

Beginning Jewish Genealogy — Twelve Steps to Getting Started

Here are helpful research tips to get you started to discover your family's past and the history of their community. The twelve steps outlined below contain the basics necessary to guide you step-by-step through the early stages of your research. Remember — Those who do have the information about the family's origins are now “senior citizens”, and recording the information for future generations can thus be done now - or never.

The most important worksheet for documenting your family history is the **Family Group Sheet** charts members of individual families (father, mother and their children).

The twelve steps are:

1. **CONSULT YOUR FAMILY.** Write, talk to, or tape record every older member of your family you can reach. Don't forget the in-laws. Search "family archives" containing documents, letters and treasured photographs. The basic facts you need are:
 - The family names — In the old country and in America. (Learn about the origins of Jewish surnames, language and spelling variations.)
 - The towns they came from — variant spellings, today's country as well as the country when they left it.
 - The approximate dates of arrival in America, ship names (if known), ports of arrival, and communities in which they settled.

Most information, however, must still be gleaned from source documents, such as the U.S. census, immigration and naturalization papers, vital records, cemetery and funeral home records, newspapers, city directories, and telephone books.

2. **CHECK THE SOCIAL SECURITY DEATH INDEX (SSDI).** (U.S. deaths since 1962.) Clues and facts from the SSDI often can be used to further genealogical research, by enabling you to locate a death certificate, find an obituary, discover cemetery records and track down probate records.
3. **CHECK THE TOMBSTONES.** Much may be learned from tombstone inscriptions. They not only show the date of death and sometimes the age or date of birth, but they usually include the given name of the deceased's father. This permits you to go back one more generation. Take someone who can decipher the Hebrew or photograph the stones. Photograph from several angles, including close-ups, to be sure the letters are legible.
4. **CHECK THE U.S. CENSUSES.** (If you know where your ancestors lived in a census year.) Most researchers begin their research with US Census records which are available after they are 72 years old. Find information about your ancestors' employment, education, parents' birthplace, and even the value of their home. Watch for neighbors and relatives. You can find the microfilms at National Archives branches, local historical societies, public libraries, online databases, etc.
5. **CHECK CITY DIRECTORIES.** In census years and at other times, to get street addresses and occupations of your ancestors (usually available in large public libraries).
6. **CHECK IMMIGRATION RECORDS.** Between 1820 and 1990, over 55 million people immigrated to the United States. Search Ellis Island database and ship's passenger lists. Information includes given name, surname, age, gender, arrival date, port of arrival, port of departure and ship name, a place of origin or place of nativity. Learn which National Archives facility holds which records.
7. **CHECK ATLASES & GAZETTEERS** for your ancestral towns, noting present-day spelling and country.
8. **FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH LOCAL AND COUNTY COURT RECORDS.** Useful for finding ancestral wills, probate (estate) records, deeds (property bought or sold), and vital (birth, marriage, death) records.
9. **CHECK JEWISHGEN and the JEWISHGEN FAMILY FINDER.** JewishGen, Inc. is the primary internet source connecting researchers of Jewish genealogy worldwide which has a

computerized database where you can learn whether others are seeking ancestors of the same surname or place of origin. One of the wonders of computers is the ease with which individuals can share and exchange information.

JewishGen's most popular components are the JewishGen Discussion Group, the JewishGen Family Finder (a database of 375,000 surnames and towns), the comprehensive directory of InfoFiles, ShtetLinks for over 200 communities, and a variety of databases such as the ShtetlSeeker and Jewish Records Indexing-Poland. JewishGen's online Family Tree of the Jewish People contains data on over three million people.

10. VISIT IMPORTANT ARCHIVES:

- U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES in Washington, DC, with Regional Branches around the country. Has census, ship's passenger lists, military records (pre-WWI) and more.
- AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES, 3101 Clifton Ave., Cincinnati OH 45220. (Hebrew Union College campus) has some congregational records and communal records in the U.S.
- AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 15 West 16th Street, New York, NY 10011, has a guide to its genealogical resources.
- FAMILY HISTORY LIBRARY (LDS MORMON LIBRARY) 35 North West Temple St, Salt Lake City, UT 84150, has world's largest collection of birth, marriage, death, and other genealogical records. Cataloged by locality. Much of it is available on microfilm via inter-library loan at branch LDS Family History Centers (small fee). For nearest branch locations, see your local phone directory under "Churches, LDS".

11. FIND YOUR WAY THROUGH THESE AND OTHER SOURCES:

- *From Generation To Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History*, by Arthur Kurzweil, (Jossey-Bass, March 2004)
- *Genealogical Resources In New York*. (Jewish Genealogy Society Inc., 2003). Details of every major source, hours, contents, finding aids, directions, etc. info@jgsny.org
- *Sourcebook for Jewish Genealogies and Family Histories*, by Zubatsky & Berent. Jewish genealogies and family histories, both published and unpublished, for more than 10,000 family names.
- *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy, Volume 1, Sources in the United States and Canada*, edited by Arthur Kurzweil and Miriam Weiner. (Jason Aronson Inc.) A comprehensive source covering all aspects of Jewish genealogical research.
- *The Source*, by Eakle & Cerny, (Ancestry Publishing). A very complete guide to genealogical resources in the U.S., with a Jewish research chapter.
- *Where Once We Walked, A Guide to the Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust* (WOWW). Gazetteer of 22,000 towns in Central and Eastern Europe where Jews lived before the Holocaust. By Gary Mokotoff & Sallyann Amdur Sack, (Published by Avotaynu, Inc., 155 N. Washington Ave., Bergenfield NJ 07621.)
- *AVOTAYNU, The International Review of Jewish Genealogy*. Quarterly journal of Jewish genealogy keeps you current on latest resources.

12. JOIN A JEWISH GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY (JGS), where you can network with other beginning and experienced genealogists. It is a must for anyone researching and recording their family history. JGSs are members of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, Inc. (IAJGS), which includes 75 national and local societies on six continents, with 10,000+ individual members who are actively researching their Jewish roots. Visit the IAJGS website at <http://www.iajgs.org> to find links to information on the society nearest you.

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