Using the VA to Get WWII Military Records

James Gross, Drexel University
Tell Grandpop We Found Them

By Lora Hull

I have a picture. It is a picture of my Grandpop’s family. There are 21 people in the picture but I don’t even know their names. I know that Grandpop, Abe Golob – changed from Avram Gendelman – is seated on the far right, and his sister Dora and her son Harold are behind him. I know that his parents, my great-grandparents, are seated in the center, but I cannot even name them.

Grandpop came to America in 1912 and settled in Philadelphia. He was 19. Several months later, his cousin David Shapiro came over. In 1913, Grandpop’s sister Dora and his brother Nathan followed. Dave and Dora married. Abe and Nathan married sisters, Yetta and Ida, who lived in New York. Dave and Dora eventually ran several movie theaters in Philadelphia, including the Admiral Theater. Abe and Yetta opened a series of deli/grocery stores in various parts of Philadelphia. In 1930, Grandpop sold his store on Courtland Street and he and his sister Dora returned home to what was then Poland to visit their family. They had the family picture taken for their brother Nathan, since he was unable to go. This was the last time they saw their family.

My grandparents, Abe and Yetta, had two daughters – Anna and my mother, Phyllis. My mother still remembers when Grandpop received the letter telling him about the fate of his family. Grandpop sat down on the steps and sobbed. My mother, a child at the time, found out that her father’s whole family was killed by the Nazis, all except his niece who had managed to survive and apparently went to Israel. Grandpop died in 1967 and all contact was lost. He could never talk about what happened and we never knew.

My uncle died a few years ago. Shortly after, my aunt found a letter from 1966. It was sent by Sonia Markfeld in Kiryat Yam, Israel, to Anna Bresalier in Far Rockaway, N.Y., and had apparently been forwarded to Grandpop who was living with my aunt at the time. The letter was written in Yiddish, which none of us reads, and no one knew of either woman. We had the letter translated. It referred to several people but gave no definite information, contained some chitchat, and told of the weather in Israel (it rained a lot that summer). None of this helped much.

I decided to try to find the woman in Israel who had sent the letter. The Gratz College librarian helped me look in the Israel phone books. She found a Sonia Markfeld listed in Kiryat Yam the same name in the

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USING THE V.A. TO GET
WWII MILITARY RECORDS
By James Gross

A veteran's military file, depending on its contents, can often have quite a bit of information regarding his family, but it can be difficult or impossible to receive WWII military records on deceased relatives from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, MO. The problem is that the NPRC had a fire in 1973 and most WWII records were destroyed. However, there is another avenue open to the researcher besides the NPRC.

Write to your local Veterans Administration office. While there is no guarantee that the V.A. route will work, at least you have a better shot at getting your records. I have found that when my male relatives were treated for some sort of illness while in the military, a V.A. file would be created.

This V.A. file is what you want to get your hands on. Even though most of the file will be of limited interest (unless you like to research historical medical care), it may give you access to a discharge certificate, enlistment application, as well as a few other useful documents.

I have successfully pursued these records with the following two-step method. Step one is to send a simple letter, citing the freedom of information act, to any V.A. office in the U.S. I suggest avoiding the Newark, NJ office. In this letter give the name, date of birth, date of death, and social security number of your deceased military relative. Simply ask for the V.A. file number and which office has it. They will eventually mail you a response with the V.A. number and the local office that has the records.

Step two is to send a letter to your local V.A. office (again try to avoid Newark, NJ) and request a copy of the complete file under the freedom of information act. In addition to giving them all the veteran's information (see step one), also give them the veteran's file number. This piece of information is essential.

Lastly, you will probably receive a letter from your local V.A. office telling you that either your request is being processed or that the file cannot be located. If they tell you that the file has been lost, file their letter and go on to the next relative. I have had several lost-file responses.

If you follow these simple steps you will soon receive a thick envelope with tons of papers that you can sort through. To make your life easier, do both steps one and two by a homemade typed form letter. This will make it easier to do volume requests.

My reference is the book How to Locate Anyone Who Is or Has Been in the Military by Johnson and Knox. In the back of the book are listed V.A. offices along with their respective addresses.

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BROKEN TOMBSTONE MYSTERY UPDATE
By Selma Neubauer

Updating our story of The Mystery of the Broken Tombstones (Summer 2003 issue), Goldstein's Funeral Home examined the pictures and other materials from the broken tombstones and discussed them with people from one of the companies that makes monuments. They concluded that the stones were probably mistakes which were broken up and discarded by the monument maker. Someone probably then used the broken stones as land fill. It sounds disappointingly reasonable.

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A LONG SEARCH FOR
THE ANCESTRAL SHTETL
By Joan Rosen

Not long after we returned from the IAJGS Conference in Washington, D.C., and unrelated to that conference as it turns out, I received an e-mail from a relative of whom I knew, but to whom I was absolutely unknown. Within my Sklaroff family, in the beginning of the 20th century, there was a feud which resulted in a serious split that has outlasted the parties to the original quarrel. Since there was little we were told as children, my brother, my cousins, and I knew almost nothing about the whole affair. As the oldest of the remaining cousins, I remembered only vaguely that there was a fight of some sort, probably economically based, and certainly related to the family business.

After I was deep into genealogy, some ten years ago, I telephoned the several people with the surname Sklaroff in the Philadelphia area to determine if we could be related. I found one in my own neighborhood who said yes, he was related to the Sklaroffs who had been in the fish business, but as he was orphaned quite young, he

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