Why do I pursue my ancestors?

by DebbiKorman

People look at me strangely when I tell them that my 2nd greatgrandfather's occupation was running contraband tobacco across borders in Eastern Europe. First, they want to know how I know this weird little fact, and second, they want to know why I care.

The answer to the first question is - I asked my grandmother and her sisters questions about their lives before they came to the USA in the 1920s.

The answer to the second question is that knowing my family history gives my life context and perspective, which enriches me in many ways. I learn who I resemble in appearance and character, how my "families" evolved to where they are today, and how the experience of one branch differs from another. I get great satisfaction from gathering family stories that never fail to fascinate others in the family. The study of my ancestry is a giant, personal, history lesson, in which I get to know my relatives, and find new relatives to treasure.

You may have noticed that I have not used the term genealogy. That is intentional. When I started researching my family tree in 1988, my pursuit was strictly genealogy - a quest to document the names and vital statistics about ancestors, going back as far as possible. My perspective as a genealogist was very narrow and the path to discovery, particularly without the Internet, was long and tedious.

What a difference 20 years and the Internet have made. Ship records that took years to locate, now are found with the click of a mouse. The Internet and e-mail afford endless opportunities to locate actual relatives and build family trees. As a result, genealogists have broadened their goals. What we do now is family history research ...documenting the full family story; assembling information about occupations, actual addresses, union membership, synagogue membership, photographs, and family stories; and compiling town histories to bring our ancestral towns and shtetls back to life in the context of history, our families, and their neighbors.

Many of us have written books about our families with these details. One acquaintance had a unique twist - she based her entire book on love letters her grandfather had written to her grandmother while they were separated in Ukraine. Others have created websites about their towns and the research resources available for those locales. Many of these are found on JewishGen at http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org and others are posted in various places on the Internet. Take a look. Perhaps you will find your town among these web pages.
I have found that family history research is a fantastic intellectual pursuit. I have to keep track of a large amount of material; I learn about and use all sorts of print and computer resources that I can use to find a missing piece of information about some elusive relative; I have to think up alternative methods of reaching my goals; I learn the history of the place and time of the ancestor I am researching; and I learn to understand records written in multiple languages. (How many people do you know who can read 18th century Polish vital records without speaking a word of Polish?)

Because I research some very unusual names - particularly Bergida and Wellesz - it is possible, if not probable, that everyone with those names is somehow related to me. So, I get to research everyone with those names, creating numerous family trees that I try to link together and then link to mine. This takes quite a bit of critical thinking, as well as occasional leaps of faith. The resources that I use to do this seem endless, with more coming every day. I linked my tree with a tree in NY by DNA testing and a tree in France with a photograph inscribed "my mother's cousin".

To sum it up - genealogy gives me the "who, where and when." Family history gives me the "why and how". Altogether they give me a broader view of myself and the world in very personal ways, and enrich me in many more ways than I can count.

My advice - start your research now, stick with it, learn to do it better, and share it with anyone who will listen. And, come to the next meeting of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon. I will give a presentation about how to develop a research plan, keep track of your sources and organize your family history information. The meeting is at Ahavath Achim Congregation on Tuesday, April 21, 2009, 7:00 pm.

Next month, Ron Doctor’s column will resume with a discussion of how to use immigration records to locate your greatgrandfather’s ancestral town.

Debbi Korman is Editor of Shalshelet, the quarterly newsletter of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon.