

#OMG! Saw Zaide on Facebook

Jewish Genealogy @ Spring Conference

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Photos by TINA WEISS

What's your *yichus*?

When the search for lineage can prove frustrating and (no pun intended) dead end, NYMA's Spring Conference "From Generation to Generation: Jewish Genealogy in 2011," held Tuesday, May 17th at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, can prove most welcome. Whether or not you uncover a High Priest or two in your own family tree, you the librarian can now help others untangle their roots.

Stein, Berg, or Steinberg?

In "Making Connections: Introduction to Jewish Genealogy," Robert Friedman — President, Steps to the Past LLC — provided baby steps to finding your background. This may often begin with the basic question, "Where did my surname come from?"

For the Jewish world, the commonality of surnames reflects a shared history. During much of the Diaspora, Jews simply took on patronyms (e.g. Isaacsohn, "son of Isaac"), or patrilineal status (Cohen, Levi, Israel). In the late 19th century, and the development of the European bureaucracy, family names eventually included towns (e.g. Lubavitch) or



ROBERT FRIEDMAN:

"Review, organize, and preserve."

occupations, both secular and religious (e.g. Glazer, Schochet), as well as personal characteristics, such as Klein (small) or Schwartz (black). So prevalent have some surnames (e.g. Weinstein, Steinberg) become

among Ashkenazim as to now be considered quintessentially Jewish.

For this reason alone, finding 100 Shapiros in the phone book can be daunting. Especially when the spelling varies (i.e. Szapiro, Schapiro), depending on where your *zeidy* came from. And even then — what part of Poland or Hungary? Not only have records in those areas been unreliable—if not destroyed in the Holocaust—but the frequent border and government changes, as well as population transfers, in that part of the world can make family search a lesson in futility, rather than history.

So where do you start?

The first place, Mr. Friedman suggests, is relatives. Interviews with elderly family members open a whole wide world. This too is not always easy, depending on the age and faculties of the person. Nevertheless, the great-aunt who can't remember "off the top of my head" may be gently asked open questions, or shown photographs, to stimulate memory.

Immigration and citizenship records, particularly those at Ellis Island, include passenger departure lists, petitions for citizenships, and alien registrations. However, because of possible difficulties, like Anglicization or name changes, as well as simple human spelling errors, flexibility is needed, as well as the need at times to revise or fill in the gaps.

"Resource"-fulness

As the process of genealogy unfolds, notes will be taken down, records uncovered and cross-checked, lists of names and sources will grow longer, often yielding amazing discoveries—and pitfalls. To keep track of your goal, Mr. Friedman emphasized three steps: review, organize, and preserve.

Nowadays the computer has thankfully taken over many clerical and investigative

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(Conference, cont'd from pg. 3)

functions, and crucial items such as records or photographs can be stored or digitized. In addition, organizations can be accessed and networked via the web, which include not only genealogical societies but government and religious organizations. Mr. Friedman's "Genealogy Source Checklist," handed out to participants, ran the gamut of legal documents, business records, directories, bibliographies, and periodicals.

And, library sources. One page, "Suggested Genealogical Materials for a Jewish Library" – jointly prepared by Steven Siegel for AJL's 2004 convention and currently updated – includes How-To-Books, References, and Periodicals. The librarian can access maps, atlases, and special collections to locate backgrounds and provide materials not readily available, as well as help the seeker navigate Mr. Friedman's "Recommended Web Sites (short list!)." (Beware: some of the websites, like www.ancestry.com or www.familysearch.org, are fee-based.)

The "route to roots" need not be limited to the U.S. – or even Jewish sources. Not only does Yad Vashem offer background to the vanished world of *shtetls*, but the Mormons also have their own extensive database, "Familysearch." European emigration or immigration records may be accessed via www.germanroots.com/ei.html. Samples of newspaper and directories handed out by Mr. Friedman charmingly revealed the flavor of small town or regional Americana.

Orphanages, cemeteries, funeral homes. The sky's the limit. But knowing how to reach it will take time and energy, and above all, "resource"-fulness.

Who R U?

