

Am I a Trot?

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—It's not every day that you're told that you might be related to a famous somebody.

My special day came last Friday when out of the blue a very distant and barely known cousin showed up in Blue Grass with the idea that we Seltzers might be related to...

...to...

Leon Trotsky.

(Better Trotsky than Vlad the Impaler, I thought.)

How might our ancestral dots be connected?

My paternal grandfather, Nathan Seltzer, fled Russia at the age of 13, making his way to Pittsburgh in the first decade of the 20th Century. He was ducking conscription for 20 years in the Czar's Army, a likely death sentence.

The one time he spoke of this to me he said that he had to run for his life at the Polish border while Russian soldiers shot at him. He remembered their laughter.

He had no fond, nostalgic memories of the old country. His family was dirt poor in all senses of that phrase. He said a school teacher had broken his nose with a cane for not being studious, a trait I come by honestly. He carried the disfigurement with him for the rest of his life.

The family name, he said, was Zeltzer. Ellis Island Americanized it to Seltzer. He never said exactly where he was from, just "Russia."

Upon washing up in Pittsburgh -- knowing no one, having no money, barely literate and speaking no English -- he apprenticed himself to a cigar maker in the City's Hill District, a crowded, majority immigrant-Jewish slum that was home to 133 of the 235 cigar-rolling shops in the City at the time.

An oral historian of the Hill wrote: "These [hand-rolling sweat] shops were congested, hired children that were hidden from government inspectors, and were filled with dangerous tobacco dust." (Ailon, Shiloh, By Myself I'm a Book!, 1972.)

The deal was this: Nathan would work without pay for six months as he learned the trade and then be hired at regular wages. At the end of his indenture, he was kicked into the street.

But at least he now knew how to roll stogies, the rough-smoking, low-end cigars that were peddled to Pittsburgh workingmen for a nickel each, or less. So he started rolling his own. A few years into it, he introduced a brand that he named for his wife, The Molly Special.

By the 1920s, he had brought over his brothers and sister. He had a wife and three sons. He owned a house and a great deal of highly leveraged real estate. My father remembered the family had a chauffeur for a few years.

The Crash of 1929 wiped Nathan out, save for a small store on Fifth Avenue that sold toys and notions. I was told that he paid his debts, dollar for dollar, though it took him years to get square with the banks.

Nathan was a self-effacing, humble and gentle man when I knew him as a child. If he ever complained about life in America, I never heard it. Anything was better than Russia.

I knew nothing about his home village, his parents or their life there. I came to assume that the Zeltzers did repetitive, mindless, unskilled physical labor, because I seem to find ways to do a lot of that myself.

My cousin thinks that the Zeltzers came from the tiny village of Yanovka, in the Yelisavetgradsky District of Kherson province in southeast Ukraine, north of the Black Sea. (This is now the renamed, 60-home village of Berislavka in the Bobrinsky region of Kirovograd province.) The land was wheat-and-sheep farming on the Kansas-like steppe then, and still is.

Yanovka was named for Colonel Yanovsky, a retiree who was given his choice of 1,000 acres in the uninhabited steppe due to his good standing at the court of Czar Alexander II.

Trotsky's father, David Bronstein (or Bronshtein), settled in Yanovka, a tiny village that was 25 kilometers away from the nearest post office. David saved enough to buy 250 acres from the Colonel and then rented 400 more. He owned a grinding mill and a small machine shop. The Bronsteins started out in the Colonel's mud hut with its leaky straw roof, and eventually scrimped together enough money to build a small brick house with a tin roof.

Bronstein was a non-believing Jew in a region where Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles and Jews got along despite religious and ethnic differences. This changed in the 1880s and 1890s as a repressive, autocratic son, Alexander III, succeeded a liberal father, Alexander II, who was assassinated in 1881 by a left-wing terrorist group, Narodnaya Volya.

Alexander III immediately instituted increasingly onerous restrictions on Jews and anyone who was not Russian and an Eastern Orthodox Christian.

His son, Nicholas II, struggled to maintain absolute autocracy and repression, but defeat in war and widespread opposition resulted in his abdication in 1917. The Bolsheviks executed him and his family the next year.

Czarist autocracy in the four decades after Alexander II helped turn Trotsky into a revolutionary and made Nathan Zeltzer an immigrant to America.

Lev Davidovich Bronstein (later Leon Trotsky) was born at home in 1879, about 15 years before Nathan Zeltzer. He was the fifth of eight children, four of whom died young.

During Lev's youth, his father was not rich, but he was a prominent local landowner who employed peasants and temporary harvest workers. His father was able to make the land pay unlike the Colonel. David Bronstein said: "I don't like money, but I like it less when there is none of it. It is bad to need money and not have any." Trotsky considered his father fair in his business dealings, but a landlord and, therefore, member of the enemy class.

From his privileged position, the young Trotsky saw the economic and social inequities of the Czarist Russian landlord-peasant system. In his 1930 autobiography, My Life, he wrote: "[As a teenager] I had an intense hatred of the existing order, of injustice, of tyranny," which came from the "conditions existing during the reign of Alexander III; the high-handedness of the police; the exploitation practiced by landlords; the grafting by officials; ...the cases of injustices at school and in the street...."

