

In Memory of Renee Kaufman – a case study
by Stephen P. Morse

A friend of mine, Jerome Levkov, invited me to be the speaker at an annual lecture in honor of his sister. He had heard me deliver my genealogy lectures, and figured that the audience would be interested in the topic. I had my standard genealogy lecture that I could deliver, but I decided that in this case I wanted to personalize it. So I put together a case study that I would deliver after my genealogy lecture, and the case study would be to find records related to his sister's genealogy.

But I needed a starting point, and I quickly realized that I didn't even know his sister's name. I could have obtained some initial information from my friend, but I wanted to see how much I could find out without speaking to the family. All I knew is that the lecture was called the “Kaufman Lecture,” and it was held at B'nai Jeshurun in New York. So I did a google-search on “Bnai Jeshurun Kaufman Lecture.” That got me to their homepage, and it listed the lecture as the “Renee Kaufman Lecture Series.” Now I had her name.

Next I googled “Renee Kaufman.” There were many people by that name, so I needed to narrow it down a bit. I knew her maiden name must be the same as my friend's last name, so I googled “Renee Levkov Kaufman.” This gave me a hit, and a very interesting one at that. Somebody had put her genealogy on line, or at least as much of it as that person knew. Here is what I found:

FIGURE 1

This was a pleasant surprise and doesn't happen often when doing such research. But usually when you start the research, you know something about the family. Since I knew nothing, this got me to where I would be if I had the information from the family. So I didn't feel like I was cheating.

Here is the initial family tree that I was able to construct from the information that was posted.

FIGURE 2

Note that many of the years of birth are missing. So I decided that I should try to find that information. But before moving on, I discovered yet another image as part of the genealogy posting, and it was a Mexican visa for Renee's father Joseph. That gave his date of birth as October 15, 1889. So now I was able to fill that information into the family tree that I was making.

Now I was ready to begin my research. I knew that I could get birthdates (as well as death dates) for Renee's parents Joseph and Ruth from the online Social Security death index. Here is what I found:

FIGURE 3

This new date of September 15, 1893 for Joseph contradicts the other date that I had (except for the 15 part), and now I had a date of birth for Ruth.

I decided to try census records next because the census gives the age, and from that I can compute the year of birth. So I looked for the 1940 census for the family. I searched for Joseph Levkov and found nothing. So then I tried searching for anyone whose first name starts with Jos and last name starts with Levk. I found a Joseph Levkovitz, born 1928. That couldn't be him because I already knew that his daughter Renee was born in 1928. I then tried searching for first name Ruth and last name starting with

Levk, and found Ruth Levkin, born 1925 and Ruth Levkovitz, born 1922. Neither of those could be right. I then searched for first name Renee and last name starting with Levk, and I obtained no matches.

In desperation I dropped the last name completely and searched for any Joseph with wife Ruth and child Renee. I found one – Joseph Obercoln in Brooklyn. Now there is no way that Levkov could be misread as Obercoln, so I rejected this one. And at this point I gave up on the 1940 census.

Next I went to the 1930 census, since it too would give me age information. Again I tried Joseph with no last name, with wife Ruth and child Renee. But the form for 1930 doesn't let me search on “child” but it does let me search on “parent.” So I changed my search to be Renee with no last name, with father Joseph and mother Ruth. I got two matches. One was a Renee Rosenberg, and I rejected it because there is no way that Levkov could get misread as Rosenberg. But the other one was Renee Revkow, in the Bronx. And the Bronx is where my friend grew up, so I knew I must have found the right record. Here is what I found:

FIGURE 4

This tells me that Joseph was born 1900, a year that contradicts both his visa information and his SSDI information. It also tells me that Ruth was born in 1902, again contradicting her SSDI information. It tells me that they were married two years earlier, which would be in either 1927 or 1928. Since Renee was born in 1928, I would assume that they were probably married in 1927. And I see that Joseph immigrated in 1922 and Ruth in 1914. Here is the tree that I have so far, with the information in red being what I added to the original genealogy that I found. Where I found conflicting information, I included all values that I found.

FIGURE 5

Now I was more determined than ever to find that 1940 census. So I decided to do a very broad search this time, giving no last name, a first name starting with Jos, with a wife whose name starts with Rut, and a child whose name starts with Ren. I got four hits. In those four cases the child's name was Reneta, Rena, Renal, and Renee. The one with the child of Renee was the Obercoln family that I had already found and rejected. But now I had three other families to consider. They were Bell, Kusic, and Leakos. Well obviously Leakos was Levkov, and I found the family. Here is their record.

