

THE NAME REMAINS THE SAME

by Robin A. Meltzer

Sometimes, an embarkation list is more than a record of passengers boarding a ship. Sometimes, an embarkation list is a thank you note, a belated acknowledgement of a kindness done in 1950 at Radio City Music Hall.

On a trip to Manhattan, teenager Elaine Levine and her mother Gertrude Wagner Levine went to see Sid Caesar perform for Voice of the Army. After the show, mother and daughter were in an elevator, excitedly reviewing the evening's entertainment, when who should step in but Mr. Caesar himself. "He was very tall," recalls Elaine. "I wanted to ask him for an autograph, but I was too shy. So my mother asked, `Mr. Caesar, would you please give my daughter your autograph?'" "I can do better than that," he said. And with a broad smile, he signed the script from the performance and handed it to the delighted teen. For many years after that, whenever Sid Caesar was on television, Gertrude would exclaim, "Sid Caesar! What a nice man! What a mentsch, to sign his script for my daughter!" I heard this story many times growing up, because the shy teen in the Radio City elevator was my mother.



Elaine Levine and her mother Gertrude Levine, 1949

Sid Caesar passed away on February 12, 2014 at the age of 92. Thousands of press reports mourned the comedic genius who shaped television's golden age. Many tributes repeated a bit of family lore from Mr. Caesar's autobiography, that his father Max, a young immigrant from Poland, had his named changed by an immigration official at Ellis Island.

The propagation of the name change myth did not go unnoticed by Jewish genealogists. On Schelly Talalay Dardashti's facebook group "Tracing the Tribe," Judy Zimmer bemoaned this latest popularization of the inaccurate tale. Schelly suggested that this prominent case was an opportunity to bust the myth. Group members Todd Knowles, Banai Lynn Feldstein, Mark Halpern, Anita Geismar and Elise Friedman collaborated in finding biographical material, census records, a passport application and marriage license showing that the family was likely from Dombrowa Tarnowska in Galicia, that Max had an older brother Joseph, that their mother's first name was Dora, and that the family was living in New York City by the late 1880s. On jewishdata.com, I found headstone photographs for Joseph (Hebrew name "Zelig") and Dora ("Dvora"). Group member Joy Kestenbaum volunteered to go to Yonkers to get Max's Hebrew name, the one likely used on his passenger manifest, from his headstone. The cemetery office said that with several feet of snow still on the ground, the search would have to wait. But there was enough information to begin searching for the proof that the Caesar family name was not changed on arrival: an embarkation list and manifest for Dora and Joseph.

Searching 1880s manifests can be very difficult. By the time the originals were imaged in the 1930s, many had faded significantly, or had paper loss at the fold lines. Problems with illegibility and incompleteness meant that a good number of these manifests could not be indexed. The brevity of information also means that it is sometimes not possible to differentiate between persons with the same name.

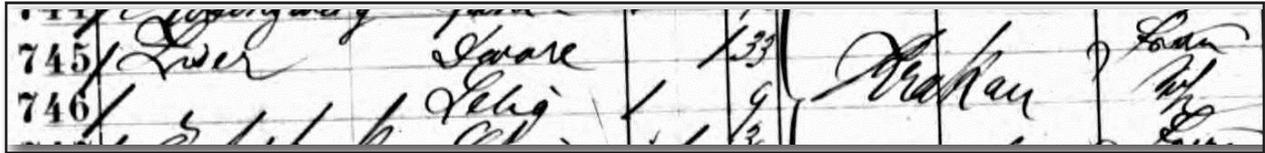
Starting with spellings for the phonetic "SEEZER" gleaned from jewishgen's kehillalinks page for Dombrowa Tarnowska, I tried C-S-R, C-Z-R, S-S-R, S-Z-R, Z-S-R. No luck with exact, wildcard and vowel substitution searches. I looked for anyone under 20 with Austrian nationality arriving in the United States from 1880 to 1890, first name only, last name only. I tried common transcription error substitutions, like capital "L" for capital "S." I ran searches using stevemorse.org's One Step utilities, on CastleGarden.org, ancestry.com and the

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Immigrant Ship Transcriber's Guild. Nothing, although I did find a manifest for a Mendel ZITHERSPIELER.

After five or six hours, it was getting very frustrating. I called my mother and told her about the project, but that I was about ready to give up. "No," she said. "Sid Caesar was such a mensch, such a kind man. He autographed that script for me. You should do something nice for his family. Keep looking!" So I brewed another mug of tea and sat back down for another go round, this time from the end of the alphabet.



Hamburg embarkation list entries for Dora ZISER (line 745) and Selig ZISER (line 746), traveling on the S. S. Lessing, departing Hamburg, Germany on November 16, 1881.

Starting with a broad search on ancestry.com, I gave another try to "Z-S-R" from Austria, no first names, no port, no year. This time, the results looked a bit different. I started clicking through, ready to check another "no" on my search log.

And then – on a Hamburg list – in looping German script -- Dwore and Selig ZISER, an Austrian mother, age 33, and son, age 9, embarking on November 16, 1881 on the S. S. Lessing for the port of New York. The names, ages and nationalities matched the known records. BINGO!

With the ship's name and embarkation date, it should have been easy to find the manifest. Except there was no record of the S. S. Lessing entering the port of New York in November or December 1881. Just what I needed - another mystery. I ran a Google search that soon yielded an answer: a NorwayHeritage.com article revealed that the S.S. Lessing lost part of its rudder in a North Atlantic hurricane. The crew managed to turn the ship around and make port in Plymouth. The steerage passengers remained there for two weeks, then boarded the S.S. Rhenania for New York. The article provided the microfilm series and roll number for the manifest, which Elise Friedman used to locate Dwore and Selig ZISER, mistranscribed as "FIZER." The S. S. Rhenania sailed into New York Harbor on December 24, 1881, but passengers were not allowed to disembark until December 27th. Why? Smallpox had broken out in steerage. What a saga!

Schelly Dardashti contacted a Caesar family spokesperson and one of Sid Caesar's daughters, who are eager to learn more. If not for that bit of family lore, they would have never "met" Dora, or learned of her harrowing journey to America. The myth, plus an autograph from Dora's grandson, brought the truth to light.

Thank you, Mr. Caesar.

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This article appeared in the Spring, 2014 issue of *Mishpacha*, the journal of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington. **Robin Meltzer** is V.P. for Communications of the Jewish genealogy Society of Greater Washington. As an attorney and family researcher, she has 30 years of genealogic research experience, focusing on Jewish genealogy. She is the assistant producer of "Stories from the Syracuse Jewish Community," a documentary on Central New York Jewish history to be released in May 2014. Robin has also written several articles on Jewish genealogy and local history for the *Jewish Observer* of Central New York and *Mishpacha*, the journal of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington.