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The People in the Papers: The Seaman Identification Card of Joseph Sofka

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22875 Soldiers' Monument, Wheeling, W. Va.
J. OSCAR.

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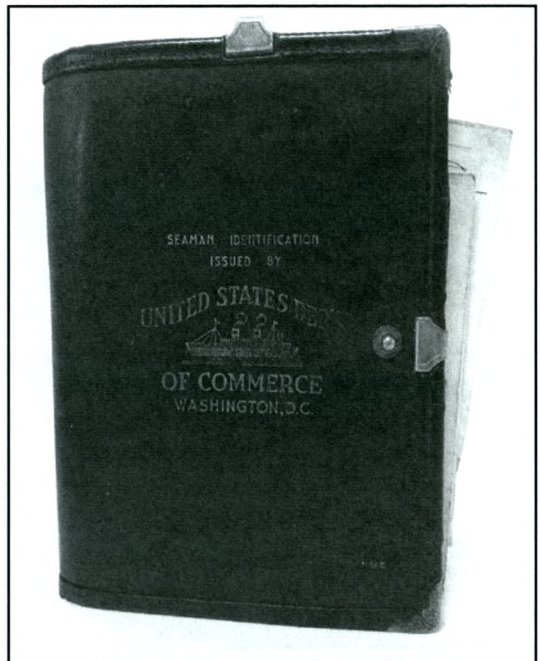
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The People in the Papers: The Seaman Identification Card of Joseph Sofka

By Elizabeth James

Imagine tucking your wallet away in a closet for seventy years, leaving everything within it. Now, imagine that same wallet being the only way that anyone could ever meet you, seventy years in the future. What would that person think of you? Are you tidy? Is your wallet stuffed with photos of your children? Is it poorly taken care of? Every object tells a story, some less complete than others.

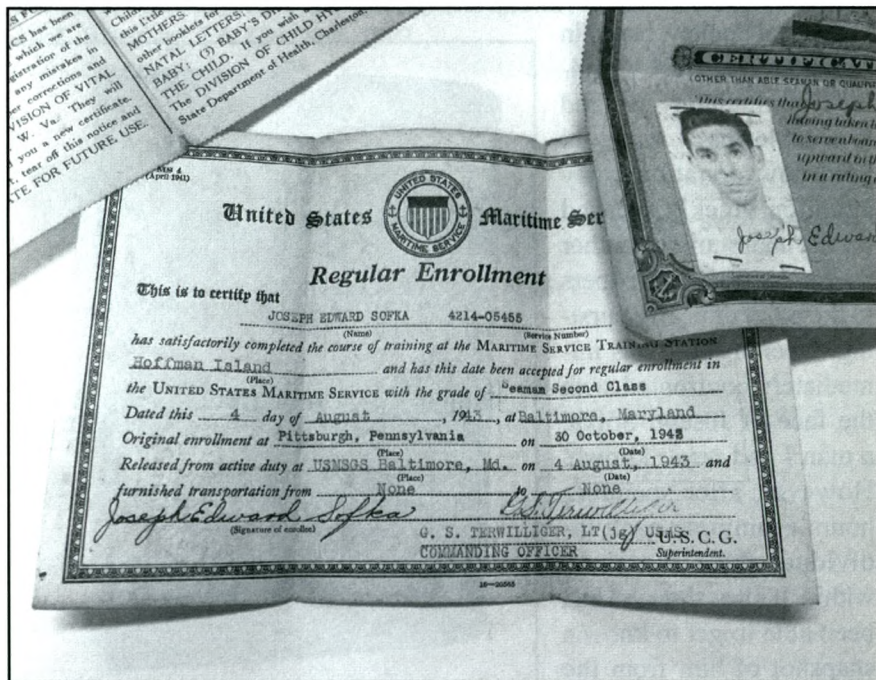
The former situation, except reversed, was the exact one that I found myself in just a month ago. Upon walking into the Marshall County Historical Society, based in Moundsville, West Virginia, I immediately walked to a table that I was told held new donations. My attention quickly focused on an unassuming leather wallet, stuffed with papers to the point of nearly bursting. Opening it, I was immediately confronted with the face of Joseph Sofka, a man I had never known. However, after spending hours examining each individual sheet contained within, I felt as though I had been able to get to know a snapshot of him from the



period 1942 to 1946.

Made of leather, the cover of the wallet proclaimed in faded gilded letters “Seaman Identification Issued By United States Dept. of Commerce, Washington D.C.,” and inside was a cache of twenty-eight papers covering Sofka’s time in World War II. Primarily holding discharge papers, pay slips, notices of classification, and medical clearances, the journey these papers took me through was one of paperwork and bureaucracy. Missing in the wallet was any kind of personal correspondence. Featuring only two unidentified personal photographs and one unsent postcard, these documents demonstrated a very clinical view of the trials of war encountered by one individual.

