

# Retracing My Grandfather's Journey: Kovno to Hamburg, Through Hull to America

by Howard Wolinsky

This is the story of how my grandfather, born Hillel Sragan in 1871 in Keidan, Lithuania, transformed himself into Henry Wolinsky, a clothing merchant in Boston, the *Goldene Medinah*, in 1892.

For 30 years I had sought answers to questions about Hillel/Henry after whom I was named. I never could locate any records for my grandfather from the time he left Lithuania until he reached Boston. Always coming up empty from soundex or wild card searches, using an asterisk (\*) to represent a range of letters aiming to overcome possible misspellings, I started to think that space aliens had beamed Hillel from Lithuania to America.

After three decades of bottlenecks, dead ends, and roadblocks, I finally had a breakthrough in 2008. I cut through a tangle of misspellings with the help of a couple of savvy researchers in the United States and United Kingdom and of a prominent Diaspora historian. Nicholas J. Evans is a lecturer in Diaspora History at the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation and the History Department at the University of Hull. He helped fill me in—with the backing of the British Broadcast Corporation's popular *Coast* program—on the specifics of Hillel's journey. In reality, his is the same journey experienced by millions of others who left Eastern and Northern Europe for the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Australia.

Evans knows all about the records on ships that carried our ancestors plus has an ability to dig up details that capture the time and place. To make an episode on emigration from Hull, the BBC hired Evans to research someone whose family came through that port city. Through sheer happenstance, some discoveries on my family made by friends in the U.S. and U.K. about my grandfather, the mystery began to be solved. This article describes what the experts and I found and how we uncovered it.

Hillel Sragan boarded the *S.S. Sprite*, with 36 other passengers, in Hamburg, on Saturday, July 30, 1892, headed first for Hull, and ultimately via Liverpool for America, according to the Hamburg Passenger Lists, accessible at <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)>.

Evans located a weather chart covering the North Sea in *The Times* (of London) which revealed the steamship encountered light clouds and relatively smooth sailing in the more commonly rough North Sea. (A research librarian at Northwestern University told me that individuals should check local university libraries for access to the *Times* Digital Archive. At Northwestern and other university libraries, the public visits the library and accesses the database on publicly accessible computers. If researchers know when their ancestor shipped out of Hamburg for England, they can browse the database for the date their ancestor sailed to

check the conditions and the news of the day.)

Evans reconstructed what Hillel went through on his journey. Calm waters must have been welcome news for steerage passengers such as Hillel, who went on deck to avoid seasickness by exposing themselves to fresh air and taking in a view of the horizon. He would have seen loads of fishing boats. The waters along the way in the 32-hour leg of the journey were filled with hundreds of them.

Hull is situated along the Humber River, considered one of the least navigable rivers in the world. Once the *Sprite* reached the river's mouth, a local pilot took over and steered the ship into port, Evans explained. He also consulted the *Hull Bill of Entry and Daily Shipping List*. The shipping news was big news in those days. Along with Hillel and his fellow emigrants, the *Sprite* carried a cargo of rags, paper, shoes, leather, flour, wheat, rice, sugar, casks, nails, a piano, and fruit.

Yiddish-speaking Hillel probably would not have known it, but the door on emigration from Europe was about to slam shut, at least for a time. On the same day Hillel departed from Hamburg, the British news agency Reuters reported in the *Times* that health officials in Paris had detected cases of an especially deadly outbreak of cholera, the acute intestinal infection caused by ingestion of contaminated water or food. The news service reported that Austrian premier, Count Ludwig Patrick Taaffe, had warned the governor of Galicia of measures his government proposed to take in case the cholera epidemic reached that province. Taaffe worried that a long, porous border, along which smuggling prevailed



Hillel Sragan  
a/k/a Henry Wolinsky

and Russian troops were massing, would make it difficult to control and treat a cholera epidemic in the autonomous province. Shades of today's travelers and various flu threats.

