

Jabotinsky Is Dead

by Michael Goldstein, President IAJGS

This article has absolutely nothing to do with the death of Zev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, the venerable Zionist leader and a family member whose vague relationship to me is hiding behind a brick wall. Yet the title of this article relates to my conviction of what genealogy is all about, as I will share with you now.

This month, I have been intensely involved in helping to bolster genealogy societies across the globe, exploring potential areas to establish new Jewish genealogy societies, and focusing on issues for this summer's international conference in Paris. I have even managed to find a chunk of time to work on my own family genealogy, and, of all the unjust rewards, instead of discovering ancestral homes rich in resources, my family's native turf was in those singular parts of Belarus and Ukraine where surviving records are amongst the poorest. How truly unfair.

My thoughts turn to how people respond when hearing that I am researching my ancestry. Their reactions run the gamut from "Why do you want to know?" to "Fantastic!" Bridging the two extremes is "I wish I could do that." To the middle group I say jump in, jot down some information about you, your parents and grandparents—and my guess is that you too may soon become addicted. The obstacle is to start the endeavor, and the obstacle to starting is believing that you know nothing, rather than spending a few minutes to think and record as much (or as little) as you know.

To the group that asks, "Why do you want to know?" I have nothing to say, especially since there is little chance they're reading this publication. However, if they were interested, I would tell them how my research has enriched the last 25 years of my life. It may have been by chance, but I was fortunate from the outset to be someone looking for more than just identifying the name of an ancestor and ticking off a box next to "milestone." In my case, the more I learned about the family past, the more I drew closer to present-day family members, some of whom I had never known. To me, this has been the experience of a lifetime. Not only was it wonderful to meet these relatives, but also to provide them with information they eagerly received which ultimately unlocked long-time family mysteries.

My next level of learning was to try to understand who my ancestors were and how they lived. I had to transpose myself from a world in which I might travel 35,000 miles a year to a world in which virtually everything took place within 35 miles of where a person lived. How did my grandmother meet my grandfather whose ancestral home

was more than 300 miles from hers? This sparks some thought about the social networking system of the pre-Geni, pre-Facebook, pre-Alexander Graham Bell eras.

My family genealogical research has certainly enriched my knowledge. I was a reluctant Jewish Day School student. How my teachers tolerated me, I now wonder—and to boot, nothing sunk in. Yet over the past 25 years, I have evolved from someone who shuddered every time he heard the name Simon Dubnow, the great Jewish historian, to a person who bought back his book that I had all too easily given away. While the mention of the name of Yehoash, the Yiddish translator of the *Chumash* from which I studied, would once send me trembling, his name now evokes the memory of meeting his grandson and having learned that Yehoash was also the intrepid author of travelogues. But by far, what my 25 years have done is to help me comprehend the reality of the Pale of Settlement. Why my grandfather

was Polish but was really born in Belarus; why my mother, though born in Ukraine, was identified as Polish when she exited the former Soviet Union; understanding what a *Subbotnik* (Judaizing Christian) is and delving into the question of whether Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's family were Subbotniks.

Now, the full circle. I still don't know how my great-grandfather, Chaim Moshkevich, was a cousin to Zev Vladimir Jabotinsky. I have spoken to the Zionist leader's grandson and namesake, Zev Jabotinsky, and know

that since both of Zev Jabotinsky's parents had many siblings of whom we know very little, it is plausible that the branches of our family trees do cross.

So why "Jabotinsky is Dead"? My ancestral Toronto family members were proponents of the labor movement. At the height of Jabotinsky's Zionist activity, he was the black sheep of the family. We all evolve, and unfortunately my desire to know the relationship and to claim this *yichesdik* (renowned) relative came after all those who knew the details were long gone. One day many years ago, when our family was discussing "our cousin" Jabotinsky and trying to figure out the relationship, we mentioned that everybody who could help us was dead. At that my young son burst into tears. "Jabotinsky is dead!" he sobbed. Young as he was, my son understood that genealogy is not just a matter of finding a name.

It's still not too late for you to join us at the 32nd annual IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy in Paris, July 15. I hope to meet many of you there! Visit www.paris2012.eu/ and register now.

