

A Search for Roots... and Passages

By Daniel S. Mariaschin

Executive Vice President, B'nai B'rith International



Years ago, stymied by not being able to find details of my parents' immigration to America, I asked my brother-in-law, a professor of American Jewish history, for advice.

"Do you know the year and the month they arrived at Ellis Island?" he asked. "Approximately," I responded.

He directed me to the National Archives and its vast collection of ship manifests and passenger lists. I went, found hundreds of volumes of such lists, and pored over several from 1903 and 1914, the years in which my mother and father, respectively, landed in the Port of New York. I gave up after several hours, learning quickly that hundreds of boats docked each year, carrying hundreds of thousands of passengers. Adding to the challenge was the fact that the lists were all handwritten and, though usually in perfect script, were hard to read because they were crammed between extremely thin lines.

My frustration continued until, several years later, the Ellis Island Foundation scanned its repository of documents and made them available online. I was able to find the man who, from all available evidence, appeared to be my paternal grandfather. Listed on the ship's manifest was Schmul Mariasin, who arrived in New York on Jan. 10, 1914, at age 42. This coincided with the year of arrival that my father told me. But for some reason, neither my father, nor his stepmother, nor his siblings were listed on that particular ship manifest. The Ellis Island entry told me also that he sailed from Rotterdam, on the *S.S. Noordam* of the Holland America Line.

This surprised me to no end. It meant that he would have had to make his way from Zakharino, a tiny shtetl in western Russia, to

the Port of Rotterdam. What a train trip that must have been!

As for my mother's family, I tried every which way to spell her maiden name, Berzak (anglicized later to Berson), but drew blanks on every try.

Once you've caught the bug of hunting for one's roots, you just don't relent. I did come to the search with some basic information: the years my parents sailed from Europe, their ages at the time, and, of course, their destinations—my father to Brooklyn, my mother to Bangor, Maine, where relatives had already settled. I was aware that many thousands of Jews came because of pogroms and persecution. Anti-Semitism was rife in Eastern Europe and in Czarist Russia; the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 was among the best-known of the attacks on Jews in what was known as the Pale of Settlement. There were hundreds of others.

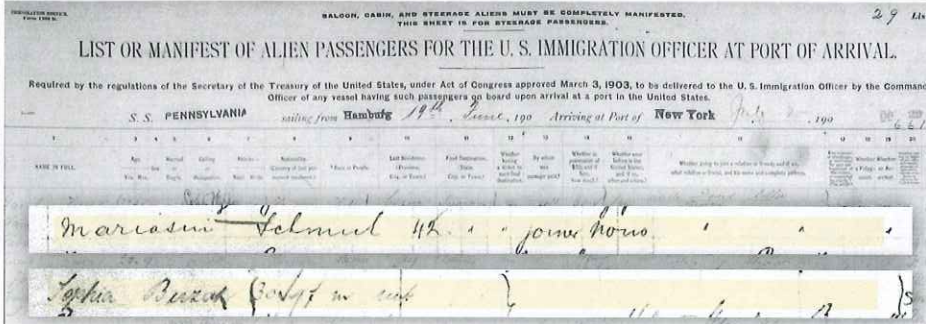
But luckily for my parents, that did not seem to be the determining factor. The impetus was the promise of a better life, and word had spread to every Eastern European shtetl that America offered that. Schmul Mariasin was a tailor who opened a small shop near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Abraham Berzak, my mother's father, became a peddler in the Maine countryside.

I would visit the Ellis Island website periodically, hoping for new information about both families, but to no avail. I left it at that, until a fortuitous trip to Hamburg, Germany, helped me uncover more of my family history.

I was in Germany with a B'nai B'rith delegation this summer on a trip organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The trip's purpose was to meet with political and business leaders, journalists, and Holocaust researchers, and to learn more about the



This photo from 1910 shows the members of the immediate Berson (formerly Berzak) family. Rose, Dan's mother, is seated between her father Abraham and mother Sophie.



history of the Jews of northern Germany. There had been three B'nai B'rith lodges in Hamburg before Hitler came to power in 1933. The lodge house of one of them still stands; it has become a concert hall and restaurant. Indeed B'nai B'rith had been founded in New York long before then by German-Jewish immigrants.

