

Update on the Czech Memorial Scrolls Project And the Search for Former Residents of Miroslav

by Chuck Weinstein

In April 2009, Dr. Michael Heppner, Research Director of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Project, gave a talk to the congregation of Temple Beth El of Huntington regarding its Holocaust Torah. The Czech Memorial Scrolls Project was originally established by the Conservative Jewish movement in the UK to ransom and repair some 1,800 Torah scrolls, removed from their congregations throughout Czechoslovakia during World War II and stored in Prague. The communist government of Czechoslovakia agreed in 1964 to sell these Torahs to British Jews as a way of raising hard Western currency in a country whose Jewish population had dwindled from 380,000 in 1938 to fewer than 8,000 by 1945 to about 6,000 by 1964. These scrolls were cleaned and repaired, and there was enough material to come up with 1,564 complete Torahs, although many were not kosher under Jewish law.

The Czech Memorial Scrolls Project then offered these scrolls on permanent loan to congregations in need of a Torah. With the exception of 84 scrolls whose origins could not be verified, each of these scrolls was labeled with the town of origin. A plaque that notes this information is attached to one of the rollers, or *etzi chai*, on each Torah. These Torahs were shipped worldwide, but about 1,000 of them are in the United States, and about 100 of those are on Long Island.

The Orphan Torahs

Temple Beth El's Torah was one of the 84 "orphaned" Torahs. When it was loaned to Temple Beth El, it was assigned to the Czech village of Miroslav, a town for whom no scrolls had been located. In 1938, just prior to the onset of World War II, Miroslav had a Jewish population of about 425 of a total population of 1,250. On October 1, 1938, German troops marched into the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia and annexed the area to Germany. The Jews of Miroslav, like other Jews in the area, fled into the parts of Czechoslovakia the Germans had not annexed. Unfortunately, before most of them could flee the country entirely, Germany invaded and easily captured the rest of the country in March 1939. Hitler arrived in Prague on March 15, 1939, and declared the "Protectorate" of Bohemia and Moravia. For the Jews of Czechoslovakia, the *Shoah* had begun.

Dr. Heppner in his talk stressed the need for the Temple Beth El community to commemorate the Jews of Miroslav. He asked me to help it get started, and I accepted. What I was able to accomplish in a relatively short time was amazing, and the congregation now has a committee working on what to do with the information I acquired. Starting with a list of names of Miroslav residents, provided by Felix Winkler of

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DOROT
The Journal of the
Jewish Genealogical Society

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JGS, Inc. is a not-for-profit,
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JGS, Inc.
15 West 16th Street, New York, NY 10011
Telephone: (212) 294-8326
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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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Printed by The Sheridan Press, Hanover, PA

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

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London, a survivor of Miroslav, I began to see what was available.

The Search for Former Residents of Miroslav

As a genealogical researcher, I felt the first place to start was with a Google search. However, Miroslav is a very popular first name throughout Europe, especially among Czechs. A Google search of the keyword Miroslav yielded 16,800,000 hits! This was clearly not going to be an easy process. The next step was to create an Excel spreadsheet of what I did have. I transferred the list of names to the spreadsheet. Luckily for me, they were arranged in family groups but with little or no other information. Thus, at the beginning, I had no idea of mothers or fathers, sons or daughters. No ages were indicated. My first stop in the process was www.yadvashem.org. There, armed with their Shoah database, I began to put together what I could.

Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial, has a large database of Shoah victims. Most of it comes from Pages of Testimony submitted by family and friends of victims from 1950 to the present. By using the keyword Miroslav in a search, I uncovered 212 Pages of Testimony as well as information from other sources documenting some 230 Jews from Miroslav. Many of them provided birth dates, maiden names, and where and when they had perished. All of this was based on the testimony of people who did not always have firsthand knowledge of the facts, so some suspicion was necessary. I have documented at least eight survivors who had been reported martyred.

Most Czech Jews spent some time in Terezin (Theresienstadt in German), a fortress town that the Germans converted into a “model” concentration camp where inmates were paraded in front of cameras for purposes of demonstrating how humanely the Jews in occupied areas were treated. Terezin, which was largely a transit point, nevertheless provided excellent records for the fates of inmates who were transported elsewhere. These records were documented in a book published after the war and are now available on a searchable database at www.holocaust.cz/cz2/victims/victims. This database is, unfortunately, only available in Czech, but with the help of Google Translator, I was able to figure out how to use it and to gather information. This database provided documented information on over 300 Jews from Miroslav, including their destination after Terezin and their fate. Over 95% of them perished at familiar places

like Dachau, Treblinka, and Auschwitz and unfamiliar places like Riga, Minsk, and Izbica. They wound up at most of the killing places throughout Europe.

What I Found on JewishGen

Next, I turned to JewishGen for help. The JewishGen Family Finder (JGFF) listed 12 researchers with Miroslav as one of their towns. I sent an e-mail to each, explaining what I was interested in and enlisting their help. I posted a similar message to the mailing list of the Austro-Czech SIG as well. I received several responses from family members of victims. Johnny Ungar, of Santiago, Chile, sent me information on his family, the Koblers of Miroslav. Joseph Feitler, of Schenectady, NY, noted the mother of his cousin, Peter Kubicek of Forest Hills, was born in Miroslav. Peter and Johnny were cousins who had not been aware that anyone else in their respective families had survived. Their reunion was heartwarming, to say the least. Peter sent me a photograph from his mother’s album of a wedding that took place in 1926 in Miroslav. He knew who the bride and groom were but could not identify the other 23 people in the picture.

I submitted the picture to JewishGen’s ViewMate, and I received a note from Shaul Sharoni, a genealogist in Jerusalem. He noted that Yad Vashem had Pages of Testimony for the bride and groom and offered to try and find the submitters, who lived in Israel and Germany. He found Miriam Samstag, a 91-year-old woman in Israel whose husband was a nephew of the bride. Her husband, as a boy of 17, was in the picture, and she was able to identify 20 of the 25 people and explain their relationships to the bride and groom (who were, themselves, first cousins). She sent me a lovely note, beautifully handwritten in English, discussing what she knew about over 100 people on my list and adding many children’s names to the list.

Finally, using contact information on the website for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC (www.ushmm.org), I made contact with their Director of Research, Dr. Jude Richter. He invited me to submit my spreadsheet, and said they would look through their voluminous collection to see what they could find. With the help of interns Bashi Packer and Huddy Haller, they have so far sent me copies of over 1,800 pieces of documentation, ranging from ID cards to transport lists to camp logbooks, on the fates of about 250 people on my list.

These documents confirm what Hannah Arendt referred to as “the banality of evil.” On list after list, as if they were describing the shipment of prized cattle to market, the Germans documented the names, occupations, and other information on people who were shipped all over Europe until they were determined to be surplus and then shipped to their deaths. These documents are the work of countless German bureaucrats laboring away on typewriters day by day until the end of the war.

91% of Miroslav Names Were Found

Armed with all this information, I have documented the fates of about 385 of the 425 names on my original list (91%), and have added about 50 other names, most with information. Of the 385, about 65 survived the war, and about 15 are still alive today. Under the leadership of Temple Beth El’s Educator, Diane Berg, the Religious School has integrated a plan to commemorate the children of Miroslav, very few of whom survived. The children of the Religious School are creating memorial tiles, each adorned with the name of a child victim from Miroslav, to be permanently hung in the Religious School wing of the Temple. I am in the process of creating a Yizkor book for Miroslav, which will reside in the Temple Library. Members of the congregation are deciding on a permanent memorial to Miroslav somewhere in the temple. And the Miroslav Torah, which is not kosher, resides in a position of honor in the ark. Every year, it is read from on the Shabbat nearest Yom Ha-Shoah. A specially designed cover notes that the Torah is in memory of the Jews of Miroslav. It does not have the crowns that normally adorn the *etzi chai*, as if in mourning for Miroslav.

