

TRACING YOUR
JEWISH ROOTS



MALCOLM H. STERN

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By

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DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF
DAVID STEINE

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Foreword

Alex Haley's best selling book, *Roots*, has created a great deal of interest in the field of genealogy. Actually, there have been hundreds of thousands of people in all parts of the country who have been writing professionally in this field for many decades.

Jews evinced an interest in their own origins as early as 1800 when young Sampson Simpson, graduating from Columbia University, delivered an oration in Hebrew. In this address he spoke of the very first Jews in the United States, describing the families from which they had sprung. Unfortunately he failed to give their names. Many years later, Dr. Walter Max Kraus attempted to establish an American Jewish genealogical journal and one issue of his paper, the *Saint Charles*, did appear. Kraus's genealogical documents are now on deposit in the American Jewish Archives.

It was not until 1960 that Dr. Malcolm H. Stern, the genealogist of the American Jewish Archives, published *Jews of American Descent*. This is a compendium which lists in great detail Jewish families who had come to the United States before 1840. They hailed from different parts of Europe and Africa. Among them were French, Hungarian, German, Dutch, Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, and English Jews.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to secure data for the Jews who came during the German and, especially, the East European periods, from 1840 down to about 1921. There are, however, as Dr. Stern makes clear, organizations devoted to the history of these Jewish families in their European settings and various steps which one can follow to trace their American roots.

We are very grateful to Malcolm Stern for taking the time to author this pamphlet. He has prepared it for the individual who has had no previous background in genealogical research. Within the relatively simple steps described by Dr. Stern, however, lie the elements of the most detailed and sophisticated methods yet developed. Hence, while this guide is for the beginner, it contains the seeds necessary to produce an expert in the area of genealogical research. Perhaps that future expert is the very person reading these words. Only by persistence and hard work will he or she know for certain.

We Jews are a strange people: we remember Moses, the kings David and Solomon, but we know next to nothing about our own forefathers besides our parents and occasionally our grandparents.

Vera Weizmann (1881-1966)
Wife of the First President
of the State of Israel

What do you know about your family? Do any records exist? Why don't you become the one to record the known generations of your family? But let me warn you that once you begin, you can easily become addicted if the "genealogy bug" gets under your skin. But the process is as fascinating as any detective work or treasure hunt. So let's begin.

A. A Table of Ancestors

Arm yourself with a loose-leaf notebook, some ruled sheets of paper for it and your favorite writing instrument — pen or pencil. A pocket-size notebook and a small portable tape recorder could also be useful for later research.

On a sheet of the loose-leaf paper put at the top:

ANCESTORS OF

(your name) (your birthplace and birthdate)

(your marriage date and place) (your spouse's name and birthplace and birthdate)

The following abbreviations will be helpful: b. — born; m. — married; d. — died.

Now, list by number all that you know about the following as to name, birthdate, and place, death date and place, marriage date and place:

Parents

1. (Father)
2. (Mother)

Grandparents

3. (Father's father)
4. (Father's mother)
5. (Mother's father)
6. (Mother's mother)

Great-grandparents

7. & 8. parents of 3. above
9. & 10. parents of 4. above, etc.

When you get to No. 15, you start great-great-grandparents, and it may be easier to list that and earlier generations as parent of No. 7, etc.

So you have gone as far back as you can from your own knowledge, and you discover that there are gaps in your information. Don't worry about the gaps. The fun will be finding the data to fill them in. We'll tell you where to search in a moment.

First, you will want to set up a series of pages in your notebook, each one headed by the name of each of your earliest known ancestors. On that page you will want to trace all his or her known descendants until they connect by marriage with one of the other pages. Number your pages so that you can cross-refer by number.

