

# A Poker Player's Approach to Genealogical Research

by Henry (Herszl) David Wagner

Last year I flew to Israel to visit my cousin, H. Daniel Wagner. For some of us, I guess, family ties and tales become increasingly important—or at least, more interesting—as we get older. The events of our youth acquire a special meaning. We recall our parents and grandparents, and we suddenly find ourselves probing and reconstructing the past with our Aunt Suzy (the only one of her generation who is still alive) and digging in the family archives. If our interest turns really bad, we become addicted to genealogy. That's me.

We genealogists progressively develop our own style of investigation, our search technique. Some will study the data rationally, step by step, helped by well-organized bookkeeping habits and systematic methodologies. That's my cousin, Daniel, the professor. I discovered his existence only last year. Our great-grandfather, Ben Zion Wagner, had married twice, and while Daniel is his great-grandson from his first wife, I descend from Ben Zion's second wife. Neither Daniel nor I knew about the "other" wife, and thus we didn't know of each other's existence. Our mutual discovery was a real shock. But that's another story.

As I said, Daniel is the rational type. He conducts his genealogical quest in systematic fashion. He then publishes his work in journals and recently has even proposed that genealogy could be studied as a scientific activity, as an academic discipline.<sup>1</sup>

But my life experience tells me otherwise. You see, I make a living as a professional poker player, on the go from one tournament to the next. I play with the top players (they are also my best pals), from Lenny Cortellino, Tony Gargano, and Barry Greenstein in the United States, to Arnaud Esquevin and Alain Parancewicz in France. Recently I took part in the Foxwoods Poker Classic WPT and in the World Poker Tour in Casino Barcelona (Spain). Just last month I visited Salt Lake City for a smaller competition. Salt Lake is special to me; since genealogy has become my second-favorite activity, I can't afford to miss a poker tournament there. It's an opportunity to do some research in the Family History Library, and I'll tell you about that trip later.

## Why I Disagree with Daniel's Systematic Approach

After reading about Daniel's approach to genealogy, I decided to write this short article to explain why I disagree with him. My way of enjoying genealogy and, at the same time, of getting significant results, is more exciting than his. My motto: Never plan your searches; always prepare for the unexpected find; anticipate the surprise. If you are really good at this, you may even provoke the stunning breakthrough—with intuition and sheer luck as your most important tools! Yes, with



*Dora Wagner nee Baum standing near the grave of her father, Icek-Meir Baum*

time I have been able to sense progressively the optimal path to the best hand. After 30 years of card playing, I have come to believe in serendipity, intuition, unsystematic ways, the irrelevance of logic, and the appeal of pure luck. These, too, are the most electrifying instruments of genealogical search! The following accounts should demonstrate this convincingly.

On my flight to Israel to visit Daniel, I sat near a religious gentleman all wrapped in black. We spoke at length, and I told him about my search for family roots. I mentioned that there might have been a Rabbi Moshe Baum on Daniel's side (since our mutual discovery, Daniel and I have extensively compared and explored each other's family lines). Upon hearing the surname Baum, the gentleman said: "Azoy? One of us on the flight (they were a group) is also a Boim, Symcha Boim. I'll tell him about you, OK?" A few moments later, another fellow wrapped in black appeared and, with a warm smile, said he was Symcha. He had bright, intelligent eyes.

We spoke. Symcha had caught the genealogy virus, too. Soon, we both switched on our computers, and we compared family data and pictures. I showed Symcha a

black and white photograph of Daniel's grandmother, Dora Baum, standing near the grave of her father, Icek-Meir Baum, in the cemetery of Putte, a village located at the border between Belgium and Holland. The picture had been taken sometime in the 1950s. Dora had been married to David Wagner, Ben Zion's son with his first wife. The text on the tombstone noted that Dora's great-grandfather had been Rabbi Moshe Bojm (Baum) from Kinsk (the town of Konskie, in Poland).

At the mention of the name Moshe Baum and the town of Kinsk, Symcha suddenly got really excited. He said he was a direct descendant of Moshe Baum, who had been a rabbinical judge in Kinsk! I was a little suspicious—but mildly excited, nevertheless. Suspicious, because I wanted to see some evidence beyond his words, and excited because something in Symcha's tone of voice and in the few sentences we had exchanged inspired confidence.

I was sure that Daniel would want to meet Symcha. When Daniel had first deciphered the text on the photograph in 1995, he had written an article about the unexpected discovery of a rabbi among his ancestors,<sup>2</sup> but he had found no solid evidence or confirmation of Moshe's "Rav Haga'on" qualification on the tombstone of his grandson. Despite a marriage record, several birth records for his children, and his death record in 1894 in Konskie, nothing emerged about Moshe's rabbinical status, not even in several books on rabbinical lineage. The assertion that Moshe had been a rabbi had remained elusive and unproven, and the puzzle had never been solved. In the end, Daniel had concluded that the title of rabbi, which had been carved on the gravestone of Icek-Meir and referred to this supposedly eminent ancestor, Moshe, was simply a fable or a grossly exaggerated portrayal, or perhaps even the self-gratifying wish of Icek-Meir's sons, who had composed the text on their father's gravestone.

