

What We Owe the Genealogists: Genealogy and the Judaica Reference Librarian*

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Profile of the Genealogical Patron

In the early 1980s there was a humorous column in *American Libraries* that dealt with the question of how much libraries ought to charge their patrons for services rendered. Fee structures for various types of reference service were devised. The proposed rates for genealogical consultations were: \$5 for the first five minutes, \$50 for the next five minutes, and \$500 for the next five minutes. . . . That morsel of library satire had its basis in the stereotypical genealogist as the most demanding type of library patron.

The stereotype of the compulsively tedious and self-absorbed genealogical researcher is one that, unfortunately, is quite often borne out in fact. Genealogists frequently have inflated expectations of how much and what sort of information libraries are able to deliver. The genealogical reference consultation is one in which the roles of library user and information provider seem to reverse themselves, as the genealogist spews forth masses of data in an effort to establish crucial missing links on the family tree. Librarians will probably never be able to escape from this type of patron, as the ranks of novice genealogists who turn to us for the answers replenish themselves constantly, like self-replicating strands of DNA.

The explosive growth of interest among American Jews in their family histories came two to three generations after most of their ancestors had left the Old Country,

at a time of widespread ethnic self-rediscovery in America. By now it may be a cliché, but it bears repeating that this increased interest in Jewish genealogy also followed by a matter of months the televising of Alex Haley's "Roots," which dramatized that author's successful quest for his West African ancestors.

Individuals come to genealogical research for a variety of reasons and with varying expectations. For some, it is a search for vicarious fulfillment through the achievements of illustrious presumed ancestors – what might also be labeled the *yihus* approach; for others, it is an attempt to gain a more secure foothold in the present, by establishing connections to distant living relatives along collateral lines of a family tree; for still others, genealogical research is a method of placing one's own family into the broader context of modern Jewish history – a history punctuated by social, cultural, and geographical dislocation, by mass murder,* and by the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel; for most, it is a combination of some or all of these factors.

Sources for Genealogists

Precisely because of the migrations and political upheavals of the past 150 years, most Jews beginning their genealogical quests are able to trace their ancestry back only to their grandparents' or great-grandparents' generations. In order to trace further back, fill in

blank spots, or learn more about their families' places of origin, genealogists need to avail themselves of birth, marriage, and death registers, ship passenger lists, naturalization records, tombstone inscriptions, town histories, published genealogies, and other published and unpublished sources in the Americas, Europe, and Israel. The painstaking detective work involved in such research is what brings genealogists over the thresholds of our libraries.

In contrast with the situation prevailing a dozen or so years ago – when search strategies were formulated according to an elaborate and informal "oral tradition" devised by genealogists, librarians, and archivists – nowadays an array of helpful published sources exists, codifying these search strategies and suggesting other innovative approaches. In addition to such publications as guidebooks and bibliographies, over the past 15 years there has been a proliferation of genealogical societies, conferences, newsletters, bibliographies, and computerized family-finders.

What follows is an overview of key events and publications that may be regarded as barometers of the maturation of the Jewish genealogical enterprise. Emphasis is placed on publications that have been produced by participants in American Jewish genealogical circles – particularly those publications that were intended to have a well-defined reference value for their users. What this presentation should reveal is the extent to which American Jewish genealogical publications reflect the grass-roots nature of their inspiration and support, as well as the contributions in this domain of a relatively small number of individuals, whose names constantly recur as one peruses the Jewish genealogical literature. Through their publications these Jewish genealogists have, in turn, helped librarians to cope with the mass of genealogical researchers who visit our institutions.

*Based on presentations made at the First International Conference of Judaica and Israeli Librarians, in Jerusalem (July 1990), and the 26th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, in Miami Beach (June 1991).

*One particularly interesting example of this is the London, Ontario, Yizkor Book Project, for which the late Dr. Daniel Lowe enlisted the efforts of dozens of Jewish residents of that medium-sized Canadian city to document the members of their extended families who perished at the hands of the Nazis during World War II.

(Full citations to these publications are found in the accompanying bibliography, by Rabbi Malcolm Stern.)

Early Jewish Genealogical Publications

While genealogy can be traced back in Jewish tradition to the Book of Genesis, with its extensive lists of "begats," and while rabbinical pedigree has been a constant preoccupation among match-makers and traditional Jews alike, in modern times genealogy has been utilized by academics as one of the "auxiliary sciences" of history, alongside such subdisciplines as numismatics and paleography. Thus, to take one notable example in Jewish historiography, we find the academically trained Polish Jewish historian Majer Balaban making copious use of genealogical data in his two-volume study of the Jews in Krakow, *Dzieje Żydów w Krakowie i na Kazimierzu (1304-1868)*, in which numerous tables representing the lineages of prominent Jewish families are reproduced within the text.

Echoes of this rather elitist approach may be found in the journal *Jüdische Familienforschung* (Berlin, 1923-38), whose contributors tended to provide documentation only for the most prominent of Jewish families, primarily in Western Europe. The publication of *Jüdische Familienforschung* coincided with, and was eclipsed by, the horrendous abuses of genealogical data by members of the German bureaucracy: By combing archival repositories in order to identify individuals of full or partial Jewish ancestry, the Germans acted to carry out the murderous imperatives of National Socialist ideology, to the ultimate physical peril of the persons whom they were researching.

Perhaps the bitter aftertaste, not to mention the profound shock, of World War II may be cited at least in partial explanation for the fact that it took until the late 1970s for Jews in the United States and elsewhere to turn to genealogy as a popular pastime. Malcolm Stern, a self-effacing Reform rabbi known to most graduates of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (New York) as their seminary's former placement officer, is the undisputed dean of American Jewish genealogy. His thick, folio-sized genealogies, *Americans of Jewish Descent* (1960) and its updated

sequel, *First American Jewish Families* (1978; revised edition, 1990), attempt to document the lineages of all Jewish families who settled in the United States up to 1840. In recognition of his professional contributions, Rabbi Stern was chosen to serve as president of the American Society of Genealogists – the first Jew ever elected to that post.

While Rabbi Stern's published works can perhaps be described as appealing to a rather limited segment of the genealogical public (a segment, moreover, that is unlikely to have extensive connections with the Eastern European Jewish heartland from which the vast majority of today's American Jews trace their descent), Dr. Neil Rosenstein's achievements in the field of rabbinic genealogy are of somewhat more general interest. His book *The Unbroken Chain* (1976; 2nd edition, 1990) documents the extensive branches of the Katzenellenbogen family, with its manifold links to Hasidic dynasties – as well as to the family of Karl Marx (!).

Guidebooks and Journals

In 1977, one year after Dr. Rosenstein's book appeared, Dan Rottenberg, a Philadelphia journalist, published the first general-purpose Jewish genealogical guidebook, *Finding Our Fathers* (a title that, one suspects, he would not have chosen to use today). For all its imperfections – and there are many – the publication of Rottenberg's book may be cited as the event that channeled the popular interest among American Jews in their family histories. A decade or more after its initial release, an unrevised, outdated, paperback edition of *Finding Our Fathers* was still in print, testifying to its utility and to an inexhaustible public demand for information on the subject.

Around the time that Rottenberg's book came out, the Jewish Genealogical Society (JGS) was founded in New York, and another publishing event of signal importance also occurred: *Toledot: The Journal of Jewish Genealogy* began publication in the summer of 1977. *Toledot's* two editors were Arthur Kurzweil, a former librarian who is now Vice President of the Jason Aronson publishing house, and Steven W. Siegel, an archivist who is now Director of the Buttenwieser Library of the 92nd Street YM and YWHA (New

York). Because of the editors' backgrounds in the information professions, it is not surprising that the journal they edited was meticulously put together and that it always included articles of solid reference value.

Alongside anecdotal accounts of family research, issues of *Toledot* included detailed descriptions of the genealogical resources of such research repositories as the Leo Baeck Institute; lists of vital records for German, Hungarian, and Polish Jews held by the Mormons' Genealogical Society of Utah; and an article on Jewish genetic diseases. *Toledot*, the first Jewish genealogical journal to be published since the demise of *Jüdische Familienforschung* in 1938, enjoyed a brief but extremely fruitful run of five years, and back issues are treasured by genealogists and librarians alike.

