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Genealogy in the Jewish Library: An Update

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An Update

BETH DWOSKIN

ABSTRACT

In 1992, *Judaica Librarianship* featured an article by Zachary Baker, entitled "What We Owe the Genealogists: Genealogy and the Judaica Reference Librarian." He followed it up in 2003 with an article in *Slavic & East European Information Resources* entitled "Resources on the Genealogy of Eastern European Jews." The present article provides an update on the resources available to Jewish genealogists today, with particular emphasis on print and online resources that are recommended for the smaller Judaica library. It lists some of the sources in Baker's article that have been updated and some that have gone online. It describes JewishGen, Routes to Roots, the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute, the Family History Library, the International Tracing Service, and PERSI, the comprehensive index to genealogical serials. It emphasizes the importance of local genealogical societies and their newsletters.

PRINT SOURCES

In 1992, the pages of *Judaica Librarianship* featured an article by Zachary Baker entitled, "What We Owe the Genealogists: Genealogy and the Judaica Reference Librarian." Seventeen years later, the genealogical world has turned decisively to the World Wide Web. In the process, Jewish genealogists have "grown up." Even the novice genealogist usually has enough web savvy to perform a Google search first, rather than showing up at a reference desk with naïve questions.

Still, genealogists are a library-loving group, and Jewish genealogists are no exception. Many are accustomed to navigating research websites and traveling to libraries that specialize in genealogy, especially Latter Day Saints collections. Yet, there is a role for the synagogue and Jewish research library in the genealogical world. The basic print-source tools in Jewish genealogy are rarely available in the average public library. A Jewish library website can easily create a module with links to the main Jewish genealogy sites. A library can thus become a research and meeting site for genealogists in a community, increasing patronage and furthering the mission of Jewish literacy.

Building a print collection in genealogy is easy because there are only a few essential tools, and they almost all come from one publisher—Avotaynu (http://www.avotaynu.com)—which is responsible for the one and only international journal in the field, the eponymous *Avotaynu* (1985–present).[1] As of September 2009, the first 24 volumes of this quarterly were available on a CD-ROM (Windows only), with index, for $99.95. (Owners of earlier versions could purchase the upgrade for $39.95.) Current issues are indexed in the *Index to Jewish Periodicals* and RAMBI. Some libraries may have issues of *Toledot* (1977–1982), the predecessor to *Avotaynu*. These are now fairly rare, and worth keeping.

Turning to monographs, Avotaynu has produced a very basic guide, *Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy,* by Gary Mokotoff and Warren Blatt (1999). This simple but thorough work will answer most of the questions of beginners and is helpful to those who are further along as well. It is so inexpensive ($11, as of September 2009) that a library should consider having several copies on hand, because some will probably disappear.

For patrons who are really determined and serious, there is a more in-depth approach: the *Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy,* edited by Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack (2003). This overview of the field includes articles about individual countries by experts in the field.

One of the works mentioned in Baker's article—*Where Once We Walked,* by Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack (originally published in 1991)—was revised in 2002 and has become the de facto print gazetteer of the *shtetlekh* of the Pale of Settlement. The first roadblock for many Jewish genealogists is identifying their ancestral shtetl, so this work is critical to have.

Another obstacle for genealogists is the language barrier, especially when dealing with tombstones. Avotaynu offers two different guides to Jewish cemeteries. Again, one is more practical and focused: *A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery,* by Rabbi Joshua Segal (2005). (Avotaynu distributes but does not publish this book.) *A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries,* by Nolan Menachemson (2006), is more in-depth. The biggest problem people have with tombstones is deciphering the dates. Although both these books explain this, it is also helpful to show people a good online date converter, such as http://www.hebcal.com.

In addition to purchasing these works, librarians should choose from Avotaynu's catalog based on their needs and budget. There are specialized works by Jewish sub-group (Sephardic, German, etc.) as well as by American locality (Chicago, Newark, etc.) There are also a number of works by the dean of Jewish onomasticists, Alexander Beider. Avotaynu also distributes relevant works by other publishers.

