

Beginning Jewish Research

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One of the very first steps in finding your Jewish ancestors is to determine where they came from. For most Jewish researchers, their search begins with a grandparent or other relative who came to America from Europe. The key to a successful search is identifying the birthplace of that immigrant ancestor. In this class we will identify sources and records to help in locating that birthplace. While there are many different sources that may identify our ancestors are listed below. In most cases there are examples listed, but for everyone listed there are many not mentioned that may provide important clues and should be searched.

Types of Jews and their naming customs

It is important to determine which type of Jews your ancestor was. The records that contain your ancestors or the process followed by the researcher can be different depending on which group they belonged to.

- Ashkenazic: The largest group of Jews in the world, these are the Yiddish speaking Jews who originate in Central and Eastern Europe. Most American Jews are of Ashkenazic descent. Most people who fit into this group did not take surnames until the late 18th century into the early part of the 19th century depending on where they lived. The laws requiring Jews to take names were passed at different times in different countries (see Jewish Genealogy research outline for the various dates). Generally, most Ashkenazic Jews will not name a child after a living relative.
- Sephardic: These are descendants of the Jews who lived in Spain and Portugal before 1492. Much smaller in number than the Ashkenazic Jews, some also include the Jews of the Middle East in this group. Sephardic Jews first began using surnames in the 1500's.
- Oriental or Eastern Jews: This group of Jews includes those who don't fit into the above two groups. They include Jews from North Africa, Yemen, Persia, Turkey and other lands.

Census Records

The first stop for most researchers looking for their Jewish ancestors is the United States census. The census is helpful to the researcher in identifying place of birth. The census records between 1850 and 1930 will give various pieces of information.

- 1850 and later, census will identify country of birth.
- 1880 and later, census will identify country of birth for parents.
- 1900 and later, census lists year of immigration

- 1920 lists year of naturalization.

United States census records that have been released are available for searching online. They can be found at:

- www.heritagequestonline.com
- www.ancestry.com
- www.familysearch.org

While they are both pay sites, free access is available at many Family History centers and libraries that have access.

Once ancestors have been identified in their home countries, there are various censuses where they may be found. These censuses can be done on a various levels, from the country level down to a small census of a community. While there are many censuses, two good examples are:

The 1939 Minority Census of Germany. While its title states it was a census of all minorities, only Jews are listed. The census is contained on 292 rolls of microfilm, of which just under half are for Berlin. A register has been compiled showing the breakdown of films:

Edlund, Thomas Kent. *The German Minority Census of 1939, An Introduction and Register*. Teaneck, NJ: Avotayna, Inc., 1996. (FHL book 943 X22e.)

Hungarian 1848 National Census of Jews:

Conscriptio Judaeorum, 1848 (Census of Jews, 1848). Budapest: Magyar Országos levéltárban történt, 1970. (FHL film #719,823 – 719, 828, 754368 item 2.)

Emigration and Immigration

One of the best sources for identifying your ancestors place of birth are the records of people coming into the United States (immigration). This can be especially helpful when combined with the United States census. For records of people arriving from the middle of the 19th century there are two great sources:

www.ellisland.org

Also, Steve Morse has made searching for passenger lists much easier, his One-Step Webpages can be found at:

www.stevemorse.org.

There are also other searchable databases available at:

www.jewishgen.org/databases/

The Jewishgen website is an excellent source of information on all Jewish genealogy topics and should become a source that is frequently searched by anyone researching Jewish genealogy.

Civil Registration

The government registration of births, marriages and deaths (hatches, matches and dispatches) can be a wonderful source for locating the vital records of our ancestors. The dates the records began, differ from country to country (See the research outlines for each country for more information). These records can be a great source for information such as place of birth, mother's maiden name, etc.

Church Records

While most people would not expect to find their Jewish ancestors in the records of Christian churches, many can be found there. In many countries where there was an established church, such as Catholic or Lutheran, the records for the entire population, including the Jewish people can be found in those records.

Gazetteers

The use of gazetteers is a must for the Jewish Researcher. The Family History Library has a large collection from all over the world, and many are available online.

Mokotoff, Gary and Sallyann Amdur Sack. *Where Once We Walked- A Guide to the Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust*. Teaneck, NJ: Avotaynu, Inc. 1991 (FHL book #940 E5 ms) and

Jewish Gen Shtetl Seeker can be found at:

www.jewishgen.org/ShtetlSeeker.loctown.htm

Collections

Some families and researchers have put together collections of Jewish families that may include genealogical information, biographies, and histories. Examples are:

Stern, Malcolm H. *First American Jewish Families, 600 Genealogies 1654-1988*. 3rd Edition. Baltimore: Oppenheimer Publishers, Inc. 1991. (FHL book 973 F2frs.)

Knowles, William Todd. *Knowles Collection*: (Available at www.familysearch.org) Contains the records of the Jews of the World. As of Mar 0f 2020 contains the records of over 1,400,000 Jews. Can be followed at knowlescollection.blogspot.com.

Archives

Many Archives and libraries have tried to preserve the records of the Jewish people. While many may have some records, and should be searched, the following archives have the more significant holdings.

YIVO INSTITUTE The YIVO Institute has the world largest collection of books and materials dealing with the history and culture of the Jews of Eastern Europe. Amongst their holdings are many wonderful genealogical records including a large collection of *yizkor* books (Holocaust town

memorial books).

They can be reached at:

YIVO Institute for
Jewish Research
Center for Jewish
History

15

West

16th

Street

New

York,

NY

10011

www.yivo.org

www.yivo.org

www.yivo.org

Leo Baeck Institute The Leo Baeck Institute is dedicated to preserving the records of all Jewish communities where German was the language spoken. The collection includes records from the 17th century to the Holocaust, including pedigrees, family histories and Jewish community histories. The institute also has a Family Research Department to assist genealogists in their searches.

They can

be reached

at: Leo

Baeck

Institute

15

West

16th

Street

New

York,

NY

10011

www.lbi.org

[i.org](#)

Yad Vashem Yad Vashem is the major repository in the world for everything dealing with the Holocaust. The library contains almost 100,000 volumes documenting the Holocaust. Amongst the holdings are the manuscript collection, called Pages of Testimony which identifies more than 3 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust.

They can be reached at:

Yad Vashem Martyrs
and Heroes
Remembrance
Authority
PO Box 3477
Jerusalem Israel
www.yadvashem.org

Other Sources:

Kurzweil, Arthur. *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History*. Updated edition with online resources. San Francisco :Josey-Bass Publishers, 2004. (FHL book 929.1 K967f2004)

Enclopedia Judaica. 17 vols. Jerusalem: Keter, 1972, 1982 (FHL book 296.03 En 19j) www.jewishencyclopedia.com

Mokotoff, Gary and Warren Blatt. *Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy*. Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 1999. (FHL book 973 D27)