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*The Story of Moishe Silberkasten:
Solving a Family Enigma with Mormon Microfilms
and Internet*

In March 1995 I was doing some joint scientific research with a colleague at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. After a long day of work, we went downtown to visit the Mormon Family History Library. I had never been there before.

I was stunned by the Library, with its endless microfilm reading machines and computer terminals, its most exotic databases, and coding systems unfamiliar to me (such as the soundex system where names are classified by the way they sound). The library opens at 7:30am and closes at 10pm, and yet it is hard to leave it, as I found out. John, my colleague, typed his last name in one of the terminals to initiate a search in one of the ancestor databases. Almost immediately some of his 18th century Scottish ancestors appeared!! I was amazed. Then I remembered a story my father often told us, when my brother and I were kids: Our name should in fact be Zilberkasten, not Wagner, because his grandfather Moishe Zilberkasten, a Yiddish theater actor, divorced his grandmother Malka a few years after they had a son David. After the divorce (this was in the 1910s, in Warsaw), Moishe went to America, never to be heard about again. He became a myth of sorts. Malka then married BenZion Wagner, a Yiddish writer in Warsaw. BenZion was a father to my grandfather David, who inherited his surname. David passed away in 1994, in Natanya.

"Why not try to see if Moishe really went to America?", I thought. I typed in "Zilberkasten" and found nothing. I tried various databases, the five CD-ROM telephone discs for the entire US, the soundex-coded 1920 US censuses of New York, New Jersey, California and Michigan states, the (soundexed) passenger lists for boats coming into New York between 1879 and 1920. Nothing. Moishe remained a myth...

I was getting ready to leave the library after three frustrating hours of search (John had left long ago, of course) when on my way out I peeked again in the social security death index (SSDI) database, and tried different spellings. Suddenly, the name Sylvia SILBERKASTEN appeared on the monitor! I was literally hypnotized: She was born on Aug 4 1913, died in March 1979, lived in Brooklyn, NY, and I now had her social security number. Was she Moishe's daughter? His second (albeit very young) wife?

At that point I decided to do two things: try later to get a birth certificate for Sylvia from New York, and, more immediately, redo a search in the library using the soundex code for Silberkasten (S416) instead of Zilberkasten (Z416). It was already quite late, 9pm or so, but I felt very excited. I rechecked all previous databases, but still unsuccessfully.

Then, finally, I found him... After checking hundreds of meters of microfilms, the name Moishe Silberkasten appeared in the list of passengers who went through the immigration services in the port of NY. On the poor quality microfiche there was only his name and a code number, supposedly his naturalization number, from which I

might be able to get more details about him by writing to the US Immigration and Naturalization Service in New York. Until this day, they have been unable to locate his file.

I left the Library at 10pm, after five fascinating hours of research, with the wonderful, exhilarating feeling that I had unearthed information that had been lost forever. Consciously or not, Moishe seemed to have done everything possible to leave as few traces and leads as possible, and be forgotten.

A few weeks later, in April, I received a copy of the death certificate of Sylvia Silberkasten from the Department of Health (birth certificates, however, are not public). From that certificate, I have been able to reconstruct an entire Silberkasten family tree, including descendants in Florida with the shortened name Kasten, and ancestors in Warsaw back to the 1860's. So far, however, I cannot reconcile that tree with Moishe's! There must be a connection, because they all came from Warsaw, and because Silberkasten is such an uncommon name. But until this very day, that connection is still a mystery.

In May 1995, something important happened: I registered with Jewishgen, the Internet Jewish genealogy group, where one can post messages, answer queries, help others in many ways. The entire game changed radically: things started to accelerate. A Jewishgen "addict" in Brooklyn, Phyllis Blumenfeld, volunteered to take a picture of the tombstone of Sylvia Silberkasten, if and when I got a death certificate and the cemetery name and tombstone location. The same person called a few cemeteries in Brooklyn to check whether they had any Silberkasten: a Rachel [Sylvia's mother] was buried at Mount Judah, and a Morris who died in 1939 in Detroit, Michigan, was buried in the Yiddish Theatrical Alliance Plot at Mt. Hebron. Bingo! Moishe must have had his name changed to Morris. David Sloan in Detroit offered to help, and within days faxed me the death certificate of Moishe. Another brick in the wall: Moishe's residence in NYC was the Capitol Hotel. He died of thrombosis. He was divorced (thus, for the second time) and his wife's name was Gertrude Stein. Phyllis in Brooklyn happened to go the next day to the NY Mormon center for her own research and volunteered again to look for Moishe's wedding certificate, if she could find it. The next day I received this simple note:

"I was at the Mormon center and found Morris' marriage certificate to Gertrude Stein. They were married April 4, 1927. It was a civil ceremony. His father was Solomon and his mother Leah Rosenthal."

