

Wood River Jewish Community

THE SHOFAR

L' Shanah Tovah!

2018-5779



Why Every Adult Should Write Their Family History

“Each of us is a book waiting to be written and that book, if written, results in a person explained.” Thomas M. Cirignano

Everyone has relevant, important, and interesting life stories to tell — in actuality, a family history with the potential to engage and enrich our children, grandchildren, and beyond. Several years ago, I was honored to teach a writing workshop in Sun Valley on behalf of the Wood River Jewish Community. To my delight, twelve people actually attended! My focus in the workshop I entitled, “Introduction to Writing Your History,” was to encourage participants to write about their backgrounds, where they grew up, how they came to be where they are — their legacies of sorts, both for themselves as well as for their extended families. I encouraged them to compile photographs, documents, personal letters, and various memorabilia to bring to class. It was clear these would only enhance their writing.

Our first class exercise was to draw a diagram either of the home in which they grew up or the one in which they lived for the greatest number of years. Next, I asked participants to draw a diagram of the neighborhood in which this house was located. Last, they were to list the people who lived in that space with them plus a few random notes about who those people were and their personal feelings about them. Completing these three tasks had a surprising effect on all our memories. Why is that? Because generally, the more we engage our memories about a particular topic, the more details are evoked. Similarly with recording our histories, the more we tend to recall. This makes it easier to move to the next critical phase of preparing our family histories: create an approximate timeline of the key events in our lives.

In our current era of the internet, email, and digitization, far too many of us are losing sight of several critical historical factors. First, while many photographs and personal documents are digitized, an entire world of information and photographs never will be. Next, and something I personally consider tragic, is the rapidly disappearing medium of personal letters. So much of the very first record of history has been based upon personal letters, journals, scrapbooks, and notes. One of the biographies I read recently (Grant by Ron Chernow) could never have been written but for the extensively detailed journals Grant maintained in addition to the massive quantity of letters he

and his wife exchanged. The same has been true for significant periods of historical information.

As the daughter of two Holocaust survivors, I have absolutely no information about either of my parents' families — their siblings, my grandparents whom I never knew, my parents' friends, their home lives, or anything else about them that my own children often have asked about. Too often, my response is, “Gee, I haven't a clue” or “You know, that's something I never thought to ask them when they were still alive because I was in my early thirties. I think when we're young it never occurs to us to ask our parents about their lives. Big mistake!” The knowledge I do have is limited to what they happened to have told my brother and me we were growing up. We heard a few additional details from two or three of my mother's relatives who also survived but we knew next to nothing about my father's background. He was the sole survivor of his entire family.

And tragically, only two photographs of my mother from prior to the Holocaust survived. One was hidden in her nephew's shoe during his three years as a prisoner in Auschwitz, the other was rescued by her cousin, a teenager at the time who fled from Romania to Italy where he was taken in and hidden by nuns in a rural convent. Of my father, nothing of his history accompanied him. I always harbor some envy of friends who possess collections of family photographs and documents that date back three, four, and even five generations — my husband included!

To forget one's ancestors is to be a brook without a source, a tree without a root. – Chinese Proverb

Last week, I traveled to Chicago, the place I live when I'm not in Sun Valley. My brother from California, along with his son, was scheduled to present at a conference in Chicago. While they and I were there, I was adamant about making dinner for my family — my husband, both my sons, and of course my brother and nephew. My goal: not simply to make dinner for all of us but to try to recreate one of my brother's favorite meals, something our mother used to prepare while he and I were growing up.

Marlene's Column

As I was cooking, prepping ingredients, and setting the table in our quiet apartment, what became clearer to me than ever before was just how many questions I'd failed to ask each of my parents when they were alive. Sad to say, they both had died incredibly young and just as sad is that when we ourselves are young adults, it rarely dawns on us to ask our parents questions. Once they're no longer with us, we face our regrets.

As we began to eat, my brother exclaimed, "Fantastic, Marlene, you did it! This tastes exactly the way mom's tasted, excellent. I really do hope you wrote down the way you did this. Do you realize, I've been trying to recreate it for years?"

At that moment, my older son, David said, "Oh, thanks for reminding me, Jake. I made a list of my favorite foods you make, Mom. I'll email it to you when I get home. I'd really like to have the recipes for them but if you don't have actual recipes, at least you can let me know how to make them."

Next, Michael, my younger son, chimed in, "Oh yea, good point, Dave! I also have some dishes I need to learn how to make. Probably most of Dave's and mine are the same but I might have a few different ones." During that exchange, so many of the important reasons we should write our personal memoirs or family histories hit home.

My first experience dealing with information about my family's background was when Penguin-Berkeley Press asked me to research and rewrite my mother's memoir, eighteen years after she had died. Far too many questions I had about her personal life — hobbies, friends, interests, remained unanswered. Fortunately, a few limited ones were answered by her younger sister who was still alive.

As a writer and sociologist, so much of my focus is on writing for publication but, in reality, some of the best writing all of us can produce is for ourselves, our personal enlightenment, to help us heal, or to clarify problems with which we're dealing. An important part of our writing should simply be to provide our own families with information about ourselves and, in turn their origins — not only to present family members but to future ones not yet born.

While most of us really have no ambitions to publish a memoir, writing our family's history is a work of legacy for our entire family. It may seem trivial — a project lacking in urgency, or perhaps even somewhat self-indulgent but anyone I've ever encountered who's launched upon writing their family's history has become convinced of its importance and value. Approaching the process systematically allows us to preserve our stories within our family's narrative. Otherwise, what will happen

to your experiences, thoughts, perceptions, and memories?

It's never too early to begin writing your family history or collecting information you'd like share with your family. In recent years, a number of genealogy organizations have evolved as well as several genetic testing groups, those that help us discover our geographic, racial, and ethnic origins. The growth of these organizations and companies truly underscores the fact that we all strive to learn about our families of origin because in knowing from where we've come, we gain insights into who and what we are. We also can contribute to future generations.

In January, I'll be conducting a three-session writing workshop, an introduction to writing our family histories. So, if you're interested — which we hope you will be, please watch for forthcoming details. In the meantime, a number of online sources and books about the process are available and worthwhile exploring.

A few are listed below:

<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/02/09/reasons-to-write-your-family-history>

<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/10-steps-writing-engaging-family-history/>

<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/18-writing-tips-tell-stories/>

<http://www.familytree.com/blog/why-you-should-write-your-family-history/>

Plus, below are a few books worth considering:

Legacy: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Personal History

Writing Your Family History (1/2/2015)

Publish Your Family History: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing the Stories of Your Ancestors (1/12/2015)

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