In my research, I discovered a beautifully written history

of the Jewish community of Miroslav, written in 1928 by the last rabbi of Miroslav, and this will be part of the Yizkor book as well. Temple Beth El has established the Seymour Lilker Miroslav Memorial Fund, which collects money to provide for the upkeep of Jewish sites in Miroslav, including the old Jewish cemetery, which is relatively intact and has *matzevot* (tombstones) dated from 1791 to 1938. The synagogue in Miroslav, built in 1849, is now used as a community center, but a plaque on the outside explains the history of the building and a large Shoah Memorial, in Hebrew and Czech, stands in front of it. Seymour Lilker z’l, was the congregant in the forefront of acquiring the Miroslav Torah and the one who encouraged us to commemorate the town and its victims.

This is a project that any synagogue can replicate for the community of its Czech Torah. It is a fitting way to memorialize those for whom there is no one left to say Kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer recited in honor of the dead. Even without a list of victims, the resources cited above have tremendous amounts of information. None of this research required me to travel or, for that matter, leave my computer.

Chuck Weinstein is currently President of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Long Island. He has long been involved in the Jewish genealogy community. For further information on this project, he can be contacted at cmw521@earthlink.net.

This article was reprinted with permission of the author. Originally published in the Fall 2010 issue of *JGSLI Lineage* (Volume XX1, Issue #3). ☆

JGS on Facebook



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 more than 470 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.

Upcoming and Current Events

Jewish Genealogical Society

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.

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 of *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 masters 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.

A book-signing will follow the presentation.

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 BRUNCH AND MEETING

NOTE TIME and LOCATION:

Brunch at 11:00 a.m. Program at 12:30 p.m.

92nd Street Y, Bittenwieser Hall

Lexington Avenue at 92nd Street, Manhattan

Program: **“Genealogical Implications of Chasidic Ancestry”**

Speaker: Rafael G. Guber

Evidence indicates that most American Jews have some Chasidic ancestry. Knowledge of this ancestry provides the researcher with a wealth of genealogical information not found in conventional resources. This talk includes a lecture and a PowerPoint presentation which respond to the following questions: Why do most American Jews descend from Chasidic ancestors? How do you determine if you have Chasidic ancestry, and, if so, what type you have? Which Chasidim are associated with which towns and regions? How does this knowledge lead to documents, photographs and new family connections not found in conventional resources? How can you access internally-maintained Chasidic survivor lists and trees that can help locate relatives living and deceased? How do you contact the genealogical representatives in surviving Chasidic communities?

Rafael Guber was an instructor and founder of the Genealogy Project at the Jewish Enrichment Center in Manhattan. He is co-creator, with Janice and Billy Crystal, of “Finding Our Families Finding Ourselves” at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, the world’s largest exhibit ever dedicated to genealogy. Guber was a researcher and narrator for the History Channel’s “Ellis Island” and the award winning film

“Conspiracy of Kindness.” His own family history was documented in the fourth episode of the PBS series “Ancestors.” He has written for or has been quoted in the *New York Times*, *Ancestry*, *Newsweek*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Oprah Winfrey Show*, *People Magazine*, *Real Simple* and many other publications. A member of the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), he has researched more than one hundred families over the last 18 years. He has also exhibited in the Nordic National Museum in Stockholm and the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. His book about the greatest scandal in US immigration history is expected to be in book stores in the spring of 2012.

Location: 92nd Street Y, Bottenwieser Hall, 92nd Street at Lexington Avenue, Manhattan
Admission to Brunch: \$20 for JGS members and \$25 for non-members

Admission to the Lecture: Free to JGS members and \$5 at the door for guests who attend only the presentation at 12:30.

January 15, 2011, 2:00 p.m.

Monthly Program: **“Property Registration Files and Records of Restitution within the Austrian State Archives”**

Speaker: Hubert Steiner

Joining us from Vienna, Austria, is Dr. Hubert Steiner, who will speak about the Austrian State Archives and some of its holdings. Shortly after the Nazi occupation and annexation of Austria, a regulation on the declaration of Jewish property was enacted on April 26, 1938. These property registrations were the first steps in the systematic robbery of Jewish properties. The next month, the Nazi authority dealing with properties was established in Austria to administer the so-called Aryanizations. Most of their files still exist and may be used not only for studying questions of economic or administrative history but also for genealogical research.

After the end of Nazi rule in 1945, property restitution laws were implemented. Ten years later a process for compensation for victims of political persecution began, and in the 1950s and 1960s relief funds were established. These files, which contain many personal biographies, especially about how people escaped and started new lives in exile, can now be viewed in the Austrian State Archives.

It is these same files which are used by the National Fund of Austria for Victims of National Socialism,

which was founded in 1995. In 1998 the Austrian Historical Commission was established to investigate and report on the whole complex of expropriations in Austria during the Nazi era and to develop procedures for restitution and/or compensation (including other financial or social benefits) to victims by Austria. In 2003 the Commission presented its results in a 14,000 page document.

Since 1990 Dr. Steiner has been responsible for the identification of the properties taken from Austrian Jews who lived in the Nazi era. He works closely with the National Fund for Victims of National Socialism and the drop-in centers of the Jewish community. From 1998 to 2003 his primary activity was with Austria’s Historical Commission. At the Austrian State Archives, Dr. Steiner prepared a finding aid for the property lists that all Jews in Vienna were forced to submit in 1938. The list is also available on the web at www.avotaynu.com/HolocaustList/a2.htm. These records are filed by sequence of submission, not by name, so without Dr. Steiner’s work it would be quite impossible to find anything. The property lists contain detailed lists of personal possessions and real property and also may contain data on what happened to the persons concerned, including their exile addresses. Practically all Jews in Vienna in 1938 were forced to submit such a list, because if they didn’t, everything was confiscated.

Until 1987 Dr. Steiner worked in the university library at the University for Educational Sciences in Klagenfurt, Austria, and then was appointed to the Austrian National Archives. His work was recognized in 1999 with the Torberg Medal by the Jewish Community of Vienna, in 2002 with the Golden Honorary Medal of the Austrian Republic, and in 2010 with the Grand Silver Honorary Medal for merits from the county of Vienna.

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 networking with other researchers.

February 19, 2011, 2:00 p.m.

Monthly Program: **“What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past”**

Speaker: Nancy K. Miller

After her father's death, Nancy K. Miller discovered a minuscule family archive containing a handful of photographs, an unexplained land deed, a postcard from Argentina, and unidentified locks of hair. These items had been passed down again and again, but what did they mean? She followed their traces from one distant relative to another, across the country, and across an ocean. Her story, unlike the many family memoirs focused on the Holocaust, takes us back earlier in history to the world of pogroms and mass emigrations at the turn of the twentieth century.

Searching for roots as a middle-aged orphan and an assimilated Jewish New Yorker, Ms. Miller, who is a Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the CUNY Graduate Center, found herself asking unexpected questions: Why do I know so little about my family? How can I understand myself when I don't know my past? The answers lead her to a carpenter in Ukraine, a stationery peddler on the Lower East Side, and a gangster hanger-on in the Bronx. As a third-generation descendant of Eastern European Jews, she learned that the hidden lives of her ancestors reveal as much about the present as they do about the past. In the end, an odyssey to uncover the origins of her lost family becomes a memoir of renewal.

Prof. Miller is the author of several books on feminist criticism, women's writing, and most recently, family memoir, biography, and trauma. She previously directed the Women's Studies Program at Barnard College. Miller has written, edited or co-edited more than a dozen volumes, including *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Acts*, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death*, and *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives*. She is the co-founder and current co-editor of the Gender and Culture Series at Columbia University Press and serves on the Board of Directors of Girls Write Now.

She has been a visiting professor at Harvard University, Hebrew University, and Tel Aviv University and a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. In addition, she is the winner of numerous fellowships and awards, including the Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, and NEH Senior Fellowship. Prof. Miller received her B.A. from Barnard College, M.A. from Middlebury College, and Ph.D. in French at Columbia University. She lives in Manhattan, on the Upper West Side, where she grew up.

A book-signing will follow the presentation.

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 networking with other researchers and access to research materials and computers.

New York City & Environs

Center for Jewish History

December 15, 2011, 6:30 p.m.

Lecture: "Bismarck and the Growth of Modern Anti-Semitism in Germany"

Location: 15 West 16th Street, NYC

Admission: Free, RSVP to mlegaspi@lbi.cjh.org or 212-744-6400

Jewish Genealogy Society of Long Island

November 27, 2011, 2:00 p.m.

"Mapping Madness: The New Exciting Digital World of Mapping"

Speaker: Ron Arons

Location: Mid-Island JCC, 45 Manetto Hill Road, Plainview, NY

Admission: Free to members and non-members

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

"A Working Session on Breaking Down Brick Walls"

E mail your questions regarding your brick walls to programming@jgsli.org

Location: To be announced

Admission: Free to members and non-members

January 22, 2012, 2:00 p.m.

"Hasidim in Every Family Tree"

Speaker: Rafael Guber

Location: To be announced

Admission: Free to members and non-members

February 26, 2012, 2:00 p.m.

"Social Media for Genealogists & Family Historians"

Speaker: Terryn Barill Tower

Location: To be announced

Admission: Free to members and non-members

MetroNY Genealogy & Computers Special Interest Group

December 6, 2011, 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

“New Online Research Resources”

Location: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 36 W. 44th Street, 7th floor, NYC
Admission: Free

January 10, 2012, 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

“Joining International Genealogy Volunteer Projects (at home and abroad)”

Location: New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 36 W. 44th Street. 7th floor, NYC
Admission: Free

February 7, 2012, 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

“Home Research Archives (Best Practices) – Part I

Location: To be announced
Admission: Free ☆

JGS Program Reports

September 18, 2011

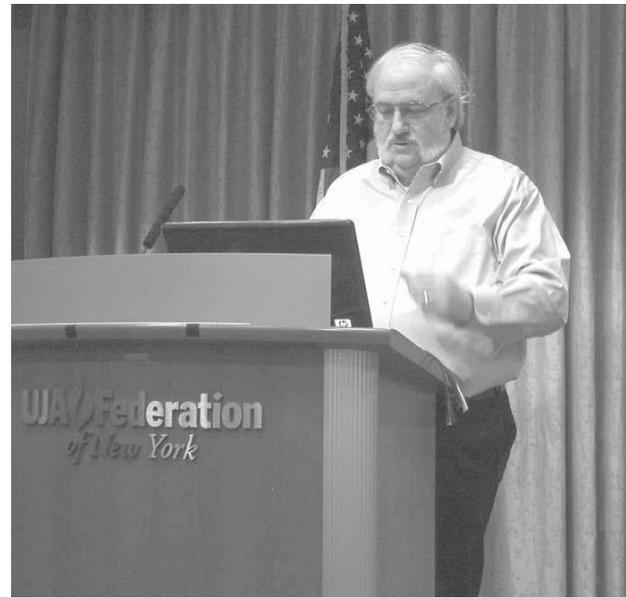
“Genealogy and Computers” by Steve Stein

The initial meeting of the fall, presented by publisher, historian, educator and JGS Executive Council member David Kleiman, was a lively, thought-provoking discussion covering a wide range of topics that gave everyone present a lot to think about as well as act on.

David opened by pointing out how the use of computers has evolved over the last ten to fifteen years from a valuable tool for certain specific tasks in genealogical research, to an essential part of almost everything we do as genealogists, both beginners and experts. It is perhaps second only to interviewing family members as the primary way we gather information. And by “computers,” David pointed out we no longer mean just the PC or Mac; this classification now includes smartphones, tablets, digital cameras, scanners, and many other devices. He led the group through a “brainstorming” session on all the tools and techniques we might use to solve a particular genealogical problem, pointing out how many of them – actually, virtually all of them – involved the computer. Vital records, censuses, newspapers (including obituaries), immigration documents, and many, many more resources formerly available only on paper or microfilm are now routinely available online.

The ubiquity of Wi-Fi hotspots and other ways we “connect” – such as within the UJA building itself for the presentation – adds to the way we communicate our results and access our research. Even people who don’t own a computer can (and do) use computers in the public domain in libraries and research centers such as the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute at our home, the Center for Jewish History.

David then got more specific, identifying some of the specific programs, websites, and such that can be used (some of his favorite websites, including a few he created, are listed at the end of this article), and



David Kleiman

why each might be used. The most popular repository programs, for example, such as Family Tree Maker, Legacy, Master Genealogist, Reunion (Mac only), each have specific advantages and disadvantages, in terms of usability and features. Depending on what a researcher’s specific needs, likes and dislikes, etc. might be, one program might be more applicable to one researcher and a different program for another researcher; there will not be one that will work for all. Usability, printing capability, features to aid in online research, and features to aid in book publishing are examples of specific needs that will differentiate one program from another.

David spent a considerable amount of time discussing and fielding questions about security and privacy. These concerns apply to everything on the internet in general, but especially to genealogy, where personal information may be exposed in unanticipated ways. Social media make this issue even more acute, where people often share highly personal information.

David also discussed alternatives for digitizing, storing,



Audience enjoying David's presentation

editing and publishing photographs and other images. These techniques include relatively inexpensive flatbed scanners, more expensive digital cameras, editing and sharing sites such as Picasa, programs such as Adobe Acrobat, etc. One technique growing in popularity is “tagging” of photographs, such that individuals may be named, and their names pop up when the mouse is hovered over the photograph. This is popular on such sites as Facebook and increasingly popular as a genealogical research technique.

One topic that generated many questions was that of “cloud” computing – using remote computing resources for storing information. The third party running the cloud may operate the genealogy software and may also store your data. Though this technique enables sharing with relatives and other researchers, it comes with some drawbacks, such as worrying about what happens should the operator of the “cloud” go out of business or get bought by another company.

Since it is impossible to capture everything that was discussed in this limited space, some of David’s favorite research websites are listed below. David also recommended following various blogs (web logs) regularly to pick up tips and other information. And finally, join the Metro New York Genealogy and Computers Special Interest Group, run by David, at <http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~metrony> and come to their monthly meetings at the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society at 36 West 44th Street, 7th floor!