The Routes to Roots Foundation, directed by Miriam Weiner, published two archival guides that are in many libraries. *Jewish Roots in Poland: Pages*

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[1] Editor's note: In 2003, Avotaynu, Inc., received a special body-of-work citation by the Association of Jewish Libraries, in conjunction with AJL's annual Reference and Bibliography Awards.

from the Past and Archival Inventories (1997) and *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories* (1998) are now out of print. Critical information from both guides (recently updated), including descriptions of the archival histories of the countries, written by the archivists themselves, is online at the foundation website: http://www.rtrfoundation.org/index.html. It is important for patrons to understand that the databases on this site are inventories of which archives are available, where they are, and how to access them. The actual contents of the archives are not digitized. Finding the correct Eastern European archive is a very small first step in the process of finding genealogical information.

Aside from the publications from Routes to Roots and Avotaynu, there are three other books that libraries may already own. *Discovering Your Jewish Ancestors,* by Barbara Krasner-Khait was published in 2001 and is now out of print. *Finding Our Fathers,* by Dan Rottenberg (1977), and *From Generation to Generation,* by Arthur Kurzweil (1980), are the two books that began the Jewish genealogy revolution, and both were cited in Baker's article. Each of these books documents the author's personal approach to his genealogical search, and the information they contain is readily available elsewhere. They are not so much guidebooks as inspirations. Both books have been updated—Rottenberg's in 1998 and Kurzweil's in 2004—and both are still available. They are classics in their field, and even seasoned genealogists find value in them.

In addition to the 1992 article by Baker in *Judaica Librarianship,* there is also his article in *Slavic & East European Information Resources,* "Resources on the Genealogy of Eastern European Jews." That article, which is oriented to Slavic studies librarians, is a comprehensive treatment of the subject as of 2003.

ONLINE RESOURCES

The real treasures for Jewish genealogists await them on the Internet. Most librarians know about the Center for Jewish History (CJH), in New York City, but patrons may not. The CJH is the umbrella organization for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Sephardi Federation, the Leo Baeck Institute, and the Yeshiva University Museum. Each of these organizations has its own website, but the CJH site (http://www.cjh.org) consolidates information about all of them in one place. More importantly for genealogists, the CJH partner organizations established the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute in 2000. This is probably the foremost "bricks and mortar" site for Jewish genealogy in America. For those who cannot travel to New York, many of the Institute's resources are available at its website: http://www.cjh.org/collections/genealogy/index.php. These include searchable databases of records that the partner organizations hold; an online bibliography of the Institute's reference collection; and "fact sheets." These fact sheets are basically subject guides or pathfinders for specific aspects of genealogy, such as country guides, guides to types of records, guides to the partner organization holdings, and guides to getting started.

Some people begin their approach to genealogy with the question of whether they lost family in the Holocaust. Many will turn to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). The Museum's FAQ page (http://www.ushmm.org/remembrance/registry/faq/) walks users through most of the resources mentioned in this article. In addition, the museum now has a relationship with the International Tracing Service (ITS: http://www.its-arolsen.org/en/homepage/index.html), the International Red Cross archive in Bad Arolsen, Germany, that has digitized records on millions of victims. Again, it is important for users to understand that they cannot get online access to this material. The extreme logistical complexity of the material, along with privacy considerations, makes it necessary for research to be done "by hand," through written request. Both USHMM and ITS have information on their websites about how to make requests.

The foremost website for Jewish genealogy is JewishGen (http://www.jewishgen.org), a tax-exempt, non-profit affiliate of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, in New York City. As its website notes:

> JewishGen®, Inc. is the primary internet source connecting researchers of Jewish genealogy worldwide. Its most popular components are the JewishGen Discussion Group, the JewishGen Family Finder (a database of 400,000 surnames and towns), the comprehensive directory of InfoFiles, ShtetLinks for over 200 communities, Yizkor Book translations, and databases such as the JewishGen Communities Database and the All Country Databases. JewishGen's Family Tree of the Jewish People contains data on nearly four million people. JewishGen also serves as host to independent organizations such as Jewish Records Indexing–Poland. Created to assist those researching their Jewish ancestry and based on the concept of free sharing of information, JewishGen Inc. is staffed primarily by volunteers.

