

JEWISH GENEALOGY

Tracing Our Roots

Genealogical resources and information are ever more available, even as confronting the past remains a challenge

For Keren Weiner, the ultimate importance of genealogical knowledge is that it lets an individual understand his or her position in history.

Weiner, formerly the office manager at Temple Anshe Amunim, recently started her own full-time genealogy service in the Berkshires. "Getting connected to a timeline can be revelatory," she says. "It can change the way a person looks at life and family. Most of us get busy making a living and raising our own families, and can lose our place in the continuum.

"Preserving the stories of the past and capturing documents that fill in our back stories lets us draw threads of experience through our own lives and preserve them for future generations."

By some estimations, genealogy is the second most popular hobby in the United States after gardening and, according to ABC News, is the subject of the second-most visited category of websites after those that – how to put it in a family newspaper – are devoted to images depicting the many ways that our family trees have been augmented since time immemorial. DNA testing, the digitization of historical records, television programs dating back to Alex Haley's *Roots*, and most of all the Internet have all fueled interest in the topic.

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Genealogy is now a big business, with the Israeli company MyHeritage (and its companion site Geni) among the biggest players. MyHeritage, a "freemium" site in which users enroll for free and then pay for premium features, boasts more than 80 million members worldwide.

JewishGen.org is the premier site for Jewish genealogy, a trove of resources with millions of records from around the world and active special interest groups (SIG) engaged in a range of genealogy projects.

Jewish genealogy, like those of all other ethnicities, has its own peculiarities with, of course, the unique historical tragedy of the Holocaust that one must inevitably confront. Jews may not be able to access the kind of oral history that other families may pass down, not only because of the family members lost, but also because of the reticence of many survivors and their relations regarding the Shoah. "Whether it's the Holocaust, the 1906 pogroms, or any kind of war zone," says Weiner, "people came away with a need not to talk." Children of trauma victims, she explains, may

have learned to share their parents' habit of silence.

Nevertheless, the stories may have been recorded in detail after the liberation of Europe by the Red Cross or other entities.

A positive thing to keep in mind when embarking on Jewish genealogical research is, according to Jonathon Podolsky, vice president of the Western Massachusetts Jewish Genealogical Society, that "in general, there is more material out there than people think. Even from the Holocaust era and World War II, not as much was lost as one might think."

Also promising is the vast amount of information that is being rediscovered, reclaimed, and re-catalogued by professional and amateur historians as part of a de facto *tikkun olam* project on behalf of those killed that has been ongoing since the end of the World War II. Armed with better preservation tools and impelled by the awareness that the survivors' generation will soon be gone, researchers are working to repair the world by assembling evidence of the Jewish world that was destroyed.

Getting Started

"People wait until their fifties, sixties, or seventies before they are ready to take on this kind of project," says Keren

Weiner, "before they are ready to feel appropriate compassion" for the people and stories they will be researching. "I wish that impulse penetrated down to more people in their forties." The sooner one gets started, the more access one is likely have to the family elders, and their memories and documents.

Typically, clients come to Weiner with very little information, maybe three to six facts that can be quite amorphous. For Jews and Gentiles alike, she says, having information beyond their grandparents' generation is uncommon. She observes that, "The impulse many people have is to skip steps and look for information from the old country right off the bat. The best procedure is to plod from the present and methodically work your way into the past." She encourages clients to reach out to their extended relations – aunts and uncles, cousins, and members of other known



Keren Weiner

branches of their family trees – who may possess data that their own immediate families did not preserve.

Skipping these steps may cause the researcher to miss a key detail – for example, whether the family changed its name at some point – or to proceed with faulty information, such as a misremembered date of when family members emigrated from their place of origin. In terms of lineage, "the question is not how far back you can go," says Weiner, "it's how far across you can go."

Yefim Kogan is a Boston-based software designer and genealogical researcher (and member of Pittsfield's Knesset Israel with a second home in Lee) whose particular focus is the Bessarabia region of the Russian Empire (part of Romania between the world wars). He recommends expanding the scope of one's interviews beyond personal anecdotes and details of the family tree – it is also important to collect details about occupations, businesses, schools, civic associations, approximate birth and death dates, emigration, possible membership in Zionist organizations, and so forth. He says that genealogical/historical projects are now underway that are making available professional directories and other seemingly mundane historical documents that nevertheless may provide exciting details to a researcher.

Kogan also notes that since the advent of widespread, inexpensive telephone connections since the 1990s, paper trails of information have become harder to come by. People stopped writing letters and started talking on the phone, sharing conversations that disappeared into the ether as

soon as both parties hung up. Therefore, he stresses, it is important to get as much down in writing (or audio recording) as possible, starting with the oldest family members.

Kogan is an immigrant to the United States from the former Soviet Union whose parents made *aliyah* to Israel. Thirty years ago, he asked his parents to create a family tree, and also requested that his mother write down her family stories and mail them to him in Boston. Kogan said he would read these letters with his family on Shabbat, and eventually his son translated the correspondence from Russian. The 95 pages of family stories are now part of an almost 400-page family book. "When people see others



Yefim Kogan

in their family doing this," he says, "it is very helpful." Kogan now can identify his own forbears back to the 1750s, others from the mid-19th century, and has also reunited with ancestors presumed lost in the Holocaust.

