

When Rolf Lederer began his quest to unearth his family's history in 1976, he only knew his grandparents' names.

Lederer, who lives in Toronto, wrote to German government offices and managed to secure his great-grandparents' birth certificates. After discovering that his ancestors reached Germany from Bohemia, in what then was Czechoslovakia, he visited the municipal archives in Prague and pored over a slew of documents from 1791. He found the names of his great-great-great-grandfather and of the man's five sons.

The information helped Lederer trace his parents' families back to the 1600s—and find relations he never knew he had. He now keeps in touch with newfound relatives in Australia, New Zealand, England, Israel, and North America, and sends them an annual family newsletter. In 1985, he established the Toronto branch of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Canada.

Finding previously unknown family, says Lederer, has “enriched my life and the lives of my children and grandchildren.”

In today's Internet age, such long-distance treks and searches through dusty files for genealogical information are mostly things of the past. But learning how to mine for the desired data, training people to pass on the knowledge to the next generation, and understanding the information's broader significance remain challenges for Jewish genealogists and historians who have little to do with the Internet. Modern technology, however, is playing an important role in preserving and disseminating important information.

The International Institute of Jewish Genealogy (IJG) was established in 2006 to meet those challenges. The volunteer-run, Jerusalem-based organization, founded by Neville Lamdan, a retired Israeli diplomat, and Sallyann Amdur Sack, a psychologist in Washington, D.C., aims to create an academic discipline of scholarly research, college courses, certification, and degrees.

The organization has already launched several research projects and solicited applications for grants. IJG's academic committee is also looking into developing university courses and study programs in the United States, Israel, Canada, and Romania.

Jewish genealogy “intensifies your Jewish identity,” Sack says. “You can't do Jewish genealogy without learning a huge amount about Jewish laws, history, and culture, and understanding the context in which your ancestors lived. These people become very real for you.

“It became clear to me and the others that it should become an academic subset of Jewish study—something you can focus on and learn everything about.”

The institute sees itself as complementing the work of Jewish genealogists worldwide and giving them more credibility in academic circles. Jonathan Sarna, a Brandeis University professor

and director of its Jewish professional leadership program, says historians have viewed Jewish genealogy “with some amusement” because of the tendency to focus on rabbis and other achievers while ignoring “the horse thieves” in the family.

According to Lamdan, IJG wants to rectify that perception by advancing genealogy as “a scientific activity.”

“The IJG can play an important part both in the study of Jewish genealogy, which is of considerable interest to individuals, and in the study of Jewish history, so much of which is the story of families as they evolve through many generations and in many lands,” says historian Martin Gilbert, a member of the IJG advisory board.

Reconstituting History

One IJG research project underway is a University of Haifa study of the DNA and migration of Sephardic Jewry since before the Spanish Inquisition. Another is cataloguing workbooks and family trees bequeathed by Jerusalem genealogist Paul Jacobi.

The IJG plans the digital “reconstitution” of European communities that the Nazis destroyed in the Holocaust. The group will assemble names to create family trees, combine the trees in a given Jewish population, and stitch together neighboring communities. Scholars then could examine the structure of communities and regions to gain greater insight into the power centers of those communities and the webs of relationships.

The institute is also working with volunteers to develop cutting-edge software to merge the vast information on individual Holocaust victims that now is dispersed in databases throughout the world. Genealogists and historians see last year's opening of the Red Cross's International Tracing Service records from the Holocaust as a likely source of even more data. The Red Cross committee for this project is made up of representatives of 11 nations,



Jewish Genealogy 101:

oversees the archives, and last year gave scholars permission to examine materials and digitally distribute copies of the records to key research institutions.

A Less-cumbersome Process

The fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent removal of barriers to historical records was one catalyst for Jewish genealogical study. Before that, the release of two books—Arthur Kurzweil’s “From Generation to Generation,” and Dan Rottenberg’s “Finding Our Fathers”—spawned Jewish genealogy societies throughout North America, Israel, Europe, and Russia.

In addition, the popularity of personal computers and the Internet has led to more of Europe’s local civil records being digitized and placed online.

“Before the Internet age, you really did need to travel to do genealogy research. Now, with the Internet, Poland comes to you,” says Warren Blatt, managing director of a leading Jewish genealogy website, JewishGen.org. “You don’t have to traverse through the files, the muck, and the lack of electricity to get things done. You can sit in your pajamas in the den and access the same thing.”

