Hot Tips for Better Interviews

How to overcome problems that may arise when interviewing elderly, difficult or new-found relatives

BY LINDEN REES

I. "Let the dead rest in peace, I'd rather concentrate on my living relatives." This commonly-heard objection presents a formidable problem to the genealogist. Don't assume the family refusenik doesn't like to share information; perhaps he doesn't wish to speak badly of the dead. You might suggest that recounting unpleasant episodes could unleash positive memories. Recently a great-aunt thanked me because my questions had jolted old memories she could now share with her children and grandchildren.

II. "It's too painful to bring up the past." Frequently heard from Holocaust survivors. They should be told that their personal recollections have enormous value as eyewitness accounts in an age of Holocaust revisionism. They may wish to set the record straight.

III. The Skeptic. Sometimes the genealogist hears the questions, "Are you a salesman? What are you selling?" It is only natural for someone to be guarded or suspicious. In this situation, identify yourself clearly, provide the name of the person (sister, cousin, aunt) who suggested you call, and mention other names that may be familiar. Offer to send a copy of your tree and photos of a shared ancestor.

IV. The Wealth Factor. Quite often, the skeptic is a victim of this. There are two categories, corresponding to those who are wealthy and those who are not.

Expect a degree of guardedness from relatives who may be wealthy, especially if they have no direct heirs. Seek to establish your own credentials from the outset and emphasize that you are looking for information only. Again, send some family information to establish that this is an exchange, not a one-sided giveaway.

V. Be Friendly and Considerate. When calling or writing a relative for assistance, the following buzz-words are apt to produce a positive response: cousin, family, appreciate, help, kindness and -- very important -- I'll be pleased to reimburse you. With older relatives, a little old-fashioned courtesy may make all the difference. When writing to older relatives especially, double-space your letters and include an SASE; your correspondent may have failing eyesight and a fixed income.

Don't attempt to get every bit of family information from an initial telephone conversation. Your questions may fluster an elderly relative, leaving him mixed up over names, dates and relationships. After making an initial phone contact, write to your relative, setting out who you are and how you are related, and ask a few vital questions. I have yet to encounter the relative who has not promised to try to answer my written questions. So far they've always lived (continued on page 3)
**AT OUR MEETINGS**

Wednesday January 27: Field Trip to the Mormon Family History Library, 95 Melhart Rd., Etobicoke. Our members filled both the afternoon and evening sessions. Some, like Hal Palter and his son Joel, had extraordinary success: having ordered a microfilm in advance, the Palters quickly found several records pertaining to their family in the Polish town of Bialystok, jumping back another generation in the process. Alas, those seeking ancestors in more easterly locales like Russia had to settle for disappointment. Because of the great demand, a third session at the LDS Library was held on March 3.

Wednesday February 24: "How to Chart Your Family Tree." Talk by Cliff Collier, Toronto-area researcher and OGS member. Focusing on the so-called Ahnentafl numerical system, Mr. Collier made many basic suggestions about laying out a family tree, organizing notes, documenting sources, how to included adoptions, and when to use pen and when to use pencil. In response to a question, he also shared his knowledge of computer software. Alas, there wasn't enough time for Mr. Collier to share his expert knowledge of the little-known Canadian Institute of Historical Reproductions.

**CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

Wednesday March 31: "Finding My Russian Relatives," a talk by Toronto filmmaker Cayle Chemin. Having located a great-uncle and some cousins in various former Soviet provinces, Ms. Chemin visited last fall with a video camera operator. She intends to discuss her trip and show "rushes" of the reunion. Shaarei Shomayim Synagogue, 8 p.m.

Wednesday April 28: "The Jews of Poland" is being shown on a large monitor to mark Yom Ha-Shoah. The film is a compilation of archival footage taken months before the German invasion, showing the once-vibrant Jewish life in five major cities. The film was compiled from the collection in the (Steven) Spielberg Jewish Film Archive at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Please note alternate location: Adath Israel Synagogue, 37 Southbourne Ave., 8 p.m. (This meeting only.)

Wednesday May 29: Due to the Summer Seminar, we have moved the Annual General Meeting ahead one month to May. The membership vote at the AGM determines the executive for the coming year; please forward nomination suggestions to anyone on the present executive. Usually brief, the business portion of the evening is to be followed by a program whose topic is yet to be announced. Shaarei Shomayim Synagogue, 8 p.m.

Sunday June 27 to Wednesday June 30: 12th International Summer Seminar on Jewish Genealogy, Park Plaza Hotel, Toronto. Call our Summer Seminar Hotline at (416) 533-5825 for further information; see also page 6.
Family Splits. Some of us have experienced the undoubted trauma of contacting family members who were ostracized by another generation for marrying "out of the faith."

Establishing contact here is tough, since you may be dealing with individuals who feel hurt and angry at having been "cast out" of the family circle. I've run into this situation several times and I've taken care to proceed slowly. It's my experience that the longer you can keep a person talking the greater chance you have of bringing him around.

Remember, in this circumstance, the object is to re-establish contact, to bridge the chasm of several generations, and perhaps even to help undo past wrongs or foolishness. Once the family split has been confronted, it may sometimes be bridged, replaced by a sincere wish on the part of your relatives to learn of their long-lost Jewish roots and family.

Beware the spectre of hereditary bitterness. Stories abound of family members being castigated and written off for failing, for whatever reason, to get the family out of pre-war Europe or, having helped them leave, for taking unfair advantage of them after their arrival in the strange new land.

Do not mistake biological for adoptive parents and take special care where divorce or separation has occurred. Quite often a person is reluctant to discuss the parent who "deserted them" or the spouse who was less than faithful. Beware also that some new-found relatives may not know that they are even related. It is vital to grab your subject's attention right away; after all, you've just called out of the blue and asked a person to jump back perhaps several generations in time.

Often, just mentioning well known family names, towns of origin or important family events will trigger long forgotten memories. Your gentle questions may help lift the veil that clouds the memory.

Quite often I've phoned a relative who sincerely believes she's already told me everything she knows. But when I provide an additional address or name, she launches into an astounding recitation of additional information.

Once, after finding a death certificate of a potential relative, I mentioned the name of the street to my mother. Instantly she recalled the street and indeed, the number of the house; she had gone there as a child to visit her great-aunt. As a result, the relationship with the deceased person fell into place.

VII. Making the Cold Telephone Call. When travelling, a genealogist may find a relevant surname in the local phone book and dial the number. When you call someone out of the blue like this, be prepared to deliver a set, brief synopsis of who you are and how you think you are related. It is vital to grab your subject's attention right away; after all, this may be your only chance to speak with her.

If it emerges that she is probably related to you, move on to the next level of information and questions. Give a more detailed description of your research, being sure to mention whatever names and places the two potential family branches share. It often takes just one half-forgotten name to open the floodgates of family history or legend.

Before finishing the conversation, offer to send a letter with comments and questions and ask for a written response.