Twenty-one-year-old Hillel had started out in Kovno (Kaunas), possibly taking a horse cart to the train station in Kovno, and boarded a train headed for the German border. He likely took a train to Berlin and then traveled in a crowded train car on to Hamburg—then one of Europe's busiest emigration ports.

According to Evans, the trek from Kovno would have

been a time-consuming affair. The journey to Hamburg would have taken up to four days. The railway carriages on which he traveled comprised a series of locked compartments. Each compartment had uncomfortable seats with limited luggage racks above them. There would have been enough space for eight people in the carriage. Most of the luggage would be in separate vans situated at the rear of the emigrant trains that traversed Germany. The railway companies locked all carriages for the passenger's own safety. Upon disembarkation at Hamburg, they would stay at approved lodging houses. Cholera was spreading across Europe and the unsanitary conditions in which emigrants traveled meant they were incubators for the spread of disease. Poor sanitation didn't help.

Probably oblivious to the trouble brewing in Hamburg, Hillel made his way through Hull on a train to Liverpool, a major port from which emigrants left for their new homelands, and then sailed on to Boston. He was one of 60,508 European emigrants who passed through Hull in 1892, Evans explained.

By the time Hillel left Liverpool for Boston on August 4, 1892, with 600 other passengers aboard the Cunard Line's *S.S. Pavonia*, cholera was simmering in Hamburg, where local authorities had tried to keep a lid on the emerging epidemic. Hillel arrived in the United States on August 14, 1892, five days before Hamburg authorities admitted that the cholera epidemic was out of control and closed its port for 18 months. Nearly 8,400 people died in Hamburg, then a city of 623,000, in a matter of weeks. Had Hillel departed just three weeks later, he might well have been turned back at the border, and he might not have made it to America then, if ever. I never spoke with my grandfather. He died in 1944, three years before I was born, and my father knew little or at least shared little.

The historic and news developments of the time when your ancestor emigrated affected their decisions and travels. Thanks to the BBC sponsoring my research, I learned from Evans about the ebbs and tides of history affecting Hillel and maybe your ancestors, too. Evans explained that pogroms did not motivate Hillel to leave his family. "Kovno never experienced a pogrom, ever. That's important to remember," he said.

In addition to pogroms, large-scale famine in 1891 and 1892 drove many Jews to leave Russia. The generally poor economy drove tens of thousands to exit the Russian Empire. That's consistent with what Bessie Israel, my maternal grandmother, who hailed from Slobodka, Lithuania, had told me about her reasons for leaving. Hillel also was an economic refugee, Evans posited.

"It was economic persecution that forced most Jews to leave Imperial Russia. Jews were prevented from entering the professions. They were restricted to living in specific areas—both inside and outside the Pale (of Settlement). In 1890, 1891, and 1892, just before your ancestor migrated, Jews had been expelled from St. Petersburg, from Moscow, and even some from ports such as Riga and Libau. Most

were now confined to living in the overcrowded Pale of Settlement or of emigrating to the West," Evans noted.

Population pressures for those living in the Pale intensified on a constant basis. "The Pale was already crowded because of the fecundity of the Jewish population and residential restrictions imposed on Russia's Jews," he added.

Records from the Lithuanian State Archives in Vilnius reveal that the ancestors of Hillel Sragan had lived in Keidan since at least the early 1700s. Hillel was born in Keidan in May 1871, the fifth son of Mosha Eliash and Chaya bat Mordechai Sragan. Russian census records showed that the family moved from Keidan to Babtai and Kovno city, apparently following development of the railway system. Sometimes fathers and sometimes sons, such as Hillel, were sent ahead to foreign lands as an advance party to "test the waters."

Young adults with the best potential to be "earners" might be sent ahead, reducing the burden on the family back home by sending a portion of their wages by cable, while at the same time saving money for fares to pay for siblings, spouses, children, or other family members to later join them, Evans explained.

