

The Jewish Genealogy & Family Heritage Center
At the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute

By Yale Reisner, Director, and Anna Przybyszewska Drozd, Associate Director

The lengthy name of our Center is a mouthful, yet it still fails to give a complete picture of what we do. While we indeed guide and assist Jews with Polish roots — and Poles with Jewish roots — in learning more about their family histories and in building family trees, that is only a fraction of our work. The Center does far more.

While our clients come or write from every continent (save Antarctica, so far), the majority of our visits are from Poles: some Jews, some of Jewish ancestry, many with only a suspicion of Jewish ancestry. Based on initial conversations and examination of any documents at hand, we try to guide them to the information they seek. At times, crucial documentation is in our Institute's own archives. In most cases, though, the search must reach farther: into family attics and trunks, vital records, state archives, university, military and property records; at times, even to church records.

Each case is different and must be analyzed and thought through. Often, clients search for months or years before finding us. On many occasions, we have found answers when all other avenues had proven to be dead ends. By taking the time to listen and ask discerning questions, we sometimes elicit more information from a client than he thought he knew. We have years of experience in using various published and Internet data, so that we can often tease additional information out of material that a client had already "exhausted." What seems like no information at all can often be built upon and expanded upon until a clearer picture begins to emerge. A recent client told us what she experienced in our office was "a mystical experience," so much did she learn starting with so little.

Many of our clients have recently learned of or begun to grapple with their Jewish identity. For some, the discovery is thrilling; for some, it is a relief to answer their family riddle; for others yet, it is profoundly disturbing. In listening to clients' stories and helping them rethink the facts, we often find ourselves offering a kind of "talk therapy." Some say their lives were changed by their visit to us. Confirmation of Jewish roots has led to decisions to learn Hebrew, to practice Judaism, to make *aliyah*.

A reunion with relatives or friends after decades of separation is surely a life-changing experience. Just recently, we've had the pleasure of reuniting a Polish client with his Israeli father and brothers, joining first cousins across continents, hosting an Israeli-Iranian family reunion, linking childhood best friends in different countries and a Lithuanian child survivor with her elderly aunt in Australia. Our information has made marriages and Jewish community membership possible in various countries.

We see a constant flow of young Poles who wish to take part in the all-expenses-paid trip to Israel offered by the Birthright-Taglit program. To go, these young people must document that they have at least one Jewish grandparent, so they come to us to learn how they can prove their Jewish descent. They come from all over Poland and they can — in

almost every case — definitively document their Jewish descent. There seems to be no end to this flow of youngsters, eager to visit Israel with peers of similar background. About 500 students have made the trip and new faces keep appearing in our doorway. No Jews in Poland? Think again. *[note to Gazeta—highlighted text can be used as a pull quote if this will suit your layout]*

With increasing frequency, we hear from non-European Jews who have heard they might qualify for Polish citizenship if they can prove their forebears were Polish citizens. With Poland in the European Union, Polish citizenship opens up a host of work and study opportunities not only in Poland, but anywhere from Estonia to the UK. Applicants ask us where to find documents that might establish their right to citizenship.

Polish Jews and their descendants abroad sometimes seek to reclaim pre-war family properties in Poland or in Israel. While our Center doesn't provide legal advice, we can sometimes help determine the location of a property or direct the inquirers to specific sources of information.

We find ourselves responding to sundry needs: We have provided consultations on Jewish customs and Hebrew and Yiddish terminology, interpreted documents in several languages and identified photos and liturgical citations. We've explained to the Polish probate court how someone could be Mateusz and Mendel or Jakub and Jankiel at the same time. We've helped the police with Hebrew and Yiddish slang—probably picked up in a wiretap. We've worked with ambassadors, ministers and parliamentarians, artists, historians, authors and journalists, captains of industry and heroes of Solidarity. But whoever our clients may be, they all trace their roots back to the same place—to the rich, shared heritage of the centuries-old Jewish community of Poland.

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