

SOME THOUGHTS ON FAMILY HISTORY.

by Vic Berecz

Joel Stein in his March 1 *Time* magazine piece pooh-poohs genealogy ... the study of family history. He said “I come from a long line of people who don’t care about our long line of people.” and then went on with “making a big deal about your genealogy isn’t for Jews; it’s for WASPs and Southerners and Democrats and other groups whose past is brighter than their future.” and further noted that no one wants to “admit they’re Polish.” Well, those statements really got me going ... and then he proudly showed his total ignorance of 19th century European geography. I’ll give Joel the benefit of the doubt and say his article was written *tongue-in-cheek*, but I still can’t let it pass without examining why I care about my family history even though I’m neither Jewish, a WASP, a Southerner, a Democrat, nor Polish.

Joel’s ancestors were *farmers*, he notes. Sure, more than 90% of all our ancestors were farmers ... whether they lived in the US, in Europe, or in China. That doesn’t make them uninteresting. Isn’t it an interesting and relevant question to ask, “Why were there so many farmers then, and so few now?” As we gain understanding of the realities of 18th and 19th century farming, we gain a better understanding of the changes that have taken place ... in mechanization, seed hybridization, fertilizer utilization and a bunch of other “zations” ... resulting in the world of today. And what better way is there to learn concretely about those realities than to find out the details of an ancestor’s farm from the 1869 census of northern Hungary ... or the less-detailed 1870 US census of Iowa for that matter.

In every family there were *heroes* ... whether earning their living as farmers or otherwise. Whatever their role in their community, isn’t it an interesting and relevant question to ask, “How did individuals in the past step up to meet the challenges of the world.” And what better way is there to understand the opportunities for personal achievement than to learn how an ancestor’s infantry unit contributed to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo or how another ancestor proudly marched with her son down Broadway to the 23rd Street ferry that would start his Irish Brigade unit on their way to Fredericksburg and his death in the Union assault on Mayre’s Heights.

In every family there are those who ran afoul of the authorities ... call them the *villains* if you wish. Is there a better way to understand and evaluate our American system of justice than to compare it to other systems? The schoolteacher who was executed on the rack for allegedly assisting protesters against the regime, or the jailed lawyer who taught his fellow prisoners to read and to understand the law ... each teach us vivid lessons and values from our own family history.

Some things you find in family histories are morbidly funny ... like the tale of a relative who drowned in a vat of wine at the age of 105 (actually he was only 96) ... and some are just plain morbid ... like the relative who committed suicide in prison so as not to bring the scorn of the community down on his family by the revelations of a trial. The drama that is life is truly brought home to us when we can put such events into the perspective of our own family history.

In every family there are the *pioneers* ... the people willing to strike out into the unknown. Isn’t it an interesting and relevant question to ask, “What caused these people to abandon the familiar for the unknown?” and “How did they step-up to the challenges they found?” Whether its the simple immigrant that came to these shores to have a chance to work hard in a coal mine or steel mill and provide a better life for their children, or true frontiersman whose murder

instigated the Nez Perce Indian War in Idaho ... family stories give some of us the will to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors and become pioneers, each in our own way.

In every family there is illness, accidents and death. What better way is there to understand the progress we've made than to answer the question, "How did my ancestors die?" and "Am I susceptible to those same concerns?" The facts that an 83 year-old ancestor died of an infection three weeks after wounding his leg cutting reeds in the marsh (despite the leg being amputated by the best local medical professional – the barber) or that a wealthy ancestor sired 21 children only five of whom lived to adulthood tells us something about the progress we've made. The frequent recurrence in a family of a cause of death, such as the effects of alcoholism, perhaps tells us something about ourselves and what we still have to fear.

Yes, I've found that studying family history really brings home answers to questions we all need to think about in order to better understand and deal with the world we live in. All the people discussed above really existed and are a part of our family history. Every family has these rich histories if you'd only seek them out ... Joel, I think you'd find your Jewish Polish ancestors interesting even if they were all farmers, and you could probably learn a lot from their stories.

© Copyright 2010 by Victor G. Berez, Jr. All Rights Reserved.