

The Story of the 1935 Photograph and the Search for David Sokolsky

By Howard I. Schwartz (v. 5)

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A 1935 photograph of my great-grandmother Yetta Schwartz (nee Demb) with a couple of young women from the small town of Mlynov came into my hands in the past few years. Yetta is the one who is seated in the center of the photo below. Mlynov was the name of the town as it was called in Yiddish as it changed hands between Russia and Poland. Today it is called Mlyniv and is part of Ukraine.

I had never seen this photo until quite recently when I was rummaging through an old box of photos in my Aunt Neena's collection. I was told this was a picture of my great-grandmother that had been taken during a 1935 trip she made back to Mlynov. Clearly these were either friends or family that she hadn't seen for nearly thirty years. Yetta must have been close to 65 at the time.

I didn't know who the other women were in the picture. My cousin Ted Fishman said that one of them (the one in the upper left) looked like a Schwartz but he wasn't sure. Ted also told me that a copy of the same photo appeared in the Mlynov-Muravica memorial book but when I tracked that photo down the caption read only "daughters of Mlynov, may their memories be for a blessing." The caption offered no clue as to the identity of the women and rendered my great-grandmother anonymous as well.¹



I didn't think much more about the photo until I accidentally bumped into another copy of it in a book I had recently tracked down in my research on the small town of Mlynov in which Yetta and the rest of the Dembs had lived. The book was titled *Monument: one woman's courageous odyssey of escape from the Holocaust*. It was written by a man named David Sokolsky. I had heard about this book from my cousin Ted. I thought it would be interesting to see what I could learn about Mlynov from that

book and whether I could learn about any of the other families that were still living there at the time that might have relevance to my story.



I ordered a copy of the book from Amazon and imagine my surprise when I opened up the book and found the same 1935 photo of my great-grandmother with the other women from Mlynov. As you can see in the photo on the left, the Sokolsky book identified three of the other women in the photo but not my great-grandmother.

One of the women was Liba Tesler (standing center behind my great-grandmother). She was the woman who had escaped the Nazis in Mlynov and about whom the book was written. The other two women seated next to my great-grandmother were Liba's sisters. Hinda was seated on the left and Golda on the right. They both were killed by the Nazis during ghetto liquidations.

David's book recounts the harrowing escape of Liba and the various subterfuges she found to survive the war in Europe and to hide her identity as a Jew. After the war, Liba was rediscovered by her family and made her way to Baltimore, where she married David's grandfather who was a widower and became David's step-grandmother. Liba's story so

profoundly moved David as a young man that he wrote a book about her experience.

The photo in the book gave me another reason to try to track down David Sokolsky. I had run into David's name before because he had done a partial translation of the memorial book in which my great-grandmother's photo appeared. There are many such memorial books published commemorating towns or shetls whose Jewish populations had been destroyed by the Nazis. The one about Mlynov, the birthplace of my father's family, had been published in 1970 in Haifa as a commemoration of all the families and memories lost there.

I had gotten my hands on an electronic version of the original Hebrew/Yiddish version of the memorial book, but my Hebrew was rusty and my Yiddish was non-existent. I had earlier wanted to find David's English translation to help me read the stories that were written about the town and people. Now I wanted to find David for another reason, to talk to him about this photo. I wanted to tell him that my great-grandmother was in the same photo with Liba, the woman who had escaped the Nazis and had married his grandfather. I wanted him to know the name of at least one of the other women in the photo and meet her descendant.

I did a search on the Internet for David Sokolsky and found a man by that name running some sort of software company in Austin, Texas. That David Sokolsky didn't respond to my repeated emails so I concluded he either wasn't interested or he wasn't the right David Sokolsky. I had all but given up on finding him. In the meantime, I started to track down the translation of the memorial book. The book was no longer in print and the nearest copy was in the JFCS Holocaust Center in San Francisco.

It was with some ambivalence that I set up an appointment with the Center's Library Manager to look at a copy of that book. My ambivalence is really part of another story I will tell at some time about my years as a professor of Jewish and Religious Studies and my antipathy towards what I had come to regard as the organized Jewish community's obsessive focus on the Holocaust. I had found that focus suffocating for myself as a Jew and as a professor. How ironic that my search for family history was taking me back to what I regarded as the lion's den even as it was reconnecting me to my Jewish identity that I had all but set aside.

I eventually made it to the Holocaust Center and met with the Library Manager, Yedida Kanfer. She had the original Mlynov-Muravica Memorial book as well as the Sokolsky translation ready for me. I flipped through the pages and pointed to various persons in my family whose photos had been published there and whom I had come to know through my family history research.

"Here is a picture of my great-grandfather's brother, Israel Schwartz, and his wife Sarah," I showed her as I flipped pages of the book. I had flipped through the electronic version of the book so many times that I had memorized approximately where in the book the photos of my family were.

Yedida had promised me I could make copies of David's translation while I was there.

"How much do you want to copy," she asked.

"All of it," I replied.

She said she could scan me digital copies if I wanted to pay for it.

"No problem." I said. It was only going to cost me about twenty bucks. Little did she know how much time I had spent already on family history research.

I told her about my research and about the 1935 photograph of my great-grandmother and showed her the version in the memorial book that only said "daughters of Mlynov, may their memory be for a blessing." I told her I was trying to find David Sokolsky because his grandmother was in that photo too as I had learned from his account of her narrowing escape from Mlynov when the Nazis invaded.



Figure 1 The same photo in the Mlynov-Muravica Memorial Book with the caption daughters of Mlynov, may their memory be for a blessing

"I know how to connect you with David," she said. "Let me get his permission."

A couple days later Yedida sent me an email and included the email contact of David Sokolsky. So I reached out to David and sent him a copy of the photo I wanted to talk to him about. David responded very quickly. He was living in San Francisco about thirty minutes away from me and he and his wife were coming in another week to San Rafael to visit a friend.

