



Starting a JGS: INTRODUCTION

Deborah Long, [Triangle Jewish Genealogical Society](#) (2015) Revised 2022

At the end of 2008, I began to experience how utterly addicting genealogy can be when a researcher begins to make major discoveries. I have been looking for relatives for more than 50 years, but prior to the advent of Internet research tools, such as Google Translate, I made little progress. This was partly due to my inability to read Hebrew, Polish, Hungarian, Yiddish or German, languages that were necessary to make any steps forward in my family's history. Both of my parents were Holocaust survivors, and except for my father's mother, none of my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents survived. My quest for information about my family's past was largely an effort to understand what had happened to my parents' families and their lives before and during the war.

After my mother's death in 2008, I picked up the pieces of information that I had about my mother and father's family and discovered JewishGen, JRI-Poland, Google Translate and other Internet resources, and much to my amazement and utter joy, within six months, I had acquired some precious photographs of three of my mother's siblings. A few months later during a remarkable trip to Poland, Hungary, and Germany, I discovered many documents which helped me to assemble the family tree. Within a year, thanks to the staff of the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the wisdom gleaned at an International Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) conference, I found the descendants of my mother's uncle now living in Sweden, descendants of my maternal grandmother's sister living in Canada, and my father's granduncle's descendants in a small town in Hungary.

As genealogists know, having these kinds of successes is positively addicting. Each one gives you the fuel to go on the next. These stories also make you rather boring at parties where you know that listeners are yearning to escape your tales about your second cousins once removed. So, when Marlis Humphrey of IAJGS contacted me in 2012 about the possibility of starting a chapter in the Triangle, North Carolina area (Chapel Hill/Durham/Raleigh), I seriously pondered her offer. I knew it was going to take a lot of time (I still work full time as a real estate teacher), but I also had run out of friends and family willing to listen to any more genealogy stories. With Marlis' second call of encouragement, I decided to go for it and organize the Triangle Jewish Genealogical Society.

I am fortunate to live in an area with a growing Jewish population, major universities and some of the best-educated people in the U.S. Many of them are retirees and have no trouble finding an outlet for their interests at the many venues offered by three major universities (UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke, NC State), several synagogues, and numerous civic and social clubs. But until then, not even in a time of the popularity of TV programs such as "Who Do You Think You Are," had anyone tried to begin a Jewish genealogy society.

In September 2012, I sent out notices of a first meeting to every Jewish group and place of worship in all of North Carolina as well as my Jewish friends and acquaintances. JewishGen was kind enough to send me their subscribers in several critical zip codes. Notices also appeared on JewishGen's online bulletin board. Coincidentally, I noticed the name of Kim Sheintal in *Avotanyu*, the journal of Jewish genealogy, and I remembered that a mutual high school friend of ours had once told me that Kim was living in Sarasota and was also equally consumed by genealogy. I contacted Kim (whom I hadn't seen since high school graduation), and she generously shared some great ideas for getting the word out and how to run the first and subsequent meetings.

In a few weeks, I had 20+ RSVPs to my notice and more than 50+ interested people in the group. I planned a dynamic first meeting, complete with refreshments and a one-hour presentation that I brought to IAJGS in 2010 titled “Three Guides, Four Countries: A Daughter of Holocaust Survivors Travels to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Germany.” Though I had several sleepless nights worried about the success of the venture, our first meeting on October 21, 2012, was a rousing success: 35 people showed up, and when, after my presentation, I asked “Did you like what you heard? Would you like to learn more? If so, I need membership dues from you so we can continue this effort,” 30 of them wrote checks or paid cash on the spot. Moreover, a significant number of them volunteered to help with hospitality, bylaws, the newsletter, financial infrastructure, and all the other elements necessary for an organization’s success.

And the *nachus* continues. As a direct result of our first meeting, one member found two cousins from two different sides of his family. Others have told me that they have contacted elderly family members to obtain valuable information, a direct result of my presentation. It is these kinds of transformative experiences that I hope will continue as we continue to plan for future meetings of the Triangle Jewish Genealogical Society. We welcome everyone. If you are visiting our area, please contact me at DebbieTheTeacher@gmail.com. For more information, join us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/TriangleJewishGenealogicalSociety> or visit our website at www.triangle.org

P.S. Ten years later, despite COVID, we continue to thrive with more than 80 members, many of whom have become adept at Zoom. Our treasury is in good shape (we made sure our treasurer was not related to Bernie Madoff before he assumed financial responsibilities for our JGS.) We continue to enjoy remarkable presentations on genealogy and to learn from our programs. Genealogy isn’t a hobby—it’s an obsession shared by the like-minded people in our JGS.