

INTRODUCTION

IN 1972, AT FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY in Tallahassee, I was studying for a master's degree in library science. One of my classes was called Resources in the Humanities. It was a course for future reference librarians who wanted expertise in areas like music, art, and literature. The final exam consisted of a single question, a reference question. Each of the twenty or so students in the class received the same question, we each had two days to answer it, we could work by ourselves or in groups, and although the professor told us that it would be nice if we could find the answer to the question, the real goal was so demonstrate our search strategy. The question was this: Can you find me a picture of *Will of the Wisp* by Harriet Hosmer?

The first two things the reference librarian needs to know, of course, are who is Harriet Hosmer and what is *Will of the Wisp*? Was it her dog, her boat, a painting? Well, it wasn't difficult to learn quickly (from standard biographical reference books) that Harriet Hosmer was a sculptor who lived in the United States in the 1800s. Slightly more difficult was learning that *Will of the Wisp* was a sculpture that she created. What was impossible for anyone in the class to locate, however, was a photograph of the piece, and that, after all, would be the reference librarian's true goal.

There we were, almost two dozen graduate students of library science, free to roam a huge university library, free to work in teams, free to use all the resources of a major American institution of higher learning, and yet we were unable to successfully answer the reference question given to us.

A few months ago, I was reminded of that final exam taken more than thirty years ago; I went to my computer and was able to locate a photograph of *Will of the Wisp* by Harriet Hosmer in about six seconds!

When I originally wrote this book in 1979, there was no Internet, of course. And when I wrote an updated edition in 1994, the major event that prompted the new edition was the breakup of the former Soviet Union and its implications for the growing number of Jews who were hoping that new sources and resources would be revealed. The Internet was already gaining momentum at the time, but I gave only brief reference to it. My major

preoccupation was the impact on Jewish genealogists of the political changes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But today, nothing compares to the Internet in terms of its impact on the genealogical researcher. The phenomenal development of the Internet as a research tool is the main reason for this new edition. The possibilities, as you will see, are amazing.

Like many authors who have written a how-to-book, I originally wrote *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History* because nobody else had written it. When it first occurred to me to go to the library to see if anyone had written a guidebook on the subject, I found that there was hardly a mention of Jewish genealogy in any book anywhere. How-to guides on genealogy were directed primarily at individuals who had Revolutionary War ancestors—or wished they had. However, no guidebook or advice was available for the Jewish person who was curious about his or her family history.

When I first began to trace my family history in the 1970s, I not only discovered sources that helped me but also began to see that there were in fact many sources that were of specific value to the Jewish family historian. I discovered, to my great surprise, that the average Jewish family can trace its background successfully. As I learned more and more about my own family, I also began to write articles for newspapers and magazines on my research in particular and the topic of Jewish genealogy in general. For two years I also wrote a weekly column for New York's *Jewish Week* called "Tracing Your Jewish Roots." In that column I shared my discoveries with my readers, telling them how they could track down information about their ancestors.

The writing I did on the subject also led to invitations from many Jewish organizations to speak on the subject. As I look back through my journals over the past years, I count over six hundred lectures that I have delivered to Jewish groups on how and why to do Jewish genealogical research. From college campuses to Jewish community centers, from synagogues to Jewish federations, invitations to speak on this subject have arrived in a steady flow ever since I first began to publicize my research successes.

When I wrote the first edition of *From Generation to Generation* in the late 1970s, I was as astonished as anyone by its success. But through my lecture engagements and the reputation of the book I came to understand that there is a deep thirst among American Jews to discover their Jewish roots. The successful hardcover edition of the book was followed by an equally successful softcover edition, and with it came a burst of growth in interest in the subject.

The first edition of *From Generation to Generation*, along with the enormous amount of traveling and lecturing I did, was but one part of the fantastic growth of the field over the past twenty-five years. When I began my own research, for example, there was no such thing as a Jewish genealogical society. Today there are dozens of them throughout the United States and the world, as well as the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, which holds an annual conference (I am proud to say that I was given a lifetime achievement award by this organization several years ago). I'm also proud to say that some of the local Jewish genealogical societies began as a result of my lecture appearances, but the growth of popularity of Jewish genealogy and the progress that has been made in the field are the result of the efforts of many people. As anyone who has been involved in Jewish genealogical research in recent years knows, some extremely gifted people have made huge contributions to our knowledge and have helped considerably in the research of others. You will learn about many of them in this book.

The first edition of *From Generation to Generation* was published in 1980. It seems to have served many people well for many years, but it eventually suffered from simply not being able to keep up with the rapidly growing field. New sources and techniques were discovered; great changes were taking place in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; addresses, fees, and procedures for many government institutions changed; and much more was happening. In 1994, a revised edition was published, reflecting many of the changes, new sources, and other developments in the world of Jewish genealogy.

One of the most significant changes over the past twenty-five years has been the attitude toward Jewish genealogy by many of the scholarly institutions that are most important to the Jewish researcher. When I first began my own genealogy research, most of the Jewish libraries and archives I visited didn't know how to help me. But I insisted that they had information that would be of great interest to laypersons tracing their family history (as opposed to scholars, who were the usual users of these institutions). In many cases I showed them resources in their own collections that at first did not seem to be of value but later proved to be extremely important to Jewish genealogists. Jewish genealogists have gained considerable respect over the past few decades. Librarians have come to see, I think, that genealogy is a serious pursuit and that its result is often life-changing. Librarians have seen how genealogical discoveries delight and transform the researcher, and they have discovered that the collections they maintain can make a difference in people's lives.

This volume now before you is a completely revised and updated edition of *From Generation to Generation*. Every address and source has been verified. Corrections and new information (such as fees and form numbers) have been thoroughly researched, and the most significant new sources in the field have been added. As every seasoned genealogical researcher knows, books in this field are out of date almost immediately upon publication. New discoveries are being made all the time, addresses and phone numbers keep changing, and whole new areas of research open up. This book is not an attempt to present the definitive guide to the field. No such guide is possible. Rather, *From Generation to Generation* is an attempt to help the reader get started on the path to making some successful genealogical discoveries.

As I mentioned, the most significant development for the Jewish family historian and genealogist is the Internet. Research that used to be impossible is now simple to do on the Internet, and research tasks that used to take weeks now take seconds! The most important Internet sources for Jewish genealogical research are identified throughout this volume.

Many people have said to me that they have read this book over and over and always find something new. This is not because they missed things the first time they read the book but because of the nature of the genealogical process. The very source that is of no use to you today becomes the missing link to information you will look for in the future. Like a big puzzle, it often happens that one little breakthrough opens up a whole new area. I have tried, in this new edition, to include all the useful sources that I think a researcher needs to get started. As you will see, there are many specialized books, journals, and other sources that provide far greater detail about many important Jewish genealogical resources. This book is intended to serve as a starting point.

I have included anecdotes and facts that came as a result of my own personal research throughout the book, particularly in the first chapter. Many readers have told me that my personal story serves the book well, so despite some temptation to exclude this personal aspect, I have left this material in. My own personal research has continued over the years in a few ways I'd like to mention.

One area of growth is the deepening relationship I have developed with some previously unknown relatives, particularly in Eastern Europe. Through my genealogy research I discovered close relatives in Hungary and Poland, and these relationships have become among my most important and cherished possessions.

Another significant area of growth has been my discovery of the more religious branches of my family. Before I began my research a quarter-cen-

tury ago, I saw myself as a fairly typical American Jew, far more involved in American culture and Western thought than in Jewish culture and religious thought. Perhaps the most surprising discovery I made in the early stages of my research was that my great-great-great-grandfather had been a Hasidic Rebbe in Europe and that there were still branches of my family that lived and breathed Jewish tradition each and every moment of their lives. I have spent much of my genealogical research time over the past two decades getting to know these branches of my family and what their lives are all about. The religious communities in Brooklyn and Jerusalem include many of my relatives. Getting to know them and their lives has had a profound effect on me.

I didn't know it when I began my research, but I see now that my own search for information about my family history was really, at its core, a yearning for a Jewish identity. Today, my family and I pursue a life filled with traditional Judaism. Study of Jewish texts is a regular activity for me and my household; Jewish celebrations and observances define the rhythm of my life; my three children, now teenagers, have been yeshiva students since they first entered school; and Jewish tradition transformed itself from a topic I wanted learn about to the foundation of my life.

