for a problematic photo. If the information is used simply to rule out a possibility, that can be important, too.

So how does this help? We examine each photo (front and back) with a magnifying glass looking for clues and enter absolutely everything into our inventory of photos. Also, and this is important, we keep track of the relatives for whom we do *not* have photos. Where did they live, and when? We make educated guesses



An unknown relative in the author's cousin's collection. On the back was written "To our cousins Bella & Sylvia, Sept. 11, 1917, Sam & Fannie". Was it just coincidence that the author found a Sam and Fannie Peller in the 1920 federal census? Apparently not.

Other Sources of Photos

You may find photos in passport applications and naturalization certificates available at the National Archives. The easiest way to inquire is to go to the website (www.archives.gov), click on **contact us**, and submit an electronic request for information. Other sources of photos are local newspapers, high school and college yearbooks, employer's records and records of social, civic, professional, sporting or craft clubs. The local library and local historical society often keep such records and they can often be contacted via the Internet.

I knew one of my relatives was a dentist. I contacted the American Dental Association archivist (matlaka@ada.org) and for \$10 she searched their holdings. It turns out my cousin was active in the dental professional societies and so the archivist found several photos of him.

Don't overlook the possibility of obtaining photographs from foreign sources. I found a collection of passport applications for the area around Stanislawow, Poland, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's archives in Washington, DC. These records had been microfilmed at a regional archive in the Ukraine. Among the records was an application submitted by a potential Fitzer cousin, complete with photograph.

about unidentified people and then circulate the photos among our relatives to see if anyone recognizes anybody. The clues in the photos can tell us where to look, who to look for, and/or in what time period to look and thus guides us in our search for more records.

More Examples

I received from my cousin Florence a photograph of a rather stern-looking woman perhaps in her mid-20s. The inscription on the back says "to our cousins Bella & Sylvia, Sept. 11, 1917, Sam & Fannie". Bella and Sylvia Peller were Florence's mother and aunt, respectively, and they lived in New York City. We were not sure that Sam and Fannie had any connection to the Pellers but it was a possibility. The 1920 census revealed there were a Sam Peller and his wife Fannie living on Ludlow Street in Manhattan. Furthermore, from the 1920 census we could determine that Fannie (age 34) was approximately the right age to be the woman in the photo. This began to look interesting. I found Sam's naturalization papers and they revealed he was from the town of Jablonow — the ancestral home of most (or all?) of my Peller family. One of the witnesses for the naturalization was a Jacob Coppelman who also served as a witness for my New Jersey

Peller relative's naturalization. This provides strong circumstantial evidence that Sam Peller is a cousin. It is certainly worth looking for his descendants.

From another relative, I received 73 photos in two batches. Among those in the first batch was a photo taken at a photographer's studio in Niagara Falls, NY. (We could determine this from the photographer's imprint in the border of the photo. This is a printed or stamped name of the photographer.) Niagara Falls was completely new in my research, but I didn't think much of it. Later, when I got the second batch of photos, I came across another taken in Niagara Falls. It took only a minute to search my database and confirm I had two photos from there. Could there have been Peller relatives in Niagara Falls? A quick check of the index of vital records for New York State revealed there were Peller births in Niagara Falls in 1918, 1919 and 1920. The 1920 federal census index for New York at the Ancestry.com website didn't list any Pellers in Niagara Falls or in Niagara County. However, we can check the Soundex index to the 1920 census (in case the name was entered as Piller or Pellor or some other variant). We can also request the two birth certificates, determine the addresses of the Pellers, and look for those addresses in the

Why Czernowitz Photos?

I always heard my Peller relatives were from Jablonow and Kolomea, and my Fitzer relatives were from Stanislau. Consistent with that, most of my European photos are from Kolomea and Stanislau. But some were taken in photographers' studios in Czernowitz, a city never mentioned by the family. Czernowitz is 60 miles southeast of Kolomea.

I searched my database and extracted the four photos taken in Czernowitz. Everyone in the photos was identified. One was my mother's parents' engagement photo. Another had my mother's grandfather, Abraham Fitzer. Two were of my mother's first-cousin on the Fitzer side. Nothing seemed striking.



Four photos in the author's collection taken in Czernowitz (Bukowina, now in the Ukraine) before WWI. Top left: the engagement photo of the author's grandparents (Matias Peller and Hudys Fitzer). Top right and bottom left: two pictures of the author's cousin Kubi Nagler. Kubi's mother was a Fitzer.

*Bottom right: Abraham Fitzer, the author's great-grandfather.
What do the photos have in common?*

Then it struck me. One picture had a Peller relative, but EVERY picture had a Fitzer relative. Czernowitz appears to have had a connection to the Fitzers. Were there Fitzer relatives in or near Czernowitz?

