

# Tracing my family tree

How one person used modern technology to discover his roots. *by Russell Shaw*

**T**here was a time when my family tree held little interest for me. I knew only two generations of my history, and little

detail of even that. Five minutes spent demonstrating the power of the Internet to my grandmother ignited a string of events that changed everything.

My late father, Theodore Shaw, was born in 1917 and passed away in 1987. He was one of three sons born to Ida Shaw. Ida's maiden name was Mark. She was of German-Jewish descent, although she was born in the United States. She died when I was six years old. My paternal grandfather came from Latvia, but died before my mother, also named Ida, met my father.

I knew slightly more about my mother's side of the family. My mother was born in New York City in 1922. She was the youngest child of Sam and Kate Snapinsky. Kate emigrated from the Ukraine in 1911. Sam emigrated from Vilna, a city once claimed by Poland and Russia. But then, as it is now, Vilna was the capitol of Lithuania. I knew nothing about either of their parents, except that Kate's father owned a tavern back in the old country.

I performed my Internet demo for my maternal grandmother back in May, 2001. I pointed my browser to Google, the powerful search

Name	Age in 1880	Est. Birth Year	Birthplace	Relation to Head of House	Marital Status	Race	Gender	State in 1880 (City, County, State)	Census Image	View This?
<a href="#">Ida Snapinsky</a>	5	<1875	Pennsylvania	Daughter	Single	White	Female	Pittsburgh, Allegheny, PA		
<a href="#">Kate Snapinsky</a>	21	<1867	Poland	Wife	Married	White	Female	Pittsburgh, Allegheny, PA		
<a href="#">Simon Snapinsky</a>	1	<1877	Pennsylvania	Son	Single	White	Male	Pittsburgh, Allegheny, PA		
<a href="#">Alfred Snapinsky</a>	1	<1875	Pennsylvania	Daughter	Single	White	Female	Pittsburgh, Allegheny, PA		
<a href="#">Sarah Snapinsky</a>	8	<1872	Pennsylvania	Daughter	Single	White	Female	Pittsburgh, Allegheny, PA		
<a href="#">Emma Snapinsky</a>	30	<1847	Poland	Sister	Married	White	Female	Pittsburgh, Allegheny, PA		

→ A search of the 1880 U.S. Census Records on Ancestry.com revealed listings for Simon Snapinsky, his wife, and their four children.

engine, to show her the research capabilities of the World Wide Web. My grandmother had told me that in all her travels, contacts, and conversations, she'd never heard of a Snapinsky outside our own family.

Snapinsky is an uncommon name, I thought. Maybe Google would lead me to the resources that would help me learn more about the people whose genes I share.

## GOOGLE YIELDS A LEAD

Google delivered. Its search results led me to a Website maintained by the Pennsylvania State Archives, where I discovered that the Pennsylvania Department of Justice Board of Pardons had issued a writ of clemency for one Simon Snapinsky in 1886. My grandmother

and I immediately suspected that Simon was a distant relative.

According to the site, the original record was stored in Carton 61 (of 70 such cartons). Noting that this citation originated with the Pennsylvania State Archives, I went back to Google, typed "Pennsylvania State Archives" (in quotation marks, to prompt Google to search for exactly that phrase), and found the appropriate Website.

Once there, I discovered that this account of Simon's encounter with the justice system (as with most older records) is not available online. But the site did direct me to a page where I could request hard copies. I filled out the form, wrote a \$15 check payable to the state, and dropped it in the mail.

Three weeks later, I received 20 pages of records. At this point, my grandmother and I still didn't know for sure if Simon was a relation, but what we read in these records shocked us.

### SIMON: NOT SO SIMPLE

It seems Simon's legal troubles emanated from a combination of marital and financial difficulties. According to the records, Simon's wife Goldie frequently criticized him for not earning enough money in his job as a peddler. Goldie eventually became so enraged that she coerced the couple's then 12-year-old daughter to file a complaint accusing Simon of improper behavior directed at her.

The files contained everything from character references offered by important citizens of Pittsburgh, to the eventual *mea culpa* from Simon's daughter, confessing that her mother had put her up to it.

