

A Practical Guide to Identifying Mystery Relatives

by Boris Feldblyum

Genealogists often wonder if it is possible to put names to the faces of unidentified relatives and friends whose photographs we inherit from other family members. Some of these people may be our own ancestors, others may be strangers, but the images were preserved for a reason. Discarding these photographs would not be smart; keeping them is a source of frustration.

When the older generation is gone and no one is left to ask, our only hope is to discover another copy of the same photograph, one with an all-explaining caption. Is it possible to find such a photograph in the possession of others? Can others find you and be willing to share the information? This discussion describes one way we might try to facilitate that process.

This article was prompted by a gift 30 years ago of seven unidentified old photographs, one of which was of a young man who looked remarkably similar to the author at approx-

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imately the same age. With no known familial connections, broadcasting these photographs to the world in a quick and a simple way seemed a logical approach to solve the puzzle of these people's identity and return their name to some at least.

Hence, the purpose of this article is to suggest a few relatively low-tech steps to take in order to share a photograph with the world and, hopefully, to hear back from someone. The discussion purposely excludes such important subjects as computer-aided facial recognition or age simulation. Its focus is on the human ability to place an image in a proper ethnic, historical, and cultural context, which may lead to the right answer.

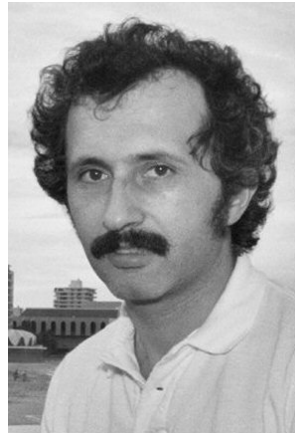
Analyzing a Photograph

Before utilizing the search options available to us today, it is helpful to spend some time studying the photograph while writing down the questions that come to mind. How did we acquire this picture? Who gave it to us, where, when, under what circumstances? If the photograph was inherited from parents or a relative, do we remember the first time we saw it? Did anyone comment on the photograph back then? Perhaps this mental exercise will revive old memories we did not remember (or think) we had.

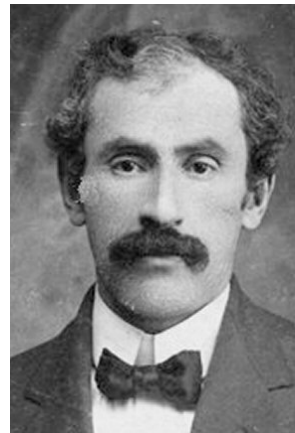
It is obviously beneficial if the photograph bears a photographer's logo or a stamp because this may help establish the location and the range of years when the image was captured.* It also is important to compare the address of the studio with the addresses of ancestors who lived in the same city, as well as other important addresses, if they are known,

such as the synagogue to which they belonged or a place of employment. If the distance is within a few city blocks, this may be an important step in identifying the "mystery relatives."

If the photo is mounted on a card stock, its design and the color may help confirm the date range. A note of caution: a universal "Cabinet Portrait" engraved stamp on the card stock has no significance because such cards were printed in the late 19th and early 20th century in large quantities and sold to photographers near and far. The only exception is when a printing factory is identified.



Author (above) and look-alike relative (below) from c. 1900 photograph.



When absolutely nothing is written on the front or the back of the photo, it is logical to assume that the person photographed was a family member or a close friend, whose name was known to everybody in his generation; it also is likely that he lived in the same city. Usually, people inscribed their photographs to others for a special occasion, or when they were separated by great distances and wanted the recipients to remember them. One must also remember that people who lived under totalitarian regimes often avoided writing anything in order to protect each other. In the case of the Soviet Union where having "relatives abroad" could be a reason for discrimination and persecution, including criminal prosecution on trumped-up charges, people exchanged cryptic notes, meaningless to a stranger's eyes.

Studying the image itself may provide more clues that will help with research. Clothing, including hats, may also help date an image as they reflect the fashion of the time and place. Paying attention to the background and the accessories is helpful. Speaking about background, is the person's cultural and ethnic background obvious in the photograph? Is there an indication of his social and economic class? After examining the face and the posture of the person photographed for a substantial time, maybe 10 or 15 minutes, we may recall seeing a similar face in another photograph, or a similar grimace, a tilt of the head,

a uniquely raised eyebrow, body posture. The photograph may even remind us of a real person that we know or once knew.

