

# Wine Goblets Reunite Cousins

by Boris Feldblyum

About ten years ago, I noticed on an early 1900's birth record from Ukraine a notation in the margin indicating that a copy of the document had been issued in 1963. I still remember the significance and excitement of this discovery. Some 60 years, three revolutions, and two world wars later, a member of the family was still alive in the Soviet Union and waiting to be found! It occurred to me then that all too often Jewish genealogists, in their pursuit of archival records, fail to realize that cousins survived the 20th century and may still be there, living in the same town in Russia, or even around the corner on the proverbial Main Street.\*

One of the social networking sites that I scan occasionally is a Russian-language social networking site that includes a Jewish genealogy chat function. It is located at <www.odnoklassniki.ru>. Recently, I noticed a posting by a woman from Israel, sharing what she termed her "fairy tale":

When we were packing to leave Russia for Israel in 1990, my mother pulled from the back of her china cabinet two sterling silver wine goblets, black with tarnish, that I had never looked at closely. The goblets were stamped 1896. They had always been in the family, my mother said, and were given as a gift on the occasion of her father's, my grandfather, birth. His father, Girsh Shulkin, was married twice. My grandfather, Itzak, was the eldest child of the second marriage. A large number of the family left for America; their descendants must have changed surnames, and all I am left with is this fairy tale.

For the past 25 to 30 years, I have heard the name "Shulkin from Polotsk" often enough to recognize it immediately as one of AVOTAYNU editor Sallyann Amdur Sack-Pikus's ancestral lines, so I sent a few questions to Anna Glazkova, the Israeli woman who had posted the message.

"Anna, would you like to find American descendants of your Shulkins?"

"Yes, but I can't imagine how?"

"Where in Russia did your Shulkins live?"

"In Polotsk"

But of course. Yes, the world is big, and yet it is small. The Jewish genealogical "grapevine" is very large, and when we circulate the names of interest to us, surprising things happen. Sallyann and Anya are second cousins. They have been corresponding since I put them in touch. Anya's grandfather was the only sibling who had been "missing," and now Anya knows all about her far-flung cousins.

How did the goblets survive? During World War II, in July 1941, Anya's grandparents and their two adolescent children (one of whom is Anya's 85-year-old



mother) fled the rapidly advancing Germans by walking four days on foot from their home in Nevel, then traveling by train until they reached a faraway, but safe, Russian collective farm. They brought with them whatever money they had and the wine goblets, thinking that they might need to be sold for food. Fortunately, the goblets were not sold, and they became the vehicle for reuniting a family.

Genealogical data is not found only in documents. Sometimes the evidence may be physical—as it was in this case. More than that, as this story illustrates, we should never neglect the search for living people who may know the answers we are seeking. As the late Rabbi Malcolm Stern, father of contemporary Jewish genealogy, liked to say: "Paper can wait; people can't. Paper will be there when we find it; people may not be."

## Note

\* See "Breaking Through the Brick Wall," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XIV, No. 3, Fall 1998.

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