

New Strategies in German Jewish Research

by Karen Franklin

The following article is based upon a presentation given at the IAJGS conference in Boston, August 2013—Ed.

Strategies for genealogical research are evolving rapidly as more data, previously available only from institutional archives, are incorporated into and made available from volunteer researchers as well as through a number of online Internet sites. Moreover, several prominent websites have extensive collections of family trees, and these provide excellent starting points for today's genealogical researchers. In this brief article, I illustrate strategies for German Jewish research with several examples.

Recently, I began a project to organize 50 years of research files for a Jewish genealogist, Jon Stedman. Jon's father, John Stedman, left Jon's mother for a third wife by the time Jon was 11 years old, and Jon learned only later in life that his father was originally named Jesse Oppenheimer. Jesse/John had hidden his Jewish identity from his family. His son, Jon, spent much of the rest of his life searching for his Jewish roots. Jon's research notes and the records he assembled were fascinating. In addition to tracing the family history, they documented how Jewish genealogy research has changed in the last half-century.

When Jon first sent for copies of vital records in the 1960s, the cost was \$1.00 each. Researchers charged him \$2.50 or \$3.00 per hour for their services. Jon worked in libraries and copied microfilms of newspaper articles; some he simply transcribed (with old-fashioned pencil and paper). He corresponded with mayors and archivists in Germany and labored with scholars (including Cecil Roth) to extract the fine nuances of translations. His trees were published in Malcolm Stern's *First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies 1654–1988*.

By the 1990s, Jon was following JewishGen religiously to tutor himself about new methodologies. He had his DNA tested early on and kept up with every advance and discovery. He began to correspond with dozens of genealogists whose names would be familiar to those who have worked in the field. He cooperated with other researchers who had already created family trees for large branches of their (mutual) families, lines that he had been unable to trace. The changes in Jon Stedman's research strategy are a reflection of the growth and opportunities in our field.

There are now major genealogy sites, Geni, and MyHeritage (the former bought out by the latter) and its rival Ancestry.com that feature extensive family trees. Complete trees also are available on JewishGen's Family Tree of the Jewish People, Geneanet, FamilySearch.org and several other sites. As a researcher, I always begin my research on

these sites, to see if anyone else has already posted a tree for a family I am researching. I also Google the family names (with two or three related ones in order to narrow down the options), because this could lead to personal family sites as well.

Thousands of researchers who have already completed trees have made them available online on their own web pages. I recently had a breakthrough connecting an ancestor I found mention of only in a death record in New York City to a tree Alex Calzareth had traced into the 17th century and placed online on his own site.

Impact on German Jewish Research

For no one do these database opportunities more greatly affect the way family historians work than for German Jewish genealogists. There has always been a plethora of existing family trees for German Jewish families, and they are prominent among those on the databases mentioned. The Leo Baeck Institute (lbi.org) has digitized more than 75 percent of its archival collections. They include thousands of trees embedded in its larger collections, as well as memoirs and community records, all of interest to genealogists.

Data from DNA testing continues to become more specific and, as more people are tested, more valuable. Groundbreaking research by Janet Akaha, Rachel Unkefer, Lars Menk, Nancy Grossman and others has unraveled the intertwining relationships

among the Jewish families in Germany. For more information, go to FamilyTreeDNA.com and look for the Jewish-German SIG Project and the Jewish_Frankfurt Project.

Undoubtedly, however, the most valuable treasure for researchers, one that has transformed opportunities for German Jewish research in the last decade, is the work of hundreds of dedicated historians in German towns who document, collect and make available genealogies and histories from their local area. These records currently may be available only in the towns or through local historians. These individuals, and now organizations and museums, are often in contact with former residents and their families, but may not have the resources to locate the descendants of all emigrants who left in the 19th or early 20th century.

