

Make Your Library a Magnet for Jewish Genealogists

Beth Dwoskin

Description: Following up on a 2009 article in *Judaica Librarianship*, “Genealogy in the Jewish Library: An Update”, this session will inform librarians about ways to make their libraries welcoming to Jewish genealogists in their communities. Ms. Dwoskin’s article was comprehensive in 2009, describing resources such as JewishGen, Routes to Roots, the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute, the Family History Library and the International Tracing Service, and PERSI, the comprehensive index to genealogical serials. It emphasized the importance of local genealogical societies and their newsletters. This session will highlight the changes to these resources.

Beth Dwoskin is a former synagogue librarian who retired after a 25-year cataloging career at Proquest. In 2015, she earned her MA in Jewish studies from the Frankel Institute at the University of Michigan. Among her publications is a 2009 article in *Judaica Librarianship* entitled, "Genealogy in the Jewish Library: An Update". That article is the fourth most-downloaded paper from *Judaica Librarianship*, and it is the basis for her presentation this year.

1. In 2009, I published a paper in *Judaica Librarianship* entitled “Genealogy in the Jewish library—an update”. It’s the fourth most downloaded paper from the journal, which indicates the interest in this subject. I wanted to introduce the idea of genealogy as a service and feature of synagogue and center libraries, and to encourage *Judaica* librarians to form liaisons with local Jewish genealogical societies in order to promote their libraries as resource centers for Jewish genealogy.

Today, I am presenting that paper visually. I hope to let you know about genealogical resources that you can add to your library at little or no cost, and to suggest ways to connect with local genealogists. Many of you will probably be aware of some of my suggestions. I hope you will have your own ideas to offer at the end of the session—please save them up. I was a synagogue librarian two generations ago, before I became a cataloger at Proquest, and even in the eight years since I wrote the article, things have changed.

So, I’m going to talk first about print resources, then websites, and then local Jewish genealogical societies and periodicals. I’m starting with these definitions just to help people understand what we’re talking about. They are politically correct, but not proscriptive:

The handout is a bibliography that is also in the AJL bibliography bank. These are titles that I will be talking about, with annotations. You might already have some of them in your libraries.

Before I begin, I want to delineate the most common obstacles that people think they will face in doing Jewish genealogy. Most often, people will say that 1. Their ancestral name was changed; 2. Their family was from Europe, so all the records must have been destroyed in the Holocaust; 3. They can't read Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, etc.; 4. They don't know where in Europe their family came from. The field of Jewish genealogy addresses all these issues.

2. The book, *Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy* is published more or less bi-annually, or whenever they think it needs updating. Along with most of the books we will be talking about, it is published by Avotaynu, the premier publisher in the field. This guidebook is currently selling for \$16.50. This book is pretty much an outline and summary of the entire field of Jewish genealogy. Everything that I will be talking about is mentioned in this book, with basic examples and all the weblinks.

The other book, *Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy*, is much more in-depth. It has chapters by multiple mavens in the field, each on their own area of expertise, including information about separate countries where Jews have lived. It is for the patron who's ready to go beyond the first steps.

3. *Where Once We Walked* is a gazetteer. Make sure you have the 2002 edition, which incorporates all the changes that have followed from the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the big problems English readers have is dealing with the large number of synonyms for Eastern Europe town names, in other languages. This is the authoritative print source for resolving that problem. And yes, this information is on the internet, and I will be talking about that.

Matsevot, or tombstones, are a significant resource for genealogists. Either of the two guidebooks that you see here will help people learn to read a Jewish tombstone. Older tombstones in North America typically are in Hebrew. People have problems with the names themselves, the symbols on the stones, and most of all, with the dates. I'm sure most people here know that traditional Hebrew dates are expressed in letters. These books will help people decipher the dates and translate them to the civil calendar. And yes, this information is on the internet, and I will be talking about that.

4. The two books by Beider cover most of the Ashkenazic names that we carry today in North America. There is certainly an Ashkenazic bias in the world of Jewish genealogy, at least according to a friend of mine who is 100% Sephardic. It is because most of us English-speaking Jews are Ashkenazic. Nevertheless, if you are serving a community that has Sephardic members, there are genealogical resources for them. The book by Beider on Mediterranean names is brand new.