JewishGen amplifies all the advantages of the print sources. The ShtetlSeeker, an online gazetteer on JewishGen, allows searching by the Daitch—Mokotoff Soundex system. (Soundex is a name-search method used for indexing the U.S. census and other genealogical databases.) Its purpose is to account for spelling variations in names. The Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex improves on the standard one because it is specifically designed for Jewish names. The JewishGen Family Finder was cited as a quarterly periodical in Baker's article. It is now entirely on the JewishGen site, searchable by Soundex, with data showing what other researchers are interested in the same name as the patron, and how to make contact.

JewishGen provides links to several other databases. Three are of particular note here. One is the Ellis Island Foundation database (http://www.ellis-island.org/). Immigration research at Ellis Island is run by a private organization, the Ellis Island Foundation. Immigration records were indexed some time ago, with mixed success, mostly due to the vast size of the database and again, the problems with name spellings and changes. The foundation's finances have not kept pace with search engine improvements, but one individual, Stephen Morse,

has devised numerous search strategies that work specifically with the Ellis Island data. JewishGen links right to Morse's "One-Step" forms, rather than to the Ellis Island site: http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/EIDB/.

Second is the JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry: http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery/. This is an ongoing, all-volunteer project, and new cemeteries are being added all the time. Third is the Yizkor Book Project: http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/. This database was discussed by Michlean J. Amir and Rosemary Horowitz in their comprehensive article on the subject of yizkor books (2008).

JewishGen links to almost every relevant site on the Internet. It has links to "SIGs"—special interest groups for particular geographic areas. It has an FAQ section similar to the approach of the monograph, *Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy.* It has date calculators and converters. To a great extent, it has taken over for libraries in serving the needs of genealogists. It is so all-inclusive that it's difficult to describe it comprehensively. It covers every facet of Jewish genealogy. For example, users who have Sephardic ancestry can click on the link for the Sephardic Special Interest Group (SIG) and be taken to a list of genealogical sites and one of general Sephardic sites, as well as specific country and family sites. All the linked Sephardic genealogy sites found on the SIG page are useful, but none are as professional and thorough as the one hosted on JewishGen. Perhaps the only important site that is not linked directly is the genealogy page of the American Sephardi Federation: http://www.americansephardifederation.org/sub/library/genealogy.asp. This site has genealogical records from Rangoon and Calcutta, and fabulous photos of gravestones from the Seattle Sephardic Brotherhood Cemetery.

There are many books about Sephardic history, but only one deals specifically with genealogy—*Sephardic Genealogy: Discovering Your Sephardic Ancestors and Their World,* by Jeffrey S. Malka (2002). The second edition of this work was published by Avotaynu in 2009. Malka is almost solely responsible for the Sephardic SIG: http://www.jewishgen.org/Sephardic/. Like many of the others, this SIG is a labor of love for one person.

JewishGen does not have a separate SIG for Mizrachi Jews. Their genealogical needs are addressed by the Sephardic SIG. For a justification of this inclusion see the article, "The Term 'Sephardic Jew'," by Sarina Roffé (http://www.jewishgen.org/Sephardic/sephardic_roffe.HTM). The Sephardic SIG site has "KahalLinks" to relevant communities, including a link for Iraq and Syria, but there is no link for Iran or Yemen.

There is no question that JewishGen favors Ashkenazic researchers, with its ShtetlLinks, translations of Hebrew and Yiddish yizkor books, and focus on the Holocaust. This may be so because the majority (though by no means all) of the users are American and Canadian, or because the Sephardic/Mizrachi story has not yet been told. The more that Sephardic genealogists post their research and build databases, the less that will rest on the shoulders of Jeffrey Malka.

JewishGen links to Jewish records in the Family History Library catalog (FHL, the Latter Day Saints collection): http://www.familysearch.org/eng/default.asp. A click on the "Research Helps" tab on this page leads to an alphabetical index under "Articles," and a click on the letter "J" leads to two PDF

files, which explain everything that a user needs in order to access Jewish records in the FHL. The FHL holds microfilms of many of the records listed in the archives covered by the Routes to Roots material. This is the archival material that until recently has been so elusive for genealogists. Now that the Soviet era is over it is becoming more accessible, but it is still not digitized. The user must request that the films be sent to a local FHL and then go to the Library to use them.[2]