In an increasingly web-based discipline where one material uncovers another, then another, the library will play a major role, according to second speaker, David M. Kleiman — Curator, Loeb Visitors Center of Touro Synagogue and President of Heritage Muse, Inc.—whose topic "Family History in the Digital Age" addressed the snowballing effect of technology.

Interest in personal history has not been only a Jewish trend. The popularity of TV shows like *Who Do You Think You Are?* reflects a national interest in climbing family trees. Television, itself, interestingly, is one tool to help contact far flung relatives, to "get the name out there" and share needs and information. In this day and desire for quick access, it helps to "be a good ancestor."



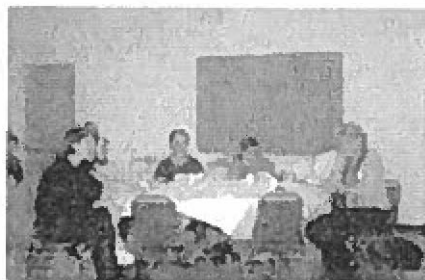
CAPTIVE AUDIENCE:
Getting tips on "ancestor-ing"

Through current technology, it is possible to start from the known to the unknown: searches begun years ago may be resumed, refined, and broadened to include new websites and fellow genealogists. Interaction with new sources of knowledge, via iPad or the social networking sites, may uncover new material, and future *bubbes* and *zaides* might have their own pages on Facebook.

Asking pertinent questions about background will broaden the mind, as genealogy encompasses names, dates, and places. Family history will not only include "Kodak moments" but anecdotes, mementos, and videos. Through the web and database software it is not only possible to search but to share family history with others, who might recognize a name and contact the seeker with additional information. The goal is to help the patron to think deeply, as he or she will discover new sources but new ways, as well, to access the past.

In the hands of a capable librarian, the amateur sleuth can blossom. When evaluating the patron's needs, the librarian should have in mind the intent of the research as well as the researcher's skill level and expectations.

Dr. Kleiman cited typical resources available to the patron: books, periodicals, websites. Other considerations: the user community (i.e. fellow genealogists), or technical support, including file format transfers of data between genealogical systems. Some libraries, university or research in particular, might offer workshops in methodology. A patron might be encouraged to link up with a local genealogical society.



SHMOOZE:

Breaktime Activity

Dr. Kleiman demonstrated certain desktop databases, such as *Legacy* (personal favorite), which, though less graphic, has many useful functions. Bet Hatefutot, in Tel Aviv, offers *myHeritage*, free of charge. There are also web-based databases, many of which are open source, and images of actual records. Dr. Kleiman handed out lists of useful genealogy and family history research web sites. (He himself can be reached at david.kleiman@heritagemuse.com.)



DEEPLY HONORED:

YIVO Librarian Aviva Astrinsky

A good librarian can help the patron to think deeply and teach him or her good web-research skills. This is especially crucial, given the current migration of archives and collections, both government and private.

into Google-Land. Good libraries will be connected to other libraries, as well, for sharing of digital resources. The world of genealogy, like other disciplines, will depend heavily on databases, be they in print or cyberspace.

Surprise!

The conference ended with fond farewells honoring the retirement of Aviva Astrinsky, of YIVO, and Phil Miller, of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

Speaking on Aviva's behalf, Naomi Steinberger — Librarian, Jewish Theological Seminary of America — praised Aviva's invaluable supervision and her involvement in NYMA's inception. Marlene Schiffman — Cataloger, Mendel Gottesman Library, Yeshiva University — lauded Phil Miller's academic achievements, including a dissertation on the Karaites and expertise in Near Eastern linguistics and languages. "Before there was Google, there was Phil Miller," she said, referring to his encyclopedic memory.



MR. GOOGLE:

Phil Miller, Ur-Search Engine

Perhaps only someone like Phil Miller would have the knack not only to tie in the conference theme, but connect it to both personal and professional life. Genealogy, he said, is something where "we could all agree to prepare to be surprised." Through research he located "third cousins," one of whom he dated in high school!

"Sometimes you think nobody cares," he said, referring to the importance of personal stories, histories, and pictures. "But we do."

Parting words, then, to posterity: To be a good ancestor, be a good librarian.

(For Phil's retirement letter, please turn to following page.)

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