In listing their descendants you may use one of two schemes. The simpler way is to use an outline form:

1. ISAAC GOLDSMITH, b. May 12,1802, Bamberg, Germany; d. October 10,1874, Pittsburgh, Pa.; m. June 1,1830, Fuerth, Bavaria, ADELHEID LOEB. They had:

A. OTTO GOLDSMITH, b. ; d. Dec. 2, 1901, New York City; unm.

B. ROSE GOLDSMITH, b. — etc.

m. June 14, 1855, Pittsburgh, Pa., MORRIS KAUFMAN

C. ALFRED GOLDSMITH, b. etc. They had:

1. etc.

or you may wish to draw a series of family trees, like this one:

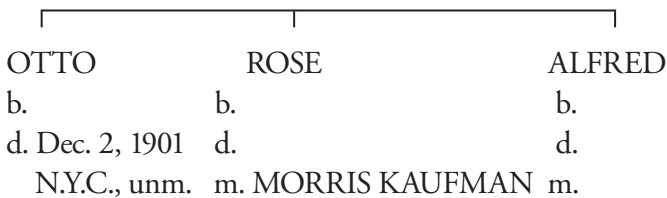
ISAAC GOLDSMITH m. June 1, 1830, ADELHEID LOEB

b. May 12,1802

Fuerth, Bavaria

Bamberg

d. Oct. 10, 1874



B. *Oral Family History*

Now you are ready to start your search for the information which is not readily available to you. Begin with visiting or writing letters to as many members of the family as you can think of who might know something about the older generations and their descendants. The answers you will get may often be vague or guesses or even inaccurate, but they are useful clues. You may find it easier to visit some aging relatives (and don't overlook widows and widowers of your relatives). Here, your pocket-size notebook and the tape recorder could

be useful. For along with genealogical data you may collect family tales that you would love to pass along to your children.

Why an oral history? As elderly relatives die, not only are their memories lost to time, but their voices, accents and even vocal mannerisms are lost to the world. Your tape recorded history will be invaluable to you and future family generations who wish to remember grandfather, aunt, uncle or mother — as they were and with “their own words.”

I am indebted to Rabbi Merle E. Singer of Congregation Beth Or, Spring House, Pennsylvania for permitting me to use the technical procedures and interview questions which he has developed for a congregational family history project.

Technical procedure:

1. Use a standard 60 minute (thirty minute per side) cassette tape, (longer tapes are more fragile and easily broken).
2. Tape only one interview per side.
3. Label all tapes (both sides) with name of interviewer, date of interview.
4. At conclusion of interview to make the tape non-erasable, break tabs at the back of the tape.
5. Interview only one parent (grandparent) at a time.
6. Use the following questions as a guide for your interview:
Ask each parent (grand) the same questions. If additional questions are to be asked note them on your interview question sheet. (Also note which parent (grand) was asked the additional questions.)

Interview Questions:

1. Name
English:
Hebrew:
2. Birthdate.

3. Birthplace (city, state, province [Gubernia] or, country) If not born in America answer questions 4 through 8.
4. Describe why, how, when you came to America.
5. Did any member of your family come to America before you? Describe who, when, and why they came before you.
6. Where did you settle when you came to America (name all places of residence up to the present) ?
7. What kind of work did you and your family do in Europe before you came to America?
8. What kind of work did you do when you came to America? Note: for women who did not work outside the home describe the kind of work you did to run your home.
9. Describe where your family lived to the present. Indicate city and state as well as neighborhoods that may have been changed within the same city.
10. Describe the neighborhood (town or community) in which you grew up.
 - a. type of homes
 - b. Jewish and Christian make-up of the neighborhoodCompare this neighborhood (town or community) to the neighborhood in which you now live.
11. Describe the work (occupation and home management) you and your family did to the present.
 - a. at what age did you go to work?
 - b. list the types of work you have done to the present
12. Describe your education.
 - a. secular (to what grade level?)
 - b. Jewish (to what grade level?)
13. Describe the synagogue your family belonged to as you grew up. Compare it to the synagogue you presently may belong to.

