

"Yikhes":
Researching Your Roots at The Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library
Amanda Seigel

Description: The Dorot Jewish Division is one of the world's great Judaica collections, freely accessible in The New York Public Library (NYPL). It serves researchers from around the block and around the world and genealogy is one of the most popular research topics. Together with colleagues in the Milstein Division of Local History, U.S. History and Genealogy, and throughout NYPL, we have a wealth of resources available for your genealogical research. This talk will provide an overview of the Dorot Jewish Division, explore how to utilize the physical and digital collections for genealogical research, and showcase some of the diverse and unexpected research sources that can help you better understand your own yikhes (lineage).

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Resources distributed: Handout with links to NYPL and other resources

PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- NYPL Resources
- Where to start: guides, vital records, classes
- Biographical sources
- Genealogy books/registers
- Geographical sources
- Unexpected sources

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY - STEPHEN A. SCHWARZMAN BUILDING

This is the “main branch” of NYPL and the home of the Dorot Jewish Division, which a comprehensive Judaica division freely accessible to the public. NYPL also has the Milstein Division of U.S. History, Local History, and Genealogy. Altogether, NYPL has four research libraries, about 85 branches, and millions of collection items including books and periodicals, archive, archives, manuscripts, ephemera, sound and video recordings, digital collections and electronic resources.

GET YOUR LIBRARY CARD

Anyone can get a free Library card for access to collections and to many electronic resources (like research databases) remotely. That means you can log in from home or anywhere you have Internet Access.

Apply online at: <https://catalog.nypl.org/screens/selfregpick.html>

WHERE TO START

If you are a total beginner, you might want to start with a guide. Here are some examples.

Vital records (birth, death, census, immigration, etc.) are another common starting point. I won't focus on these because they are not our specialty. They are not necessarily specific to Jewish genealogy and our focus is more on the Library's collection as opposed to records that are online and/or in other collections. I am listing several key websites here.

GENERAL GENEALOGY CLASSES AT NYPL

NYPL also offers regular, free classes in genealogy research.

JEWISH BIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES

Examples: Encyclopedias, Biographical Dictionaries, Memoirs/Autobiographies/Biographies, Oral Histories

BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARIES

-Who's Who in American Jewry

-American Jewish Biography - and other biographical dictionaries of American Jews. Entries are alphabetical and short, but the bibliographic details can be helpful.

-Meori Galitsyah - Galician rabbis, set of several volumes (in Hebrew)

-Leksikon fun der nayer Yidisher literatur - bio-bibliography of Yiddish writers

-Jewish Women in America (Encyclopedia) -also Jewish Women's Archive online

Biographical dictionaries focus on prominent personalities and authors, so unless your ancestor or the person you're researching was famous in some way, you wouldn't necessarily find them in a biographical dictionary. But if you would, here are some places to look.

You can also look at more general (not specifically Jewish) biographical dictionaries if you know that your person was prominent in a certain field. These are resources like dictionaries of artists, writers, or theater personalities. Online counterparts include Who's Who and Biography Resource Center.

For researchers who are not able to come in person or to devote the necessary time to a research project, the Library does have a fee-based research and document delivery service if you want to hire a professional to do extensive research for you. Also, there are many excellent translators and researchers for hire.

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

NYPL has 2,250 oral histories from the American Jewish Committee Oral History Collection. 350 are digitized. They include all kinds of people from the famous to the regular person who has a connection with a particular neighborhood, organization, etc. The collection has many categories such as sports stars, Holocaust survivors, Civil Rights activists, Yiddish actors, people who grew up in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, etc.

BIOGRAPHIES, AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, MEMOIRS

NYPL has, conservatively estimated, more than 10,000 biographies, autobiographies and memoirs of Jews as well as more than 400 of non-Jews who had a connection to Jewish life. These include many works by Holocaust survivors. These statistics are just for items held in the Jewish Division - there are many more included in various divisions of the Library. One example is the late Sammy Davis, Jr., a Jewish artist whose books are included in other collections such as the Performing Arts Library.

GENEALOGY BOOKS (FAMILY GENEALOGIES)

Here you would use the last name (family name) as the subject or try a keyword search (family name and genealogy). We have more than 700 book that are about specific families.

Example of subject heading: "Sassoon family" or "Ben-Israel family" - but you may be asking, which one? You have to use the subject information (for example, geographical subject headings) as well as look through the actual books to discern if this is actually the family you're looking for.

NAME ORIGINS

These won't necessarily tell you a lot, but they can provide interesting clues such as the geographic, occupational and religious origins of names.

These sources can also help provide documentation of your Jewish roots, if you trying to find documentation of Jewish ancestors.