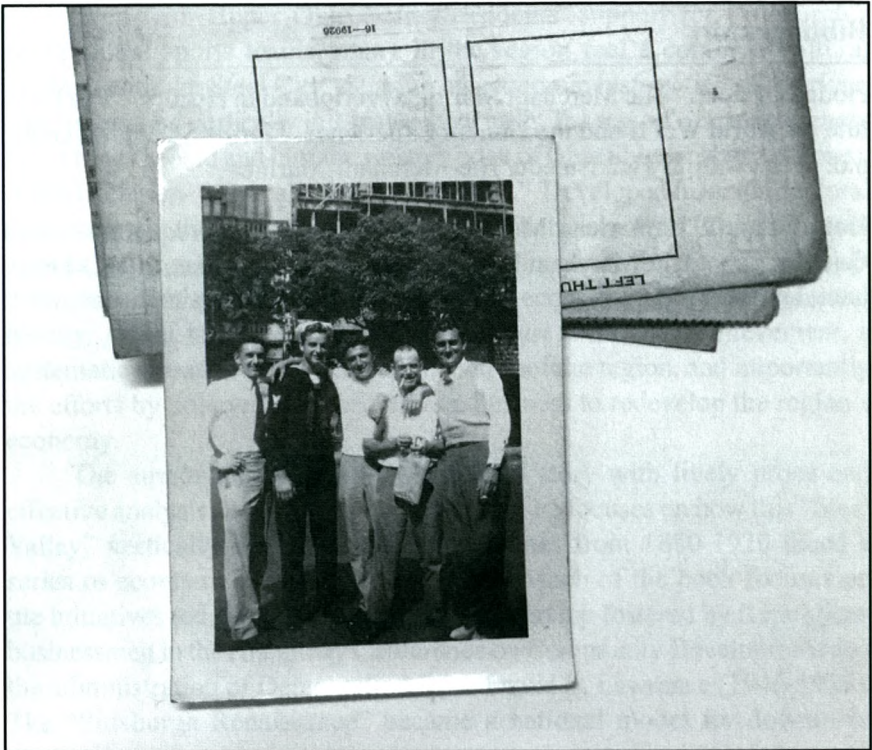
According to the enclosed documents, at the age of eighteen, Joseph Sofka enlisted as a Merchant Marine in Pittsburgh after traveling there from his hometown of Wheeling. A frequently little known branch of the armed forces, Merchant Marines were responsible for ferrying cargo from the United States to the front lines in Europe and the Pacific, and were instrumental in maintaining supply lines to sustain the troops overseas. Merchant Marine ships had to avoid submarines, ships, and mines from the enemy, making a seemingly simple task into a deadly effort. As a result, the Merchant Marines had the highest casualty rate of any section of the armed



services, with roughly 1 in 26 men dying.¹ Compared to the Marines, who suffered a 2.9% casualty rate, the Merchant Marines had a dangerous job in order to keep the front-line troops from starving or running out of munitions.²

The wallet contained pay slips featuring line entries for “Explosive Bonuses,” which represented an additional amount of money to be paid based on the risk of danger. The life-or-death situations faced by many of the Merchant Marines were trivialized to a mere entry on a pay slip. Similarly, Sofka’s emergency contact during the war was his mother, a sobering reminder of how young an innumerable number of soldiers were when they enlisted. People’s lives and experiences were compressed into a slew of official documents and papers, removing the fraught emotions behind the time and converting them into papers with dry official phrasing.

However, with a bit of additional research into the time period in which Joseph Sofka lived, I was able to obtain a more complete picture of the man within the papers, and a better understanding of the same hands that left the once-gilded lettering on the cover, now faded and worn. The chronologically last paper in the wallet was one certifying that he was now eligible for reemployment and no longer eligible to be considered for the



selective service. This simple, typescript paper gave him the right to get back to a life that had now immeasurably changed. He left Wheeling, West Virginia at the young age of 18, returning at 22 with a wealth of life experience. Thankfully, he left his wallet intact for seventy years, giving me the opportunity to meet him at a moment in time when life was uncertain, and when he was never sure if the next voyage he embarked on would be his last.

Endnotes

¹ Hodges, Frank. "The Merchant Marine: Overlooked in History." The Institute on World War II and the Human Experience. Florida State University, n.d. Web. <<http://ww2.fsu.edu/The-Merchant-Marine>>.

² Horodysky, T. "American Merchant Marine at War." Frequently Asked Questions about the Merchant Marine. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 June 2016. <<http://www.usmm.org/faq.html>>.

Bibliography

Hodges, Frank. "The Merchant Marine: Overlooked in History." The Institute on World War II and the Human Experience. Florida State University, n.d. Web. <<http://ww2.fsu.edu/The-Merchant-Marine>>.

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