So we agreed to meet over coffee at Peet's in San Rafael. I sensed he was as excited as I was about meeting a descendant of one of the women in the same photo from his

book. It seems trite to put it into words, but it felt like those gears of universe that had kept locking into place during this work just clicked another one into place. This was one of those moments when time seems to open up and fold in on itself, collapsing the distance between two points across its relentless march. David was pleased to know the name of the other woman seated in the front and center of the 1935 photograph, my great-grandmother, Yetta Schwartz.

As It turned out, he was at that time working on a revision of the two books about Mlynov he had previously published. First, he was bringing out a new edition of the book on Liba's harrowing escape from the Nazis. He told me he would now be adding my great-grandmother's name to the caption of the photo when he republished. I was thrilled. Somehow, I felt that I had done justice to the women in the photo. They had been the anonymous "daughters of Mlynov" in the memorial book for the town. My great-grandmother's name had also been missing in David's book for his grandmother. Most of the generation that knew who my great-grandmother was in this photo are deceased, including my father. Now, Yetta's identity would be restored to the photo. My sleuthing and persistence had paid off.

It is good to have a result like this from time to time to justify the relentless obsessiveness that comes with this kind of work. My family and friends smile bemusedly at my daily efforts, writing emails, hours searching the Internet, looking for and studying records, going back to Baltimore. Sometimes I feel that I could end world hunger or homelessness with the amount of energy I spend on family history. But, of course, that is not really so as I know from my work these days in a Catholic nonprofit focused on housing the homeless. That problem needs the collective attention of many more people.

What purpose then does my obsessive search for the family's history really serve? Is it not just another futile attempt to claim a stake in immortality? At times, it feels as if I am one of those European explorers and conquerors who egotistically planted their flags in the Americas and claimed the land for their kings and queens and countries. At other times, I am more like the natives who reclaim the history that has been erased by their conquerors. I am all of those metaphors, conquering hero and return of suppressed native, both. I am reminded from time to time of Ernest Becker's book, *The Denial of Death*, which I had read when I was a younger man and an academic. He argues, pretty persuasively I still think, that much of what we do as human beings is to avoid the realization of death and nothingness. Is family history not an attempt to link to something with deep history and permanence?

As David and I talked about that photo and wondered about the nature of relationship that it implied between his step-grandmother and my great-grandmother, we realized that we had more in common than we thought. David had grown up in Baltimore just as I had. As we explored the Baltimore connection, we realized that at one point in time he had lived on Hatton Rd just one block away from my home on Boxford road. I am about ten years younger than David so we aren't of the same generation and didn't know the same people in grade school, though both of us had attended Falstaff Elementary School. But he did know my childhood friend and next-door neighbor, Sam Esterson.

"You got to be kidding," I said when he told me this.

My brick house and Sammy's shared a wall in what are called semi-detached houses in Baltimore. We were both young in those houses. I lived there until I was ten when my parents moved us away to Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington DC where my father had taken a job. That was the move that severed me from the deep Baltimore connections that everyone else there grew up with.

I wasn't to rediscover these connections again until I started this family history work. But back then, when I was seven or eight years old, Sammy and I used to run cups with a string between the windows of our bedrooms so we could talk to each other over those makeshift "walkie talkies" that kids used to make. I never really knew if I heard his voice over the string or just through the thin walls between our houses. I used to tap on the wall when taking a bath and could hear Sammy tap back. Sammy's older sister Rachel was my baby sitter for a time. We used to play handball with one of those "pinkie balls" on the wall between our two porches. David reminds me they were called "Pensy Pinkies." We also used to play tidily winks, cat's cradle and jump rope, though we snickered that the latter was for the girls. Bobby Warner was the big hero a couple doors away. I'm not sure what happened to him. Elliot Caplan lived across the street and his father eventually started Caplan's delicatessen, which was a favorite around Baltimore for many years. I recently connected with Elliot by Internet and we caught up after all those years. Elliot had become "frum" [Jewishly religious] and I, who had gone on to be a rabbi, had since shed most of my religiosity. I still have a painful memory of sleeping over Elliot's house and peeing in the bed during the night, one of those anguished, embarrassed childhood memories one carries the rest of one's life. It is interesting how something so long ago can still trigger shame and embarrassment. John Denick was a friend down the street. He became a lawyer in Baltimore and I heard he ran into some troubles a few years back, but the Internet doesn't reveal anything about that.



Figure 3 A picture of our semi-detached home at 7003 Boxford Road during my recent visit to Baltimore. Our house was on the left, Sammy's on the right.

The Estersons were my introduction to orthodox Judaism. Sam's father, Mort Esterson, always wore a kippah on his balding head. And they built a significantly sized Sukkah [symbolic tent] in their back patio that we used to play in. It was quite beautiful yellow and blue with decorated with all sorts of gourds by Sammy's mom Hinda. My family was ethnically Jewish. My brother and I were sent to Hebrew School three days a week at Beth El [an experience we hated, by the way], celebrated the high holidays and Passover and never ate pork or bacon. But my folks like many Jews of the day ate crab cakes outside the house when we went to the Eastern shore. There was a kind of separation between inside and outside the home. Inside the home's intimacy you had to be or could be a bit more Jewish than outside. Crab was for outside the home, not inside. This practice was a nod to the grandparents who still were religiously kosher. I think now that it was also some secularized version of those deeper distinctions that have defined us Jews, like the separation of meat and milk, and kosher and non-kosher foods. I later wrote about such distinctions as a professor of religious studies. But all of this was just how things were back then.

At the time, my memory is that the Estersons were probably the only orthodox Jews on the block. Last time I went back, the entire block is orthodox or "black hat" and large parts of Pikesville are dominated by religious Jews. Sammy still lives in Baltimore and his sister Rachel lives only a few blocks away from where we grew up. What a contrast to myself, who lived up and down the East Coast and then ended up in California. I learned that my new connection, David Sokolsky, used to sit behind Mort Esterson in synagogue and kibbutz with him. How small a world was that?