5. After you interview your elders, research your name, visit the cemetery, and search the census and vital records in North America, the next step is European archives. This is where it gets difficult and complicated, but these are a few basic books on the subject, which I will discuss further when I talk about the internet. You also see here the most basic book for Sephardic genealogy, and a book for those with German ancestry.

6. These are some older books that you might have on your shelves. They are worth keeping even though much of their information is superseded by the internet. They are still useful for beginners. The books by Miriam Weiner have an accompanying website, which I will discuss later.

7. Many of the books I've mentioned were published by Avotaynu. You can see that AJL has taken note of Avotaynu's work by awarding the Bibliography and Reference Book Award to three of the books that I've mentioned. This is gratifying. There is a historical belief or notion that librarians look down on genealogists. In the Fall, 2005 issue of *Avotaynu*, Gary Mokotoff, the editor of the journal, recalled an incident he witnessed at the old YIVO Institute here in New York in the early 1980s. He says, "... someone came into the library and told Dina Abramowitz, the late librarian for YIVO, that he wanted to find information about his family's history. Dina, in a rather abrupt voice, told him, 'We have nothing of interest to you here.'" Now of course, YIVO is filled with genealogical information, which I'll be speaking about. The point is that in the past, genealogists got very little guidance from librarians, so they learned to do research on their own. Nowadays, they know more about their subject than librarians do, and they have developed sophisticated online resources. I think we need to play catch-up.

8. Librarians don't have to know internet genealogy resources in depth, but providing and promoting them is a way to bring a new and different constituency into the library. The first and most important one is jewishgen. The jewishgen site is a comprehensive source for Jewish genealogy, and it encompasses all the print sources that I showed you.

9. It has critically important databases such as the Family Tree of the Jewish People, which contains family records that genealogists have uploaded, and the Family Finder, which contains information about family names that people are researching. You see here also the Gazetteer and the Communities databases. This is not an online version of *Where Once We Walked*, but it covers the same material.

It has the Worldwide Burial Registry. This is very useful, but not necessarily comprehensive. You should also provide a link to your local cemetery databases.

Here you see the Yizkor Book Project Database, which is the closest thing we have to a union catalog of Yizkor Books, done by non-librarians. Most of them are in NYPL. It also has detailed information on Jewish records from all these locations.

10. Besides Jewishgen, serious genealogists tend to use one of the commercial genealogy sites to search databases and store data. The most popular site is ancestry.com. It caters to the private market and is expensive, but it has a library edition, and many local public libraries subscribe to it. I'm assuming that you are all aware of your local public libraries and the research services they offer. You may even have an account with your public library that allows you and your patrons to access their databases. Chances are that they offer some form of ancestry.com. The different options are all based on differences in price. Like most internet services, the more you pay, the more features you can access.

11. Here you see a subset of the databases that ancestry.com offers for Jewish records. This is just to the L's; I didn't copy them all. You'll note that most of them are marked, Free, and several come from Jewishgen. This is because Jewishgen data is hosted for free on ancestry.com servers, as part of an agreement that the two organizations made in 2008. Most of the others are free as well.

After pornography, genealogy is the most popular subject that is searched on the internet. There are multiple sites offering access to vital records. Ancestry is providing all these free links as a form of one-stop shopping for its subscribers as a convenience. Users can also go to the sites for their own particular search.

12. As an example, for census records, users can go to the National Archives and Records Administration site, and to

13. Library and Archives Canada. There are numerous sites that assist with census searches and retrieval. States, counties, and provinces all have sites with

instructions for obtaining vital records. Sometimes they're digitized, and sometimes they're not. City directories are also useful for genealogists, and many of them have been digitized and can be found online. I could give a whole presentation on North American sources for Jewish genealogy and I would never be able to show you all the sites. There are multiple ways to access all the information.

14. The Ellis Island Archive is another example of an American resource. There are better ways to search this archive than the Ellis Island site itself. My point is that it is easy to search North American sites because you are searching along with all of your fellow American and Canadian genealogists, not just the Jewish ones.

15. As I said before, Jewish genealogists have more trouble when they try to access Eastern European sources. The Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute at the Center for Jewish History, here in New York, has extensive helpful information.

