# Scouring the World for Plauts:
# The Making of a Jewish Genealogist

### Elizabeth S. Plaut

When in 1973 I decided to trace my husband's family beyond the 1758 date then known to us, I had no idea how that undertaking would affect my life. After a while I found myself with a new profession. I became a serious genealogist.

I had never had any experience in tracing family trees and was a neophyte when I plunged headlong into the sea of details. Little did I know how vast that sea would be or how long would be the voyage or where it would lead.

## Beginning The Search

I began by contacting as many members of the family as I could, in order to obtain all the details and bits of information — even hearsay — they might be able to furnish. I got in touch with men and women who were born Plauts and people whose mother, grandmother or great-grandmother was the last to bear that name. They as well as women who married into the family often were very knowledgeable about relationships and data. I found that older people, including 80-90 year olds, were excellent correspondents with great funds of information.

Cemetery records often give helpful information, and gravestones frequently have inscribed upon them the date and place of birth as well as the Hebrew name of the deceased.

There is also the important job of reading and researching records wherever they can be found. Such records exist for German Jews and go back into the early 1800's or before.

In order to obtain some data on the earliest ancestor about whom we knew, I felt it imperative to trace his descendents

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in as complete detail as possible. One of these distant cousins might well hold a key to the search.

The fact that the family came from Germany made the quest somewhat easier. When German Jews are searching for their family, the city registry is often most helpful. Thus, when I wrote to Detmold that I was searching for data about the family, the registrar supplied me with the address of the widow of one of the relatives. She in turn forwarded my inquiry to her 85-year-old sister-in-law who became a great source of information.

I began inquiring about Plauts who might or might not be part of our family. In doing this, I expanded my field of investigation. I found some Plauts who had traditions of being related to our family "way back," but didn't know how. I worked on their trees hoping to find a common ancestor. I included additional families, and little by little my trees grew in size and number. Soon I had Plauts everywhere in the world as my field of research. My investigations circled the globe: South America, Central America, North America, Europe, England, Israel, Australia, China, Japan. The world became my field for collating Plaut data.

As I probed, searched and investigated, I obtained some fascinating information about the family and about other Jews as well.

## Jews And Family Names

Most Jews had no family name before the 1810's. They were known by their given name and that of the father: Moshe ben Yitzchak was Moses son of Isaac; Shmuel ben Avraham was Samuel son of Abraham; Rivka bat Yitzchak was Rebecca daughter of Isaac. With no last name for the family, continuity could be ascertained only if one traced son to father and that father to *his* father and so on. This was most laborious, especially if the records were not specific or if the family moved from one city to another.

When, around the time of Napoleon, Jews took or were given last names in Germany, some took the name of the city in which they lived (becoming Dessauer, Wiener, Frankfurter, Wormser), or the name of trades (Schneider, Metzger, Fenstermacher, Kaufmann), or names of colours (Schwartz, Grün, Blau, Gelb). Others took the name of the house-sign

of the place they inhabited (Rothschild, Windmüller, Adler, Strauss). Many used their Hebrew names, placing the German word for son *after* the given name of the father and thus Moses son of Isaac became Moses Isaacsohn.

Some Jews translated the Hebrew name into a type of vernacular; both Menachem and Mordecai might become Marx, and one gentleman, *M*oshe *A*us *K*üps (Moses from the city of Küps), took the first letter of his name and the city from which he came and made the acronym Mak or Mack out of it.* (Other Jews took the name Mack for a different reason.) In some cases one brother took one last name and another sibling chose a different one, so that their blood lines were confused by their descendents having different surnames, as in the case of the above mentioned Mak (Mack). His brother took the name Rauh. It should be remembered, however, that people who had the same surname were not necessarily relatives.

### Records That Help

Birth, death, and marriage records of a large number of German cities are available. There are also synagogue records extant as well as registries of families in which the father is listed with his wife and all children living with him. Included in these records are the date and place of birth for each person. With German thoroughness the marriage records list the bride's and groom's name and place of birth, as well as birth places of each parent (including maiden names of the women). In many cases the records show the exact birth dates of the couple being married, and in some exceptional cases even the dates of birth of both sets of parents.

Birth records usually list the complete data on the parents of the newborn; death records generally give the age of the deceased, often listing it in years, months and days, or record the date of birth. In the case of a child or unmarried person, sometimes one even 50 years old or older, the names of parents including *their* fathers' names and maiden names of the mothers are noted.