Sitting in Peet's in San Rafael, the Baltimore of my childhood had reached across time and figuratively grabbed me by my shoulders and shook me to my core. It was 2800 miles back to Baltimore. Of course, we can cover that distance today with a six-hour air flight though I had been back for a serious visit for the first time in forty years only this past summer. For some reason I didn't quite understand, I had never felt the need until recently to return to Baltimore or to keep up with relatives there. I thought about my great-grandparents making a journey of about 7900 miles that took more than a month from Mlynov to Baltimore. What would my great-grandmother and David's step-grandmother have said about David and I meeting in Peet's coffee these many years later near San Francisco. Did Yetta and Liba have coffee together after Liba made it to Baltimore? I do not know, but David tells me this 1935 photograph was up on the wall of his house when he was growing up.

We are not sure about the relationship of my great-grandmother and David's step-grandmother, Liba. Clearly, they thought enough of each other to take a photo together along with Liba's sisters. I wondered if there was a family relationship, though I have not been able to turn up one so far.

Before I met David face to face, I had in fact unknowingly picked up a possible clue to their relationship during my trip to Baltimore. It happened in a roundabout way that seems to be routine in Baltimore.

Ahead of my trip to Baltimore, I had set up appointments with second and even third cousins whom I had met over the Internet and whom I wanted to meet and interview in person. This was the culmination of about three years of genealogy and Internet work to track down contacts of second and third cousins. One of my third cousins, Betty Reichenberg, had not responded to my repeated requests to meet, but her daughter Eileen Sheridan had responded and I had a lovely time meeting with her family in the Inner Harbor of Baltimore.

The location was significant to me which is why my wife and I were staying near there. Many of the first members of my father's family to leave Europe and come to the United States had landed in Baltimore and lived within blocks of what is now the revitalized Inner Harbor. My visit with Eileen prompted her mother Betty to finally reach out and insist that we meet, as if she was the one initiating the contact.

Betty invited a few other folks to a bagel brunch at Goldberg's kosher deli on Reisterstown Road in Pikesville. It was one of those Baltimore mornings where I had two scheduled family appointments at Kosher Delis. One of those people she invited was Sheila Mandelberg and her husband. I didn't know who Sheila was and felt initially that she was "crashing" my gathering. Sheila brought along a number of things to show me including a hard copy of the memorial book about Mlynov-Muravica. As I was feeling my space invaded, she informed me she was a relative of mine, which completely changed how I was feeling about the encounter. She said she was at my aunt Pearl's birthday party when Pearl was a little girl and showed me a photo of that party. Pearl is my father's younger sister and my aunt.

"What is the nature of our relationship," I asked. Sheila didn't know but she was certain we were related.

Sheila also pulled out a photo of Liba Tesler, the same one in which my great-grandmother Yetta Schwartz appeared. It turns out that Sheila was related to Liba. Sheila's mother, Sarah, was first cousins with Liba. Sheila's grandmother, Clara, was the sister of Liba's father. Another link of the universe just dropped into place. If Sheila was related to Liba and if Sheila was related to me, was it possible that my great-grandmother, Yetta Schwartz, was related to Liba Tesler, David's step-grandmother? Sheila told me she remembered when her family had helped bring Liba over to the United States after Liba was rediscovered when WWII had ended.

"My God," I thought to myself. I had read this story in David's book. David had written the moving account of how Liba had seen a notice in the Forward posted by a man named Boruch Merin who was originally from Mlynov, but was living in Baltimore at the time. In the notice, Boruch was requesting information about any person who had survived from Mlynov. Liba responded to that notice with a letter and told him about her relatives, the Marders, whom she believed were living in Baltimore. Boruch was able to track down the Marders who then helped bring Liba to the United States.

I went home and spent a couple of seriously obsessive weeks putting Sheila's and Liba's family tree into Ancestry and finding all the related records I could find. Sheila's family names were super confusing. Her father was David Mutter and her mother was Sarah Marder. I had the hardest time keeping Marder and Mutter from getting mixed up in my head. Eventually I got it all untangled. Sheila's grandmother, Clara Marder, had been born a Tesler. She was the sister of Liba's father, Jacob Tesler.

The research returned me to my original question. So why was my great-grandmother Yetta Schwartz and Liba Tesler in the same photo in 1935? Refocusing on that question, it dawned on me that they couldn't have been childhood friends. Liba was born in 1912 and my great-grandmother was born in 1870. It was much more probable that they were relatives. That would explain why they took a photo together and why Liba's sisters were in the photo as well. But in my research to this point I couldn't find a marriage in the family trees.

There was, however, another relevant connection that had emerged from this encounter with Sheila Mandelberg. Her maiden name, “Marder,” sounded familiar to me, though I couldn’t place where I had bumped into that name before. As I was working on my family history, I rediscovered the Marder name in the 1920 immigration records of one of my other Demb relatives. The families were traveling together to the United States.

My great-grandmother Yetta Schwartz, whose photo I was chasing, was one of nine Demb children born in Mlynov. She had come to Baltimore in 1912 with her husband Chaim Schwartz, for whom I am named, and her two younger sons, Norton and Paul. Two of her other sisters had preceded Yetta to Baltimore with their families. One of Yetta’s younger brothers, Aaron Demb, came to Baltimore in 1914. Aaron arrived just before WWI broke out and his wife Bessie and children couldn’t join him in Baltimore until after the war in 1920. It was in Bessie Demb’s passenger manifest from June 1920 that I rediscovered the Marder family.

