Passover Break, in Four Episodes
H. Daniel Wagner

1. Linda's Tale
Our Passover host this year asked us to tell short stories of relevance to Passover. My wife told the following concise tale, inspired by an Argentinean story for children (Bucay, 2002). It deals with freedom, perseverance and hope.

When I was a small child I loved the circus, particularly the animals. The elephant was the greatest mystery to me: this was an enormous creature with an amazing physical power, yet, when not performing in the circus, it was chained to the ground by only a tiny wood peg. The fact is that despite its huge strength, the elephant did not try to free itself and flee, although he obviously was able to do so without much effort. That was incomprehensible to me! By contrast, a baby elephant near its mother was trying very, very hard to free itself from the chain, and despite all its efforts, it was unable to do so: the chain and the peg were indeed stronger than the small elephant. And one day, I finally understood: The big elephant does not know that it can free itself because when it was small it became convinced that it would never be able to free itself, and never did the elephant question this fact again! Thus, the only way to know, to free oneself from adversity and obstacles, is to try again and again with all our heart, even if one is convinced that things cannot be different from what they were in the past. Sometimes it is worth to keep trying, persevering, and wondering about long-accepted truths…However, if to free oneself from the past proves to be too difficult, a creative solution might be to wander in the desert during 40 years …!

2. Daniel's Tale
My story for the Seder was a bit longer and has some genealogical flavor:

When I was a child, my father Benny used to create funny effects to the fables he would tell by "Yiddishizing" the French words of his stories (we lived in the French-speaking part of Belgium). Names of streets and towns were comically transformed: the Boulevard Maurice Lemonnier would become the Boulevard Moishe Limonad; the Chaussée de Mons would become the Chaysse de Maysse; Brussels and Antwerp were transformed into the Polish shtetl-sounding Brisselevke and Antrepevke, and so on. His own father, David, would similarly enjoy playing with words, and my brother and I were used to this and much enjoyed it. Many years later, I began to systematically explore the various branches of my family tree, and tried to collect some information about the father of my grandfather David, BenZion Wagner. I discovered that he grew up in Zyrardow near Warsaw, played in the Yiddish theater, then emigrated to France and Belgium in the 1910s, where he became the editor of a Yiddish newspaper published in Antwerp. He also wrote poems and plays: "Shlomo Hamelekh der Tsveyter" ("King Solomon the Second"), "Der Vilner Gaon" ("The Vilna Gaon"), "Erotomania"…, and died prematurely in 1930, at the age of 40 (his son, our grandfather David, was then only about 20). BenZion has remained an unknown Yiddish author and so far I have not been able to discover a single work of his. My father never knew him as he was born after BenZion's death. Then, about 5 or 6 years ago, my father joined me on an exploratory visit of the newly opened Jewish Museum in Brussels to find a concrete trace of BenZion. To our delight, two single 1928 issues of the "Yiddisher Tzaytung" (The Jewish Journal) had been preserved, in which BenZion wrote long essays and theater analyses under the pen name of Benye Plapler (Benye the Chatterbox). My father must have been astonished to see that his first name matched exactly BenZion's nickname … And the title of one of BenZion's essays seemed to be addressed to me: "Mayne Portretlekh : Wer is Benye Plapler?" (My little portraits: Who is Benye Plapler?). BenZion's style was satirical: Transforming himself into a fly to become invisible, he observes (and criticizes) the Jewish community of Belgium and presents an acid analysis of the level of the Yiddish theater there. But above all, compelling comical effects are obtained when he uses the words "Brusselevke" and "Antrepevke" to describe Belgian towns like Polish shtetls, and

when the Yiddishized version of the Chaussee de Mons – Chaysse de Maysse – inevitably appears and plainly reveals the lost starting point of comic sentences that innocently are to be passed on from one Wagner generation to the next one…

3. Maimonides Then and Now

Over the Passover vacations I read a fascinating little book by Sherwin B. Nuland about the Rambam, Moses Maimonides, which had the somewhat unexpected effect to make me ponder about our pastime: genealogy. I'll try to put this within as few lines as manageable, and despite the fact that the following text will probably read in the same associative way as one dreams, I will nevertheless do my best to make this as clear and enjoyable as possible.

