

International Tracing Service Trip Report

Bad Arolsen, May 2008

WHY WE WENT

I began my genealogy quest in 2002. I had some "spare" time and my nephew asked me to organize some notes he had taken on the family history. I purchased Family Tree Maker, entered the info and began to fill in some blanks. Within days I was hooked ... and the good news is that shortly thereafter, my husband was too.

It wasn't until 2004 that I began to suspect some branches of the family had not survived the Holocaust. My grandparents all immigrated between 1898-1921 and never mentioned any relatives murdered in the Shoah. Eventually, one of my new-found cousins gave me two photos:

The woman in the center of the first photo was my gggm with several of her children and grandchildren. GGG-Ma was Hinde-Neché ENGELSON-WELLER. Her husband, Shimon WELLER, died before 1910 and it seems the photo was most likely taken between 1910-1920.



The second photo was of nine people. GGG-Ma is not in the photo and the woman in the center was in the earlier photo - so we assumed this was my gggm's daughter, or my gg-aunt with several of her children. The photo was taken in 1939 in Kupiskis and no one in the photo has been heard from since.



(Neché's daughter married, and unfortunately we do not know her first or married name. It seems her husband may have passed away prior to this photo being taken.)

About a year ago, I came across several other photos posted on the internet that were also taken in Kupiskis in 1939. It seems that several of the people from my photos were also in those photos ... but they were not identified there either.

The question of who these people were and what became of them haunted me. When notice of the trip to the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen was posted I saw it and rejected the idea of going. But the third time I saw the notice something inside me said those people are crying out to be identified and this is a chance, granted a long shot, to establish the facts of what happened to them and to give names to the people in the photo. So we signed up.

TRIP PREP

I constructed a "list" of all my ancestors who may have been killed in the Holocaust. I use the word list loosely as basically all I had were surnames and town they came from. I had no idea of how many ancestors there may have been. As requested, I sent the list off to the ITS researchers.

My first clue that we might be embarking on a useless quest was when we heard back from ITS. They were asking for the first names we were researching. Bobby and I looked at each other, considered backing out, but decided to go anyway.

THE RESULTS

While in the end I'm very glad we went, we did spend the week "looking for a needle in a haystack". The concept of "database" did not exist when the ITS began organizing its data. We could not do a search to find everyone from Kupiskis with the last name WELLER. We did not know any first names ... so we had to look through every record in the Central Names Index WELJER, WEHLER, WALER, WEALER ... It was quite tedious, very time-consuming and not terribly fruitful. We found several records that looked promising and in some cases got additional information on those records, but we still have not been able to confirm the people from those records are related.

We repeated this scenario for DUBINER, ENGELSON, POMERANTZ, SAFER and ZEMSER ... with much the same results ... no success.

We did find my cousin David KATZ (KACS) whom we knew survived the Holocaust. Trembling and with a sense of awe, I held the actual paperwork he signed that was filled out when he was registered in Auschwitz along with several documents from his DP camp. But unfortunately, despite testimony from David about the unfortunate fate of his family, I was unable to find any records of his mother, father, sister and brother who were all with him on the 4th transport from Pruzhany on the 29th of January 1943.

WORDS OF ADVICE FOR ANYONE THINKING OF GOING TO BAD AROLSEN

The ITS staff members are amazingly helpful and friendly, however, there are limitations in terms of what information is available. For instance, the German's were excellent record keepers, but the farther you get from Germany, the quality and quantity of records decline. For example, there are no records from Latvia, Estonia or Russia. Many of the Auschwitz records were destroyed by the Nazi's in the final days of the war. We suggested that ITS publish a geographic table based on their history of successful results so that people thinking of visiting could know if you are searching for relatives from Latvia there is a X% chance you might find information while if your relatives are from Germany you might have a Y% chance of finding files on them.

IN RETROSPECT

Standing in a room the size of a football field filled with documents on 17.5 million Nazi victims was difficult and frightening. The chutzpah of the Nazi's for keeping these records is mind numbing. Yet, had they not kept them, the fate of many of our six million ancestors, like the people from my 1939 photo, would forever be unknown.

(Joan & Bobby Engel have been researching their family histories since 2002. Joan's website www.flora-and-sam.com documents ancestral towns, immigration, family trees and more. They live in Long Island City, NY.)