
The Journal of the Jewish Genealogical Society

DOROT דורות

Volume 32, Number 4

Summer 2011

The Kling and Niman Family Visitor Center Opens at the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy

by Michael Pertain

The morning of Friday, May 6, 2011 was beautiful on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The sun was shining, the weather perfect. A crowd was beginning to gather in front of 400 Grand Street at around 10:30 for the opening of the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy (LESJC) Kling and Niman Family Visitor Center.

The Klings and the Nimans are two interrelated branches of my family on my mother's side. They lived in the Kaunas Guberniya in what is today Lithuania, specifically in the area around Vabalninkas, Kupiskis and Anyksciai. Our ancestors included such luminaries as the *Ari* (Rabbi Isaac Luria) and the *Lyush* (Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe). I have been researching my family tree since 1998 and have been disseminating fascinating discoveries about remarkable ancestors to the family members with whom I have come in contact with throughout the years since I began. Like other families

of our ethnicity, Klings and Nimans can be found on virtually every continent (except Antarctica), creating and achieving in many fields of endeavor.

The opening of the Kling and Niman Family Visitor Center was the culmination of almost a year of planning and renovating. The ground floor store front, that was for 25 years the home of Ruby Fruits, was about to open as the public face of the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy, an organization dedicated to preserving the heritage of the Jewish immigration experience of the early twentieth century, and supporting present day Jewish continuity in the neighborhood.

On that May 6 morning, members of the family that owned Ruby Fruits mingled with former customers, neighborhood folks, administrators, board members and licensed tour guides of the LESJC, local civic and government representatives and members of the Kling and Niman family.

The LESJC building, a four floor brick structure, stands between a parking lot and another similarly unassuming brick building. The front is all glass, sporting a bright two tone green striped awning, reminiscent of the time and place it hopes to evoke. The name of the center, ***THE LOWER EAST SIDE JEWISH CONSERVANCY KLING AND NIMAN FAMILY VISITOR CENTER***, is written in English across the stripes. The translation into Chinese and Spanish will soon adorn the front windows, inviting in the neighbors. A central door welcomes the visitor into the interior space, where the theme continues. Three original benches from the now defunct Beth Hamidrash Hagadol synagogue provide seating and exhibit space. Two old wooden doors have been reconfigured to serve as the reception area, where the visitor can get information and purchase tickets for

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DOROT
The Journal of the
Jewish Genealogical Society

Editor.....Toby Carliner Sanchez
Design and Production.....Jim Garrity

.....Contributors.....

Larry Freund, Michael Marcus,
Michael Pertain, Sarina Roffe

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JGS, Inc. is a not-for-profit,
tax-exempt organization.

JGS, Inc.
15 West 16th Street, New York, NY 10011
Telephone: (212) 294-8326
E-mail: <info@jgsny.org>
Website: <http://www.jgsny.org>

DOROT (ISSN 0886-2796)
is published quarterly as the
fall, winter, spring, and summer issues.
Subscription is by membership only.
Back issues are for sale at
<http://www.jgsny.org/dorot.htm>.

To request permission to reprint an item,
contact the editor at <editor@jgsny.org>.

DOROT is indexed in
Index to Jewish Periodicals.

RATES FOR DISPLAY ADS

Full page \$150 Half page \$80
Quarter page \$45 Eighth page \$25
Publication of an advertisement does not imply an
endorsement or recommendation by JGS, Inc.

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<president@jgsny.org>
Roni Seibel Liebowitz, First Vice President/ Program
<vpprogram@jgsny.org>
Michael L. Levine, Second Vice President/ Membership
<vpmembership@jgsny.org>
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Printed by The Sheridan Press, Hanover, PA

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The Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc., founded in 1977, was the first of over eighty such societies. Our almost 1,000 members live in the New York metropolitan area, other states, and other countries. We hold membership in the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies. We have an office in the Center for Jewish History and a library in the Center's Genealogy Institute.

We support organizations, repositories, and archival projects through generous annual donations to insure the preservation of many of the Jewish community's treasured documents and to provide greater public access to them. Some of them are American Jewish Historical Society, American Sephardi Federation, Center for Jewish History, Center Genealogy Institute, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, JewishGen, Jewish Records Indexing-Poland, Leo Baeck Institute, National Yiddish Book Center, Ronald S. Lauder Foundation Genealogy Project at the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

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- free admission to our monthly meetings (September through June), featuring guest lecturers from a variety of disciplines, and field trips to libraries and archives;
- discount on admission to JGS events, such as all-day seminars;
- a subscription to our quarterly journal, *Dorot*, containing reports on monthly meetings, descriptions of items held by repositories and organizations, announcements of new books, feature articles on genealogical research, and tips on new Internet sites;
- free access to JewishData.com;
- discount on JGS publications, including *Genealogical Resources in New York*, an invaluable tool for genealogical research in New York City; and
- discounts from the JGS Friends listed on the inside back page of *Dorot*

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JGS is a not-for-profit organization open to people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Kling & Niman Center continued from page 1

tours and programs. Extra materials are hidden away in compartments designed to resemble the fruit and vegetable bins of the previous tenants.

The essence of the Center is to be found on the walls, where is displayed the history of Jewish life on the Lower East Side and the story of the Kling and Niman family and their dispersion from Eastern Europe to communities around the world, including the Lower East Side. Both narratives are presented with text, maps, photographs and films. I provided the material, the narratives and one of the films for the Kling and Niman part. Robin Esrock, a Kling cousin, provided the second film, and the LESJC provided everything for the exhibit about the Lower East Side.

Sixteen family members attended the opening, two from as far away as St. Louis, Missouri. Many had never met each other. Indeed I had never met some of them before. Speakers included state legislators, city officials, and members of the local community and the LESJC.

How did it come about that a visitor center is exhibiting the story of my family? The simple answer is that I funded the renovation in return for the inclusion of the exhibition about my family. Little did I know at that



Michael Pertain and Hope Niman-Prosky at the opening of the Kling-Niman Family History Center

time just how much more would be involved beyond writing a check.

This leads to the next question, just how did this opportunity come to me? Actually, in a way, I came to it.

Like many of us doing family history, I wondered how I could create out of it something that would be of some *lasting value to someone in future years and do it in a usable format. Who is going to sit and read a database?* I wanted, also, to show my appreciation to my ancestors for struggling so that I could live a comfortable American life. There was something else I wanted to do—that is, to do my part to make the world a better place—but connecting that to the family history only came to me later.

It was while thinking about some possibilities—*maybe a book or a film*—that I received a fundraising letter from the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy. The letter offered naming rights for a new visitor center they were hoping to open, in return for what seemed a surprisingly small sum. It was an amount even I, a retired school teacher, could possibly



Left to right: Kling Cousins Connie Levy and Carol Levy-Charles who came from St. Louis, Missouri and Lynn Levin who came from Southampton, Pennsylvania.



The opening ceremony at the Kling-Niman Family History Center

afford. In addition, the organization's objective was to conserve Jewish heritage, an obvious attraction for any genealogist. I decided to call. We met, agreed that this would be beneficial for all concerned, and work began.

I visited the Museum of the Chinese in America to get ideas about how the exhibit should be organized, since it was a similarly small space focusing on an ethnic immigrant group. *Why reinvent the wheel?* I then began writing an introduction. This was the point at which I had to seriously think about my purposes and goals. Is this to be a vanity piece? I paid, so I get to tell a parochial story that would probably be of interest only to my family? No, I want to include tourists of all backgrounds, plus the Chinese and Hispanic neighbors who might walk in. What value might this exhibit offer them?

I began to write. I wrote about how the Chinese and Hispanics today on the Lower East Side are also often poor, struggling immigrants, like the Klings and Nimans. They, too, have cousins all over the world. They, too, sometimes lead heroic, impressive lives, despite their challenges. Perhaps our story will make them feel validated and valued, give them hope for their own and their children's futures. Maybe they will be inspired to share *their* story.

Then I chose which family members should be highlighted for the inaugural exhibit and planned a mapping of the family diaspora. Scott Guerin and Jane Dodds were hired by the Conservancy to do all of the space design, renovation, carpentry, furniture making and the visuals. We worked together to plan how much space could be committed for each aspect. A PowerPoint

presentation about a family member, which I created a few years ago, was edited and turned into a film. All this sounds simple enough, but believe me, it wasn't! The original plan was that the Visitor Center would open in early October, 2010. It opened early the following May, and we are still working on improvements.