Hillel's big brother, Isaac Sragan, born in 1861, led the way. In 1884, in the wake of distant pogroms and other unrest following the assassination of Czar Alexander II, Isaac came to New York City, where he changed his name to Wolinsky for reasons I have not discovered. He and his wife, Rochel, had their first two children there before moving to Boston in 1890. Hillel Sragan took the name Henry Wolinsky after he arrived in Boston. None of the five other Sragan brothers left Lithuania.

Possibly one reason that Hillel's siblings remained in Russia was the fact that an economic bubble burst in the United States in 1893. But the fact that the family remained divided demonstrates that life in pre-World War I Russia was not as difficult as family memories suggest, Evans observed.

More than two million Europeans, Jews, and Gentiles followed the same path that Hillel traveled. From reading AVOTAYNU over the years, I picked up on these tales of the transmigration from ports such as Hull on the North Sea, to a train ride across England to Liverpool or London, then a ship to America. I assumed Hillel changed his surname to Wolinsky to have the same name as his brother Isaac. What I did not know was when Hillel changed his name. I did not know if my grandfather traveled to the United States as Henry or as Hillel. The U. S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) yielded information on the immigrant ships on which my grandmothers had traveled, but I could find nothing about Hillel. When the Hamburg indexes became available online a couple years ago, I checked them—to no avail.

Then, a casual conversation with one of my genetic/DNA cousins, Rebekah Canada, godmother of the H haplogroup for mitochondrial DNA, changed my luck. Canada mentioned that she often has helped people solve

family history questions in Iowa where she lives and where my other grandparents had resided. I had found records for my maternal grandmother, Bessie Israel, of Slobodka, Lithuania, but struck out with my maternal grandfather, Schmuel Geskin from Dvinsk. As it happens, my Geskin grandfather landed in Dubuque, Iowa. I asked Canada to take a look. I had used wildcards—using asterisks to represent various characters in hopes of uncovering misspellings, and never got anywhere. But Canada is an expert and found Samuel Geskin at Ancestry.com. Here is how she approached the problem.

### Finding Samuel Geskin

Spelling was not fixed and often variable in those days. Adding to the problem, English-speaking officials were dealing with migrants who spoke little or no English, and transcriptions of all records may be misinterpreted because of hard-to-read handwriting. Names may be mangled and/or lost for many reasons.

Canada constructed a wildcard search, substituting \* for other letters. She looked for Sch\* Ges\*n at Ancestry and came up with “Schmerl Gespin from Dwinsk.” That indeed was my grandfather, Schmuel Geskin.

After that, I confided that I considered Hillel my biggest roadblock. I had searched for Schrogin and Shragan, the names some of our relations took. I later searched for Sragon and other variations that show up in records from Lithuania. Canada then ran a wildcard search at Ancestry.com, inserting an asterisk to stand for any letters to reveal variants of names. “While soundex, metadex, and other soundlike systems allow you to find common variants of a surname, wildcards overcome the problems of original typographic errors and mistranscriptions,” she said. To learn more about the technique, go to <http://blogs.ancestry.com/ancestry/2010/01/04/ancestry-search-improved-wildcard-flexibility/>.

Canada searched for Sr\*g\*n. She found Isaac Sragan, the older brother, in the Hamburg Passenger Lists, 1850–1934, a list kept by the port of travelers and emigrants. Isaac arrived in New York by way of Glasgow on October 30, 1884. I duplicated her search and was thrilled finally to see Hillel Sragan pop up on my screen at Ancestry.com on the Hamburg Emigraton List.

I asked for help from London resident Jill Whitehead, another DNA cousin, who is an expert on British records. She checked FindMyPast at [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk).

