

# The Most Powerful Genealogical Research Tool of All: Jewish Genealogical Societies

by Michael Goldstein

I grew up in what I considered to be a large extended family in Toronto, my birthplace, and Montreal, my hometown. Understanding family relationships was simple, or so I thought. My maternal family was in Montreal and my paternal in Toronto—except for the day when I was around 12 and realized that members of my maternal family had migrated to Toronto, which rocked the family equilibrium I had so carefully balanced in my mind.

In Montreal our extended family was close, and I knew people as my cousins—my mother's cousins, my grandmother and great-grandmother's family—but if you asked me then how they fit together, I could only say that we were cousins. I was mildly curious as to the actual relationships, but not enough to question or document the people and events.

Twenty-five years ago, an historic occasion changed my life. My eldest son reached bar mitzvah-preparation age and our synagogue required him to do a project. The task of helping him fell to me. He was already interviewing his grandparents for a school assignment, so I suggested creating a family tree and sharing the results with the congregation. This project hooked the father, who, unlike the son, could not put the data back on the shelf at the conclusion of the talk.

Thus, my family research is about to mark its 25th anniversary.

At the start of my research, the Internet itself was in its infancy. JewishGen was not yet imagined, much less a vital resource. If there were genealogy societies in my hometowns (Montreal and then Jerusalem), I was unaware of them. My venture into genealogy coincided with acquiring our first PC—personal computer—and being enticed to buy a genealogical software program to have something to load onto the empty disk. Had I been forced to hand draw a tree and continually redraw it, my new genealogy hobby would have been stunted at the first branch.

Extensive changes have occurred both in the genealogy world and in the world of researching my own family, whom I now know extend far beyond Montreal and Toronto. In genealogical research, no one can function without JewishGen, Ancestry.com, and a

multitude of Internet sites and resources. E-mail and Skype are also my irreplaceable partners. I am slowly trying to understand the role of DNA and how it might help me locate relatives worldwide. To my surprise, a recent DNA lab test did correctly identify my cousin Arthur as my second cousin.

As president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) and immediate past president of the Israel Genealogical Society (IGS), I am intrigued by reflecting upon how Jewish genealogical societies fit into the past, present, and future pursuit of our roots.

For the first 15 years of my genealogical life, I had no contact with genealogical societies. I was content to use the ever-increasing electronic tools and spend time meeting and interviewing family members whenever possible. Around 2002, I ventured out to a lecture at the Jerusalem branch of the Israel Genealogy Society. Although I can no longer recall the topic of that lecture, talking and consulting with the members I met prior to the meeting is what made a lasting impression. Even though I had made virtual contact through JewishGen with fellow researchers, this was my first face-to-face encounter with a group where exploring roots was normative and not oddball. Today I still remain tied to computer, Internet, and e-mail but am more addicted to my genealogical society and preaching participation to others.

My monthly high is to arrive well in advance of a society lecture and help those who are encountering brick walls or seeking information. It is a particular treat when I can spend time with someone who is on the verge of beginning genealogy, and I can give him or her pointers and direction. I know, too, that at every society meeting I will find someone who can help me in an area where I am struggling, or introduce me to another member with the answers I seek.

Coming together in a non-virtual setting is a respite, but more important, it is a jump-off point. As vital and beneficial as all the other modalities may be, nothing replaces being part of a strong Jewish genealogical society that offers personal interaction. It allows people to come together to create one-day and weekend seminars and courses for members and the public, to



establish mentoring programs for newcomers, to take advantage of its library's range of valuable reference materials, embark on group visits to genealogical research sites, and much more.

Local genealogical societies can be a catalyst to seek out priceless local material, furnish the expert manpower to organize it into databases, and make it accessible to members and others through a society website or JewishGen. A crucial task is to visit local schools, synagogues, and other institutions to educate the public to preserve documents and historical paraphernalia that may yield treasures of genealogical data. Society newsletters or journals are ideal platforms for sharing research or knowledge that can lead to advancing the research through countless contacts with others interested in a particular topic.

While the web is jam-packed with information, it cannot serve as the sole resource for genealogical research. A world of vital books, periodicals, and reference works simply is not available online, and even those that are web-accessible may be more "user friendly" to maneuver when they can be held and thumbed through. Expensive reference volumes may be prohibitive for individual purchase, yet society libraries can purchase one copy for general use. Working with local municipal libraries, societies can encourage them to acquire genealogical books and audiovisual material, as well as ordering Internet subscriptions to ancestry.com.

Of course, the flagship event is the annual IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, where first-rate experts give lectures and guidance. Only through the untiring efforts of a local Jewish geneal-

ogy society does such a complex endeavor come to fruition.

It's clear that today's genealogists have an unprecedented, stellar array of research tools at their disposal. Yet the most valuable tools of all remain those that harness the personal resources, interests, talents, and work of fellow genealogists in the field. Genealogical societies combine these efforts and skills to form a powerful entity with boundless potential. I urge every genealogist to join and take an active role—for the betterment of today's researchers and of future generations to come.

*Michael Goldstein, president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, lives in Jerusalem.*

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