FIGURE 6

Note that my friend Jerome is in the record. I hadn't searched on his name because I had assumed that he was born in 1940, after the census was taken. But it looks like I was mistaken, and he was actually born in 1939. This record gives the years of birth for Joseph and Ruth as 1900 and 1902, consistent with the 1930 census.

Now I wanted to get Joseph and Ruth's actual marriage date. The New York city marriage records are on line. So I searched them for Levkov and got no matches. Next I searched them for Schrader (Ruth's maiden name) and got too many matches. So I narrowed the search down to Ruth Schrader, and got one hit. And when I brought up the groom's record associated with Ruth Schrader's record, I got Joseph Levkor. That's why I didn't get any matches when I searched on the correct spelling of Levkov.

FIGURE 7

Next I decided to look for Joseph's naturalization record. That too is on line, and I found the following

FIGURE 8

Unfortunately there are no dates given in this record. It does give the page and volume of the record, so I could probably obtain the actual record by calling or going down to the Bronx courthouse.

I now wanted to find more census records for Ruth. Besides the federal census, which was taken every ten years starting in 1790, some of the states took their own censuses. New York, in particular, took several censuses, the last three being in 1905, 1915, and 1925.

So I went to the 1925 New York census and searched for Ruth Schrader. Nothing. I searched for her brother Louis Schrader. Nothing. I searched for her sister Laura Schrader. Nothing. But then I searched for first name starting with Rut, sibling's first name starting with Lau, born in 1898 plus or minus 5 years, and no last name. Bingo – but the name was spelled Shrager instead of Schrader, which is why I couldn't find them when I used a last name. Here is the record.

FIGURE 9

From this I learned a lot. I see that they are living with their parents Jacob and Hannah. The names I previously had for Ruth's parents were Yankel and Havashana, so this must be their anglicized names. I now have years of birth for Yankel and Havashana, as well as for Laura. Ruth's age is consistent with the other records. The record tells me that the parents were in the US less than a year whereas the kids came 12 years earlier.

Here's Ruth's 1920 federal census record. She and her sister Laura are living with her brother Louis's wife's family – and that family's name is Nagourney. I now have the birthyear for Louis, the name and birthyear for his wife, Sadie Nagourney, and yet another birthyear for Ruth. Note that Ruth and Laura's relation to the head of household is listed as “niece.” That's incorrect – it should be son-in-law's sister.

FIGURE 10

Here's the updated tree that we have so far.

FIGURE 11

To try to clear up the “niece” mystery, I fetched the 1910 federal census for the Nagournys. There's the whole family, including daughter Sadie who would later become Louis's wife. But also living with them is Louis, and he is listed as nephew. So niece for Ruth in 1910 was correct, and Louis married his first cousin whom he was living with all along. And to find out when Louis and Sadie got married, I went back to the New York city marriage index and found the following, showing that they married in 1918.

FIGURE 12

There's still one more census record to find for Ruth, namely the 1915 New York state census (recall that she came to the US in 1914). I searched for first name Ruth and last name starting with Schra,

born 1895 plus or minus 5 years. I got only one match, and it was for the inhabitants of the New York State Training School for Girls. So Ruth, who just arrived in this country, went to a boarding school to learn a vocation. It wasn't clear from the name of the school as to what she was training for. But then I went to the line with her name on it, and it gave her relationship to head of household as "prisoner." So this was not a training school as it named suggested, but rather a prison – what we used to call reform school.

This raises a very important point. You will find surprises when you do your research, and you will uncover all the skeletons in your family's closet. If you are not prepared for the answers you might find, don't do the research.

Then I read across the line and it mentions that Ruth was born in England and has been in the US for 15 years. But our Ruth was born in Russia, and has been here only one year. So this is not her. Our Ruth was not in a reform school. She's been vindicated. However I am unable to find our Ruth's 1915 census record.

FIGURE 13

Now for some more family records. I wanted to Schrader family's 1930 census record, but was unable to find it when I searched for either Jacob or Hannah. But then I searched for Laura Schrader and found the following

FIGURE 14

So Havashana, who was Hannah in 1925 is Eva in 1930. She's a widow now, so Jacob died between 1925 and 1930. Rae is 22 and immigrated here in 1927. Laura, who was 21 in 1925 is now 24 in 1930. And Havashana, who was 65 in 1925 is 65 again in 1930.

If Jacob died between 1925 and 1930, I should be able to find his death record by searching the New York city online death index. I searched for first name Jacob and last name starts with Schr, in the Bronx, and died between 1925 and 1930. I got the following three hits.

FIGURE 15

Jacob Schroder, died 1930, is the most likely, and I will confirm this later.

Since I've found Havashana in the 1925 and 1930 census, I decided to try for her in 1940. This time I searched for Eva Schrader, and found her on the first try. And she was on the same census page as Joseph and Ruth Levkov, whom I found previously, but didn't notice who Joseph's neighbor was. There's a lesson to be learned by it – always look at who else is on the census page you find since it might be other people related to the family. Here's that page.

FIGURE 16

Eva is living with daughter Rae, and in the same household is Jack and Laura Lesinsky, the son-in-law and daughter. Previously I had Leeson as Laura's married name, so Lesinsky must have been shortened to Leeson sometime later. Note that Eva lost 6 years and Eva another 5.

To get more information of Laura and Jack, I searched the New York city marriage index for Jack

Lesinsky and turned up nothing. I then searched for Laura Shrader and found them. But it has Jack's last name as Lesonsky, which is why I didn't find them when I searched for Jack. And I now know Jack and Laura's date of marriage.

FIGURE 17

Next I wanted to focus on the brothers – Louis and Abraham. I found them both in the 1930 census. I found Louis and Sadie, and obtained yet another year of birth for both of them. I also learned that they had daughters named Phylis (sic) age 9 and Sylvia age 7. For Abraham I learned that his wife was Rose, she was born in 1903, and they got married in 1925, and they had a daughter Estelle age 2.

FIGURE 18

Then I went to the 1940 census and found both Louis and Abraham. There was no new or contradictory information in Louis's record. For Abraham I learned that he had sons Morton age 8, and Steven age 4. But Estelle was no longer there. Had she died in childhood?

FIGURE 19

And here's Louis Schrader's 1925 New York census record. No new information here.

FIGURE 20

And then there's Abraham's marriage record. From this we learn the date of his marriage, and also we learn that his wife Rose's maiden name – Platt.

FIGURE 21

It's time once again to see how our family tree is progressing. Here it is.

FIGURE 22

The sad part of doing this type of research is finding death notices and tombstones. Doing an online search I found the death notice for Laura Leeson. It appears not to have any new information. In particular, the names of the people who survived her are not mentioned. But it does refer to her as “Aunt Laura,” implying that she didn't have any children of her own.

FIGURE 23

Here is Yankel/Jacob Schrader's tombstone. Note that the name in Hebrew on the tombstone is Yakov and not Yankel as we had been led to believe. And the Hebrew tells us that his middle name is Meyer and his father's name is Shadga. He died in 1930. So that confirms the 1930 death record that we found previously as being his. Of course all we confirmed is that the Jacob Schroder whose 1930 death record we found is most-likely the Jacob Shrader whose tombstone we just found. But he haven't yet confirmed that this is our Jacob Schrader. However we will confirm that shortly.

FIGURE 24

Here is Havashana's tombstone. Note that her name in Hebrew is actually Hava Sheina (meaing Have

pretty one), so it's now obvious how it got anglicized first the Hannah, and then later to Eva. From the Hebrew on the tombstone we learn that her father's name is Abraham. And the tombstone tells us that she died in 1944.

FIGURE 25

Now for Louis's tombstone. He died in 1946. And the Hebrew tells us that his father's name is Yacov Meyer. This is the confirmation that we needed in order to be convinced that the death record and tombstone that we previously found for Jacob was indeed for our Jacob.

FIGURE 26

Here is the tombstone for an Estelle Schrader, daughter of Abraham. She was born in 1927 and died in 1934. So now we know that the Estelle whom we saw in the 1930 census and lacked in the 1940 census indeed did die in childhood.

FIGURE 27

And last is the tombstone of Rae Schrader. The Hebrew tells us that she is the daughter of Yakov Meyer the levite. More confirmation that we had the right Jacob Shrader. And now we have new information about Jacob – namely he was a levite, which is an honored position in the Jewish religion. Of interest here is the Rae, who obviously married (tombstone says “Beloved Mother” is listed with her maiden name. And the tombstone gives us yet another year of birth for Rae.

Here's the final family tree that we were able to construct.

FIGURE 28

In conclusion, let me make some key points. First, all the records presented here were found on line. It took about four hours, spread out of two days. It's not magic, and you can do this too.

Here are the lessons that we learned.

1. Names are never spelled the way we think they should be.
2. The record you find might not be the right one. If you don't check carefully, you could wind up with your mother in a reform school.
3. Some records are un-findable. Notice that I have not shown any ship records. That's because I was unable to find any for the family.
4. Never trust a woman's age.