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Researching Old US Immigration and Naturalization Coorespondence and Case Files

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Researching Old U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Correspondence and Case Files

by James H. Gross

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For determined and methodical researchers looking for a fascinating yet obscure gem of a resource related to 20th-century immigration to the United States, working with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) microfilm series T458, Record Group 85, entry 6 may prove to be time well spent. T458 is a 31-roll microfilm series (offered for sale by the National Archives) entitled “Subject Index to Correspondence and Case Files of the Immigration and Naturalization Service” (INS). This series contains old microfilmed INS index cards that, on their faces, bear the typed file numbers that researchers and NARA staff use to identify and pull the paper textual files. Not all files can be located; some have been discarded, lost, misfiled and/or transferred into a new classification series. According to reference archivist Suzanne Harris (NWCTB), the index to the series is referred to as RG 85, entry 6, while the actual records reside in several series and are identified as entry 7, entry 9, entry 26, and so forth.

I developed an interest in this series after reading two genealogical articles. Both “Children Under 16 Unaccompanied by a Parent: The Family Zuser,” (AVOTAYNU, Vol. XX, No. 2, Summer 2004) and “Hebrew Immigrant Cases, 1906–1914,” (*Chronicles*, the newsletter of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Philadelphia’s newsletter [2005, 5]) cited NARA series T458, RG 85, entry 9. The second article referred to the website, <<http://members.aol.com/ImmigrantCases>>, which posts a database of Jewish immigrants whose cases were brought before the immigration board between 1903 and 1924. Although the site does not thoroughly explain the microfilm series, it does contain a listing of case files. Using this information, I researched a small file obtained for me by reference archivist Suzanne Harris to identify one possible distant family surname.

According to the T458 finding aid (Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS] reference guide cited below) written by Marian Smith,* the textual collection, housed at Archives I in downtown Washington, DC, consists of old INS immigration correspondence and case files dating from approximately 1906 to 1957, with a few cards dating back to 1903. Most references are to INS subject correspondence in the “56,000 Series.” T458 material may also include references to Bureau of Naturalization correspondence. Alien files, visa files and naturalization records, which researchers may also find listed in T458, are in the custody of

United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), formerly known as INS.

This microfilm series, given to NARA by the INS along with the reference guide, is arranged by a somewhat difficult-to-use subject list, and not by surname. No complete listing of subject headings exists. A basic microfilm list, indexed by subject, appears at the end of the T458 finding aid and can be found as well on the LDS Family History Library website, <www.familysearch.org/Eng/Library/FHLC/framsetfhlc.asp> under title search “subject, case files.”

In the end, I limited my research in this series to a few items. I searched “Jews” on roll 18 and located an entry “see Hebrews.” I searched roll 16 and found a number of entries under the heading of “Hebrews.” Roll 15 has an entry for “German–Jewish Children’s Aid, Inc.” This was a World War II-era, U.S.-based nonprofit refugee organization. These entries consist of two large folders. Roll 21 has many civic and social organizations under the heading “Organizations.”

For researchers who cannot visit the research center at Archives I, these microfilmed materials also are available at NARA’s regional archives in New York, Chicago, Seattle and San Francisco and in libraries at the University of Chicago, University of California–San Diego, Macalester College, and the University of Texas–El Paso <www.oclc.org>. The index to this series also may be accessed at any LDS (Mormon) family history center <www.genhomepage.com/FHC/fhc.html>; the rolls are numbered 1527605 through 1527635.

Note

* Marian Smith, *A Reference Guide to T458, Subject Index to Correspondence and Case Files of the Immigration & Naturalization Service*, content and cover letter written by Marian Smith, (Washington, DC.: U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, December 8, 1999). This resource is available at the National Archives, Washington, DC. Contact reference archivist Suzanne Harris for a copy.

James H. Gross is a member of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Philadelphia (JGSGP) and is the database coordinator of the JGSGP Jewish Exponent obituary project, which can be found on JewishGen. He formerly worked as a micrographic technician with the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, where his duties included organizing, identifying, and preserving film rolls held in the Master Microfilm library.