

Web search reveals story of WWII survival

Newsday story of Arthur Meyerowitz

[via:Newsday] Seth Meyerowitz never knew his World War II veteran grandfather, a turret gunner who survived the crash of a B-24 Liberator in France in 1943 and who evaded capture by the Gestapo because of the kindness of strangers.

But prodded by plans to travel last month near the French region where his grandfather's plane went down, the Web entrepreneur decided to use the Internet to learn more about the crash and the survival of his grandfather Arthur Meyerowitz.

With a few keystrokes on a laptop in the bedroom of his Merrick home, Meyerowitz began uncovering clues to his grandfather's past that had remained hidden for decades.

And within weeks of beginning his search, Meyerowitz was standing in a French nursing home, talking to an elderly, former French Resistance fighter who 68 years ago helped spirit Arthur Meyerowitz from hiding place to hiding place, one step ahead of the Gestapo, on his way to safety in Spain.

"Before this, all I knew was that he had been shot down during the war," Meyerowitz, 27, said of his grandfather, who died in 1971, before Meyerowitz was born. "I began to wonder what had happened to him in France. It kind of snowballed from there."

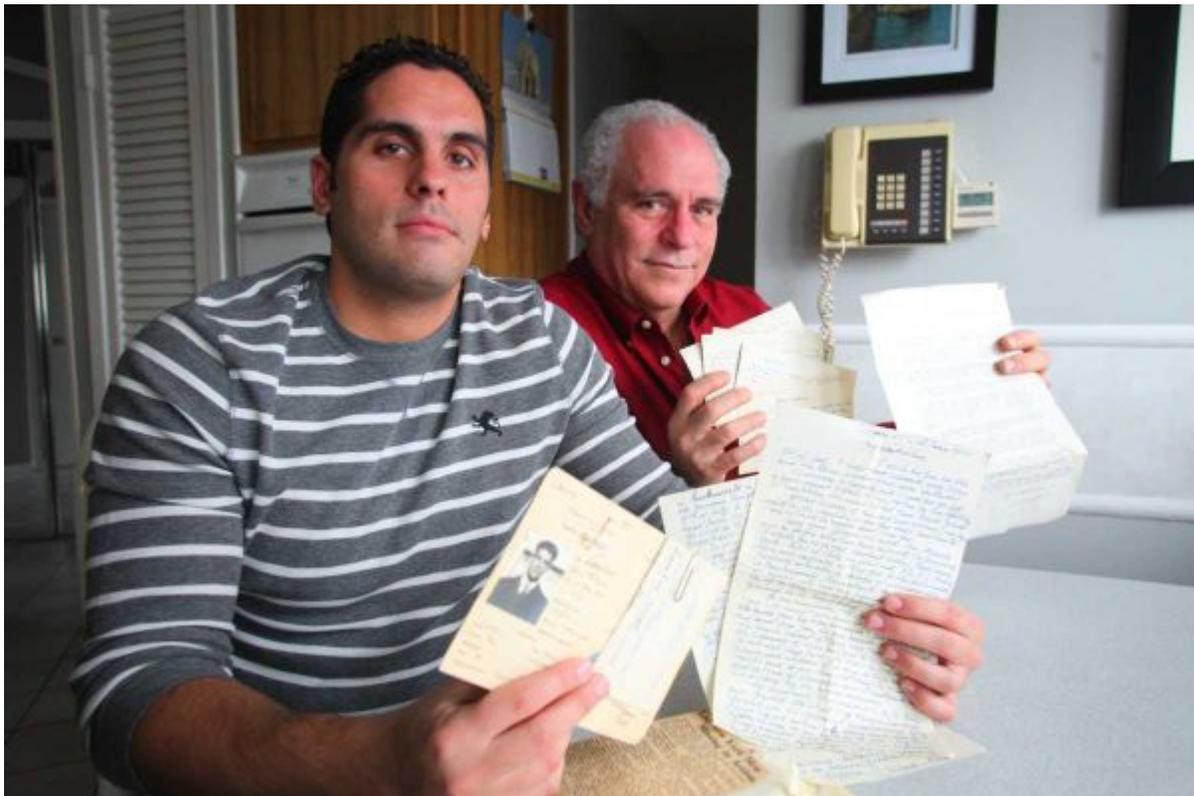


Photo credit: Howard Schnapp | Seth Meyerowitz, sits with his father Mark, used off-the-shelf Internet tools to trace the story of the grandfather he never met, a WWII pilot who was shot down over France, and who evaded capture by hiding with the French resistance. (Feb. 2, 2012)

How grandson did it

Each new discovery electrified him further. “He would be upstairs on his computer, and every so often I would hear him yell,” said Meyerowitz’s father, Mark Meyerowitz, who is Arthur’s son. “And I knew he had found another clue.”

