

Montrealers are starting to join the Jewish genealogy wave. While there are currently more than 50 Jewish Genealogical societies around the world with new ones being added every few months, local genealogists have had to look to Toronto or elsewhere to hook up with fellow family history researchers. This is now changing.

On Sunday, November 13th, 32 active and budding genealogists gathered in the Bialik High School library for a "Jewish Genealogy in the 90's" workshop led by Dr. Rolph Lederer, International Vice President of the Jewish Genealogical Societies. Lederer, a Toronto psychiatrist, has been tracing his family tree for more than 20 years and has 2,000 living and deceased relatives in his database. Lederer has gathered birth, marriage and death records (known as vital records) going back to ????? and photos from the middle of the 19th century.

The participants learned about the use of modern technology in genealogical research, including sophisticated software, CD-ROM indexes and databases, and the world of the Internet. Lederer talked about the breakthroughs in the availability of Jewish vital records, a direct result of the opening up of archival resources in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Genealogists are obtaining records about their ancestral towns, records that our Bubbas and Zaidas believed never existed or were destroyed by the Nazis.

Lederer also described the resources of the Mormon Family History Library in Salt Lake City, the world's largest single repository of vital records. Of specific interest to genealogists with Polish roots is the vast collection of Jewish records which the Mormons microfilmed in the early 70's. Working with the films of Ostrow Mazowiecka, a town halfway between Warsaw and Bialystok, enabled local genealogist Stanley Diamond to create a family tree with Polish roots going to 1725 as well as discover his original family name "Cukier."

While genealogists travel from all over North America to research their history in Salt Lake City, the microfilms can also be viewed right here in Montreal at the Mormon Family History Centre on Terrebonne Avenue in NDG.

Lederer also mentioned that Mormon cameras have been microfilming in all the countries of the former Soviet Union. While it takes about two or three years for films to be catalogued and be available to the public, birth, marriage, death and census records of Minsk and Pinsk will be available shortly, with other Belarus towns to follow.

Computer technology has also resulted in the development of the Jewish Genealogical Family Finder, a database of more than 30,000 names and towns being researched by Jewish genealogists around the world. Stories are told every day of contacts being made between branches of long-separated families. The Family Finder database is updated every year and the latest edition was on hand at the workshop; several of the participants quickly identified potential family "matches."

The latest addition to the genealogist's tool box is the Jewish Genealogy message base (JewishGen) on the Fidonet computer network, shortly to become a "newsgroup" on Internet. JewishGen can be accessed without cost through Quebec Genealogy Online, a Montreal-based BBS (Bulletin Board System). Lederer pointed out that genealogists around the world are now sharing their research tips and successes, asking questions, and finding relatives - just by sitting at their computer.

Representatives of the Montreal Jewish Public Library and the Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives were on hand to provide information on genealogical resources in their collections.

By discussing their ancestral towns and family names, the participants started the networking that so often sparks research successes. The many positive comments heard such as "this was wonderful," "I have been waiting for this for years," and "let's get together again quickly" are indications of the strong core of interest. Monthly meetings are planned with hopes that the Montreal group will soon become an integral part of the network of Societies around the world.

Interested Montrealers can obtain more information by calling 484-0100 or faxing 484-7306.