Kogan also stresses the value of collecting photographs, and identifying as many people in them as possible. Even if a person cannot be identified, a page on JewishGen.org exists where people share

photographs, giving thousands of researchers the opportunity to view the images and make connections. In 2011, Kogan organized a Bessarabia SIG for JewishGen.org, for which he also translates documents, conducts cemetery photographing and indexing, and participates in many other projects.

Presently, the most important piece of any genealogist's methodology, Kogan says, "is to get connected."

Last October, Jonathon Podolsky revived the Western Massachusetts Jewish Genealogical Society, a group he originally started in 2002 and which is a chapter of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies.

Those interested in getting started in a genealogical research project who may prefer a more personal connection may want to check out the Society's February 4 event at the Springfield JCC, "Finding Your Roots – Jewish Style," which will take place from 1:30 – 4:00 p.m. Attendees will be able to consult experienced researchers for 20-minute appointments, work with a strategist to plan next steps, get translation help with documents written in various foreign languages in 30-minute appointments, or learn more about DNA testing and its interpretation. See Resources on page 23.)

Jewish Genealogy Basics

Many of the genealogical records available now were collected after the fall of the Soviet Union by the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) – i.e., the Mormon Church – which maintains and shares a vast collection of information. Even before the Iron Curtain fell, Keren Weiner's sister Miriam Weiner, a pioneering Jewish genealogist, in 1989 traveled to Eastern Europe and dis-

GENEALOGY, continued inside on page 23



These images, plus that shown on page one, are of a rare, elaborate German folk art painting of a Jewish family tree completed circa 1901-1911. The Hebrew reads: "Work on this illustration took 8400 hours over 4200 days."



GENEALOGY, *continued from page 24*

covered that many records thought lost in World War II were, in fact, preserved in national archives. The Miriam Weiner Routes to Roots Foundation website (www.rtrfoundation.org) is another key research resource.

In an email exchange with the BJV, Keren Weiner shared some of the ways that Jewish genealogy is complicated:

Name variations both in spelling and actual name changes. Weiner writes: "Names were spelled differently within the same family – for example Wyner and Weiner, or Rapkin and Rabkin. Other variations may have been used by siblings and cousins in two branches of a family. This means that whether one is searching through manual indexes, or online, all variations must be investigated."

"Name changes may have occurred during the immigration process or before. An immigrant could legally change the name during the naturalization process. Ship manifests were filled out at the port of departure in Europe, not the port of arrival. One of the great myths in Jewish genealogy is that names were changed at Ellis Island by those processing immigrants, but in fact, examples of this have not been discovered."

Absence of surnames. "In the vast Russian Empire, Jews did not use surnames until the mid-18th century making it very difficult to trace them back farther, unless the family was part of a rabbinic line, and those were sometimes well documented."

All the genealogists interviewed for this article said that gravestones, on which the person interred is identified by their Hebrew name and that of their father (and maybe other relatives, as well), can be sources of key information. Yefim Kogan spoke about projects underway in Eastern Europe to photograph headstones in Jewish cemeteries before their inscriptions wear away from erosion.

Changing borders. "Most Jews from Eastern Europe have trouble identifying exactly where their ancestors came from because of continual border changes. For example, one branch of my family came

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from Shepetovka, which is within the current borders of Ukraine, but on some documents my ancestors identified relatives as being from Russia, and at one time Shepetovka was part of Poland. In addition, town and village names were changed by governments. Lemberg became Lvov, then Lviv. Ekaterinoslav on the Dnieper River, became Dnepropetrovsk."

Furthermore, Weiner says, assuming the era of changing borders is over may not be

a good idea. She warns that researchers, due to shifting political currents, may not always have the kind of access they have enjoyed since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and therefore time may be of the essence in gathering available data.

Record keeping in the Russian Empire. "Over time, what records survived the Holocaust were variable if existent," Weiner writes, "and some remained in the town, some were sent to nearby cities, some to regional and national archives and repositories. They were not indexed necessarily, either by alphabetical order or chronologically within a year or range of years."

The recordkeeping in the United States can also be hard to navigate, particularly before 1906, the year naturalization became standardized by the Federal government. Before that, different types of courts across the nation followed their own procedures. Sifting through this kind of archival material can only be accomplished through old fashioned legwork, Weiner says, which often includes requesting data from various repositories that tend to move at their pace in processing applications. "Not everything is available on the internet, contrary to what one might think. I still find that I manually review microfilm, send to government offices, libraries and museums for documents, and interview relatives."

Finally, there are the differences between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish history. Researcher Jeffrey S. Malka, who is half Ashkenazi and half Sephardic, shared some of the following differences on JewishGen.org:

Countries: "Sephardim lived in countries around the Mediterranean, the Ottoman Empire, which welcomed them after their expulsion from Spain, and in the Americas, particularly South America... Sephardic researchers... would be more interested in early Hispanic notarial records, Inquisition records both in Spain and in the Americas, are similar."

Naming Customs: "While Ashkenazi names are of relatively recent origin... many, though not all, Sephardic names go back many centuries and sometimes a millennium or more." As a result, Sephardic last names may indicate kinship in the distant past,

though not necessarily among contemporaries in the more recent past. "It is dictum in Ashkenazi research," writes Malka, "that a family name is of less importance than the name of the ancestral shtetl, [which] is not true of Sephardic names." He points out: "The most singular difference [is] the Sephardic tradition of naming children after their grandparents, especially if alive to honor the grandparent whereas Ashkenazim avoid naming children after living relatives."