As demand for genealogical information grew, new Jewish genealogical societies were formed in Washington, DC, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and other cities, and two more Jewish genealogical guidebooks were published: *My Jewish Roots*, by David Kranzler (1979), and *From Generation to Generation*, by Arthur Kurzweil (1980; 1982). The latter work, which combines the author's personal account of his own genealogical odyssey with helpful and systematic chapters on how to obtain various types of information, has remained in print since it was first published in 1980. Now, as is the case with Rottenberg's guidebook, *From Generation to Generation* is a bit dated, but rather than simply revise it, Kurzweil has chosen to join forces with Miriam Weiner, a well-known consultant, to produce the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy*. The first of three projected volumes appeared in early 1991.

In the summer of 1981 the first National Summer Seminar on Jewish Genealogy convened in New York under the aegis of the New York JGS. The summer seminar has become an annual event, taking place each year in a different city (usually with the local JGS serving as sponsor). Because of New York's focal role as the point of arrival for most Jewish immigrants to the United States, and as the place of residence, at any one time, of a plurality of American Jews, the Summer Seminar has been held there twice (and is scheduled to be held there for a third time, in 1992). The second

time was in 1985, on which occasion a 150-page, loose-leaf guide to 50 public and Jewish research facilities, entitled *Resources for Jewish Genealogy in the New York Area*, was prepared for the benefit of those attending the Seminar.

The utility of such a resource guide was widely recognized, and thanks to its extensive coverage of public records offices and The New York Public Library, its potential audience far surpassed the relatively circumscribed pool of Jewish genealogists. As Kenn Stryker-Rodda, the past president of the American Society of Genealogists, noted during a tribute to Rabbi Malcolm Stern (delivered in 1987, at the tenth anniversary banquet of the JGS), nothing quite like that resource guide had ever been compiled. In 1989, it was succeeded by an updated version, *Genealogical Resources in the New York Metropolitan Area*, whose editor, Estelle M. Guzik, expanded its coverage to include 104 research facilities – including 52 government agencies, 32 libraries, and 20 archives – in over 400 pages of printed text.

When *Toledot* ceased publication with vol. 4, no. 3 (1982), the lack of a comprehensive genealogical journal was keenly felt. Several local Jewish genealogical societies (including those in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Los Angeles) continued to publish newsletters, some of them containing articles of interest far beyond their local regions, but the need for a more broadly based Jewish genealogical forum was clear.

For a time, there were hopes that *Toledot* would be resuscitated, but when it became evident that such was not to be, Dr. Sallyann Amdur Sack, a psychiatrist from Washington, DC, and Gary Mokotoff, a computer software specialist from Teaneck, NJ, combined forces to publish the journal *Avotaynu*, the first issue of which came out in 1985. *Avotaynu* bears the subtitle, "The International Review of Jewish Genealogy," and the international scope of its coverage is reflected by the fact that it prints correspondents' reports from across the U.S., Canada, Western Europe, South Africa, South America, Australia, New Zealand, and Israel. Each issue includes digests of American Jewish genealogical newsletters, along with informative, in-depth articles on a wide range of topics.

Collections Uncovered by Genealogists

Sallyann Sack has edited two other important genealogical publications: *A Guide to Genealogical Research in Israel* (1987) and (with Suzan Fishl Wynne) *The Russian Consular Records Index and Catalog* (1987). These two books underscore a number of salient points regarding genealogy and its ramifications for Judaica research repositories. First of all, it is interesting to note that the first book-length guide to genealogical resources in Israel was produced by an American. This may be a reflection of the relative popularity of genealogy as a hobby among American Jews – a pastime that Israelis may regard as an expendable luxury. Secondly, Dr. Sack's role in these and other genealogical publications is indicative of the contributions that a few key individuals have made to Jewish genealogical literature. And thirdly, these two publications bring into clear focus the role of genealogists in identifying and making accessible little-known library and archival collections. As two examples of materials that have been discovered by genealogists, we may cite Eastern European Jewish community memorial books (*yisker-bikher*) and the Russian consular records.

The memorial book literature arose in the decades after World War II, as *landsmanshaft* societies in Israel and the Diaspora sought ways to commemorate the Jewish communities of their hometowns, after their extirpation by the Nazis. The several hundred memorial books that have appeared to date were compiled for the society members who financed their publication – and that helps to explain the fact that most are almost exclusively in Hebrew and/or Yiddish. Most memorial books also include lists of townspeople who perished during the Holocaust – many of them related to the *landsmanshaft* members who constituted the books' initial readership base.

