Using the Russian "Memorial" Database
by Boris Feldblyum

For more than three decades, the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin practiced starvation, deportation of entire peoples, mass imprisonment, torture and murder. As many died under Stalin as died during World War II. Only after Stalin's death in March 1953 did the USSR begin its slow emergence from the nightmare he generated. Since the fall of the USSR, the urge to remember victims has generated numerous grassroots campaigns—to open archives and to publish thousands of articles and books listing the names of millions of victims. Over time some of these lists have migrated to the Internet where they are available for research by those willing and able to deal with the Russian language. This article describes one such site.

Memorial (*Мемориал* in Russian) is the name of perhaps the best-known organization dedicated to preserving the memory of the victims of Stalin's terror. Located in Moscow and a number of other Russian cities, Memorial maintains a website (WWW.MEMO.RU). A few introductory articles on the website are in English and German. Their titles are descriptive: *Who and What Is Memorial, The Historical-Enlightenment Work of Memorial, Perpetuating the Memory of the Victims of Repression*. The site also features an extensive *News* section. A portion of the website is dedicated to the modern-day human rights movement. Everything else, including a database and an extensive bibliography, is written in Russian. Memorial's list of victims is a unique resource for Jewish genealogists with roots in Russia. Not only does the list supply information on the sad fate of relatives of many a researcher, but by providing new information, it offers opportunities to develop ideas and strategies for further research—as does any new data.

In addition to documenting individuals who never left Russia/Soviet Union, the database includes many other former Russian subjects who returned to the "Workers Paradise" after the Bolshevik Revolution, some from misguided idealism, others simply to escape the Great Depression of the 1930s. Almost all of the returnees ultimately were accused of spying and subsequently either executed or sentenced to many years in concentration camps. Twenty years was a standard sentence in the late 1930s. A notable example was Victor Herman, who went with his parents to the USSR in 1931 only to come back 45 years later. (Herman later published the book, *Coming Out of the Ice*, 1979.) A large number of Polish Jews who ran from the Germans in 1939 were sentenced as British spies. Their names also appear in the Memorial database.

The volume of data available to genealogists is staggering. That's the good news. The bad news is that research into the Memorial database is not for the easily discouraged. The database seems to have been built without a uniform structure by many different people who had different approaches to computerizing data. Some entries contain nothing but a name; most are free text; a few include a small portrait of the subject. Primary sources are not explained. Simple knowledge of the Russian language often is not enough; it must be complemented by knowledge of Russian history and culture to understand and decode frequent abbreviations and acronyms, for which no explanation is provided.

Given the myriad difficulties, who can benefit from this source? Just about anyone. In fact, only one prerequisite is necessary for those who do not know the Russian language or the Cyrillic alphabet. Any researcher who knows how his family name looks in printed Russian can use the source. In that case, the task of reading the research results is reduced to recognizing the name and copying the relevant data—to be translated later by someone with knowledge of Russian. Those who have trouble transliterating a name from English must solicit the help of a Russian speaker—or learn the Russian alphabet and the name construction in that language.

A simple procedure that English-speakers can use to query the GULAG database is described below (GULAG is the Russian acronym for the Main Administration of the Camps). The procedure consists of two main steps:

1. Enter search parameters in Russian.

2. Copy the information found to a word processor with Cyrillic capability for further translation and analysis.

Before using these steps, however, it is necessary to use Stephen Morse's website, HTTP://STEVEMORSE.ORG. The link of interest is found in the Holocaust and Eastern Europe folder. It is called "Soviet Gulags: Searching for People Interned in Soviet Gulags in One Step (1935–1955)."