With that information in hand, my next step was to search the U.S. Census records for Simon Snapinsky. Census records are generally released 72 years after a particular count is compiled (the 1930 census is the most recent available online. Tragically, most of the 1890 records were lost in a tremendous fire in 1921.)

Since the census is taken every ten years, and Simon's pardon was granted in 1886, I thought a look at the 1880 census records would be the most efficient course of action.

### SUBSCRIPTION RESOURCES

My first step was to join Ancestry.com, a subscription Website (\$99.95 per year) that features databases containing hundreds of millions of family history records. After signing up, I went to the Ancestry.com home page and entered the name "Snapinsky" in their search engine.



## IT'S ON THE DISC

You'll find trial versions of three genealogy programs on this month's disc.

**GENIUS FAMILY TREE, \$29.95**  
Genius Solutions  
www.gensol.com.au

**LEGACY FAMILY TREE, FREE**  
(Legacy Family Tree Deluxe is \$56.95)  
Millennia Corp.  
www.legacyfamilytree.com

**ROOTSMAGIC, \$29.95**  
RootsMagic, Inc.  
www.rootsmagic.com

Ancestry.com retrieved 12 records, including a Social Security Death Index citation noting the passing of my grandfather, Sam Snapinsky, in 1963. Five citations from the 1930 Census documented Sam, his wife Katie (my maternal grandmother), and their three children (my mother Ida and her two brothers).

These records also revealed that Simon Snapinsky (referred to by his Hebrew name of "Siomore") was born in Poland, in 1842. I already knew that Vilna, the town where my grandfather Sam was born 49 years later, was under Polish rule in 1842.

Simon's occupation was listed as peddler, matching the character references in his 1886 clemency hearing. Simon's wife Goldie was born in 1847, also in Poland. The couple had four children born in the U.S.: Sarah, in 1872; Bella, in 1875; and Moses and Racheal, both in 1879.

### CENSUS AND SENSIBILITY

A link under the name of each person listed in these records led to a particular page about the individual. A copy of the census image for that individual was also on this page. Clicking on it led to an oversized graphics file, which contained a copy of the actual census record.

The record listed such information as the individual's birthplace, relation to the head of household, marital status, race, and gender.

Unfortunately, the ravages of time, coupled with the arcane handwriting styles of the day, made many of these census records completely, or almost completely, undecipherable. Undeterred, I turned to Google again. A search using the terms "1880," "Pittsburgh," and "census" produced a listing for the Historic Pittsburgh Census Project, where I found a transcription of that city's 1880 Census records.

### ETHNIC GENEALOGY SITES

Since few 1890 Census records survived the 1921 fire, my next step was to find out as much as I

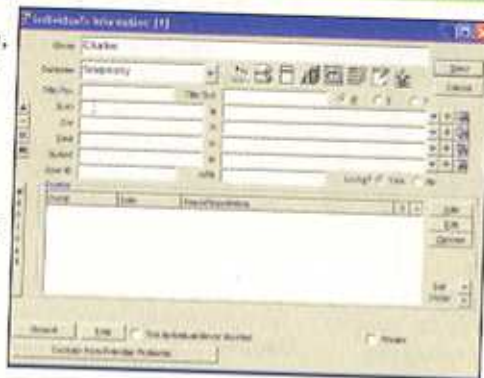
Personal Information	Census Image
Name: <b>Siomore SNAPINSKY</b>	
Age: <b>38</b>	
Estimated birth year: <b>&lt;1842&gt;</b>	
Birthplace: <b>POLAND</b>	
Occupation: <b>Pedler</b>	
Relation: <b>Self</b>	
Home in 1880: <b>Pittsburgh, Allegheny, Pennsylvania</b>	
Marital status: <b>Married</b>	
Race: <b>White</b>	
Gender: <b>Male</b>	
Head of household: <b>Siomore SNAPINSKY</b>	
Father's birthplace: <b>POLAND</b>	
Mother's birthplace: <b>POLAND</b>	
Cannot read/write: <a href="#">View image</a>	
Blind: <a href="#">View image</a>	
Deaf and dumb: <a href="#">View image</a>	
Otherwise disabled: <a href="#">View image</a>	
Idiot or insane: <a href="#">View image</a>	
Image Source: <b>Year: 1880; Census Place: Pittsburgh, Allegheny, Pennsylvania; Roll: 79_1092; Family History Film: 1255092; Page: 363C; Enumeration District: 115; Image: 0390.</b>	
	<a href="#">View original image</a>
	<a href="#">View blank 1880 census form (PDF 16K)</a>

→ The 1880 Census Records page for Simon (Siomore) Snapinsky revealed this basic information about his life. Viewing the digitized copy of the actual Census form requires a subscription fee.

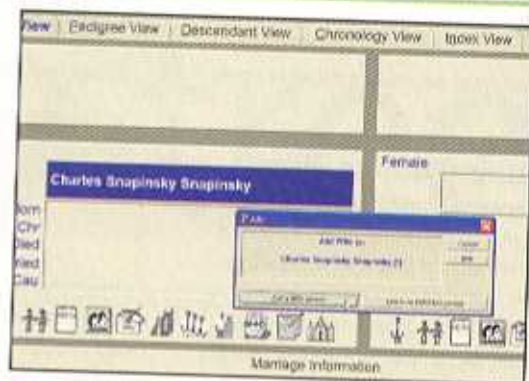
CREATE A FAMILY TREE The EasyWay

With my family history starting to take shape, I decided to draw my family tree. I chose Millennia's Legacy Family Tree for this task, but there are several others to choose from. In fact, you'll find three genealogy programs on this month's disc!

*[Editor's note: For privacy reasons, the first three screenshots reveal relatively little information about the author's family and personal history. The fourth screenshot, taken from the Legacy Family Tree sample database, displays a few more of the program's features.]*



**1** After installing and launching the program, I clicked on the File menu and chose New Family File to begin. I entered the name "Snapinsky," which is one of the surnames on my family tree. I started this tree with my maternal great-grandfather, Charles Snapinsky.



**2** I next added Charles' wife by clicking on the Add menu and choosing Wife to Charles. I clicked on "Add a New Person" in the pop-up box, and then entered as much information as I knew about Gussie.

could about Pittsburgh's Jewish community in the latter part of the 19th century.

I pointed my Web browser to the Jewish history Website [www.jewishgen.org](http://www.jewishgen.org), typed "Pittsburgh" in the search box, and was rewarded with an article titled "Jewish History of Pittsburgh." This record told me that "...by 1877, there were 2,000 Jews in Pittsburgh, many of them recent immigrants from Lithuania, sharing in the ferment of the industrial growth of the city and its environs. Many peddlers moved out to the surrounding towns, but all returned to the city for the Sabbath and holidays and for kosher food."

From my previous research, I knew that Vilna was part of Lithuania in the 1870s. That fact, plus Simon's occupation as a peddler, was strong evidence that he had come from Vilna (the only town in Lithuania with a substantial Jewish population) in the 1870s.

I went back to Ancestry.com to search the 1870 census records. There were no listings for a

Snapinsky anywhere in the U.S., but since I knew Simon's first child was born in 1872, I concluded that Simon must have emigrated to the U.S. in or around 1871.

#### CITY DIRECTORY RESOURCES

I next turned to city directories from that era. City directories are an invaluable reference tool for genealogists, because they provide historical details about both individuals and businesses. I found a collection of Pittsburgh city records on Ancestry.com, but a search for the Snapinsky name yielded no results.

Knowing that my grandfather Sam sometimes went by the last name Shupinsky, I next tried that name. Bingo! The 1890 Pittsburgh city directory listed a peddler named Simon Shupinsky.

