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John M. and Nadine A. Hoenig look at what photos tell us about the dearly departed



The Schaechter family in Roumania in the 1920s. Missing from the get-together is Gedalia, but he's there in spirit through the photograph held by his brother, Moishe.

SOMETIMES A PHOTOGRAPH contains a picture of a dearly departed relative. The photo (left) of the Schaechter family in Roumania shows they were thinking of young Gedalia, recently departed. In this case, Gedalia didn't go to heaven, the Army or to the New World. So where was he?

Also missing from the photo were sons Avrum and Itzig who had already departed for Detroit in the New World. However, Gedalia's niece Sylvia, who gave us the photo, couldn't remember why Gedalia wasn't present for the photo. Sylvia contacted some of her relatives and figured out that Gedalia must have been in Iasi (Roumania) because there are letters in existence from that time from Gedalia to his mother. So the story is that the family wanted to send a picture to the two sons in America of everyone back home, and they included Gedalia the only way they could. The mystery is why Gedalia was in Iasi?

Photos like this can be of genealogical importance. Knowing when the relative departed can help date it. Alternatively, dating the photo can shed light on when the relative departed. In this case, Gedalia's sister Feige (front row, left) departed for the New World around 1928 so the photo was taken before that. Furthermore, Sylvia's cousin has a copy of the photograph of Gedalia and it bears the date 1924. It turns out also that two relatives have copies of the photo of the family gathering and on one print is written the year 1926. So, even without the 1926 date, we wouldn't have been too far off if we had used the 1924 date on the picture of Gedalia or the approximate 1928 date of departure for Feige to date the photo of the family get-together. Once we have an approximate date for the image, we can estimate years of birth of the people if we can guess at their ages.



OFTEN, PHOTOS WERE sent to relatives with death announcements. The borders of such photos are likely to be marked with heavy black lines. The accompanying photo with the black frame is of Belgium's beloved Queen Astrid, who died tragically in a car accident in Switzerland in 1935. The Catholic Church in Belgium distributed the photo at masses across the country; on the back was a short biography and an extract from the Cardinal's eulogy.

Another important clue can sometimes be had when photos are examined for funerary dress and adornments.



Black jewelry worn by Nadine's grandmother to funerals and while in mourning in the first half of the 20th century. Looking for such adornments can establish the occasion for some photos. (Photo by Richard L. Tenney.)



Funerary photo of Belgium's Queen Astrid who died in 1935. Note the black border that indicates the photograph was produced for her funeral.

In the last photo is some of the black jewelry Nadine's grandmother wore when she was in mourning in Belgium during the first half of the 20th century.