

Maximizing Your Mileage from the Ellis Island Database

Megan Smolenyak shows us how to make the best of this wonderful resource.

ON 17 APRIL 2001, the millions of us having at least one ancestor who came through Ellis Island received an amazing gift from the American Family Immigration History Center. Some 22 million passenger and ship crew arrival records from 1892 to 1924 had been transcribed (by a huge volunteer effort of the

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) and uploaded to the Internet at ellislandrecords.org. Better yet, most of these records were linked to digital images of original ship's manifests, making it easy to see all the details of Great-Grandma's arrival in New York.

Avid and novice genealogists alike were quick to grasp the value of this resource and overloaded the site so that it was almost impossible to get in. A few months after the launch, much-needed equipment upgrades and a leveling off of the traffic made it possible for the Ellis Island Database (EIDB) to deliver on its early promise. What used to take hours, weeks or months, depending on your access to selected repositories, could be accomplished in minutes. It was now possible to search in ways that weren't feasible using the traditional microfilm approach, and, if your ancestors happened to enter New York in the previously unindexed years of 1892-97, the EIDB could save you a lifetime of scrolling.



The Ellis Island Database has become a wonderful resource for millions of genealogists.

dants of the majority of the people who came through Ellis Island — now had a reasonable chance of finding kin hidden under names one, two or even five letters off from what was expected.

But wait. We found more of our immigrant ancestors, but discovered that there were still some missing.

In my case, I had researched all the Smolenyaks who had immigrated to the US using National Archives microfilm. A quick comparison revealed that a few I had located using the Soundex functionality of the "old-fashioned" microfilms could not be found with the EIDB. Others were discouraged to finally find an elusive ancestor, only to be greeted by a "no image available" message when trying to view the original ship manifest.

Frustrated by similar experiences, Stephen P. Morse introduced a search form

(home.pacbell.net/spmorse/ellis/ellis.html) to help genealogists search the EIDB using multiple criteria (e.g., age, year of immigration, ethnicity, etc.) in one step. To this he added an advanced search feature allowing users (with a little extra effort) to search by town name, not possible directly through the EIDB website. Building on work done by Alex Calzareth and Michael Tobias, who had both tackled the broken and missing links situation, he also incorporated

Glitches and Solutions

But almost as soon as the site became easily accessible, the complaints began: "I tried, but my grandfather wasn't in there"; "The database doesn't have a single record of my surname!"; "His naturalization papers say he came from Italy in 1912, but there's no entry for his name."

The introduction of a phonetic and handwriting variants tool developed by a linguistics professor went a long way to quieting these gripes. Those with "exotic" Eastern and Southern European names — in other words, descen-



The basic search program will often yield numerous, but not necessarily all relevant records.

a user-friendly means of finding missing manifests. Morse's contribution made it possible to unearth almost all the immigrants who were still in hiding, mostly because their names had been recorded in unexpected ways in the original ship's manifest or during the recent transcription process.

Recommended Strategy

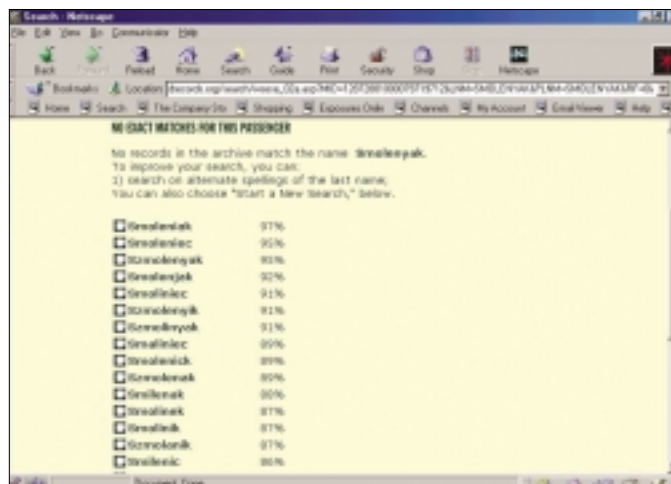
So now we have several approaches at our disposal: traditional microfilm research, the EIDB website, and Morse's tools. Curious to understand more fully the relative strengths of these approaches and to determine the best plan of attack for future Ellis Island research, I experimented with all three methodologies using a variety of surnames. Considering the results I obtained as well as ease of use, I reached the conclusion that, in general, the quickest way to find your Ellis Island kin is to:

1. Search the EIDB, making sure to use the alternative spelling feature.
2. Round out your research by using Morse's tools to find creative spellings, specific immigrants, missing manifests, and other special situations.
3. Employ traditional microfilm techniques if you still can't find that missing ancestor or want to be as sure as possible that you've found all candidates. The unique ability to do a Soundex search this way may solve your mystery or reveal a few stray immigrants.

Not surprisingly, there are exceptions — instances where it's more expedient to start with the Morse tools instead of the EIDB — so these will be highlighted in the discussion of these tools.

Ellis Island Database Tactics

Basic use of the EIDB is apparent to anyone who visits the site, so it's not necessary to dwell on fun-



Alternate spellings will often unearth many more records.

damentals. Because of certain nuances of the database, however, employing specific tactics is key to obtaining the best possible results. The following are devices I have found to be especially helpful in sniffing out evasive immigrant ancestors or all variations of a given surname:

- Search by the entire last name *and* by just the first few letters. You can search the EIDB either way, so if you're dealing with a surname that's prone to misspelling, try using just the first few letters. For instance, I found no hits on Smolenyak, so I tried searches on Smol and the Hungarian-style Szmol. If the most likely misspellings generally occur within the first few letters, you'll want to experiment with a number of different beginnings.
- For the first name, experiment with all four options. The natural tendency is to enter the entire first name of the immigrant you're seeking and, if he had a straightforward name such as John, this may well work. But just maybe the John you're seeking entered the country as Jan, Johan or Jean. To find such people, you could enter just J to get a list of all immigrants with that surname whose first names start with this letter. This tactic can result in extra names to sift through (e.g., Josephs would appear, too), but ensures that you'll get all the appropriate candidates.

As with the surname field,

using the leading letters works with the first name, but only if you have entered a complete last name. So if I enter Ja to try to find men named both Jan and Janos, I will find Janos Szmolenyak, provided I entered Szmolenyak as the last name, but not if I had tried to broaden my search by only entering the first few letters of the surname.

Finally, if you want to find all the people with a given surname, your fourth option is to leave the first name blank.

- Try the alternate spellings if you don't get any exact matches. If you enter a surname and there are no matches, you will be led to a group of 30 likely phonetic and handwriting variants within the EIDB. Since entering my current spelling of Smolenyak, for instance, results in no matches, I'm taken to a page of alternatives. I can click on these one at a time and view the results as if I had searched on each variation initially.

Many of us fail to make best use of this feature because we're too quick to dismiss alternatives we couldn't fathom. I was guilty of this when I neglected to check the option of Smolina. A more patient, distant cousin found one of our missing Smolenyaks by trying this possibility. Experiment with as many as you can possibly imagine being a version of the surname you seek. They're ranked by likelihood, so you're apt to find most of your hidden matches early in this process, but thoroughness occasionally pays off. As you do this with different surnames, you'll recognize that the spelling alternatives generated are well thought out (taking into account letters that can be easily confused, Eastern and Southern European spelling quirks, and other factors) and that they only include names that are definitely in the EIDB. This spares you from having to brainstorm and search countless variations of each surname.

- Use the **Name and Gender** edit

option under the **Passenger Search Profile**. When you get any matches to the name you requested, you will be taken to a page entitled **Matching Passenger Records** and shown exact matches only. However, near the top of the page, you'll find options to view **Close Matches Only**, **Alternate Spellings** or **All Records**. Clicking **All Records** will give you Exact matches, Close matches and Alternate spellings.