Birth, death, marriage records act as cross references. By

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*This had a well established Hebrew precedent: thus *K*atz was an acronym for *K*ohen *T*zedek.

comparing the age and parents of the groom with the birth record of a child whose parents have the same name, one can determine if the names refer to the same person. This is of utmost importance, because there were frequently in the same city several grandchildren named after the same grandfather. Thus in Schenklengsfeld, Hirsch Plaut's five sons each named a child after the grandfather. There were Hirsch Plauts born in 1835 (father Jacob), in 1838 (father Juda), in 1840 (father Joseph), in 1842 (father Baruch) and in 1845 (father Meyer). Thus a son born to a Hirsch Plaut does not identify who the grandfather was, until one checks the date of birth of the child's father or the name of the grandfather.

Where a family name existed, the given name of the father usually became the middle name of the son or daughter. Thus we find Isaac Abraham Plaut with his sister Rebecca Abraham Plaut.* This custom helps the researcher in determining family relationships. Care must be used, however, to determine that similar names do indeed belong to the same person.

## The Name Plaut

The name Plaut appeared in Germany long before the Jews had to take family names, and may be found in records (especially tombstones) as early as in the 1600's. In all the records I have seen (and they include birth, death, marriage records as well as synagogue registries etc. for over 60 cities — most in Hessen) the name Plaut is listed as the last name for members of the family. It is easily discernible even in what are very poorly handwritten records in frequently almost undecipherable German script.

The grave of Menachem ben Ruben who was buried in 1645 in the Altona cemetery, bears the earliest date I have found when the name Plaut was used.

Joseph Plaut from Witzenhausen visited the Leipzig Fair in 1677 as did Victor Plaut from Sontra in 1691 and again in 1692.

Jac Hartig Plaut, Jac Is. Plaut, and Simon Is Plaut were living in Wandsbeck in 1734. Hamburg had a Mordecai

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*This represents the Jewish custom of the father's name being part of the child's name, only the word "bar" or "bat" was omitted.

Gumpel Plaut who died "a very old man" in 1750.* He was the son of Joseph Plaut.

In Ottrau a business transaction in 1738 was arranged between Solomon Plaut, another Jew and their non-Jewish neighbors.

The Rauschenberg birth records 1770-1876 tell us that Simon Plaut was born in 1780 to Michael Plaut and his wife Sara. Most of the other families recorded at that time had no family names.

## Variations in the Spelling of Plaut

The name Plaut is recorded in various hands and in various spellings: Plauth, Blaut, Blauth and even Blaud. In nineteenth century Germany the "t" was often followed by a (silent) "h" as in the case of Blauth, Plauth.

The change from "P" to a "B" (and a "t" to a "d") was due to dialectic pronunciation in Hessen where the explosive "P" and "T" were softened to "B" and "D". In Nordhausen in 1835, where 18-year-old Levy Blaut died, it was noted that "the other brother was Plaut, Jehudah". In Frankershausen the name appears on the same family tree as Blauth, Blaut, and Plaut.

My husband's grandfather who died in 1891 is buried in the cemetery in Merzhausen as Moses Blaud, although he and all his ancestors and descendents were recorded officially as "Plaut". Evidently the stone cutter heard "Blaud" when he was given his commission. Moses' wife is buried as Plaut.

Isaac Blout (died 1916) and his brother Henry (died 1904) are buried in Washington, D.C. A granddaughter of one of the brothers remembers a wedding ring of her grandmother's with the letter "P" on it, and it is believed that the family which in the mid-1800's was living in Alexandria, Virginia, changed the "P" for a "B" at that time. The spelling was changed then from Blaut to Blout in order to retain the German pronunciation.

## The Hebrew Spelling of Plaut

In traditional Hebrew, names are written without vocaliza-

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*The names Mordecai and Gumpel accompany each other frequently as do the names Leib-Löb-Yehudah.

tion. At one time the name Plaut could have been written פלט [PLT]. Such was the way a 12th-century scholar Joseph ibn Plat usually transcribed his name. He died in Lunel, France, in 1190 and was a well-known scholar of that time. But in writing about him, his contemporaries wrote not only פלט but also פלאט [Plaut], פלאט [Plat] and also פליט [Plit]. How the name was vocalized in the local French language is not known.

In 1245 there was in France another scholar, Rabbi Shem Tov Plat, פלט in Hebrew.

In France today there are Plaut families who trace their families back in that country for several generations.

