

How do I find my great-grandfather's ancestral town?

Part 4 - Useful Organizations

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This month I'll discuss some of the organizations and events in Jewish genealogy that can help you find great-grandfather's ancestral town. The annual conferences of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) are particularly important. Later in this column, I'll tell you about the most recent conference. But, first, let's look at some of the organizations that comprise the structure of Jewish genealogy and at how these organizations can help you.

"Think Local" the gurus tell us, and, we're fortunate to be able to do that in Oregon. There are 72 local Jewish Genealogical Societies (JGSs) in 14 countries. Two of these are in Oregon: The JGS of Oregon (<http://www.rootsweb.com/~orjgs>) and the JGS of Willamette Valley (<http://www.nwfam.com/jgswvo.html>). All JGSs are affiliated with the IAJGS. Most have considerable information available for the areas they serve. All meet regularly and even the most distant are eager to help answer genealogical questions you may have. All you have to do is ask. Websites and e-mail contact information are at <http://www.iajgs.org/members/members.html>.

There are many websites useful for Jewish genealogy. JewishGen (www.jewishgen.org) is, by far, the most important. It is a gateway to tens of millions of records and other websites. It hosts 20 country and region-specific Special Interest Groups (SIGs) like Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (<http://www.jewishgen.org/jri-pl>) and Litvak SIG (<http://www.jewishgen.org/Litvak>). JRI-Poland provides searchable databases with more than 4 million translated records from ancient and modern Poland. Litvak SIG offers over 600,000 records from a variety of sources, some dating to the early 1800s.

JewishGen began in 1987 as an electronic discussion group with 150 participants. Today, it has more than 400,000 active members, 40,000 web pages, and 14 million database records. The JewishGen Family Finder (<http://www.jewishgen.org/jgff/>) lists 86,000 researchers and the 440,000 surnames and towns they are researching. More than 4,000 people from all over the world have submitted their family trees to the Family Tree of the Jewish People (<http://www.jewishgen.org/gedcom>). It now has more than 4 million names. The JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Register (<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery>) is a searchable database with more than 1.2 million records from the 15th century to today. It covers 2,417 cemeteries in 14 countries. JewishGen's Holocaust databases have more than 2 million records. JewishGen

offers online courses in basic and intermediate Jewish genealogy. They have had 14 classes with more than 800 students. The classes always are oversubscribed within a day after announcement.

This is only the "tip of the iceberg". JewishGen has many more important features. With all these resources, and a fairly complex structure, JewishGen can be pretty intimidating. The best way to find out what is there and how to use it is to take a few minutes to read the JewishGen FAQ (<http://www.jewishgen.org/InfoFiles/FAQ.html>). Many other organizations, online and physical, provide even more information. I'll describe the most important of these resources in future columns.

All of this coalesces in the annual IAJGS Conference on Jewish Genealogy. This year the 29th Conference was held in Philadelphia, 2-7 August. From Sunday through Friday, the program was jam-packed with 8 concurrent presentations in 6 time slots from 8:15 am through 6:15 pm daily, in addition to breakfast, lunch and evening sessions, and special workshops. There were 282 sessions presented by 140 people, plus 55 film screenings at a Jewish film festival, 21 book signings and 29 exhibitors. A Resource Room offered free access to many databases, expert assistance for researchers, and translators to help make sense of foreign language documents. There was something for everyone, from beginners to specialists. (Ten sessions and several workshops were devoted to beginners.)

Most sessions focused on research in specific regions and countries. Every major Jewish geographic area was covered. There was a significant increase in sessions devoted to DNA, genetics, and Jewish genetic diseases. DNA testing is the hot new area for confirming or rejecting possible relationships between people. New technology also was a hot topic.

Father Patrick Desbois, a French Catholic Priest, was the keynote speaker. His talk, "Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's journey to uncover the truth behind the murder of 1.5 Million Jews", was moving and informative. Father Desbois and his team travel to the small villages of Eastern Europe trying to identify mass burial sites where the Nazis and their collaborators murdered Jews from 1941 to 1944. He does this by interviewing elderly villagers who were children at the time. The villagers open up to Father Desbois, providing previously untold eyewitness accounts of the mass murders, and, in the process, give names to previously unknown Holocaust victims. When a mass grave is identified, Father Desbois' team honors the victims with proper burials and brings their long untold stories to life. Father Desbois' book, "The Holocaust by Bullets" tells the story of this effort. For more information, visit his website, www.yahadinunum.org.

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The 580 page Conference Syllabus is in the JGSO section of Neveh Shalom Congregation's Library. The Syllabus includes written papers for most of the presentations. A digital edition of the Syllabus on cd-rom also is in the Library. Within about a month the Library will have cd-roms containing recordings and handouts from all the Conference sessions.

The 2010 Conference will be in Los Angeles. Washington D.C. is the site for 2011, and 2012 is set, tentatively, for Paris. That's one I don't want to miss!