

A Jewish Genealogic Fable

by Dan Leeson

In the form of a genuine welcome to all the new members of JEWISHGEN*, and also as an expression of pleasure to see so many new people hunting in the forest of Jewish genealogic research, here is a long, think-about-it posting on the general subject of the meaning of life and where to find a death certificate. No one is permitted to take this personally.

So many new people have joined JEWISHGEN that I want to offer them my personal hello and hopes that they will find family going back to Adam and Eve (it's not impossible you know, though any such results would be considered very speculative).

Nothing makes me happier than to find people digging up their Jewish roots. For the last 100 years, Jews (mostly Eastern-European Jews) doing genealogic study was not considered a very Jewish pastime, and that so many believed this to be true is testimony to our poor knowledge of Jewish history: for 25 centuries and more, Jews have been genealogic aficionados, fascinated by the subject! Interest in it went into decline during the latter part of the last century and did not pick up again until about 30 years ago. The reasons for this anomaly are complex and sociologic, probably due in large part to the desire on the part of immigrants to avoid even thinking about the miserable unpleasantness of the life that they had left behind them in what is now nostalgically referred to as "the old country." The idea that someday their grandchildren and great-grandchildren would be searching their brains out to find a maiden name here, a distant cousin there, and even take a visit back to beautiful downtown Slutsk would never, never, never have occurred to them.

Many of the new contributors to the JEWISHGEN list appear to be rather new at what I call the "Yichusology business." That's no crime. We were all new to genealogic matters when we started and I see, in the questions of many of the submitters, the same problems that I had to dig my way out of. The biggest problem that faced me when I began, and that I see facing some of the newcomers, is not genealogic. It is expectational. Let me explain.

When I began to find my roots, I was absolutely convinced that "my family's file" was out there somewhere, that it contained all of my history in all branches, and all I had to do was find out where it was located; i.e., genealogy was the hunt for a complete but already-created file that was all about my family.

I envisioned armies of government workers (Department. Of Commerce???) preparing my file as I headed towards and through puberty, and now that I was old enough to have this intense interest in where I came from, my file was there waiting for me. It would tell me my Bube Sprintze's maiden name (which my mother had forgotten), and what the original family name of my grandfather, Alazar Yusof ben Avraham had been (my father never really knew), and those thousand questions that would enable

me to know who I was and how did I get to where I am. And best of all, this file would document in considerable detail, the travels of all of my ancestors from the year of the destruction of the second temple, maybe even the first. Who's got my file, please? Would whoever has it please notify me by Tuesday next? Would that inconvenience anyone?

So I started my genealogic quest by presuming the existence of such a file and this made my search easy. I would keep asking "where" all my data was and never have to bother with actually researching it. I went to the NY Public and asked if they had my file. Then I tried Yeshiva University, the Jewish Theologic Seminary, Hebrew Union College, the American Jewish Historical Society, and finally the Ponnovez Yeshiva. Hmm.

No file. Maybe I'm asking the wrong questions. It's kind of like trying to locate a misplaced library book.

Of course there was no INTERNET then, only mail. So I sent out a million letters asking everyone if they knew where my file was. It would be easy to spot. My Bube Sprintze died in Lodz sometime after WW1, and I think my grandfather was from Sidzun or maybe it was Radviliskis, I'm not sure. But he had red hair, that I am certain of. All good data, of course, no silly family stories and other stuff like dates and precise locations. Just solid evidence like "red hair." But no one seemed to have my file. Did the Department of Commerce spend all of that taxpayer money to make a file on me only to lose it?

One day, in the NY Public, I met a woman who was doing her genealogy and she had a file!!! It was a foot thick and wandered through the middle ages with the same ease that I wandered through Moskowitz and Lupowitz' dairy restaurant.

So I asked her where she found her file (mine would be bigger and more impressive, of course, because I'm sure that there was royalty in my family) and she looked at me as if I had asked her where to buy a size 19 bustle frame?

"What the hell are you talking about?," she said graciously, full of the warmth and charm of someone suddenly disturbed. "This file has already taken me 23 years to put together. Every scrap of paper in it was lovingly found by me. What's with you? You think someone has already done your genealogy for you? You have to do it YOURSELF, you yutz!."