THE LIBRARIAN'S ROLE

Nowadays, the genealogist is more likely to approach the librarian seeking offline records. This is problematic. Synagogue and federation records are erratic, unindexed, and private. Legally, an institution can no longer release them casually. This is where the local Jewish genealogical society comes in. JewishGen can help here, too. Librarians wondering if there is a society in their vicinity can go to the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies' website for a list of them: http://www.iajgs.org/members/members.html. (See the Appendix for a partial list of Jewish genealogical societies in the U.S. and Canada.) The societies' members are the best guides to finding unindexed local records, if any exist. The websites of these groups are an excellent source of information about access to local records. In several cases, local record indexes are online as a result of heroic effort on the part of volunteers, most of whom start their projects with no formal training.

JewishGen databases are currently hosted on the servers of ancestry.com, and are aggregated as Ancestry's Jewish Family History Collection. According to the site:

> These Jewish Family History Collections will remain free as long as they exist on ancestry.com. These record collections are provided free of charge on ancestry.com. Please note that some individual records, such as those attached to members' family trees, may sometimes appear in other areas of the site, including paid areas.

Ancestry holds the electronic rights to numerous valuable genealogical databases, especially those of American interest, and provides a gateway to many that offer free access. They have perfected the technique of allowing a free search, but then requiring a membership to view the resulting document. Private membership is expensive, but use of the databases is free at libraries that subscribe. JewishGen allows free basic searches, but has begun to charge $100 annually for

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[2]For example, using the FHL materials, I retrieved a list of microfilm of the metrical books of the rabbinate of Mogilev, the provincial home of my paternal ancestors, for the years 1837–1894. My next steps were to go to the local LDS library, request that the films be sent there from a central site, and then return to view them.

the privilege of advanced searches in some databases—quite a bargain compared to ancestry.com. Also available free in libraries (but not for private subscription) is heritagequest.com. Both ancestry.com and heritagequest are available to home users who have accounts with libraries that have paid for that privilege.

Heritagequest, like ancestry.com, offers access to the U.S. census, but its other two modules are books and serials. The books module has a small amount of Judaic material, but the serials module is the database of PERSI, the Periodical Source Index. This database is maintained by the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana. It is a comprehensive index to all genealogical serials, including Jewish ones. In addition to *Avotaynu* and *Toledot,* the invaluable newsletters mentioned above are included. The Allen County librarians have been zealous in searching out the many genealogical societies nationally and internationally, and just reading their titles is a delight, e.g., *Mishpochology, Somos Primos, Taproot, Mass-pocha, Zichronnote, Scattered Seeds, Shem Tov.* These newsletters often contain the diligent work of local genealogists on material that is too specialized to make it into *Avotaynu.* Less scholarly in style than *Avotaynu,* more timely and local in their coverage, they represent genealogy in the trenches. Outside of their localities, they are not collected much, except by libraries such as Allen County Public, which specialize in genealogy, so any Judaica library that collects them regionally will be adding content and value, as well as forging a rewarding local connection. Finally, these local organizations usually have websites, which librarians can bookmark for easy access to the local experts, and some are beginning to mount their newsletters on their web pages.

CONCLUSION

It is thus relatively easy for a Jewish library to begin or update a collection of print materials in genealogy. Librarians can bookmark and familiarize themselves with JewishGen, Routes to Roots, and the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute, the Family History Library, and some of the Holocaust resources. They can use their relationships with local public libraries to facilitate the use of genealogical databases. They can also collect local genealogical newsletters as a means of enhancing their collections and making connections with the genealogical community.

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WEBSITES

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Avotaynu: http://www.avotaynu.com/ (accessed April 12, 2009).

Center for Jewish History: http://www.cjh.org/index.php (accessed April 12, 2009).

Family Search (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints): http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp (accessed April 12, 2009).

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International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies: http://www.iajgs.org/index.html (accessed April 12, 2009).

International Tracing Service: http://www.its-arolsen.org/en/homepage/index.html (accessed April 12, 2009).

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: http://www.ushmm.org/ (accessed April 12, 2009).