- a. was it Reform, Conservative or Orthodox?
 - b. when did your family join a Reform congregation and for what reasons?
14. What were your first memories of being Jewish?
- a. How was Judaism celebrated in your home as you grew up? Compare that with the Judaism which is found in your present home.
 - b. mention important family traditions, holidays, and life cycle celebrations, i.e., birth, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Confirmation, Marriage, Death, etc.
15. When did you get married?
describe the circumstances of your courtship, i.e., how you met your spouse and what or who brought you two together.
16. What did you and your family do for entertainment when you grew up? Compare that with what your entertainment activities are today.
17. Describe the relationship you had with the Christian community as you grew up. Compare it with the relationship you enjoy today.
18. Describe the extent of any anti-Semitism which you may have experienced when you grew up. Compare that with any you may have experienced as an adult and today.
19. Describe the roles played by your mother and father.
- a. who made the decisions?
 - b. who was the most influential parent of the two?
20. Other recollections.

C. Personal Documents and Family Tombstones

If you are lucky, one of your relatives may have an actual record in the form of a family Bible or letters, copies of wills or other legal documents like immigration papers or naturalization records (remember, however, that naturalization

often came years after that person arrived in America). Make photocopies whenever possible, so that you can have an accurate copy of the record.

One very useful source of information can be a tombstone. If you know where your ancestor is buried, visit the cemetery and find the tombstone. Photograph it or copy it. If some of the data is in Hebrew, take along someone who can read Hebrew, if you cannot. (The Hebrew name can sometimes give a clue as to the deceased's father's name). Tombstones may be more legible in some kind of sunlight than in others; you may have to go back at a different time of day. If the cemetery has an office, ask to see any record of burial. It may give the names of nearest of kin and/or the undertaker, who, if his firm is still extant, kept his own records which may offer you some data.

D. Synagogue Information

Not many synagogues have kept careful vital records (i.e. birth, marriage and death records), but you can telephone the congregation to which your ancestor belonged and ask what data they might have about a specific family, or ask permission to search in their records for your own data.

E. Library Information

The main public library of the city in which your ancestor lived may be able to help a bit. If the library has a local history section, ask for the following:

1. Any index to obituaries in the local paper.
2. If your family was at all prominent, you may find birth or marriage records, or a local history which biographed your relative (such so-called "mug" books were very popular between 1890 and 1910).

3. City directories which would list the business and home address of your ancestor (if he was a business or professional man). What you want especially are his home addresses during the years for which U. S. censuses are available on microfilm: 1840, 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880. (Earlier censuses are available, but they tell only the name of the head of household and list the others by age grouping. The 1900 census is available only at the branch offices of the United States National Archives and in Washington, and may be seen by authorized genealogical researchers who have secured written permission from the family they are researching or you may search for your own family). If the city is large, find out from a commercial atlas in which ward your ancestor's home was located in a given census year. This can save you hours of microfilm reading.
4. Ask for the census microfilm of the year and city (and ward) in which your ancestor was located. If he was there in 1880, use that census first, because it gives more information than any — listing every member of the household by age, sex, place of birth, occupation, value of real estate and personal property, and birthplace of parents. (The librarian will show you how to use a microfilm, if you don't know. It is easy, once you learn how, but a bit hard on the eyes for long usage.) If the library does not have the census microfilms, a local historical society probably does. Since some of the family may be married and out of the house by 1880, you may want to find them in the city directory and census, if you can. You will also want to look in the earlier censuses.

F. *City Hall and Court House Records*

Ask a lawyer where to look for such records as wills,

deeds, probate records, court records, etc. All these records are indexed, usually in large ledgers which lie horizontal on rollers. You roll them out and lift them onto a reading table. The index to wills may list your ancestor, if he left a will; if not, you may find him in an index of administrations. (Wander around the record room and get familiar with where the various types of records are stored). If you find some record, show it to a clerk and he will have a photocopy made for you at very moderate cost. Wills can be the most useful records because they often list relationships. Next in order of usefulness can be deeds, which are divided into “grantor” (seller) and “grantee” (buyer), both indexed. Often property was bought or sold by man and wife, and her name may be given — helpful when you don’t have it; disappointing when the record merely says “et ux.” (and wife).

Probate records deal with settlement of estates and may list children or other relatives. Court records may show legal decisions between or among members of a family (not too frequent); minutes of a mayor’s court or corporation court may indicate when your ancestor indicated his desire to become a citizen, giving his age, country of origin, occupation, and sometimes a sponsor or attestor. Don’t overlook a county court house which may have jurisdiction over an area now part of the city in which your ancestor could have lived or done business or appeared in court.