But Symcha had it all in his computer! He had compiled his extensive genealogy, based for the most part on rabbinical sources rather than metrical records. He showed me the scanned version of *Shir Hashirim* (Song of Songs), a book published in 1874 in Warsaw, which he said had belonged to his great-grandfather, Moshe Bojm. The book included various handwritten inscriptions and, most fascinatingly, a stamp in Hebrew on the title page that stated, "Moshe Bojm Av Bet Din Kehila Kedoshah Kinsk." In other words, Moshe's stamp indicated that he had been a rabbinical judge in the (holy) community of Konskie. This could only be Daniel's ancestor.

We landed at Ben-Gurion Airport, where Daniel was waiting for me at Terminal 3. You should have seen Daniel's face when I introduced him to his newly found distant cousin, Symcha Boim from Bnei Brak, whom I had met by pure chance on our flight from New York and had just provided the first tangible proof of the thus-far elusive veracity of the epitaph on



*Stamp present on the cover of an 1874 book belonging to Rabbi Moshe Baum which states, "Moshe Bojm Av Bet Din Kehila Kedoshah Kinsk."*

Daniel's great-grandfather's gravestone! Daniel was shocked, to say the least, and I was more than pleased to tell him with a big smile, "See? That's how I do genealogy...!"

There was more to come. During my visit to Salt Lake City for a minor poker competition, I, of course, found ways to spend time in the LDS (Mormon) Family History Library. I had just read about Daniel's latest expansion of his Kumec rabbinical branch,<sup>3</sup> and since he knew where I was traveling, he had asked me for help with the LDS records for the Polish town of Zarki. Daniel had never researched this town before, but he had heard from another Kumec descendant that a bunch of Kumec folks from Konskie had migrated to Zarki. I agreed to help, but only if I could do it my way! By that, of course, I meant that chance would be my main guide, and that I was definitely not planning to follow any rational plan or to systematically explore any microfilmed records.

Daniel agreed (did he have a choice?), and I quickly accessed and copied a few of the Kumec family records for Zarki, which he had identified on the JRI-Poland website. This was easy and rather boring, so, while making a last photocopy of a marriage record, I started talking with one of the usual eccentric characters who wander into the library. An old woman with a strong French accent inquired about the language of the marriage record and the years I was interested in.

When she heard that these were Jewish-Polish records, she went berserk, and I couldn't stop the flow of queries: "Are you Jewish yourself? Are these Hebrew signatures (on the marriage record)? Can you read Polish? Are the records based on Napoleon's Codex, too? And my goodness, you also speak French!" "Well, just enough to play cards, you know." "You are a poker player (with a look of connivance)? I can't believe it!" And so on.... Then she asked me to read one of the Polish records to see how they compared to her own Quebec marriage documents, so I politely started translating the marriage record of Lewek Szarf and Haja Malka Komec, which was the last one I had printed:



משה בום

משה בום

כך קראו לו בעיירה. משה בום!  
מנין השם הזה איש לא ידע. אבל כולם  
הכירוהו — זקנים, נשים וטף. הוא היה  
ליצן העיירה או טפש העיירה. בכל מקום  
בו התרחש מה בעיירה, הוא היה מוכרח  
להיות נוכח! שמחה, חתונה, אסון, תיג'  
רה, ריב, מכות, בכל מקרה יצא הוא  
בשן ועין.

*Moshe Bom. This was the name under which he was known in the town. Moshe Bom! Where did this name come from, no one knew. But everyone knew him—old people, women, and children. He was the town's clown or fool. If something was going on in town, there he was, he had to be present! A celebration, a wedding, a tragedy, a fight, a dissent, an exchange of blows, he was always barely getting out of it.*

It happened in the town in Zarki, on the day such-and-such of the month such-and-such of the year eighteen thousand and sixty seven, presented himself here in the Town Hall the individual Moshe Baum, Rabbi of the town of Zarki...

Did I just read what I think I just read...? This was unbelievable! A Moshe Baum signing as a rabbi on a wedding record in Zarki?

I was very excited, but a few questions arose. Was he the “right” (meaning Daniel’s) Moshe Baum? How could it be proven? And if he indeed were, what was he doing in Zarki when he was supposed to live in Konskie?

Needless to say, I was really—but really—enjoying this experience. Thanks to that weird old woman, I had been forced to read the record and had been led to the shocker: my “method” was working again! The thought that Daniel would be both stunned and mildly irritated made me smile. I wanted to kiss the woman and tell her, “I think you might just have solved a long-standing family mystery,” but she had unexpectedly evaporated.

The next morning, I was back at the Family History Library, and I discovered that Rabbi Moshe Baum, whether he was Daniel’s rabbi or not, had signed most records as the rabbi of Zarki from 1863 to 1867. Of course, to prove it, this time I really had no choice but to be systematic. Thereafter, I skimmed through the Zarki microfilms for the 1860–67 time frame, but nothing inspirational or serendipitous occurred. The “method” didn’t seem to be too effective on that day.

