

Digging for roots of the family tree

By Rachel L. Axelbank

The Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston marked its 25th anniversary last month with a conference and celebration at Gann Academy in Waltham. In recognition of this milestone, the Advocate posed a few questions to JGSGB's Carol Clingan of Newton, member of the Board of Directors heading up Special Projects, Linda Levine of Cambridge, founding member, and Michael Marx of Lexington, treasurer and current member of the Board of Directors.

What is JGSGB's greatest achievement in the past 25 years?

Carole Clingan: Getting a lot of people excited about and involved in genealogy – witness the dozens who regularly come to our meetings or the number of hits we get on our Web site.

Linda Levine: Our society played host to the International Seminar in Jewish Genealogy in 1996, which featured more than 40 speakers during the course of six days and attracted close to 700 peo-

ple from all over the world. Our 25th anniversary event was smaller in scope but nevertheless two years in the planning. Time will tell if it is our greatest achievement because it spawned several important projects with implications for the future of Jewish genealogy, including a video of interviews with our members about what genealogy means to them and to our society, and the announcement of Jewish genealogy courses at Hebrew College.

What is the most interesting thing you've learned about your own family?

CC: I have found a cousin who is a Lubavitcher rabbi and whose family went to Palestine in the late 1800s after coming to America because they feared assimilation in the U.S. There are lots of interesting little anecdotes – one of my father's cousins fell in love with a non-Jewish girl and was separated from her but married her decades later; another was called "the Human Fly" for his ability to scale buildings in robbery pursuits.

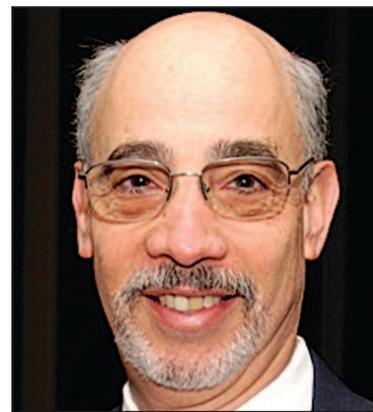
Michael Marx: I have been able



Carole Clingan



Linda Levine



Michael Marx

to trace my ancestral roots back to the early 1600s in a small town in southwestern Germany. It is pretty exciting to think about discovering 10 generations of ancestors and what their lives must have been like in those times.

What is the most gratifying element of researching one's own history, and what is a potential danger of doing so?

MM: Gaining an understanding of where one comes from in the context of direct ancestors and relatives.

LL: Reconnecting long lost branches of the family.

CC: Being able to fill in more of the history of my own little Jewish chain and to see how it fits into the larger story of the history of the Jewish people. I am not interested just in names and dates, but in the context in which people lived and made decisions and took actions – genealogy is about individuals, but it is also the story of their times.

The potential risk is always

of finding out something you won't like or that will upset a cherished belief.

MM: Even the danger of digging up some "skeletons on one's family closet" makes one's history all the more interesting.

How does the historical trajectory of Judaism and the Jewish people make the study of genealogy particularly important to us?

LL: It helps to heal the separations that our families experienced due to time or wars, be they the 1848 revolutions in Europe or the Holocaust.

MM: I feel it is important to preserve the memories of lost family members' lives. The study of genealogy is a means to this end.

CC: The keynote speaker at the 25th celebration, Arthur Kurzweil, said that we are all searching for the remnant of the Jewish people. It struck me that this statement is exactly right – we want to know about our indi-

vidual families and their history, but we are also doing our part to keep the Jewish people alive.

What is your hope for the future of Jewish genealogical research?

LL: The computer, the Internet, and the new frontier of DNA for genealogy are rapidly changing genealogy research. What took weeks and weeks of time to research 20 years ago now takes days. One huge project in the works is to document the names of all six million killed in the Holocaust. Wouldn't it be great to have this proof for those who doubt the Holocaust?

CC: It is my hope that this work will continue to grow and to add to our individual and collective knowledge bases, that access will become ever easier, and that more "lost" records will be found. I'm very excited by the notion of a family tree of the entire Jewish people, and the project to catalogue every Jewish grave in the world.

sunday, may 20, 2007

1:00 to 7:00 p.m.

Dana-Farber Field House at Gillette Stadium



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