How to Search Without Knowing Russian

One way genealogists may explore the Memorial database is to ask or hire a native Russian-speaking researcher who likely will navigate the database very quickly and immediately understand the relevance of the information found. Another possibility is to use the search procedure as described in detail below—and then engage the help of a Russian-speaker knowledgeable about this history. The family name Amdur is used as an example. Other family names will yield different results, but the reader is strongly advised to perform the steps below before attempting to search for another name. The practice will be useful when navigating the site. To begin:

– Open the web site HTTP://STEVEMORSE.ORG

– Open the "Holocaust and Eastern Europe" folder

– Click on the "Soviet Gulags: Searching for People Interned in Soviet Gulags in One Step (1935–1955)" link

In the new web form that appears, enter AMDUR into the "Enter name as English text here" text box. Steven Morse's application transliterates the name into Russian characters in the large field below. Copy and paste the

Russian name into the yellow search screen. Pressing the "Find" button will bring up Figure 1.

Figure 1

Number of matches for: *амдур: 24*

Number of documents found: **12**

Documents **1-12 of 12**

1. <u>Сталинские списки: Киевская область</u>
2. <u>АП РФ, оп.24, дело 418, лист 67</u>
3. <u>Сталинские списки</u>
4. <u>Сталинские списки</u>
5. <u>Сталинские списки</u>
6.
7. <u>Март</u>
8.
9. <u>Vag42</u>

Each search result is both a source name and a link to its computerized version. Unfortunately, no explanation of the sources could be found on the MEMO.RU website, even in Russian. For this reason, the search results represent a challenge even for a Russian speaker. This author has managed partially to decode the list because of a general knowledge of Russian history and culture.

Following is an English translation of the search results; for unknown reasons, items 6 and 8 are blank:

Figure 2

1. Stalin's Lists: Kiev region;
2. A[rchive] P [of the] R[ussian] F[ederation], inv[entory] 24, case 418, sheet 67
3. Stalin's Lists
4. Stalin's Lists
5. Stalin's Lists
6.
7. March
8.
9. Vag[an'kovskoe cemetery] 42

Clicking on Item 1, initiates another search, resulting in a long list of names in Russian. Fortunately, the name Amdur is easy to find because of the red arrows: ◄ Амдур ►► (NOTE. The notation in the upper right corner reads: Исходный документ (Source Document): *http://www .memo.ru/history/vkvs/regions/reg81.htm* If activated, this link will return the same list of names.) Activation of the ◄ Амдур ►► link, opens a new screen with the Amdur entry:

Figure 3

АМДУР Семен Хананович

12.09.38 Украинская ССР, Киевская область Кат.1

The entry provides a minimum of information on this person. Since many translation tools are available on the web, we will show how they may be used and how they compare to human translation. The site used for translation was HTTP://WORLD.ALTAVISTA.COM/.

Translation Using an Internet Translation Software

AMDUR Of the seeds Of khananovich 12.09.38 Ukrainian SSR, Kiev Region Of kat.y

Human translation (by the author):

AMDUR, Semen Khananovich. [Executed] September 12, 1938. Ukrainian SSR, Kiev Region. Cat[egory] 1.

"Category 1", as seen elsewhere on the Memorial website was assigned to individuals slated for execution (as opposed to those who received 20 years of hard labor, for example).

The date link (12.09.38), when activated, brings up a screen that appears to be a computerized copy of an actual archival document, where Semen Amdur is listed as No. 137:

137. АМДУР Семен Хананович

The notation in the lower right provides the source: *АП РФ, оп.24, дело 418, лист 67*.

The author's years of experience with Russian archival documents suggests that the actual document probably does not provide any more information.

Returning to Initial Search Results

Return to Figure 1. It is easy to see that clicking on Item 2 brings up the page just visited, i.e. the computerized copy of the archival document.

Item 3, entitled simply "Stalin's Lists" in translation, opens another, extremely long list of names. Amdur is marked with red arrows. (Tip: It is faster to find items in the list by using the Find [Ctr-F] function of your browser.)

Clicking on this Amdur will bring us to the same Semen Khananovich from the Kiev Region lists. Nothing explains why the search results contain at least two entries for the same person, nor is that really important. What is important is to check every link, because it may contain different information—as we have found when testing the database with other names..

Item 4 is another version of Stalin's Lists. It also links to Semen Khananovich Amdur, as does Item 5.

Item 7, titled "March," is a link to a document whose title is hinted at in the upper right corner: "Communarka, Chapter 13." The meaning of the title is unknown to this author, but it could perhaps be clarified if the reader contacts Memorial directly.