Given the absence of easy access to 20th-century Eastern European Jewish vital records, these lists assumed an extraordinary importance when interest in Jewish genealogy took off in the late 1970s. Today, almost all of the researchers making use of memorial books at repositories such as the YIVO Library are genealogists. This intensive interest in memorial books on the part of

genealogists has brought about a tremendous inflation in the resale prices of *yisker-bikher* on the secondhand book market. It has led to a number of these books being translated into English. It has even provided an incentive for a few genealogists to study the languages in which these books were written.

Proper identification of their ancestral European towns has always posed a particular obstacle for genealogists. While an array of sources exists to assist them in their efforts, it was only with the publication of *Where Once We Walked: A Guide to the Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust*, by Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack (1991), that researchers were able to have a handy sourcebook to the "Jewish geography" of Central and Eastern Europe. *Where Once We Walked* includes official and alternative spellings of place names (along with extensive cross-referencing), precise geographical coordinates, bibliographical citations, and a Soundex guide to facilitate determination of the place names' spellings. This gazetteer provides one more example of the concrete way in which genealogists have helped librarians to assist family history researchers: [*In recognition of their achievements, AJL honored Mokotoff and Sack with the Reference Book Award, presented in 1992.*]

Now, to our second example, the Russian consular records: Up to the Russian Revolution, hundreds of thousands of case files for Russian immigrants to the United States and Canada were generated by the consular representatives of Tsarist Russia. When the U.S. extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union in December 1933, these prerevolutionary archival records were confiscated by the U.S. Government and put into the custody of the National Archives, which sent them to storage in a Maryland warehouse, where they moldered, unused for almost half a century.

In the early 1980s, the existence of the Russian consular records came to the attention of the Jewish genealogical community. The Washington, DC-area JGS, under Dr. Sack's leadership, recognized the importance of these records (especially in light of the lack of access to archival records in the Soviet Union proper) and made arrangements to have these case files organized, indexed, and microfilmed. The *Index and Catalog* to these records stands as published testimony to the

crucial role that Jewish genealogists have played in making these files accessible. (Though their importance to genealogists may be apparent, the Russian consular records should be of considerable value to historians as well.) In the age of *glasnost*, the Russian consular records were returned to the Soviet Union, whose authorities always claimed them as Soviet state property. Had they been returned before being indexed and microfilmed, their utility to Western researchers – including genealogists – would have been lost for a long time to come, perhaps forever.

Looking Ahead

Glasnost provides the next frontier for the majority of Jewish genealogists who trace their ancestry to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Genealogists have not been slow to perceive the advantages of the recently improved political climate. Soviet authorities and their successors have only begun to open up vital records to outsiders, with the prospect of an infusion of hard currency providing the prime incentive for making access to archival collections in that financially exhausted country more open.

Rabbi Malcolm Stern has represented the interests of the American genealogical community in formal discussions between American archivists and their counterparts in the former Soviet Union, regarding enhanced access to Soviet archival collections. Jewish genealogical societies are poised to play a pivotal role in opening up Eastern European archives, in cooperation with government bodies, librarians and archivists, and non-Jewish genealogical organizations (including the Genealogical Society of Utah, which needs to be encouraged to renew its microfilming of Central and Eastern European vital records).

Alongside such traditional media as print and microform, genealogical tools that make use of the advanced technology of our age are now becoming available. There is an array of competing software packages, which enable genealogists to construct family trees on their personal computers without constantly having to

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Compiled and Annotated by
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Manuals and Sourcebooks

Baxter, Angus. *In Search of Your European Roots: A Complete Guide to Tracing Your Ancestors in Every Country in Europe*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1985. 289 p.

A country-by-country description of resources [now outdated for Eastern Europe]. Includes a chapter on Jewish sources in Europe and Israel.

Cohen, Chester G. *Shtetl Finder Gazetteer*. Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1989. 145 p. Paperback.

Locates with varied spelling many of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, identifying by name some prominent citizens of each [cf. Mokotoff-Sack, below].

Eakle, Arlene; Cerny, Johni, eds. *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, Ltd., 1984. 786 p.

Chapters indicate where to find every type of record in the U.S. Lists LDS [Latter-Day Saints, i.e., Mormons'] microfilms of vital records for Jewish communities in Germany, Poland, and Hungary (updated in *Avotaynu*, see Periodicals).