Clara Marder and her children were traveling to the US with Yetta’s sister-in-law on the SS New York from Southampton to New York in June 1920. The Marders are listed as coming from Mlynov and the record indicates that Clara was on their way to her husband who is already living in Baltimore at 1615 Presbury St. There were other travelers from Mlynov on that passenger manifest as well including a family named Lerner as well as a young man named Ben (“Boks”) Fishman. Ben ended up marrying one of my grandmother’s sisters and becoming the father of my cousin Ted Fishman from whom I have learned many of the family stories. There are a few interesting stories of how these families got out of Europe that I tell in another context.²

18	✓ Marder	Clara	34	✓	F	m	Wife	yes	5-67	Yiddish	yes	Poland
19	✓ Marder	Sara	17	✓	F	s	Domestic	yes	5-065	Yiddish	yes	Poland
20	UNDER 16 ✓ Marder	Clara	11	✓	F	s	Child	yes	4-245 92-3-20-43	Yiddish	yes	Poland
21	UNDER 16 ✓ Marder	Nathan	9	✓	M	s	Child	no			no	Poland
22	ADMITTED ✓ Demb	Bessie	32	✓	F	m	Wife	yes		Yiddish	yes	Poland
23	UNDER 16 ✓ Demb	Hyman	11	✓	M	s	Child	no			no	Poland
24	UNDER 16 ✓ Demb	Chaim	9	✓	M	s	Child	no			no	Poland

Figure 4 1920 Passenger manifest of Aaron Demb’s family (Bessie, Louis Hyman Demb) and the Marder family, Clara, Sarah and Pauline and Nathan Marder.

In my quest to understand the 1935 photograph of my great-grandmother, this passenger manifest seemed like further possible evidence of a family connection between Liba and my great-grandmother, Yetta. Liba’s aunt, Clara Marder, was traveling with Yetta’s sister-in-law to the United States. What this record showed, if nothing else, is that part of the Demb family knew the Marder family well enough to make the journey to Baltimore together. But were they related?

When the Marder family made their way to Baltimore in 1920, the rest of the clan stayed behind in Mlynov. Clara’s brother, Jacob Tesler and his daughter Liba, remained in Mlynov and didn’t make the passage to America. When my great-grandmother went back to Mlynov in 1935, Liba and her sisters were still there and hence the photograph I have been chasing.

In the meantime, I set up a time to visit David Sokolsky at his home in San Francisco. He lives in a classy Victorian-type house known as an Edwardian on a side street in San Francisco called Russell St. The house across the street, David informed me, was historic. It had been the house of Neal and Carolyn Cassidy where Jack Kerouac used to be as an occasional house guest. Kerouac had stayed in the attic for several months in early 1952 while writing his book *Visions of Cody*.³ Kerouac, as you may know, went on to be one of the defining writers of the postwar Beat and Counterculture generation. David tells me he is continually bumping into people who are wandering down Russell St looking for the place Kerouac crashed. I felt a kinship with those wanderers on Russell street, looking for the past, wanting to touch eternity, though what brought me here that day was a small town called Mlynov. Somehow the opposition of Mlynov and early Beat Culture seemed oddly appropriate.

David graciously invited me into his home for coffee. The place has a warm, beautiful interior with old family photos on the wall of his dining room and images of the passenger manifests that had brought his family to the United States. I loved how he had displayed artefacts of his family's history. I was learning that using visuals is so much more tangible when trying to tell others about family history. I had always been a writer. Visuals were not my strong suit. Before we sat down to look at photos, David gave me a tour of his home which had been built after the 1906 San Francisco fire which followed the earthquake of that year and devastated the city. It is ironic that I had heard of the San Francisco fire before I learned of a similar devastating fire in Baltimore in 1904. As school children, many of us learn about the great Chicago fire of 1871 that was triggered mythically by Mrs. O'Leary's cow.

I only learned of the Baltimore fire after starting to research my family's history. In 1901, two of my great uncles had started the Demb family migration from Europe when they followed a brother-in-law named Getzel Fax to Baltimore and took up residence with Fax family.⁴ In 1904, Getzel, his wife Ida, and my great uncles were living in downtown Baltimore at 818 E Pratt during the fire that. According to Getzel's great-grandsons, whom I have been able to track down, Getzel was on the top of their roof watching the fire which came within a block of his own residence. My great uncles who were living with him at the time may very well have been there that day too.

The Great Baltimore Fire raged for two days on Sunday, February 7 and Monday, February 8, 1904. It is considered historically the third worst conflagration in an American city, surpassed only by the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, and the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906. One reason for the fire's duration was the lack of national standards in firefighting equipment. Fire crews and fire engines came from as far away as Philadelphia and Washington that day. Most could only watch helplessly after discovering that their hoses could not connect to Baltimore's gauge size of water hydrants. High winds and freezing temperatures further contributed to the fire's extent and firefighters' difficulties. As a result, the fire burned over 30 hours, destroying 1,545 buildings spanning 70 city blocks—amounting to over 140 acres.⁵ The 1904 fire was the beginning of Baltimore reimagining itself and rethinking what it wanted to be.

The traces of the San Francisco fire of 1906 were still visible in the walls and ceiling of David Sokolsky's kitchen. You could see a kind of embossment protruding through the walls and ceiling that looked like pictures and text. David explained to me that in the wake of the SF fire, there was a shortage of building materials and his kitchen walls and ceiling had been built with plates that had been used to produce the newspaper of the day. David pulled out paper copies of pages containing stories and ads from 1907 that matched the protrusions on his wall. Something so mundane as daily ads for soap

protruding from history into the present serve as a remembrance to events of the past. There was something so metaphoric about those literal historical protrusions into David's kitchen.

After the tour of his kitchen, David and I sat down at his dining room table to turn pages of his family album that included passenger manifests. I felt like I was sitting in front of "the Torah" and should not touch it directly with my hands. David shared with me a number of records he had found relating to Liba. Since writing his first book about her, the one in which my great-grandmother appeared anonymously, he actually discovered correspondence which Liba had exchanged with one of the families who hid her during the war. The correspondence was surprising to David. Liba's experience living with the family had been harrowing. She was never sure if they would turn her in. Apparently, several members of that family felt special regards for her because the letters were filled with gratitude that she had survived the war.