Internet tools and Web-based archives have allowed people to embark on research projects that could hardly be imagined little more than a decade ago, said Rolf Swensen, who teaches research techniques at Queens College.

Paid services such as Ancestry.com, open sources like FamilySearch.org and government repositories, including the National Archives and the Library of Congress, allow anyone with a computer and an Internet connection to search family histories, declassified military documents, land records, and even the scanned pages of books and magazines.

As he collected whatever he could find about his grandfather, Meyerowitz was able to peruse an archive located in Washington, D.C., read a book published in France, and view the streets of a town where his grandfather had been hidden.

Before starting his research, Meyerowitz got early leads from a box of papers his grandfather had left behind, which for decades lay mostly untouched in a family closet.

Sifting through old letters and military documents, it became clear that after the war ended, his grandfather corresponded with people in France who had protected him.

Meyerowitz used names mentioned in the documents to begin Google searches. “All I had was a box of letters, mostly in French, to start my research with,” he said. “But being pretty handy with technology and the Internet, I utilized some basic tools such as Google Search, Translate and Voice; the National Archives, and my overall knowledge of how to search to really dig down.

“By the end of the first day I found a man who had written a book about his father, a leader of one of the French Resistance groups which apparently had helped my grandfather,” he said. “By the end of the third day, I had my grandfather’s entire government debriefing file from the day he was found in Gibraltar, almost six months after he was shot down.”

A 68-year connection

On Dec. 31, 1943, Staff Sgt. Arthur Meyerowitz, 25, was on his second mission with the Britain-based 715th Bomb Squadron, 448th Bomb Group, when a fire broke out in one of the plane’s engines near Queyrac, 50 miles northwest of occupied Bordeaux.

He bailed out at 18,000 feet, hid overnight, and sought help at a farmhouse. The family helped him get in touch with members of the French Resistance, who gave him civilian clothes and fake identification papers, hid his Star of David necklace and taught him to avoid revealing his outsider status by acting deaf and mute.

Resistance leaders eventually helped him flee over the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain, and from there he was able to make his way to Allied forces in Gibraltar in June 1944.

Arthur Meyerowitz's family was at a New York beach when a telegram announcing that he had been found arrived at their Bronx home. A downstairs neighbor with phone service called a merchant near the beach, who agreed to close his shop and walk the beach with a sign addressed to Meyerowitz's parents, saying their downed son was alive.

Safe, Meyerowitz returned home, married a childhood friend and started a family. He got a job driving a milk truck and moved to Bellmore in 1959.

After discovering the book on the French Resistance, Seth Meyerowitz contacted the author, who encouraged Meyerowitz to visit him in France to see for himself where his grandfather had been hidden.

Meyerowitz, who had planned a trip to Spain, persuaded his father to go with him to the French region where Arthur Meyerowitz hid.

There, in a nursing home, Mark and Seth Meyerowitz met Pierre Delude, 93, who as a 25-year-old Resistance member helped spirit Arthur Meyerowitz from safe house to safe house, and eventually over the Pyrenees.

"He looked up at me, and his eyes welled up, as did mine," said Mark Meyerowitz.

"I cried a lot," he added. "This was a guy who had hung out with my father when he was being chased by the Gestapo. My whole family would not have existed had it not been for him."

Seth Meyerowitz said being able to connect his father to the man who helped save their turret-gunner ancestor meant a lot to him.

"My father is not an emotional man," Seth Meyerowitz said. "This is one of the most meaningful things I could have done for him."

A transcript of Arthur Meyerowitz's military debriefing, as well as letters included in his personnel file, can be found by searching his name on the National Archives website at <http://media.nara.gov/nw/305270/EE-758.pdf>.

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