

Who were my ancestors? How do I find them?

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Too often, I hear people saying, "I'll never be able to find who my ancestors were because the Nazis destroyed all the Jewish records in Europe." Fortunately, that belief is a myth. Since the mid 1990s we have learned that an enormous number and variety of Jewish records have survived in the countries of Europe, even in obscure archives in eastern Europe. Documents and cemeteries that trace the lives of our ancestors survived the Holocaust as well as centuries of war and devastation that ravaged Jewish populations in Europe. Through incredible volunteer efforts, these records are becoming increasingly available.

So, the question is not *whether* we can find our ancestors, but rather *how do I begin?* Starting with this column, I will offer some suggestions to help you compile your family history. I also will try to respond to your questions. All you have to do is ask. Write to me at rondocor@earthlink.net.

Almost all genealogy gurus suggest that you begin by writing down what you know about yourself and your immediate family ... names (including birth as well as married names for women), dates of life cycle events (births, marriages, deaths etc.), places where life cycle events occurred, relationships (parents, spouse, children, grandparents etc.), dates and places of immigration and ancestral towns or countries if you know them. Once you have this information you can build a basic family tree or "pedigree chart". (Download a free blank pedigree chart on the Web at: <http://www.cyndislist.com/freestuff.htm>. In the "Category Index", click on "Charts and Forms to Print or Download".)

However, in today's world of computers and on-line databases, my experience is that most people want to begin by jumping on-line. Since so many good databases with our family names are on-line, why not use them to create an instant family tree? The problem is that when you start tapping into these databases you will find so many records with your family names that you will be overwhelmed. Your first question will be, "how in the world do I figure out how, if at all, these people are related to me?" To illustrate this, take a look at a few of the large free databases on the Web:

- Ellis Island (www.stevemorse.org.) Select the "Gold Form" and put your surname in the Surname search box.
- Yad Vashem Israel's Holocaust Center:
http://www.yadvashem.org/wps/portal/IY_HON>Welcome

- JewishGen country-specific databases, *JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry*, *JewishGen Family Finder*, and *Family Tree of the Jewish People*: <http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/>. The country-specific databases include America, Austria, Belarus, Czech, Germany, Great Britain, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Scandinavia, South Africa, and Ukraine. In addition, be sure to read JewishGen's FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions). It is an excellent primer for getting started in Jewish genealogy.
- *FamilySearch* (the Mormon database): <http://www.familysearch.org/eng/default.asp>

Each of these databases contains millions of names. All are free. In addition, there are some excellent "fee for service" databases. The most notable is www.ancestry.com. And, there is much, much more information available on the web and in archives around the country.

Overwhelmed yet? Don't be. As I mentioned earlier, the way to approach all this is to start with what you know about yourself and your immediate family. Then, work backwards, one generation at a time. Record your data using simple forms. (After a while, you can graduate to a genealogy computer program. I'll discuss these in a future article).

Don't forget to interview your older relatives ... and record what they have to say. Let them talk. Ask questions only for clarification and to prompt them for more information. Besides important data, their family stories are invaluable and will be cherished. Transcribe the interview. Review it. Then, interview them again so that you can ask more questions to fill in the gaps.

As you accumulate more and more information, you will be able to make connections between your family data and stories and the information you find in online and documentary databases. Be sure to note the source of each piece of new data.

In future columns, I'll go into these processes in more detail and I will try to answer your questions. Just write and let me know what you would like to see discussed in this column. In the meantime, be sure to visit the website of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon (JGSO) at <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~orjgs/>. JGSO holds monthly meetings from September through June each year, bringing distinguished speakers to Portland. The group usually meets at Ahavath Achim Congregation on the 3rd Tuesday of each month, from 7 to 9 pm. If you wish to receive meeting notices by e-mail and occasional messages with new information about Jewish genealogy, write to JGSO at JGSOregon@gmail.com.