After we looked at his new discoveries, we turned back to the 1935 photo of Liba and my great-grandmother and marveled at the photo that had brought us together in his San Francisco Edwardian, across the street from where Jack Kerouac had crashed during his San Francisco stay. We now knew three of the five women in the photo. We were still missing the identity of two others and we still didn't know Yetta and Liba's relationship.

We focused in on the faces of the women we hadn't identified. I told David that my cousin Ted thought the woman in the upper left looked like a Schwartz and I felt he was right. She did look familiar. We started to look at other photos I had of relatives from Mlynov. In contrast to David's 20 x 20 beautiful albums, my collection is all digital. I had spent fifteen years in the computer industry in Silicon Valley and the computer was second nature to me. I started showing him other photos of my great-grandmother.

As we flipped through my digital collection, my heart skipped a beat. I had completely forgotten about one photo. It was of my great-grandmother Yetta standing alone with the very same woman who appeared standing in the back left of the 1935 photograph. David and I looked closely at the photo. It was clearly the same woman, as you can see from these two pictures set below side by side. I had made that connection once before, but didn't pursue it at the time because my attention had been focused elsewhere. This time, as I set them next to each other, I realized they were from the very same photo shoot. My great-grandmother's necklace looks identical in both photos as do the background curtains. In retrospect, it is so obvious they were from the same sitting that it is hard to imagine I did not realize it earlier. But I had gotten the two photos from different family members and it took me a while to put two and two together.



Figure 5 A photo postcard found in a manila envelope sent to me courtesy of Marvin Schwartz



Figure 6 The original 1935 photo that started my search.

This photo on the left I had received in a packet of material about a year ago from my cousin Marvin Schwartz. Marvin was a grandson of my great-grandmother Yetta Schwartz. He had been born to a different one of Yetta's sons than my father, who was his first cousin.⁶ I had reached out to Marvin over the past year to chat and he confessed that he didn't know that much about the family history.

"But I have something for you," he said.

The following week a packet from Marvin arrived at my door in a manila envelope. Inside the packet was a large pile of photos and photo postcards most of whom I still can't identify. But I had noticed that there was one postcard photo of my great-grandmother, Yetta, and the mysterious woman from the 1935 photo.

I had forgotten about this photo in the intervening months since I had received it. But now sitting and looking at it in David's dining room, I had my interest piqued interest to find out more. David and I had finished our coffee and had run out of time for our visit. I had a new puzzle on my hands that I was bringing home with me. I said goodbye to David and looked again at the house where Kerouac had stayed across the street and I figuratively nodded goodbye to him as well. At this moment, Mlynov felt closer in time than Beat Culture.

When I got home that day, I returned to the manila envelope of photos that I had shoved into my filing cabinet some time back. I flipped through the photos until I reached the one of the mysterious woman with my great-grandmother. I had forgotten that it was a photo postcard.

On the back of the photo was some Yiddish. I don't speak any Yiddish though I can read the Hebrew characters and could discern the name "Rivkah Schwartz" at the bottom. It took me a while but via a friend, I tracked down a Yiddish speaker and had the postcard translated. The post card reads: "For Cousin Peretz and Cousin Fefe (probably a diminutive of Fayge), From me, Rivke Shwartz."

Looking at that photo again, it seemed a good bet that the Rivkah Schwartz was the woman standing in the 1935 photo with my great-grandmother Yetta and David's step-grandmother. That insight suggested that the people in the 1935 photo were possibly all related through the Schwartz side of the family.

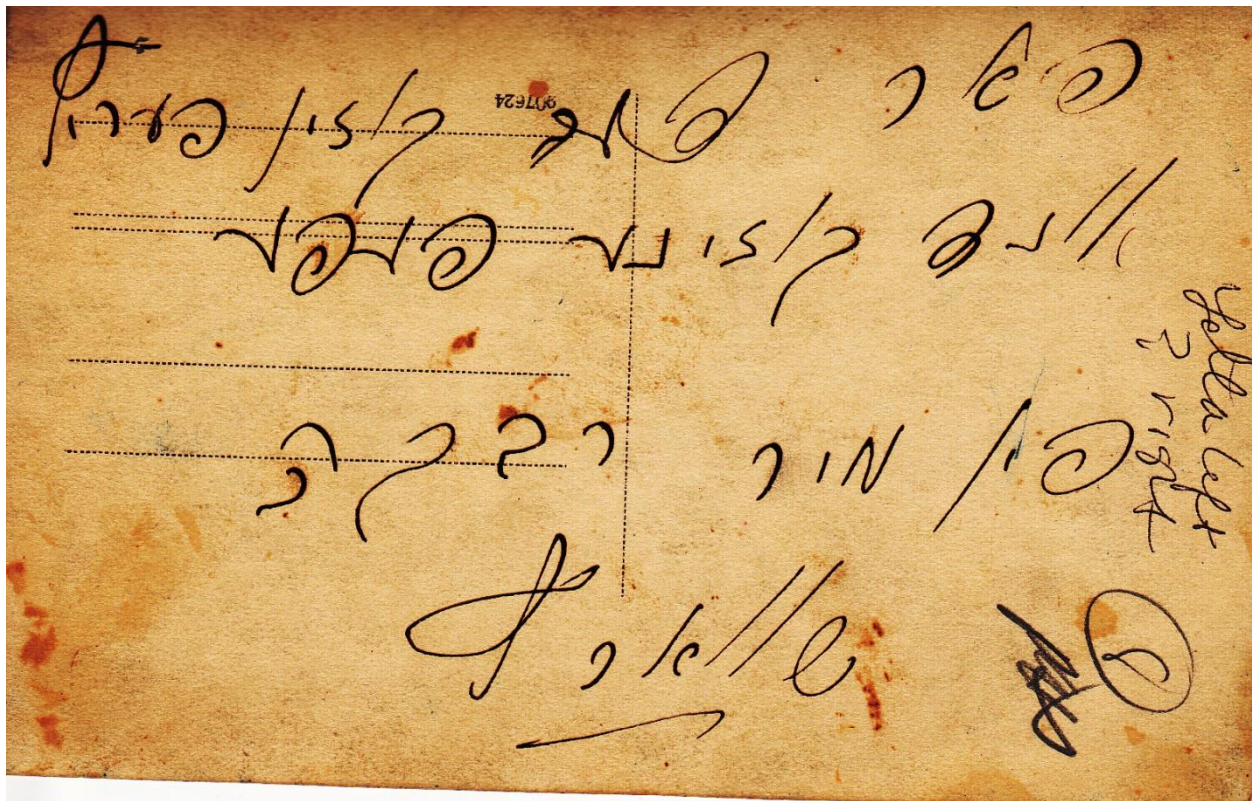
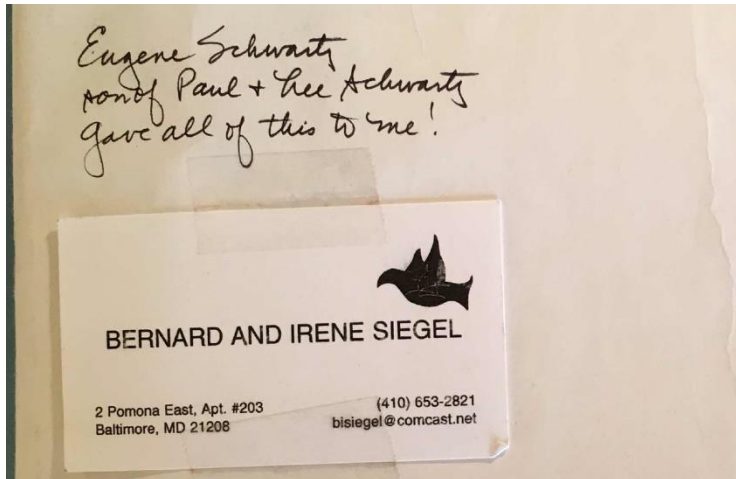