If time permits, visit this individual before you leave town. I established a family link once by this means. It turned out that the person I'd phoned was the double of my grandfather. As a result, we kept right on reviewing our trees until we found that we were indeed cousins.

VIII. "Out of the Faith" Marriages and Other Family Splits. Some of us have experienced the undoubted trauma of contacting family members who were ostracized by another generation for marrying "out of the faith."

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Beware the spectre of hereditary bitterness. Stories abound of family members being castigated and written off for failing, for whatever reason, to get the family out of pre-war Europe or, having helped them leave, for taking unfair advantage of them after their arrival in the strange new land.

Do not mistake biological for adoptive parents and take special care where divorce or separation has occurred. Quite often a person is reluctant to discuss the parent who "deserted them" or the spouse who was less than faithful. Beware also that some new-found relatives may not know that they are even partly Jewish. The revelation may produce shock or disturbance.

IX. Understand Your Motive. Genealogists are often asked, "Why are you doing this?" It may be hard to come up with a good explanation for your hobby and passion in 15 words or less unless you've given the matter some prior thought. Analyze your own motives beforehand and be ready for this inevitable inquiry.

Sometimes a co-operative relative will end the conversation with, "Well, I've told you everything I know about the family, but now you tell me, don't you have anything better to do with your time?" Keep a sense of humor at all times.

X. Skeletons in the Closet. Walk with caution when you sense the presence of dark secrets. Take care when you question older relatives about potential family scandals or rascals. Be sure of your ground or you may risk closing the door forever.

Linden Rees is a member of our Society. This article is a summary of the talk he presented at our December meeting.
The Archives of Ontario

A capsule summary of some relevant holdings

By Henry Wellisch

SINCE MOST JEWS resident in Ontario today are descended from families who arrived here after 1880 or so, the Archives of Ontario provides an important source for research in Jewish family history. First of all the Archives have the following Vital Statistics Indices:

Births: 1869-1896
Marriages: 1873-1911
Deaths: 1869-1921

The indices give the full name, date and place of the event and registration number. The full record books are being filmed at present and will be released later this year.

(For information on more recent events, contact the Office of the Registrar General, 3rd Floor, 189 Red River Road, Box 4600, Thunder Bay, Ontario P7B 1A2; tel. 800-461-2156 in Ontario or 807-343-7420.)

Court Records and Wills: This group contains documents of probate and administration of estates. Most estate files before 1930 are available on microfilm. Indices between 1793 and 1978.

Municipal Records: Assessment rolls, abstracts and some voters' lists for many Ontario localities.

Canadian Censuses: Available between 1842 and 1891. Only the 1871 census is indexed. The 1901 census was released this year and will be available at the Archives of Ontario soon.

Ships Passenger and Border Crossing Lists: 1865-1920. Immigrant, visitor, transit persons and returning Canadians are listed by place of entry and chronologically. There are also some immigration records for the province of Ontario, 1892-1932.

City and Telephone Directories: The Archives has an extensive collection going back to the 19th century. (Toronto: city directories 1833-1983; telephone books 1879-1979).


Multicultural Society of Ontario: The Archives of Ontario has a large part of the holdings of the MHSO. The Jewish section consists of 6.9 metres of textural material and 59 - 35mm reels of microfilm, including five reels devoted to the records of the Holy Blossom Temple. (For more details about pertinent MHSO holdings, see "Toronto Scene," Shem Tov, Vol XII, No. 2.)

Jewish Canadian Labour Organizations: Documents on various unions and political organizations such as the United Jewish Peoples Order, Workmen’s Circle, International Ladies Garment Workers Union and others.

Jewish Religious Life: Documents on congregations in Toronto, Hamilton, Brantford and Niagara Falls.

There are many documents pertaining to the Jewish immigration experience, business enterprises, armed forces in WWII, refugees, internees and others. See catalogue F 1405 for a complete listing.

The MHSO collection also contains thousands of photographs that reflect Jewish life, primarily in Toronto. Labour and some political organization are particularly well documented.

The Archives of Ontario is located at 77 Grenville St., phone 327-1600. Business hours are 8:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday (full service). The public reading room is open 8:15 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Monday to Friday and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Saturday. However, research material has to be requested by 3 p.m.

Henry Wellisch is the contributing editor of SHEM TOV. He is currently compiling a detailed guide to Jewish genealogical resources in the Toronto area, to be distributed as part of the syllabus of the 12th Summer Seminar on Jewish Genealogy, June 27-30 in Toronto.

FIN J1DRO JEWISH ROOTS

Visits to your shtetl in Poland, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus or Russia

Where do you come from? Stop wondering and start knowing. I will search Russian archives for birth, marriage and death records of your ancestors; interview Jews in the towns they came from; take photos and videos of synagogues, Jewish cemeteries and local sites. I also organize personalized genealogical tours to Eastern Europe.

For information write or call Miriam Weiner, certified genealogist and co-author of the Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy (Jason Aronson Publisher), at Routes to Roots, 136 Sandpiper Key, Secaucus, NJ 07094. Phone 201/866-4075 or fax 201/864-9222.
Mailbox of a Genealogy Columnist

By Miriam Weiner

By now, my mailman can identify when one of my articles has been published by the amount of letters which begin to fall from my mailbox. I receive at least ten inquiries per day by telephone and letter from people wanting help in tracing roots.

The letters come in varying lengths, sometimes with voluminous enclosures of family trees, frequently handwritten in difficult penmanship or in foreign languages that must be translated at my expense, but always requesting help.

Yesterday, the mail brought something new (I didn't think this was possible after all this time). The letter from Irene in Bayonne, New Jersey said: "My birthday is April 5, 1905, please send a trace of my roots."

The question is, what can you expect when you write to a specialist for help in tracing your roots? First, some guidelines to help insure that you receive a response.

Typewritten letters are always preferable. Keep your inquiries to a minimum without a lot of unnecessary background about your family history. If you are referring to your ancestral town in the "old country", it helps to provide an accurate spelling and the name of a larger town nearby in order to establish the exact locality. There are many towns with the same name throughout Eastern Europe.

When writing to a specialist (author, columnist, lecturer, librarian, archivist, etc.), remember that one or two questions are reasonable. A two-page list of inquiries requires time to read and extensive time for research and response. It will most likely result in a bill being sent to you or no response at all.

While most professionals will respond to brief requests for information, an absolute necessity due to rising postal rates is a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE).

Many people send me very small envelopes, the type used to RSVP a social event. I cannot imagine what kind of information they expect to receive in such a small envelope. A standard size #10 business envelope with postage affixed and your typed return address will be greatly appreciated.

Keep your expectations realistic. For example, people send me photographs of their ancestors and ask if I can verify if the person is Jewish. Other inquirers want me to verify their Jewish ancestry by their name only.

What can you expect in response to your inquiry? Do NOT expect someone to trace your family history, to provide the history of your name, to locate your missing relatives or to determine if your ancestors were Jewish by looking at an old photo.

