



Jewish Genealogical Society of the Conejo Valley and Ventura County

"How To Begin Your Genealogy Research"

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Suggested Questions to Ask During Interviews

There is more to family history than lists of names and dates. Each story you get from a relative/ancestor may generate more questions, so there is no definitive list! The questions may stretch over multiple visits- you want to be able to return with follow-up questions after you study the answers to the first round. You do not want to wear them out with too many questions the first visit- you may have many questions whose answers generate even more questions. Never argue with what they say- they shut down and you will not get any more information.

Not all of these suggested questions will apply to all people so pick out those questions which are relevant to the person you are interviewing.

Encourage more than yes and no answers!

Find out the how, why, where and why not, with what results

How did you get to the US?

Where did you immigrate from?

Why didn't your brother/sister come too?

What happened to your brother/sister for not immigrating with you?

Handle sensitive questions delicately.

For example: Subjects of divorce, death of a spouse/child, holocaust survivor, adoption, out-of-wedlock birth, imprisonment, illnesses may cause someone not to talk- so broach the questions CAREFULLY

Ask the person their earliest memories of their parents/grandparents/siblings/children.

Examples:

What did you call your mother? father? grandmother? grandfather? Did they have nicknames?

Did they speak English? Yiddish? ???

Did they go to school?

What do you remember about your mother- your earliest memories?

Who was the relative name for - Ashkenazi Jews name after someone who died? Sephardic Jews after living relatives. How is/was that person related to the person in question? What was the Hebrew name? Where are they buried (the metzevah would have the father's Hebrew name and death date. (Others from the family may be buried in the same cemetery)

Where did you live? City/farm/ state/country

If the family lived on a farm, what kind of farm? Did they own the farm or rent?

(If they owned the farm you may want to look at property tax records)

What kinds of crops were grown?

Where they raised for sale or home consumption?

Living on a farm what animals did you have?

What were your chores on the farm?

Tell me about the town, did you walk to school?

When did you stop going to school?

What did you study?

If they family lived in town/city- what did they do for a living?
What kind of business did they have?

Did the family move during this time? If so where to?

Did they belong to a synagogue? Which one? Did other relatives belong to the same temple?

Did you go to Hebrew/Sunday school?

Who came to celebrate Chanukah/Passover at the house or did you go to someone's house? Whose house did you go to? Who was there besides your family?

Did you have a radio (1920-1930) Did you have a car? Did you have a TV?

When did you immigrate to the US?

Did you have pets growing up? What were their names (interesting stories may result by asking about the pets)

What kind of house did you live in? Who lived in the house with you? How many people lived in the house (relatives/borders, etc)

Did your father/grandfather/brother/uncle etc serve in the military? What branch (Army, Navy, Air Corps, Kaiser's Army, RAF, underground, etc.) Did they serve during the first World War/ Second World War? Korean War? Vietnam? What did they do in the war (infantry, fly planes, submarines)

When did XXX marry? Was it the first marriage? Where did they marry?

What schools did you attend? What clubs did you belong to? What were the rules? How far was it from home? What was your favorite subject?

How did you meet your spouse?

When did you get married? Where did you get married?

When/where were your children born?

Where have you lived?

What was your political affiliation? Your parents? Where you or they active in politics?

What synagogue did you belong to? Your parents? Where you/they active in temple?

What did they look like? Eye/hair color/ height/ thin/fat?

What were their hobbies?

Family medical history is important due to genetic or hereditary issues.

Did they have -list of diseases - diabetes/cancer/allergies/blood disorders etc

Ask about others in the family that you may not know- they may know how to contact them. Looking in City Directories or old telephone directories may be of help. Relatives may have lived in the same building or household and they would be listed in the city -directory or phone directory,. Look up old newspapers from the town.

If you have any old family photographs, bring them with you and ask the person if they know who the people are in the photographs. They may show you family photographs they have that you don't!