

WHO DO YOU COME FROM? Jewish family tree experts from around the world will be in Chicago for the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy

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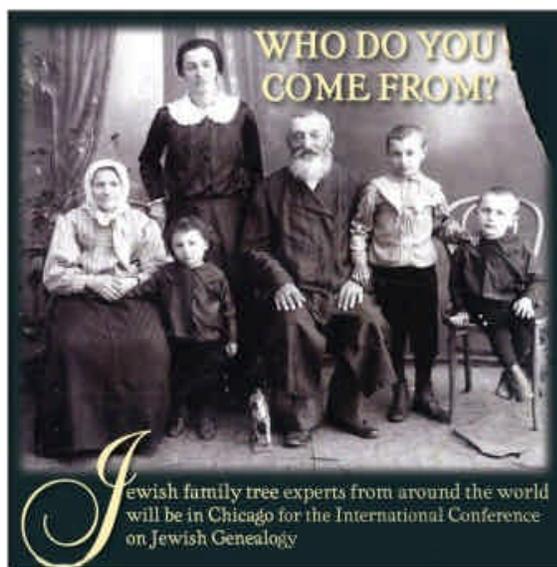
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WHO DO YOU COME FROM? Jewish family tree experts from around the world will be in Chicago for the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy

A look at the conference



WHO DO YOU COME FROM? Jewish family tree experts from around the world will be in Chicago for the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood (08/01/2008)

While Judith Frazin was sitting shiva for her grandmother, she heard a story from a family member that amazed her. As a young girl in Poland, the grandmother had fallen in love with a man her father didn't approve of and ran away from home to marry him. The girl's father found out and brought his daughter back home. The family member who told Frazin the story, a niece, had been responsible for passing notes between the two until the young lovers managed to reunite, marry and leave for the United States.

These were the grandparents Frazin had known all her life as respectable, hard-working family members.

"My grandmother was a very regal woman. I couldn't picture her in that role of rebellious daughter," she says. "I was so intrigued. I asked this relative over to ask some more questions. That led me to other people from the town my grandparents came from, and it became an evolving thing."

Today, Frazin is president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois, one of the organizations hosting the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy (see separate story), and has been involved for years in tracing her ancestry. In the process, she has made some fascinating discoveries, including the fact that her grandfather on the



other side, a relative she never met, helped many Jews leave Poland before the Holocaust.

Frazin's story is typical of those who become involved in - or obsessed with - tracing their family's ancestry. Mike Karsen, a Chicago-area man who now works as a professional genealogy speaker, instructor and researcher, was looking for something to do when he took early retirement from his job as a business manager at a large company.

"I started poking around, going to some genealogy meetings," he says. "Then my aunt, who had been the family historian, died. It was a big loss. How are we going to find things out? My theory is that when people lose their connections with the past, we feel like we're kind of orphans, so genealogy fills that."



Judith Frazin

Karsen not only became involved in researching his family's distant past, he also discovered living relatives and has visited them.

He has also taken advantage of one of genealogy's newest tools, DNA testing, locating a distant relative living in Wisconsin who had no clue about his family history.



Mike Karsen

But whether the tools they use are high-tech or low, those who occupy themselves with genealogical research agree on one thing: it's addictive.

"Once you get involved, you can't put it down," Frazin says. "Once you're bitten by the genealogy bug, you're hooked." Like many others, she compares genealogical research to detective work or solving a puzzle - one that is never finished.

Chicago in August will be humming with these puzzle-solvers, some 600 of them.

At the conference, they'll not only get an opportunity to meet others from around the world who share their passion, but will be able to do some real work on their own family histories, especially if any branches of that history have touched Chicago-area soil.

The annual conference was last held in Chicago in 1984, Anne Feder Lee, president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies and conference co-chair, says. "Over the years, we have had many requests to go back to Chicago. The city has many research opportunities for Jewish genealogists because of the large Jewish community it has had over the years. It's an ideal location" for the conference, she says.

Trudy Barch, president of the Illiana Jewish Genealogical Society, a conference co-sponsor, will be in charge of the resource room, which,

she says, should be a big draw for conference attendees, especially those interested in doing Chicago-area research.

"Here they can focus on the local stuff," she says. "Some you can do online and some you can't. If you want to get a birth, death or marriage certificate (from Chicago) now you might be able to get it right away."

