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Genealogy society helps uncover Jewish roots

Editor's note: This is part I of a two-part series on the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston. Part II will discuss some of the connections members have found.

By Ellen L. Weingart

From a genealogical perspective, 25 years is not a very long time. So it's easy to trace the history of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston (JGSGB) back to Linda Levine.

It was Levine's interest in her family's history that in 1981 led her to respond to an ad in *genesis 2*, an alternative Jewish newspaper, for a workshop on genealogy. The workshop was taught by Eli Grad, then-president of Hebrew College and an avid genealogist. Grad urged Levine to start a local genealogical society.

With *Roots*, the 1976 book by Alex Haley and the television miniseries it engendered, stoking people's interest in tracing their ancestors, the time was ripe. Jewish genealogy groups already existed in New York and Philadelphia, for example. And a few Jewish genealogy books, such as Malcolm Stern's *Americans of Jewish Descent*, and Jewish genealogy journals, including *Toledot*, had been published.

When Levine did an article on Jewish genealogy with *genesis 2*, her name was given as a contact for anyone interested in the subject. She received a number of calls and in April 1982 met with Judy Izen and Karen Harris, laying the foundation for what would become the Jewish Genealogical Society of



Ernie Adler looks at a poster marking the 25th anniversary of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston. (courtesy tom weiss)

Greater Boston.

"We had about eight other people and we formed a group," said Levine, a Cambridge resident. "We met in each other's homes and talked about how to conduct genealogical research.

"*Roots* had been on TV (1977) and had caught America's attention. Up until then, everybody thought there were no African American records to trace. Likewise, it was commonly believed no Jewish records existed, either."

Levine and Izen served as co-presidents until 1984. "Although we were small, we felt we needed support from

each other," said Levine.

Today, the JGSGB is providing resources, guidance and support to about 400 members with a variety of genealogical research experience. It also serves as an adviser to the Western Massachusetts Jewish Genealogical Society, based in the Springfield area.

"They had come to an IAJGS (International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies) conference and asked how to start a group," recalled Levine. "We told them, 'Put an ad in the paper and you'll be able to start a

GENEALOGY page 3

With Lauder leading new regime, WJC looks to end its inner strife

By Jacob Berkman

NEW YORK —

With the election of Ronald Lauder as its interim president, the World Jewish Congress (WJC) hopes to put aside years of turmoil from political infighting and allegations of financial mismanagement.

Lauder, the cosmetics heir and president of the Jewish National Fund, defeated Mendel Kaplan, the South African steel magnate and former chair of the Jewish Agency for Israel, in a 59-17 vote of the organization's board of governors.

"The next step is to build a unified organization and look at the entire World Jewish Congress, and determine the extent of the polarity and end the strife because we have to move beyond



Matthew Bronfman, Edgar Bronfman and Ronald Lauder (from l to r) (courtesy david karp)

that," Lauder, 63, told JTA shortly after his victory. "I think a lot of that is behind us. We need to look at the unity of the Jewish people, and I am very excited."

Lauder succeeds Edgar Bronfman, who retired this month after serving nearly 30 years as president. The board of governors overwhelmingly voted

in Bronfman's son, Matthew, as its chair. Matthew Bronfman, the chairman of the WJC's finance committee, was running as part of a ticket with Lauder and was unopposed.

Young Israeli reformer Einat Wilf received no votes from the WJC executive committee, which voted 11-4 to recommend Lauder to the board. She pulled out of the election during her speech before the board of governors. A fourth candidate, Israeli nuclear physicist Vladimir Hertzberg, was not in attendance and received no votes.

The WJC is best known for securing billions in Holocaust restitution funds and fighting anti-Semitism, but its reputation has suffered as a result of the turmoil of the past several years.

LAUDER page 19

Peres, Barak are winners

By Dan Baron

JERUSALEM —

Call Ehud Barak "the comeback kid" and Shimon Peres "Mr. President," as the two former Israeli prime ministers picked up important victories.

Peres was elected Israel's ninth president; Barak won a Labor Party leadership election and became defense minister, potentially setting him up to again become premier.

Peres, 83, will assume the presidency, a largely ceremonial post, on July 15 for a seven-year term. The presidency will cap a six-decade career in which Peres has served in virtually every top civilian post in Israel.

In 1993 he won the Nobel Peace Prize along with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat.