Whitehead explained, “The point about FindMyPast (and any other database) is to uncover information bearing in mind the myriad of different spelling options at a time when spelling was free and easy and when ships’ clerks were trying to write down foreign surnames given them by those who did not speak English (in most likelihood). Thus, when I checked out FindMyPast, I tried a variety of different possible surname options swapping round vowels and consonants. I got oddities like Seagren or H Ragon, for example.” She finally hit upon “Halel Seagan” in immigration records

### An Interview with Dr. Nicholas J. Evans

The emigration expert, Dr. Nicholas J. Evans of the University of Hull, was my guide to Hull, starting on the Humber Dock on the Humber River in August 2008 for filming of a segment of the BBC show *Coast*. A few weeks later, I returned the favor at the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, which Evans attended as a speaker and I as a journalist. Evans shared his BBC-sponsored findings on Hillel Sragan. Here are some of my questions and his answers.

*Q. How long did the trip take from Kovno to Hamburg?*

Evans. It would have taken three, maybe four days maximum to journey from Kovno to Hamburg. It is not a long journey if you are traveling on railroad. But if you are traveling without official documentation and, thereby, need to smuggle yourself across the border, then that is a different matter entirely.

*Q. Were there ID papers or passports?*

Evans. Pre-1894, which is when your ancestor went through, how you got across the border varied. Every journey was different. Some were smuggled. Some had tickets. Some had passports; most did not. Unless you sailed from a Russian port, you did not need a passport to emigrate. So there’s no need for an identification paper to leave, so that’s why no paper trails have survived. Everyone is looking through their family archives saying, “Well, why didn’t they survive?” The answer is simple—most traveled without official paperwork.

*Q. How long did the trip take from Hamburg to Hull?*

Evans. It took 32 hours. Although this does not sound long, the usually rough seas on the North Sea crossing made travel difficult.

*Q. What did it cost?*

Evans. I do not have figures on the train journey across Europe, but it cost approximately 10 shillings to make the crossing from Hamburg to Hull. (Note: [Measuring-Worth.com](http://Measuring-Worth.com) estimates that would have been the equivalent of £233 or about \$400 today.) Sailing directly from Hamburg to New York would have cost 8 pounds 10 shillings. (Note: the equivalent today of £3,966.04 or \$6,500 today.)

*Q. Why go by way of Hull?*

Evans. Emigrants could save about 10 percent of the cost by going overland by rail from Hull to Liverpool, a significant discount.

*Q. What was the train like from Hull to Liverpool?*

Evans. Trains worked better then than today. Hillel’s train trip from Hull to Liverpool would have taken about four hours, traveling through the flat British agricultural land on the east coast of England, the industrial areas of Leeds and Manchester, more than 179 kilometers, or 110-plus miles. The emigrants would have seen the dark, Satanic mills, with the tall chimneys bellowing out smoke, described in literature. They would have seen the unfamiliar moorland, which the Brontes described in *Wuthering Heights*.

held at the British National Archives. Hallel of course was Hillel.

Back at Ancestry.com, Canada found the Boston passenger list with the entry for my grandfather. She wrote, starting the sentence with exclamation marks, “!!! I think this is our Henry!” He was listed as “Hillel Seagren,” having left Liverpool on the *Pavonia*, arriving in Boston on August 14, 1892. Schrogin, Sragan, Srogen, Shrogin, Sragen, Seagren, Seagan. All these names show up in official records. No wonder Hillel had been so hard to find.

I had recalled Nick Evans’ AVOTAYNU articles on the immigrants who moved to the States indirectly, using the route from east coast ports of England via train to the west coast to sail to America. Evans is a distinguished researcher on transmigration with a special affinity for the Jewish people going back to his childhood in Hull.

### **BBC Documentary**

Many Jews had settled in Hull, including Whitehead’s ancestors. I asked Evans if I could hire him to do further research for me. My winning streak continued, showing the value of persistence. Several weeks later, Evans responded:

Sincere apologies for my delay in replying to your e-mails.