Figure 7 Yiddish inscription reads, "For Cousin Peretz and Cousin Fefe (probably a diminutive of Fayge), From me, Rivke Schwartz" You can see my English handwriting on the right from before the Yiddish was translated.

But who was Rivkah Schwartz? I wasn't sure. All I knew from the postcard translation was that Rivkah Schwartz had written a letter to Peretz and Fefe Schwartz. From my earlier genealogy research, however, I knew that there were in fact three first cousins named Peretz Schwartz in the family, one of which was Yetta's son and my grandfather. To which Paul Schwartz was Rivkah Schwartz writing?

I deduced the answer from something that was written on the cover of the manila envelope that had contained the photos Marvin Schwartz had sent me. As you can see below, on the envelope was handwritten the words "Eugene Schwartz, son of Paul and Lee Schwartz, gave all of this to me!"

Underneath that handwriting was a card from Bernard and Irene Siegel who had apparently received the packet from Eugene Schwartz and sent the envelope to Marvin Schwartz who sent it to me.



I thought about this packet of photos passing from hand to hand before it got to me and about the inscription written on the manila envelope. That postcard of Rivkah and my great-grandmother had made its way from 1935 Mlynov to my hands in California in 2017. It was not a copy but the original postcard with Rivkah's handwriting scrawled across the back. No one in the family seemed to know who Rivkah was but the post card had survived nonetheless

like a sacred heirloom, proving there had still been Schwartzes back in Mlynov in 1935 and providing a possible clue as to my relationship to David's step-grandmother. I realized it was the only actual object from Mlynov that I had ever held in my hands. It was a relic of sorts. By this time, I had, of course, read about Mlynov, and seen many photos but now I was holding an object that had actually come from there. There were not many objects that had been saved from the past.

I felt grateful to Irene Siegel for having taken the time to write a note on the manila envelope before she sent it to Marvin Schwartz, who had sent it to me. Had she not done so, I would never have known which Paul Schwartz was the addressee of Rivkah's postcard. I had bumped into the name Irene Siegel only recently when I learned that she too, like David Sokolsky, had translated parts of the memorial book about Mlynov. She apparently had been a family historian too and had held on to material from part of the Schwartz family. Irene was herself descended from two families from Mlynov who had also settled in Baltimore. Her father was a Fishman and her mother was a Goldseker.

Thank you, Irene. I now knew that the Paul Schwartz who was listed on the front of the manila envelope was not my great-grandmother Yetta's son Paul, but her nephew Paul, the son of Israel and Sarah Schwartz. Israel Schwartz was the brother of Yetta's husband Chaim Schwartz, the man for whom I am named. Israel and Sarah had also named one of their sons Paul or Peretz. To confuse matters more, both of these Peretz Schwartzes had been born in 1902 and both were on the same ship in 1912 that came to the US. This all made sense now. Israel's wife Sarah Schwartz had been born a Fishman and Irene was herself a Fishman and descended from Sarah's brother. That must be why Irene had the photo in her possession. Paul Schwartz was related to me through the Schwartz line. He was related to Irene through the Fishman line. It was hard to keep it all straight in my head all the time but I now knew why Irene had a packet of material that included a photo of my great-grandmother.

What can we conclude from this 1935 postcard of Rivkah and Yetta, sent by Rivkah to Yetta's nephew Peretz Schwartz? It seems probable that Rivkah was sending the photo to either a sibling or a cousin. We have no evidence that Israel and Sarah left any children back in Europe when they migrated to the US. Sarah followed her husband to the US in November 1912 and brought her son Paul who was ten at the time and her daughter Ida (later Irene) who was eleven. There is no indication that they had left another child back in Mlynov. We are left with the likelihood that Rivkah was likely a cousin of Paul

Schwartz and probably a niece of Yetta's. Yetta was approximately 65 in the 1935 photo and Rivkah Schwartz looks to be about half her age, perhaps in her thirties. When I figured all of this out, I thought back to the comment of my cousin Ted that the woman in the photo "looks like a Schwartz." Ted was right in his intuition or had accessed some memory buried deep inside.