Future plans include translating all

narratives in the exhibits into at least Chinese Mandarin and Spanish. The translations would be placed on cards in pouches beneath each visual. In addition, I would like the film offerings to be expanded. I just interviewed on video a 99 year old cousin and expect to interview another one who just reached 90 and was born and lived on the Lower East Side. I would like these to be shown on a touch screen on which visitors would be encouraged to respond and also to comment about their own or their family's immigrant experiences. I hope we can hire a genealogist/curator to organize new exhibits and events to make our Visitor Center a really exciting place to be.

The Kling and Niman Family Visitor Center of the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy is located at 400 Grand Street at Clinton Street. It is open on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., on Tuesdays through Thursdays from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m., and closed on Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays. If you would like to come see us or learn more, visit us online at www.nycjewishtours.org or call 212-374-4100, Ext. 1 for hours, directions and information about neighborhood tours and special events.

Michael Pertain has been active in the Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc. since 1999. He was on the Executive Council for several years, serving as Vice President and Secretary, as well as a Council member. He has taught classes on researching family history. An ordained rabbi, Michael has been an educator throughout his life, working for many years in the New York City school system. He is now an adjunct in the Brooklyn College SEEK Program, where he teaches English and counsels students. ☆

Upcoming and Current Events

Jewish Genealogical Society

September 18, 2011, 2:00 p.m.

Monthly Program: **“Computers and Genealogy”**

Speaker: David M. Kleiman

We'll take an updated look at how genealogy database software can help us organize research, share charts, and create books or websites for your family. The program, presented as a very interactive (audience participation) program), will offer expert insights on how to judge your own needs and requirements in choosing or upgrading this primary genealogical tool. Starting from a truly independent viewpoint, we look at current technology trends (software and hardware), and at the three most popular genealogical database programs currently available (Windows PC or MAC). The Q&A includes a discussion on best practices for entering, sourcing and reporting with your research data.

David M. Kleiman is a publisher, historian and educator, and has been a genealogist and family historian for over 35 years. He is co-founder and chair of the New York Computers and Genealogy Special Interest Group and serves on the Executive Council of the Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc. and on the Education Committee of the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society. David is president of Heritage Muse, Inc., digital and print publishers in the humanities, and is the curator of the Loeb Visitors Center at the Touro Synagogue National Historic Site in Newport, Rhode Island. He has authored articles for *PC Magazine*, *Home & Small Business Computing*, *Avotaynu*, and other genealogical publications.

NOTE LOCATION: UJA Federation, 7th floor Conference Center, 130 East 59th Street, NYC (between Lexington and Park Avenues)
Admission: JGS members are free, guests pay \$5 at the door

October 16, 2011, 2:00 p.m.

Monthly program: **“Introducing the JTA Jewish News Archive”**

Speaker: Adam Soclof

The Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) (www.jta.org) is the definitive source for American Jewish community news and opinion. Throughout its 90-year history, it has been the trusted global source of breaking news, investigating reporting, in-depth analysis, opinion and features on current events and issues of interest to the Jewish people. The new JTA Jewish News Archive (<http://archive.jta.org/>) is a powerful reference tool about current events and modern Jewish history. Come hear about this recently launched resource which holds over a quarter-million articles. The project was created in conjunction with Dr. Jonathan Sarna and archivist Anne Mintz. Tips will be shared that will help you

during your searches whether you browse by keyword, topic, or date. This archive, which covers the period 1923 to 2008, provides a unique lens through which to view world events that is not available elsewhere. Try some searches before the meeting and come learn how to maximize the results.

Save These Dates of Upcoming JGS Meetings

January 15, 2012

February 19, 2012

March TBD, 2012

April 15, 2012

May 20, 2012

June 10, 2012

Adam Soclof is the media & marketing associate at JTA, where he writes for the JTA Archive Blog (<http://blogs.jta.org/archive>) and coordinates outreach and social media (www.facebook.com/JTAarchive) for the JTA Jewish News Archive. An alum of Presentense and the Schusterman Insight Fellowship, Adam has previously worked for JDub Records and the Natan Fund. Adam hails from Ann Arbor, Michigan and is a graduate of the University of Michigan.

Location: Center for Jewish History, 15 West 16th Street NYC (between 5th and 6th Avenues)

Admission: JGS members are free, guests pay \$5 at the door

The Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute at CJH will be open before the meeting at 11:00 a.m. for access to research materials and computers and for networking with other researchers.

November 20, 2011, 2:00 p.m.

Monthly Program: **“Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams”**

Speaker: Charles King

Italian merchants, Greek freedom fighters, and Turkish seamen; a Russian empress and her favorite soldier-bureaucrats; Jewish tavern keepers, traders and journalists—these and many others seeking fortune and adventure rubbed shoulders in Odessa, the greatest port on the Black Sea. Home to one of the most progressive and creative Jewish communities in Europe, Odessa grew as a trading center throughout the nineteenth century and inspired some of Russia's most enduring writers, artists, and musicians, from Alexander Pushkin to Isaac Babel and Vladimir Jabotinsky. In his intricately researched book, Charles King tells Odessa's story, from its origins under Catherine the Great through the transformation of the city during the Soviet era. He has uncovered new documents that shed light on an untold story of the Holocaust, when the Romanian occupation of Odessa reduced its Jewish community to a mere 48 people by 1944. King also reveals how the city recovered after the Second World War, but how its Jewish identity was reshaped as well—from a thriving center of Jewish culture into an object of nostalgia and longing. A book-signing will follow the presentation.

Charles King is Professor of International Affairs and Government at Georgetown University. He previously served as chairman of the faculty of Georgetown's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. He is the author *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, and *The Black Sea: A History*, and his work has been translated into more than ten languages. King's articles and commentary have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*, as well as leading academic journals. King studied history and philosophy at the University of Arkansas and later earned master's and doctoral degrees at Oxford University, where he was a Marshall Scholar. Before coming to Georgetown, he was a junior research fellow at New College, Oxford, and a research associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. He lives in Washington, DC, with his wife, the writer and anthropologist Margaret Paxson.

Location: Center for Jewish History, 15 West 16th Street NYC (between 5th and 6th Avenues)

Admission: JGS members are free; guests pay \$5 at the door

The Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute at CJH will be open before the meeting at 11:00 a.m. for access to research materials and computers and for networking with other researchers.

December 25, 2011

Annual JGS "Members Only" Brunch and Meeting

NOTE TIME AND LOCATION

Brunch at 11 a.m. Program at 12:30 p.m.

Location: 92nd Street Y, Lexington Avenue at 92nd Street, NYC

Program: **"Genealogical Implications of Chasidic Ancestry"**

Speaker: Rafael Guber (Details to follow)

New York City & Environs

Brooklyn Jewish Center Circle

September 25, 2011

Dinner Reunion for former members or descendants of members of the Brooklyn Jewish Center

Location: 667 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY 11213

Admission: Contact 718-483-9000, www.BrooklynJewishCenter.org

Genealogical Society of Bergen County

September 22, 2011, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Technologies of Genealogists

Speaker: Dick Eastman, Publisher of *Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter*

Location: Bergen Community College, Paramus, N.J.

Registration: www.njgsbc.org

Admission: \$50 by 9/30/11 or \$55 thereafter

Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy, 235 East Broadway, NYC.

September 11, 2011

Bialystoker the Beautiful Walking Tour

October 9, 2011

Jewish Harlem Walking Tour

October 23, 2011

Distinctive Brooklyn Neighborhoods: Borough Park and Brighton Beach Bus Tour

November 20, 2011

Jewish Community of Colonial New Amsterdam Walking Tour

Location: For trip times, meeting places and reservations, go to

www.nycjewishtours.org/events_calendar.htm or call 212-374-4100.

Admission: Walking tours are \$18 for adults, \$16 for seniors and students. Bus tours are \$30.

Lower East Side History Project Walking Tours
September, October, November, 2011
Tours on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, of Alphabet City, Chinatown/Five Points, the Jewish Mob, the Mafia, The Bowery, East Village, and the Lower East Side.

Location & Admission: Contact <http://leshp.org> or call 347-465-7767.

New York Genealogical & Biographical Society
September 24, 2011
Cutting Edge Genealogy: Using New Technology & Thinking – An All Day Program

Speakers: Dick Eastman, publisher of *Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter*,
Ruth Carr, former Chief, Division of U.S. History, Local History & Genealogy, NYPL
David M. Kleiman, publisher, historian and educator
Location: New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue & 42nd Street, South Court Classrooms
Admission: \$60 for members, \$90 for non-members.
Registration: www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org, or education@nygbs.org, or call 212-755-8532, ext. 211.

