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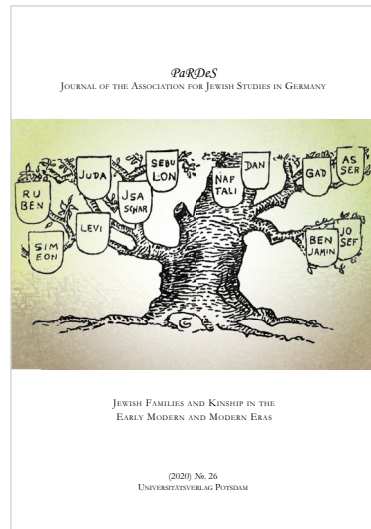
### Jewish Families and Kinship in the Early Modern and Modern Eras

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# Family History and the Leo Baeck Institute<sup>1</sup>

*by Frank Mecklenburg*

## **Abstract**

Genealogical documents offer crucial information on various aspects of Jewish history. They are still underappreciated by many historians, and there is little overlap between academic researchers and the genealogical community, for whom such documents serve a different purpose, as they retrieve individual family histories. The article provides an overview of the material held by Leo Baeck Institute Archives and Library as well as other digital resources for family research today.

## **1. Introduction**

The tradition of writing history as genealogy, “these are the generations,” is found in Genesis. History and family history are interwoven. Prominent rabbinical families and German Jewish families followed this tradition, creating their own monuments to memory, documenting their histories through family histories and family trees. The Leo Baeck Institute Archives and Library hold many collections that document the interest in Jewish genealogy publications in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, collections that contain family trees, correspondence and written histories, and also document the attempts in Germany to wipe out that legacy during the 1930s and 1940s. These collections are sometimes neglected by historians, but they offer valuable information with regard to social history, documenting trajectories of migration, outlining regional, national and global networks, and the developments of businesses. They also reflect the enthusiasm of current generations of family historians throughout the world, and include material produced in Germany today that document and tell the stories of former Jewish residents in small towns.

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank my colleague Karen Franklin, Director of Family Research at the Leo Baeck Institute, for her ideas and inspiration that she shared with me over the past 35 years and her help in writing this article.

I want to give a brief introduction to the scope of materials found in the Archives and Library of the Leo Baeck Institute, actually the LBI New York|Berlin for the Study of German-Jewish History and Culture, as well as the LBI Jerusalem; the latter just started to join the electronic catalog and the digital assets in DigiBaeck.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Publications Documenting the History of Genealogy in Germany

Two German Jewish families that are almost unknown today are the Samson and the Salomon Benedict Goldschmidt families. A deeper investigation in these names offers insight into more complicated subjects. The March 1931 issue of *Jüdische Familienforschung* (Jewish Family Research) has two articles, “Jüdisches Blut im ‘arischen’ Adel” (Jewish Blood in ‘Aryan’ Aristocracy) about the Samson family, and in the June issue of the same year the same topic about the Salomon Benedict Goldschmidt family (353f.).<sup>3</sup> The Samson family or the Salomon Benedict Goldschmidt family today have disappeared from public memory. They are but two examples of the untapped potential of family research, as an in-dept look into these family histories promises insights beyond individual cases for larger questions of Jewish social history and history of daily lives.

In contrast to the Samson and Goldschmidt families, other names of German Jewish families have remained and shape our memory and knowledge until today. For example, Julius Schoeps, a descendant of the Mendelssohn family, wrote *Das Erbe der Mendelssohns: Biographie einer Familie* (The Legacy of the Mendelssohns: Biography of a Family) published in 2009.<sup>4</sup> The LBI library holds more than 40 titles of publications about the Mendelssohn family, their cultural impact and banking business, not counting the publications about Moses Mendelssohn himself. In 1999 Elisabeth Kraus presented the

<sup>2</sup> The online catalog of the LBI can be searched at [http://search.cjh.org/primo-explore/search?vid=libi&lang=en\\_US](http://search.cjh.org/primo-explore/search?vid=libi&lang=en_US); the digital collections of the LBI are accessible at <https://www.libi.org/collections/digibaeck/>, accessed May 26, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Max Markreich, “Jüdisches Blut im ‘arischen’ Adel,” in *Jüdische Familienforschung* 7, no. 25 (1931): 344–346; Ernst Kahn, “Zum Thema Jüdisches Blut im ‘arischen’ Adel,” in *Jüdische Familienforschung* 7, no. 26 (1931): 353–354.

