

Scholarship and Education Are Focus of Lectures At Annual Conference in August

by David Laskin

Genealogy, as its devotees are well aware, touches on every essential aspect of the human experience—family, language, history, science, genetics, economics, migration, institution building, ethnic identity, and last, but by no means least, religion. Jewish genealogy is particularly rich because of the extraordinary continuity of Jewish identity, a tumultuous history and the unique dissemination of Jews around the world. Any one of these threads would make a superb theme for a conference. This summer's 36th IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy in Seattle will feature all of them. Breathtaking is the only word that does justice to the line-up of speakers who will be presenting at the lovely downtown Sheraton Hotel from August 7 to 12, 2016.

Conference programming committee chair Joel Spector notes that his committee received a total of 420 proposals, an embarrassment of riches that had to be winnowed down to 235 presentations. "The breadth and depth of the presenter pool was impressive," says Spector. "The level of scholarship astounded me." The proposals that have been chosen from this impressive pool include individual presentations, panels, 12 computer labs and 44 Special Interest Group and Birds of a Feather meetings.

Sephardic Experience

When the call for papers went out in the fall, the topic track that topped the list for this summer's conference was the Sephardic experience. Conference organizers felt that Seattle, with the third largest Sephardic population in the country, after New York and Los Angeles, was the perfect place to highlight this branch of the Jewish family tree. Sure enough, scholars and researchers responded with an extraordinarily rich array of abstracts focusing on Sephardim. Dr. Devin Naar, chair of the Sephardic Studies Department at the University of Washington, will set the stage for the Sephardic presentations with his keynote address on the opening night of the conference. Dr. Naar is an electrifying public speaker and his talk is sure to be a highlight of the week.

Programming committee chair Spector is delighted to have secured the participation of Dr. Jeffrey Malka, one of the pioneers of Sephardic genealogy in the United States and creator of the SephardicGen Resources website, www.Sephardicgen.com. Malka, author of the prize-winning book *Sephardic Genealogy: Discovering Your Sephardic Ancestors and Their World* (Avotaynu, 2002) and scion of a long line of Sephardic rabbis going back to the 13th century, will give two presentations in Seattle. "SephardicGen: Its Resources and How to Use Them" will focus on the more than 50 searchable and sourced databases available on Malka's site. With close to 200,000 names, it



Sheraton Seattle, site of the 2016 conference

includes a Sephardic gazetteer and an extensive bibliography, sections on Sephardic genealogy resources arranged by country and Sephardic history. Dr. Malka will take attendees step-by-step through the methods of accessing and using this wealth of information.

In his second presentation entitled "Sephardic Surnames Through the Millennia," Dr. Malka will deal with the evolution and transformation of Jewish surnames from Biblical times to the present. Because hereditary Sephardic surnames are so ancient (many go back to the 12th century), they are of great value when searching through the archives since Jews are clearly identified. Moreover, whereas many Ashkenazi families may carry the same surname, that phenomenon is far less common among Sephardim. Malka will illustrate how history and local languages have played a role in Jewish surnames and will offer strategies for distinguishing true name variants from imaginative interpretations.

Another high-profile presenter who will be in Seattle this summer is Yitzchak Kerem, an historian of Sephardic and Eastern Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, veteran Sephardic genealogist and co-author of the award-winning genealogy book *Guidebook for Sephardic and Oriental Genealogical Sources in Israel* (Avotaynu, 2006). Of the two talks that Kerem will deliver at the conference, one is of particular interest to Seattle's Sephardic community: a history of the Sephardic migration from Rhodes and Turkey to Seattle in the first three decades of the 20th century. Kerem has discovered that eastern Mediterranean Jewish communities followed in the footsteps of their Greek Or-

thodox townsmen. He will look at oral histories, naming patterns, intermarriage and migration to Portland, Oregon, to round out his portrait of Seattle's rich and vibrant Sephardic world. Other topics that will be touched on in this presentation will be the involvement of Jews in Seattle's historic fish market, the rabbinic lineage of the Maimon family and the post-Holocaust migration of Jews from Salonika. Kerem will give a second talk on the history of the Sephardic community in Romania, which dates back to the period immediately following the expulsion from the Iberian peninsula.