Tuesday, October 28, 2011, 5:30 p.m.
Beyond the Draft: World War I Records in the National Archives

Speaker: Marie Varrelman Melchiori, Certified Genealogist
Location: New York Public Library, 5th Avenue & 42nd Street, South Court Classrooms
Admission: Free – Registration not required

Polish Genealogical Society of Connecticut and the Northeast, Inc.

October 14-15, 2011

2011 Polish Genealogical Conference

Speakers on: Immigrant Steamships, 1890-1950; Passenger Lists, Police Records and Unreadable Localities; Polish Online Digitized Historical Sources; Searching Russian Consular Records, Polish Peasants in the 19th Century; Preparing a Research Trip to Poland; The International Tracing Service; and more.

Location: Central Connecticut State University Student Center, New Britain, Connecticut

Admission: \$25 for Friday, \$55 for Saturday, \$70 both days, with buffet luncheon

Registration: www.pgsctne.org/events_conferences.html

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

September, October, November, 2011

Daily and Weekend Tours of the Tenement Museum Building at 97 Orchard Street, entitled “Hard Times,” “Sweatshop Workers,” and “The Confino Family.”

Daily and Weekend Walking Tours: “Important Immigrant Sites – Past and Present,” “Lower East Side Life, 1935 to the Present,” and “Taste of the Lower East Side.”

Location: All tours start and end at 108 Orchard Street
Admission: \$20 for adults, \$16 for students and seniors, www.tenement.org, 866-606-7232. ☆



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JGS on Facebook

JGS, Inc. has created a group page on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>), an online social networking facility. After you join Facebook, you can reach JGS's page in any of these three ways: (1) Go to the JGS website (<http://www.jgsny.org>) to link to the page. (2) Go directly to the page at: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=62112838856> (3) Log in to Facebook and search for “Jewish Genealogical Society–New York.”

We hope you will join the nearly 450 members of the JGS Facebook group. The page includes details about our upcoming meetings and follow-up reports about the presentations. We welcome comments and reactions to the meetings as well as suggestions of topics for monthly meetings.

JGS Program Reports

May 22, 2011

“Methods from the Mavens: Researching Galicia, Hungary and Lithuania

A trio of experts presented the May meeting with an insider’s take on researching areas of Eastern Europe that were home to the ancestors of a large proportion of family historians. One theme each of the three emphasized was Know Thy Geography. Mark Halpern, the program’s Galician maven, described it this way: “Half of Galicia is now in Poland, half is in Ukraine. The borders have changed many times. My grandfather Moshe was born in Austria, he died in Poland, his grave

line, others are on microfilms that can be ordered and viewed locally. Mr. Auslander said researchers should not discount Vienna when looking for their Hungarian relatives. If an ancestor from Hungary served in the military, for example, the records might be in Vienna’s Kriegsarchiv (oesta.gv.at/site/6154/default.aspx), and you can write to them for possible information.

To Research Lithuania

Eden Joachim reviewed the LitvakSIG (Special Interest Group) web site (www.litvaksig.org/). A member of the LitvakSIG board, she said that when



Linda Cantor, moderator, Jordan Auslander, Eden Joachim, Mark Halpern

is in Ukraine and he never left Tarnopol. You really have to identify where your family was from.” Or, as Jordan Auslander, the Hungarian research expert put it, “If you find documentation that indicates ‘Hungarian,’ you need to know the town that these folks came from and where it is today.”

To Research Hungary

Jordan Auslander, a professional genealogist and author of *A Genealogical Gazetteer of the Kingdom of Hungary*, said that while on-site research in Europe is an option for some people, there are two major resources for U.S.-based Hungarian research. The first is online, using the databases at JewishGen (www.jewishgen.org). The Hungarian Database (www.jewishgen.org/databases/Hungary), he said, just had a major increase in the volume of records. The other resource is the LDS (Mormon) Family History Library and its online web site (www.familysearch.org). Many records are on

the SIG was formally founded in 1997-1998, its aim was to translate the 1858 Revision List (similar to a census). The organization has expanded profoundly since that time. The Revision List was the basis for the District Research Groups –now 13 of them—which pool contributions to acquire various records that cover towns within the district or the entire district. It’s all on the Internet, she said, at the All-Lithuanian Database (www.jewishgen.org/Litvak/all.htm). Most of the records are duplicated in the JewishGen country database (www.jewishgen.org/databases/Lithuania/), she added, although they are not exactly the same, so she advised researchers to search both locations.

Another major undertaking of the LitvakSIG is its Vital Records Translation Project. This is based on each shtetl. Not every year of records exists for each shtetl, Ms. Joachim explained, and not every shtetl has records. Some may have only 20th century records, while some may have records for only one or two years.



Mark Halpern explaining how to research your ancestors from Galicia

To Research Galicia

Mark Halpern, a member of the Executive Committee and the Board of Jewish Record Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland), recommended two major Jewish organizations for researching ancestors who lived in the former Austrian province of Galicia – JRI-Poland (www.jri-poland.org) and Gesher Galicia (www.jewishgen.org/galicia/) –and one book, *The Galitizians: The Jews of Galicia, 1772-1918* by Suzan Wynne. The good news, he said, is that many vital records have survived, and JRI-Poland has indexed over 4 million of those vital records for Poland (about 1.5 million of those are for Galicia). Surviving vital records are mostly from the 1850s and beyond, but in many towns the records don't start until 1877.

Since surnames were taken early in Galicia compared to the rest of Eastern Europe (1788-1789), there are surnames in most of the vital records. Mr. Halpern added that just in the last few years Gesher Galicia has done a really good job of looking at other records, including voter records, cadastral map records, and land ownership records. If you're looking for records for your town, he said, the best place to look for everything, not just vital records, is the Routes to Roots web site (www.routestoroots.com). If the town is not on that website, he continued, the best place to look is in the Wynne book. Its Appendix F will indicate the town where the records were maintained for smaller villages, etc.

June 12, 2011

"The Tree of Life" – An Exploration of Italian Ancestry

The JGS June meeting was a particularly satisfying and educational combination of a film screening and post-film commentary by a prominent authority. The film was the well received 2008 documentary "The Tree of Life," written, directed and produced by Hava Volterra, an Israeli-born, California-based electronics engineer whose late father, Vittorio Volterra, was a physicist who survived World War II in Italy by hiding with his parents and siblings in the countryside home of family friends. After the war, when he was in his early twenties, he left Italy for Israel, where he died in 1998. His daughter Hava set out in 2004 with her camera to explore her ancestry as well as her relationship with her father. The journey, she explains in the film, began in Ancona, her father's hometown.

By the end of the 76-minute film, the JGSNY audience had learned about the family of Hava Volterra's paternal grandfather (traced back to the early 15th century), about the family of her paternal grandmother (traced back to the ancestors of Ramhal, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, an 18th century rabbi, kabbalist and philosopher), and about her relative Vito Volterra, a physicist and mathematician who was one of only 12 Italian professors who refused to sign a fascist oath in 1931. Toward the end of "The Tree of Life," the film maker and her aunt return to the village outside Ancona, where the Volterra family was



Poster for the *Tree of Life* film

hidden from the Nazis, to thank the Catholic family for their life-saving act.

Following the screening of “The Tree of Life,” journalist Alessandro Cassin appeared at the podium to comment on the film and answer questions. Mr. Cassin is Deputy Director and Director of Publishing of the Primo Levi Center, which is dedicated to studying the history and culture of Italian Jewry. He described the film as an ambitious and unusual documentary with three main themes: the Jews who left Italy during the fascist persecution and their complex relationship to the country, the amazement of being able to trace your own family all the way back to the renaissance, and the richness and variety of the Jewish presence in Italy, which he described as the oldest Jewish community, having survived uninterruptedly in the West for 21 centuries. He said Hava Volterra’s trip “back” to Italy was both a journey of self discovery and at long last a closing of a circle with a chance to thank the family that hid the Volterras during the war.