A bit of clarification of terms is warranted here. Close Matches would be more easily understood as "names starting with the same letters", as that's what they actually are. Alternate Spellings are variations of the surname found within the EIDB, what most of us would probably refer to as "close matches." Searching for Szmolen, for example, will bring up names such as Szmolenszky under the Close Matches category and names such as Szmalen under Alternate Spellings.

Routinely selecting the **All Records** option will increase your chances of success by bringing up more candidates, and many researchers have found their elusive targets hiding under variations one, two or five letters off what was considered to be the correct spelling.

You can improve your chances still further by using the **Name & Gender** edit option after reaching the **Matching Passenger Records** page. Clicking on the edit button will take you to a list of 30 alternate spellings where you can select two at a time to be included in your search. In fact, if you use the **All Records** approach just covered, the results will default to the top two alternate spellings from this list of 30. By momentarily detouring to this list of 30, though, you can refine your search by selecting any pair of alternatives or systematically working your way through the entire list with 15 pairs. This will ultimately surface more of the people you're

seeking.

- Don't discount the three dots. Search results may occasionally surprise you by including a variation of the surname with three dots (...) in it. This happens most frequently in the **Alternate Spellings** section and is the EIDB's way of telling you that the transcriber was unable to determine a letter or brief series of letters. By way of example, searching for Nelligan results in some alternate spellings of ...elligan. First letters in particular tended to be somewhat elaborate and difficult to distinguish, so your ancestor may be one of the 59,693 in the EIDB whose name starts with ...

In fact, it's sometimes worth deliberately prompting the database to give you such candidates. Although the results are presented with ..., you search for such possibilities by using a question mark. So if your Fell ancestor can't be found, you can look for candidates by entering ?ell in the surname field.

- Look forward and backward to find the digital images you're seeking. When you find a match, you'll undoubtedly want to view the original ship manifest. This is when you'll discover that some images are missing or mislinked and that many were scanned in backwards. Missing images and broken links will be discussed later, but making it a habit to use the **Previous** and **Next** options several pages each way will help with the backwards situation.

When the listing for a passenger extends across two pages, it seems that the EIDB brings you into the second — the one without names — more often than not. The natural inclination is to click on **Previous** to see the first page, but this will frequently bring you to a non-list page. In such cases, the manifest was probably loaded in backwards, so you will simply need to click **Next** to get to the previous page and vice versa.

Morse Tools Tactics

By using Stephen Morse's tools, you can improve your results still further. And while I suggest starting with the EIDB for generic situations, if any of the following circumstances apply, you'll probably save time by beginning with Morse's site. Either way, you'll want to add home.pacbell.net/spmorse/ellis/ellis.html to your bookmarks.

You know some details of the immigration

Many of us know a few details of an ancestor's immigration from naturalization records, family tales or other sources. In such cases, the EIDB allows you to specify certain criteria (i.e. name, gender, date of arrival, age at arrival, name of ship, port of departure and ethnicity) to help you zero in on that individual. But the EIDB site forces you to make these decisions sequentially, whereas Morse's One Step search form lets you specify all these criteria at once.

For instance, I knew that my great-grandfather, Gregorz Sydorko, had emigrated as a young man of perhaps 24-28 sometime in the period 1910-13. So I requested the following search:

First Initial: G
Surname: Sydor
Gender: m
Year of Arrival: 1910-1913
Age at Arrival: 24-28

I typed just the first five letters of the surname because I knew the last syl-

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL "http://home.pacbell.net/spmorse/ellis/ellis.html". The page title is "Searching the Ellis Island Database in One Step". Below the title, it says "Stephen F. Morse, San Francisco (e-mail: smorse@rockcage.com)". There are two buttons: "Jump Search Page" and "My Other Webpages". A note states: "Minimum required information is the first letter of the last name". The form has several input fields and options: "First Name or Initial" (with a dropdown arrow), "Last Name" (with a dropdown arrow), "Gender" (with a dropdown arrow), "Year of arrival in between" (with two year input boxes and a dropdown arrow), "Age at arrival in between" (with two age input boxes and a dropdown arrow), and "Start Name (see last spelling)" (with a dropdown arrow). There are also radio buttons for "starts with", "is exactly", and "contains" (which is selected), and a checkbox for "(show list)".