The top of the page reads (in Russian), 1939. March. The list is long. Use of the browser's Ctr-F function immediately brings one to a short biography:

Figure 4

◄ Амдур ►► Изидор Самуилович (Самуйлович). Род.1905, г.Лондон (Англия); еврей, член ВКП(б), обр. среднее, редактор журнала «Иностранная литература», прож. в Москве: ул.М.Дмитровка, д.23, кв.17.

Арест. 23.02.1939. Приговорен ВКВС СССР
14.04.1939 по обв. в шпионаже. Расстрелян
15.04.1939. Реабилитирован 28.04.1956.

An online translator (AltaVista) offers the following Russian-English translation:

> Amdur Isidore samuilovich (Samuylovich).
> Rod.y90shch, g.London (England); Jew,
> member the AUCP(B), shape average, the
> editor of the journal "foreign
> literature", prozh. in Moscow: ul.M.
> Dmitrovka, d.и, kv.y". Arrest.
> 23.02.1939. is sentenced VKVS OF USSR
> 14.04.1939 on obv. in the espionage. It
> is shot by 15.04.1939. It is
> reabilitirovan 28.04.1956.

Human translation (this author):

> Amdur, Izidor Samuilovich (Samujlovich).
> B[orn] in 1905, c[ity of] London,
> England; Jew; member of VKP(b) [All-
> Russia Communist Party (of Bolshevics)];
> secondary education; editor of the
> "Inostrannaya Literatura" magazine;
> l[ived] in Moscow, at No. 23 M[alaya]
> Dmitrovka St[reet], ap[artment] 17.
> Arrest[ed] February 23, 1939. Accused of
> espionage and sentenced by VKVS
> [probably High Commission of the Supreme
> Soviet] of the USSR on April 14, 1939.
> Executed on April 15, 1939.
> Rehabilitated April 28, 1956.

Without seeing the primary source, we cannot know if this biographical statement includes all recorded information about Izidor Amdur or is merely an abstract. We also do not know if he was rehabilitated summarily by a post-Stalin government action or as a result of a request from surviving relatives. (Some were rehabilitated this way). Locating the source referred to as "Communarka, Chapter 13." Contacting *Memorial* may provide a clue.

Item 9, titled Vag42 is a link to yet another page, called Указатель имен (Index to Names). The Amdur link is near the top:

◄ Амдур ►► И.С.. When we activate this link, we see that it brings us to the entry just seen at the March link.

Researching a more common name than Amdur, e.g., Kogan (the Russian version of Cohen) or Feldman, yields an avalanche of information:

Number of matches for *коган (Kogan): 386*
Number of documents found: **221**

Number of matches for: *фельдман (Feldman): 922*
Number of documents found: **152**

Summary

As the test sample illustrates, the search results generate as many questions as answers—perhaps more. Although the original records may not provide any additional information, a thorough researcher will always try to obtain them. Original records frequently include notations that seem unimportant to those who enter data into computers.

Moreover, if the Amdur researcher knows for a fact that his family originally was from Lithuania-Belarus (Beider's dictionary places the name in Novo-Aleksandrovsk [today, Zarasai] and Courland [today, Latvia]), and that part of the family lived in England early in the 20th century, the database offers two new bits of data: a missing Isidor Samuilovich and possibly a new family branch in Kiev (because the original list was from the Kiev region). The reasons for migration from Lithuania-Belarus to Ukraine could be many, from moving to southern Ukraine early in the 19th century to live on newly opened land, to being expelled from Novo-Aleksandrovsk or Courland during World War I when the Russians were concerned that the Yiddish-speaking Jews might be spies for the invading Germans.

In fact, it appears that both of these victims of Stalin were probably members of my family. My grandfather emigrated to the United States early in the 20th century. A few years earlier, his brother and other members of the extended family moved to London where they founded a large group of Amdurs. My branch of the Amdur family has two "marker" names that appear several times in each generation, one of which is Simon. Hence, the man from Kiev likely also was one of ours.—Sallyann Amdur Sack, editor.

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