
RESOURCES FOR JEWISH GENEALOGY IN THE CHICAGO METROPOLITAN AREA

Starting at the End: Death Records as the Foundation of Your Research

by Mike Karsen

The various types of death records available are ideal resources for beginning your research on the life of your ancestor. These include Social Security records, funeral home and cemetery records, tombstone inscriptions, death certificates/indexes, and death notices/obituaries. All provide significant information that can give you a good foundation for your research. Some of the statements documented in these records, however, are clearly secondary information—i.e. provided by someone without first hand knowledge of an event (such as birth date of the deceased). While taking such statements as a good set of working assumptions along with any facts found, you now have many useful clues to help you find the other documents needed for your research.

Cemetery records provide a good place to start when you do not know the exact death date for a family member. Most cemeteries have computerized records of their burials. If you have a rough idea of the death date and know other family members (such as spouse), you can often locate the grave and determine the exact date of death. You can then order a death certificate or call the funeral home to obtain additional information. Of course you can also visit the grave to obtain information from the inscription on the tombstone.

The name of the specific cemetery section where your ancestor is buried can provide insight into a group/organization where your ancestor belonged. Additional information about some of these organizations can be found in Sidney Sorkin's book *Bridges to An American City: A Guide to Chicago's Landsmanshaften 1870 to 1990*.

There are over 20 cemeteries in the Chicago area that are totally Jewish or have Jewish sections. The largest number of Jewish burials can be found in Forest Park (just west of Chicago) and make up the Greater Waldheim cemetery. It has three caretaker organizations currently managing sections of the cemetery:

Waldheim Cemetery (708-366-4541):
150,000 burials

Silverman & Weiss Cemetery (708-366-0125):
26,000 burials

Free Sons Cemetery (708-366-1190)
12,000 burials (estimate)

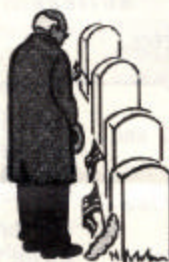
The next largest is:

Westlawn Cemetery (773-625-8600)
over 43,000 burials

These four organizations manage over 60% of the Jewish burials in the Chicago metropolitan area.

The oldest Jewish graves, some of which date back to the mid-1800s, can be found in the following cemeteries:

Jewish Graceland (312-409-4296)
Hebrew Benevolent Society (847-279-8116)
Mt. Mayriv (Rosemont Pk) (773-736-2553)
Rosehill (773-561-5940)
Greater Waldheim (see above)



Tombstones inscriptions can be especially useful to the Jewish genealogist. In addition to the date of death and the age, most Jewish tombstones give the Hebrew/Yiddish name of the deceased and the given name of the father. Other symbols/text on the tombstone may indicate whether the deceased was a Kohen or Levite. Help in reading the Hebrew/Yiddish inscription can be found at the infofile on the Jewishgen website www.jewishgen.org.

The Social Security Death Index (SSDI) can be very useful in determining a death date. The SSDI is published on a set of two CD-ROMs and can also be found on the websites of Ancestry (www.ancestry.com) and Rootsweb (www.rootsweb.com). It contains the names of all individuals whose death was reported to the Social Security Administration (SSA) since 1937, although the most complete set of records is for individuals who died after 1962. The index gives the individual's Social Security Number (SSN), birth date (as originally reported to the SSA by the applicant), the date of death (usually just the month and year), his or her last residence (usually the city, county, state, zip code), and the state where the

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

original application was made to the Social Security Administration (not the birthplace). You can also write the SSA for a copy of the original application, which may include the place/date of birth, parents' names, and address/date of the application. Many of the websites provide a sample letter to the SSA for requesting this record.

Funeral home records contain information about the burials they have supervised. The name of the funeral home can be obtained from either the cemetery or from the death certificate. Although many of the old Jewish funeral homes are now out of business, most of the records have been assumed by succeeding funeral homes. Since these records are generally not computerized, you need to provide the date of death and the location of the original funeral home. Ask the funeral home for whatever information is in their file, such as next of kin (including addresses and phone numbers), death certificates, copies of death notices and obituaries.

The following are the key funeral homes to call for Jewish genealogical research:

Weinstein Family Services (773-761-2400)

Archives include Weinstein Bros. (from 1894), Palmer-Lauer and Robert Weinstein.

Piser Chapels (773-561-4740)

Archives include Original Weinstein (from 1920), Hartman-Miller, Gratch-Mandel, Albert & Jaffe, and J. (Jacob) Weinstein. Oldest records date back to around 1900.

Furth and Company (773-784-4300)

Death certificates have been recorded in Chicago from 1871 and were mandated to be kept by the State of Illinois starting in 1916. These documents (src:VR1) contain personal information about the deceased, including age, name of spouse, profession, birthplace, father's name and birthplace, mother's maiden name and birthplace, and also the date and place of death, cause of death, place of burial, name of informant, and funeral home (undertaker). Death records for Chicago can be obtained from the following:

Cook County Vital Records (312-603-7790)

Illinois State Archives (217-782-3556)

Family History Center (incomplete set),
Wilmette (847-251-9818)

Death indexes exist for Cook County for 1871-1916 and for the State of Illinois for 1916-1949. These indexes are arranged alphabetically and contain name, sex, race, age (if known), date of death, county, city, and certificate number. Deaths are not listed in the index until fifty years after the death.

These records can be found at the following locations:

Illinois Regional Archive Depository
(773-442-4506)

Family History Center, Wilmette
(847-251-9818)

Newberry Library (312-255-3512)

Death notices and obituaries appear in the newspaper immediately following the death. They usually give names of

immediate relatives of the deceased, information that may be very helpful. Look at the newspapers for up to five days following the death.

The three major newspapers which should be reviewed are the following:

Chicago Tribune (1860-present)

Chicago Sun-Times (1948-present)

Chicago Daily News (1875-1978)

These newspapers are available at the Chicago Public Library (312-747-4300) and some of its branches. The *Chicago Tribune* is also available at some suburban libraries, including Schaumburg (847-985-4000) and Arlington Heights (847-392-0100).

Once you have finished collecting data from the various death records, you have the foundation to continue acquiring the other records that will trace the entire life of your family member.

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Mike Karsen is a member of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois (JGSI) and the Computer Assisted Genealogy Group of Northern Illinois (CAGG-NI). If you have comments or questions you can call him at 847-803-4446 or email him at: MikeFamHistorian@aol.com. □