Stephen Morse's One Step program allows users to select and search multiple criteria simultaneously.

lable had a tendency to be spelled different ways. Both led me to my great-grandfather's record, but entering each of these details via the EIDB required four steps as compared to Morse's one.

Moreover, Morse's search form lets you specify any combination of criteria while the EIDB will only allow you to select from the ethnicities, ports or boats corresponding to passengers with the exact surname of the leading characters you entered. For instance, if I type the leading letters of Szmolen to try to flush out those with my surname, the EIDB then permits me to narrow my findings by selecting relevant ethnicities. However, the EIDB only gives me the ethnicities for people whose entire surname is Szmolen. None of the choices given is Hungarian or Ruthenian which is how the Szmolenyaks in the EIDB are classified, so I would have missed them. The versatility of Morse's search form circumvents such hard-to-spot limitations. These and other nuances of his **One Step** search are provided in his FAQs (frequently asked questions), which are well worth the few minutes they take to read.

You want to find people from a particular town

When the EIDB made its appearance, many were disappointed that the town of origin could not be searched. In the advanced search portion of his page, Morse incorporated this option, but you'll need to have Netscape to use it (see his FAQs to learn more). Even if you generally work with another browser, this feature is so useful that it is worth downloading Netscape just for this purpose.

For example, I had always been told that the Shields in my family were from Ballymoney in Northern Ireland, but because they had come so early, no confirming evidence was available through naturalization, port or other records. It occurred to me that if I could locate others named

Passenger records 1 to 112 out of 112			
21	Anastasia Sydorko	Dworce, Poland	2902 24
22	Jan Sydorko	Dworce, Poland	2902 20
23	Marcial Sydorko	Dworce, Poland	2902 4
24	Zdzislaw Sydorko	Dworce, Galicia	2912 25
25	Karolina Sydorko	Dworce, Galicia	2911 20
26	Polina Sydorko	Dworce, Galicia	2912 17
27	Wiktoria Sydorko	Dworce, Austria	2911 20
28	Julia Sydorko	Dworce, Austria	2910 26
29	Zdzislaw Sydorko	Dworce	2907 27
30	Anna Sydorko	Dworce, Galicia	2911 18

Search results for Sydorkos from the village of Dworce using Morse's program.

Shields from Ballymoney, I could follow their paper trail in the hope of establishing a link. I was delighted to discover that the EIDB contained 1,827 Shields, but was less thrilled at the prospect of mining these 25 at a time. Fortunately, Morse's town option quickly plucked out the only one from Ballymoney.

This feature is also a boon for the growing field of genealogists exploring the origins of an entire village or town and, as with the surname field, it's possible to enter just the first few letters of the town name. Since foreign town names were just as prone to misspelling as unfamiliar surnames, this flexibility is critical. In searching for people with roots from a village called Osturna, I limited myself to just the letter O. Doing so turned up variations such as Oszturneya and Osztuonya that I never would have tried.

Before attempting to find all the people who emigrated from a particular town, though, it's necessary to know the surnames associated with it. Theoretically, it would be possible to type in a town name and the letter A in the surname field to generate a list of the people with a surname beginning with A hailing from that town. Then you would repeat the process with B, C, etc. The obstacle to this working is the large numbers involved. Morse's site begins such a search by querying the EIDB for all the people with the surname you've provided, and then whittles down this list by town. If you indicate that you want names beginning with S, you're asking it to sort through a

whopping 2,442,735 people and the communication with the EIDB will time out. When searching for Smolenyaks, therefore, I tried first with Sz, but this still produced 120,998 possibilities. Szm finally brought me to a more reasonable population of 2,502. So rather than try to unearth all the As, Bs and Cs from a village, it's better to have a good idea of the

local surnames and to enter at least the first two or three letters of each.