When I was a youngster growing up in Belgium, I attended the then only Jewish school in Brussels: the "Ecole Israélite de Bruxelles", which later became the "Athénée Maimonide", a name given to the institution by its Director, Mr. S.B. Bamberger. Until now, I had never asked myself why the name Maimonide had been selected. In retrospect the choice is obvious and it sheds some interesting light on the personality of our old school Director, a religious man whom, without really being very close to him, we liked very much and who, it seems so to me now, had a broad outlook on the type of education that had to be provided to his young pupils: Education had to be Jewish *and* universal, traditional *and* scientific, all at the same time. Like the Rambam, we would learn to understand the Prophets and the Talmud as well as Mathematics and Astronomy…

If one of your ancestors was a famous character like the Rambam, you are fortunate because usually there is ample material available for you to discover him (I am using the masculine form for convenience only), to make you feel closer to him. For example, books about him (or by him) may be available, and the exploration becomes delightful because, as a genealogist, you often dream of better understanding not just who your ancestor was and how he thought about things, but also the atmosphere of the times surrounding him and the society in which he lived. At times I find myself wondering how I would feel if I could suddenly meet one of those anonymous personages who occupy a spot in my family tree, of whom the only trace left is a yellowing photograph that fascinates me. How would it feel if, by some magic trick, I could suddenly meet him for example at his wedding party or at another significant event in his life, 150 years ago...? It is a different thing of course to descend from someone like the Rambam, when your ancestor is so famous that large amounts of research material exist and it is much easier to enter into his mind and thoughts.

But frankly I sometimes suspect that the genealogical activity has the troubling scent of an ego-trip: "*My great-grandfather was a famous writer…My ancestor was a Rabbi*"… It may sometimes indeed be so, but more often than not, genealogy has a more altruistic side.

Indeed, some portions of that enlightening little book about Maimonides make it plain that the painstaking research work we perform in order to learn more about families and ancestors is the supreme antithesis to an ego-trip! When speaking of charity (tzedakah), Maimonides clearly implied charity in the broadest sense of beneficence to others, and not only Jews but all people: "*…the intention of the heart is the measure of all things.*" Nuland emphasizes: "*Maimonides insists that tzedakah must be a motivating force in the life of every Jew, not only in the form of monetary charity, but as social justice, benevolent deeds, and ordinary kindness*". And yes, examples abound in genealogical research of recurring acts of generosity and kindness, which are the simple reflection of the fact that we often identify with each other's joy of discovery! And sometimes the findings are such that the lives of individuals are changed forever… I happened to read the above lines last night, which were followed this morning, out of pure coincidence, by the reading of Gary Mokotoff's amazing article 'Evelyne Reclaims Her Identity'' in the last issue of Avotaynu (Winter 2005). Gary describes how he assisted a sixty-eight year old woman living in Liège, Belgium, who had been a Hidden Child during World War II, in finding her cousins and reclaiming her Jewish identity. Numerous other examples clearly demonstrate that genealogical research is not simply about recording names, dates, and places, it is not just about transmitting basic family information to the next generation; it is not just about belonging to a line of well-known or gifted individuals

which increases one's pride: Genealogical research is about the preservation of memory, everyone's memory, the memory that is of significance, symbolic and practical, to all of us individually – because we are not immortal, and collectively – because it helps crystallize what we have in common, concretizes our togetherness, and brings us closer to each other. And quite often (like in the case of Evelyne's recovered identity, or the generous acts of a new generation of Poles who actively help rediscover the contribution and involvement of Jews to their own history, and so on) the best way to describe the role of genealogy is by applying Maimonides' words about tzedakah, in their fullest meaning. The most fitting way to further illustrate this is by revealing that my own mother Paulette was also a Hidden Child in Liège, and that following Mokotoff's article I was put in touch with Evelyne. She was so shocked by the similarities between her life story and that of my mother that she offered to help identify the families of those who bravely helped my mother during those dreadful times. She has already identified some of them and I hope soon to visit Liège and a few villages in the Belgian countryside…

4. Merging It All
Since these lines are being written at Passover time, on the one hand, and since genealogy is what Sharsheret Hadorot is all about, on the other hand, the best way to put together all parts of this article is by telling, in this fourth part, about the memory of people and events past, perseverance against difficulty, tzedakah, and the transmission of information from one generation to the next.