It's pretty routine for us to get readers in the library who say: "I know/suspect that my family is from a Jewish background. How can I find out and trace my ancestry?" They might know that their family comes from or has lived in Portugal, Spain, the Caribbean, or Latin America, to give a few examples, and find a Jewish connection that they want to research.

REGISTERS

Another area to find names is in registers (lists of names). The Jewish Division has about 250 books under the category “registers” - the subject headings here get complicated so I’d suggest just a keyword search on “Jews”, “registers” and the name of the country.

The registers really range from graves in cemeteries, to victims of Nazism, and, lehavdil, survivors, historical lists of Jewish populations in specific areas (Tunisia, Alsace-Lorraine, Poland).

GEOGRAPHICAL SOURCES: ENCYCLOPEDIAS

As we see from the registers, geography is another access point for genealogical research. By researching an area, we can find out how people used to live, and sometimes knowing where ancestors are from can lead us to sources that give us information about them specifically. These geographic encyclopedias have entries about specific locations but don’t usually have much about individuals unless they were very prominent like famous authors or rabbis. They give statistics and sometimes pictures. For example, I looked up “Ibn Yahya” in the Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World, and found information about three members of a prominent Sephardic family that supposedly had a Polish branch - and these descendants are the subject of books by genealogist Arthur Menton.

SEFER HA-PRENUMERANTN (HEBREW SUBSCRIPTION LISTS)

by Berl Kagan

This reference book is arranged by town name (Eastern Europe and North Africa). It lists the names and dates of Hebrew books that were supported by town residents. Then, you can look for the book itself to see a list of supporters from that town.

YIZKOR BOOKS

Statistics are displayed. The collection is hosted on two sites - NYPL’s Digital Collections and the Yiddish Book Center, via Internet Archive. This is a joint project of NYPL and the Yiddish Book Center.

OTHER GEOGRAPHICAL RESOURCES

These are some other examples of books where you can find information about specific locations. The Library has a huge collection of books about Jewish communities in specific locations - while these are not necessarily focused on genealogy, they can provide a lot of useful background information.

NYC-SPECIFIC RESOURCES

Because we are in New York City, we have many local research sources. This is also a specialty of the Milstein Division of Local History, U.S. History and Genealogy. Here are some of my most frequently used publications. The Jewish Communal Register (1918) was a comprehensive survey of Jewish organizations in New York City and it is a treasure trove of information. There was an attempt to organize a unified kehillah which did not work out, but as a result we have this amazing resource. The WPA book lists specific synagogues, landsmanshaftn or organizations founded by people from the same town (landslayt) by the name of the town, with names and addresses of presidents, number of members, percentage American-born, language of the meetings, where they meet, how often, etc. Also we have about 200 souvenir journals from landsmanshaftn. I compiled this information, along with links to other online sources, into a blog post (see handout).

PERIODICALS

Here are some statistics about our periodicals collection, both in the Dorot Jewish Division and more generally in NYPL.

A word of caution: you have to know what you're looking for (dates, etc.), and know that materials may not necessarily be in English, also many immigrant newspapers did not necessarily list obituaries or death notices until the 30's or 40's. We get questions nearly every day from people who don't have specific dates of articles/notices and we can't really help them other than say, here are 10 years of a newspaper on microfilm - good luck!

PERIODICALS - HOW TO FIND STUFF

But there are increasingly more and more online sources for searching periodicals - both indexes and digitized periodicals, especially for historical research. We frequently use Historical Jewish Press, which is a wonderful resource, and have in fact contributed several newspapers in Yiddish, Ladino, Hebrew and English, to the project.

UNEXPECTED SOURCES

Cookbooks

In some cases these are the only printed publications from small Jewish communities in specific locations, some of which no longer exist, like rural communities. They have names and recipes. Also since women are a typically underrepresented group, these are a great way to get more information about women's history, or herstory. Altogether we have about 2500 cookbooks - most collected by our dear, departed colleague, Roberta Saltzman, and organized in an online guide.

Yiddish theater collection

A researcher in Tennessee contacted me to ask if I had any information about the Nadolsky family, Yiddish actors in the late 19th and early 20th century. It turns out that we have about 20 posters and programs mentioning these names. He was overjoyed to find this information (see quote). These are part of a collection of about 400 items of ephemera that I cataloged and succeeded in having digitized. The metadata is very important - I tried to include as much information as possible, such as addresses, names of actors, composers, lyricists, directors, playwrights, translators, etc., to make it easier for researchers to quickly find relevant information.

Postcards

Another unexpected source of information is postcards - like this one from the Hebrew Confederate Soldiers' Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia. We have for example many unique postcards of old synagogues and Jewish communal institutions throughout the U.S. and beyond. Many of these buildings are gone now, so it's an interesting and helpful link to the past.

So in short, those are just some of the unique items available which are freely accessible to you.

Thank you. Come visit us soon.