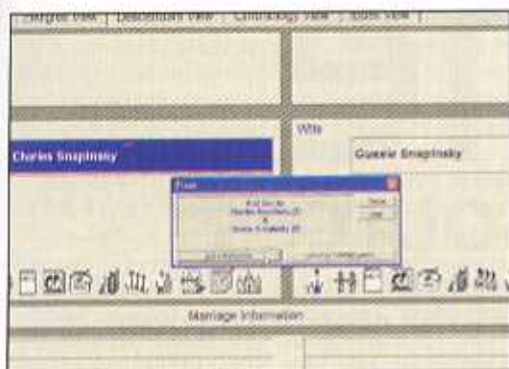
It seemed much too much of a coincidence that two men working as peddlers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the late 1800s would have such similar names. My assumption that these were, in fact,

the same person was eventually proven true.

At this point, I returned to the JewishGen Website and posted a message on their discussion board. My posting detailed the results of my search up to that point, and I asked that anyone with additional information about the Snapinsky/Shupinsky line get in touch with me.

A week later, I received a phone call from the step-granddaughter of a Julius Shupinsky. She told me that Julius was the last surviving member of a Shupinsky family who had emigrated from Vilna to Pennsylvania. But Julius was a practicing Catholic, as were his four, now-deceased brothers. Julius' brothers were coalminers in Western Pennsylvania, and all four brothers had changed their last names to Shupink.

I asked the young lady to ask Julius if he knew of any Jewish ancestry in his family. He didn't, but he did recall that his wife's parents "spoke a language that sounded like Arabic." I thought that language was likely Hebrew, and that like



**3** Charles' and Gussie's children were Sam, my maternal grandfather, and Philip. To enter each of these people into my growing family tree file, I clicked on the Add menu and chose Son. I clicked on "Add a New Person" in the pop-up box, and then entered all the details I knew about Sam. I repeated this step for Philip.



**4** As you can see from the sample database, you can store a great deal of information about your family history. The ability to add pictures is particularly cool. Check out the trial version of the software on the disc and see what you think.

many Eastern European Jews escaping religious persecution, this branch of the Shupinsky had converted to Catholicism generations ago.

#### EMAILS POINT THE WAY

I was about ready to throw in the towel when I received two emails in response to my postings on the JewishGen.org message boards. One was from a Pittsburgher of Jewish faith who recalled that the Hebrew Free Loan Society was founded in the early 1900s by a Simon Shupinsky.

The other email came from an archivist at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, who provided me with a list of burial records for Pittsburgh Jews. There, I saw a record noting the passing in 1934 of Sarah Shupinsky. Her birth year of 1872 matched that of the Sarah Snapinsky listed in the 1880 U.S. Census. Simon had passed away 20 years earlier and was buried in the same cemetery. The Snapinsky/Shupinsky coincidences were beginning to coalesce.

The Hebrew Free Loan Society of Pittsburgh still exists today. If the institution had an official—or even an informal—archivist, I said to myself, such a resource should be able to provide me with more information about Simon Shupinsky. Perhaps this person could point me to some of his remaining descendants.

Another Google search led me to the Website for the International Association of Hebrew Free Loans ([www.freeloan.org](http://www.freeloan.org)), where I found a phone and a fax number for the Pittsburgh branch. I faxed a query to the institution.

#### "HELLO, COUSIN"

In less than a week, I received a phone call from an elderly gentleman named Paul Kaplan. Kaplan told me he was Simon Shupinsky's grandson, and that his mother—Simon's daughter—was named Bella. He believed, but was not totally sure, that Simon had emigrated from Vilna.

Kaplan noted that although he and his late wife never had children,

his brother David did have one son, who is now a famous cancer researcher at a pediatric hospital in Ohio. He ended the conversation with an invitation for me to look him up if I'm ever in Pittsburgh. And I think I will!

Although irrefutable evidence remains elusive, and my research is ongoing, the information I've gathered so far leads me and my immediate family to believe that my late grandfather, Sam Snapinsky, who came to the U.S. in 1911, was related to Simon Snapinsky, who arrived on these shores four decades earlier.

My family, along with the Snapinsky/Shupinsky descendants I spoke with, believe it's highly likely that Simon was Sam's grandfather's brother.

Thanks to the Internet, I now know of distant cousins I never knew I had. Although your circumstances and family history might be decidedly different than mine, you can use these same tools and resources to research your own family tree. ■