When I am asked why I got interested in Jewish genealogy, I often joke and say that I discovered that I had more in common with my dead ancestors than I did with my living relatives . . . and they are also far easier to get along with. In some ways I am not joking. The fact is that at a certain point in my life, I was tired of hearing how my ancestors died as Jews; I wanted to know how they *lived* as Jews. As I discovered this, I also discovered that I belong there, with them. Slowly but surely, over the years, I have come to eat, pray, study, and generally live the way my relatives have lived for centuries. I am not tied to old customs for their own sake; rather I have learned that the eternal ideas that have sustained our people for generations still serve us well and contain profound wisdom.

Genealogy is more than names and dates on a chart. It is more than sentimental stories about the good old (or bad old) days. It is not an effort to gain status by discovering illustrious ancestors. Nor is it an effort to build walls between people. For me, genealogy is a spiritual pilgrimage. My generation comes after a terrible trauma for our people. A third of our family was murdered sixty years ago. Mass migration of Jews before and after the beginning of the twentieth century and the destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust cut most of us off from our identities. I was once told by a hostile relative, "Why be Jewish? Just be human." The trouble is that by just being human, we become a part of the general culture that is far from "just human." My genealogical

research serves as a doorway for me. As I enter the world of Jewish culture, Jewish thought, Jewish life, I come to see that Jewish ideas are profound, Jewish sages are nourishing for my soul, and it is my obligation to fan the flame of Judaism by being an active part of it.

One specific mitzvah required of traditional Jews each day is to remember that we were slaves in Egypt. This mitzvah is not performed with a ritual object, nor is it an act that would cause someone to think you looked religious. Merely reflecting in your mind and heart and hearing that we were slaves is, in itself, considered a spiritual act of great significance. For me, this is the point of genealogy. The act of looking back on our heritage is a spiritual deed in itself. I am not saying that anyone who does Jewish genealogical research is going to become a traditional, religion-focused Jew. Nevertheless, I do maintain that each person who is doing Jewish genealogical research, whether or not he or she acknowledges it, is responding to an inner yearning for a connection to our heritage.

Much of my genealogical research over the past several years has not been centered on library or archival research, nor has it focused on obtaining more documentation from government agencies in the United States or in the “old country.” Rather, I have spent much time and effort cultivating relationships with previously unknown relatives. I have also focused on understanding Jewish thought, especially Jewish theology. I have discovered that our sages were profound and original thinkers whose slant on life and whose approaches to the riddles of existence are the most nourishing that I have thus far encountered. My friend Gary Eisenberg, an expert on the Jewish involvement in religious cults, will tell you that there is a disproportionate number of Jews in these groups. I believe that this is because these individuals are thirsty for spiritual nourishment and have not been able to find it in their local Jewish community. Many genealogists have had the same thirst and have traveled centuries and continents, only to arrive home.

When I look at photographs of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, I often see bookshelves in the backgrounds. This observation led me to wonder just what those books were about. They were volumes of the Talmud and other classical Jewish texts. It was owing to my genealogical interest that I pushed myself to learn what was inside those books. What I found was the most subtle, most profound, most uplifting, most nourishing wisdom I had ever encountered. Genealogy is not just names and dates on a chart: it is a search for meaning.

Genealogical research can be a painful activity. Family stories, like Jewish history, are often tragic. Recollections are often heartbreaking. But I firmly believe, based on my own experience and the experiences of count-

less others who have taken the time to pursue this research, that genealogy can be a life-changing activity. It is hard to explain from the outside, but when two genealogists meet, a silent bond connects them because they both know that somewhere in between all the family interviews and photographs and forms and documents, in between the books and journals, in between the last discovery and the next one is some intangible yet very real sense that this pursuit is in some way a mission.

My most sincere and heartfelt prayers include my hope that this book will serve its readers—and the Jewish people—well. In recent generations our loved ones have been torn from us, but like a plant that has been cut back, we are now in the midst of a burst of growth and creativity that is revitalizing the Jewish people. Those of us who are involved with Jewish family history research will surely be seen, in generations to come, as vital links between past and future.

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I do not wish anything to happen in Jewish history without it happening to me.

—Elie Wiesel

Judaism is not just a matter of individual commitment. However personal one's involvement may be, Judaism always entails a linkup with past and future generations.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

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