GENERAL:

- Cyndi’s List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet (www.cyndislist.com)
- Ancestry.com (www.ancestry.com)
- Genealogical Society of Utah (LDS Library/Mormons) (www.familysearch.org)
- US GenWeb Project (www.usgenweb.org)
- Stephen Morse’s Research Tools (www.stevemorse.org)

NEWSPAPERS:

- Genealogy Bank (www.genealogybank.com)
- World Vital Records (www.worldvitalrecords.com)
- New York Times (www.nytimes.com)
- Brooklyn Daily Eagle (eagle.brooklynpubliclibrary.org; www.fultonhistory.com; www.brooklyn eagle.com)
- Library of Congress (loc.gov)
- New York Public Library (www.nypl.org)
- Brooklyn Public Library (www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org)
- NY State Library (www.nysl.nysed.gov)

MAPS:

- www.davidrumsey.com
- www.maphistory.info

BLOGS:

- Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter (blog.eogn.com)
- GenealogyBlog (genealogyblog.com)
- Family Tree Magazine (blog.familytreemagazine.com)

INSTITUTIONS & MUSEUMS

- American Jewish Archives (www.americanjewisharchives.org)
- American Jewish Historical Society (www.ajhs.org)
- Center for Jewish History (www.cjh.org)
- Jewish Museum (www.thejewishmuseum.org)
- Museum of Jewish Heritage (www.mjhnyc.org)
- U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (www.ushmm.org)
- YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (www.yivoinstitute.org)

JEWISH RESEARCH – General

- JewishGen (www.jewishgen.org)
- International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (www.iajgs.org)

JEWISH RESEARCH – Eastern Europe

- Routes to Roots Foundation (www.rtrfoundation.org)
- Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (www.jri-poland.com)

JEWISH RESEARCH – Early Americas

- Americans of Jewish Descent (www.AOJD-online.net)
- Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr. Jewish Portraits Database (www.loebjewishportraits.com)

- Political Graveyard (www.politicalgraveyard.com)

JEWISH RESEARCH – International

- JewishData.com (www.jewishdata.com)
- SephardicGen.com (www.sephardicgen.com)

LOCAL / ETHNIC GENEALOGY SOCIETIES

- Jewish Genealogical Society (www.jgsny.org)
- NY Genealogical and Biographical Society (www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org)

SYNAGOGUES & CHURCHES

- Shearith Israel (www.1654society.org)
- Mikveh Israel, Philadelphia (www.mikvehisrael.org)
- Beth Elohim, Charleston, SC (www.kkbe.org)
- Touro Synagogue, Newport, RI (www.loebtouro.org)
- Trinity Church, NY (www.trinitywallstreet.org)
- United Methodist Archives (www.gcah.org)

OTHER SITES

- Cemeteries
- City, County, State Historical Societies
- Family Associations
- Government Agencies
- Social Service Agencies

October 16, 2011

“Introducing the JTA Jewish News Archive” by Steve Stein

Attendees at the October meeting were introduced to an exciting new resource, the Jewish News Archive of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), during a lively and interactive session. The presentation was given by Adam Soclof, media and marketing associate at JTA, where he writes for the JTA Archive Blog and coordinates outreach and social media for the JTA Jewish News Archive.

What is the JTA?

The resource, at archive.jta.org, which was launched earlier this year, is free, and consists of about 250,000 articles from the JTA, an international Jewish news agency. The JTA was founded in 1917 by Jacob Landau, and the archive currently covers the years 1923 through 2008. Many of the articles have been published in the *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, as well as in many major Jewish and mass-market newspapers. The articles cover pretty much every topic relevant to the Jewish world - local, national and international - over the past 85 years. The JTA began with bureaus in New York and London, expanded rapidly to Warsaw, Moscow, and other places, and currently includes dozens of bureaus around the world. It is a not-for-profit corporation with no allegiance to a specific branch of Judaism or political viewpoint. JTA was an early adopter of the Internet as a means of distributing its content.

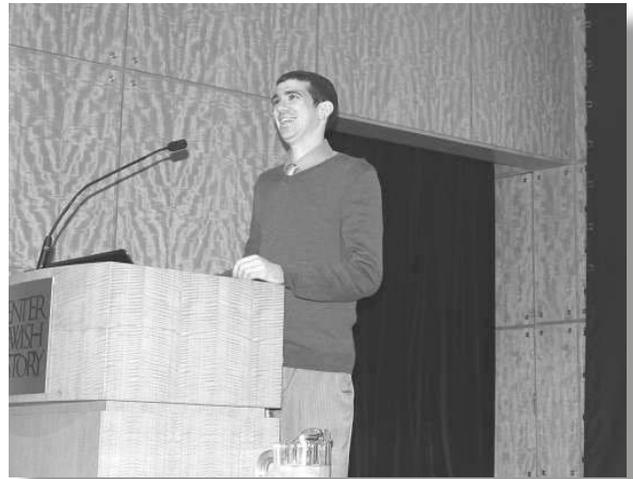
Though Adam is a self-professed neophyte in genealogy, he is well aware of what genealogists do and has great respect for the skills of the genealogical community. So his presentation focused on the most typical searches for surnames, cities, synagogues, cemeteries, Jewish organizations, addresses, events, etc. The website's search engine is built on a Google appliance (software component), and, therefore, the tools for searching, such as quoted phrases, multiple terms, and the like, follow closely on the syntax of Google. Adam's search using the keyword "Vineland" returned a number of articles concerned with this New Jersey agricultural community that long served as a magnet for Jewish farmers in the United States. Hits included at least one article about visits to Vineland by a noted Israeli dignitary, the kind of article that could well be of historical and/or genealogical interest.

Adam then asked for search suggestions from the audience, such as place names or people's names, and many were taken. For each search Adam and the audience discussed the results, and Adam pointed out the relevant genealogical material that could be found. My suggestion of my probable relative Morris Raphael Cohen, the noted philosopher and former CCNY professor, was no exception. I noticed later that one of the hits, the obituary of Professor Cohen's father, gave the names of his heretofore unknown siblings.

In addition to the Google-powered search, the site provides additional features such as bounding by date; sorting by relevance or date; being able to generate a PDF file; and adding articles to one's personal "archive," similar to Ancestry's "shoebox" feature. And Adam gave some helpful hints about how to deal

with event dates vs. dateline dates (using different date formats), and how to find obituaries (use the keyword "dead"). Use of other common journalistic style words such as "yesterday" and "last night" can also be helpful when applied appropriately.

A limitation of the Google approach to the search is the lack of phonetic or soundex capability, which exists on sites with more of a genealogical focus. So searches for surnames and place names are more successful when common spelling variations are included as search terms.



Adam Soclof of the JTA

Adam gave some background on how the archive was constructed. It uses OCR technology (optical character recognition), where the computer is able to recognize characters and spaces, thus constructing words, and "tagging," which enables the use of alternate terms to find certain keywords (such as "Babi Yar" for the 1941 massacre at Kiev, Ukraine). In general, the process has proven to be highly accurate; however, as OCR may introduce an error now and then, the site has a feedback mechanism which enables users of the site to send corrections to Adam and others for investigation and resolution.

During the Q&A, our President Steve Siegel suggested that it might be possible to reconstruct the missing years, 1917 through 1923, by finding the JTA byline in Jewish and other newspapers already available in online archives. JTA may look into this possibility.

Try out the archive! (I did) And while you're at it, check out Adam's blog.

