

## JEWISH WORLD

# Playing Jewish geography with your ancestors

The time is now to start discovering your own personal landscape and history

By MIKE KARSEN *Special to JUF News*

### WE'VE ALL PLAYED JEWISH

Geography with people we think we know. "Where did you grow up?" "What shul did you go to?" "Did you have a younger brother?"

Researching your family history is like playing Jewish Geography—but with your ancestors. Unfortunately, many of the individuals who had the information we need are no longer here to ask, and we never thought to inquire when they were still sitting next to us at the dinner table. So what do we do now?

### How to start

The journey to discover your family's history begins by talking with your oldest and most knowledgeable living relatives. Consider yourself the family detective. The following list of questions should be helpful in starting your investigation:

1. Tell me about your grandparents—their names and when/where they lived. Who were their siblings?
2. Who were the first members of the family to come to America? When and where did they arrive?
3. What can you tell me about the "old" country or life in the "old" neighborhood?
4. For whom were you and

your siblings named?  
5. Do you have any old family photos? Who are these people?

6. What was the hardest part of your life and what was the most joyful?  
7. Tell me about your earliest memories of the family.

If individuals are far away, talk to them by phone and

record the conversation if possible (with their permission). Even if you are not ready to take the plunge into genealogy, interview everyone you can now—before it's too late. If you are the one with the most memories of the family's history, write them down or record them as a lasting gift to your children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

### The key documents for Jewish genealogy

Once you have made significant progress on the interviews, you can obtain official documents and records to provide verification of some of the facts obtained through the oral testimonies and also to fill other voids. This new informa-

### Key resources for the Jewish genealogist

Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois  
(312) 666-0100 • [www.jewishgan.org/jgsil/](http://www.jewishgan.org/jgsil/)  
Illiana Jewish Genealogical Society  
(708) 947-9457 • [www.lincolnet.net/jigs](http://www.lincolnet.net/jigs)  
Jewish genealogy • [www.jewishgan.org](http://www.jewishgan.org)  
Ellis Island • [www.ellislandrecords.org](http://www.ellislandrecords.org)



The Bursztyn & Gilder families from Poland (*circa*) 1907.

tion becomes part of the family puzzle that you are piecing together.

Jewish genealogy is—for us—by and large a story of immigrants who came to the United States for a better life and then proudly became American citizens. A great source of family information, naturalization papers usually show when and where the applicant was born, when and where s/he married, and when s/he came to the U.S.A. If you do not have these records, you can easily get

them, as they have been preserved by the court where your relative was naturalized. There is even an index that lists everyone who was naturalized in the Chicago area starting from the late 1800s.

Ship manifests provide a crucial link between life in America and our ancestral homes. When our ancestors boarded ships in the great ports of Europe, their names were care-

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### GEOGRAPHY

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fully documented. Many of these records have been preserved, microfilmed, and are available for the family historian's use. A big boon to genealogists came recently when the Ellis Island records were digitized, indexed, and put online by the Ellis Island Foundation. Before you run to your computer, however, do keep in mind the following. When our ancestors left the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe, they in most cases were not using the names by which they would later become known in America. A search for Paul Karsen's arrival yielded "none found," but a search for *Pesil Pekarsky* (actually transcribed as *Pesie Pekarsky*) informed me that my

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father arrived on the S.S. Rotterdam on Aug. 3, 1914, from Zytomir, Russia.

Local resources to help you delve more deeply into your family's history include the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois (JGSI), which has monthly programs covering various aspects of Jewish genealogy. In addition, JGSI is sponsoring a one-day conference next month in Skokie, which will include sessions on how to obtain naturalization papers and how to search the Ellis Island website.

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family's history, you will find that the rewards for playing *this* version of Jewish Geography are many. Through honoring our ancestors and reconnecting with living relatives, we bring the family back together. ■

*On Sunday, June 6, 2004, the Midwest Conference on Jewish Genealogy will offer 15 sessions in three concurrent tracks—for beginners through advanced researchers. For more information, call (847) 803-4446, e-mail [jgsi2004@yahoo.com](mailto:jgsi2004@yahoo.com) or visit [www.jewishgen.org/jgsi/conf](http://www.jewishgen.org/jgsi/conf).*