My thoughts turned back to the original 1935 photo. We now had the names of five of the six women. With the realization that Rivkah Schwartz was the woman standing in the back left of the photograph, I surmised that the relationship of my great-grandmother to David's step-grandmother, Liba, was likely through the Schwartz family line.

In the meantime, while I was doing all this research, David was revising his two earlier books. He was bringing out a new version of Liba's story about her escape from the Nazis. This version would include the new extraordinary letters he had found between Liba and one of the families she had stayed with during her hiding. Something that touched me deeply was the republishing of the 1935 photo in this new version of the book. This time my great grandmother Yetta Schwartz is no longer an anonymous face. David added her presence back to the caption.

I felt a great deep satisfaction rise up through my system when David first told me he was restoring Yetta's name to that photo in his republished book. I felt I had repaid some kind of debt to my great-grandmother. I don't know if I ever met Yetta. I was born in 1956 and she died in 1962. I have no memory of her though I suppose it is possible we might have been introduced. I have no one left to ask who would know the answer.

During this same period that I was getting to know David, he was also working on an updated translation of the Mlynov-Muravica Memorial book. I was deeply moved to be acknowledged by David as a Mlynov descendant in his new preface. David wrote:

I wish to acknowledge two descendants of Mlynovers who provided information and support for this translation: Howard Schwartz, of San Rafael, California, and Audrey Goldseker Polt of Baltimore, Maryland. Howard descends from the Schwartz, Demb and Shulman families and Audrey descends from the Goldseker and Fishman families...

A photograph of Howard Schwartz's great grandparents, Chaim and Yetta Schwartz, appears on page 503 of the original Memorial Book. In addition, Yetta Schwartz is seated in the center of the photograph on the lower right of page 469 of the original Memorial Book, titled *Daughters of Mlynov*. Another relative of Howard, Rivke Schwartz, is standing on the left in the same photograph. My step-grandmother, Liba Tesler, is in the same photograph standing in the center.

I can't really describe how powerfully this acknowledgement touched me. David and I barely knew each other. And yet we had discovered a profound connection in a photograph that had been nearly obliterated by time. What had begun for me as a personal journey into family history had become something more. I had reconnected with my childhood in Baltimore, the Jewish immigrant experience to America, and with the experiences of those who escaped and suffered the Holocaust. I had also made a new friend, one of the only ones in my life with whom I could talk about childhood memories of warm rye bread from Silber's Bakery, Wagner's Drugstore, and the Estersons, and who would understand what

I was talking about. More than that, I felt like I had connected with time itself, reaching across eighty years, via a photograph and postcard that had been left lying in a box and kept in a manila envelope.

In the last few months, I recently discovered one more piece of evidence that confirms a family relationship between David's step-grandmother and my great-grandmother. In tracing the descendants of Liba's cousins, I bumped into a person with whom I had a DNA match. Figuring out relationships from DNA matching is much more difficult than you might think. Of the many people I have DNA matches with, there are only a few second cousins whose names I have been able to place so far.

But this discovery was different. I already had the suspicion that I was genetically related to Liba's cousins, the Marders. Sheila had told me so and the 1935 photo suggested it as well, though no one could tell me the nature of that relationship. But I confirmed this suspicion when I bumped into a family tree that listed one David Mutter.

There couldn't be more than one David Mutter, I thought to myself. I knew, however, that David Mutter had married a Sarah Marder, Liba's cousin. That was the Mutter/Marder confusion that had plagued me earlier. In this tree, however, David Mutter was married to one "Sarah Marsden," not Sarah Marder. Was that a mistake or had the owner of the family tree not known the background of Sarah? No ancestors or cousins of Sara were listed, and I almost dismissed the connection as accidental until I noticed that the person maintaining this family tree had a genetic match with me. We were supposedly 5th to 8th cousins. His online name was "jacintodanieljoseph" but he didn't respond to my request for more information. I eventually tracked down some of the Mutter and Marder descendants and was able to confirm that Daniel Jacinto was in fact a Marder descendant. Daniel was the great-great-grandson of Clara Marder, Liba Tesler's aunt. Jack is thus four generations below Clara who was born in 1881. My great-grandmother Yetta was born in 1870 and her husband Chaim was born in 1863. If Jack and I are 5th to 8th cousins, it suggests that the marriage we don't know about could have been in the generation of Clara and my great-grandmother Yetta or in the generation of their parents. Maybe Jacob Tesler's wife was related to the Schwartzes?

As I sat there and pondered what I had found, I thought about my search that started with the 1935 photograph of my great-grandmother and the discovery of the same photo in David's book. I thought about how her name had been missing in the earlier version and how it had been restored through my search. I thought about my great-grandmother going back to Mlynov in 1935 at the age of sixty-five, visiting with her cousins and taking several photos. I thought about how lucky my great-grandmother was that she was just visiting Mlynov then and would not be there in 1942 when the Nazis invaded. I wondered whether Liba and Yetta had spent much time after the war when Liba made her way to Baltimore. Or had their experiences differed too profoundly to bridge once they were both in Baltimore? I should like to ask them both that question.

The DNA match did not feel as important any more. It was nice to confirm a suspicion, to be sure. But it was nicer still to have found David Sokolsky, to have talked of Mlynov and Baltimore, and to have restored Yetta's name to her photograph. We shared people who had a common past. I felt that David and I were now cousins and that Liba and Yetta would be thrilled that we sat and had coffee together in San Francisco.

