

News from The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

Digging up Our Roots: American Jewish Genealogy at the AJA
Christine Crandall

Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus was fond of saying, "A people that is not conscious of its past has no assurance of a future." Certainly learning about one's personal history explains why genealogy has for the past fifty years been a favorite hobby of Americans. This popularity can be traced to a number of reasons, ranging from mild curiosity to a desire to reconnect with family roots in order to recapture something felt to be lacking in one's life. Although Jewish genealogical research has its antecedent in the 1940s, it was not until Dan Rottenberg published *Finding Our Fathers* in 1977 that it became popular. Rottenberg helped shatter the myth that Jewish genealogy is impossible to track due to the loss of records. Shortly after the publication of his book, local genealogical societies were started. In 1984 the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies was founded, serving as the umbrella organization and impetus for many genealogical initiatives. The AJA sees itself as an integral component in this loose organization, for its collection is one of the best places to research American Jewish roots.

When the American Jewish Archives opened its doors in 1947, Dr. Marcus not only recognized the need to work with scholars and to have them close by, but he also recognized the importance of genealogy. Malcolm H. Stern was one of these scholars. A rabbi and historian, Stern's name became synonymous with American Jewish genealogy. In fact, Stern's doctoral dissertation, later published as *First American Jewish Families*, was written under Dr. Marcus's supervision. Stern served as president of the American Society of Genealogists and was active in many other organizations. From 1949 to 1994 Stern served as the genealogist at the AJA, bringing both prestige and important materials with him. Though he had no formal mandate from Marcus except as the AJA's genealogist, he was a presence at the AJA and in the world of genealogy until his death in 1994. After his

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death, AJA archivist Kathy Spray continued some of his work in assisting researchers with their genealogy queries and working with other institutions to bring their Jewish genealogical collections to light. Sadly, her work ended too soon when she passed away at the age of fifty. Knowing that the AJA's collections contain many treasures for genealogists, Dr. Gary P. Zola decided to make the genealogy collections one of the priorities of the AJA.

The collections at the AJA that have genealogical use range from the most obvious—the family trees in the genealogy files, for example—to materials that one would not initially suspect. Family trees, oral histories, memoirs, and biographies are the most obvious places for most researchers to begin. Synagogue records also contain a wealth of information and often hold membership lists, vital records (births, deaths, and marriages), and minutes of various committees of the temple. These minutes can be difficult to read, as some are in German, and even those in English have handwriting that is difficult to the modern eye. Another great source of information is organizational records. An ancestor who was a member of Hadassah, B'nai B'rith, or the temple's Brotherhood or Sisterhood, for example, could be found in the local chapter's records, which stated their interests, activities, and additional information. Along this same line are the personal papers of rabbis. Many rabbis' collections contain information on marriages or funerals, notes regarding births or other life cycle events such as *b'nei mitzvahs*. The AJA also has many personal papers and manuscript collections of families and individuals, such as the Minis family of Savannah, Georgia, the Nathan-Krause family papers, and the Seligman family of New York, to name a few. Personal manuscript collections are best utilized for genealogical research when a family connection is known.

Though the past is embraced here at the AJA, the future now looks to be quite inviting. Karen Franklin and Nancy Brandt have been hired as consultants to build a new genealogy department. With Dr. Gary P. Zola's commitment to Jewish genealogy, the AJA has several initiatives to expand the scope of genealogy work and the services provided to genealogists. This will most likely include providing access to some information online at the website. Although a start has been made, this is still a work in progress, so keep checking the website [<http://www.americanjewisharchives.org>].

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The collections held at the AJA are, for the most part, gifts. As is often told to guests on tours of the archives, the AJA only has what people give. Therefore, information on family lines is available only if someone else has done the research and donated the results. For example, through the kind gift of Joan Reis, the AJA now has genealogical information on the Sachs family. Other recent genealogical donations include a history and family tree of the Apple family, 1820-2001, from Mark Glickman of New York City, the Klein family tree from Walter Klein of Charlotte, North Carolina, and the Skirball family tree from Hank Skirball of Jerusalem, Israel. Though some of the families mentioned may be more prominent than others, the AJA desires genealogical information about Jews from all walks of life. The material donated need not be about famous people nor contain startling new revelations about the history of Jews in America. Rather, the AJA desires the real story of American Jews as told through the normal and sometimes extraordinary lives of average people.

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