

Jewish Genealogy: Its Past and Now Its Future

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I have been given the easiest of tasks at this symposium and the hardest of tasks.

My talk is the easiest of tasks because I have been asked to talk about the past — the history of Jewish genealogy and its accomplishments to date. The past is identifiable. But I have also been asked to be the initial speaker at the symposium and, therefore, to set the tone of why we are all here. That is the hardest of tasks.

This symposium will be a historical event. It will go down in history as the day Jewish genealogy emerged from its status as a hobby to its new status as an academic discipline. It will be as historical as the day in 1977 when 11 men met in Neil Rosenstein's living room to form the first Jewish genealogical society. It was the start of organized Jewish genealogy as we know it today. Their concept was that this new organization, the Jewish Genealogical Society, would be based in New York City with chapters throughout the world. That is what their bylaws implied. But they forgot the mentality of Jews. We do not like to work for others, so when the second society was formed, it did not become a chapter of JGS but formed its own independent organization.

Like many people, I tend to look at history as discrete periods of time, called eras. Jewish genealogy, too, has had its eras, each about a decade in length. The decade of the 1970's was the era of the origins of organized Jewish genealogy as we know it today. The first Jewish genealogical society was founded in 1977 in New York. The first guide to Jewish genealogy, *Finding Our Fathers*, by Dan Rottenberg, was published in 1977; it was followed three years later by Arthur Kurzweil's *From Generation to Generation*.

The 1980's was the decade of the Jewish genealogical society. Here, for the first time, was a way for people interested in their Jewish family history to network. They could attend a meeting once a month in their geographical area, hear a lecture and—more importantly—interact with others who could help them with their research. A portion of the meeting was devoted to informing the membership what was new in the area of genealogical research. Newsletters, typically published quarterly, informed the entire membership of what was new.

Today there are about 80 Jewish genealogical societies worldwide in 18 different countries. Almost all are under an umbrella organization, the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS). IAJGS, itself, also was created in the late 1980s when it appeared there was value in bringing all the societies together for matters of mutual benefit.

The ability to network was expanded with the start of annual conferences on Jewish genealogy in 1981. Here, in the pre-Internet days, it was possible for genealogists from many geographical areas to come together for networking and education.

The most primitive of databases were developed in the 1980's. The *Jewish Genealogical Family Finder*, today called the *JewishGen Family Finder*, a database of ancestral towns and surnames being researched by genealogists, in the 1980s was maintained on a single computer and distributed to societies in printed form through the mail for perusal by its members only at monthly meetings. When the *Family Finder* was turned over to *JewishGen* just ten years ago, there were about 3,000 contributors. Today, with the power of the Internet, there are more than 50,000 contributors.

The “Family Tree of the Jewish People”, a database of family trees, began at the Douglas E. Goldman Jewish Genealogy Center at Beth Hatefutsoth in Tel Aviv in 1984. To access it, you had to visit the computer center. Today, the JewishGen *Family Tree of the Jewish People* contains more than 2 million entries and is available online.

So the accomplishments of the 1980’s were the establishment of organized Jewish genealogy through societies and the start of sharing information through databases.

The 1990’s was the beginning of the Internet era. Networking was no longer limited to people within a single geographical area or by postal mail to researchers in other countries. Now it was possible to post messages by e-mail—and often have a response in minutes rather than days. This was the decade that saw the creation of JewishGen, the primary Jewish genealogical presence on the Internet. The JewishGen Discussion Group became popular. Here a researcher could pose a question and have it viewed by 5,000 people all over the world with an interest in Jewish genealogical research. Often one of the readers would supply an answer. The Discussion Group was also the medium for making announcements of matters that could advance genealogical research.

JewishGen evolved into a virtual monopoly which, for the most part, was for the common good. It meant no duplication of effort--something economists call competition. With the spirit of volunteerism, we were able to develop databases rapidly and the Internet made it possible to share this information worldwide.