Genie Milgrom, born a Cuban Catholic, made headlines around the world when she succeeded in tracing her own family history through 15 generations of grandmothers to prove that she is in fact the descendant of Sephardic Jews from Spain. *My 15 Grandmothers* (2012), Milgrom's book about her genealogical journey from Cuba to a Beit Din in

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Israel, has become a classic of contemporary genealogy. Currently president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Miami and president of the Society for Crypto Judaic Studies at Colorado State University, Milgrom is a spellbinding public speaker. She will give a number of presentations in Seattle. The first, entitled "From the Spanish Inquisition to the Present: A Search for Jewish Roots," will describe how she traced her unbroken maternal lineage back to 1405 and Pre-Inquisition Spain and Portugal. The drama of the family's past and the twists of this very personal journey are showcased in a highly personal narrative.

Milgrom's second talk is called "Researching Your Jewish Roots Through Catholic and Inquisition Records." This presentation explores the nuts and bolts of uncovering a Jewish heritage through Catholic church records. As Milgrom has discovered, research into pre-Inquisition Jewish roots involves not only looking for the names and dates of ancestors, but also uncovering small clues within the records that indicate a Jewish background hidden beneath a Catholic exterior.

Milgrom also will give an evening presentation about a new undertaking called the Converso Genealogy Project. Originating at the 2014 IAJGS conference in Salt Lake City, this project will, in Milgrom's own words, "span many countries and five centuries in an effort to bring modern-day converso descendants to their ancestral origins, while at the same time making Inquisition resources, articles, publications and books available in one location." Academics from Israel, the Netherlands and the

UK will team up with genealogists from Spain and Portugal in launching this ground-breaking new endeavor, which is sure to have a major impact on Sephardic family history.

You Don't Have to Be Sephardic to Love The Lectures at the Upcoming IAJGS conference

To adapt the old Levy's rye bread ad, you don't have to be Sephardic to love the upcoming IAJGS conference in Seattle. Ashkenazi families in the U.S., Europe and Israel will be the subject of a slew of compelling presentations.

Do you have family in New York City? Did your ancestors ever live there? Have you ever struggled to track down NYC records? If so, then Jordan Auslander's presentation entitled "Genealogy in Gotham: New York City Research" is not to be missed. Auslander, a New York-based forensic genealogist, as well as a real estate historian, will describe the ancestral trail that more than 100,000 Americans left in New York City and will offer guidance on tracing New York ancestors.

You probably don't have family in Leadville, Colorado, but William Korn's talk on the Jewish pioneers of this Rocky Mountain mining town promises to be fascinating. Korn, who has lived in Leadville since 1989 and who worked as a lecturer at the University of Colorado School of Business, will trace the history of some of Leadville's Jewish families, both the famous ones like David May of the May Corp., the Guggenheims, as well as ordinary Jews who made this remote city their home. Korn has studied the archives of the local synagogue and the history of the Jewish cemetery, and he will enrich his talk by describing how Leadville Jews built enduring institutions and interacted with the broader community.

Traveling to the other side of the globe, certified genealogist Sara Scribner will give a talk entitled "Eastward Ho!: The Jews of Shanghai in World War II." Peter Nash lectured on this same subject at the 2006 IAJGS Conference, but in the ensuing decade new archival material has come to light, along with newly published articles, memoirs and research sites. Scribner, who teaches critical thinking and research techniques at Olympic College and volunteers as an arbitrator for Family Search's indexing projects, will add depth and nuance to the histories of Jewish families who escaped the Holocaust in Europe by going East.

