Roots and Branches

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Jewish Genealogy ‘By The Book’

"Where do I start?" That is the question asked most frequently by genealogists. Fortunately for the family historian and those interested in learning more about their Jewish roots, the number of books on this fascinating subject is increasing as interest in the field grows.

The first major publication was Dan Rotenberg’s Finding Our Fathers. It includes a country-by-country guide to tracing Jewish ancestors abroad, a guide to Jewish sources and public records in the United States, and a description of archives, libraries, and agencies in Israel along with their holdings. Also included is a list of 8,000 Jewish family names, giving their origins, sources of information about each family, and the names of related families whose histories have already been recorded.

For those trying to locate the shell of their relatives, the Shtetl Finder by Chester G. Cohen is a good place to start. This gazetteer (145 pages) includes a listing of Jewish communities in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the Pale of Settlement of Russia and Poland, and in Lithuania, Latvia, Galicia, and Bukovina, with names of residents. Mention is also made in the town entries of additional references contained in the Encyclopedia Judaica, Berl Kagan’s book on Hebrew Subscription Lists, and Wooden Synagogues by Maria and Kazimierz Piechota. At the end of the book is a list of obituaries which appeared in the Hebrew newspaper Hatzeira in Warsaw from 1875 to 1896.

The history of Sephardic Jewry is told in The Road From Babylon: The Story of Sephardi and Oriental Jews, by Chaim Raphael. Numerous illustrations and several maps, along with a survey of the life and culture of the Jews of Spain under Islam and Christianity, make this ambitious volume a valuable source for those with Sephardic roots.

Rabbi Marc D. Angel, a scholar specializing in Sephardic history and rabbi of the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue in New York, writes about the Sephardic experience in America in his book La America.


The one person who has had perhaps the most influence on the growing field of Jewish genealogy is Rabbi Malcolm Stern, the genealogist of the American Jewish Archives and an expert in early American Jewish history. His book, Americans of Jewish Descent, consists of a collection and compila-

procedures for beginning research, the reader is treated to the author’s warm and personal account of his own experiences in discovering the links to his past and the richness of his heritage.

In My Generations: A Course in Jewish Family History, Kurzweil has produced a book written especially for children which contains both things to read and things to do. There are spaces for photographs, documents, family recipes, yahrzeit records, and family trees. This unique book, which has been used by Jewish groups of all ages as a tool for the exploration of our Jewish past, presents a wonderful opportunity for parents and children to share a project together.

In 1984, the first International Seminar on Jewish Genealogy was held in Jerusalem. The chairwoman for that event was Dr. Salliyann Amdur Sack, the founding president of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington. Her outstanding guide to research in Israel, published by the Society, is a valuable resource for those interested in pursuing their Jewish heritage.

A book which has been described as the definitive guide for Jewish genealogists is Arthur Kurzweil’s From Generation to Generation. Published in 1980, it helped spark the growing interest in today’s generation. In our past and in the Jewish lives of our ancestors. In addition to the detailed description of archival sources and

knowledge in her continuing efforts to share that data with those who most want to know. In her book, she includes sections on Yad Vashem, the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jewish National and University Library, Israel State Archives, Jewish Agency’s Search Bureau for Missing Relatives, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem Municipality Historical Archives, and chevrot kadisha (burial societies) as well as sources outside of Jerusalem, and valuable appendices of Yizkor books, Landsmannchaft societies and location maps for the various archives.

According to Kurzweil, "Salliyann Sack has not only written what is sure to be the most thorough guide to genealogical sources in Israel. She has also offered an absolutely convincing case that a trip to Israel will serve the Jewish family historian well. And, at the same time, she has transformed the genealogical quest from a pastime into a pilgrimage. Now that her book exists, many Jewish genealogists will wonder how we got along without it. I consider the book essential."

For an extensive bibliography on Jewish genealogy, a Jewish history, and genealogy in general, send a self-addressed stamped envelope and $2.50 to: Miriam Weiner, 136 Sandpiper Key, Secaucus, NJ 07094.