Our current decade has seen the growth of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) that bring together researchers with common interests, usually a common country of ancestry. Members are dispersed throughout the world, but the Internet allows them rapid communication through e-mail and special interest Discussion Groups. Each SIG has its own organization, most have their own website and most, through volunteers, have indexing projects. There are All-Country databases for Belarus, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Scandinavia, UK, Ukraine, U.S. We estimate that in the past decade, Jewish genealogist volunteers have made 10 million records available to be shared.

To date, Jewish genealogy has focused totally on its own needs. The needs of the rest of the Jewish community have not been not considered, except for an occasional project such as JewishGen’s “Holocaust Global Registry.” But unknown to us, the rest of the Jewish community began realizing our presence because the work we did for ourselves was of value to others.

We published books on Jewish given names and surnames to have a better understanding of the origin of our names and where they existed in the Old Country. But these books also advanced the field of onomastics. The gazetteer *Where Once We Walked* was created to help us locate towns of ancestry in Central and Eastern Europe. Today it is the standard gazetteer in many institutions, Jewish and non-Jewish, that also are concerned with locating towns in Central and Eastern Europe. Five of Avotaynu’s books have won awards from Jewish institutions that give book awards, not because of their contribution to genealogy, but for their contribution to the Jewish scene in general.

Jewish genealogical societies have helped Holocaust survivors find family or discover the fate of family members. Through the proceeds of genealogical events that make a profit, we have expanded the collections of libraries and other institutions. I knew our relationship with the rest of the Jewish community was improving when, many years ago, Marek Web, then archivist of YIVO Institute, commented on receiving a copy of a valuable database we had created, “Thank God for genealogists.

@Genealogy has now become part of the mainstream Jewish scene.

It is now time that a portion of the Jewish genealogical community start focusing beyond the needs of individual researchers. It is time that we start to partner with other members of the Jewish scene in mutually beneficial projects. It is time we started focusing on aspects of Jewish genealogy that benefit the Jewish genealogical community in the long term rather than satisfy the immediate hunger of individual researchers. To me this is the purpose of the Institute.

By the way, let's coin a nickname for the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy. "International Institute for Jewish Genealogy" is a mouthful. "IIJG" is difficult to pronounce. From now on, let's refer to it as "The Institute."

@Prof. Daniel Wagner used a new word that describes the direction the Institute should take in an article in the Spring 2006 issue of AVOTAYNU. Let's the Institute start focusing on *macrogenealogy*, while the rest of the genealogical community focuses on *microgenealogy*.

We should look at developing standards. I thought the American genealogical community had all of this problem solved. After all, they have been doing genealogy in a scholarly manner for more than a hundred years. I was amazed to find that the American genealogical community has only some of the problems of standards solved. They have standards for sharing family tree data (known as GEDCOM), citing sources (published in the book "Evidence!") and for identifying locations. Missing are such standards as how to represent a person's name and how to define alternate names. I am sure there are others.

Regarding soundex systems, Randy Daitch, as long ago as 1986, developed improvements to the Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex System, but we were too busy fulfilling the everyday needs of individual genealogists to implement his ideas. The table used in the current Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex System favors Germanic and Slavic names. Why not develop tables for Hebrew, Spanish and other languages? Such a project could fall under the Institute's umbrella.

Regarding merging family trees and merging data in general, the Institute is already considering the problem in its project on Reconstituting the Destroyed Communities of Europe.

Behind all of this is the need for genealogy to participate in academia. Academia justifies its existence not only in teaching but also in advancing knowledge and that is what we want the Institute to do: to advance our knowledge of family history. There should be a curriculum for family history leading to degrees. We can look to the efforts of Brigham Young University located in Provo, Utah, and Samford Institute for Genealogy and Historical Research, located at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, for guidance.

These are just some of the things the Institute should focus on. The purpose of this symposium is to define the near-term goals and projects of this organization.

I am excited about what we are doing and planning to do.