

TRACING YOUR JEWISH ANCESTORS

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What about you and your family? What do you know about them? Do any records exist? Why don't you become the one to record the known generations of your family? But let me warn you that once you begin, you can easily become addicted if the "genealogy bug" gets under your skin. But the process is as fascinating as any detective work or treasure hunt. So let's begin!

A. A Table of Ancestors

Arm yourself with a looseleaf notebook, some ruled sheets of paper for it, and your favorite writing instrument--pen or pencil. A pocket size notebook and a small, portable tape recorder could also be useful, but are not essential, for later research.

On a sheet of looseleaf paper--put at the top:

ANCESTORS OF:

(your name) (your birthplace and birthdate)
(your marriage date and place) (your spouse's name
and birthplace and birthdate)

The following abbreviations will be helpful: b.-born;
m.-married; d.-died.

Now list by number all that you know about the following as to name, birthplace, death date and place, marriage date and place:

Parents

1. (Father)
2. (Mother)

Grandparents

3. (Father's father)
4. (Father's mother)
5. (Mother's father)
6. (Mother's mother)

Great-grandparents

7. & 8. parents of 3. above
9. & 10. parents of 4. above etc.

PROGRAM BANK

When you get to number 15 you start with great-great grand-parents, and it may be easier to list that and earlier generations as parent of number 7, etc.

So you have gone as far back as you can from your own knowledge, and discover that there are gaps in your information. Don't worry about the gaps. The fun will be finding the data to fill them in. We will tell you where to search in a moment.

First you will want to set up a series of pages in your notebook, each one headed by the name of each of your earliest known ancestors. On that page you will want to trace all his or her known descendants until they connect by marriage with one of the other pages. Number your pages so that you can cross-refer by number.

In listing their descendants you may use one of two schemes. The simpler way is to use an outline form:

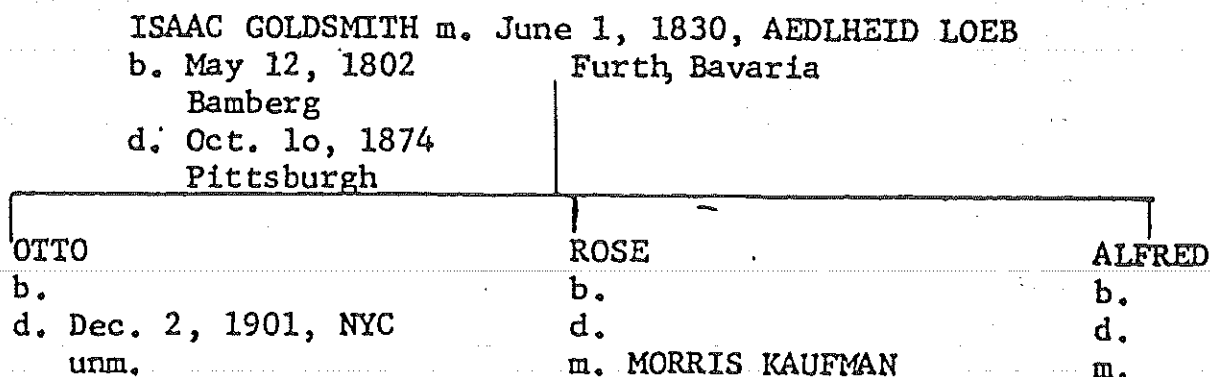
I. ISAAC GOLDSMITH, b. May 12, 1802, Bamberg, Germany;
d. October 10, 1874, Pittsburgh, PA.; m. June 1, 1830,
Furth, Bavaria, ADELHELF LOEB. They had:

- A. OTTO GOLDSMITH, b. _____ ; d. Dec. 2, 1901,
New York City; unm.
B. ROSE GOLDSMITH, b. etc.
m. June 14, 1855, Pittsburgh, Pa. MORRIS KAUFMAN
C. ALFRED GOLDSMITH, b. etc.

They had:

1. etc.

or you may wish to draw a series of family trees, like this one:



B. Filling in the Gaps

Now you are ready to start your search for the information which is not readily available to you. Begin with writing

letters to as many members of the family as you think of who might know something about the older generations and their descendents. It is best to ask them specific questions, such as: "Do you know the names of the children of Grandpa, and if possible, the dates? Who did they marry? Did they have any children? Where did they live? When did they come to this country?"

The answers you get may often be vague or guesses or even inaccurate, but they are useful clues. You may find it easier to visit some aging relative (and don't overlook widows and widowers of your relatives). And here, your pocket-size notebook or that tape recorder could be useful.) For along with genealogical data you may collect family tales that you would love to pass along to your children. If you are lucky, one of these relatives may have an actual record in the form of a family Bible or letters, copies of wills or other legal documents like immigration or naturalization records (remember that naturalization often came years after a person arrived in America). Make photocopies whenever possible, so that you will have an accurate copy of the record.

One very useful source of information can be a tombstone. If you know where your ancestor is buried, visit the cemetery and find the tombstone. Photograph it or copy it. If some of the data is in Hebrew, take along someone who can read the Hebrew, if you cannot. (The Hebrew name can sometimes give a clue as to the deceased's father's name) Tombstones may be more legible in some kinds of sunlight rather than in others; you may have to go back in a different time of the day. If the cemetery has an office, ask to see any record of burial. It may give you the name of the next of kin and/or undertaker, who, if his firm is still extant, kept his own records which may offer some data.

C. Synagogue Information

Not many synagogues have kept careful vital records (i.e. birth, marriage and death records), but you can telephone the congregation to which your ancestor belonged and ask what data they might have about a specific family, or ask permission to search in their records for your own data.