My response to general letters of inquiry includes a personal letter explaining who I am and what I do, along with: a map of Jewish Eastern Europe, a reprint of an article describing how to trace relatives in Israel, information on how to learn more about the Jewish history of your ancestral town; a review and order form for my book, the Encyclopaedia of Jewish Genealogy; announcement about genealogy reference guides and information on visiting ancestral towns.

Some years ago, when the pursuit of "roots" was my part-time hobby, I met Rabbi Malcolm Stern, described by many as the grandfather of Jewish Genealogy. Rabbi Stern is known for many accomplishments in this field which he shaped and nurtured to its present state, particularly for his newly revised and updated First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies 1654-1988. Through his many years as a mentor and advice dispenser to family historians, I have benefited by his guidance. With his permission, I'd like to share the following:

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR GENEALOGISTS

By Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern

I. I am a genealogist dedicated to true knowledge about the families I am researching.

II. Thou shalt use family traditions with caution and only as clues.

III. Thou shalt not accept as gospel every written record or printed word.

IV. Thou shalt not hang nobility or royalty on your family tree without verifying with experts.

V. Thou shalt clearly label the questionable and the fairy tale.

VI. Thou shalt handle all records in such a way that the history of your name, to locate your missing relatives or to determine if your ancestors were Jewish by looking at an old photo.

VII. Thou shalt credit those who help you and ask permission of those whose work you use.

VIII. Thou shalt not query any source of information without supplying postage.

IX. Thou shalt respect the sensitivities of the living in whatever you record but tell the truth about the dead.

X. Thou shalt not become a genealogical teacher or authority without appropriate training and certification.

Miriam Weiner is an author and lecturer in the field of Jewish genealogy and Holocaust research. For information on how to research your family history, send a stamped self-addressed envelope to Weiner at 136 Sandpiper Key, Secaucus, NJ 07094.
H ave you ever attempted to get a message in a hurry to someone in Russia?

I tried to telephone but it was impossible to get a line during the day. In the dead of night I tried again. And again. The operator had no better luck. "I'm sorry, sir," she said, "but I'm really not surprised. Russia has the worst telephone system on earth."

Are there fax machines in Russia? Didn't matter, we didn't know the fax number anyhow. Finally we sent a telegram -- relying on outmoded Western Union technology to communicate with a country essentially off the grid of modern instantaneous telecommunications.

Dr. Alexander Kronick, president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Moscow, is one of a small but growing number of Muscovite Jews with a serious commitment to Jewish genealogy. Kronick accepted our invitation with great excitement. An innovative psychologist with an international reputation, he has already travelled abroad several times in his professional capacity.

Planning to report on various archival institutions in the former USSR, Kronick will likely also describe what life has been like for Soviet Jews in this tumultuous century. It's a sad truth that almost all Soviet Jewish families have had no connection with Jews outside their country or indeed with Judaism since before the Stalin era. We feel honoured to be the agent for re-establishing, on behalf of Jewish genealogists everywhere, an important Western link to this isolated and needy Jewish community.

Our prospective speaker from Moscow is one of a growing number of exciting elements falling into place as the Summer Seminar approaches. Our Speakers List is starting to read like a Who's Who of Jewish Genealogy and we expect major additions in the coming weeks. Rarely have we encountered a more enthusiastic, helpful and fascinating assortment of people than our prospective speakers.

Rabbi Malcolm Stern, proverbial grandfather of Jewish genealogy and author of the trailblazing Six Hundred Early American Families of Jewish Descent, needed only a nanosecond to respond to our invitation. Besides "Jewish Surnames As Genealogical Clues," he's presenting a talk on "Sephardic Genealogy."

With all the advancements being made in our field, it's difficult to keep current. That's why we asked Gary Mokotoff, publisher of Avotaynu and president of the Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, to provide a capsule overview of "Recent Developments in Jewish Genealogical Research."

Both Mokotoff and his esteemed colleague, Avotaynu Editor Sallyann Amdur Sack, have been generous with their advice and support. Both are Summer Seminar veterans. Mokotoff organized the Salt Lake City gathering in 1991, while Sack arranged a seminar in Jerusalem several years earlier. Sack's proposed talk is on her genealogically-related experiences in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where she met Alexander and Katerina Kronick (vice-president of JGS Moscow) last year.

Since most North American Jews have Russian roots, we're fortunate in getting Philadelphia researching ace Harry Boonin to outline his remarkable success with "Russian Records in the 19th Century." As for Poland, Chicago-area author Judith Prazin has agreed to show us how to unlock the secrets of 19th-century Polish-language civil registration documents, and we're hoping for other superlative talks.

Daniel Schlyter, specialist on Eastern European and Jewish records for the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City, is offering an overview of Jewish holdings at the LDS Library as well as detailed talks and workshops on the Hamburg Passenger Lists, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and finding ancestral towns.

Other confirmed speakers include Alex Friedlander on Lithuania, Dr. Rolf Lederer on Germany, Hal Bookbinder on resources in the US National Archive regional centers and British researcher Michael Honey on "The Horowitz Family of the Prague Ghetto." Also from England, Dr. Anthony Joseph and David Jacobs, are doing a joint presentation and workshop on Anglo-Jewish Genealogy. For those like myself with missing family branches in Australia, Dr. Joseph will also share his expertise on Australo-Jewish Genealogy.

We're arranging some good presentations on the United States and Canada as well. Torontonians Sheldon and Judith Godfrey, who have completed an unpublished study of 100 early Canadian Jewish families, are debuting their pioneering research with "Jewish Life on the Canadian Frontier, 1749-1840." Dr. Stephen Speisman, director of the Ontario Jewish Archives, is offering "The Early Years of Jewish Toronto." Other talks should cover pertinent resources in Montreal and Western Canada.

Not all the topics are strictly geographical by nature. California researcher Patrick Gordis, a contributor to Shem Tov, has agreed to report on "Hebrew Subscription Lists, Ethical Wills and Other Sources From Jewish Literature."

Scott Meyer, former associate editor of Search, is offering "Mail Order Family History Books: Myths and Methods." Involved in a large Holocaust oral history project in Toronto, historian Paula Draper is planning a workshop on techniques for interviewing relatives for life stories.

Computers have become firmly entrenched in the genealogical scene, and on hand to explain how best to use...
them will be computer mavericks Eileen Polakoff and David Kleiman. Vendors have also become part of the Summer Seminar tradition, and we're pleased that Boris Feldblyum intends to come to Toronto to show off his unique collection of old photographs and postcards.

The Park Plaza, the Summer Seminar hotel, is ideally situated for our purposes. Downtown, on two major subway lines, it's within walking distance of the Robarts Library, the Archives of Ontario, and the Metropolitan Toronto Central Reference Library. We have arranged for Seminar participants to be permitted into the stacks of the Robarts Library, which are usually closed to everyone except students and registered readers. (Robarts, the main library of the University of Toronto, boasts a Judaica collection of some 50,000 volumes, including 450 Yiskor books and many titles pertaining to Jewish genealogy.)