"Zvi Gitelman is an outstanding speaker," remarks conference co-chair Phyllis Grossman. "I would attend his lecture no matter what the subject." Keep this in mind when budgeting your time in Seattle. Zvi Gitelman, Tisch Professor of Judaic studies at the University of Michigan, has won awards as a teacher and accolades as the author and editor of 16 books on Russian and East European Jewry, politics and on Israeli politics and society. His acclaimed *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union since 1881* (2001, Indiana University Press) has been translated into Russian and Japanese. Dr. Gitelman, who has served on the council of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and is on the Board of Directors of the Joint Distribu-

tion Committee, will present three talks at the Seattle conference. The first, “Vayis’u Vayahanu (and they traveled and they encamped): The Nature and Consequences of Jewish Migration” will explore the determinants and consequences of Jewish migration. As he will make clear, that migration continues into the present, with more than one million Jews leaving the former Soviet Union since 1989.

Gitelman’s second talk, entitled “What’s in a Name? The Origins and Meaning of Jewish Family Names,” will examine the Hebrew, Slavic, and German origins of Jewish names and delve into what these names tell us about family origins, occupations, and the position of the name-bearer in Jewish and non-Jewish communities. The humorous and sometimes derogatory meaning of Jewish names—and Jews’ attempts to disguise their names—will leaven this talk.

Lecture on Litvak-Galitsianer Wars: Jewish Cultural Geography

Have you ever wondered about the deep and sometimes contentious divide between the Litvaks and Galitsianers of Eastern Europe? Four out of five American Jews trace their ancestry to Eastern Europe, but far from being homogeneous, that region had diverse religious practices, Yiddish pronunciation, food, customs, dress and political ideology. Professor Gitelman’s third talk, “The Litvak-Galitsianer Wars: Jewish Cultural Geography” will explore the nature and repercussions of the major divide between Eastern European Jews. Though the Litvak-Galitsianer wars have ended, the richness and vitality of Eastern European Jewish civilization continues to inform Jewish life in Europe, the Americas and Israel.

DNA Testing: An Essential Tool

Over the past decade, DNA has emerged as an essential genealogical tool, and Seattle is the perfect place to learn all about the latest breakthroughs in this emerging science. Whether you’re a novice or an advanced researcher, you will want to hear Bennett Greenspan’s talk on “The DNA of the Jewish People.”

Greenspan, an entrepreneur and life-long genealogy enthusiast who founded Family Tree DNA in 2000, revisits the genetic ancestry of Jews (Ashkenazim and Sephardim) and compares the signatures common among Middle Eastern populations with those of European populations,

Other cutting edge presentations focusing on DNA research include “Expand and Support Your Genealogy Research with DNA Tools,” by Anna Swayne, who leads Ancestry.com’s efforts to develop DNA education; a talk about Y-DNA by author and genealogist Dr. Jeffrey Mark Paull and three talks by Israel Pickholtz, a notable family researcher for the past two decades.

Special Program for Educators

Lead co-chair Janette Silverman is particularly excited about something new that will be offered in Seattle for the first time, a special program for educators, to be held on

August 7, the first morning of the conference. “It was especially gratifying to have so many proposals submitted for our first-ever educators’ program,” notes Silverman.

Carol Starin, a premier Jewish educator, has organized the 10 sessions that will run concurrently with the morning sessions the first day of the conference. This author is flattered to be one of the speakers Sunday morning. I will address that esteemed group of Jewish educators who bring their passion for genealogy into the day school and religious school classrooms.

The author of this article also is honored to be among the conference presenters. I will talk about how I researched my own family’s history and, in the process, discovered that they embodied the great currents of 20th-century Jewish history, immigration to the U.S., the founding of the State of Israel and the Holocaust. I wrote about my discoveries in my award-winning book, *The Family: A Journey into the Heart of the 20th Century* (Viking, 2013).

David Laskin, an award-winning Seattle-based writer, is the author of The Family: A Journey into the Heart of the 20th Century. Published by Viking/Penguin, The Family tells the story of three branches of his mother’s family—those who came to America and founded the Maidenform Bra Company; those who went to what was Palestine as early Zionist pioneers; and those who remained in present-day Lithuania and Belarus and perished in the Holocaust. Laskin has spoken about the book at synagogues and Jewish genealogical societies nationwide.

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