Joseph ibn Plat and his son Solomon spent some years in Italy. It is believed by some that the name became Plautus and then the ending "us" was dropped when the family emigrated. It then reverted to the original root פלט but maintained the "au" (או) sound and was written in the vernacular as "Plaut". Plaut families that lived in Germany from the 18th to the 20th century generally wrote their names פלאוט, sometimes, פלט, פלויט and occasionally פלאט, פלאיט.

The name פלט, in the 12th century, could have been vocalized in various ways. It is postulated that the name Bolat is derived from Plat, and a family Bolat living in Switzerland today (and joined in marriage to a Plaut family) has a tradition that Bolat and Plaut are one and the same name.*

## Changes in the Name Plaut

In the 19th century, in a few German villages, records show that some changes took place whereby the name Plaut was superseded by another last name.

How does one account for these additions to and later changes away from the name Plaut? Only in a few places does there appear an additional family name. My theory is that when Jews were given or took last names, the authorities discovered that there were some Jews who already had family names which had been handed down for genera-

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*It is quite probable that the name Flaut is also Plaut. When my husband and I lived in Israel for a month we were frequently called Flaut until we indicated that the פ was indeed a פ and not ף. However, I have not branched out into researching Bolat or Flaut families. The name Plaut-Blaut-Blout is a large enough subject to examine.

tions. This did not sit well with the registrars who were not Philo-Semites and forced the Plauts to change their name to a newer one and in time the older family nomenclature was forgotten. Thus in Guxhagen as early as 1810 an Isaac Blaut König was a witness to a legal transaction.

In the Gudensburg marriage records, Nanny Plaut Wolf, from Felsberg, married Moses Levi Elias. In recording the births of her many children she is listed as follows: in 1851, Nanny geb. Plaut; in 1853/4, Nanny Katz; in 1855, Nanny Plaut Hess; and then again Nanny Plaut in 1857-65. Yet there is no change in the name of her husband, the father of her children.

In Felsberg there were many different names added to Plaut: e.g. Seligman Plaut Nagel, Juda Plaut König, Juda Plaut Goldberg, whose descendents omitted "Plaut" from their name.

In Obervorschütz, Marcus Plaut Löwenstein had three sons each of whom dropped the Löwenstein name and, with their descendents, became Plaut.

## Is Plaut a Jewish Name?

Has Plaut always been and has it remained a Jewish name? The answer is "no". Through intermarriages and conversions, there are and have been Plauts who were not Jewish. The majority of defections from Judaism have occurred from the mid-1800's into the present, and in cities away from the ancestral family homes.

In Cincinnati, Ohio, in the mid-1800's there were 3 Plaut families. One was already non-Jewish by the 1860's or before. In another Plaut family, although there were 13 children born between 1855-1869, the only child who in the 1970's bears the name of Plaut is a non-Jew whose mother is non-Jewish and whose father converted to Christianity.

One descendent of a Plaut family from Wehrda, Germany, went to Copenhagen at the turn of the 20th century. There he married a Catholic woman; thus his family was non-Jewish and so it has remained. A sibling of his who settled in Indiana had a son who married out of the Jewish faith and his descendents are all non-Jews, although they and the Danish family are interested in their Jewish forebears.

When Hitler dispersed German Jewry, they found refuge

in countries throughout the world. Many Jews of that genera-
tion married out of the faith. This was true also of Plauts.
Thus we find that in various countries there are a number
of people bearing that name who are first- and even second-
generation non-Jews.

Conversely, there have been Gentiles who became good
Jews through conversion, married Plauts, and whose children
have remained Jewish.

### Does "Plaut" Have Any Meaning?

The meaning of the name Plaut is unclear. Joseph ibn
Plat who died in 1190 in Lunel was reputed to have been
a Sephardi coming from either North Africa or the Iberian
peninsula. When the spelling of his name in Hebrew was
פליט Plit it could have been read as Palit, "refugee", and
several Plaut families hold to that interpretation. That would
mean that the name goes back to the migrations of Jews
from Spain as early as 1000 or 1100.

Other traditions equate the name with Platt, meaning flat
or flat-footed, and one explanation is that it comes from
the Latin, meaning a flat short sword.

There is no certainty about the meaning of the name Plaut
or its derivation. That it is one of the earliest surnames of
Jews in Europe is certain. Even more certain is the challenge
that the name holds for the genealogist in search of its origins.