Group photographs, whether formal or informal, present more questions, but they may also provide clues about the family dynamics, the relationship between people who were photographed, relative ages, and so on. It also stands to reason that more copies of group photographs were printed to give out. Hence, the chance to uncover another copy is greater than in the case of a single individual pictured.

Similarly to ordinary genealogical research, when trying to identify a “mystery ancestor” we envision two approaches to seeking an answer: active and passive.

Active Approach

One can actively browse—in person or over the internet—the large photograph collections of public and private institutions such as the U.S. Library of Congress, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Temple University (Philadelphia) or many other libraries, collections, and archives. Unfortunately, this approach requires a tremendous investment of time.

An alternative approach, in the internet age, is to assume that somebody somewhere has posted the same photograph and search for a “twin image” on the web. The concept is simple. Just as we enter a word or a phrase into a search engine’s text box, an image can be “entered” by uploading it from a computer or by copying its address from another web location where it was previously posted. In computer lingo the procedure is called “reversed image search.” Three of the most popular search engines that have image search capabilities and that we regularly use are Google, Yandex, and TinEye.

Google. One of the most frequently used search engines is Google’s image search, at <https://images.google.com/>. The procedure is simple and intuitive. It starts with a click on the Camera icon, which brings up a self-explanatory dialog box.

Yandex. Yandex is another search engine. Visually, it is similar to Google, but apparently it uses a different algorithm because it returns different results. Its URL is <https://yandex.com/images/>. Each of these search engines seems to return many images similar to yours either in the tonal range or similar graphically. If you are lucky, the twin image you’re seeking will be the first image displayed.

Tin Eye, at <https://tineye.com/>, seems to find *only* identical images, for in most cases the result will read “0 results.”

eBay and Delcampe. Web auction sites such as eBay.com need no introduction. Thousands of items are added to eBay every day, including many photographs. Going through them in the hope of finding an image of interest may take a lifetime. Designing a proper filter to limit the number of returns is a tremendous time saver. This is a trial and error process, but once a search page is bookmarked, many sale items may be viewed in a relatively short time.

eBay also allows users to generate email alerts for items of interest based on the filter. Another major auction website, advertising predominantly paper items, is the European-based firm Delcampe. Like eBay, it too allows users to design filters.

Genealogy meetings. Attendance at local genealogy meetings offers a unique opportunity to show your “mystery relatives” to a like-minded community of enthusiasts. It is best to print a copy of a photograph on a letter-size sheet of paper, so that it can be easily attached to a wall or a panel. Include a short caption, your name, telephone number and an e-mail address.

Passive Approach

The passive, “wait and see” approach to a search for images requires uploading a photograph to an image-hosting website and then waiting for someone to contact you. The key to success is to properly caption the photo and to add key words. The more eyes that see your picture, the greater the chances someone will recognize it. Each image-hosting website is designed and operates differently.

Flickr. The biggest image hosting service is Flickr, <https://www.flickr.com>, which has been in existence since 2004. Free membership allows users to add up to 1,000 images. In the default display mode, called Photostream, many photographs are displayed on the same page for easy viewing. The application allows a user to organize pictures into albums, so one’s “mystery ancestors” may easily be separated from regular family and travel pictures. There are thousands of Flickr groups, organized by interests. Joining a group allows members to add photographs to that group. One may start a new group as well. During the photo upload process, keywords called Tags may be added and the photograph may also be placed in albums and groups. If desired, tags, albums and groups may be modified later. Flickr provides the ability to search by photographs, people and groups.

Instagram. Instagram, <http://www.instagram.com>, has surpassed Flickr in popularity in recent years. It is free to use and does not limit the number of photographs to upload. Unlike Flickr, Instagram has no albums or groups. Images can be filtered by keywords called hashtags. Entering “mystery ancestor” in the Instagram’s search box to check what is already there, returns two hashtags: #mysteryancestor and #mysteryancestors. Each can be clicked to display filtered images.

Many additional free image-hosting sites will publicize the image and, hopefully, identify the subject of the mystery photograph. They all are easy to master and all are user-friendly. Ten such sites were reviewed in late 2019, at https://www.lifewire.com/free_image_hosting_sites_3486329. Read the reviews and use the sites that seem most useful.

FaceBook. FaceBook was not designed as an image-hosting site. It presents information as a constantly flowing stream of words and pictures with no way to filter out data or

easily find a previously posted photograph. It is best to join a group such as “Jewish Genealogy Portal” or “Jewish Ancestry in Ukraine”, or “The Nameless Bunch - Shrubs to Trees Companion Group” and post your photos within that group. Many other fine groups, organized by interests are available on Facebook. To find them, search by key words such as, for example, “Philadelphia Jewish,” “Philadelphia History,” “Philadelphia Old Photos,” etc. and see if anything relevant appears.

ViewMate. An important resource for a Jewish genealogist is JewishGen’s ViewMate, <https://www.jewishgen.org/ViewMate/>. It automatically displays images within a few days of being received; searching the image archives by a family name or a locale will yield many more photographs.

KehilaLinks. Another JewishGen feature, just as important as ViewMate, is KehilaLinks, <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/>. The word *Kehilla*, means “congregation” in Hebrew; as noted on the site, “KehilaLinks provides the opportunity for anyone with an interest in a place to create web pages about that community. These web pages may contain information, pictures, databases, and links to other sources providing data about that place.” Hundreds of web pages are dedicated to big and small cities around the world, designed and maintained by volunteers. If a page dedicated to a place of interest does not yet exist on JewishGen, it can be created with the help of KehilaLinks administrator.

In addition to JewishGen, web pages and websites, dedicated to a town or a region exist all over the internet. Uploading a “mystery relative” photograph onto a page of their actual or presumed place of residence presents an opportunity to reach other researchers interested in the same area.

OK.ru. Be sure to use foreign language social media platforms as well. One example is a Russian site called ok.ru, previously called *odnoklassniki* (classmates in English). The Wikipedia article states that ok.ru is currently available in English.

The site is free to use but requires registration. Users may organize into groups by interests, such as the city of origin or family name. Some large cities have more than one group. Within groups are many albums with photographs. A “mystery ancestor” photograph may be uploaded, e.g., into a “People of Minsk” album, a part of the “Minsk” group, if one knows or presumes that his ancestors came from that area.

Personal website or web page. Many readers have personal and/or business web sites. It is easy to add a page to it that displays only “mystery relatives.” An example of one such web page, may be seen at the author’s personal site, http://www.bfcollection.net/subjects/anon2/anon_02.html.

Newspapers. Print newspapers still exist and all have a web presence. Most have interest in “human interest” stories. Sending them a photograph with a properly composed caption and a letter to the editor may put the image before thousands of new eyes. Search engines regularly index all newspapers. This means that the information may be found years from now.

Smart phone. An album that displays only “mystery relatives” can be created on any smart phone, so that the photographs are always with you and can be easily shared. The procedure to create an album will differ from phone to phone because of the many different models, which are designed to operate differently.

There are, most likely, other methods to disseminate the information, including images. It may feel a bit like putting a note in a bottle and then setting it afloat in the ocean. How likely are we to get a response, if any, and when? A researcher shared recently that she once put a group photo of people she did not know on Flickr. Nine years later, she was contacted by a person who identified all of them. What is the chance we will get an answer to our quest in nine years or ever? In one person’s opinion, the entire field of Jewish genealogy exists and flourishes precisely because we made the notion of “chances” irrelevant and recreated a large part of our history and heritage despite hundreds of years of persecution and genocide.

Note

* One example, a truly encyclopedic compilation, the “Langdon’s List of 19th- & Early 20th-Century Photographers,” may be viewed at <https://www.langdonroad.com/>.

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Ashkenazi and Sephardi Research in France, especially in Paris

- French Vital Records
- French Naturalizations
- French Foreign Office Archives
- Jewish Consistory Archives
- Shoah Records
- Alliance Israélite Universelle Library and Archives and many other sources

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