Steve Stein is a member of the JGS Executive Council. He is a software systems professional in the telecommunications industry and has been researching his own and his wife's Eastern European genealogies for more than thirty years. ✧

Scenes from the “DC-2011 - A Capital Conference,” the 31st IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, held August 14-19, 2011



JGS members at the Gala Banquet: Left to right: Lillian Faffer, Renee Stern Steinig, Hadassah Lipsius, Jerry Liebowitz, Nina Lenz Sitron, Howard Rotblatt, Schelly Talalay Dardashti, Gary Mokotoff, Roni Seibel Liebowitz, Paul Silverstone, Phyllis Kramer, Bob Friedman, Eden Joachim



Gary Mokotoff, publisher of Avotaynu in the Vendor Room



Gloria Berkenstat Freund in the Resource Room



Renee Stern Steinig; Roni Seibel Liebowitz, Shelley Kellerman Pollero, Nina Lenz Sitron at Gala Banquet



Ladies dancing to the music of The Robyn Helzner Trio at the Gala Banquet



Paterson, New Jersey Birds of a Feather Group



People with awards (holding plaques) : Left to right: Toby Brief, Phyllis Kramer, Michael Tobias



JGS members standing: Hadassah Lipsius, Gloria Berkenstat Freund;
Roni Seibel Liebowitz. Sitting: Linda Cantor, Renee Stern Steinig

Free Access to 1940 U.S. Census on Ancestry.com

Soon after the 1940 U.S. Census is released on April 2, 2012, all images and indexes will be accessible for free on Ancestry.com through the end of 2013. The data will be made available in sections as soon each one is converted digitally to online availability. The exact dates of availability will be based upon when the streaming of the data begins. That date will be announced closer to the actual release of the data. Upon completion, more than 3.8 million original document images with over 130 million records will be available. Fields that may be searched include name, gender, race, street address, county, and state. For comprehensive information about the 1940 census, visit www.archives.gov/research/census/1940.

How to Find Difficult Ancestors

[About.com](http://www.about.com) has eight tips posted by Kimberly Powell for tracking down hard-to-find family members. Go to <http://tinyurl.com/3gs2n12>

Footnote.com is now Fold3.com

[Footnote.com](http://www.fold3.com) has changed its website name to www.fold3.com. The name is derived from the third fold in a traditional military flag folding ceremony to honor a departing military veteran. From the site users can access more than 74 million images of documents and photographs from the Revolutionary War up to today, plus extensive genealogical resources including city directories.

Jewish History in Eastern Europe Preserved on Centropa

Since 2000 Centropa: A Collection of Jewish Memories (www.centropa.org) has interviewed 1,250 elderly Jews still living in the 16 countries between the Baltic and the Aegean Seas and has collected and digitized 25,000 family photos. The interviewers spent many hours with each respondent, asking them to paint a picture of the world they grew up in, as well as the world they experienced after the war. One may search by name, by country, or by key words. The site also has short films, lessons plans for teachers, recipes and travel information by Ruth Ellen Gruber.

Phase I of the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine Is Now Online

This site, hosted by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, contains a vast amount of information on all aspects of Ukrainian history, folklore, religion, culture, etc., including a comprehensive article on the history of Jewish life in Ukraine from earliest times to the present. It has many links to associated topics that do not yet have their own separate entry but are discussed in various other entries. The site, www.encyclopediaofukraine.com, will eventually contain the completely revised and updated contents of the five-volume *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* (published by the University of Toronto Press, 1984-93) and will be the most comprehensive source of information in English on Ukraine.

How to Research House Histories in the Five Boroughs

Thanks to the New York Public Library's Milstein Division of United States History, Local History & Genealogy, there is now an on-line beginner's guide to useful resources for researching house histories in the five boroughs of New York City, available from www.nypl.org/blog/2011/10/14/guide-researching-your-homes-history

Frequently Asked Questions about DNA

The International Society of Genetic Genealogy (ISOGG) has posted a list of frequently-asked questions on the subject of genetic genealogy at www.isogg.org/ggfaq.htm. The mission of this organization is to educate individuals on the subject of genetics in genealogy.

JewishGen Update for 2011

JewishGen published a comprehensive list of all the items that you can find when you go to [jewishgen.org](http://www.jewishgen.org). The document has the most recent descriptions of JewishGen's Resources and Databases, Special Interest Groups (SIGs), Hosted Organizations, Support, and more. You can view the update at <http://tinyurl.com/3173mfs>. ☆

Notes from All Over

How Privacy Rules Affect Access to Birth Records of Holocaust Victims

“The fact that countries have rules that keep birth records private, usually for 100 years, means today that births prior to 1911 are in the public domain. In other words, the birth records of all Holocaust victims murdered when they were 34 years old or older are in the public domain. Next year, all birth records of victims who were 33 years old will be available, the following year 32 years old, etc.” Reprinted from *Nu? What's New: The E-zine of Jewish Genealogy from Avotaynu*. (Vol.12, Number 27, July 10, 2011).

Privacy Rules & Identity Theft

“Identity theft is not caused by access to vital records! We must make that fact known, not only when legislation is introduced, but also proactively so legislation/regulations will not be introduced from the start. This is a global problem, not simply an American one...Little or no proof exists of a grandmother's marriage or death certificate sparking a major crime” Reprinted from “Present and Future Access to Public Records Depends on You” by Michael Goldstein, President, IAJGS, *Avotaynu*, Vol. XXVII, Number 2, Summer 2011, p. 33.

Cemeteries for Patients of Rockland Psychiatric Center to Be Restored

Five cemeteries hold the graves of former residents of the Rockland Psychiatric Center, originally the Rockland State Hospital, in Rockland County, NY. All the cemeteries have been neglected over the years, with some graves unmarked and others with gravestones and grave markers which are buried or obscured by high grass. The Rockland Psychiatric Center Board of Visitors and outside advocates for the mentally ill, including historians and archivists, are planning to restore two of the cemeteries in the near future. Their goal is to provide some dignity to the deceased by putting names and life spans on the headstones. Because of HIPAA laws, names cannot be included without the approval by family members.

If you have some family connection to the Rockland Psychiatric Center and would like to help document the names of former patients, contact JGS member Eden Joachim, esjoachim@optonline.net For more information see the article in the *Journal*

News of September 30, 2011 at www.lohud.com/article/20110930/NEWS03/109300337/Advocates-seek-dignity-for-patients-buried-in-anonymity.

Yad Vashem in Deal for Hidden Holocaust Files

As a result of a breakthrough deal with the Lithuanian National Archives, documents on the murder of Jews in that country will be made available to researchers worldwide after generations in which they were hidden or inaccessible. The files will be copied and made available through the Yad Vashem memorial project. Similar agreements are expected to be reached soon with representatives of Ukraine and Belarus.

Yad Vashem director Avner Shalev said, “This is an important achievement because in many cases the documentation of the murder of Jews in former Soviet territories was on the level of local bureaucratic communications.” Among the documents revealed through the agreement will be local appeals to Nazi authorities regarding Jews, official records of the confiscation of Jewish property, and lists of the names of Jews in various professions. Researchers said the new files are expected to shed light on the realities of day-to-day life for Jews in the region, particularly during 1941-1943.