Questioned about the genealogical research underpinning the “The Tree of Life,” Mr. Cassin cautioned that in some respects, the film may leave a misleading impression. “It seems that any Italian Jew goes back to Italy and finds easily traces of their family to the 15th century,” he said, adding, “this is



Alessandro Cassin, Deputy Director of the Primo Levi Center.

obviously not true.” What made the movie possible,” Mr. Cassin continued, “was the renown of many of Hava Volterra’s family members. She identified the scholars who had researched these people, and so she had immediate access to documents, stories and a wealth of information that is not there for the majority of families.” Mr. Cassin went on to say that the “history of the Jews in Italy has been so varied and, depending upon geographical location, in some cases it is still very easy to find records of things going back three or four centuries. But in others, it is virtually impossible. So,” he concluded, “this is not an indication at all of the ease with which somebody can engage in this kind of research.” Mr. Cassin explained that the Primo Levi Center does not engage in genealogical research and referred those seeking assistance to the Sephardic Special Interest Group (SIG) on JewishGen at www.jewishgen.org/Sephardic/

Information about “The Tree of Life” (including the source for copies of the film) can be found on its own web site: www.thetreeoflifethemovie.com/The_Tree_of_Life/home.html. The web site for the Primo Levi Center is: www.primolevicenter.org/Home.html ☆

Jews Built the Roman Coliseum After the Destruction of the Second Temple

The Historical Background of Italian Jewry

by Sarina Roffe

Today tour guides at the Roman Coliseum, probably the most visited tourist site in Rome outside of the Vatican, casually mention that it was built by 20,000 Jewish slaves brought back by the Emperor Titus, after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple. Proof of this lies in the Arch of Titus, which depicts a menorah as part of the bounty from Jerusalem. To this day, the Talmud forbids Jews from walking under the Arch. After Titus destroyed Jerusalem, Babylonia arose as the new Jewish center.

Academics generally agree that the Jewish presence in Italy began in 161 BCE, when Judah Maccabee sent a delegation to the Roman Emperor. Four families of Jewish nobility settled in southern Italy and were dependent on Jerusalem for law and prayer. They also referred to themselves as Italiani, i.e. Jews descended from the period of Judah Maccabee.

To this day Italian Jews remain loyal to the Jerusalem Talmud. This is significant because it shows why the earliest Italian Jews placed heavy emphasis on the study of Tannach; had different Hebrew grammar; learned cabala and Midrash; and wrote piyutim, when those who followed the Babylonian Talmud did not write piyutim or learn Midrash. In addition, Italian Jews gave extra significance to custom (*minhag*), to the extent that at times it could override Halacha, something that could never happen in Babylonia. Few people understand that the roots of *minhag* in Ashkenazic Jewry originate from the first Jews to arrive in Italy.

Jewish Migrations in the Middle Ages

In 632 C.E. after the death of Mohammed, Islam began to spread throughout the Mediterranean area, and by the end of the century, ninety percent of the world's Jews had come under Islamic rule, where they had autonomy. This meant their communities were run independently of the government, but they did not have equal rights with Muslims. For example, Jews could not build a synagogues higher than a mosque and in a dispute with a Muslim, they were subject to Muslim law.

Eliezer ben Yehudah of Worms, a descendent of the four original Jewish families in Italy, wrote that there

was a major migration of Italian Jews between 914 and 957, moving from southern Italy north to Germany and France, founding new communities along the way, and bringing with them the Jerusalem Talmud.

In 1276, Spain took control of Sicily, and in the 1280s, the French invaded southern Italy, bringing with them anti-Jewish legislation. Italiani Jews moved to north central Italy, settling in small groups. In 1306, Ashkenazic Jews were expelled from France and moved into the Piedmont area of western Italy. In 1348, the Black Plague came to Germany, killing more than 60 percent of the population, and Jews were blamed. Life became intolerable in Germany and resulted in a population shift into eastern Italy.

In 1492, when Spain expelled its Jews from its empire, which included Sicily, Sephardic Jews began to settle in western Italy. So by the end of the 15th Century, Italy became a mix of French and German (Ashkenazic), and Spanish Jews (Sephardic), competing against the original Jewish settlers (Italiani), each community with its own customs and language.

During the entire Middle Ages life for Jews in Italy was extremely unstable. They had to negotiate their stay in each city under a contract called a *condutta*, which allowed a certain group to stay for a limited amount of time, but the *condutta* could be annulled at any time. No synagogues or mikvehs were built. Because of the *condutta*, Jews lived in small numbers, usually not enough for a minyan, in hundreds of localities and in isolation from organized Jewry. Yet the Jews were legal citizens, subject to local laws, with the same responsibilities as other citizens, so they could not be self governing. From 1492 until the emancipation of the 19th century, Jewish life was not very different from that of other European communities.

Prominent Rabbis

Italian Jewry produced a few prominent rabbis. For example, Rabbi Joseph Cologne, known as the Maharik (1420-1480), wrote rabbinical responsa, which clearly show the conflict between German and French influences on Italian Jewry. Rabbi Judah Messer Leon

was an Italian with a profound secular education. He was an accomplished physician and philosopher, who received the titles Messer (sir) and Leon (Lion –Lion of Judah). He was anointed a knight and was given the right to award doctoral degrees.

R. Messer Leon established a yeshiva in Ancona, had many disciples, and in 1473 was the first Jew to see his own book published while he was still alive. This book, *Nofet Tsofim*, translated into English by A. Lesley as *The Book of the Honeycombs' Flow*, is an analysis of language and how rhetoric can be used for convincing others, based on the ancient models of Cicero and Quintilian. Messer Leon measured the Torah against these models to show how the Torah is perfect and embodies every kind of ideal rhetoric. In addition, he showed that one can be both very educated in the secular culture and still be strict on religious matters.

In the second half of the 15th Century, Rabbi Elijah Capsali (1490-1560) was born to a German Jewish family that migrated to Crete (ruled by Venice). He was a Rav and an historian, who wrote *Seder Elijah Suda* (*The Lesser Order of Elijah*), a book which chronicles the history of Torah Study in Venice. Other rabbis of note include Rabbi Yehuda Minz and Rabbi David Provencal.

Venice

In 1516, the first Jewish ghetto in Europe was established in Venice, and Jews from then on had to live behind its walls. In Italian the word ghetto means foundry and was used because the Venice Ghetto sat on the land of a dormant foundry. Pope Paul IV in 1555 issued a Bull or decree which caused other cities to follow Venice's example and start ghettos in much of western Europe.

Italian Jews had always been citizens with equal rights until the Venice ghetto opened. By comparison, citizenship was not granted to the Jews in France and Germany until the Emancipation of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the Venice Ghetto Sephardic, Ashkenazic and Italiani Jews had five different houses of prayer. Synagogues were opened on the top floors of existing buildings. There were three parts to the Venice ghetto. The New Ghetto, dates from 1516, and was the first section occupied; the second section is called the Old Ghetto and dates from 1541. A third section, the Newest Ghetto, was added in 1633.

“Throughout the Middle Ages, the Venetians had reservations about the Jews, but there were never persecutions, and in the 14th century, they were given rights to residency in the Veneto neighborhood and complete freedom to carry out their business interests. The commercial boom in the city meant many Jewish merchants came to settle there, including some who arrived from Sepharad. Authorizations to live in the city continued to be granted until 1513, although now limited to the island known as the New Ghetto, where, from 1516, Jews were obliged to remain within the neighborhood after sunset.” (*Jewish Merchants in the 14th Century* by Maria Jose Cano)

All that exists of the Venice ghetto walls today is the portico, through which guests enter. There is a huge square and tall buildings that surround the long narrow streets. Three of the synagogues – the Spanish School (Sephardic), the Levantine School (Sephardic) and the Italian School (Italiani) - surround the same square. They can only be accessed today by taking a tour of the Ghetto. There are two Ashkenazic synagogues in the Venice Ghetto. One is the Canton School, aptly named for the German Canton family. The other is the Great German School.

It was not until 1590 that Jews in the rest of Italy began to live in walled communities and ghettos, which created larger Jewish communities where Jewish life could thrive, and Jews could live autonomously, with their own schools and minyanim, and where the population could regenerate itself. In addition, *condutta* were no longer needed. As a result, the first Italian synagogues were built after 1590.

Leghorn

The Leghorn Jewish community was not established until late in the 16th century. Cosimo Medici, a wealthy industrialist, who did not always conform to church policy, had gained control of the port in Pisa and the free port of Leghorn and issued an invitation in 1548 to attract people who would make the ports into trade centers. He also offered incentives, such as religious freedom and tax exemptions, thus providing a magnet for Jews.

In 1593 Fernando de Medici renewed the invitation via a public manifesto to merchants of every nation, especially persecuted Jews. He promised them tax exoneration, freedom of religion and trade and amnesty. He also promised that they wouldn't have to wear the

humiliating Jewish badge, listen to Christian sermons or be subjected to forced baptisms. Thus a larger group of Sephardic Jews flowed in, followed a few years later by Italiani Jews and Germans. Medici allowed them citizenship, an autonomous tribunal, and the freedom to build synagogues.