In parliamentary voting, Peres defeated rival Knesset members Reuven Rivlin and Colette Avital.

Rivlin and Avital dropped out after the first round, having received 37 and 21 votes respectively. In the second round, 86 Knesset members supported Peres, the only remaining candidate, and 23 opposed him.

"I have been in the Knesset for 48 years and not for one moment have I lost faith or hope in Israel," Peres said in his acceptance speech. "What Israel has achieved in 60 years, no other country has been able to achieve. I hope I can represent our faith not because there are no problems but because we all want to overcome them."

Barak, too, said he intended to address Israel's many problems.

"Today begins the long and difficult task of unifying the State of Israel," Barak, 65, told supporters after results showed he had beaten ex-admiral Ami Ayalon in the Labor runoff. Barak won 51.3 percent of the vote to 47.7 percent for Ayalon.

"It is also the beginning of our mission of healing the people's faith in its leaders," Barak said.

By assuming the defense portfolio, Barak, who emerged only months



Peres makes his acceptance speech at the Knesset. (photo courtesy bph images/jta)

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Genealogy society helps Jews dig into their roots

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group.' And they did."

If JGSGB members could give only one bit of advice to would-be researchers, it would be to talk to relatives.

"Your own family is whom you want to work with," said Levine.

"Ideally, if people have even the slightest interest, they should start by interviewing their oldest relatives," said Heidi Urich of Cambridge, the group's current president. "They will get personal stories and raw information. It's worth doing now, even if you're too busy to do more right away. It's a rare person who has no one to ask." People should also try to get old photographs identified.

Fortunately for those just starting their search for ancestors, the group has much more to offer, including stories of success.

"People's interest is frequently aroused when they lose their parents and suddenly realize it's up to them to pass on the family history," observed Jay Sage, who with his wife, Daphnah, is a former JGSGB co-president.

Sage, of Newton, had begun some family history work while his mother was still alive. "Sadly, she never knew whom she was named after. Her knowledge of her family tree didn't go back that far," he said. Sage's research led him to his mother's great-great-grandmother, Charna Rigler.

"She was born not long after 1800," he said. "According to family lore, she lived to be 104, dying shortly before my mother was born. She's the person farthest back that I've been able to find so far and she also lived to the greatest-known age, although there are quite a number of her descendants who came close, living into their mid- or late 90s, one even to 101."

Sage's advice is to interview relatives now. "Even if you have no interest (in genealogy). And don't be afraid to talk repeatedly to the same people. You can learn more each time," he said.

Inspired by *Roots*, Florence Schumacher, the society's publicity chair, started taking oral histories and taping interviews even though young children and a job left her no time to do much with the information she gathered. "Fifteen years later there was a family reunion and I pulled out the tapes — some of them had to be restored — and played them. Then I wrote a narrative.

"All the relatives enjoyed it — except my mother, who aged two years when we found that she claimed to be born the same year as her younger sister."

Schumacher noted that genealogy is a popular avocation for retired people. "It can be very time-consuming," said the "semi-retired" marketing professional. "It seems a lot of people who are really into this are retired, but don't wait until then to speak to your elders."

Sage recommended to start off by interviewing people separately. "But if you get people together — family reunions, even *Shiva* — you can flesh out the stories," he said. "Something one person says jogs someone else's memory.

"I like meeting people and hearing



JGSGB former and current presidents (from l to r): Gary Rachins, Fred Davis, Daphnah Sage, Jay Sage, Sara Schafner Kelman, Judy Izenberg, Heidi Urich, Fay Bussgang, Patti Couture, Linda Levine, Judy Izen and Bill Rubin. (all photos courtesy Tom Weiss)

stories of the past," said Sage. "You won't want your brother to be a criminal, but it adds color if some ancestor was."

The JGSGB has guides for what kinds of questions to ask, but that's not even the tip of the iceberg of what it has to offer both beginner and experienced genealogists.

"People can get started by attending one of our introductory workshops," said Urich. "They can also talk to people individually at the help tables we set up at our monthly meetings."



Urich

While serving as co-president with Urich, Judy Izenberg, who recently resigned that post to be in charge of volunteers, helped set up a buddy system to pair new and longer-time members. "The people might live in the same town or be searching in the same place," said the Framingham resident. "More importantly, the new person has a contact, a friendly face. We can't promise this will solve a newcomer's problems because we can't make any guarantees — but they will have someone to turn to."