More NYC Vital Records Indexes Are On-line

The Italian Genealogical Group www.italiangen.org reports the following updates to indexes of various groups of vital records:

New York City Deaths

Brooklyn: 1862-1897

Manhattan: 1868-1897

New York City (all boroughs): 1898-1948

New York City Grooms

Kings County: 1864-1907

Manhattan: 1866-1907

Richmond: 1898-1907

Bronx: 1898-1907

Queens: 1905-1907

New York City (all boroughs): 1908-1937

New York City Brides

Brooklyn: 1871-1918 and 1928-1937

Bronx: 1899-1937

Queens: 1904-1937

Manhattan: 1866-1937
Staten Island: 1898-1937

New York City Births: 1880-1909

Suffolk County Marriages: 1908-1935

Nassau County Marriages: 1908-1935 ☆

Volunteers Needed to Help Create & Update More Vital Records Databases

The Italian Genealogical Group reports that that it is very simple for volunteers to assist in its work. The only thing required is a spreadsheet program such as Excel or Microsoft Works, or you could even use a word processor program. Volunteers are asked to type a name, a date and a certificate number. The Italian Genealogical Group mails the material to you, and you can do the work at home. If you can give a little back to genealogy, contact John Martino at JohnM16881@aol.com. Financial contributions are always welcome and may be sent to John Martino, Project Coordinator, 49 Brookhill Lane, Huntington, NY 11743.

New, Recent, and Noteworthy Publications

About Jewish Life in Germany

Nils Roemer, *German City, Jewish Memory: The Story of Worms*. Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2010. 328 pages, 46 illus. \$35 paperback

From the publisher: "This is a remarkable, in-depth study of Jewish history, culture and memory in a historic and contemporary Germany city. German and Jewish ways of life have been interwoven in Worms, Germany for over a thousand years. Despite radical changes brought about by expulsion of Jews, wartime devastation, social advancement, cultural and religious renewal, and the Jewish community's destruction during the Holocaust, the Jewish sites of Worms display a remarkable degree of continuity, which has contributed to the development of distinct urban Jewish cultures, memories and identities." A reviewer said, "Roemer's new book opens up an exciting new way of telling the story of one city."

Rebecca Boehling and Uta Larkey, *Life and Loss in the Shadow of the Holocaust: A Jewish Family's Untold Story*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 350 pages, 42 b/w illus. \$29.99

From the publisher: "A family's recently discovered correspondence provides the inspiration for this fascinating and deeply moving account of Jewish family life before, during and after the Holocaust. Rebecca Boehling and Uta Larkey reveal how the Kaufmann-Steinberg family was pulled apart under the Nazi regime and left divided between Germany, the US and Palestine. The family's unique eight-way correspondence across two generations brings into

sharp focus the dilemma of Jews in Nazi Germany facing the painful decision of when and if they should leave Germany." A reviewer said, "Among the many strengths of this superb study is the extent to which it challenges persistent notions concerning gender roles, relations with non-Jewish Germans, and attitudes toward traditional Judaism within Germany Jewry."

About Jewish Life in Muslim Lands

Aron Rodrigue and Sarah Abrevaya, editors, *A Jewish Voice from Ottoman Salonica: The Ladino Memoir of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi*. Transliterated and translated by Isaac Jerusalemi. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. 432 pages, 3 maps. \$50

From the publisher: "This book presents for the first time the complete text of the earliest known Ladino-language memoir, transliterated from the original manuscript, translated into English and introduced and explicated by the editors. The memoirist, Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi (1820-1903), wrote about daily lives of Ottoman Jews at a time when the long ascendant fabric of Ottoman society was just beginning to unravel. His vivid portrayal of life in Salonica, a major port in the Ottoman Levant with a majority-Jewish population, thus provides a unique window into a way of life before it disappeared as a result of profound political and social changes and the World Wars."

Aron Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims: Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Modern Times*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. 320 pages, 2 maps. \$24.95 paperback

From the publisher: “Following the rise of Islam, many Jewish communities lived in predominantly Muslim lands. Muslim-Jewish co-existence was not seriously challenged until the modern period when European colonization and the emergence of Zionism and Arab nationalism led to growing friction and conflict, resulting in the mass departures of Jews from these lands in the middle of the twentieth century. *Jews and Muslims* throws light on the history of these communities and on the developments that led to the snapping of ties between Jews and Muslims. It interweaves analysis with translations of primary documents drawn from the archives of a French-Jewish organization, the Alliance Israelite Universelle, that had an extensive Jewish school network around the Mediterranean basin and whose teachers reported extensively on local events and trends over the decades.” A reviewer called this “A delightful book, full of erudition and charm.”

Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*. New York: Nextbook Press and Schocken, 2011. 304 pages, \$26.95

From the publisher: “MacArthur-winning poet and translator Peter Cole and acclaimed essayist Adina Hoffman tell the story of their retrieval from an Egyptian *geniza* (a repository for worn out texts) of the most vital cache of Jewish manuscripts ever discovered. Their tale of buried scholarly treasure weaves together unforgettable portraits of Solomon Schechter and the other heroes of this drama with explorations of the medieval documents themselves—letters and poems, wills and marriage contracts, Bibles, money orders, fiery dissenting tracts, fashion-conscious trousseaux lists, prescriptions, petitions, and mysterious magical charms. Presenting a panoramic view of nine hundred years of vibrant Mediterranean Judaism, Hoffman and Cole bring modern readers into the heart of this little-known trove, whose contents have rightly been dubbed ‘the living Sea Scrolls.’ Part biography and part meditation on the supreme value the Jewish people has long placed on the written word, *Sacred Trash* is above all a gripping tale of adventure and redemption.”✧

CORRECTION

In the Summer issue of DOROT, the final sections of the interview with genealogical expert Renee Steinig were accidentally omitted. We apologize for the error and herewith include the missing material.

STEINIG: 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.

DOROT: The lesson from that seems to be that, if possible, you should try to do the research yourself.

STEINIG: Yes, you should look yourself, even if you sent inquiries in the past.

DOROT: Have you thought about what you’re going to do with the genealogical papers that you have accumulated?

STEINIG: I haven’t given enough thought to preservation. My younger daughter tells me that she has occasional nightmares about dealing with my “stuff.” 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.

Metro Area Repository Round-up

The Museum of the City of New York Re-Opens to On-site Researchers

Now that its storage facilities have been renovated, the Museum of the City of New York will resume accepting appointments from researchers interested in using its collections of manuscripts and ephemera, prints, drawings and photographs, and holdings on New York City theatre history.

Its manuscript and ephemera holdings include papers related to notable New Yorkers, organizations, schools and various types of businesses. The prints, drawings and photographs collection documents the built environment of the city from its earliest days to the present, and includes the works of Berenice Abbott, Jacob Riis, the archives of *Look* Magazine, and much more. The theatre collection contains 40,000 folders, documenting theatrical activity from the 18th century to the present, including playbills, manuscripts, advertising materials, reviews, obituaries, clippings and autographs.

To request an appointment to conduct on-site research, one must send a request to research@mcny.org, describe your research need and the specific collection of interest. Before contacting the Museum to inquire about a research appointment, the Museum requests that you visit the Museum's Collections Portal (collections.mcny.org), which has over 100,000 digital images of photographs, negative, prints, drawings, postcards, and maps from the Museum's collections.

The Museum also holds collections of Costumes and Textiles, Decorative Arts and Furniture, and Paintings and Sculpture; however, due to the special preparation necessary for handling these objects, access is extremely limited. For specific inquiries into these collections, please email research@mcny.org.

Volunteer Opportunities at the National Archives in New York City

The National Archives has openings for volunteers interested in working as public program assistants, archival staff aides, genealogical staff aides or research room assistants.

Public program assistants help to prepare and present talks on how to do research in the records of the National Archives. They may also help staff members to represent the National Archives at various off-site conferences.

