

Connecting with Collateral Cousins Using DNA

By Karen A. Melis

Family historians are passionate about documenting their direct ancestors. Beginning with themselves, they compile data about their siblings, their parents and their siblings, and their grandparents. Once reaching the immigrant ancestors, the key find is locating the ancestral village. For people with Eastern European ancestry, taking the direct lines back further relies heavily on Church records overseas.¹ Based on this research, one typically will know their 1st cousins as they share grandparents. They may even know the second cousins who share great-great-grandparents. But European families tended to be large and the number of 3rd to 6th cousins can grow quite quickly.

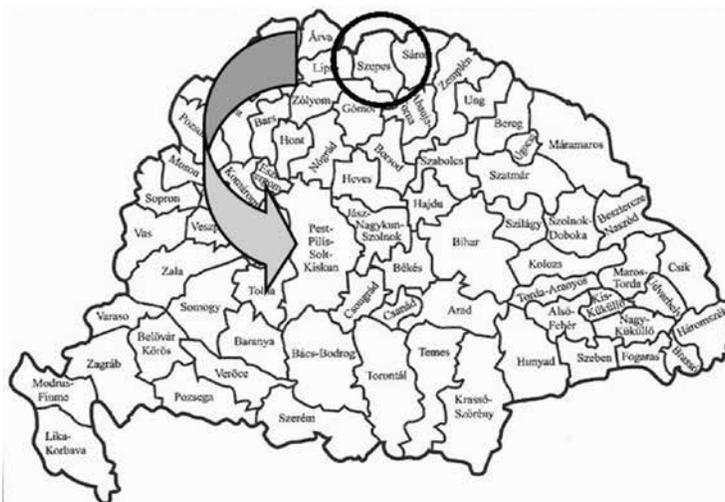
Enter DNA testing! With lower costs, more people are DNA testing. Some just wish to learn their ethnicity breakdown. For others, DNA testing is another tool to deepen their roots. The serious researcher tests with one company and transfers their raw data to as many companies as possible, casting a wide net to fish for genetic cousins.² Commercial genealogy DNA testing companies then provide cousin matches suggesting the range of possible relationships -- or possible generations to consider -- from 1st to 2nd cousins (close relatives) to 3rd and 4th cousins and beyond. Most matches will range from 4th cousins to distant cousins. In general, a suggested match at the 3rd -- 4th cousin or less is worth checking out. The task then is to figure out who these matches are and how they fit into your family tree.

Several of my family members and I have DNA tested with more than one company. The results were transferred to MyHeritage³. One day, new matches were found. Upon closer inspection, one match looked particularly interesting. Gabor K. and my mother match, sharing 123 centimorgans (cm) with the longest segment being 30 centimorgans. A match at this level can indicate a number of possible relationships, but most importantly, it was close. From Gabor's profile, I learned he was about my age, which could eliminate certain relationships to my mother. For example, he could not be my 88-year-old mother's great-uncle. Gabor's ethnicity breakdown indicated he was ~59% Eastern European.

He had no online family tree but listed one surname. When making a first contact, I always send a short request to see if people want to compare notes. I wrote, "Hi, On MyHeritage DNA matches you share ~129 cm with my mother. We have Eastern European roots (southern Poland and northern Slovakia). I note only your surname, Bryncska, which has variant spellings in our geographic region. Do you have known connections to southern Poland / northern Slovakia?"

Over the course of several messages, Gabor indicated he had just retired and was interested in learning more about his family history. His wife had recently DNA tested, so he did too! While he lives in Norway, Gabor's father was Hungarian. His mother, Magdolna, was born near Budapest, Hungary. The family history was complicated. Magdolna's maternal lines were deeply rooted in Hungary and ethnically Hungarian. The family knew little about her paternal side of the family and had no records. Magdolna's father was also born in Budapest, and the family only knew his surname. They had no clue if there was a link to the Zamagurie Region.

Our direct ancestors were from the Zamagurie Region, once part of the former Spiš (Szepes) County, Hungary, for hundreds of years. The rather large number of shared centimorgans strengthened the hypothesis that Magdolna's paternal grandparents or great-grandparents *may have* emigrated from the Zamagurie Region to Budapest. To make the connection, we needed to locate records in Hungary that might reveal the names of Magdolna's father's parents and the ancestral village. Then we could tap into the Zamagurie records to try and confirm the common ancestral couple in church records.