You need to narrow the field

The flip side of having an unusual name prone to misspelling is having an annoyingly common name that forces you to wade through pages of matches on the EIDB website. Finding the solitary Shields from Ballymoney is one such example, but Morse's search form allows you to just as easily find the Italian Marinos rather than the Cuban ones, the Johnsens who departed from Sweden as opposed to other ports, the Robinsons who came during that 1892-97 unindexed void, the Schmidt immigrants who were of draft age, the Richardsons who traveled on the *S.S. Britannia*, and so forth.

You suspect there are more "out there"

So you've "worked" the EIDB, exhausted every search you can think of, but believe there are probably still more ancestors to be found. You're not alone. Using just the EIDB, I found 15 Smolenyaks who came through Ellis Island, but I strongly suspected that there were more hidden under especially creative versions of our name. With some experimentation through Morse's site, I was able to smoke out another five. Coupling the first few letters of my surname with each of the following worked especially well:

Use first letters of the town name, including:

- likely misspellings of the town (e.g. speculating that the O and A sounds could be confused pro-



New arrivals in the early 1900s, a small fraction of the 22 million immigrants found in the Ellis Island Database.

duced an Osturnite from "Astornia")

- ports of departure (e.g. guessing that some might have named the port of departure as their last residence revealed an Osturnite supposedly from Bremen)
- the letter U (e.g. knowing that some immigrants made visits to the old country turned up an Osturnite from the US)
- years of arrival of 1892 to 1897 (to find those who emigrated before last residence was consistently recorded)
- ethnicities (e.g. specifying Ruthenian surfaced the unanticipated spelling of Smolmak)

You're researching Jewish ancestors

Building on the efforts of Michael Tobias who combed the EIDB for all passengers having an ethnicity of "Hebrew", Morse created a separate search form specifically for Jewish passengers (home.pacbell.net/spmorse/ellis/ellisjw.html). As Morse indicates, this remarkable search engine provides a true search-by-town capability and a true Soundex capability, neither of which is available from the EIDB itself. This means that it's especially easy to locate Jewish ancestors

(provided they were listed as Hebrew). And if you have a little patience, you can assemble a list of all Jews from a particular *shtetl* by simply leaving the name fields blank and typing in the name of the town. A sample search on the village of Mosty Wielkie produced a list of 31 Jewish immigrants in about five minutes.

The ship's manifest is missing or mislinked

Occasionally, you'll find a match in the EIDB and try to view the original ship's manifest, only to find a "no image available" message or the wrong manifest. Unfortunately, links in the EIDB to many manifest images are broken (although far fewer than when the website first launched). Morse offers another simple tool (home.pacbell.net/spmorse/ellis/mm.htm) to help researchers find these missing images by using details given by the search results of the EIDB. Again, it is worth reading Morse's FAQs to fully understand how to use this to your best advantage.

There are some images that are missing from the EIDB altogether. Such errors can be reported to dberrors@ellisland.org, but

there's no timeframe for corrections and no response will be provided. In such cases, your best alternative is to do what you've always done in the past — make a copy from microfilm.

Happy Hunting!

First with the efforts of the American Family Immigration History Center, and then through the talents of Stephen P. Morse, Alex Calzareth and Michael Tobias, the more than 40 percent of Americans who are descended from Ellis Island immigrants received a tremendous gift. Evidence of our gratitude can be seen in the hundreds of Lithuanian, Italian, Norwegian, Cuban, Jewish, Irish and other ethnic websites that sing their praises. Here's hoping that the ideas shared here will help you get the most from your Ellis Island quest.

Megan Smolenyak, author of *In Search of Our Ancestors*, companion book to the 2000 PBS *Ancestors* series, and the forthcoming *Honoring Our Ancestors: Inspiring Stories of the Quest for Our Roots*, can be reached through www.honoringourancestors.com 