Gedenkbuch, compiled by the Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, and the International Tracing Service, Arolsen, Germany, with the cooperation of Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. Koblenz: 1987. 2 v.

Lists 128,000 Jewish victims of Nazis in Germany, 1933-45, citing last place of residence, birth date, and circumstances of death, where known.

Guzik, Estelle M., ed. *Genealogical Resources in the New York Metropolitan Area*. New York: Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc., 1989. 404 p.

Detailed guide to every agency between Albany, New York, and Trenton, New Jersey, that could provide data of use to Jewish genealogical research, including many specific records, hours of opening, public transportation, finding aids, fees, and restrictions. Appendices include: bibliography and locations of yizkor books, vital record application forms, Soundex codes, available foreign telephone directories, U.S. city directories, newspapers, and Jewish cemeteries. Indexes.

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Kurzweil, Arthur. *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Personal History*. New York: Schocken Books, 1982. 353 p. Paperback.

A very personal approach to each step.

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An up-to-date finding aid to sources of Jewish genealogical information.

Mokotoff, Gary; Sallyann Amdur Sack. *Where Once We Walked: A Guide to the Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust*. Teaneck, NJ: Avotaynu, 1991. xxviii, 514 p.

*Reprinted with the permission of the compiler and the editors of *Avotaynu*. First published in *Avotaynu*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 22-23.

microfilms include Jewish records from many countries, notably Poland, Germany, and Hungary. Microfilms may be obtained on interlibrary loan at local Mormon libraries. Computerized and microfiche catalogs available at branch libraries. Finding aid: Cerni, John; Elliot, Wendy, eds. *The Library: A Guide to the LDS Family History Library* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, Ltd., c1988). Separate chapters are devoted to records for each region of the U.S. and countries abroad.

Leo Baeck Institute. 129 East 73rd Street, New York, NY 10021.

Library and archive of surviving records of Jews from German-speaking lands. Finding aids: *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*, published guides to LBI Library (1970) and Archives (1991).

Library of Congress. Jefferson (main) Building, housing Genealogy & Local History, Independence Avenue between 1st & 2nd Streets, SW, Washington, DC; connected underground with Adams and Madison Buildings (Hebraic Section).

Contains every book submitted for U.S. copyright, city directories, maps, gazetteers. Finding aid: Neagles, James C. *The Library of Congress: A Guide to Genealogical and Historical Research* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1990. xii, 381 p.).

National Archives & Records Administration. 8th & Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20408.

Research room has federal censuses 1790-1910 (1920 will be available in 1992), passenger arrival indexes, 18th & 19th century military records, some naturalizations, land records. Regional branches have microfilm copies and regional records. Finding aids: *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives* (Washington, DC, 1982. 304 p.); Szucs, Loretto Dennis; Luebking, Sandra Hargreaves. *The Archives: A Guide to the National Archives Field Branches*. (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, Ltd., c1988. xvii, 340 p.)

New York Public Library. Fifth Avenue & 42nd Street, New York, NY 10018.

Jewish, Map, Microfilm, and Local History & Genealogy Divisions contain useful materials. Finding aid: Guzik, *Genealogical Resources in the New York Metropolitan Area* (above).

YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. 1048 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028.

Library and archive of data from Yiddish-speaking lands. Finding aid: Guzik. *Genealogical Resources in the New York Metropolitan Area* (above).

Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern, a Fellow of the American Society of Genealogists, is known for his many contributions to American Jewish genealogy. He lives in New York City, where for many years he was on the staff of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

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erase and redraw the charts. Databases with obvious genealogical uses are also being generated. As examples, we may cite the passenger arrival records that are to be included alongside the exhibits at the Ellis Island Museum in New York, and Yad Vashem's "Pages of Testimony," which are currently being entered into a database at the Museum of Jewish Heritage (also in New York). None of these databases, however, is as yet available for public use.

We may be encouraged by the proliferation of Jewish genealogical publications and by the promise of further progress toward gaining access to records that until now were not available. The more genealogical reference tools there are, the easier it will be for us, as librarians, to deal with the persistent inquiries of the many researchers who wish to learn more about the lives, the times, and, above all, the *names* of their ancestors.

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