For those who have relatives buried in the Chicago area, there will be supervised visits to all Jewish cemeteries.

The only problem conference attendees might have, Barch says, is that there will be so much to do that "it gets overpowering - what do I do first?"

Schelly Talalay Dardashti, a former New Yorker now living in Tel Aviv whose Jewish genealogy blog (<http://tracingthetribes.blogspot.com>) was named *Best for Jewish Researchers* by **Family Tree** magazine, writes in an e-mail that the conference "provides an unparalleled opportunity for researchers, from absolute beginners to professionals, to learn from the field's best experts. It is the place for announcements of major discoveries and projects and innovations in the Jewish genealogy world, and from these annual meetings, the word goes out around the world."

Dardashti adds that "perhaps the most important aspect of each conference is the personal interaction among attendees as they network with those researching the same names and towns, consult with international archivists and learn together. ... Some people plan to meet relatives at the conference for the first time." For herself, after researching her own and her husband's families for more than 20 years, she met a cousin, Victor Talalay, for the first time at a conference held several years ago in Toronto.



Schelly Talalay Dardashti

Dardashti first became involved in genealogical research years ago when her daughter came home from her Hebrew School class with a brief family history assignment. "That weekend, we attended a family celebration of my husband's very large Persian family. We began asking questions of our 'walking encyclopedia' and came home with several hundred cocktail napkins covered in notes," she writes.

That was the beginning of more than 20 years of research she spent tracing her husband's family from Iran and her own from Belarus. Her research has extended as far back as 1353 and a document on a "probable ancestor," a kosher winemaker living in Spain.

Those who engage in this kind of research say it's about much more than just digging up documents in a dusty archive and finding out how far back you can go.

"People are trying to figure out, where exactly did I come from?" Frazin says. "Other people are trying to make their ancestors seem more real to them, to find out information about them, trying to flesh them out as human beings. Most people want to know more about how their family members lived, what they were like as people. It has to be more than just names, places, dates. That's very sterile. You want to find out (your ancestors') town of origin, but also what these people were like as human beings."

Others are interested in discovering if there is someone famous in their background. "It's very prestigious to say you're descended from such-and-such a rabbi," she says.

While Frazin didn't come up with any famous ancestors, several years ago she had a particularly enlightening experience during the annual conference. "A guy contacted me and said he had a document from Ukraine he thought was mine," she says. "He had been doing research in the town my people came from." Frazin had no idea what it could be, but when she met the colleague, who had taught himself to read Russian to help in his genealogical work, she discovered he had the marriage certificate of her great-grandparents from 1878.

"I almost fell over," she says. "That's an amazing thing. I never would have found it. This is the kind of thing that happens at conferences. People make these connections."

For the beginner, though, the question usually is where to start.

While the Internet has made genealogy research much easier than it used to be, Frazin says "there's no substitute for starting out by interviewing anyone you can from the family town. But most people don't think to ask the questions until after the relatives are gone. As children, what do you care about those things? You don't. Most people don't start it until the people who could have given them the most information aren't around anymore."

Mike Karsen agrees. "My theory is that when people lose their connections with the past, their heritage," they often turn to genealogy," he says. "We don't have too many young people. It's mostly people over 50. When someone younger is involved, usually they've lost a parent early, they're trying to connect with their roots, their heritage, their identity."

After Karsen started researching his own family history, he discovered fourth cousins living in London and visited them. "All of a sudden, I found out genealogy could be about living relatives. I started meeting other relatives and having family reunions, then kind of put together a cousins club, which had been lost in my mother's generation," he says. After finding and contacting 33 cousins, he is now working on getting in touch with their children all over the world.

His message to beginning genealogists is, "This is fun," he says. "The people I found were very gracious, kind and appreciative of what I was doing. I was afraid someone would say, who are you? What do you want? Are you looking for money? But most people were very appreciative."

Now, in his genealogy lectures, Karsen advises his listeners to ask family members questions while they are still able to answer. He also asks, "Who's finished with their genealogy?" Usually no hands go up.

"You are never finished. People are dying and being born and there's always more to find. It's like a never-ending saga," he says.

One of the latest weapons in the genealogist's arsenal is the relatively recent science of DNA testing, which, Karsen says, can find individuals who are related who might never have known anything about each other. The test is not cheap, though, and it gets more expensive the farther back the individual wants to go. In addition, Karsen says, DNA matches are more exact through the male line.