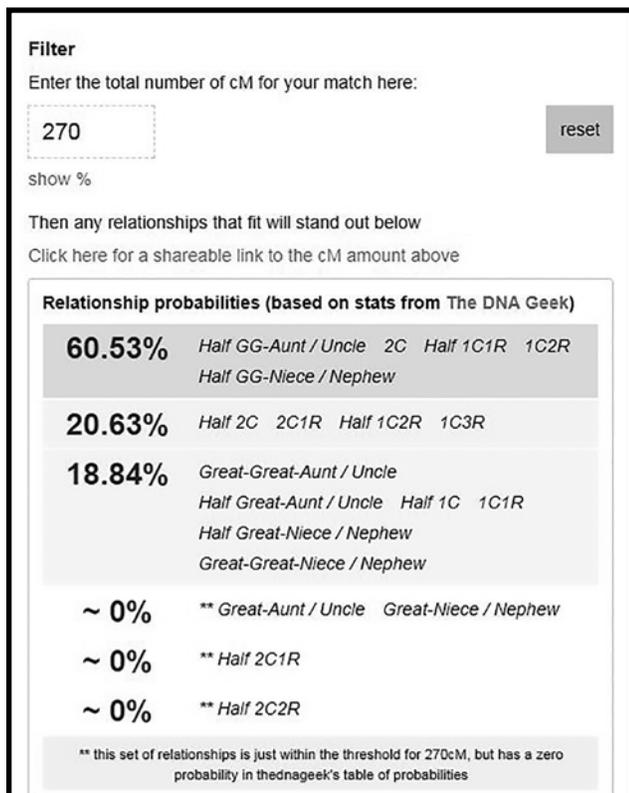


Map of the old Hungarian Empire showing the movement of the author's family member from Szepes County (Northern Hungary), now Slovakia to the region of Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun in today's Hungary. Map courtesy of Karen Melis.

Having made a possible connection to the surname and ancestral region, Gabor agreed to have his mother, Magdolna, DNA test when he visited her in Hungary. It is always best to test the oldest generation possible. We both anxiously awaited the results. My 88-year-old mother and 85-year-old Magdolna's results were of course a match! Using the Shared Centimorgan tool,⁴ we plugged in the number of shared centimorgans of 270. A chart provides the possible relationships. Note that the range of relationships can be quite broad. Another way of looking at this chart is that it might help to pin down the generation of the match.⁵ Certain relationships are simply not possible based on the close ages of my mother and Magdolna! We were getting closer!

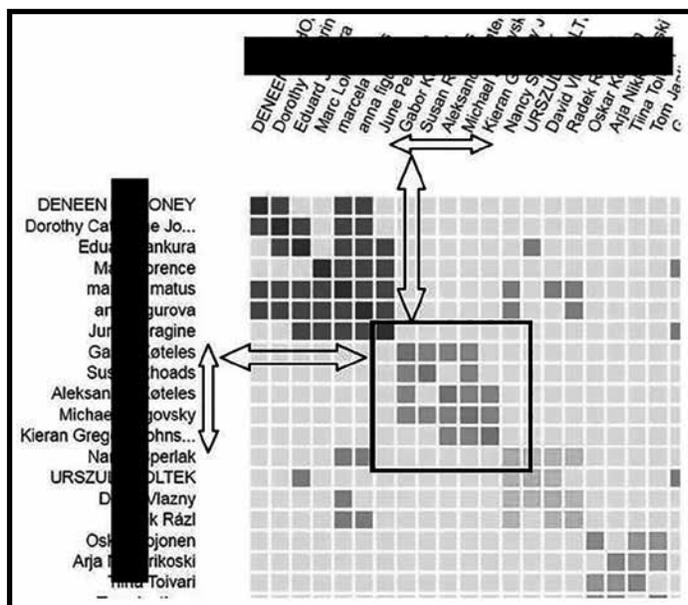
tracking the siblings or their descendants who emigrated to New Jersey, New York, and South Side, Pittsburgh. These are all **collateral cousins**: those not in the direct family line but share common grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, or earlier ancestors back in time with our direct line. The result was that I could trace all but one of my mom's grandfather's siblings, Sophia. I located her birth (1867), her marriage (1892), and the recorded birth of one child in Frydman (1895) but found no death record. Her husband was a "Brinska!" The trail had gone cold. A migration pattern to Budapest was not a common migration pattern for people from this region.

Magdolna and Gabor also transferred their results to the Zamagurie Region Geographic DNA project with FamilyTreeDNA.⁶ We now had more cousin matches! Turning to the tool bar on MyHeritage, an AutoCluster was run on my mother's results. The Auto Cluster tool is an automatic tool that organizes your DNA matches into clusters that likely descended from common ancestors. The results are presented in graphic format with only a portion show here.⁷ The grid shows names on both axes. All the names in each generated block reportedly share a common ancestor with my mother *and* with each other! So, the five people along the axes in the black highlighted square have a common ancestor. Further, I had followed up on several of the other DNA matches previously and traced their families. This yielded a list of possible common ancestral couples to Magdolna and my mother.