I smiled condescendingly at her outburst. Clearly she did not understand. "Of course," I said. "I know that I have to do it, and that is exactly what I am trying to do. I am doing my genealogy by locating my file. When I find it, I will have done my genealogy. It will all be there and my genealogy will have been both found and completed by the act of finding the file and then I can go on to something else in life."

"Gevalt!," screamed the lady, causing armies of librarians to say "Sssshhh." "I have the misfortune to be in the presence of a class A, gold-medal meshuggah! There is no file on you, Mr. Crazy, dopey-in-the-head. All there is about you and your family in the world consists of little remnants of what your ancestors left as they passed through this mortal coil." (Now that lady had a flair for language. "Mortal coil" is hot stuff.

I wonder how to say "mortal coil" in Yiddish? But I woolgather.)

"What do you mean?," I said.

"You imbecile, you! Four hundred years ago one of your ancestors, a tinsmith by trade, made a pot that he sold in the central market in Erfurt, Germany at a price that was considered by the buyer to be way too high. Your ancestor was sued by the buyer and taken to court. The court record, (Vol. 524, page 361, subfolio CIX, city of Erfurt, now located in the federal archives in Berlin) records his name, the name of the suing party, and the price of the pot as well as the fact that your ancestor was found guilty of price gouging and spent one month in the slammer."

"I don't want that information!," I said. "I want his birth certificate, full name, name of wife (including maiden name), date of death, death certificate, plus the names of all his children as well as the full names of all their spouses. That's what I want. What do I care for a law suit in 1695? And besides, no one in my family was ever in, as you indelicately put it, 'the slammer'!"

"You better start learning to love the kind of information that is out there," said my new-found friend, "because that is what you will get if you are very, very fortunate. Besides, birth certificates and last names are a relatively modern invention."

With any luck there might be a record of this man's circumcision if a mohl book were kept in Erfurt at that time, but only if the mohl book still exists and he were born in Erfurt, which I am convinced he was not."

"How do you know all this," I countered, "and how did my ancestor get to Erfurt if he wasn't born there? My family came from Lithuania and Poland."

"Like hell they did," my friend replied. "Nobody came from Lithuania and Poland because they came from somewhere else until they eventually went to Lithuania and Poland and, eventually found residence in those countries. And how I know this is because it happened to one of my ancestors and I was telling you this story in the hopes of getting through that thick Polische dripke skull of yours." (Please do not ask for a translation of "Polische dripke." My mother would have been ashamed if she even thought that I knew what that meant.)

"Finding that court record about that pot is what genealogy is all about. And finding out how your Jewish ancestor got to Erfurt in the first place is also what Jewish genealogy is all about. It took me four years to find out about the pot and the day I did I treated myself to a bottle of Dom Perignon 1927 and a large plate of very greasy kasha varnishkas!!" (In addition to our many other fine qualities, Jews have a very cultivated and discriminating sense of haute-cuisine.)

And ever since that fatal encounter with that lady in the NY Public, I have been looking for those little fragments that my ancestors left in this world as they passed through it. On good days, I find nothing. On bad days I find contradictory information or data that shows unequivocally that I have been slogging through the wrong family for three months. On very bad days the microfilm reader at the local Mormon stake is busted beyond human recognition, the part needed to fix it is in Pakistan, and seated next to me at the only functioning reader is a researcher who asks me if I ever considered the advantages of both a good insurance program and becoming a tree worshiper?

Now this whole megillah is being posted for the sole purpose of trying to help all the new JEWISHGEN researchers to get their expectations set at the right level. The rules are these:

1. There is no file. The Department of Commerce never heard of you. They are doing the other person's file.
2. Once in a while you'll find a cousin who has genealogic data, but it is probably all wrong, your name will be misspelled, and s/he will have you identified both as a bastard and an adoptee which, according to Jewish law is going to give you and your descendants trouble for the next 7 generations.
3. If it is out there, you have two problems: (1) identifying "there" and, (2) finding "it," whatever it is. When you do find "it" it will probably be a report of the death by venereal disease of your direct paternal 5-times grandfather. Now that's genealogic success!!
4. If you don't know much, other genealogic researchers will help you for about 3 milliseconds and then drop you like a "heise kartofel" when they find out you're are not a relation.
5. The joy of genealogy (It's up there on the bookstore shelf next the "The Joy of Sex.") is as much in the search as in the find. Oh the things you will learn about living as a Jew in Turkey in 1542, life in the pale in 1875, the main consequences of the expulsion from Portugal just before the beginning of the 16th century, the exquisite scholarship of my Litvak ancestors in Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, and a good recipe for cheese kreplach (called "salte noces" among the Litvak cognoscenti and made mostly of fat and flour and other artery clogging things).