I CAN’T PRETEND: planning for the Summer Seminar has taken over our already busy lives. Registration kits went out about two weeks before this writing (mid-March) and already returns are trickling in like the first drops of a refreshing summer shower. Our Summer Seminar Committee -- consisting of Gert Rogers, Howard Shidlowsky and Henry Wellisch -- has nobly abolished the concept of "free time" until July. They move from one planning meeting to the next, acquiring volunteers -- wonderful volunteers -- at every turn.

As the Seminar approaches, more volunteers are required. We need assistance for various tasks like distributing flyers and posters, picking up speakers at the airport, and on-site services during the Seminar. We also require a few homes where speakers may be comfortably billeted. If you can help, please call (416) 533-5825 and leave a message.

That number, our Summer Seminar Hotline, has been ringing steadily since our ads, publicity and registration kits started going out. Call (416) 533-5825 to request a registration package, to volunteer your help, or to learn particular details of the Seminar. (Or write: JGSC Summer Seminar, PO Box 466, Station A, North York, ON Canada M2N 5T1.)

AS THIS ISSUE goes to press, Passover is almost upon us. On behalf of our executive, may I take this opportunity to wish all our members -- and all readers of this modest journal -- a hearty Chag Sameach.

Look around as you drink your four cups of wine. The bright faces you see around the Seder table comprise a good reason to attend the Summer Seminar. As genealogists, we explore our roots as much for others as for ourselves.

Please register now for the Summer Seminar. I look forward to seeing you in June. With Best Wishes,

Bill Gladstone

BILL GLADSTONE, President

SEARCH ADS

GOLDENBERG/NOEL -- Born in Russia, my great-grandparents Arthur & Molly Goldenberg & son Benjamin may have used surname Noel. I'm told he ran a Jewish bookstore in Toronto & died age 98 (ca. 1948?). Molly supposedly died ca. age 102. Seeking info & possible descendants. Charlene Palmer, 2310 Calumet St., Flint, Michigan 48503. (SP92)

MAIMAN -- Seeking info on Barnett Maiman and Elizabeth Gutman who emigrated from Europe to Montreal, where they were married ca. 1908. Moved to Chicago 1917. Arlene B. Edwards, 1001 Highlight Dr., West Covina, CA 91791 (DC92)


SCHWARTZ -- Seeking info on Herman & Samuel Schwartz, 106 Elizabeth St., Joseph & Morris, 239 Gilford Pl.; both Toronto, ca. 1908. Morris aged 75 ca. 1920 & had two sons (?) Shmuel & Avram. Louis ran Exclusive Lady's Garments. Avram's children included Motel, Lazar, Chaim, Soshie/Sadie, Esther, Faga/Fay. Itszack, Shmuel's eldest son, died in a fire. A daughter, Chika, married a man who ran Rothstein's furnishings store on Queen St. Son Lazar was furrier in Queen-Spadina area. Allen Schwartz, 18 Russo Dr., Hamden, CT 06518 US. (MR93)
An extended correspondence between long-lost cousins in St. Petersburg and Toronto reveals the tragic past and difficult future for the Jews of the former Soviet Empire.

Three years ago, Hyam Raphael (a pseudonym for one of our members) discovered that an elderly cousin in Toronto had been corresponding in Yiddish for some years with a Russian cousin, an elderly lady descended from his great-great-grandfather.

The two branches of the family had parted when Raphael's great-grandparents left for Canada in 1908. Contact was lost during the war, then re-established in the 1970s after a newly-released Soviet Jew made some inquiries in Toronto on behalf of friends left behind.

Attaining an address in cyrillic script, Raphael penned a brief letter in Yiddish to his Russian cousin and mailed it along with several copies of old family photos. Months later a response in Yiddish arrived from the daughter of the woman to whom he had written.

"I am sad to write that my mother died on the 30th of December," Katerina Aronowicz (a pseudonym) related in her brief letter. Even without her mother's help, however, she could name most of the relatives in the photos. "Write to us again and don't forget," she penned. "Write in English, it'll be easier to read. I kiss you and send heartfelt regards."

Thus began a prolonged exchange, with letters leaving Toronto in English and arriving from the former Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in Russian.

"We're very excited that you are showing us the roots of our family," she wrote in May 1990. "I studied the photos you sent with tears in my eyes. Unfortunately, they arrived after my mother had died. My mother used to cry when she looked at the old pictures of her family in America."

According to Aronowicz, her grandparents left M., a shtetl near Bobruisk, Bielorussia (now Belarus) for Leningrad just after the Revolution. "M. was a very little town and it was impossible to give the children a proper education there," she explained. During the German siege of Leningrad, her grandparents moved to Novo Sibersk in Siberia. "It's amazing to think how we have grown up in absolutely different environments and lived absolutely different lives," she wrote in October 1990.

"I tried to research the family tree long ago. I went to M. but events like revolution and war destroyed the archives there."

In her letters Aronowicz admitted that circumstances were forcing her and her husband to leave the country along with many of their Jewish friends. In their early sixties, with only a few years standing between them and their retirement pensions, they felt too old to start a new life elsewhere -- but what choice did they have? They had applied to emigrate to America, she said, but had received no reply. "We will accept any recommendations you may have that will help us come to Canada, including talking to a lawyer. We have to get out of the country. Life is forcing us to move," Raphael replied that bringing them to Canada would be difficult but that he would investigate all possibilities.

Raphael and a Toronto cousin spoke with a lawyer and with staff at the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society and Canadian Immigration. The situation seemed unpromising. However, some members of his large Canadian mishpochehd of the Aronowicz and sent him funds on their behalf.

Reading reports in the winter of 1991 that the food supply in Leningrad was unstable, he asked his cousins what he could send them. "We are in good health," came the reply. "It's not true that we don't have enough food. There..."
are restrictions on meat, butter, sugar and so on, but we have everything we need." Besides, they added, most packages sent to their country never reach their intended destination.

IRONICALLY, THEY WANTED to send him a package: an old bible and a pair of large menorahs, both significant family heirlooms. However, since the religious books dated from 1878 and were considered historical artifacts belonging to the state, they would likely need a permit to export them. The same letter contained some belated tragic news: "All Jews were executed in M. on April 12, 1942, on the first day of Pesach. They were buried in a mass grave and now there is a monument there." On Erev Pesach, Raphael and his family lit a Yizkor candle.

In the spring the Aronowiczes wrote that they had discovered another mutual cousin living in Kiev; their families had lost touch during the war. A few weeks later, Raphael received a letter from the cousin, Aaron Lichtenberg. It contained an extensive family chart showing which relatives had survived the Holocaust and indicating branches in Dniepeterovsk, Riga and Moldova. Lichtenberg also described two aunts who went to America before the war with whom his family had lost contact.

Raphael read the letter with mixed emotions. His inquiries about bringing distant cousins to Canada had been discouraging. Would he now have to disappoint his newly found cousin from Kiev in the same way?

Raphael had reluctantly painted a bleak but realistic picture to the Aronowiczes. As he explained, a Canadian citizen may not sponsor anyone except a direct family member, not even with an iron-clad guarantee that the potential immigrant would not become a public charge. Recognizing his good intentions, his cousins thanked him, adding that they were planning to visit Israel. "Israel is the only place where someone is waiting for us," they wrote. "It is the only right decision." They added that they had given the menorahs to a local museum and would mail the prayerbooks soon. "Let them stay in our family in memory of our great-grandparents."

The prayerbooks arrived in August. Raphael was inspecting them when news of the hardline coup against Gorbachev flashed across the television. As events unfolded in Moscow over the next few days, Raphael was intensely and somewhat guiltily preoccupied with the fate of his cousins in the crumbling empire. Had he done everything possible to help them in their plight? Opening the brittle pages of the antique Chumash, he prayed they would still be allowed to leave.

MEANWHILE, A SECOND letter arrived from Aaron Lichtenberg, describing what life was like for a 55-year-old Jewish engineer in the Ukraine. "I can't say I've suffered difficulties for religious reasons," he wrote, "but I've had difficulties due to my nationality and the necessity of filling in every application form truthfully. In every form I had to mention my aunts who live abroad, even though I didn't know anything about them except that they left for the United States about 30 years before I was born.

"This circumstance always created a problem for me. I couldn't enter the university that I wanted, I couldn't work where I wanted or attain a promotion in my employment. I couldn't go abroad, not even as a tourist, not even to Bulgaria. They let my wife go but they wouldn't let me.

"I'm not talking about smaller things that I encountered daily. And you understand, they never give you a real reason for their refusal or allow for any means of appeal."

In the same letter, Lichtenberg reported that his wife had developed cancer, possibly in reaction to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. She had had four serious operations already, he said. He enclosed a medical diagnosis and requested specific medication. With a doctor's assistance, Raphael was arranging to courier the medication when word came that it was too late. He sent condolences instead. He also provided Lichtenberg with the address of his aunt's son in Brooklyn, whom he'd tracked down with information supplied from Kiev as well as Toronto.

The Aronowiczes' next letter came around Rosh HaShana: "Thank G-d the horrible events of August are over. The situation here is unpredictable at best. It seems most unfortunate for us, at our age, that everything is so indefinite and that a critical situation may arise at any moment."

In Israel, the Aronowiczes had been advised repeatedly against making aliyah because of the difficulties of finding jobs and affordable housing. Now they were considering Germany, where Jewish immigration is encouraged as part of a reparation scheme. They explained that they wanted to be close to their son and his family, who had left two years earlier for America, been waylaid in a transit camp near Rome, and had decided to stay in Italy. In Germany, they would have at least a hope of seeing their grandchildren.

UNDERSTANDABLY, RAPHAEL was somewhat disturbed at this prospect. Having heard abundant reports from the new Germany about neo-Nazi violence against Jews and foreigners, he advised his cousins not to go. Alas, their next letter was postmarked from Dillenburg in the German Republic, where they had arrived only two weeks earlier.

It was not a happy letter. Before they left St. Petersburg, officials in Dillenburg had assured them there was a Jewish community in a nearby town. When they arrived, however, they found that no Jews lived in either city. They spent the first night in a poor hotel and in the morning contacted the closest Jewish community. "The organization said it could not help us in any way, not with support nor in finding an apartment," the Aronowiczes wrote. "We found it very hard to get an apartment since no one wanted to rent to us. We found that everything we heard in Russia about how Germans want to take in Russian emigrants was wrong. Nobody needs us here."
A Translated Russian "Passport", ca. 1890
Upon expiry, an official residence permit became an effective Notice of Expulsion

[FRONT]

BY ORDER OF HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY
ALEXANDER ALEXANDROVITCH,
Absolute Monarch of all the Russias, &c, &c, &c.

The holder of this passport, Levush of Friedrichstadt, Government of
Covland, the Jew, Lev, a hat and cap maker,
is allowed to reside in the different cities and towns of the Russian Empire for
his own purposes, for two years from the undermentioned date, that is,
until the 18th of January, one thousand eight hundred & ninety-two;
at the expiration of which term he must return, in default of which he will be
dealt with according to law. Given according to the document entered in the
book under No. 49 from the Friedrichstadt Department with the seal attached,
January the eighteenth, one thousand eight hundred and ninety.

Note. -- This passport is valid only in those governments where
Jews are allowed to reside.

Signed B. Bislman. Signed P. Ulman.

[BACK]

The Jew, Lev, herein mentioned, with his wife and 2
sons, a hat and cap maker, in accordance with the documents
submitted and particulars gathered, is allowed to reside in the capital till the
first of January, 1891.

St. Petersburg,
Chief of the Police,
Signed, Dresser.

March 16th,
1890. M.G. B.K. 1435
87
B B M F M.G.

The Jew, Lev, herein mentioned, with his wife and 2 sons,
as hat and cap maker, in accordance with the documents submitted and
particulars gathered, is allowed to reside in the Capital till the first of
January, 1892.

St. Petersburg,
Chief of the Police,
Signed, Dresser.

January 20th,
1891. 6297.
Although 10, 20, 50 census.

It is hoped that our Indiana Society intends to meet again. For further information, contact Linden Rees at 886-3982.

This three-page English resource list, a list of London synagogues with mailing addresses, and a list of Jewish cemeteries in and around London. After some discussion of these resources, the seven attendees described the earliest year an ancestor had first set foot in Britain.

For most participants, England seems to have been more popular. Typically, all their British ancestors originated somewhere in the eighteenth of January, 1892, and this, in fact, constituted an expulsion order. The expulsion order of the 5th January, 1882, written across the face of the original document, not only confirmed the last-named order, but compelled the victim to return, not to Courland, but to the Pale. No reason is stated for Yungman's expulsion, and one can imagine the anxious care with which for two years he must have treasured up this precious document, which conferred the sole right he had of residence beyond the Pale.

Changes at Beth Hatefutsoth (Tel Aviv)

Following an unsuccessful pay-per-name policy, the Dorot Genealogy Center of Beth Hatefutsoth, the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv, has begun accepting, free of charge, computer diskettes of family trees in IBM compatible GEDCOM format for inclusion in their data base. Beth Hatefutsoth announced the welcome change in policy last month, they have not become their final resting place.

The document at left is based on an original passport that appeared in translation in the London Jewish Chronicle, March 18, 1892, with this explanation:

The "passport" of which an exact copy appears on the opposite page is an average specimen of its class. The necessity for its various indorsements and renewals must have given frequent opportunity for extortion by the police. In addition to this, the Jew here mentioned had to pay for the Government stamp at every stage. It will be noted that though the original "passport" gave Leib Yungman the right of residence in any part of Russia until the eighteenth of January, 1892, the passport was afterwards indorsed with a permission to reside in the capital only till the 1st January, 1892, and this, in fact, constituted an expulsion order. The expulsion order of the 5th January, 1882, written across the face of the original document, not only confirmed the last-named order, but compelled the victim to return, not to Courland, but to the Pale. No reason is stated for Yungman's expulsion, and one can imagine the anxious care with which for two years he must have treasured up this precious document, which conferred the sole right he had of residence beyond the Pale.