A check of the Ellis Island database online (www.ellisland.org) revealed Fitzers came to America from Ladagora, a town I simply could not identify. But, a glance at the passenger manifest revealed the town was actually Sadagora, very close to Czernowitz. (In European handwriting, a cursive upper case S looks very much like our cursive L — it helps to have a European wife to read European handwriting.) I'm now searching for Fitzers from the Czernowitz area.

census. Based on what we found in following up on the photographic evidence, it now seems worthwhile to investigate these Pellers.

Once we locate these Pellers' descendants, we need to determine that they are relatives. This is easily accomplished if the descendants have copies of the same photos I have or if they recognize the people in the photos. We can then interview the newfound relatives to find out about their living relatives and their ancestors. We then ask our relatives — and all their relatives — for more photos (and documents and artifacts and oral history) and we start the process all over again.

Determining just how these relatives fit into the family tree can be problematic, at least for a while. I now have four separate Peller trees. All are my relatives, but I can't tie the trees together, yet. But, I now have much to work with.

Casting Your Net

Here is an important point: cast your net wide and interview not just your relatives but also the relatives of a relative's spouse. For example, Sam Peller appears to be my relative; his wife, Fannie Hallem, appears to be a relative by marriage. But, if I could find descendants of Fannie's brothers and sisters, they might have photos of Pellers. (Fortunately, the 1910 census reveals that two of Fannie's sisters and a brother lived with the Pellers for a time so I have information to guide my search.)

Think of it this way: among your photos are those of in-laws, friends and "cousins-in-law" (family of a cousin's spouse). Many of those photos are unidentified but you don't dare throw them away. If you have such photos, it's reasonable to expect that most people do, too. So ask for the photos. People will be delighted — and impressed — if you can identify some of them and will dig out more pictures for you. I found a woman in Montreal whose cousin Israel married my cousin Pearl, probably in the 1890s. We traded

STUDYING YOUR PHOTOS

To use photographs effectively, you must study them carefully and compare them to reference material in order to identify the time and place, to identify the people and to deduce any contextual information such as the occasion for the photograph or the person's profession. Fortunately, there are a number of books available to guide you.

Frisch-Ripley, Karen. *Unlocking the Secrets in Old Photographs* (Orem, UT: Ancestry, 1991). Book discusses care and restoration of photos, identifying types of photos, dating photos and sources of photos.

Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929 (Toronto, ON: Family Chronicle, 2000). A book of more than 650 photographs to help you date photographs based on clothes, hair styles, poses, etc.

See also Moorshead, Halvor, "A Quick Guide to Dating Photographs", *Family Chronicle* March/April 2003.

pictures of their children and I learned that Israel and Pearl had two children and a grandchild I hadn't known existed.

Another important point: collect every photo you can get. If you have a photo of your uncle Louis at age five and at age 40, it may be difficult to identify a picture of him at age 20. But, if you have photos of him at age five, 10, 15, 25, 30 and 40 (say) and then get an unidentified photo of him at age 20, you may well be able to identify him. By looking at many photos sorted in more-or-less chronological order, you can study fashion trends to assist you in dating photos and you can see who appears with who and when. Note that different copies of the same photo may have different inscriptions, so always look carefully at every photo.

Imprints and Inscriptions

The imprints and inscriptions on the photos can be very important for telling you where to look. I would have had no reason to look in Albany, Niagara Falls and Minneapolis records, and in Czernowitz records, without the clues in the photos. One set of Peller cousins disappeared from Saratoga Springs, NY, around 1911. I knew they had a son Herman in 1900. There was a Herman Peller in the Social Security Death Index who applied for his social security number in Minnesota. Could this be the

Herman from Saratoga Springs? The birth date seemed right. When I received from a cousin an unidentified picture of a young man (in his 20s) taken in Minneapolis, I rightly suspected the Saratoga Springs relatives moved to Minnesota. My suspicion was strengthened by my observing that the photo appeared to be rather modern — perhaps taken in the 1920s or 1930s — so the age appeared approximately correct for Herman. It turns out I was right.

It is always preferable to look at the original photos rather than copies. Copies may lack resolution and may not clearly show the embossed name and address of a photography studio. Also, information in the border of a photo, or written on the back, may not be copied for you by your cooperating relative. I usually offer to make copies for my relative's children at the same time that I make copies for myself as an inducement for the relative to lend me the photos. If the relative won't let the photos out of sight, then I simply have to plan a visit. An easy way to copy photos is to take them to a drugstore that has a machine for copying photos. It's used like a regular photocopier but produces a full sheet, glossy photo.