<sup>4</sup> Julius Schoeps, *Das Erbe der Mendelssohns: Biographie einer Familie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2009).

history of the Mosse family on almost 800 dense pages in an academic study examining all social, political, and economic aspects, and of course the genealogical history of the Mosse family.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. The Genealogical Community

The LBI holds several thousand family histories of less known names, published and unpublished, done as home-spun projects or done by professionals. These holdings are all available online for researchers to study. Fortunately, work on the family story continues. With the emergence of the World Wide Web and the availability of dedicated database programs for personal computers since the mid-1990s, a global community of genealogists has developed. In the Jewish context, they initially gathered around the volunteer site JewishGen.org, with special regional interest groups, such as the German group “GerSIG” (German-Jewish Special Interest Group). The GerSIG is an ever-expanding enterprise, with its own website, an archive of all previous inquiries, and numerous databases.

In subsequent years, the online community has expanded to multiple platforms, such as Facebook pages for GerSIG and “JEWS – Jekkes Engaged Worldwide in Social Networking.” A number of websites such as MyHeritage.com or Ancestry.com are for-pay businesses with features that could only be sustained with operations that have corporate business models. Subsequently, Jewish genealogy has become a big business, too.

It may not be a surprise that among the largest and very consistent user groups of the LBI holdings is the genealogical community. Academic researchers have been using the archives and the library in similar numbers. Social historians comprise the largest share, but the study of Jewish families and communities takes place in two separate universes. It seems that little has been said about the relationship between these two fields of inquiry. One reflection on the weak link can be found in the 1937 volume of the journal *Jüdische Familienforschung*, in an article by the historian Toni Oelsner (1882–1943), “How does family research lead to historical inquiry?” (*Wie führt Familienforschung zu historischer Forschung?*):

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Kraus, *Die Familie Mosse: Deutsch-jüdisches Bürgertum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Beck, 1999).

“This was to show how something one knew about the family, the grand-parents and great-grandparents, and that at first seemed completely arbitrary and therefore uninteresting, finds its historical ‘place’ as it is integrated into history. Grandfather’s manufactory shop in the small town in Thuringia and the rabbi’s work as a craftsman in 18th-century Silesia turned out to be typical lines of work, shaped by the historical developments in the respective regions. In this way, such fates are revealed to be not so much individual fates, but rather parts of a comprehensive historical and sociological framework. Knowledge, which was often lost, of the Jews’ special status even before the pre-emancipation and the slow process of emancipation allows for a much clearer understanding of the current situation of the Jews in Germany.”<sup>6</sup>

Arthur Czellitzer’s (1871–1943) journal *Jüdische Familienforschung: Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für jüdische Familienforschung* (Jewish Family Research: Newsletter of the Society for Jewish Family Research) started 95 years ago at a time when the emancipation and secularization of the German Jews had reached a level that made the traditions of keeping track of one’s heritage not seem significant any longer; or was it rather that the Jewish tradition had been replaced with the aspiration of becoming a citizen of equal rights and standing? It is noticeable that in the late 1920s and into the 1930s families felt the urge to record what was left of the tradition that had been neglected. Researchers began to go into the archives and retrieve documents that were needed to write the history, apparently with a sense of increasing urgency. The pressures on the Jews in Germany were felt to the point of salvaging the written legacy before it was too late. Berthold Rosenthal (1875–1957) for the area of Baden, Michael Berolzheimer (1866–1942) for Franconia, Max Markreich (1881–1962) for Frisia, John Henry Richter (1919–1994), John

<sup>6</sup> Toni Oelsner, “Wie führt Familienforschung zu historischer Forschung?” in *Jüdische Familienforschung* 13, no. 44 (1937): 805–810, here 810. (“Hier sollte aufgezeigt werden, wie durch die historische Eingliederung das, was zunächst von der Familie, von den Großeltern und Urgroßeltern bekannt war und vorläufig völlig zufällig und damit auch uninteressant erschien, seinen historischen ‘Ort’ gewinnt. Das Manufakturwarengeschäft des Großvaters in der Kleinstadt in Thüringen, der Handwerkerberuf des Rabbiners in Schlesien im 18. Jahrhundert erwiesen sich als typische Berufsverhältnisse, bedingt durch die historische Entwicklung in diesen Ländern. Diese Schicksale enthüllen sich somit weniger als ‘Einzelschicksale’, sondern als eingespannt in den gesamten historischen und soziologischen Rahmen. Eine Kenntnis der jüdischen Sonderstellung vor der Voremanzipation und des langsamen Emanzipationsprozesses, die uns vielfach abhandeln gekommen war, ermöglicht auch eine klareres Verständnis für die jetzige Lage der Juden in Deutschland.”)

Bergmann (1908–1996) for Swabia, Henry Stanton (1921–2019), and Charles P. Stanton (1935–2001; not related to Henry) are only a few examples of researchers who felt the urgency to collect what was left with a sense that the documentation might not be available much longer.