This delay was caused by the BBC as they contacted me last week (the day after you had e-mailed) and are keen—subject to your approval—to film you visiting Hull in the first week of August to discover what I can find out about your ancestor arriving in Hull.

He added:

This may appear like a wind-up but if you are in agreement, can they contact you? They are seriously considering flying you to Hull where you will be shown around the place and given copies of all related documentation—with the BBC picking up the bill for research, travel, and accommodation!

The program was to focus on Hull’s role as a gateway for migration to America, Canada, South Africa, and Australia.

I had to agree to do no research myself and to not write about the experience until the show aired on September 1, 2009. I’m a professional journalist and have been on TV many times, including once being interviewed about genetic genealogy by Jonathan Samuels, Sky TV correspondent, based in London, via a satellite connection to Chicago, where I live. As it happens, Samuels and I are DNA cousins.

Although I am not crazy about doing TV, a free trip on the BBC, along with setting Evans loose to do the research, was an offer too good to refuse. My wife, Judi; son, David; and sister, Faith, came along (not on the BBC pence) to witness the taping and to follow Hillel’s path through Hull. We got to Hull from Liverpool, following Hillel’s journey in reverse.

The BBC hired a boat to take me out on the North Sea and enter Hull via the Humber River. We retraced Hillel’s arrival in Hull. It was a rough ride for the brief time we were on the water. We rocked back and forth. The director made sure we hit our marks as the cameraman and soundman, dressed in all-weather gear, recorded the scene, barely able to stand. I can only imagine how uncomfortable it must

have been to travel for a week or more, coping with seasickness and culture shock. We saw some of the same buildings Hillel would have seen when he came into port. Some of the old warehouses had been converted to loft apartments. The dock, now a marina, is a bit posh, as the Brits say. Cuckoo’s, a coffee shop overlooking the sleek new Princes Quay mall, was the site in 1892 of the ticket office for the Norddeutscher Lloyd steamship line.

We walked down cobblestone streets, as the soundman captured the clip-clop, clippity-clop Hillel would have heard en route to the Harry Lazarus Hotel. A City Heritage Plaque on the two-story structure notes that the hotel was used to feed the transmigrants. The hotel closed shortly after Hillel’s trip because of the decline in the number of emigrants traveling through the port caused by the cholera epidemic. After about 12 hours in Hull, emigrants climbed aboard horse carriages to be transported to the central train station. (I spent 12 hours with the BBC team to film a six-minute segment.)

Evans told me Hillel would have smelled oranges for the first time because the area where he landed, known as “Convent Garden of the North,” was near the landing stage for citrus fruits from the Mediterranean.

We ended the shoot at “The Tiger’s Lair,” a sports pub for the fans of the Tigers, Hull’s soccer club. Back in 1892, the site of the Lair bar was the waiting room where the emigrants came—men went to wooden benches in the room to the right of the entrance, segregated from women and children who waited to the left. As many as 500 people at a time waited there for the train—apart from the main section of Paragon Station. Draft beers were served at the tables, and TVs were hanging from the ceilings in the old waiting area. Evans, *Coast* host, Neal Oliver, and I drank a toast for the cameras.

After we finished in the bar, we followed the path of the emigrants to a huge train platform, the largest in England, separate from the regular train station. Hillel and the others boarded the train at Paragon Station for Liverpool or other ports on the west and south coast of Britain.

My grandfather, Henry/Hillel, like many of our ancestors, accomplished an amazing feat, traveling alone to America, where he fathered, grandfathered, and great-grandfathered at least 80 descendants who today live all across the United States.

You may not have a historian at your disposal, but on your own you can fill in your ancestor’s amazing journeys by looking into the newspapers and histories of the times.

### **Note**

\* FindMyPast offers passenger lists, in partnership with the British National Archives, with details of over 24 million passengers leaving Britain on long-haul voyages between 1890 and 1960. Searches are available for free. Fees are charged to review transcripts and original records.

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