Leghorn soon became the richest and most important Jewish community in Italy. It also became the center for the printing of Hebrew books. By the end of the 17th Century there were 3,500 Jews in Leghorn, a number that doubled in the next century. The Sephardic Jews dominated not just in numbers but in trade, real estate, Torah study and culture. The community lasted until the time of Napoleon and was unique in Italy.

Rome

As previously mentioned, the Jewish community of Rome was the oldest in the Diaspora, dating back to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Roman Jews (who are to be differentiated from Italiani Jews, who date themselves from the time of Judah Maccabee), are descendants of the Jews who came as slaves of Titus, were freed and established themselves in the area of Rome known as Trastevere. Caesar allowed them public meetings, and Cicero recognized their importance as traders and artisans. Historical records indicate the existence of 13 synagogues.

Jews had to live under varying rules and regulations issued by the Roman Catholic Church during much of the 13th and succeeding centuries. For example, in 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council under Pope Innocent III required Jews to be segregated in a separate living area and to wear clothing to indicate they were Jews. The 1555 Bull of Paul IV did more than require Jews to live in ghettos. It also required them to sell their real estate, have only one synagogue, trade only in secondhand goods, and wear a yellow cap. The Roman Ghetto was on the banks of the Tiber River and had five and then later seven entrances. It was limited to five squares and eight streets and lanes, all of which rose upward for lack of space. For over 300 years, the existence of the ghetto required over 6,000 Jews to live in squalor and degrading humiliation. By the end, there were five synagogues (three Italiani and two Spanish) in a single building, but each had its own rich furnishings. In 1893, the synagogues were destroyed by fire.

Napoleon

When France's emperor Napoleon invaded Italy in 1796, he granted the Jews their first emancipation,

which lasted until his fall in 1815. At the time, the Jews of Italy still lived in ghettos, 9,000 of them in the Papal States, 6,000 in the Republic of Venice, about 5,000 in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, where they enjoyed, especially in the harbor city of Leghorn, very favorable conditions. Six thousand lived in the area of Trieste and Milan, which was under the Austrians. Another 6,000 lived in the territories ruled by the House of Savoy, which included Piedmont, Savoy, the coastal area from Nice to Genoa and the island of Sardinia (where there were no Jews).

Late 19th and Early 20th Century

The relief brought by Napoleon was short lived. The French "new international order" granted freedom, but imposed heavy taxes and in some cases made the Jews the scapegoats after Napoleon's defeat. By the late 19th century, Jews in Rome were forbidden to follow their dead in procession or to sell goods to non-Jews. They were obliged to wear yellow stripes on their clothes, and their rabbis were made responsible for bringing them to listen to conversion lectures.

In 1885, the Rome ghetto was demolished completely, thereby erasing all historical evidence of its existence. In 1904, the community built the great synagogue, a symbol of splendor, probably to recapture its role as the first Jewish community in Italy. Underneath is the Spanish synagogue. In an adjacent building, there is a museum devoted to the history of the Jewish community of Rome.

At the start of World War II, 40,000 Jews lived in Italy, most of their families having been there for centuries. About 10,000 disappeared through conversion, another 12,000 emigrated abroad (including 2,000 to Palestine), and more than 7,000 died during the Holocaust. As a result, about 10,000 Jews of old Italian origin remained.

Conclusion

Today there are Jewish communities in Rome, Venice, Trieste, Sienna and Milan, to name a few. Italian Jews can be Italiani, Sephardic or Ashkenazi. They may pray in different synagogues, but they will send their children to the same schools. The Italian Jewish community, as we know it today, has a long and complicated history, one which is heavily influenced by the migration of Jews from France, Germany and Spain in different centuries, who brought with them their own languages and customs.

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Sarina Roffe is a member of the JewishGen Board of Governors and has a long history of genealogical research in the Syrian Jewish community. She has presented papers at IAJGS conferences here in America and in Israel and at historical conferences worldwide. Her research uncovering marriage and britot records in the Syrian community and compiling numerous genealogies, including the Kassin and Labaton rabbinic dynasties, has brought her wide recognition. She is considered an expert on the Jews of Aleppo. Ms Roffe is president of Sephardic Genealogical Journeys (<http://sephardicgenjourneys.com>) and has published many articles on Sephardic Jewish history. She holds a BA in journalism from the University of Maryland and an MA in Jewish Studies from Touro College. She can be reached at sarina@roffe.com ☆

Online News

Brooklyn Jewish Center Website Has Hundreds of Names

The Brooklyn Jewish Center was a large and prominent Conservative synagogue in Crown Heights, which was dedicated in 1920. After serving for 65 years as the leading synagogue in Brooklyn, attended by all the prominent politicians and judges, it was sold to a Lubavitcher yeshiva in 1985. In its heyday, Moss Hart and Robert Rauschenberg were associated with its cultural programs, and every important Jewish visitor from abroad paid a visit and gave a lecture. A building restoration campaign is now underway.

Three new websites contain the names of hundreds of founding members (<http://brooklynjewishcenter.org/founding.html>), the names on the yearzeit plaques in English and Hebrew (<http://brooklynjewishcenter.org/plaques.html>), and the names found in prayer book inscriptions (<http://brooklynjewishcenter.org/siddurim.html>).

Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio Records Are Online

In Hamilton County birth, death and marriage records, as well as estate matters, are maintained by the Probate Court. Its site, www.probatect.org, will lead to marriage licenses from 1808-1931; birth records from 1863-1908; death records from 1881-1808, wills from 1791-1973, and much more.

Deceased Online Now Provides Burial Records from 450 UK Cemeteries

Deceased Online (www.deceasedonline.com), which was launched in 2008, is making it possible for burial and cremation authorities throughout the United Kingdom to convert their register records, maps, and photographs into digital form and bring them together into a central searchable collection. Recently it added over 2.5 million names to its database, which covers from the north of Scotland to South Devon. Most records date from the 1850s, but many are much older. The goal is to build a national database and to include all major cities and large urban areas. Searching the website is free of charge. If relevant records are found, the online user has the option to purchase access to view, print and download (at a price of 1.5 English pounds). The data comprises computerized entries, digital scans of burial and cremation registers, details of others buried in the same grave, and, where available, photographs of memorials with searchable inscriptions, plus maps of cemeteries indicating exact grave locations. A major advantage of Deceased Online is that users need not know the cemetery, town, city county or local authority area where the person being sought was buried. Deceased Online enables UK-wide searching by name with a variety of search tools and filters to enable users easily to locate the subject of their search.

1911 Scottish Census Records Now Online

In Scotland census records are kept closed for 100 years, and so the 1911 census has just been opened to the public. It is fully searchable by name or address and includes high quality color images of the handwritten entries. In 1911 the Scottish population was growing quickly, as a result of better health, improvements in child mortality rates, and because of immigration. The total population grew six percent in one decade. In the words of the Register General for Scotland, "The 1911 Census gives us a snapshot of what Scotland was like just before the great cataclysm of the Great War. Many thousands of young people recorded here never returned from the battlefields of Europe. For family historians, the major change is the inclusion of details of the number of children born from a marriage, which make it easier to track children between the census years. Also, the full color images make it easier to decipher the enumerator's handwriting."

Life on the Lower East Side 1880-1920

The website, www.tenant.net/Community/LES/contents.html is dedicated to describing how people coped with the vicissitudes of life on the Lower East Side in the period of the greatest immigration, urbanization, and industrialization. It contains articles, documentary sources and study guides.

New York Street Scenes Viewable OnLine

Put in the address and you will see the street view. The videos were sourced from Google street views. Go to www.vPike.com.

Updated List of Aliyah Bet Ships

This is a special interest of JGS and IAJGS member Paul Silverstone, who has compiled the names of ships which carried Jewish refugees to Palestine between 1938 and 1948. His site, at www.paulsilverstone.com/immigration/Primary/Index.htm/, has new information, pictures, sources and some information on where lists of passengers may be found.

Foreign Alphabets in Nine Languages

The Routes to Roots website has a section called "foreign alphabets," which provides translations of

genealogically relevant words in German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish. See www.rtrfoundation.org/archdta.shtml

Two Lists of World War II Refugees

The names of hundreds of German and Jewish intellectuals can found in the special collection, "Inventory of the American Council for Emigres in the Professions, Records, 1930-1974, (GER017)" available from <http://library.albany.edu/speccoll/findaids/ger017.htm>. The site contains a list of 1160 individuals, (among them Bertolt Brecht, Max Brod, Stefan Wolpe and many other well known and accomplished persons) about whom records are on file. The contents of the individual folders are not on line. To gain access to the files, it is necessary to send an email inquiry to the archive and/or arrange a visit or call 518-437-3935.