Shared Centi-morgan (Cm) tool for relationship probabilities between Magdolna and Karen's mother Irene.

How was it that I did not know how we were related? I had done the research for my mother's direct line as far back as church records go, jumping villages as necessary. I had already located my mom's grandfather's six siblings. Bringing these siblings forward in time, I traced their marriages and their children and their children's marriages and their children. I recorded death dates, which are so often overlooked by researchers. I even crossed the ocean



An Auto Cluster display with a list of the possible common ancestral couples to Magdolna and the author's mother Irene.

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|--|---|
| Buda- pest 1903 máj 3 | Brinska Bálint napisánus r. kat. Fridman szül. l. Bécs (a.m.) 1871. júl. 29. lak. Budapest II. Hörismarty u. 48. | néhai Brinska Gábor Jurgovsky Mária | Gurcsák Agnes r. kat. Absolajos szül. l. Bécs (a.m.) 1876. jan. 2. lak. Budapest II. Hörismarty u. 48. | Gurcsák Mátyas néhai Anikó Mária | Gurgovics Gábor Budapest II. Hungaria körút 111. Gurgovics István Budapest II. Hörismarty u. 48. |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|--|---|

Marriage record for Valentinus Brinska and Agnes Gurcsak dated May 3, 1903 in Budapest.

brothers! And Gabor now had the Brinska line back another generation. Returning to the AutoCluster results, we find that several of the matches share either the Brinska or the Jurgovsky surname.

her. Together, the documentary evidence supports the DNA findings. DNA testing just made the world a little bit smaller!



Magdolna Briska K. Courtesy of Karen Melis.



Karen Melis (L) with her mother Irene (R).

Connecting collateral cousins can help us learn more about respective branches of our family trees. We can identify our 3rd to distant cousins by two methods: traditional genealogy and DNA! In this case, a DNA match between two total strangers from across the ocean reconnected two families. Cooperative efforts led my mother to know the final destination of her grandfather's sister, Sophia. Magdolna discovered a complete branch of her family history and ancestral region unknown to

Endnotes.

1. Family Historians should check familysearch.org to see if their ancestral church records are available on-line. In August 2017, certain microfilmed records were taken off-line to be digitized while others removed for privacy reasons because they went beyond 1895. The ancestral villages involved in this article are part of the Zamagurie Region which now straddles southern Poland and northern Slovakia. The records have never

been microfilmed and are available only in the parishes themselves.

2. For instructions on how to transfer your DNA results see <www.YourDNAGuide.com/transferring> by Diahnan Southard.

3. MyHeritage.com is one of the commercial genetic genealogy test companies that accepts transfers from other companies. FamilyTreeDNA also accepts transfers.

4. The Shared Cm Tool was developed by Blaine Bettinger. Blaine collected the amount of shared centimorgans between known cousin matches from citizen scientists. He then generated a table of typical ranges of shared centimorgans for the various known relationships. The result is an invaluable tool that helps to identify possible relationships between you and an unknown match. See <www.dnapainter.com/tools/sharedcmv4>.

5. Diahnan Southard, "A Day Out with Your DNA, Legacy Family Tree Webinars" <<https://familytreewebinars.com>> October 2019.

6. <<https://www.familytreedna.com/groups/zamagurie-region-dna-project/about>>. Karen A. Melis is the volunteer group administrator for this project. All of the

project members have at least one confirmed branch of their family pedigree from the sub-set of villages that now lie on both sides of the southern Polish and northern Slovak borders.

7. The names of the matches are hidden to protect their privacy.

8. <<http://egykor.hu/budapest-keruletei-1873-ban/2592>>

9. "Hungary Civil Registration, 1895-1980." Database with images. *FamilySearch*. <<https://FamilySearch.org>>: 26 August 2019. Archiv der Stadt Budapest (Archive of the City), Hungary. Unindexed. Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kis-Kun, Budapest (V. Kerület). Birth Balint Brincsa 2 July 1907. (Szulettek 1907). Image 110 of 204.

10. "Hungary Civil Registration, 1895-1980," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6XW9-NM5?cc=1452460&wc=927M-JWG%3A40678301%2C51865101%2C1077262805> : 14 March 2018), Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kis-Kun > Budapest (VI. Kerület) > Marriages (Házassultak) 1903 (jan) > image 97 of 295; Archiv der Stadt Budapest (Archive of the City), Hungary.

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