His own experience was revelatory. After sending in his DNA sample - a swab taken from his cheek with a Q-Tip - he found he was a match to a man living in Wisconsin. The two started e-mailing each other.

"He told me his father was abandoned as an infant in a New York City office building. He was adopted, but nobody was ever able to find out anything about him, although they thought he 'looked European,'" Karsen relates.

The father was raised by a Christian family and there was no sense that anyone in the family was Jewish, but the son says people often tell him he "looks Jewish," he told Karsen. In fact, "some people think we look alike," Karsen says of the Wisconsin man. "This guy had no idea about his roots but he thought he might be Jewish,

especially since his father came from New York," he says. "And here I come up a match for him. That means that five or six generations back we had the same ancestor. We couldn't have found out about this any other way." He continues to muse about "the power of it - 150,000 people in the data bank, and we come up a match.

"Of course if you go back far enough we're all related, but this is more than that," he says. He adds that for people concerned over privacy or insurance issues related to genetic testing, the genealogical DNA testing is secure and is never used for such purposes.

While DNA might be the newest trend in genealogical research, it isn't the only one to emerge in recent years. As might be expected, the Internet has proven to be a great boon to amateur genealogists, although Frazin warns that "not everything is on the Internet," and if there are living relatives, interviewing them is the best place to start.

Online, she suggests that beginners subscribe to ancestry.com, which charges a fee, or visit jewishgen.org, a portal to Jewish genealogical resources on the Internet.

Karsen recommends Cyndi's List as the most comprehensive genealogy Web site, with links to more than 200,000 other sites worldwide, all indexed by topic and location, including a Jewish page.

Most American Jews can trace their ancestry to Eastern Europe, but Frazin suggests that beginners "get U.S. documents first. Don't jump right into Europe." In one instance, "nobody knew where in Russia a family came from. They found out on a U.S. birth certificate. That led to their origins in Europe."

Two other occurrences that have given hope to Jews tracing their ancestry are the microfilming program of the Mormon church, which makes its copious genealogical records available to the public online, and the opening of archives in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Over the last 12 years, the Mormons have been working to create Internet access to genealogical information contained on two-million-plus rolls of microfilm housed in vaults the church owns. While the religious purpose of the records has been controversial - the church considers the information "essential for the salvation of mankind after death," -- the records have proven a boon to researchers.

"Jewish people at one point felt they couldn't do research because of the Holocaust, but the microfilming program of the LDS church showed us there were records available. These are not religious records, they're records kept by civic governments. They were not housed in synagogues and that's why they survived" the Holocaust, Frazin says.

"There are a lot from Poland, Hungary and Germany. The Soviet Union wouldn't give them permission to microfilm their records," but later governments have, and those records are becoming available now, she says.

Karsen agrees that, while it may be counterintuitive, the Holocaust did not make genealogical research more difficult.

"A lot of people think that everything was lost in the Holocaust, and we try to dispel that myth," he says. "Yad Vashem in Israel has an online searchable database with three million names. The Germans kept good records, and people have been able to find" relatives who either perished during the Holocaust or survived it.

"Jews' biggest challenge is that we didn't have surnames until about 1800," he says. Most Eastern European Jews were named according to their father's name or occupation, such as Jacobson, son of Jacob, or Schneider, meaning tailor. "Just like in 'Fiddler,' there was Motel the Tailor. He never had a last name," Karsen says. Sephardic Jews, he says, had last names from an earlier time.

Still, he says, Eastern European Jews, at least, can usually only trace their ancestry back to a certain point because of the lack of records. "Somebody said to me, my husband traced his family back to the 1500s in England. Was he Jewish? No. Only non-Jews had (last) names then."

But, as most genealogists note, it's not about finding how far back you can go or how many ancestors you can find. For most, the human element is the most important.

"Our relatives left footprints," Judith Frazin says.

Later this month in Chicago, some 600 people will try to fit their feet to those prints.

For more information on local genealogical resources, contact the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois at (847) 509-0201 or www.jewishgen.org/jgsi or the Illiana Jewish Genealogical Society at (708) 957-9457 or www.ijgs.home.comcast.net. The Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois meets on the last Sunday of the month at Temple Beth Israel in Skokie, from 12:30-2 p.m. The meetings are free.