Archival staff aides, preferably those with an archival or library science education, are needed to assist in the arrangement, description and preservation of federal records from the 18th through 21st centuries. The work includes creating indexes of records; unfolding, flattening, and re-folding records; arranging and describing records; performing holdings maintenance and other archival projects.

Genealogical staff aides assist visitors in learning about the holdings of the National Archives, how to use the microfilm, photocopy machines and other types of equipment. Most visitors are researching family histories, some for the first time. Volunteers may also assist staff in reviewing original records in response to written inquiries.

Research room assistants work in the research room greeting visitors and answering questions about the types of materials available. They assist visitors using the public access computers, microfilm readers, copiers, and publications. They also transfer research calls to staff.

For more information or to apply, visit the National Archives & Records Administration office at 201 Varick Street (at Houston Street), 12th floor, contact Christopher Zarr, 866-840-1752, or go to www.archives.gov.

Catskills Institute Announces New Website

The Catskills Institute Archive is the world's largest repository of material on the Jewish experience in the Catskills, and thanks to Brown University and its Center for Digital Scholarship, its records are now available on-line. Go to library.brown.edu/cds and type Catskills Institute as the keywords. You may search for all sorts of materials by hotel or bungalow colony name, by type of object (such as menu, postcard, stationery) or by thumbnail. The site has a large collection of Alfred Landis postcards, and the bulletin board has an automatic posting mechanism for your queries. Also available are an annotated booklist, texts of mountain memoirs and historical essays, Catskills poetry, interviews, reports of conferences and research papers, plus links and resources. ☆

QUESTIONING THE EXPERTS

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

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

Interview with Robert J. Friedman

DOROT: Bob, when did you start work on genealogy and what got you started?

FRIEDMAN: I started working on my family genealogy in December 1994, almost 17 years ago. When I was growing up, I had a close relationship with my father's parents, who were both born in Hungary. I heard many stories from my grandfather about the old country, so I was always curious to find out more about what life was like and who was who back then. But for many years I never really pursued it. When I was in my late thirties, a relative on my mother's side of the family started doing that family tree. His work eventually inspired me to collaborate with him on my mother's side and then to start working on my father's side on my own.

DOROT: So we've established the fact that at least part of your family came from Hungary. Does that define part of the geography of your research?

FRIEDMAN: Yes, it does. My grandparents were born in Hungary in territory that is now part of Romania. Prior to that, the family came from a part of Hungary that is now territory of Slovakia. So I have research interests in Romania, Hungary and Slovakia on my father's side. Then again, on my mother's side, they came from the former Suwalki gubernia in Russian Poland, along the borders between Lithuania, Poland and the former East Prussia, which is now part of Russia.

DOROT: That's a large number of countries when you're talking about just two people!

FRIEDMAN: Essentially, that's true. My mother's father never wanted to talk about his family, so we don't really know where he came from. That's my

biggest stumbling block in terms of pursuing all of my family lines.

DOROT: Was that grandfather born in the U.S.?



Robert J. Friedman

FRIEDMAN: He was born in Boston in 1890. Apparently his home life was not too happy. When he was 18, he signed up with the Marines, and he served in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and in Cuba, all in a period of four years, from 1908 to 1912.

DOROT: Looking back at your research, did you make any discovery that opened the doors wider for you?

FRIEDMAN: There were actually two such occasions. The first was when I hired a Romanian professor, Ladislau Gyemant, to go into the archives in Oradea and look up the Jewish vital records for the villages

that my father's family came from in the late 1800s. He identified dozens and dozens of records that he copied and translated for me, and that really got me started. The second breakthrough came shortly after 2001. For my 50th birthday we decided it was time for me to go to Europe finally and visit my ancestral country of Hungary. So my wife and I went to Budapest and visited the grave of a cousin who was buried there. When we got to the grave we noticed that someone had left flowers recently. I was unaware of any living relative in Budapest so it was thrilling and exciting to know that someone was there remembering my cousin. I tore out the page for "Friedman" from the Budapest telephone book in my hotel room, took that back to New York with me, and ended up writing a letter to all 30 Friedmans who were listed to see if they knew my cousin and were connected to my family. I eventually got one response that proved to be a connection to two brothers from my family, who had survived Auschwitz and gone back to Romania. They eventually left Romania for Germany and had established apartments in Budapest, so they did eventually receive my letter in

the mail. That was a huge breakthrough because that's one of the goals we all have, to reunite with family.

DOROT: Are they the ones who left the flowers?

FRIEDMAN: As it turns out, no, but they did know who had left them. They said that my late cousin, after his wife died, became friendly with another woman, and it was her family who was leaving the flowers.

DOROT: Have you also run into brick walls in your research and do you have any counsel for others who have had the same experience?

FRIEDMAN: Everybody runs into brick walls sooner or later. You try all the familiar sources, you try all the possible spellings that you can imagine or that the search engine will concoct for you, and you still are left with no hits or confusing information that contradicts itself or is inconclusive. My advice is to put it aside for a while and go work on other projects and then come back to it with a fresh mind. You might have come across new sources to check, or new sources may have become available that weren't available previously, or you'll have an insight as to where to look that was different from the first time.

DOROT: Are you continuing your personal research in addition to working with clients?

FRIEDMAN: Absolutely. I was just doing research on my own family over the weekend. There are a huge number of resources available in the world. Some of them used to require travel to get to or a lot of waiting time for microfilms to be shipped out from the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City. Now, so much more is available on the Internet. As I said before, if you just wait a little while, some resources that weren't available or easily accessible two or three years ago may become so. I found that was the case for some Hungarian records from the early 20th century that were not so easy to come by a few years ago.

DOROT: For someone researching that same region, where do you go?

FRIEDMAN: First of all, in many places in the world, and, in this case specifically Hungary, there are for privacy reasons time restrictions on when records are released to the public. If you think of 100 years as a common rule, that means since 15 years ago when I started research, 15 more years of records have become available. In the case of Hungary, that means that records

from 1895 (when civil registration began in Hungary) until 1910 can now be accessed. Those records are not only in the archives in Hungary, but they also have been microfilmed and scanned by the Mormons and posted on the Internet. So in those 15 years I have gone from a completely inaccessible resource to one that I can look at on the computer in my home.

DOROT: Have you had reason to deal directly with the archives and other institutions in Hungary and Romania, and if so, what has been your experience?

FRIEDMAN: Generally speaking the Romanian archives have not been responsive to mail requests for records. I haven't tested this recently, but my understanding is that you had to go to their archives in person to get material. I have had some success in writing to Hungarian archives in getting summary reports back on materials that they had, such as vital records and censuses. Generally they are not quite as easy to deal with as, say, the Polish State Archives. Thanks to the resources on Jewish Records Indexing-Poland, you can get a specific citation for a record, order it directly from the Polish State Archives, and in a matter of a month or two you will have it. It hasn't evolved to that level yet in Hungary or Romania. But on the other hand, many of the records are now showing up on the Internet, so that's even better.

DOROT: You were formerly the Director of the Ackman & Ziff Genealogy Institute at the Center for Jewish History.

FRIEDMAN: That's right. I was there for four years. I enjoyed my time there. I worked with a lot of the volunteers who came from the Jewish Genealogical Society, and I actually started there as a volunteer myself. During the time that I was a volunteer, I served on the JGS board. So there is a very close relationship between the JGS and the Genealogy Institute, and I tried to strengthen that as much as I could.

