When Visiting Washington, Add “Roots” Focus to Vacation

With the advent of summer, the kids out of school and vacation plans in the offering, a favorite destination is Washington, DC. Both adults and children relish the feeling of patriotism and glow of American spirit that engulfs them when they visit the Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson Monuments, Congress on Capitol Hill, the White House, the Smithsonian’s array of museums, Arlington Cemetery and whatever else time permits.

Although that seems like a hectic schedule, I would like to suggest another worthwhile visit for you and your family. It’s part of Americana, but it also may provide a link to your family’s roots. The National Archives in downtown Washington is within walking distance of most hotels, but more important, it houses the history of most families in a mind-boggling collection of documents.

“But my great-grandparents didn’t come over on the Mayflower,” you may respond. “They weren’t in this country during the Civil War or the Spanish-American War either. They came here after the turn of the century from Eastern Europe.”

You’re absolutely right. However, recently, the largest single cache of information about Jews of Russia and Eastern Polish origin known to exist anywhere in the world (outside of the Soviet Union) became available to researchers in the West.

The newly-accessible collection of documents housed at the National Archives in Washington consists of a large collection of Russian Consulate records which were impounded by the United States in 1933 from the Russian embassy. In the 19th and early 20th century, the Russian empire, which included most of Eastern Poland, maintained consulates all over the US and Canada. The consulate records consist of case files on some 250,000 persons and it is estimated that at least 60 percent were Jewish. Today, most American Jews have at least one grandparent who originally came from Russia or an area that was once part of the Czar’s empire.

Approximately 500,000 names were generated by these records that contain birth, death and marriage certificates as well as passports, official and unofficial correspondence along with countless photographs.

These files contain correspondence between individuals of Russian descent in the United States and their family in Russia during 1849–1926. Passport and visa matters, financial correspondence and many civil documents are a part of this collection.

The Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington, recognizing a project of great historical and genealogical significance, reached a three-way agreement with the National Archives and Mormon Library. The Mormons, recognizing the unique value of these records, have microfilmed the entire collection with the National Archives providing technical and material support.

Under the sponsorship and direction of the Jewish Genealogy Society, the indexing and cataloging has been completed. The index is soundex by name which means that all the different spelling variations will be grouped together by sound. The microfilms and index are available for research at the National Archives Building in Washington while the index, itself, can be consulted in any one of the 13 regional branches of the National Archives throughout the country.

While at the National Archives, be sure to ask for their free brochure entitled “Genealogical Sources at the National Archives” which describes ship passenger records, census and military records, and much more.

A quick look at the index (Russian Consular Record Index and Catalog by Sallyann Amdur Sack and Suzan Fisher Wynne; Garland Publishing Co., New York: 1987) produced three unknown members of my Odnoposoff family. I have since identified two of these people and determined their place on my family tree by meeting with their descendants whom I traced to California, Colorado, Massachusetts and New York. Although postage is high in the pursuit of family history, it is easily outdone by long distance telephone charges and escalating airfares.

The actual case files on my new “cousins” revealed a wealth of information including occupation, date and place of birth, names and of parents, religion, nationality, purpose of travel and a photo! The Russian Consular Records at the National Archives hold the promise of unimaginable discoveries for many, and possibly you.