Hamburg was one of the major embarkation points for immigrants coming to the United States from Central and Eastern Europe. Many sailed on the Hamburg America Line (later to become the shipping giant Hapag-Lloyd), which was headed, at the height of the immigration period, by Albert Ballin, who was Jewish. Ballin, we learned, was a marketing genius. In order to attract passengers to sail on his ships, he built what amounted to Ellis Island East: a complex of buildings to house, feed, and ultimately move immigrants west to the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere. Just outside Hamburg, one can visit this "emigration village," now restored as a museum. The attraction to Jewish passengers was immense: There was even a synagogue on-site (as well as Roman Catholic and Protestant churches) and a kosher dining hall.

In the rotunda of "BallinStadt," as it is now called, is a bank of computers, with free access to a number of important genealogical websites. Rather than tour the rest of the complex, I was drawn to the computer. I'd give my mother's side of the family one more try. I entered my grandmother's name, Shifra Berzak. Then my mother's name, Raichel (Rachel) Berzak. And then, that moment I'd been waiting for, so thankfully in this era of Google and YouTube: "Bingo!" I shouted out, startling several tourists working on either side of me.

There, from the ship passenger lists, was the following information: Sophia (her Anglicized name) Berzak, age 30, with two chil-

dren in tow: my Uncle Jakob (who became Jack), 6, and my mother Rosa (Raichel or Rachel in the old country, who later became Rose), 2. They sailed on the S.S. *Pennsylvania* from Hamburg on June 19, 1903, arriving in the Port of New York on July 2. Their destination was Bangor, and the list indicated that my grandfather was already there—waiting, I'm sure, impatiently, for them to arrive.

All this information, with one click of a mouse! I never knew my mother sailed from Hamburg and that it, too, must have been an arduous journey from Lithuania just getting there. I learned that my grandmother, who knew no English, sailed alone with her two children. And I not only learned the name of the ship they sailed on but was able to view a picture of it.

And one more thing: My mother, who was nearly three when she arrived, always told me that they made it to Bangor on the evening of July 4. The sailing and arrival dates on the passenger list, and a two-day journey to Bangor fit perfectly. And so did the date they arrived in Bangor, America's Independence Day. Though they weren't fleeing anti-Semitism, my grandparents certainly were familiar with it; even in those days, word travelled fast. They knew that America—the "Goldene Medina"—was a land of promise, which made saving the money to buy passage, getting to Rotterdam and Hamburg—and in the case of my grandmother, sailing with her two young children on a ship with 2,000 strangers—well worth the effort.

America never reneged on that promise. Those of us who are its beneficiaries know we mustn't take it for granted. Our grandparents never did, nor our parents. Some two million Jews entered the United States between 1880 and 1924. I now know more about the most pivotal point in several of their lives, without which I wouldn't be here. 📍

International President

Dennis W. Glick

Honorary Presidents

Gerald Kraft

Seymour D. Reich

Kent E. Schiner

Tommy P. Baer

Richard D. Heideman

Joel S. Kaplan

Moishe Smith

Executive Vice President

Daniel S. Mariaschin

Honorary Executive Vice President

Sidney M. Clearfield

Chairman of the Executive

Allan J. Jacobs

Senior Vice Presidents

Ted Greenfield

Yves-Victor Kamami

Roberto M. Nul

Bruce Pascal

Gary P. Saltzman

Stephen B. Zorn

Treasurer

Seth J. Riklin

International Vice Presidents

Pablo Sergio Grinstein

Argentina

Dr. Peter Schiff

Australia and New Zealand

Matilde Groisman Gus

Brazil

Aubrey Zidenberg

Canada

Hernán Fischman

Chile, Bolivia, and Peru

John Manheim

Europe

John P. Reeves

Europe

Arie Bar Zion

Israel

Daniel Belozercovsky

Northern Latin America and the Caribbean

Enrique Jinchuk

Uruguay and Paraguay

FOLLOW US ON