Since the visit with David, I have tracked down Eugene ("Gene") Schwartz, who was named as the original owner of the photos from the manila envelope that contained the postcard of my great-

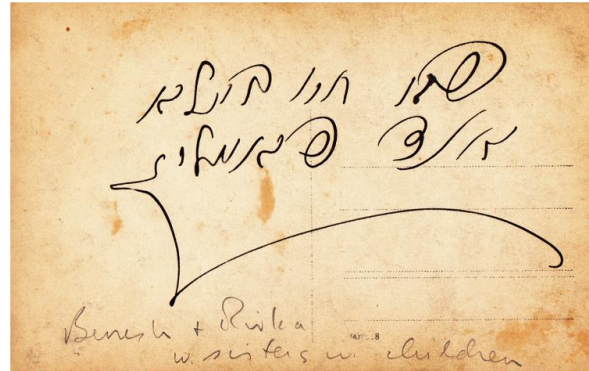
grandmother Yetta and Rivkah Schwartz. Gene was the son of Paul Schwartz #2 and the grandson of Israel and Sarah Schwartz, my great grandfather's brother. His father was the one I believe to whom the postcard had been sent. Would Gene be able to shed some further light on my puzzle?

We had a delightful conversation by phone and from Gene I learned that there were five Schwartz brothers, not four as I had earlier suspected from my research. Another whole line of Schwartzes was running around someplace or had been liquidated. Gene was not sure about the name of the fifth Schwartz brother. Nor could he tell me if Rivkah Schwartz was that brother's daughter but said he would try to dig out some information from files he has.

It seems possible and even probable that Rivkah Schwartz may have been a daughter of the fifth Schwartz brother and had stayed in Mlynov since she was there in the 1935 photo with my great grandmother. However, her name does not appear in the list of persons in the Mlynov memorial book who died in the Holocaust. It is possible that she had left Mlynov before the Nazi invasion, or even that she had already immigrated to Baltimore and had travelled back to Mlynov with her aunt Yetta Schwartz during this trip. If the latter were the case, however, why would she have sent a postcard to her first cousin Paul Schwartz in Yiddish? She could have given it to him when she returned to Baltimore. At the date of this writing, Gene and I have spoken again, but he has turned up no new information, so far. The search continues.

I was prompted by my conversation with Gene to return to the other photographs in the manila envelope that had been passed along from Gene to Irene Siegel to Ted Fishman to me. It felt as if I was closing a circle talking to Gene directly about photos he had launched into time many years ago that were intended for me. He didn't remember even passing those photos to Irene.

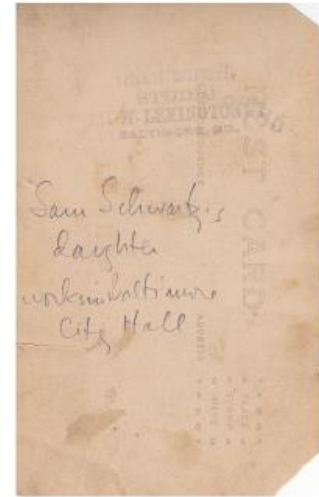
As I flipped through the pile of photos that I had originally received more than a year ago in that envelope, I saw that others were relevant to this story. Most of the people in the photos I still did not know or recognize and perhaps they would launch me one future day into some other search or journey. But there were a couple that now seemed more relevant to this search, if not its end, perhaps a spot for some future family historian to grab hold of and launch into their own journey.



As you can see here standing in the back left, one of the other photos was of the same Rivkah Schwartz who had been standing with my great-grandmother in the 1935 photo. I hadn't made this connection earlier when I first received the photos because I had not yet connected Rivkah with my great-grandmother. But now it was clearly the same woman only in this photo she was with another family, possibly in the same photo shoot background as the original photo. There is Yiddish on the back of this postcard and someone has written in English "Benesh & Rivka with sister[']s children." So now we knew a bit more about Rivkah Schwartz. She had a sister who had children and she may have had a husband named Benesh.



SAM SCHWARTZ



There are a couple of other intriguing photos in this collection that may eventually prove relevant to the search. One photo has the name "Sam Schwartz" on the back and another photo of a baby girl reads "Sam Schwartz's daughter works in Baltimore City Hall." Is Sam a son of the fifth Schwartz brother? Is he related to Rivkah Schwartz and her sister? I am left for now with these open mysteries. And in some sense these open dangling questions are the stuff of family history, for as one question closes, a hundred others open up, since we are ultimately a convergence of many thousands of lives that overtime produce the individuals that we ultimately are. Pulling on any string of our past has the potential to unravel thousands of others. And this is one of the reasons it can be so obsessive a search and so difficult to get to the bottom of one's story, for in the end, there is no bottom of one's story.

My journey has identified all but one of the women (top right) in the original 1935 photograph of my great-grandmother. She is still at least one more story waiting to be discovered. We can assume this woman too was related to my great-grandmother Yetta via the Schwartz line, though to date we have no clues as to her identity. Perhaps one day someone will read this essay and recognize her and start out on their own journey to find me or David Sokolsky.



Figure 8 Yetta Schwartz seated center with Liba Tesler standing center. Seated to Yetta's left is Hinda Tesler and to her right is Golda Tesler. Standing top left is Rivkah Schwartz. Standing top right is unknown.

Notes

¹ The photo appears on p. 469 in the original Memorial book of Mlynov-Muravica, 1970.

² I tell the story of this trip in Part I of the Demb Family Narrative.

³ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-iorio/the-jack-kerouac-tour-of-sf_b_1591950.html

⁴ In another context, I talk more about Getzel Fax's role in the Demb family's migration to the US. Getzel was the brother-in-law of Pesse Demb (later Bessie Hurwitz). Pesse, who was Yetta's oldest sister, had married a man named David Rivitz. Getzel was married to David's sister, Chaia or Ida Fax

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Baltimore_Fire

⁶ Marvin was the son of Norton Schwartz, one of Yetta's sons. My father was the son of Paul H., Yetta's youngest son.