Another significant aid was the refinement of the Soundex system, developed by computer software designers Randy Daitch and Gary Mokotoff, who, along with Sack, publish the genealogy journal *Avotaynu*. The

Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex organizes names by their sounds, rather than by their spelling. JewishGen uses this program, which makes it easier for Jewish genealogists to locate a surname in a list, regardless of how it was spelled in the Old Country. This saves “thousands of hours” in research, Blatt says.

That said, the Internet is not the be-all and end-all. “There’s still intuition involved,” he notes.

According to Lamdan, who was trained as an historian, most of the local and Jewish communal records for births and deaths were destroyed by “the havoc” of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, as most of the documents from the heavily Jewish regions of Eastern Europe known as the Pale of Settlement were filed in triplicate, copies likely are available in a regional governorate (county seat) and in either St. Petersburg or Moscow.

This made it possible for Daniel S. Mariaschin, executive vice president of B’nai B’rith International, to learn about his ancestry without ever having to leave Washington, D.C. Mariaschin researched his mother Rose’s roots in the Lithuanian shtetl of Musnik with assistance from Ilya Lempertas, a Vilnius teacher and an expert on Lithuanian Jewry.

Lempertas examined the state archives and emerged with a wealth of information from government and Jewish communal records: 60 references to the Berzak and Khvoles families, all believed to be relatives of Mariaschin. The documents included a copy of Mariaschin’s grandparents’ marriage record.

“To have two to three pages faxed to me, and seeing the references [to family]—it’s exhilarating, because it’s the equivalent of finding a lost treasure,” Mariaschin says. “It’s that important.”

Lamdan also started small. He wanted to uncover his father’s roots in the town of Lyakhavitch, in today’s Belarus.

“The more I got involved, the more my history background came into play,” he says. “I started off with absolutely nothing, and I can now document my family back 300 years. My voyage took me to the archives of Minsk three times. In the course of doing that, one begins to realize that there’s a fantastic amount of information that gives insight into the [impact] of individual Jews on history: ordinary Jews, how they lived, how they survived, how they kept their families together.”

Lamdan was surprised to discover that his ancestors “were all village Jews” who remained in and near Lyakhavitch, where they worked as innkeepers and blacksmiths; he had presumed that they “knocked around from village to village and town to town.”

Lamdan also learned that, when his grandfather emigrated to Scotland, he became the head of the synagogue in Glasgow. The family journey that the grandfather began, which culminated in Lamdan’s becoming an Israeli professor and diplomat, exemplifies “the geographic and social mobility of Jewish society,” Lamdan said.

Lamdan hopes to learn far more about his ancestral region



Photo by Corbis/Barbara Quinn

Evolving into its Own

By Hillel Kuttler

beyond his own family's place in it: about the relationships between the Jews of Lyakhavitch and those of nearby villages, how they provided their children a Jewish education, and how they married off their daughters.

"There's a whole series of interesting questions that can be asked. Genealogy is another lens through which to look at Jewish history. It's what one can learn from family relationships within society," Lamdan says.

"We would hope that, by teaching courses [in genealogy], we'll excite the imagination of young students. I hope that [this knowledge]...will add another dimension to an understanding of Jewish history." 🇮🇱



The International Red Cross (ICRC) is the custodian of the Holocaust-era archive at Bad Arolsen, Germany. Known as the International Tracing Service (ITS), which was founded in 1946 and formally opened to researchers and the public in 2007, the archive is the repository of 50 million documents covering 17.5 million persons. In the photo, Mariaschin is in the ITS Reading Room reviewing the ITS database to trace the fate of family members who were Holocaust victims. B'nai B'rith was among several American Jewish organizations invited by the ICRC. The ICRC, which has been criticized for bias in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saw this visit as part of a new outreach effort to the Jewish community. The group of Jewish organizations was also hosted at ICRC headquarters in Geneva, where it was briefed on Red Cross humanitarian activities in Africa and Asia in providing emergency medical, food, and other forms of relief to victims of armed conflict and natural disasters.

For More Information

International Institute for Jewish Genealogy: www.iiyg.org

International Tracing Service: www.its-arolsen.org

JewishGen: www.jewishgen.org



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