

RESPONSA

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"Responsa": There could hardly be a more appropriate title for a column devoted to reference questions from Judaica librarians. After all, "questions and answers" are the librarian's equivalent of the *she'elot u-teshuvot* that rabbis and laymen have exchanged since the time of the Mishnah. The difference is that the librarian's "responsa" are seldom halakhic in nature.

The Judaica librarian in particular is constantly bombarded with inquiries ranging over the entire gamut of Jewish knowledge, covering the disciplines of history, linguistics, literature, sociology, anthropology, drama, sports, the fine arts, and many others—not to mention all aspects and manifestations of the Jewish religion. No single individual can possibly command a truly encyclopedic knowledge of the Jewish universe. As librarians we do nevertheless have a few tricks up our sleeves: We are familiar with a wide range of Judaica reference sources; we know how to construct a search strategy; and we presumably are familiar with a variety of interview techniques.

Each "Responsa" column will be devoted to answering three or four reference questions sent in by readers of *Judaica Librarianship*. Questions will also be referred to subject specialists or back to the general readership of this journal. Readers will, in addition, be invited to share their own "responsa" via this column. In this way "Responsa" is meant to serve as a Judaica reference clearinghouse. Please address your letters to me, c/o the Jewish Public Library, 5151 Cote Sainte Catherine Road, Montreal, Quebec H3W 1M6 Canada.

This being the first "Responsa" column, the mail has not yet had a chance to pour in, so I will take this opportunity to describe one facet of my own experience as a reference librarian.

During the mid-1970's the "genealogy boom" caught much of the Jewish library world unawares. It was part of a much broader development, to be sure, but Jewish genealogists faced obstacles spared their gentile counterparts. One of these obstacles was the total lack of

suitable "how-to" literature directed at a Jewish audience. This obstacle was in due course overcome, and it is perhaps no coincidence that of the three existing Jewish genealogical guidebooks, two were written by trained librarians.¹

It was through no design of my own that I became involved in genealogical reference work. But the demands that this new clientele made on the YIVO Library (where I was working at the time) were so great that it seemed logical to have a specific staff person assigned to assist genealogists. So I was "drafted" for this service and found myself devoting a good 25% to 30% of my working hours consulting with visiting family historians and answering correspondence.

Genealogists are a notoriously hard group to satisfy. It is one thing to determine the Christian calendar date of 5 Iyar 5743 (Israeli Independence Day 1983), but quite another to provide information on "the Goldstein family from Vitebsk and the Pinsky family from Odessa" — as one letter in my files requests. For the genealogist there is no single correct answer to his or her question. But like other library users, genealogists can be pointed in the right direction, and librarians have naturally been instrumental in setting genealogists on the right track.

Since in order to trace one's lineage it is important to know where one's European ancestors came from, I found that genealogical inquiries often led directly to geographical research. Furthermore, since North American Jews normally have only a vague sense of Eastern European geography, it was often quite a chore to come up with successful search strategies to locate obscure towns known only by the garbled versions of their names, as handed down to genealogists by their grandparents.

Here is a case in point: A visitor came to YIVO, complaining that he had been trying for months, without success, to locate "Boslav," his grandfather's home town in the Ukraine. I turned first to the pre-revolutionary Russian-Jewish *Evreiskaia Entsiklopediia*, but could not identify any town named "Boslav." Upon reflection, though, it occurred to me that "Boslav" was probably a Yiddishized

form of what in Ukrainian would be called "Bohuslav" (God's Glory). And since there is no "h" sound in Russian, I correctly conjectured that this town would be identified as "Boguslav" in English language reference sources (which are usually based on Russian — rather than Ukrainian — sources). I was soon able to locate articles about Boguslav in the *Evreiskaia Entsiklopediia*, the *Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer*, the Polish gazetteer (*Slownik Geograficzny*), and both the German and English *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

It was this experience that spurred me on to set my geographical search strategies down on paper, and the result was a short article designed to aid others in finding their *shtetlekh*. The article bore the title "Eastern European Jewish Geography," and its subtitle, I would like to think, could have been conceived only by a librarian: "How to get from Amshinov to Mszczonow without moving an inch."² By codifying my search strategies in this short article I contributed a modest "reference source" of my very own to the literature.

Thus, reference librarianship is a two-way street, with librarians consulting already-existing reference works and creating new ones of their own. Moreover, as the "Boslav" case attests, reference work remains as much an art as a science—as dependent upon such caprices as the librarian's imagination, memory and intuition as it is on the library catalogues, published works, and data bases that the reference librarian regularly makes use of. Though new technologies may yield new reference tools, the human touch will always remain at the center of the reference equation.

¹See *My Jewish Roots*, by David Kranzler (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1979), and *From Generation to Generation*, by Arthur Kurzweil (New York: William Morrow, 1980). Kranzler is Chief of the Social Science Division of the Queensborough Community College Library, and Kurzweil worked as a public librarian in New Jersey. Dan Rottenberg, who wrote the first "guidebook to Jewish genealogy," *Finding our Fathers* (New York: Random House, 1977), is a freelance journalist.

²*Toledot*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Winter 1978-1979), pp. 9-14.

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