For some time now I have been sporadically wondering why so many of us are investing so much effort to discover our past and shed light on the lost stories and lives of our ancestors. I have also been thinking about the formal ways and approaches to achieve this. The result of this musing took the shape of a long article in *Avotaynu* (Spring 2006), advocating that genealogy should be an identifiable and focused academic discipline. In a way, at the present time, genealogy is at odds with most other academic disciplines. Indeed, in many fields researchers often struggle mightily with how to make their findings more accessible, understandable, and relevant to the public. Contrasting with this, genealogy is a very popular activity, a widespread pastime. If significant progress and breakthroughs are to be achieved, genealogy will likely need to develop its own modern academic tools, adapted from less familiar areas of investigation, mainly the so-called hard sciences such as mathematics, software development, the evolving field of 'biomatics', molecular biology and even statistical physics! I am quite convinced that the source of the true transformation of genealogy into a modern academic discipline resides in the momentum arising from those areas.

As a simple illustration, which integrates aspects from the episodes of the present article, I propose here one example, the genealogical importance and significance of which will be easily understood because it led to a significant step forward. It has to do with the concept of database merging.

One of the most important research issues in current genealogical research is the creation of sophisticated software dedicated to merging genealogical databases. In the simplest case, two databases containing genealogical material that includes both overlapping (usually names of individuals) and non-overlapping information are compared. An example is the merging of a town's metrical birth and death records. In addition to details regarding the newborn, birth records usually include also the names, ages and occupations of the parents while death records often include age at death and identify surviving family members. Merging databases obviously increases the amount of genealogical information in one place. When more than two databases are available for merging, usefulness (as well as complexity) grows. Following is a concrete, true example of the usefulness of this concept.

Several weeks ago Bengt Sjalin, a descendant of a family from Zdunska Wola, Poland, sent me a 1928 photograph of his great-grandmother Blima Warszawsky and her brother, both standing – according to family lore – behind their parent's tombstone(s) in the cemetery of Zdunska Wola. Unfortunately, the epitaphs on the tombstones were not visible. Bengt, who knew about my current mapping and photographing work with Kamila Klauzinska in the cemetery, was inquiring whether it was possible to locate these graves, if they still existed at all. But how do you identify two graves

out of more than 3,000 tombstones, if no text is available? All Bengt could add was that the name of Blima's father was Mordechai.

Figure 1 – Bengt Sjalin's photograph of his great-grandmother Blima WARSZAWSKI and her brother standing behind their presumed parents' grave.

A clue of the gravestone location was provided by the profile of the cemetery wall in the background of the picture: it looked like this was Section A (the cemetery comprises 11 sections, from A to K). Unfortunately this is also the largest section of all, with 605 tombstones! I decided to browse the photographs by starting from the last stone (A605) and was very lucky: gravestone A-568 had the right set of symbols and was definitely a match.

Figure 2 – Gravestone A-568 today, corresponding to the stone on the right hand side of Figure 1.

However, the name Chaim on the broken stone was insufficient information. Fortunately, stone number A-585 was then found to match the second gravestone on the photograph. Badly broken, it

was still quite readable (see Figure 3 below): Mordechai son of Shlomo HaLevi, died 25 Shvat 5670 (4 February 1910).

Figure 3 – Gravestone A-585 today, corresponding to the stone on the left hand side of Figure 1.

The name Mordechai was of course a good sign but was it the right Mordechai? No surname appeared on the gravestone, as is the case for a large number of gravestones in Polish-Jewish cemeteries. But the date of death was available and we could merge what we knew from the epitaph with the (huge, computerized) metrical database for deaths in the town. This provided the following information: Year 1910, death certificate number 3, name: Mordechai WARSZAWSKI ! This was a successful merge; the gravestone was indeed the correct one! Bengt had now the additional benefit of having found the so far unknown name of Mordechai's father: Shlomo. Further database merging could possibly lead to additional information, for example through birth, marriage and death certificates for Shlomo and Mordechai.

A number of difficulties can arise as, quite often, several individuals bearing the same first name may have died that year; the name, possibly transliterated, in the metrical data may be spelled differently from the name on the tombstone; only one of two first names may be listed; the deceased may have been registered in a later year in the metrical books; and so on. But in the case of a positive identification in a merged database, the precious tombstone of a deceased family member becomes available to the descendants. Indeed, in Zdunska Wola, systematic manual merging has already led us to assign surnames to a large number of gravestones having none so far. Database merging is of course a rather time-consuming process when performed manually, and the development of sophisticated computer software would simplify the procedure enormously. In

principle, merging could eventually be applied to a large number of family trees existing in a given community, in an effort to create a single communal tree: the "community forest".

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