And that is how my tree grew back one more generation in just a few days of work, thanks to my new Jewishgen friends on Internet. A week later, I received the wedding certificate, with Moishe's handwriting and signature. Strangely, I have come to feel closer to him.

In July, I went again on a business trip. It was Sunday, early in the morning, and at JFK airport in NY where I just arrived from Israel, I met with my Jewishgen friend Lauren Davis for a genealogical breakfast. Later that morning, I went with Phyllis Blumenfeld to the immense Mount Hebron cemetery. Armed with a map of the cemetery, we quickly discovered the grave of Morris. I felt overwhelmed.... I stood near Moishe's tomb! Moishe the Myth! No one probably had visited him for decades! The Yiddish Theater plot was very well taken care of. It was also rather fascinating, because many famous yiddish actors (such as Tomashefsky and others) are buried there.



Back from Utah, I had a free afternoon in NYC and was on my way (with Lauren Davis again) to visit the Yiddish Theatrical Alliance. It is on the East side, and I wandered on 2nd Avenue, where Moishe lived sixty years ago, and where most of the Yiddish theatres were located... At the Alliance, I spoke with an elderly gentleman who remembered the actor Moishe SILBERKASTEN, as he himself was a child playing in the theatre at the time... He remembered that Moishe married Gertrude Stein, and let me look at the Lexikon fun Yiddishe Theater, where I discovered a full biography of Moishe.

Better yet: After the Alliance, I still had some time that afternoon before my 11 pm flight back to Israel. I decided to visit the YIVO Institute on the West side, where I might possibly find some information regarding the Yiddish theater and its actors. There I asked about Moishe Silberkastein and after a while, the lady in charge brought a few files back. I could not believe my eyes: Moishe had played in the troupe of Maurice Schwartz; there were journal clips, articles, pictures of the troupe with Charlie Chaplin and Albert Einstein. And portraits, and small size posters of Moishe, who had toured the US and the world, even acting in 1935 in Belgium where Malka and David, his first wife and his only child, resided!!... What a day...

I left NY that night, with the distinct feeling that I was bringing my great-grandfather Moishe back with me.

The best was yet to come. Back in Israel, two things happened. To my surprise, I found a long obituary article about Moishe in a microfilmed copy of the NYC Daily FORWARD, at the National Library in Givat Ram, Jerusalem. Reading a book about Yiddish movies, I was amazed to discover that Moishe had played in three Yiddish movies!and that one of them, "Vu ist mein kind" (1937), had been restored by the National Center for the Jewish Film at Brandeis University, and was available on videotape!! Exactly one year after I searched the computer at the Mormon Center in Salt Lake City, I was watching my greatgrandfather on the television monitor, alive, speaking, moving.... a curious mixture of my father and my grandfather, the same voice as my grandfather's...



We are now in March of 1997. My investigations into the Polish Jewish archives (which have been microfilmed by the Mormons, and a copy of which is available at the Beit Hatfutsot Museum in Tel-Aviv) have led me to discover more members of the Zilberkasten family. I have at present nine family trees, one of them leading back to the year 1750. Four of those trees connect with each other. Two of the trees have been cut by the Holocaust. Most of the nine trees are short, with the exception of three of them which span 250 years, from 1750 to the present. One of these leads to a Jan Zilberkasten, whom I discovered lives in Walbrzych, a small village in Poland. Jan is a nice 30 years old fellow who, with his charming wife Ewa, hosted me last August and helped me reconnect his own family tree with an older tree I had painfully extracted from the archives. Jan and Ewa are --apparently-- the only two persons on earth still left with the name Zilberkasten. The second long tree leads to Louis and Lillian Bernstein, who live in California. I discovered Lillian and Louis by visiting the Jewishgen site on Internet, inquiring about other people looking for the name Zilberkasten. It happened that Louis' greatgrandmother was Mary Silverkasten, and I had her birth certificate, found in the archives! I also was able to discover that Louis and Lillian are distant cousins of Jan and Ewa!

Two months ago, in January 1997, to my great surprise and by pure chance, I found another Silberkasten branch somewhere on this planet, with the full name of Silberkasten. We have been in touch over the last weeks, and I was able to connect them to one of my Polish archives trees, that goes back to 1750. And they are cousins of Jan and Ewa in Poland, and of Louis and Lillian in California. That last Silberkasten family is located in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which is where my wife Linda was born and grew up...