Curiously, the odd French-speaking woman appeared again. I thanked her for her help on the previous day, but, brushing the air with her hand in a self-effacing gesture, she said she hadn’t done a thing. I told her about my failure to find a way to prove that this was the right Moshe Baum, the one who was supposed to be residing in Konskie. She responded:

Don’t worry about it; if things must happen, they do.

Why don’t you think about something else? Here, look at these fascinating Quebec documents I just found.

They are the birth records of my great-great-grandfather and his siblings. That handwriting script is soooo beautiful, isn’t it? And notice that some of the kids are from his first wife; others are from his second.

I thought, “This is exactly like Daniel and me. We also descend from two different wives of the same ancestor—and like Moshe Baum, too. He had two Kumece wives.”

But...that was it! Looking straight in the old woman’s eyes, it suddenly occurred to me that if Moshe had resided for several years in Zarki, then maybe he had some children who were born there, from his second wife (his first wife, Ronia Kumece, had died in 1852 in Konskie). The name of his wife would appear in their birth records, and if it were Rajca Kumece, then he would be Moshe Baum, Daniel’s ancestor. Goodness! The weird woman had done it again!! I turned around to tell her, but poof, she was nowhere to be found, once again.

The strategy didn’t work, however. Between 1860 and 1867, no Baums had been born in Zarki. What a cruel disappointment. What was I to do apart from ruminate about the deadlock while rewinding my last microfilm before I left the library? The filmed images were running fast backward in front of my eyes. After a short while, I stopped the rewinding to let my hand relax for a brief moment. The immobilized image in front of me was an index of death records— and there it was: death record number 45, Maria (Miriam) Baum. Incredible! I rushed back to read the full text of record 45:

It happened in the town of Zarki, on the day such-and-such of the month such-and-such of the year eighteen thousand and sixty-six, etc., etc., and he reported the death of Maria Baum, age 6, daughter of Moszek and Rajca nee Komece married Baum.

That afternoon, on the flight back to New York, reflecting upon the magic that had materialized in these few hours at the Family History Library, I regretted that I had been unable to thank the weird old woman properly for her help. She had triggered a mysterious touch of magic in the quest.

Daniel accepted all this with relative grace. (He mentioned only that despite the lucky events, without some logic and insight, I would not have succeeded!) Following my discoveries, Daniel explored the online *yizkor* (memorial) book for Zarki to see if Moshe Baum perhaps was mentioned as one of the 19th-century rabbis of the town. Unfortunately, that book contains only memories from Holocaust survivors, but

practically no past (pre-1900) details about the town or its religious history. A bizarre, but possibly meaningful, resonant echo of the past turned up in the book, however, in the form of a short biography and a photograph of one of the late-19th-century odd characters of Zarki, a familiar beggar nicknamed Moshe Bom. The text mentioned that this beggar was known by all the residents of Zarki, although no one could remember the origin of his nickname. We probably will never know who this man was or what was his true name, but Daniel and I speculated that, similar to the derogatory phrase, “a real Einstein”—used facetiously to indicate someone who is not too clever—the name of a known, possibly respected rabbi who had officiated a few decades earlier in the town could have been used to designate the village beggar.

My mission was over. What a quest this had been. With the help of an improbable, possibly even day-dreamed character haunting the floors of the Family History Library, hidden records and a likely solution to a puzzle—blurred reverberations of a distant past—had materialized in unanticipated ways.

Like wild cards in a poker game.

#### Postscript

Since I wouldn't want any of Daniel's descendants to find out, 250 years from now, that there is a myster-

iously undocumented individual in his family tree, I must reveal to the reader that I, Herszl David, am a wholly invented character (Daniel's alter ego, if you wish). The rest of the tale is entirely true.

#### Notes

1. H.D. Wagner, “Genealogy as an Academic Discipline,” AVOTAYNU, XXII, 1 (Spring 2006), 3–11.
2. H.D. Wagner, “La Mémoire de Nos Ancêtres,” *Regards* (Belgium), 499 (June 2001), 34
3. H.D. Wagner, “Tracing Pre-1700 Jewish Ancestors Using Metrical and Rabbinical Records,” *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 6, 93–104 (2008). See also H.D. Wagner, “Uncovering the Oldest Records of the Kumec Family: Wandering Rabbis and Perhaps a Love Story Too...,” *Sharsheret Hadorot* 22 (3–4), November 2008.

*Daniel Wagner has researched his Polish roots since 1995. He was co-chair of the 24th International Conference of Jewish Genealogy Conference held in July 2004 in Jerusalem. He is a member of the JRI-Poland Board, coordinator of the Grodzisk Mazowiecki Archive Project, and the Zdunska Wola JRI Shtetl CO-OP coordinator and Town Leader. Wagner is a professor of Materials Science at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel.*

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