The second list contains information about just 132 of the many Jewish immigrants who came to the U.S. through Angel Island, near San Francisco, California in the late 1930s and 1940. The site is <http://aiisf.org/history/ai-jewish-refugees>, and the Angel Island restoration organization would like to interview the individuals and/or their descendants in order to get their full stories.

Back Issues of Jewish Telegraphic Agency Online

Articles from the JTA files from 1923 to 2008 are now on line. The web address is www.jta.org. Click on "Archives" and type in the key word or phrase. For example, typing in "Romania 1923" brought up numerous articles on pogroms and laws against Jews. The phrase "Bolivia, 1937" brought information on German government activities in that country. Or one could search for specific persons. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency describes itself as "the definitive, trusted global source of breaking news, investigative reporting, in depth analysis, opinion and features on current events and issues of interest to the Jewish people. The JTA is able to provide in depth coverage of political, economic and social developments affecting Jews in North and South America, Israel, Europe, Africa, and Australia." ☆



They Served Our Country

by Michael Marcus

As a family genealogist you begin to remember things about your family that you heard when you were a child. Two things stand out about my father's family.

Let me begin with, "He's alive!" It is about my Uncle Jesse P. Marcus, my father's brother. Jesse was in the Army during World War II. I was seven years old and the talk that I remember was that he was probably dead because no one in the family had had any news about him. The Army had him listed as MIA. My mother and several of Jesse's sisters were active in the Red Cross. They would receive Red Cross periodicals whenever they were printed for circulation. One of their publications was a "Prisoners of War Bulletin," which was published for relatives of American Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees. It contained articles and photos of POWs. In the bulletin dated September 1944, there was a photo of 16 POWs. The photo looked like a small graduation class photo. You cannot imagine the family's joy when they discovered Jesse's image among the group of POWs.

Jesse lived a tragic life after the war. He married, had a child, was divorced, and lived a life of alcohol and drugs. I remember Jesse well. He would go to spring training and follow the Brooklyn Dodgers. He once gave me a baseball autographed by many famous players. Jesse died in 1998 and is buried in Calverton National Cemetery on Long Island.

The second strong childhood memory about my father's family concerns "Hannah's Boy." Hannah's boy was Louis Cohen. His mother and my father were sister and brother, so Louis was my first cousin. I remember my father telling us that Louis was dead. It was the middle of April 1945, and I was eight years old. That is the last time anyone spoke of Louis until I started researching my family. Everyone who could tell me anything about Louis was dead, but I did remember that Louis was in the Navy. In fact, I had a picture of him in his uniform. Being a novice in genealogy, I contacted my senator's office, and I was told to write them a letter, which I did. Two months later, after a long runaround, I was told by a member of the senator's staff that the information was classified. I said, "Who told you that? Give me the name, I'm going over his head." The response was, "Give me a few days and I will get back to you." Two weeks later a large envelope arrived. I started to read the contents, which said that Louis was a radio technician, who was transferred to the USS Whitehurst. On April 12, 1945,

a Japanese plane crashed into the bridge killing Louis instantly. On May 25, 1945, the Commander of the Whitehurst wrote the following letter to Louis' parents. As I read the letter I cried.

U. S. S. WHITEHURST (DE-634)
c/o Fleet Post Office San Francisco, Calif.

May 9, 1945

Mrs Hannah Marcus Cohen
363 Sackman Street
Brooklyn (12), New York

Dear Mrs. Cohen:

I wish to extend my profound sympathy to you in the loss of your son, Louis Cohen. There is little I can say to afford you comfort, but know you will want to know these details which military security will permit me to disclose.

It is now permissible to say we were engaged in support of the landings on Okinawa Island. Your son gave his life as a result of enemy action near the Kerama Retto (a small group of islands westward of Okinawa), but not before considerable damage had been inflicted on the enemy.

It was not possible for the ship to remain for the burial service, due to the exigencies of war, but a dignified and appropriate service was held on a near-by larger ship and most of the crew was able to attend. The cemetery is located on Zamami Island of the Kerama Retto. It is one of the most pleasant spots we have visited in our wide travels in the Pacific. The climate is mild and sunny. The island is small and hilly, rising abruptly out of the sea. The land is well wooded and free of underbrush with many areas carefully terraced and cultivated. All details of the burial were handled by the U. S. Army Graves Registration Service, an organization set up for that purpose.

He had not been on board long but in that time had learned much about the equipment and spent much time keeping it in top efficiency. He readily made friends among his shipmates and is sorely missed by all.

Let me again assure you of my heartfelt sympathy, and I want you to know that your son's influence is still

felt in the determination of all hands that his sacrifice be not in vain. He will live in our hearts always.

Sincerely yours,
J.C.HORTON
Lt Commander
U.S. Naval Reserve
Commanding Officer

As I read more of the file I found out that in 1949 Louis' parents had his body exhumed and reinterred in the Long Island National Cemetery. My wife and I went to visit Hannah's Boy. I had a small American flag in my car that I wanted to place on the grave site. My wife said I should read the cemetery literature - nothing can be placed on the grave site. After several minutes of thought I picked up two pebbles. I gave one to my wife and we placed them on the gravestone of Hannah's Boy. Louis was awarded the Purple Heart, the American Campaign Medal and the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal posthumously.

Most of my information came from Jesse's and Louis' personnel records. You can obtain Military Records from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, MO by downloading their form at www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/standard-form-180.html and mailing it as per the instructions on the form. Don't be disappointed if the records you seek are not available. A fire destroyed many military records. I was 50% lucky. Jesse's information was in a shoe box with my mother's family photos.

Every Memorial Day, in front of my house, I place a detailed sign and an American flag in memory of my uncle and cousin.

Michael Marcus is a retired New York City physical education teacher and a former Adjunct Professor at Long Island University. He currently teaches stained glass classes for UFT retirees. He has been a family genealogist for the past 15 years. ☆

Notes from All Over

The Czech National Archives Is Digitizing Jewish Vital Records

Work is underway to scan 4,000 volumes of the records of Jewish births, marriages, and deaths and to make them available on the Czech National Archives web site (www.nacr.cz). The collection of vital records (known as *matriky*) for the Jews of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia start from the 1700s and go through the 1950s. After 300 years, two world wars, the plunder of Jewish institutions by the Nazis, and many difficulties in obtaining information about Jewish records under communism and post-communism, many *matriky* are in poor condition. The cost of restoring a single *matriky* register is approximately \$3,300, but the results can be extraordinary, according to Daniela Torsh, who has personally funded some of the work. She reports, "When I saw the 'new' *matriky*, I was dumbfounded. Pages that had been ripped were like new; bindings that had disappeared miraculously were replaced; and pages that had been loose had been glued into the volumes, and you could not see where." (quoted from *Zichron Notes: Journal of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society*, May, 2011)

Ms. Torsh is working closely with the Czech National Archives to facilitate the restoration process, and she encourages people to make donations to this cause. She

can be reached at danielat1@bigpond.com/.

Genealogist Finds 19th Century Surrogate's Court Records in a Philadelphia Book Store

Unbeknownst to anyone, the earliest Brooklyn records of guardianships, for the years 1830 to 1852, were stolen from the Brooklyn Surrogate's Court. Sandra Hewlett, a professional genealogist and former Brooklyn resident, saw the registers entitled, "Bonds of Guardianship," Vols. 1 through 4, on a desk in a used book store in Philadelphia and recognized their value at once. She purchased them for \$420 and returned them to the Brooklyn Surrogate's Court, at no charge. Ms. Hewlett said, "When genealogists see something like that on a bookseller's desk, it heats our blood. I'm glad the records are finally home. The pages are still intact, the signatures, the seals, the stamps, too." No one knows how or when the books were stolen, but the judges and administrators of the Surrogate's Court are glad they are back where they belong.