NO PLACE TO CALL HOME (from page 9)

Accepting social assistance amounting to about 880 deutschmarks per month, they found many of their modest dreams vanished. "Our wish to see our children and grandchildren is impossible at the moment. Fortunately, a German family helped us move into an apartment near other Russian emigrants, five families and ourselves. Right now life is a little better and we pray for patience."

"We don't understand German but I am talking Yiddish and little by little the Germans are understanding me. We want to go to Wiesbaden where there's a good Jewish community, but we don't know if we'll get permission. I know this is a very sad letter but I hope you understand what we're feeling."

In November, the Aronowiczes wrote again of their feeling of being unwanted in their new country: strangers in a strange land. The German family that had befriended them had taken them to the closest synagogue, some 40 km distant, for the High Holidays. They confided to being grateful but puzzled by their interest. By contrast, many other Germans seemed decidedly cold and unfriendly. They spoke again of visiting Israel.

THIS SPRING, Raphael hopes to send more funds to the Aronowiczes from family members in Canada. "They're facing very difficult decisions, and we'd be facing the same decisions too if our great-grandparents hadn't been brave enough to come to Canada," he says. He expresses the hope that the Aronowiczes will reconsider Israel.

In their most recent letter, the Aronowiczes also express the hope that Germany does not become their final resting place. Whatever ultimate fate awaits them, this three-year correspondence shows some of the difficult choices that politics have thrust upon the Aronowiczes and our many other forgotten cousins in the former Soviet Empire.

British Special Interest Group

A N APPROPRIATELY cold and foggy evening in January marked the first meeting of our Society's British special interest group at the home of Linda and Lynette Rees in Thornhill.

Linden distributed a generous sheaf of photocopied papers. Included was a three-page English resource list, a list of London synagogues with mailing addresses, and a list of Jewish cemeteries in and around London. After some discussion of these resources, the seven attendees described their British lines, each in turn, and attempted to estimate the earliest year an ancestor had first set foot in Britain.

Linden's great-great-grandparents had probably arrived from Kovno and Brest-Litovsk about 1860, he said, while Lynette's likely came from Warsaw in the 1850s; Newcastle, in the 1860s; and showed a possible cousin in the 1870s; Lynette's likely came from Warsaw in the 1860s.

Addie Sapera guessed that her maternal grandmother had come to England about 1870. David Harris, who showed evidence of his great-great-grandparents' presence in London in the 1870s, he explained that several lines likely arrived in the 1850s and showed a possible cousin in the 1840 census.

For most participants, England seems to have been more than a temporary stop-over -- but a stop-over nonetheless. Typically, all their British ancestors originated somewhere else. Enlightened Britain proved a good home for interest groups. If you are interested in starting one, contact Bill Gladstone at 652-2455.

Changes at Beth Hatefutsoth (Tel Aviv)

Following an unsuccessful pay-per-name policy, the Dorot Genealogy Center of Beth Hatefutsoth, the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv, has begun accepting, free of charge, computer diskettes of family trees in IBM compatible GEDCOM format for inclusion in their data base. Beth Hatefutsoth announced the welcome change in policy last summer, in a letter encouraging genealogists to use the museum to preserve family histories for future generations.

"Many genealogists have discovered that by registering at Dorot, they have access to a new untapped source: the myriad of international visitors to Beth Hatefutsoth, the hundreds of people who write and phone daily with inquiries..."
from around the world, and most recently, the new Russian immigrants anxious to find long lost relatives," the letter read. It described the museum's own genealogy software, Personal Dorot, as simple, easy to use, and IBM compatible. (The cost is $99.95 + $5 for postage & handling.)

"We look forward to receiving your family tree so that you too can become part of our 'forest' here in Israel," read the letter, which was signed by Diana Sommer, director of the Dorot Genealogy Center. Write to Beth Hatefutsoth, P.O.B. 39359, Tel Aviv 61392 Israel.

City Directories, Phonebooks, at Nat'l Library of Canada Numerous significant 19th-century city, county and provincial directories from across Canada are among the 300 linear feet of Canadian directories accessible at the National Library of Canada (NLC) in Ottawa.

As well, Bell Canada's historical telephone book collection, comprising some 2,500 items from as early as 1878, was transferred to the NLC last year.

The NLC also possesses a microfilm collection of 488 Canadian telephone directories, primarily for cities in Ontario and Quebec for the period from 1877 to 1980. Years covered vary from city to city.

These items are located in NLC's Reference Room and are not available through interlibrary loan. National Library of Canada, 395 Wellington St., Ottawa, Ont. K1A ON4.

Protest Urged As National Archives Considers User Fees The Saskatchewan Genealogical Society (SGS) is spearheading a campaign to prevent the National Archives of Canada from implementing full cost recovery for services, which the federal government has been encouraging. As a large user group, genealogists would pay the brunt of these fully recovered costs. These fees could include entrance, consultation with archives and an increase in photocopying charges. The income will not remain with the National Archives but in fact will go into the consolidated fund and could be directed to pay off the debt.

In a letter of concern, the SGS remarked that cultural heritage should not be treated like a commodity. "Deterrent fees should not be imposed as they would limit access to our heritage..." Write to the National Archives, David Enns, Director of Reference and Researcher Services, 395 Wellington St., Ottawa ON K1A ON3.

Toronto's First Century is Theme of OGS Conference Billed as Ontario's largest genealogical event, the Ontario Genealogical Society is holding Seminar '93, four days of speakers and workshops at the University of Toronto, May 27 to 30, 1993. The theme is "York: The First Hundred."

Sponsored by the OGS' Toronto branch, the conference offers tours of historic sites, speakers on many aspects of family history, beginner and computer workshops, and -- says a brochure -- "something for every genealogical interest." Write to OGS Seminar '93, Toronto's First Post Office, Box 2, 260 Adelaide St. E., Toronto ON Canada M5A 1N1. Telephone: (416) 489-0734.

Restore Cemeteries, Visit Jewish Sites in Czech Republic Czech-born Nora Freund, a member of our Society, is planning to take a group of young people to the Czech Republic this summer and put them to work restoring one or more Jewish cemeteries.

Freund left Czechoslovakia as a child with her parents as the Nazi juggernaut was beginning to roll across Europe. Having visited her native land several times since it wrested free of Soviet control, she was appalled by the poor condition of its Jewish cemeteries, which once numbered about 400. Many have been totally destroyed. "A lot of the remaining ones are being totally neglected," she says, "and they're in quite bad condition. They've reverted back to the Jewish community but the Jewish community doesn't have the funds to maintain them. They need some Western interest."