David Bronstein sent his bright son, Lev, to Odessa for school at the age of nine. Had Lev's father not had the money to educate him, the anti-communist White armies, including the U.S., might have defeated the Trotsky-led Bolsheviks after WW I.

Lev Bronstein changed his name to Leon Trotsky a few years after leaving high school and serving time in jail for Marxist, anti-Czarist activities. He took the surname of his Polish warden.

By the time he was 18, Trotsky was a full-time, Marxist revolutionary. He spent much of the next two decades in 20 prisons and in exile where he wrote for communist publications and squabbled with his fellow radicals. Neither he nor Lenin was in Russia when the 1917 Revolution happened.

Trotsky's father was hounded in the years after WW I both by the Reds for being a prosperous landowner and by the Whites for being Trotsky's Dad. By the early 20s, the Soviet government had taken all of David Bronstein's land, leaving him penniless. His son got him a job running a state-owned grain mill until his death a few years later.

Trotsky was Stalin's principal opponent. Trotsky, the theoretician who never did much in the way of working-class work or served in the military, organized the Red Army that defeated the White armies. But Stalin came to control the Party, the secret police and the Army by the mid-20s. He exiled Trotsky in 1929 and then pursued him and his four children, killing two. All of Trotsky's children predeceased him, two by Stalin's bullets.

In 1940, Stalin's agent, Ramon Mercador (Mercader), murdered Trotsky in his study in a Mexico City suburb. Mercador struck Trotsky in the head with a short-handled mountaineering ice axe that he had concealed under his coat. Mercador served 20 years, then went to the Soviet Union where he was awarded the Order of Lenin in 1960.

Trotsky was smarter than Stalin, but far less shrewd and apparently less ruthless. Both believed in liquidating opponents, but the purges of rich peasants, Army officers, intellectuals, Jews, dissidents and others that Stalin orchestrated might have been beyond Trotsky who seemed to be most comfortable thinking and writing.

When the legendary sportswriter Red Smith was covering the 1937 Philadelphia Athletics in off-season Mexican baseball, he interviewed Trotsky. He described the tired, beleaguered Trotsky as exhibiting "...all the wild-eyed revolutionary fervor, all the sinister aspect, all the mastery of men, all the compelling powers of oratory, all the irresistible ardor and magnetism of an elderly and not very successful delicatessen keeper in the Bronx."

Trotsky's grandchildren and great grandchildren survive in various places. One heads a federal anti-drug agency. Another is an extreme right-wing, pro-settlement Israeli.

It's possible that the Zeltzers share a little blood with the Bronsteins from the bad old days. If enough guys married the girl next door in a tiny isolated village, pretty soon everybody became related to everyone else.

But I have doubts.

While Pittsburgh cigar makers were often left-of-center, sometimes very far left, there's no family history of Nathan Seltzer being involved in any strikes as a worker or their opposite as flip-flop capitalist. Surely a Trotsky kin would have stirred up something, given the bubbly pot in front of him.

The most radical thing Nathan did was to take off all his clothes and chase the girls when he was a resident of the local old-age home. This gives me something to look forward to. Some in the family suggest that dementia caused this behavior. I hope that's not true.

Several Yanovka women born in 1915 reported having heard a story from relatives of the young Trotsky fastening goat horns to his head and swimming under water toward his naked sisters as they bathed in a pond. The girls jumped out screaming that a “water devil” was after them. Trotsky, that card! I’ll try this on my wife next year. Maybe there *is* a connection between the Bronsteins and the Zeltzers.

Of my father’s two brothers, the oldest was stumpy and had dark hair and dark eyes. The other could pass for a tall, blond, blue-eyed Ukranian. From my own blue eyes, I infer that some uncelebrated mixing around occurred in the past. At most, maybe I’m just a really watered down Trot.

More to the point, Trotsky had a full head of hair; the best I have is a full head of hair memories. Trotsky liked pure mathematics; I feel confident in adding single digits. He was a theoretician; theory makes my head hurt.

If anything, I now look more like Lenin than Trotsky. Nobody has appeared in Blue Grass suggesting *that* genetic connection.

And when I was 18, a girlfriend said I looked like Hollywood’s Jeff Chandler. You may remember him playing Cochise in *Broken Arrow*. Brooklyn-born Chandler’s real name was Ira Grossel. Ira looked as much like Cochise as I do, which is not much.

I would not turn down having a famous ancestor. Trotsky would not have been my first choice, but you don’t get to cherry-pick the folks who produced you.

Trotsky, hmmm. That might explain a few things.

Postscript: How did the truck story end?

We bought the giant F 150 EcoBoost rather than the more giant F 250 diesel this week after the resident horsewoman took a loaded trailer for a test haul up Afton Mountain. The F 150 showed that it could pull the 7th Cavalry at 75 mph without breathing hard.

We are now debating whether to trick out the truck with a chromed rearing-stallion hood ornament of the type the British royals prefer (her choice) or a bare-bosomed goddess with blue wings that light up (mine).

The goddess is so beyond tacky that it rises to the level of being cool as a moose. This opinion is not widely shared in our two-person household.

If I win the hood-ornament debate, retaliation may take the form of a custom flame job.

I’m also thinking about installing a set of goat horns on the hood.

Now which of my psychological tar pits could have given rise to that thought?

I wonder.

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