Examine an Online Family History to Get Ideas for Writing Your Own

If you are thinking of writing a family history or are now in the processing of recording your information in a book, blog or web site, the JGS of Palm Beach County

recommends that you take a look at “The Grossman Project” (<http://grossmanproject.net/intro.htm>). The project was created by a young man, Max Elijah Grossman, who set out at age 29 to learn the origins of his Grossman family. Encouraged by his grandfather, Max took time off from his graduate studies to research his family, record many interviews, gather documents,

and visit cemeteries. He put all his work together into a well written correctly sourced, online family history. Before relating his family’s story, he provides the context of their lives with detailed histories of Ukraine, the Pale of Settlement, pre-World War I conditions, the Russian Revolution and Jewish life in each of these periods. ☆

New, Recent, and Noteworthy Publications

New Insights on the Holocaust

Martin Winstone, *The Holocaust Sites of Europe: An Historical Guide*. New York: Macmillan, 2010. 458 pages, 46 ill., \$25.00 paperback

From the publisher; “To better understand the significance of the Holocaust, its scale and magnitude, millions of people each year now travel to the former camps, ghettos and other settings for the atrocities. *The Holocaust Sites of Europe* offers the first comprehensive guide to these sites, including much practical information as well as the historical context. It serves as an indispensable guide for anyone seeking to add another layer to their understanding of the Holocaust by visiting these important sites for themselves. Extensive references to the many museums and memorials that commemorate the Holocaust complete this guide.”

Father Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 272 pages, .16 photos, \$17 paperback.

From the publisher: “In this heart-wrenching book, Father Patrick Desbois tells the poignant story of his discovery of mass gravesites of Jews exterminated by Nazi mobile units in the Ukraine during World War II and his journey to honor the victims with proper burials and to bring their stories to life. Using forensic evidence, eyewitness accounts, and new archival material, Father Desbois has created the first definitive account of one of history’s bloodiest chapters.” Published with the support of the U.S. Holocaust Museum.

Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, translated by Ora Cummings. Lincoln, Nebraska, The University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2009. 720 pages, 7 tables. \$50 hardcover.

From the publisher: “*The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* is the most complete account to date of the Soviet Jews during World War II and the Holocaust (1941-

1945). Reports, records, documents, and research previously unavailable in English enable Yitzhak Arad to trace the Holocaust in the German occupied territories of the Soviet Union through three separate periods in which German political and military goals in the occupied territories dictated the treatment of the Jews. This historical narrative presents a wealth of information from German, Russian and Jewish archival sources.” A reviewer wrote: “This study begins with a broad historical background on the Jews in Russia, including the Tsarist regime and the Pale....This book is a supreme achievement and an essential work for all Holocaust libraries.”

Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 906 pages, 250 b/w/ illus., 20 color and 3 color maps. \$75.00 hardcover.

From the publisher: “The establishment and liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto has become an icon of the Holocaust experience. Remarkably, a full history of the Ghetto has never been written. *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* is this history. The authors explain the history of the ghetto’s evolution, the actual daily experience of its thousands of inhabitants from its creation in 1940 to its liquidation following the uprising in 1943 “ A reviewer wrote: “Virtually all aspects of the Ghetto’s existence are treated here in depth. The volume includes an introductory chapter on Jewish settlement patterns up to 1939.” This book was a finalist in the 2010 National Jewish Book Award in the Holocaust Category and was chosen as “One of the Best 100 Books of 2009” by the *Toronto Globe & Mail* in its history and war category.

June Feiss Hersch in association with the Museum of Jewish Heritage/A Living Memorial to the Holocaust., *Recipes Remembered: A Celebration of Survival*. New York: Ruder Finn Press, 2011. 360 pages, ill. \$36.00 hardcover.

From the publisher: “*Recipes Remembered: A*

Celebration of Survival is a tribute to food as nourishment for the body and the soul. ...{It] is a moving compilation of food memories, stories about food, and recipes from Holocaust survivors from Poland, Austria, Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Russia, Ukraine and Greece “ A reviewer writes: “The [survivors’] stories , which are organized by geographical regions across Europe, are often both remarkable and heartbreaking, ranging from recollections of members of the Bielski partisans to recipes help the reader peer into the kitchens of a generation of European Jews and remember their tales through the dishes that sustained them.”

Of Genealogical & Archival Interest

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Faces of America: How 12 Extraordinary People Discovered Their Pasts*. New York: NYU Press, 2010, 304 pages, \$26.95 hardcover

From the publisher: “In *Faces of America*, the Harvard scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explores the family trees of 12 of America’s most recognizable and extraordinary citizens, individuals who learn that they are of Asian, English, French, German, Irish, Italian, Jamaican, Jewish, Latino, Native American, Swiss, and Syrian ancestry. In addition, each of the subjects in *Faces of America* underwent dense genotyping to trace their genetic ancestry on their father’s line, their mother’s line and their percentages of European, Asian, Native American, and African ancestry.....Gates demonstrates that where we come from profoundly and fundamentally informs who we are today.” The *Boston Globe* reviewer said, “[Gates] applies the most rigorous genealogical and genetic tools to the family histories of ethnically distinct Americans, and in doing so touches on the history of not only these individuals, but on the human race itself.”

Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, F. J. Hoogewoud, and Eric Ketelaar, *Returned from Russia: Nazi Archival Plunder in Western Europe and Recent Restitution Issues*. Biltwell Wells, U.K.: Institute of Art and Law, 2007. 349 pages, \$70.00 hardcover. Available from the Society of American Archivists

From a review in *The American Archivist*: “This volume tells the story of the largest theft of archives in history, a heist perpetrated first by Nazi agencies during World War II. Much of the plunder was then stolen a second time at the end of the war by the Soviet Union under Stalin’s orders and held in secret ‘Special

Archives’ for half a century in Moscow. When the loot was rediscovered after the fall of the U.S.S.R., it became the object of a decades-long international dispute.....All those interested in the fate of modern records should familiarize themselves with this extraordinary chapter in history. This book is the definitive account of how some, but not all, of the loot was eventually returned from Russia.....The good news is that the retrieval of cultural property is possible. The bad news is that it can be a costly and complex operation.” ☆

Questioning the Experts

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She’s concerned about locating my family trees and knowing which other records should be preserved. I’m grateful that she cares. We spoke briefly about what’s where, but I need to do more to get my papers organized, identified and prioritized.

DOROT: Thank you.

Renee Stern Steinig, a professional genealogist, has been doing family history research for over 30 years. She has traced thousands of members of her own family and has constructed family trees for numerous clients and friends.

Renee’s personal research has been motivated in good part by the desire to document and memorialize her many family members who were murdered by the Nazis. Her efforts to learn about her relatives’ lives before World War II and their fate during the Shoah brought her to the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Germany, where in May, 2008, she was one of the first Americans to do on-site research. She has also worked with records at Yad Vashem, the U.S. Holocaust Museum, and other repositories around the world and with the many Shoah records that are now online.

Renee is co-founder, past president, and current officer of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Long Island. She is also a board member of Geshet Galicia and moderator of its 2,000 member email discussion group. Last year Renee became vice president of the Young Tlustser Society, a landsmanschaft formed over a century ago by immigrants from Tlustse, Galicia. She is a long time trustee of the Dix Hills Jewish Center and the Half Hollow Hills Community Library.

Renee and her husband live in Dix Hills. Their family tree includes two married daughters and four grandchildren. ☆

QUESTIONING THE EXPERTS

DOROT questions JGS members about their genealogical adventures and elicits their advice for those embarking on similar paths

Interview with Renee Steinig

DOROT: How long ago did you start doing genealogical research and what got you started?

STEINIG: I started to do genealogical research in 1977. My involvement began a year before we moved to Long Island, but then roots research was temporarily derailed by my need to deal with real trees. My interest in genealogy was inspired by the six-generation Stern-Isenburger family tree researched by my first cousin, Asher Joseph. When he gave me the booklet he had published, I thought, "I should do a tree for my mother's side too!" Naively, I envisioned a few months' work. Of course, as you know, family research is not a short-term project. Thirty-four years later, I'm still working on my mother's family -- and many others as well.



DOROT: When you look back over the years, was there anything that you would regard as a breakthrough in your research?

STEINIG: I had a dramatic and emotional experience when I went to the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Germany on the research trip organized by Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Sack shortly after the ITS opened its archives to the public. For years I had tried to learn the fate of my mother's two sisters, Mala Reifer Sieger and Hana Reifer, who lived in Krakow before World War II. Over the years, I made multiple inquiries to the ITS and searched in various other Holocaust sources. I found some Krakow registration records for Mala but nothing more. At the ITS -- where the records are now digitized and people were working off computers -- a sympathetic staff member allowed me to use the paper index cards. I suppose the results could have been the same on the computer but, with the cards in my hand, sitting on the floor in a back corner of the huge room that holds the card files, I may have read them in a different way. Going through

150 or so cards, I found one that I believe was Hana's and it led me to documents about her imprisonment in several concentration camps. I was shocked to learn that she was still alive in February 1945, when she was transferred to Ravensbrück, where the trail ends.

