

In every generation, tracing family history

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Pesach is a time for family – and at the Seder, many of us recall our ancestors. In some Haggadot there is even a space for showing participants in the seder, as a mini-family tree



I have been interested in my own family tree since I was 18 when I interviewed family members about their backgrounds, childhoods and stories. If you want to know about family origins speaking to relatives from previous generations is a first step and get as much detail as possible. One way is to ask them about the people and places in family photos; where and when taken, who were they and what were they like.

Next, look at official records, many of which are online although not all are free. Family documents and photos may go back a century or more. I have grandparents’ passports, naturalisation documents and a notebook dated from 1822 (see picture) that belonged to my father’s great grandfather.



The 1822 notebook

Newspapers are another source. I crafted an almost complete family tree for part of my family using personal messages from the Jewish Chronicle. Obituaries in other newspapers can also give information.

I discovered the existence of a great-great-uncle who moved to St Louis, USA from an obituary in an Austrian newspaper. I found further information on him from one of the main genealogy websites, myheritage.com – an Israeli owned site that also does DNA testing and can help find family links. Other websites such as jewishgen.org, geni.com, ancestry.org, myheritage.com and findmypast.com are also useful,

There are special interest groups for particular locations. I’ve spent a lot of time going through official Lithuanian records held at www.litvaksig.org. For the UK, check the National Archives (nationalarchives.gov.uk) or visit them at Kew. Look for shipping

records, birth, marriage and death notices and check the census. An excellent directory of genealogy sites is held at www.cyndislist.com.

Researching my own family

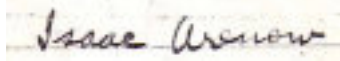
I now know something about all my great-great-grandparents and, on my mother’s, side details go back over 1000 years. I’ve traced, got back in touch and swapped stories, with family members where contact had been lost.

I still have many unanswered questions. For instance, my grandfather. Arthur Isaac Arenow was born in the 1880s in Kretinga on the coast of present-day Lithuania. I was told his mother’s maiden name was Zipporah Graff and that after his Bar Mitzvah he went to South Africa to live with an elder brother and then moved to Cork in Ireland where my mother and her siblings were born. Also, that that my grandfather’s grandparents were buried in Limerick in Ireland. Here, research overtakes family lore and records conflict.

On my grandfather’s English naturalisation certificate his mother’s name is Sarah Rebecca, not Zipporah. His birth year is given as 1883. and his death certificate says he was born 1886. The 1901 census says he was 19 and living with his uncle, Hyman Graff, in Limerick. I also found him on the passenger manifest of the *Walmer Castle* – a ship that sailed to South Africa in 1906. He was now 18. So, all I know is my grandfather was born between 1882 and 1888. Lithuanian tax records say his father was married to a Sore Graff – so was his mother Sarah Rebecca or Zipporah. On ancestry.com it gives a clue with the name Sarah Rebecca (Sore Zipporah) Graf – presumably Zipporah was her Hebrew name and Sarah Rebecca the official name for records. However, this doesn’t solve everything – as my mother was born in 1924, while Sore Zipporah died in 1926 and I don’t know the documentary source for the name Sore Zipporah.

I’ve also not been able to confirm that my great-great-grandparents were buried in Limerick. All the graves there now have names except the oldest which is a single grave and not a double grave and the Chevra Kadisha records do not say whose grave this is. Yet I do know that they were in Limerick in 1898 from a court record and an article in the Old Limerick Journal.

The shipping record suggests that the story that my grandfather went to South Africa straight after his Bar Mitzvah may be incorrect. He went there after having lived with his uncles in Limerick for at least five years. My grandfather is listed not only on the 1901 census records but also on the 1902 purchase document for the Limerick Jewish cemetery. This was initially confusing. The document includes 22 names. In some reports one of these was an Isaac Arinon and in another Isaac Aronove. When you look at the actual handwriting however, the final letters could be an “n” or a “w” – and the signature was similar to that on his 1908 South African naturalisation certificate.



My grandfather’s signature

I suspect a boy of 13 or 14 would not have been a legal signatory to a purchase document so it made sense to say in the census that he was 19 (and so could be 21 when signing the 1902 document). More importantly, this shows how handwritten documents can be misread – so perhaps the 1926 for Sore Graf was misread and should have been 1924.

There once was a Jew from Limerick....

The Limerick Jewish community where my grandfather lived for five years is interesting historically as it is viewed as the only Western community to have suffered a pogrom. That occurred, like so many others, in the weeks and months before Pesach, 1904. There had been sporadic anti-Semitism for several years with attacks on Jews and Jewish property. Part of this may have been because some of the community earned a living as money-lenders and Limerick city was poor, while the Jews were reportedly affluent. It was also due to misunderstandings – for example over Kashrut. An 1884 report said “... *the Jews had been celebrating the Passover. They had killed some fowl in a yard by stabbing them and it had given offence to people in the locality, the result being the attack on the house. The people are very incensed against them and they cannot understand why they are allowed to remain in town*”.

The most severe example was the 1904 “pogrom”. In 1898, Chief Rabbi Adler warned the Irish Jewish communities that certain statements had been made before a Parliamentary Commission on Money Lending, in London, that there were Jews in Ireland guilty of usurious practices. He asked that these should stop. In January 1904, Father John Creagh gave a sermon condemning the use by Jews of the ‘Mayor’s Court of Conscience’, used to force payment of debts. “*The Jews came to Limerick apparently the most miserable tribe imaginable, with want on their faces, and now they have enriched themselves ... How do the Jews manage to make their money? ... They forced themselves and their goods upon the people and the people are blind to their tricks.*”

The result of the sermon was an economic boycott of Jewish owned shops followed soon after by active harassment of Jews with stones thrown and windows broken – and in April 1904 there were 40 attacks on Jews, supported by many. (Not long after, anti-Jewish riots started in Stepney.) Although this was nothing like the Eastern European pogroms, it resulted in many of the community leaving.

Money lending was not only a source for inter-community hatred. It also led to intra-communal strife. The Limerick Jewish Community was small – never growing to more than 150 people (30-35 families) yet had two synagogues. Acrimonious letters in the Limerick Leader newspaper three years earlier, (one mentioning my great-great-uncle Hyman Graff as president of one of the synagogues, illustrated the strife to the greater community. The arguments extended to fights in shul, and court cases. This is now just history and an example of how much can be found through genealogy research. It is also a lesson in how fortunate we are at Belmont not to suffer such splits.

Irish Jewish History

For those interested in learning more about Irish Jewish genealogy, there is the website IrishJewishRoots.com – founded and managed by Belmont Member, Stuart Rosenblatt, whose article is above this one.

If you have links to Limerick (or Kretinga in Lithuania) I’d love to speak to you also – as we may share family links.



The Limerick Jewish cemetery with its minyan of graves, and the plaque placed by Rabbi Mirvis on the prayer-hall.



The building that housed one of Limerick’s two synagogues.