

## How I found it: Out of the family box

*By Gail Chaid*

The box was from my mother's closet. You know the type — the cardboard box with all the stuff from decades ago that no one knew what to do with. I inherited it. In it were letters from my grandparents during the World War I era, from 1914 to 1919. Back and forth they wrote. She was in Bulgaria. He was in the United States. The letters were written in Cyrillic, an alphabet common to Slavic languages. I began the quest in 2010 to uncover family history through the letters. Along the way, I met those on a similar quest for their eastern European ancestors.

I used recommended research techniques, joined genealogy groups, attended classes and seminars, and searched websites in search of my elusive family history in Bulgaria. Finding records in the United States was comparatively easy. Also, I had original documents my mother had saved. However, the details of their story in Bulgaria was a challenge. A country like Bulgaria, which was overrun for centuries by other governments, and where boundaries changed from war to war, made the quest harder.

In addition, women's names are different than men's, and the algorithm used in online genealogy search routines wasn't adequate. The more help I sought, the more I felt that I was running headlong into a genealogical black hole. Some experts either gave me a blank stare or just shrugged their shoulders. An expert at Ancestry Day suggested I go to the Berkeley campus. "nine libraries," he said. "You might find something there." He was right in one context. Universities have lots of information, and it is beneficial to learn what is being taught and which faculty members could help me make connections.

My quest turned to finding someone who could translate the letters my grandparents wrote in Cyrillic. I had been providing genealogical updates to a friend who happened to attend a theatrical play, read the program, and noticed that the costume designer was Bulgarian and was on the faculty of San Diego State University. I emailed the professor and asked if she could translate the letters. She replied that she could not, but she referred me to someone who could. He, in turn, found me a translator. The translator found a genealogist/ historian (through Facebook) who was in the Bulgarian town of my grandparents. Remarkably, the genealogist in Bulgaria was instrumental in preserving the Eastern Orthodox church records that included my grandfather's records of birth and baptism from 1889. During the church renovation, the genealogist walked two blocks to the church to ask for any materials he could use in the town's historical museums, which he managed. Persons at the church gave him all the church records from the 1800s. If the genealogist had not asked, the workers might have thrown out all those books. I learned my great-grandfather's name and occupation from those saved books. He was a blacksmith.

When visiting Bulgaria in May 2014, we went to Varna, a Bulgarian port on the Black Sea from which many emigrants left. They could not just take a train to a city in Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, France, or Germany to then come to the United States; they may have left from Varna. Also, countries needing immigrant workers advertised in Bulgaria. When Argentina needed workers, many eastern Europeans moved to Argentina. I learned to research where workers were needed.

A third class steerage ticket to America was less than US\$5. Immigrants came through Ellis Island and learned where jobs were available. Some went to work in the steel industry in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a city that now has some 75 ethnic groups. Railroad jobs were available in many locations, including Montana and Illinois. I read of one immigrant who found a job in Hammond, Indiana, where he made \$1.60 a day. He and three other men pooled their resources and bought beef liver, brains and hearts for pennies. They then cooked the meat with onions; the four men could eat for 25 cents a day.

Friends in genealogy classes suggested I look for contacts at cultural centers. Although I found no cultural centers when I started looking in 2010, advances in technology have made it easier to find and connect with cultural centers, churches, schools, universities, and places where records are archived. For example, the Bulgarian-Macedonian National Educational and Educational Cultural Center in Pittsburgh ([www.http://bmnecc.org/](http://bmnecc.org/)) now has an improved website that makes information easier to access. The center's board maintains contact with the other ethnic and community groups in the area. In Balboa Park, San Diego, the International Cottages each represent a country, with 33 represented in total (<http://sdhpr.org/guide.html>). All of the houses have contacts who may be able to help move your search forward. The houses offer classes in languages and writing and they support cultural events. Look for similar opportunities in your area (such as the Nationality Rooms at the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, with digital materials (<http://www.nationalityrooms.pitt.edu/archiveresources>)).

Check for film seminars in your area that feature cinema from your country of interest. It is another way to learn and to meet people who may further your research. When I was doing general searches on the web, I found eastern European university classes and other learning opportunities throughout the United States. Look for history, culture, and linguistics resources.

Keep asking, updating and moving forward. Also, search again for terms you searched for previously. The web is constantly changing and expanding. Recently I looked again for Bulgarian cultural connections in the Bay Area. In 2010 I found nothing. Recently I found Eastern Orthodox churches nearby and a Bulgarian school that opened in 2012 in Sunnyvale, California. Both offer potential connections and cultural activities to enhance my knowledge and genealogy research.

If your research involves European ancestors, one of the best things you can do is to get the *Family Tree Guidebook to Europe: Your Essential Guide to Trace Your Genealogy in Europe*, by Allison Dolan and the editors of *Family Tree Magazine*. It is packed with helpful maps, history, timelines and resources from 35 countries and areas including Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland, Scandinavia, France, the Benelux region, Germanic regions, Poland, eastern Europe, Russia and the Baltic, Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, and areas known for European Jewish ancestry. Published in 2013, this book is invaluable for finding hard-to-find European ancestors. You will still have a search, but at least this book points to a trail. Keep searching, have fun, and learn history and culture along the way. Насладете се на пътуването! (Enjoy the ride!)

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