DOROT: Are there any particular areas that you would describe as your own brick walls?

STEINIG: One brick wall involves my mother's family. Her mother, Rivka Fallik, died from the Spanish Influenza pandemic, probably in fall 1918 in what's now Kliszow, Poland, near Mielec. According to my mother-- and she has proven reliable -- her father, Avraham Yakov Reifer, remarried soon after. His second wife was a few months pregnant when he too died -- less than two years after Rivka -- and the baby was named for him. Rivka's six young children, divided among relatives

in three countries, had no further contact with their half brother. A distant relative once told my mother that the boy moved to Palestine in the 1930s with his mother, Regina. Reportedly he had a beautiful singing voice and may have become a cantor. So far I have not been able to locate any record of them in Israel. Perhaps the family story is not valid, or the names changed, or I've left some stones unturned in Israeli sources. In any case, it's quite frustrating that I've probably lost the opportunity to find my half-uncle alive.

DOROT: If there were one set of data, one group of records that you would like to get your hands on but haven't yet, what would it be?

STEINIG: Does this question allow fantasy, wishing for records that apparently don't exist? If so, I would like Jewish vital records to be available for the Mielec area of what's now southeast Poland.

DOROT: You've searched for them?

STEINIG: Yes. They appear to have been lost or

destroyed, maybe during World War II. Mielec was a Jewish administrative district of Galicia where vital records were also kept for a number of smaller surrounding towns. I haven't been able to locate the records filed with the Jewish community when the area was part of Austria or those created post-World War I, under Polish rule. So, for example, I've been unable to find the exact death dates of my grandparents, in order to put up *yahrzeit* plaques in their memory. And there's no hope of getting dates from their gravestones, which stood on what is now the site of the Mielec post office. On the other hand, I should mention that JRI-Poland has uncovered several thousand Mielec records -- including a large body of very informative draft registrations and a Mielec ghetto census. Many of the draft records are indexed in the JRI database.

DOROT: Which areas of the world have been your focus?

STEINIG: The bulk of my research has been on western Galicia (now southeastern Poland), where my mother's family originated; eastern Galicia (now western Ukraine), where my husband's ancestors lived; and the small towns near Frankfurt am Main, Germany, that were home to my father's family.

DOROT: For those regions, what research sources would you recommend for someone just starting?

STEINIG: First of all, I recommend that anyone doing research on Galicia connect to fellow Galitzianers by joining the Geshen Galicia Special Interest Group and subscribing to its JewishGen discussion group. Besides a quarterly newsletter, GG members receive an annual *Family Finder*, with a "Galicia Research Guide" and additional information on identifying and locating Galician towns. Another important source for Galician research is JRI-Poland, which has indexed eastern Galician Jewish records held by the AGAD (Archiwum Główny Akt Dawnych) Archives in Warsaw, as well as western Galician records held by the Family History Library and the Polish State Archives. The Family History Library has also recently filmed a large body of Jewish vital records held by the Lviv archives; these records are available only on microfilm. I also recommend a look at Miriam Weiner's Routes to Roots Foundation database, to see the records available for specific towns. And of course, beginners should look for family and town information on JewishGen.

DOROT: How difficult is it to find information in German archives and to locate German records?

STEINIG: Other than Holocaust-related inquiries, I have done no research in German archives. Much of the information that I have was handed to me on a silver platter by my cousin in the family tree that I mentioned earlier. And then the silver service continued with Hans Kreutzer, who lives in my father's little town, Meerholz. Hans is one of many Gentiles in Germany who serve as voluntary historians of the former Jewish communities of their towns. He does considerable research and often sends me wonderful documents. Although I have not worked in the archives, it is my impression that far more Jewish records survive in Germany than in the Eastern European countries I'm researching. I'm reminded of a conversation I had about 10 years ago on my first trip to Germany. In one of my family towns, a small city called Friedberg, I met with the deputy mayor -- an intelligent man, who knew a lot about the Jewish history of the city and the region. He commented with a smile, "Americans think 100 years is a long time. Here our sense of time is different. In Germany, the Thirty Years War was a dividing point. A lot of material was destroyed then, but past the mid-1600s, the records are here."

DOROT: You do research for other people. Do you find there is a repetitive pattern to your work or does each inquiry require an individual approach?

STEINIG: In general, the path is the same. It involves using censuses, immigration and naturalization records, vital records, draft records, cemetery records -- the basic sources. But I've had a number of clients who wanted to find specific family members, rather than construct family trees. For example, one client's father abandoned the family, moved to California, and remarried there. The client hoped to learn more about her father's life and family. Another client was the child of a long-term extramarital affair. She knew that somewhere in the world she had a half-brother and was eager to find him. In these cases, I make more use of newer tools, such as address databases and social networking sites.

DOROT: That work sounds very challenging.

STEINIG: It's challenging and it's very satisfying. I'm always very nervous about the initial contact, fearing that the person will deny the relationship or refuse to discuss it. But in fact, in almost every case the missing relative has responded very positively and happy, ongoing relationships developed between my clients and their newfound relatives.

DOROT: In general, what strategy seems to work best

when you make these initial contacts?

STEINIG: I usually give a client the phone number I've found and ask him or her to make the call. But a few times, the client was more terrified of making the call than I was and convinced me to do it. I'm far more comfortable with e-mail, where words can be carefully crafted and the recipient has time to absorb the message before responding. Recently, I located a missing relative via one of his relatives on Facebook. She e-mailed her cousin (the half-brother I mentioned earlier), who then wrote me, "Hi, what's this all about?" My response was something like, "I'm not quite sure what to say, so I'll just be direct..." I also quoted from my client's e-mail, where she expressed concern about causing him any distress or discomfort.

DOROT: When you're doing your people searching, what are some good sources?

STEINIG: I make a lot of use of the subscription version of PeopleFinders.com, which lists living people (and sometimes deceased people too) with their addresses, full dates of birth, and even, relatives' names. So it is often the source of, say, a daughter's married name. And I sometimes use PeopleFinders interactively with Facebook.

DOROT: How so?

STEINIG: Say I go on Facebook looking for a common name -- Joan Cohen, for example -- and find dozens of entries. If I find a Joan Cohen on PeopleFinders whose birth date and location are promising, and one of her relatives has a less common name, I'll search for that person on Facebook, hoping that the relative and Joan are "friends." Or I might find someone on Facebook and try to guess his/her location by looking up a few of his friends on PeopleFinders. There's a lot of back and forth.

DOROT: As you've gathered information about your own family, what do you foresee doing with it or what have you done with it?

STEINIG: Not enough. I have written short narratives to send to relatives along with genealogical charts, maps, documents and information about our towns, but I haven't published any family books and I should.

DOROT: Has the information you've gathered about your own family shed any light on who you are?

STEINIG: I think of that often. In general I feel that genealogy gives you a sense of your place in history and your place as part of a larger whole. You can be very philosophical about it: What does it mean to say who you are? It has made me more aware of the forces that shaped my parents and in turn influenced who I am. I think I have a greater understanding than I used to of what my parents went through, as refugees from Hitler's Europe. And having learned about what happened to their family members, I have a greater understanding of some of their fears and anxieties when I was growing up.

DOROT: As you mentioned earlier, you were among the first group of genealogists to go to Bad Arolsen. Based on that experience, do you have any thoughts on what a researcher can gain from that source?

STEINIG: One thing I was unprepared for at the International Tracing Service was the extent of the information on DPs, Displaced Persons. If anything, I made more discoveries there about DPs than about victims.

DOROT: These were people after World War Two who were in Displaced Person Camps.

STEINIG: Yes. I came home with dozens of documents for my friends' DP parents and for friends born in DP camps. In one case, I found a friend's birth certificate, issued by the German town where the DP camp was located. My friend had never before seen his own birth record. Another friend described her elderly father's happiness with the documents I found. She told me that he ran around the house waving the papers and telling family members "You see, it really happened the way I told you!"

My visit to the ITS also shed light on why some of my past inquiries yielded no information. I sent two different inquiries in the 1980s and 1990s about the aunt whose records I ultimately found. Each time the ITS wrote back that they had found nothing. My aunt's name and date of birth were slightly different in my request than on the records, but it was clearly her. I commented to the staff member assigned to help me, "I'm surprised that when I wrote, the ITS didn't ask if this woman could be the person I'm searching for." And the staff member said, "Oh, we had very strict instructions to avoid false positives. We were only supposed to respond if the information we found was an exact match to the inquiry." She said this policy was intended to avoid raising false hope.

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future generation, Psalms 48:14

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