Starting Your Family History Research:
A Step-by-Step Guide

Genealogy and Family History

Genealogy is the pursuit of information about your ancestors. Family history research goes beyond simply tracing family lines--gathering names, dates, and places--to discovering how our ancestors' experiences were affected by the times in which they lived.

The most basic principle of family history research is to use the facts you know about your family history to work backwards, looking for documents and artifacts that reveal more information and bring to life the bare outline of your family tree.

Getting Started

1. Human resources are the most valuable! First conduct interviews, asking elderly relatives for stories and information about their families and their childhoods. Take notes while you record the interviews on audiotape or videotape. Listen to the interviews again or create transcripts, writing down relevant information.

2. Ask your relatives if they have any documents, such as citizenship papers, marriage licenses, or birth and death certificates, that may contain further clues. Ask about other kinds of artifacts that may have been handed down across the generations: photographs, prayer books, wedding invitations, birth announcements, school report cards, diplomas, military discharge papers, etc.

[*NOTE: Take care to preserve valuable documents in archival-quality, acid-free paper or plastic!*]

3. Begin making a family tree using standardized forms or genealogy software on your computer.

4. Read the research guides on our website, www.genealogy.cjh.org. For more in-depth explanations, consult the reference books in our collection.

5. Join the Jewish Genealogical Society, www.jgsny.org, attend monthly meetings, and network with other family history enthusiasts. Jewish Genealogical Societies in other geographic areas are listed at www.iajgs.org.

6. Search online databases for U.S. records that will help you fill in the blanks:

- ➢ Vital records indexes (birth, marriage, and death certificates)
- ➢ Federal and State census returns (e.g., 1900 U.S. Census, 1925 N.Y. State Census)
- ➢ Naturalization papers (Declaration of Intention, Petition for Citizenship)
- ➢ Passenger departure and arrival records (Ellis Island, Castle Garden, and other ports)
- ➢ New York Times and other newspaper online indexes (articles and obituaries)
- ➢ Social Security Death Index (people who died while receiving benefits)
- ➢ City directories (residential and business addresses)
- ➢ Military records (draft registration cards, enlistment records)
- ➢ JewishGen Family Finder (other people researching family names & places)
- ➢ Center for Jewish History online catalog and databases (archival and published sources)

7. Write to or visit appropriate repositories to obtain materials not available online (government archives, vital records offices, courts, and other agencies, such as the Social Security Administration; public libraries; and private libraries and archives, such as the Center for Jewish History).

8. Visit cemeteries where family members are buried, photograph their gravestones, and translate any Hebrew or Yiddish inscriptions.

9. Once you have identified the places your family lived before they came to the U.S., search online databases focusing on foreign records:

- ➢ Consolidated Jewish Surname Index
- ➢ Center for Jewish History Online Catalog (archival and published sources)
- ➢ JewishGen discussion group and country databases
- ➢ Special Interest Group (SIG) databases
- ➢ Family History Library Catalog (records on microfilm and microfiche)
- ➢ Holocaust databases (Yad Vashem Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names; U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Namesearch and Name Lists Catalog; and various individual country databases)
- ➢ See our Foreign Research Guides at www.cjh.org/collections/genealogy/factsheets.php for additional online sources.

10. Each step along the way, take time to organize your data and add to your family tree (see Step 3 above). Always remember to take careful notes and document all your sources!