Freund, who has traced her family back some 200 years in Bohemia, was born in the village of Oracov, near Carlsbad, in Western Bohemia. Damaged but still standing, the Oracov cemetery is among those she hopes to work on. It hasn't been touched since the Nazis vandalized it and left it in 1939. "We may not be able to fix the stones -- that takes money -- but at least we can record what's written on them so the information is not lost," she says.

With the assistance of a Czech colleague connected to the Czech Union of Jewish Youth, Freund hopes to match the Canadian group with a group of young Jews from the Czech Republic who most likely had little chance to explore their Jewish heritage under the previous communist regime.

The trip will likely last three weeks in July and also involve extensive touring of Jewish and tourist sites. Several educational lectures are also being arranged. Hoping to attract "mature teens" and adults in their 20s, Freund says that some older people have expressed interest. "I'm very gratified by this but I really want young people," she says. "I'm doing this more for the future than for the past."

For further information, phone (416) 481-1933.

Our Society Donates Nearly $100 to AJGS Gift Fund Many of our renewing members kindly added $1 or more to their membership fees for the gift fund established by the Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies. Our Society recently sent the AJGS a contribution of $99.40.

Recent Acquisitions to Our Library Collection New titles in our library collection include Rabbi Shmuel Gort's Jewish Personal Names, and the Biographical Dictionary of Canadian Jews, From the Jewish Times 1909-1914. (See review, page 13.)

NEW MEMBERS
We welcome the following new members to our Society:

HARVEY ATKIN  
EDWARD M. COHEN  
MURRAY KANE  
AYRUM ROSENSWEIG  
JEFFREY R. STUTZ  
SUSAN J. BARTENSTEIN  
S. RICHARD GORDON  
JEFFREY D. MILGRAM  
NORMA SCHECHTER  
DEBBIE TESSLER-GLINA
**New Biographical Dictionary is Genealogical Gem**

*Avotaynu publishes best source yet for Canadian Jews before WWI*


By Bill Gladstone

**P**UBLISHED in Montreal between 1897 and 1914, the Canadian Jewish Times was a quality English-language fortnightly newspaper that captured the flavour of Jewish life in Canada in the period between the rise of Zionism and the start of the Great War. Filled with local news, literary contributions and articles and editorials about Jewish concerns, it also functioned as a community bulletin board in the days before telephones were common. Social notices and personal family announcements (everything from births, bar mitzvahs, marriages and deaths to announcements of holidays and business trips) regularly appeared from Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Glace Bay, Halifax, Calgary, Hamilton, Winnipeg and other Canadian cities.

The Times is a potentially valuable source for genealogists whose families had established themselves in Canada in the pre-WWI era. It is available on microfilm in a handful of repositories including the Ontario Jewish Archives in Toronto and the National Archives in Ottawa. In the past, researchers who cared to visit these institutions and slog through reel after reel of microfilm in search of particular family references might have been richly rewarded.

Now, thanks to Avotaynu and the painstaking devotion of National Archives archivist Lawrence Tapper, all surname references from the Times have been indexed and the ads reprinted in an engaging encyclopedic format, with attractive display ads supplying visual relief. With this work, Tapper makes the genealogical material of the Times infinitely more accessible to a much wider public.

This book is the most extensive collection of biographical data on Canadian Jews yet assembled between two covers. Although the period is earlier and more restricted than that treated in either Arthur Daniel Hart's classic *The Jew In Canada* (1926) or Dr. Zvi Cohen's *Canadian Jewry: Prominent Jews of Canada* (1933), it contains several times more information than both sources combined. The ads, reprinted in a small and easily legible typeface, run about 180 pages. The index is 56 pages long and includes -- astonishingly -- some 11,000 references.

Here's a simple demonstration of the book's worth for genealogists. The nominal index indicates that the surname Antipitzky appeared on five occasions in the Times between 1909 and 1914. As it happens, Antipitzky is an ancestral surname of one of our members, Mrs. Addie Sapera, who knew only that the family came from a Russian town or village beginning with the letter 'R'. She seemed greatly excited to learn of the following notice, dated September 20, 1912, which she says refers to her great-grandfather's brother:

ANTIPITZKY, Moses, senior member of the Antipitzky Metal Co., died last week at the family residence, 76 Grange St., Toronto, after an illness lasting ten weeks. Mr. Antipitzky was one of the earliest Russian Jewish settlers in Toronto. He came to Toronto in 1881 from Regula. "After many years of hardship he finally succeeded in establishing the business which subsequently became one of the wealthiest of its kind in the city. Besides, he was extensively interested in real estate," Active in Jewish fraternal and benevolent societies, he was a member of the Goel Tzedek and McCaul Street Synagogues. Mr. Antipitzky is survived by his wife, four daughters, Mrs. A. Grassman, of Vancouver; Mrs. Louis Kom, the Misses Annie and Lillie Antipitzky, and two sons, Herman and Samuel Antipitzky, all of Toronto.

The book is equally valuable to students of early Canadian-Jewish history, since it contains a "General News" section containing information on historic personages of the 19th-century Jewries in Montreal, Toronto and other cities. The compass of Jewish life in early 20th-century Canada is illustrated through various vivid vignettes and telling tableaux. In June 1911, an English-born Jew named Alex Claude Jacobs wrote an agitated letter to the editor that he had encountered some newly-arrived Russo-Jewish emigrants near the C.P. Railway Station in Montreal, seemingly lost and confused, "without a word of advice or help." And that month in Toronto

GOLDBERG, Samuel, Maurice Hans, Hyman Katz, Isidore Fink, Samuel Gleek were arrested and charged with being disorderly as a result of a riot at the
corner of Agnes and Terauley Sts. Sun. night, sparked by a Jewish missionary. Dr. Soaskin, of Louisville, Ky. "...who it is claimed, has been attacking the Jews at a series of meetings during the week..." Others arrested were Harry Pinchefsky for assaulting the police and Nathan Girdstone for obstructing the police. Rabbi S. Jacobs came down to the police station but could not arrange bail. Dr. John Shayne, president of the B'hai Zion Association, "...stated that Mrs. Lizzie Pinchefsky was sitting in front of her store at 91 Agnes street, when the policeman ordered her to go inside and when she questioned the order, struck her over the seventh rib with his club and when she threw up her hand, struck again and fractured one of her fingers." Others for whom Dr. Shayne had medical certificates were: Harry Pinchefsky and Joseph Weiss, bruises on the head; Nathan Girdstone, swelling over the left shoulder; and Samuel Goldberg, swelling below right ear."

Social notices also contained pertinent information: "KOPEL, Miss Esther, of Leeds, England, is in Montreal to attend her brother's marriage to Miss Sophie Florence which takes place Sun. March 30, 1913." Torontoians may be disappointed (and Montrealers delighted) that much of the Biographical Dictionary deals specifically with Montreal, which then possessed the largest and most dynamic Jewry in the Dominion. Montreal receives some 88 pages as compared to a scant 24 for Toronto.