D. Library Information

The main public library of the city in which your ancestor lived may be able to help a bit. If the librarian has a local history section, ask for the following:

1. Any index to obituaries in the local paper.
2. If your family was at all prominent, you may find birth

or marriage records, or a local history which biographed your relative (such so-called "mug" books were very popular between 1890-and 1910).

3. City directories which would list the business and home address of your ancestor (if he was a business or professional man). What you especially want are his home addresses during the years for which U.S. censuses are available on microfilm: 1840, 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880. (Earlier censuses are available, but they tell only the name of the head of the household and list the others by age grouping. The 1900 census is available only at the United States National Archives in Washington, and may be seen by authorized genealogical researchers who have obtained written permission.) If the city was large, find out from a commercial atlas in which ward your ancestor's home was located in a given census year. This can save you hours of microfilm reading.
4. Ask for the census microfilm of the year and city (and ward) in which your ancestor was located. If he was there in 1880, use that census first, because it gives more information than any--listing every member of the household by age, sex, place of birth, occupation, value of real estate and personal property, and birthplace of parents. (The librarian will show you how to use a microfilm. if you don't know how. It is easy, once you learn how, but a bit hard on the eyes for long usage.) If the library does not have the microfilm census, a local historical society probably does. Since some of the family may be married and out of the house by 1880, you may want to find them in the city directory and census, if you can. You will also want to look in the earlier censuses.

E. City Hall and Court House Records

Ask a lawyer where to look for such records as wills, deeds, probate records, court records, etc. All of these records are indexed, usually in large ledgers which lie horizontal on rollers. You roll them out and lift them onto a reading table. The index to wills may list your ancestor, if he left a will; if not, you may find him in an index of administrations.

Wander around the record room and get familiar with where the various types of records are stored. If you find some record, show it to the clerk and he will have a photocopy made for you at very moderate cost. Wills can be the most useful records because they often list relationships. Next in order of usefulness can be deeds, which are divided into "grantor" (seller) and "grantee" (buyer), both indexed. Often property was bought and sold by man and wife, and her

name may be given--helpful when you don't have it; disappointing when the record merely says "et ux." (and wife).

Probate records deal with settlement of estates and may list children and other relatives. Court records may show legal decisions between or among members of a family (not too frequent); minutes of a mayor's court or corporation court may indicate when your ancestor indicated his desire to become a citizen, giving his age, country of origin, occupation and, sometimes, a sponsor or attestor. Don't overlook a county court house which may have had jurisdiction over an area now part of the city in which your ancestor could have lived or done business or appeared in court.

F. Government Records

Besides the Federal census records, the United States National Archives in Washington preserves many types and varieties of records: ship passenger lists (if you have any notion as to when your ancestor arrived, and at what port); military pension records; some other military records; land grants in western states and territories beyond the original thirteen states; etc. Your helpful librarian can show you a listing of what is available at the National Archives and how to go about requesting information.

G. Municipal Vital Records

Many cities have kept records of births, marriages and deaths at a Bureau of Vital Records. They usually charge a nominal fee for each card consulted. In most cities, the official vital records seldom go back before 1900, but there are exceptions. In the nineteenth century some enterprising clerk may have kept ledgers which are tucked away on some shelf. Be persistent and ask. A few cities have set up archives for their earlier records where you can check data either in original volumes or on microfilm. Some cities conducted censuses at odd times. Tax lists can be another source of information.

H. Historical Society

Your local historical society and/or genealogical society will undoubtedly have a library with many manuscript volumes containing such things as clippings from the local paper on births, marriages or deaths, or indexes to such. Their librarians can be very helpful in leading you to sources of data, if you come prepared with all the information you have unearthed about a given individual.

I. Additional Jewish Sources

The American Jewish Archives, located on the Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College, has collected every available record of Jews in America for the period before 1900, including synagogue records, personal letters, diaries, wills, etc. While they can not trace individuals, unless they have documents belonging to that individual, they can tell you if they have records for a given Jewish community and you are welcome to visit the Archives and search for yourself, or engage a student researcher. Address: American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH 45220.

The American Jewish Historical Society, 2 Thornton Road, Waltham, MA, 02154, also has a vast collection of manuscripts, books, and memorabilia.

For a bibliography of reference works, documentary histories, biographies, and communal histories, as well as background on Jewish migration to America, purchase a copy of Genealogical Research, Volume II, from The American Society of Genealogists, c/o Mrs. Donna Hotaling, 2255 Cedar Lane, Vienna, VA, 22180. Pages 291-311 contain this author's article on "Jewish Migrations

J. Foreign Ancestors

So far we have been talking about resources for finding your ancestors who reached America. What about those in the "old country"? This is far more difficult. Records were often destroyed. Many Jewish families did not acquire family names until the early 19th century. Surprisingly, the Nazis preserved many of the Jewish records which came into their hands. Most of what survived them is being preserved in Jerusalem at the Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People. (PO Box 1026, Jerusalem, Israel). They cannot research for you, but, if you know the town from which your ancestor came, they will let you know which records they have from that town and will sell you microfilms (@ \$50.00 each, approximately) of whichever records you request. But be prepared to read Hebrew or Yiddish or possibly German Gothic script in these records.

If your ancestors lived in Germany, you may find some data at: Leo Baeck Institute, 129 East 73rd Street, New York, NY 10021.

If your ancestors came from Eastern Europe, you may get some help at: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Inc., 1048 Fifth Avenue (at 86th Street), New York, NY 10028.

HAPPY HUNTING!

P.S. A little known source of information is the Consolidated Index of Naturalizations for all New York City prior to 1906, housed at the Federal Records Archive, 641 Washington Street (at Christopher Street) New York City.