APPENDIX

Websites for Jewish genealogical societies in the United States and Canada[3]

UNITED STATES

California

Jewish Genealogical Society of Sacramento
www.jgss.org

Jewish Genealogical Society of the Conejo Valley and Ventura County (JGSCV)
www.jgscv.org

Jewish Genealogical Society, Los Angeles
www.jgsla.org

San Diego Jewish Genealogical Society
www.sdjgs.org

San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society
www.jewishgen.org/sfbajgs

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[3] A comprehensive list of Jewish genealogical societies is found on the website of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS): http://www.iajgs.org/members/members.html.

Colorado

Jewish Genealogical Society of Colorado
www.jewishgen.org/jgs-colorado

Connecticut

Jewish Genealogical Society of Connecticut
http://www.jgsct-jewish-genealogy.org/JGSCT/Home.html

District of Columbia

Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington
www.jewishgen.org/jgsgw

Florida

Jewish Genealogical Society of Broward County (Ft. Lauderdale)
www.jgsbc.org

Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Miami
www.jgs-miami.org

Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Orlando
http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/%7Efljgscf/

Jewish Genealogical Society of Palm Beach County
www.jgspalmbeachcounty.org

Jewish Genealogical Society of Southwest Florida
www.jgsswf.org

Jewish Genealogical Society of Tallahassee
www.rootsweb.com/~fljgst

Jewish Genealogical Society of Tampa Bay
www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~fljgstb/

Georgia

Jewish Genealogical Society of Georgia
www.jgsg.org

Illinois

Illiana Jewish Genealogical Society
ijgs.home.comcast.net

Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois
www.jewishgen.org/jgsi

Louisiana

Jewish Genealogical Society of New Orleans
www.jewishgen.org/jgsno

Massachusetts

Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston
www.jgsgb.org

Western Massachusetts Jewish Genealogical Society
www.wmjgs.org

Michigan

Jewish Genealogical Society of Michigan
www.jgsmi.org

Missouri

Jewish Special Interest Group (J-SIG) of the St. Louis Genealogical Society (StLGS)
www.stlgs.org

New Jersey

Jewish Genealogical Society of North Jersey
mysite.verizon.net/vze2gnpn

Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey
http://www.jewishgen.org/jhscj/index.html

Nevada

Jewish Genealogy Society Southern Nevada
www.jgssn.org

New York

Jewish Genealogical Society of Buffalo
www.jewishgen.org/jgs/jgs-buffalo

Jewish Genealogical Society
www.jgsny.org

Jewish Genealogy Society of Long Island
www.jgsli.org

Ohio

Jewish Genealogical Group, Columbus Jewish Historical Society
www.columbusjewishhistoricalsociety.org

Jewish Genealogy Society of Cleveland
www.clevelandjgs.org

Oklahoma

Jewish Genealogical Society of Tulsa
jewishmuseum.net/jgs/jgs.html

Oregon

Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon
www.rootsweb.com/~orjgs

JGS of Willamette Valley Oregon
www.nwfam.com/jgswvo.html

Pennsylvania

Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Philadelphia
www.jewishgen.org/jgsp

Jewish Genealogical Society of Pittsburgh
www.jewishgen.org/jgs-pittsburgh

Texas

Dallas Jewish Historical Society, Jewish Genealogy Interest Group
www.djhs.org

Greater Houston Jewish Genealogical Society
www.texsys.com/ghjgs

Jewish Genealogical Society of San Antonio
www.jewishgen.org/JGS-sanantonio

Utah

Utah Jewish Genealogical Society
www.ujgs.org

Washington

Jewish Genealogical Society of Washington State
www.JGSWS.org

CANADA

Genealogical Institute of the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada
www.jhcwc.org

Jewish Genealogical Institute of British Columbia
www.geocities.com/Heartland/Hills/4441

Jewish Genealogical Society-Hamilton & Area
www.jgsh.org

Jewish Genealogical Society of Canada (Toronto)
www.jgstoronto.ca

Jewish Genealogical Society of Montreal
www.jgs-montreal.org

Jewish Genealogical Society of Ottawa
www.jgso.org

Jewish Genealogical Society of Southern Alberta
www.jewishgen.org/jgssa

Beth Dwoskin is a cataloger of Research Collections at ProQuest. She did a substantial amount of the cataloging that became the metadata that was applied to the digitized books in Heritage-quest. She is a member of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Michigan.