Remember those bewildered Russo-Jewish emigrants in Montreal? Just as the Jewish authorities of the day seemed to overlook them, so did the Times, which was the voice of the "landed gentry" -- the established English-speaking Jews who were already well-integrated into the Canadian mainstream. It held little appeal and was of little use to the Yiddish-speaking "Green" throngs who were still arriving daily at Halifax, Quebec City and other ports. (All of my great-grandparents arrived in Canada just before or during those years, yet none apparently placed an ad, not even my paternal ancestors who had grown up in England.)

The Biographical Dictionary marks another coup for Avotaynu Inc., the Teaneck N.J.-based publishing house responsible for the much-awaited Dictionary of Russian-Jewish Surnames, the award-winning Where Once We Walked and the renowned journal Avotaynu, which has long been essential reading for all serious students of Jewish genealogy. The book is Tapper's second contribution to the literature. His Archival Sources for the Study of Canadian Jewry (1978) was reprinted in 1987 by the National Archives, which still distributes it upon request at no charge.

Unsurpassed as a source of information on Canadian Jews from the period it treats, the Biographical Dictionary of Canadian Jewry belongs in public libraries across Canada and in the private collections of historical and genealogical researchers. Curiously, in the forward, Tapper refers to the work as a "sequel" to a parallel volume for the years 1897-1909. No such luck: the other book has not yet been published, and may not be for some time.

To order a copy of the "Biographical Dictionary of Canadian Jewry, 1909-1914," send US$35 + $3.50 (shpg. & hndlg.) to Avotaynu Inc., PO Box 1134, Teaneck NJ 07666.

The Case of Opatow
Book describes town's Jewish life in 18th-C.


By Sheryl Erenberg

ANYONE researching their Polish roots will enjoy Professor Hundert's book, even if Opatow is not their ancestral town.

According to the author, a quarter of the Jews in the world lived in privately owned Polish towns like Opatow in the eighteenth century. Jews lived in Opatow from about 1538 and in the eighteenth century Jewish life flourished. Professor Hundert writes: "Jewish life in the town was distinguished by its vitality and energy, so much so that Jewish predominance in commerce and industry exceeded in its weight the numerical preponderance of Jews."

Hundert, a professor of history at McGill University in Montreal, says he has no ties to Opatow but chose the town for his study because of the abundance of documents available -- specifically the records of two of the town's owners.

The book describes the relationship between Jews and Poles within the town, between residents and the town owner, and details the workings of the Jewish community, including its courts, taxation, commerce and residency restrictions. Several of the town's elders and authority figures are profiled, among them Yechezkel Landau, Binyamin Wolf and Svi Hirsh.

This glimpse into eighteenth century Jewish life is fascinating to the historian, useful to the genealogist and a treasure for those, such as myself, whose ancestors came from Opatow. Even if you can't document your ancestors back to the 1700s, you will at least know how they lived.

Also of interest to genealogists is "A Tale of One City," edited by Ben Giladi, a newly-published collection of essays about pre-war Piotrkow-Trybunalski.
Cochin, a city on the western (Malabar) coast of India, has been home to communities of Indian Jews since ancient times. Historical references to the ancient Jews of Cochin come from several sources. Benjamin of Tudela, a famous Spanish traveller, noted approximately one hundred "Black Jews" on the coast of Malabar around 1170. Moses Pereira de Paiva detailed an account of the Indian Jews after the Portuguese-Dutch struggle for Cochin in 1662. His book, Noticias dos Judeos de Cochin, noted that both white and black Jews were living there.

Several communities of Jews who settled long ago in India were known collectively as the Bene Israel ("Children of Israel"). Theories of their evolution are manifold. According to some scholars, they represent remnants of one or more of the lost tribes of Israel. One hypothesis places them at the dawn of the Northern Kingdom of Israel's secession from Rehoboam in 721 B.C.E. Another suggests they endured disheartening treatment by Antiochus Epiphanes shortly before the Maccabean uprising. Still another view suggests that their ancestors left Judea before the destruction of the Second Temple, since their offerings of frankincense in the synagogue service recalls the same rite observed in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Although differing greatly, these theories all agree that the Bene Israel arrived in India from "the West" after being shipwrecked, and subsequently retained little knowledge of Hebrew or of Jewish customs. Because of their disaster at sea, their sacred Sefer Torah was lost, leaving them without knowledge of many Jewish traditions for centuries. The Bene Israel recall this event as the single greatest tragedy of their community's history. Consequently, they did not learn about Hanukkah or the destruction of the Second Temple until recently.

Over time, many other traditional Jewish customs were also unknown or "forgotten" among the ancient Jews of India. One prayer that remained with them, however, was the Shema, the basic creed of the Hebrew religion meaning "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!" They apparently used the incantation at almost every cultural ceremony. Although they may have been ignorant of much of their religion, they still managed to honor the Sabbath, practice circumcision and adhere to a strict kosher diet.

While historians concur that the Indian white Jews originated as shipwrecked Western voyagers, much uncertainty surrounds the history of India's black Jews, who racially appear to be natives of the Indian sub-continent. The most obvious conclusion is that intermarriage produced a new population of Jews with dark skin, probably as a result of cohabitation between white Jews and their slaves. The black Jews explain their dark skin as the effect of the subtropical climate on their ancestors.

Eventually, the black and white Jews separated from each other, creating a strong caste division based on skin color. Similar to the history of class distinction in other societies based on race, a premium was placed on white skin. Separate temples were formed even though black and white Jews worshipped the same god. The white group became known as the Gora-Israel or "true Bene Israel" while the blacks were called Kala-Israel. These distinctions brought about social separatism and conflict, for the Gora felt they were superior to the Kala.

Towards the end of the 18th century, about one-third of the Bene Israel migrated to Bombay to pursue more attractive job opportunities as clerks and laborers. The Cochin Jews taught them about Judaism while wealthy, recently-arrived Baghdadi Jews aided the Bene Israel financially and helped them fund a Jewish school. After India became independent in 1947, the formerly rigid walls of the caste system finally caved in, resulting in the intermingling of Baghdadis, Bene Israel, Gora and Kala. Once the social barriers were removed, relations among the various Jewish factions in India improved. A large percentage of the black Jews achieved esteemed positions as merchants, engineers, lawyers and doctors.

Ralph G. Bennett is a physician living in Hayward, California. His articles on medical subjects, history, genealogy, anthropology, art history and economics have appeared in many publications internationally.
Jewish Genealogical Society of Canada
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See inside for details on the 12th Annual Summer Seminar on Jewish Genealogy
Park Plaza Hotel  Toronto Canada  June 27-30

Mr. Neil Richler
42 Crimson Millway
WILLOWDALE, ON
M2L 1T6

WHERE ONCE WE WALKED: Portrait of 18th-Century Frankfurt Jews & the Judengasse of the old Frankfurt Ghetto (From old prints)