G. Government Records

Besides the federal census records, the United States National Archives in Washington preserves many types and varieties of records: ship passenger lists (if you have any notion as to when your ancestor arrived, and at what port); military pension records; some other military records; land grants in

western states and territories beyond the original thirteen states; etc. Your helpful librarian can show you a listing of what is available at the National Archives and how to go about requesting information. Branches of the National Archives with records on microfilm have been established in all regions of the country. Your public library can borrow the microfilm on inter-library loan. A little known source of information is the Consolidated Index of Naturalizations for all New York City prior to 1906, housed at the Federal Records Archive, Army Base, Bayonne, N. J.

H. *Municipal Vital Records*

Many cities have kept records of births, marriages, and deaths at a Bureau of Vital Records. They usually charge a nominal fee for each card consulted. In most cities, the official vital records seldom go back before 1900, but there are exceptions. In the nineteenth century some enterprising clerk may have kept ledgers which are tucked away on some shelf. Be persistent and ask. A few cities have set up archives for their earlier records where you can check data either in original volumes or on microfilm. Some cities conducted censuses at odd times. Tax lists can be another source of information.

I. *Historical Society*

Your local historical society and/or genealogical society will undoubtedly have a library with many manuscript volumes containing such things as clippings from the local paper on births, marriages or deaths, or indexes to such. Their librarians can be very helpful in leading you to sources of data, if you come prepared with all the information you have unearthed about a given individual.

J. *Additional Jewish Sources*

The American Jewish Archives, located on the Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion, has collected many records of Jews in America for the period before 1900, including synagogue records, personal letters, diaries, wills, etc. While they cannot trace individuals, unless they have documents belonging to that individual, they can tell you if they have records for a given Jewish community and you are welcome to visit the Archives and search for yourself, or engage a student researcher. Address: American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45220.

The American Jewish Historical Society, 2 Thornton Road, Waltham, Mass., 02154, also has a vast collection of manuscripts, books, and memorabilia.

For a bibliography of reference works, documentary histories, biographies, and communal histories, as well as background on Jewish migration to America, purchase a copy of *Genealogical Research, Volume II*, from The American Society of Genealogists, c/o Mrs. Donna Hotaling, 2255 Cedar Lane, Vienna, Virginia, 22180. Pages 291-311 contain this author's article on "Jewish Migrations."

K. *Foreign Ancestors*

So far we have been talking about resources for finding your ancestors who reached America. What about those in the "old country?" This is far more difficult. Records were often destroyed. Many Jewish families did not acquire family names until the early 19th century. Surprisingly, the Nazis preserved many of the Jewish records which came into their hands. Most

of what survived them is being preserved in Jerusalem at the Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People (P. O. Box 1026, Jerusalem, Israel). They cannot research for you, but, if you know the town from which your ancestor came, they will let you know which records they have from that town and will sell you microfilms (approximately \$50.00 each) of whichever records you request. But be prepared to read Hebrew or Yiddish or possibly German Gothic script in these records.

If your ancestors lived in Germany, you may find some data at Leo Baeck Institute, 129 East 73rd Street, New York, New York 10021.

If your ancestors came from Eastern Europe, you may get some help at: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Inc., 1048 Fifth Avenue (at 86th Street), New York, New York, 10028.

The new enthusiasm for genealogy has produced two useful books which you would do well to consult:

Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy, by Dan Rottenberg (NY: Random House, 1977). \$12.95. A valuable listing of every known source for Jewish genealogy. Half the book is a list of names of Jewish families appearing in encyclopedias and archives. (Be sure to read the introduction to this section or you may be led astray.)

The Unbroken Chain, by Neil Rosenstein. (NY: Shengold Publishers, Inc., 1976). \$17.50. This mammoth volume traces all known descendants of the famous rabbinic Katzenellenbogen family, and includes many rabbis and others of German and East European origin over the last six centuries.

HAPPY HUNTING!

A Sample Family Tree
 (Donated to the American Jewish Archives by Mrs. Alexandra Lee Levin, Baltimore, Maryland)