On a recent trip to Germany, I discovered three towns that had a complete or almost complete genealogical record of all the families who had lived there. None of the documentation was to be found in local archives. In the tiny village of Braunsbach, Elisabeth Quirbach and her husband Hans Schultz, founders of the Rabbinats Museum Braunsbach, have spent a decade documenting the former Jewish residents and their descendants. The same work has been

Several prominent websites have extensive collections of family trees, and these provide excellent starting points for today's genealogical researchers.

done by the Jewish museum in Veitshoechheim for its former Jewish residents. The Nazi Documentation Center in Ulm has an extensive database of Jewish citizens of Ulm; the records are constantly updated.

Other cities also support Jewish research. Christof Eberstadt, who was recently appointed commissioner for the old Jewish Community of Erlangen, recently wrote to me, “At the moment I collect every single bit of data I have in my collection in an Excel file, which some day will be the basis for an Internet platform about Erlangen Jews.”

How can one locate these individuals and organizations? I Google the name of the town and the word “*judische*,” which brings up the pages of *Alemannia Judaica*, a series of websites developed for former Jewish communities in Germany. The bibliographies often identify local historians. Additionally, colleagues who are listed in the Family Finder on JewishGen, and those who post on the GerSIG discussion groups, may suggest names of local experts with whom they have worked.

More than ten years ago, Arthur Obermayer established the Obermayer German Jewish History Award. This honor is given to five individuals each year in Berlin to bring international attention to their activities that “study, interpret and reconstruct information about the Jewish life that flourished in Germany....” Recipients of the award are listed on the website www.obermayer.us/award. More about the award and the individuals who have been nominated is available online or through Arthur Obermayer’s office, a valuable resource for researchers.

Of course, the serious researcher will surely need to use archives in Germany along the way. Even if research has already been done on a family, one can’t always be sure that it’s accurate or exhaustive, but it’s a good strategy to first explore the many avenues leading to genealogists, historians, family trees, DNA and websites that may al-

ready be available.

An Illustrative Story

In closing, here is an illustrative story about the work of local historians and how they helped me assist a friend find more about her family. Her grandmother had committed suicide only two months before the friend was born. The grandmother had emigrated from Germany at the end of the 19th century and died shortly after World War II. My friend was always puzzled and saddened that her grandmother had timed her death so cruelly.

My friend knew little about her grandmother—not even where in Germany she had lived, nor anything about the family history. After identifying the grandmother’s hometown, we sought to learn what resources were available and discovered a recently published, lovingly-prepared book by Hanno Mueller, Monica Kingreen and others about Jews from that area. The two-volume set had extensive histories for each family.

We learned that just before deportations began from that region in 1942, the grandmother’s cousins were found floating in the river that flowed through the town, and their father, whom the grandmother must have known as a child, was dead from an overdose of pills, surely a fate they found preferable to what otherwise would have awaited them. Knowing the specifics of the situation gave clarity and context to her grandmother’s life and death, and provided solace as well. Could these stories have been found in an archive? Perhaps, but probably not like this.

Karen S. Franklin is a co-chair of the Board of Governors of JewishGen. A past president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies and past-chair of the Council of American Jewish Museums, Franklin is a juror for the Obermayer German Jewish History Award. She lives in Yonkers, New York.

Now in Second Edition – 88 More Pages!

Sephardic Genealogy – Second Edition: Discovering Your Sephardic Ancestors and Their World

by Jeffrey S. Malka

Winner: Best Judaica Reference Book (2002) by the Association of Jewish Libraries. At last! A guide to researching Sephardic ancestry. In this profusely documented work, Malka explains how to trace Sephardic ancestry through archives as ancient as 12th-century Spanish notarial records or as recent as today’s country repositories. Taking us on a journey traversing environments as diverse as the Amazon Basin or the Ottoman Empire, the author discusses Sephardic history, their various diasporas and where to find their records. The origins of Sephardic surnames and clues derived from their origins and meanings are clearly explained, and an extensive bibliography is provided for additional study.

7"x11" 472 pages hardcover
\$45.00 + shipping

To order:

- Call our order phone at 1-800-AVOTAYNU (1-800-286-8296).
- Order from our web site — <http://avotaynu.com/books/Sephardic.htm>

