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Spring 2015

Using the Veterans Administration to Obtain Records on Deceased Veterans

James Gross



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CHRONICLES

JOURNAL OF THE JEWISH GENEALOGICAL
SOCIETY OF GREATER PHILADELPHIA

דברי הימים



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REFLECTIONS FROM YOUR CHRONICLES TEAM

Spring 2015



Barry Levinson's 1990 film, "Avalon", captures the growth, tensions, and assimilation of an extended Jewish family living in Baltimore during the 1940s and 1950s. One element the film projects to which I readily relate is the institution of the family circle. During my childhood and well into my teen years, I attended monthly family circle meetings of my mother's maternal side which were held in a hall in Hillside, New Jersey. Eight siblings, born between 1892 and 1912, formed the nucleus of this amalgam of individuals. Together with their spouses, their children (consisting of nineteen first cousins), the spouses of those nineteen first cousins, and their grandchildren, we convened to play out our lives on a more informal, everyday basis than official family celebrations such as weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, and funerals.

The eight siblings grew up in Newark, New Jersey, and many of them still lived there or in the immediate environs. The family circle also included a contingent of cousins from Brooklyn. I never knew precisely how they were related, but they shared the same surname. One can imagine the sheer numbers; potentially eighty people, covering three generations, could have shown up at a given meeting!

At any family gathering, smaller groups develop, often along generational lines. I didn't have much to do with my first cousins once removed. When you're eight years old, even a five-year age difference seems enormous.

(Continued on pg. 3)

I kept searching for more information on Karl and Sarah. Luckily Ben, his sister and Karl all applied for naturalization. Now some genealogy blanks could be filled. They came from Chernigov and had grey blue eyes like my daughter Dina Sara, with her middle name in honor of my elusive great grandmother Sarah. In 1924, Karl had his name, Coppel Chitrik, changed to Carl Rich. I found Sarah in one census only. I thought perhaps she had remarried and changed her name.

Coming to a dead end in my search I posted a note on Facebook to the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Philadelphia. Emily Garber suggested I look for the name Sarah Rick at the Italian Genealogical Group's website: <http://italiangen.org/>. That seemed unreasonable, but it showed she passed away at 70 years old in 1945. Later Evan Fishman forwarded a suggestion by Ann Kauffman that perhaps Carl's name was erroneously spelled Carol on a Pennsylvania death certificate in 1935. That proved correct with his mother's maiden name listed as Sarah Rosen. Informant on the death certificate was my grandfather, Ben Rick from Atlantic City. I thought I had tried every "C" or "K" name I could think of including Charles, yet I never would have thought to look for Carol. The death certificate shows he was buried on October 10, 1935 in Har Judah Cemetery. I checked their site online, however, neither his name nor Sarah's is listed. A note says many graves are not easily legible, and those that are legible were recorded on their site. I did note several Rosen family members are buried there. When Karl left Russia for Philadelphia, possibly he lived near his mother's family. Some of the surnames in the cemetery are the same ones that show up as fourth cousins in my DNA Ancestry report.

I also discovered that Sarah's husband was listed as Arnold Rick. Ben's tombstone shows his Hebrew name as Behr Ben Yonah Ha Levi revealing his Hebrew name.

I'm very grateful for everyone's help in finding information regarding this part of my family that I knew so little about. The "trees" online can stand as silent as trees made into telephone poles. Finding information from many sources helps us locate our ancestors. Sometimes we can find more information from a long lost sibling than our own grandparents. ❖

Bobbi subsequently requested her great grandmother's death certificate from the New York City Department of Health which indicated that Sarah Bella Rick was buried at Beth El Cemetery in [Paramus] New Jersey.

*Bobbi Schwartz is a writer who blogs regularly at www.hurricaneharbor.blogspot.com. She specializes in the interrelatedness of weather, history and politics. She is piecing together the broken branches of her family tree applying her knowledge of demography & history. After arriving in America from England & Nezhin her family settled in the Philadelphia area as well as Malaga, NJ before moving south to Key West & Tampa. The surnames in Philadelphia she is researching are **Rosen, Chitrik/Rick, Morris and Abrahams**. She remembers fondly hearing her grandmother talk about living in Strawberry Mansion as a teenager, the samovar her mother-in-law brought from Russia and modeling high button shoes at Wanamakers. Contact her at bobbischwartz@gmail.com*

USING THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION TO OBTAIN RECORDS ON DECEASED VETERANS

by James Gross, MLIS



The focus of this article is to explain how to use Veterans Administration (VA) files on deceased relatives as an alternate resource. In addition to medical records, VA files may contain, the DD 214 Form that provides information about the veteran from the date of entry through separation, application for military duty, and/or other military records. In essence the files provide a snapshot into the military lives of these veterans and provide as well as a timeline as to when and where they served in defense of their country.