DOROT: There must have been a wide range of questions that were brought to you.

FRIEDMAN: Among the most fascinating inquiries that we received were from people who had been raised as Christians and were practicing Christians for most of their lives, but who decided at some point that they felt Jewish or thought that there were certain Jewish practices that were carried out in their family without being acknowledged as such. They wanted to trace their roots back to Spain, in most cases. These were often

Latino-American people. In many cases I was at a loss to tell them how to fill in 500 years of missing history, but I did encourage them, like anyone else, to start with their immediate family, their living relatives, and work backward to see if they could find at some point where they came from, how their family traveled, and maybe that would connect somehow with a place where Sephardic Jews were known to have lived.

DOROT: Do you know if some of the people who came to you continued their research?

FRIEDMAN: Unfortunately, one of the disappointing aspects of working at the Genealogy Institute was that most people who received help from us didn't report back to us. Occasionally I did get some positive feedback from people who returned months or years later and said, "Remember the day that I was here?" And they would tell us how they pursued their research and what they found.

DOROT: In your work with private clients, are there areas of documentation or information that you use that non-professional family researchers might not be aware of? Perhaps in the area of vital records?

FRIEDMAN: I would say one type of record that perhaps is under-utilized would be probate records. You don't usually find them indexed on Ancestry.com or most of the proprietary web sites on line. But they can provide very detailed information about next of kin and descendants of someone who died. They don't necessarily have to have a very large estate. But if you don't look to see if there is a letter of administration or a will that was filed, you won't know. That entails usually going to a courthouse. Perhaps that's a venue that many genealogists in New York City are not necessarily comfortable with or not familiar with, because so much attention is given to things like the census and naturalization and immigration.

DOROT: How complicated is it to research the probate records?

FRIEDMAN: In Manhattan, for example, it's pretty easy. You go to the same building that houses the Municipal Archives, the Surrogate's Court building at 31 Chambers Street, and you go upstairs to the fourth floor. It's pretty much all computerized now. There are different databases so it can be tedious to open up the different files and scroll through the alphabet in different time periods. But aside from being a little cumbersome, it's not that hard to find. Then you fill out a request form on the computer and it gets printed out. After they

retrieve the files from storage, you'll get an e-mail from them telling you it's ready, and then you come back to the courthouse to look at the files. You can make all the copies you want. It's really worthwhile.

DOROT: The experience of some people using that record room is that the personnel there can be very accommodating in helping walk you through the process.

FRIEDMAN: That's absolutely true. I've always found them to be extremely cordial and respectful and they do not fit the stereotype of the "It's-not-my-job" kind of civil servant.

DOROT: Are there other research sources that you find useful?

FRIEDMAN: When it comes to finding ancestral towns in Europe, I've always been a map lover. I've found that maps are invaluable in trying to ascertain where my family came from. There are clues in documents. But with all the changes in place names and district boundaries, it really pays to go and look at as many detailed maps as possible over a span of years, anywhere from the early 1800s to the 1930s or 1940s. And don't just rely on one source. Use both maps and gazetteers. I find some online gazetteers helpful but also there are some only available in print that are extremely useful. It's not at all possible to rely strictly on what used to be called ShtetlSeeker but is now the JewishGen Communities Database. There are many, many locations that won't be found by that method alone. You have to use it in conjunction with others.

DOROT: Can you give us an example?

FRIEDMAN: In Europe and in the United States too, for that matter, there are often many towns that have the same name even within fairly close proximity to each other. You have to look for clues to distinguish between one town with the same name and the other. Sometimes you won't

know what those clues are until you look up in the gazetteer and see the alternate names for those towns. For example, in my father's family there were two towns within the same county in Romania that had the same name. One was near Belenyes (Beius in Romanian). The other one was further north on the other side of the Körös (Cris) River in Romania. Only by looking in the gazetteer or on a map could I see that one was called Tiganestii de Beius and the other was Tiganestii de Cris. The further confusion for me is that my family lived in other towns near both of them. So I wasn't quite

able to be absolutely, 100 percent certain which town they lived in. But judging by the time period, I think I narrowed it down to the one near Beius.

DOROT: Where is a good place to find these maps?

FRIEDMAN: There are certainly many more map sites on line now with very detailed historical maps. But if you want to put your hands on the real thing, at least once, the place I highly recommend is certainly the New York Public Library's Map Division at 42nd Street, which is one of the premier map collections in existence.

DOROT: You say you're still finding new data, but do you see yourself at some point having gone as far as you can go with your personal work, or is this an open-ended project?

FRIEDMAN: For me, it's definitely open-ended, because I know that there are many, many resources in more obscure and more-difficult-to-access places. Talking about Poland, there are various different censuses and land owner records from the patronymic era when there were no surnames. It is, therefore, a big challenge to try to do the analysis to see which of your family members might have been living in a certain time and place. I haven't yet had the time to concentrate on that advanced level of analysis. So that's open for research. And, as I said, in terms of my maternal grandfather's family, there is no oral history to go on and it's really a challenge for me to get over or around that brick wall. I may be scratching my head over that for the rest of my life.

DOROT: That leads to this question: if there were one set of data that you have not put your hands on yet but would like to get, what would it be?

FRIEDMAN: I would have to say at this point, what I would like to have available to me sooner rather than later would be 20th century vital records from any number of places, whether it be New York City or towns in Hungary and Romania. In Hungary and Romania, it's more to find out who married whom and what children they were having during the period up to and through 1950, who survived the Holocaust and who was killed in the Holocaust. Without knowing who was married and who was born, it's hard to put names to those people.

Locally, in New York City, in my professional work, I'm finding that I want to access at least death records from the 1950s and 1960s, if not later. Those are just

not available to the public now, only to families of the individuals who died. It's my understanding that the Department of Health could release more records to the Municipal Archives so that they could be accessible to the public, but for whatever internal reasons, the DOH has not done that yet.

DOROT: What do you intend to do with all the personal family data and information that you've accumulated?

FRIEDMAN: I keep a computer database with detailed information about the sources where I found the data, as well as the actual facts themselves, so that anyone coming after me will know where to look to see the evidence of our ancestors of our family history. I would like to combine into that database as many images of people and documents as I possibly can. Ultimately I would like to see it perhaps become some type of multi-media thing on the web. I haven't decided whether I would like it to be open to the worldwide web, or just to a private web site where I would have control over who may access it. At some point, a web presence seems to be the way to go. In the past I would have thought of a book or CD, which might happen also, but I think, looking to the future, something on the web would probably be more effective.

DOROT: Thank you.

Robert J. Friedman was Director of the Center for Jewish History's Ackman-Ziff Family Genealogy Institute from 2003-2007 and currently performs genealogical research for individual clients. Mr. Friedman graduated from Bronx H.S. of Science, Columbia and Hunter Colleges, and Long Island University, where he earned an M.S. in Library and Information Science (Archives and Records Management certificate).

Mr Friedman's personal family history investigations focus on Hungary, Romania, and the former Suwalki gubernia, as well as the states of California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, New York, and Ohio. He has conducted on-site research at archives, libraries, and cemeteries in the U.S., Hungary, and Romania, and corresponded with several additional European archives.

Active in the Hungarian and Romania-Moldova SIGs, Mr. Friedman also participated in the IAJGS Cemetery Project and the JewishGen Yizkor Book Project, served on the Executive Council of JGSNY, and volunteered at the Museum of Jewish Heritage and YIVO Institute. ☆

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