



Jewish Family History Research

Tips on starting a project to research your family's history

JEWISH GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY OF MONTREAL

www.igs-montreal.org

Family history does not have to be a mystery. We all leave a paper trail that can reveal the story of our families for generations. Get started with the basic books on Jewish genealogy at the Jewish Public Library, Montreal:

- [*From Generation to Generation*](#) (Arthur Kurzweil, Harper-Collins)
- [*Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy*](#) (Gary Mokotoff, Avotaynu Press).
- [*Sephardic Genealogy*](#) (Dr. Jeffrey Malka, Avotaynu Press)

The Internet provides instant access to countless websites with genealogical information. Start your Jewish genealogical research at JewishGen at www.jewishgen.org, the home of Jewish Genealogy on the Internet. Read the “Frequently Asked Questions” and check JewishGen’s country-based databases with an amazing number of records you may not have realized had survived. If your family came from Poland or lands that were Polish at some point search the website of the independent JRI-Poland.org website.

IMPORTANT: Register your family surnames and ancestral shtetls in the JewishGen Family Finder.

For Montreal/Canadian sources, the starting point is the JGS of Montreal website at www.jgs-montreal.org. Download “How to Begin Jewish Genealogy,” which includes a list of online resources for getting started. Use the JGS-Montreal “Dashboard” as a quick way to explore many of the readily available resources.

Start with what you know

- Write down everything you know about your family: names, Hebrew names, dates and places of birth, marriage and death of all members of your family starting with yourself and your siblings, and going back, generation by generation, to your parents, their siblings, your grandparents and their siblings, etc.
- Include the occupations; when and from where your ancestors emigrated and where the family settled and later moved to; languages spoken; family stories that have been passed down through the years.
- Never discount family lore, even if it seems far-fetched. Relatives who say they don’t know anything about the family, very often do produce some clues if prompted.
- Document everything you can. The smallest detail can open up doors for follow-up research.

Documenting your research - family trees and computer programs

To efficiently record and share your family tree, use a computer program. There are many to choose from such as Family Tree Maker, MyHeritage, Legacy Family Tree, Reunion. Free online programs are also available. All programs can generate charts and lists for sharing.

Find out what others in the family know

- After writing what you know, circulate the information to everyone in your family.
- Ask each person to check the accuracy of what you recorded, and to add as many facts as possible.
- Also, ask for the names of other relatives likely to know the most about the family.
- Consult in-laws who are very likely to remember all the relatives in their son or daughter's new family.

Interview your relatives and family friends

- After accumulating information from immediate family, interview people who have been recommended as being good sources for family stories including long-time family friends.
- Start with the older members of the family. 15 minutes with an older relative asking "who, when, where, why and how" can save years of research. Write it down or use a digital recorder (or smartphone). And follow up a week or two later to see if their memory has been sparked by your earlier questions.
- Interview all the sisters, brothers or even cousins – remember, memories vary from person to person.

- You may be told "I know nothing about my ancestors" by three children in a family - only to later learn that the youngest sister, who took care of the parents in their old age, has a shoe box stuffed with family records and photos and never said anything about it to anyone because no one asked!
- Don't ask questions that force "yes" and "no" answers. Ask open-ended questions such as "What do remember about family gatherings when you were a child?" or "who came?" and so on.
- Ask the interviewee to describe his or her early life within the family and the community.
- If the person being interviewed was not born in Canada or the U.S., try to get him/her to recall life in the "old" country, as well as the transatlantic journey.
- If they can't recall exact names, jog their memories with hints; ask the same question a second time.
- Ask questions in various ways. Asking if grandpa had any siblings may get a "who knows" answer! Asking for names of grandpa's brothers (even if you don't know if he had any!) may result in a different answer.

Look for documents

Searching for genealogical records can start anytime but interviews will point to many more questions that can only be answered with documents:

- The **family's recollections**, plus the interviews, and your personal memory, should point to what details are still missing and where to look for them.
- **Birth, marriage and death records** are some of the first documents to locate. The JGS of Montreal has indexed Jewish births and marriages from 1841 to 1942. They are a great starting point. The JGS of Montreal also has private indexes of all Quebec marriages and deaths from 1926 to 1996. Check all the records. The marriage records of five siblings may not have their mother's maiden name, but the sixth one might.
- **Canadian and U.S censuses and Passenger Arrival lists** are available online from many sources. Use the [Steve Morse's One-step website](#) to maximize search potential. The latest available Canadian Census is from 1921; the most recent U.S. Censuses is from 1940.
- **Canadian Naturalizations** from 1915 to 1946 are online on the [Library and Archives Canada website](#).
- **Montreal Circuit Court Naturalizations** also available on the [Library and Archives Canada website](#).
- The **Canadian Jewish Heritage Network** www.cjhn.ca website has invaluable information about Montreal, Quebec and Canadian families and immigration files (JIAS collection).
- **New York State**, where many immigrants first landed and lived, took censuses from 1825 to 1925.
- Family's entries in the **1940 Canadian National Registration** ('Wartime Census') can be invaluable as these forms typically include town of birth of both the individual and his/her parents. Available from the [Census Pensions Unit of Statistics Canada](#).
- Some other records to be consulted are **U.S. Border Crossing records, naturalization papers, newspaper obituaries, probate files, cemetery and funeral home records, tombstone inscriptions, property records, voter registrations and records of religious, fraternal and union organizations**.
- Never overlook anything, such as a **family bible/siddur** with a whole genealogy written in it.
- A **bank safety deposit box or shoe box** at home will often be stuffed with expired passports, naturalization papers, wills, old letters or even wedding telegrams (typical in the early 20th century).

Define your goals

Trying to trace all of your "lines" or finding all your "collateral" relatives (descendants of your ancestors' siblings) and all living cousins is noble; but, unless you have unlimited time and resources, may be unrealistic.

- Do you want to do both your mother's and father's families? Can you start with just one? Try to enlist a sibling or cousin to do the "other side?"
- It's never too early to plan a family reunion or write a family history book.
- There are times when you have to gather information when it's available, even if you then have to set it aside until you are ready to utilize it more fully; just understand, you can't do it all at once.

Family history research is both exhilarating and educational; it will give you a sense of achievement and the opportunity to pass on a treasure to future generations, while making many new friends along the way.

Join the Jewish Genealogical Society of Montreal - Phone the hot line for meeting updates: 514-489-0949

Enjoy monthly lectures and monthly Sunday Morning workshops. Network with your fellow researchers.

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