This resource has taken on greater importance as a result of the massive 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in Overland, Missouri.¹ I previously wrote an article on this topic which was published in *Avotaynu* in Winter 2003.² To give you an idea of the scope of the potential destruction consider the following facts about the NPRC:

- It handles the service records of persons in Federal civil service or American military service.
- It holds historical military personnel records of nearly 100 million veterans.
- The vast majority of these records are paper-based and not available on-line.
- It is a department within the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

As a result of the fire, approximately 16-18 million official military personnel records were lost³ including:

- 80% loss to records of U.S. Army personnel discharged November 1, 1912, to January 1, 1960.⁴
- 75% loss to records of U.S. Air Force personnel discharged September 25, 1947, to January 1, 1964, with names alphabetically after Hubbard, James E.⁵
- Some U.S. Army Reserve personnel who performed their initial active duty for training in the late 1950s but who received final discharge as late as 1964.⁶

A 2014 Fox News article describing the long ordeal veteran Tom Morrow experienced in trying to retrieve his records noted that, "No duplicate copies of these records were ever maintained, nor were microfilm copies produced... Neither were any indexes created prior to the fire. In addition, millions of documents had been lent to the Department of Veterans Affairs before the fire occurred. Therefore, a complete listing of the records that were lost is not available."⁷

The first step is to identify whether the VA has a copy of the NPRC military file. When dealing with a military record that has been presumed to have been destroyed, the NPRC is able to reconstruct basic service information, such as military date of entry, date of discharge, character of service, and final rank by using the following sources: VA claims files, individual state records, Multiple Name Pay Vouchers (MPV) from the Adjutant General's Office, Selective Service System (SSS) registration records, pay records from the Government Accounting Office (GAO), as well as medical records from military hospitals.⁸ In reality this reconstruction effort takes a lot of time, and the results are often mixed. Is there was a way or a method for a researcher to try and locate and possibly recover some of the date or information from the burned NPRC military records?

Let's face it: we live in the digital information age in which everyone expects instant information! Fortunately, there is a partial solution. Ancestry.com has added a database entitled, "U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File, 1850-2010." This index contains birth and death dates for more than 14 million veterans and VA beneficiaries who died between the years 1850 and 2010. Per Ancestry, "The majority of information in the index comes from the BIRLS (Beneficiary Identification Records Locator Subsystem) Death File; however, the veteran's name has been added by cross-referencing the Social Security Number in the BIRLS Death File with the Social Security Death Index. No names were provided directly in the BIRLS Death File."⁹ See image below from Ancestry.com.

The BIRLS, Beneficiary Identification Records Locator Subsystem Death File is a Veterans Benefits Administration database that lists information for deceased individuals who had received benefits from the Veterans Administration while they were alive. These include veterans who received educational benefits and veterans' survivors who applied for benefits.

So, does the Ancestry.com database totally eliminate the need to send a written Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) letter to the VA? I can tell you there's no record in Ancestry's copy of the Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File database for my late grandfather, Dr. Nathan Steinberg, a captain in the U.S. Army during World War II. So, it may be prudent to send a letter to the VA if your relative is not listed.

Name:	Samual Steinberg
Gender:	Male
Birth Date:	12 Aug 1895
Death Date:	19 Jan 1982
SSN:	077201140
Enlistment Date 1:	29 Apr 1918
Release Date 1:	9 Aug 1919

Here's the method I use:

1. Typically I send a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) letter to a VA office, preferably one in a smaller city or town because they are often less busy and more apt to actually reply. I cite the FOIA and inquire as to whether a BIRLS file existed on my deceased veteran. I include the veteran's name, date of birth, date of death, and social security number. I usually ask that in their reply, they enclose a copy of the BIRLS file number or to print out and send me a screenshot of that information from their computer monitor screen.

What replies have I received from the VA? I have often received a reply in the form of my original letter with the words "no record" scrawled on it. On occasion, however, I have had positive results and received either my letter with the VA BIRLS file number written on it or a print out from the VA computer screen showing the VA BIRLS file number.

2. Take the BIRLS information, whether from the Ancestry.com online database, or from the written VA reply, and send a follow-up letter to your local VA office, citing the FOIA, and requesting a copy of the deceased veteran's complete file. During the VA's interaction with the veteran it often requests a copy of that veteran's military file in order to verify his or her eligibility for veteran's health benefits. The VA maintains medical records on veterans. This includes those veterans who filed a medical claim before July 1973.¹⁰

An example of one published reply from the VA: "All the paperwork from 1967 was there, including a detailed drawing a doctor had made of my Dad's head injury." In December 2004, Shawn Morrow said his father finally received a letter stating the VA would begin sending him checks for \$2,600 per month. "They gave him 100 percent disability after waiting 42 years to get anything," Morrow said.¹¹ ❖

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- [11] See footnote #7.

Author James Gross has been working on his family tree since the early 1990s. A periodic contributor to various genealogy newsletters, James volunteers regularly at the Cherry Hill, NJ Family History Center where he helps other genealogists in their research.

He also has a genealogy website: <http://tinyurl.com/gross-steinberg>. James can be reached at: navistar96@yahoo.com