The JGSGB also maintains a library of resources. Materials are kept at Temple Emanuel in Newton Centre, where the group generally holds its meetings. The material is available for use at the meetings. Resources are also kept at the American Jewish Historical Society on the campus of Hebrew College in Newton Centre. The public has access to the collection at the Historical Society, which is not part of Hebrew College. A list of JGSGB holdings can be found on its website, www.jgsbg.org.

Another useful resource is the newsletters of the various Jewish genealogical societies, including the JGSGB's award-winning *Mass-Pocha*.

"When I first started, I would pick up old newsletters that were going to

be discarded," said Izenberg. "That's how I found my father's name on a ship's passenger list."

Her finding that bit of information illustrates how tracing family history is like gathering pieces of a puzzle. A course in interviewing led Izenberg to interview her father. That was how she learned he had come to the United States as a teenager, joining his father who had come some years earlier. Her father gave her a close approximation of the name of the ship he had come on, enabling Izenberg to use *Mass-Pocha* to find his name on the passenger list.

While the JGSGB still buys hard-copy materials — holdings are purchased with the help of the Margery Y. Hyman Fund, established in memory of a JGSGB member, and other sources — more and more research is being done via the Internet.

The site most frequently recommended by society members is www.Jewishgen.org, which in addition to lists of resources, includes databases, links to other researchers and discussion groups.

"The Internet is doing more and more, but it won't do everything," said Sage. "Not everything is on the Internet."

Still, Sage said, many records do exist on the Internet that are scanned, digitized and indexed. "You don't have to go anywhere — you can sit in front of your computer and get a wealth of information."

Nonetheless, he suggests that the best way to get started is to go to a genealogy meeting. "You have to be able to understand the process, how to do research, what it means," he emphasized. He said books help, too, and recommended *Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy* by Garry Mokotoff and Warren Blatt. The latter is a former

JGSGB board member.

In addition to JGSGB introductory workshops, beginning researchers can get a taste of genealogy through the society's outreach program.

"People call us from JCCs and synagogue groups and ask for a speaker," said Izenberg, noting that the society now has a central contact to arrange such presentations. There also is a traveling display on Jewish genealogy that includes sample documents. "We can bring it anywhere there is a suitable place to display it. And, if asked, we will also make an introduction-to-genealogy presentation.

Next spring, through the efforts of the JGSGB, Hebrew College will host an "intensive" course on genealogy, which will be open to the public.

"Hebrew College played an important role in our society's founding and then the connection lapsed," said Urich, who as president has worked on developing a reconnection.

"It's pioneering," she said of the course. "Participants will learn how to start a genealogical search."



Levine

Helpful to both novice and seasoned family history researchers, the JGSGB's monthly meetings usually feature speakers talking about their own findings, such as author Michael Good's search for the Nazi major who saved his mother's life, or guidance, such as Stephen Morse speaking about the tools he developed for

doing genealogical research on the Internet.

But the greatest benefit of belonging to the JGSGB, its members agree, is the camaraderie the group provides.

"What I primarily get out of my JGSGB membership is the companionship of those with similar interests," said Tom Weiss, who as program chair is generally responsible for lining up speakers. The Newton resident, who has been seriously researching his family since 1999, joined the society about five years ago. "You meet people who can offer support when you get stuck — which is frequently the case.

"It's an enjoyable group. They're wonderful people."

More information about the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston can be found on its website, www.jgsbg.org.

Yeshiva University wants to be on British boycott list

NEW YORK —

Yeshiva University (Y.U.) has requested that it be included on the list of Israeli universities that British academics are proposing to boycott.

In a statement released by the university last week, university President Richard Joel blasted the proposed boycott, calling it a "hypocritical act."

"This boycott is a threat not only to Israeli academics but also to open societies everywhere," Joel said. "As president of Yeshiva University, an American university that has immutable ties to Israel, I proudly add our institution to the roster of universities on the boycott list and decline to participate in



Joel

any activity from which Israeli academics are excluded."

The Y.U. statement comes amid a growing backlash against the boycott of Israeli academic institutions proposed late last month by the University and College Union, Britain's largest university teachers association. Through advertising campaigns and articles in leading journals, Jewish leaders have fired back at an initiative that even many British academics are said to oppose. The presidents of Britain's leading research universities also issued a statement opposing the move, and members of the British government have also

come out against it. — JTA

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