The LBI Archives holds an enormous body of papers and documents not only from these researchers but from that era in general. In 1934, at a moment when the Jewish heritage became an issue in maintaining good standing as a citizen, Czellitzer published a small booklet, entitled *Mein Stammbaum: Eine genealogische Anleitung für deutsche Juden* (My Pedigree: A Genealogical Guide for German Jews).<sup>7</sup> Soon after, German Jews would be stripped of their citizenship, and having abandoned the family history became a problem that one would want to reverse. Czellitzer noted that a few of those histories had been preserved within the *Society for Jewish Family Research*, and a few years later his journal published a list of these archival accounts.

#### 4. Family Research Today

This new direction in family research initiated by Arthur Czellitzer and the members of the *Society for Jewish Family Research* found its continuation in the United States by the generation of their children born in the 1920s, who are now in their 90s, and their grandchildren. A very active successor group formed by way of the refugee community with participants all over the United States, Canada, Israel, Australia and Europe. During the past 40 years a number of non-Jewish researchers joined the club in Germany. The Shoah made it necessary to regain family stories in order to include the lost. Daniel Mendelsohn's monumental study "The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Millions" is probably the most impressive example of a spiritual and intellectual journey to regain the memory and the history.<sup>8</sup> For the German-Jewish context, it is maybe the deep study by Elizabeth Plaut (1910–2003), wife of Rabbi Gunther Plaut (1912–2012) and sister-in-law of Rabbi Walter Plaut (1919–1964), whose book *The Plaut Family: Tracing the Legacy* includes more than 10,000 names and touches on many regions and families in Germany, and in the chapters on

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Czellitzer, *Mein Stammbaum: Eine genealogische Anleitung für deutsche Juden* (Berlin: Philo, 1934).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006).

the Holocaust turns into a global study.<sup>9</sup> For others, too, writing family history became a means of tracing the dispersal, and the attempt to reconstruct what once was.

## 5. The LBI Archives and Library as Resource for Jewish Family Research

However, the other side of the Society's efforts consisted in the construction and re-construction of family histories that had been lost in the course of the embourgeoisement of the modern era. Czellitzer had already noted at the onset of the journal *Jüdische Familienforschung*: "There are many reasons that led to destructing the old forms of the Jewish sense of family and the old traditions." (Viele Gründe sind es, die dazu führten, die alten Formen jüdischen Familiensinns und die alte Tradition zu zerstören.)<sup>10</sup> The *Society for Jewish Family Research* started with a broad cadre of professionals who worked hard to establish lost lineages; their papers are all available in the LBI archives. Among the first family researchers was Albert Phiebig (1908–2004), a young lawyer who lost his career after 1933 and devoted his time to work on commissioned family histories. Phiebig emigrated to the US and stayed active as a genealogist beside running a bookstore. Another early family researcher was Rudolf Simonis (1893–1965). He went to Sweden and left an enormous collection of family histories. Other active professionals and members of the Society were Eduard Duckesz (1868–1944) in Hamburg, Felix A. Theilhaber (1884–1956), and the rabbis Arnold Tänzer (1871–1937), Caesar Seeligmann (1860–1950), and Bernhard Brilling (1906–1987).

The online availability of the journal *Jüdische Familienforschung*, along with other sources such as the refugee paper *Aufbau*, has enabled the exchange of sources, leading to research strategies and topics to explore unlike anything ever before.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the LBI has worked closely with an organization that recognizes and honors researchers in Germany who investigate local Jewish history for the past twenty years. The Obermayer German Jewish History Award has

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth S. Plaut, *The Plaut Family: Tracing the Legacy* (Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Czellitzer, "Zum Geleit!" in *Jüdische Familienforschung* 1, no. 1 (1924–25): 1–5, here 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Jüdische Familienforschung*: <https://archive.org/details/judischefamilien>; *Aufbau*: <https://archive.org/details/aufbau>.



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“[...] raised awareness of a once-vibrant Jewish history and culture in their communities through educational programs exhibitions, restoration of synagogues and cemeteries, installation of Holocaust memorials, genealogical research, development of websites, publications, Stolpersteine, public programs, and other activities [...] Many individuals and organizations in Germany have [...] forged meaningful relationships with former residents and descendants of those who once lived in their towns. They are teachers and engineers, publishers and judges, artists and bankers, lawyers and business executives, and they come from every corner of the country. These volunteers have devoted countless hours to such projects.”<sup>12</sup>

Most of the publications are collected in the LBI Library, where they are preserved together with academic social history studies covering similar topics and locations.

<sup>12</sup> The quote, see <http://obermayer.us/award/>, accessed May 26, 2020.