So those of you out there who are posting questions such as, "How do I find out about my uncle Mordechai who had blue eyes?", keep posting, but it is very unlikely that anyone will respond to tell you that your uncle Mordechai became the leading brain surgeon in Omaha, ca. 1913 where he did the first Nebraskan brain transplant, putting the brain of a Litvak schnorrer into the body of Rumanian Zionist. The resulting composite schnorred his way to Haifa where he became mayor in 1921 and still schnorrs. He may still be mayor for all I know. And the reason why no one will tell you this story is because it is buried in Omaha newspapers all of which you are going to have to research, yourself, alone, in a dusty corner of the Omaha public library as penance for not realizing what a terrific history your family has.

I conclude by pointing out the obvious. A vast body of literature has grown up about "How to do your genealogy" and even specialized subsets such as "How to do your Jewish genealogy." It can be even more precise: "How to do your German Jewish genealogy." The volume of this helpful literature is now so large that becoming acquainted with it has become almost more forbidding than doing your genealogy.

The preparation and publication of helpful genealogical literature is a cottage industry in America and elsewhere. Little firms in Arkansas and Utah are cranking out brochures that are sold for very modest amounts about "Cemeteries in Cape May County, New Jersey" or "Swedish Immigration To Minnesota" (which is probably not going to help you much).

Suppose you pose to yourself a question as simple as "How do I get my uncle Mordechai's death certificate from Omaha?".

Eventually you will learn that there are several books that deal with obtaining vital records from every corner of America.

And, therefore, doing your genealogy partly involves devoting the time needed to become familiar with the basic genealogic "How" and "Where to" literature.

And that is what the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are trying to do for you. About every 3 months these items are posted on this list. The FAQs describe the basic elements that you need to learn about in order to get off the ground. I know that it's easier to post a question to the board about "Where do I go for Omaha, Nebraska death certificates?" than to do the research needed to get the same answer, but in the long run, and for the serious genealogist, there is no other good long-haul way of working. In order for the many experts on the board to be able to help you, you must know what to do, how to do it, where to search, how to search in those places, what's right, what's not likely to work, etc., etc., etc., before you pose your question. And if you avoid this learning process, those who can help are not going to want to; i.e., they are not motivated to help those who give the appearance of not being ready to do some heavy-duty research on their own.

One of the things that one will learn about from these FAQs is what the "Social Security Death Index" is, and how to get death certificates from Passaic, NJ, and which researchers in Lithuania might be able to help you (and how much it will cost, and who to write to, and what the protocol is when in this mode). There is a lot of sorting out of things that have to take place in your head before you can do optimally productive genealogic work. It is not dissimilar to studying any advanced technical discipline in that one needs time to prepare to study at an advanced level.

It depends if you want to work hard or want to work smart. If you want to work hard, ignore the FAQs, post requests on genealogic lists asking for your grandmother's maiden name, and then sit back and listen to the unproductive silence. If you want to work smart, find the FAQ that deals with documents and records in the country where your grandmother was born, and then start poking there. Make no mistake; you will also have a lot of silence here too, but it is productive silence.

Genealogy is, if I may paraphrase Einstein, 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration, though the percentages may be somewhat inaccurate. As much as I would like to find someone to do the 99% part, I always wind up doing it myself, and in the long run I am happy that I did do it because the voyage was as fascinating as its conclusion.

Now I must go. There is a microfilm waiting for me in the Mormon stake of San Jose that deals with the Jewish community of Erfurt in the 16th century. Maybe there will be something in it about pot makers. Probably not. But I am going to look anyway. And who knows ... ?

Oh yes, does anyone out there know where my file is?

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Mr. Leeson received this reply:

Subject: Re: JEWISHGEN Digest - 18 May 1995 to 19 May 1995 - Special issue

From: Howard Gershen <howard@boxhill.com>

Date: Mon, 22 May 1995 11:23:22 -0400

Message-ID: <199505221523.LAA16414@chutzpah.boxhill.com>

From Dan Leeson:

> I envisioned armies of government workers (Department of Commerce???) preparing my file as I headed towards and through puberty, and now that I was old enough to have this intense interest in where I came from, my file was there >waiting for me. It would tell me my Bube Sprintze's maiden > name (which my mother had forgotten), and what the original family name of my grandfather, Alazar Yusof ben Avraham had been (my father never really knew), and those thousand questions that would enable me to know who I was and how did I get to where I am. And best of all, this file would document in considerable detail, the travels of all of my ancestors from the year of the destruction of the second temple, maybe even the first. Who's got my file, please?

> Would whoever has it please notify me by Tuesday next?

> Would that inconvenience anyone?

I've got the file, or, um, at least I know what happened to it:

I spilled some tea on it, see, while I was sneezing while speaking the name of a dead relative and putting the salt in front of someone else at the table where we were dipping parsley and eggs into salty water.

Then the dog jumped up and grabbed it off the table and ran with it out into the street and buried it in a hole next to the place where some ancestor buried the family fortune under the house the day after returning from the Russian army, or was it the day before he met Emperor Franz Josef, who was visiting the Archives branch, where my cousin discovered the person who had been sitting next to her for the last 4 hours, and who mysteriously had every other roll of microfilm that my cousin wished to view, was, in fact, a long-lost fourth cousin twice removed, whose ancestor had taken a different name when they were passing out names in the 1800s, and then got the name changed by accident to something completely different after another ancestor fled the pogrom in Kishinev by fleeing east, past Kazakhstan, over the Himalayas, north through Kai-Feng (to schnorr with other cousins on that ancestor's mother's side), and further north, via Birobidzhan, over the Bering Strait, down to the San Francisco immigration port, where his first and last names got switched by a drunken immigration worker with a palsied hand, who sent him on his way over the Union-Pacific railway across the U.S. to New York City, where he (the ancestor of the long-lost fourth cousin twice removed, not the palsied

immigration worker) happened to take a ferry to Ellis Island to greet an incoming cousin (second cousin once removed to the afore-mentioned fourth cousin, twice removed) who had come to the U.S. from Warsaw by way of England, thence to Cuba, where some local yokel shmendrik told him that he was in America when he was, in fact in Cuba, where he stayed for five years before he realized something stank and it wasn't the cigars, and he went to the local HIAS office, where they told him the truth, created a file for him, helped him buy a ticket to NYC, lost their file on him (which was *not* the file you were seeking in the first place), and got him bumped from the regular ship and put him on some tramp steamer that arrived 10 days after the Morton Allen Directory said it was supposed to arrive at the Port of NYC, at which point this man's name was mangled by an immigration worker who was hard of hearing and had never gotten past Penmanship 101 in First Grade, thus making it impossible for the first cousin (who was actually the ancestor of the fourth cousin twice removed) to realize that the name being announced at Ellis Island was actually the name of *his* relative who was being held in detention as an LPC (Likely Public Charge) because he came with no money (actually, he came with \$50 in American money, but lost it in a card game on the ship, so he had to borrow the famous \$25 from HIAS that each immigrant got in turn, showed to the immigration official to prove he/she wasn't destitute, and then handed back to HIAS for use by the next immigrant after the first immigrant's interview was over), so the two cousins never met and the ancestor of the fourth cousin twice removed was bumped by some conman who had just stolen an immigrant's worldly possessions including the precious yichus book that traced that family's lineage (not the family of the cousins) back to the Inquisition, and, thus, the ancestor was knocked into the water by the dock at Ellis Island, was pulled out, shivering, was brought to the hospital on Ellis Island, where he was near death for three days until the fever broke and he was well, but his papers weren't because some other idiot from Immigration thought he was an immigrant who had a contagious disease that causes polygamy and communist sympathies, and thus was put onto the next boat back to Bialystok (or the closest port), which wasn't even his hometown, and ended up marrying again and starting a whole new family with the daughter of a Khazarian Samaritan from Vilna, who raised the kids as Litvaks, even though he was a Galitzianer through and through, and so my fascinating story reaches its conclusion.

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From: "Dan Leeson: LEESON@admin.fhda.edu" <leeson@aspen.fhda.edu>

Date: Fri, 19 May 1995 10:51:54 EDT

* The Jewish Genealogy ListServ. Address: JEWISHGEN@cgsg.com