16. Besides Jewishgen, this site is another good place to begin looking at European searching. It will walk the beginner through the process of finding European vital records. Eastern European Jewish vital records that have survived the centuries were mostly preserved by local and national government entities rather than by Jewish communities. Jews were obligated to provide info for tax and military conscription purposes. The data that the communities themselves preserved are often found in yizkor books.

17. As many of you probably know, the Church of Latter-Day Saints, also known as the Mormons, has been microfilming these records for many years, and they have stepped up their efforts since the fall of the Soviet Union. That doesn't mean that the records are digitized; some are, but not all of them. The LDS Family History Library site will help you find the relevant microfilm for the ancestor that you are searching. This page shows how the microfilm can be ordered at CJH, but you can also order it at your local LDS Family History Library.

18. The Roots to Routes Foundation also gathers material about access to Eastern European archives. Many of the pages on this site are PDF's of pages from Miriam Weiner's books, *Jewish Roots in Poland* and *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova*, which I displayed earlier. Again, this site will point you to the indexes and archives of documents, not the documents themselves. Many people hire local European researchers to look in the archives for them and this site can help with that.

19. Patrons who are descended from Holocaust survivors can use the Holocaust Museum databases, including the International Tracing Service. The ITS is also not a digitized database. Rather it is a search service. Users submit names to ITS staff, who then search the records housed in the archives of accounts that the Germans kept of their victims. This is another example of European material that has not yet been digitized.

20. Now we come to Jewish genealogical periodicals. The most important one is called *Avotaynu*, also published by Avotaynu. It is a quarterly, and it is indexed in the *Index to Jewish Periodicals*. You are probably all aware of the Index, which is hosted on EBSCO or available in print. You can also get a yearly subscription to this index they've done themselves, which is currently \$35 per year.

21. *Avotaynu* is also indexed in PERSI, which is the Periodical Source Index, the primary index of genealogical and ethnic periodicals. This database was started by the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, but it is now housed on Findmypast, which is another private, subscription-based genealogy service. When I wrote about Jewish genealogy in 2009 I wanted to turn a spotlight on the newsletters that many of the Jewish genealogical societies were publishing. Most of those are now defunct because the information they contained is now on the internet. The Allen County Public Library still holds the hard copies for many of the newsletters of Jewish genealogical societies worldwide, and they are also indexed in this database.

22. This slide talks about how to order the hard copies of the articles. Many of the articles are digitized, but I don't know that you can download them without paying for a findmypast subscription. I did not create a findmypast account so I can't say for sure.

23. This is just a partial list of some Jewish genealogy newsletters that have come and gone, and that are probably indexed on PERSI. This list comes from the site of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies. One of the great benefits and joys of Jewish genealogy is that it connects Jews worldwide.

24. This map is also from the IAJGS site. I hope it is somewhat reflective of the origins of some conference attendees who are here today. The green markers indicate historical societies rather than genealogical societies, but membership and activity of the two types of groups is very often intertwined. The vast majority have websites with contact and program information and several have Facebook pages. They will sometimes have links to local databases such as obituaries, lists of

cemeteries, cemetery records, synagogue records, and so on. Each group is different, with differing numbers of members, levels of activity, and focus. Some might be somewhat moribund, some have already established their own library connections, and most will probably welcome your interest and input.

25-27. Most of you probably know about some digitized Jewish newspapers. These digitization projects are typically done independently or as part of an ad hoc project, so you have to do some searching to find the links to the newspapers for your locale.

People sometimes become genealogy addicts after they see their ancestor's name in the local Jewish newspaper. Genealogists especially love these papers because of the obituaries. You just need to provide a link to the local Jewish newspaper for your own community. These are some examples of major Jewish newspapers that have been digitized.

28. More examples of how varied the coverage is and the different types of initiatives.

In conclusion, what I've tried to do is to suggest that you can extend a welcome to Jewish genealogists without great expense or expertise on your part. I hope that you will consider writing about genealogy in your blogs or bulletins, featuring genealogy titles and weblinks on your displays and home pages, and possibly inviting local historians and genealogists to speak at your library. The goal is to promote Jewish genealogy and Jewish libraries at the same time, for the benefit of both.