

Early Jewish Genealogy Organizations In Berlin and Jerusalem

by Arnon Hershkovitz

“For all practical purposes, organized Jewish genealogy started in 1977,” wrote AVOTAYNU editor Sallyann Amdur Sack-Pikus in this journal a few years ago.¹ Indeed, a consensus exists among most Jewish genealogists that the formation of the Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc., in New York City in 1977 marked the beginning of contemporary organized Jewish genealogy. The very title of the organization declares its inauguration, for it omits mention of any geographical location. Organizations do not need to distinguish themselves by location if no other similar organizations exist—and at that time, no other Jewish genealogy organizations did exist.

In reality, however, organized Jewish genealogy had started more than half a century before the New York-based organization. It began in Berlin in 1924 with a successor organization in Jerusalem, as Sack acknowledged in a different article, “The first-known Jewish genealogy society was founded in Berlin in the 1930s....The society and its members fell victims to the Nazis. A record exists of the founders of a Jewish genealogical society in Palestine in 1937, but nothing more is known of that group.”²

Until now, the story has not been fully told of the first Jewish genealogy organization formed in Berlin in 1924, and its successor organization in Jerusalem.³ Thanks to valuable online sources for digitized Israeli newspapers, additional details now are readily available. This article sheds light on that early organized Jewish genealogy history, tells the story of its leaders and explores the possible whereabouts of a potentially valuable Jewish genealogical archive.

Arthur Paul Czellitzer, Berlin, 1924

Dr. Arthur Paul Czellitzer, born April 5, 1871, in Wrocław, Poland, was an ophthalmologist who did much to promote Jewish genealogy research. In 1924, he founded in Berlin the *Gesellschaft für jüdische Familienforschung* (Society for Jewish genealogy). This organization and its journal, *Jüdische Familienforschung* (Jewish genealogy), as well as Czellitzer’s publications, are briefly mentioned in various sources, including *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy: Sources in the United States and Canada* by Arthur Kurzweil and Miriam Weiner. A comprehensive introduction about the society was published by Hanns G. Reissner in *Toledot* in 1977, excerpts from which were reprinted in *Stammbaum* in 2002.⁴ In the same issue of *Stammbaum* and in the following one some very important lists and indexes were published.⁵

In 1934, Dr. Czellitzer published a 32-page booklet in German entitled *Mein Stammbaum: Eine genealogische Anleitung für deutsche Juden* (My family tree: A genealogy

News in the Gazette

GENEALOGY. — Dr. Hermann Mayer, residing at Jerusalem has been granted a permit to publish four times a year at the “Lychtenheim and Son” printing press, situated at the Valero Lane, Jerusalem, a newspaper in the English, French and German languages, entitled “The Jewish Genealogist”, treating of the history of Jewish families, and under the editorship of Mr. Siegfried Ascher of Jerusalem.

Palestine Post, 25 April 1940

a time when Germany already was governed by the Nazi party and its leader was Adolf Hitler. The Aryan Race ideology was promoted by the government, and by 1935 it was anchored by the Laws for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor and the Reich Citizenship Law. These laws discriminated against Jews based on their race, i.e., their family origin. In the introduction to his booklet, Czellitzer refers to the outside atmosphere and states that the “new government strives to make us all conscious of the importance of the family’s worth to the state, the significance of race, and an interest in one’s ancestors.”⁶

From its early beginnings, the *Gesellschaft* distributed its publication throughout Germany (written in Gothic German until 1930). A total of 50 issues (in 14 volumes) appeared, with a circulation of about 1,000 per edition; the last was published in 1938.⁷ The journal included studies of Jewish families primarily, but not only from Germany. It served also as a vehicle for discussions among readers, and many of its subscribers were knowledgeable about family history, clothing of the past, origin of family names and other genealogical topics.⁸ A valuable resource for German Jewish history, the journal published, for example, indexes to surname changes that were part of the Stein-Hardenberg Reforms in the early 19th century.⁹ Copies of the journal may be found today in several libraries around the world, but a full set is known to exist only in the LDS (Mormon) Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah.¹⁰ In addition to its meetings and its journal, the society also built an archive for research on German Jewish families that included many documents, family trees and Jewish registers.

Eventually, of course, the Nazis halted the activity of the *Gesellschaft für jüdische Familienforschung*. The journal ceased publication in 1938, and in the same year, Dr.

Today

Jerusalem:

Dzalel Museum: Visiting Hours
a.m. to 1 p.m. 3 to 6 p.m.

Labour Seminary: Mr. P. Corneli:
"Statistics of Jewish Settlements" (Hebrew); 7.15 p.m.; **Dr. Mehlman:** "Realism in Literature" (Hebrew); 8.15 p.m.; Histadruth Building.

Dr. Brillling: "The History of Silesian Jews"; **Dr. Asher:** "Pedigrees of Silesian Families"; 8 p.m.; **Cafe Tabor; Auspices: Jewish Genealogical Society.**

Palestine Post, 31 March 1940

Czellitzer was forced to leave Germany, escaping to Berda in The Netherlands. Along with his family, he took the society's archive with him. His wife, Margaret, documented her memories from that time; from these articles we learn the family's fate.¹¹ On May 1940, when the Germans invaded Berda, the Czellitzer family began to run towards France, but were arrested by French soldiers when they arrived in Belgium. Since Dr. Czellitzer held a German passport, he was considered a "suspected German," although his wife and three daughters were allowed to continue onward. They reached England where they were arrested for holding German passports and confined in a women's prison for about four months. After the war, Mrs. Czellitzer and her daughters immigrated to the United States.

Dr. Czellitzer was released six days after he was arrested and returned to Berda where he lived alone for three years. During this period, he compiled a 300-year family history, *Geschichte Meiner Familie 1640-1942*. This work survived the war, and a copy of it is held in the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) library in New York and in Berlin; a digital copy is available through the LBI catalog. In April 1943, Dr. Czellitzer was arrested in his home by German soldiers and was transferred to Westerbork concentration camp. In July of that year, he was sent to the death camp of Sobibor, where he was murdered on July 16, 1943, three days after he arrived.¹² Yad Vashem's Central Database of Names holds two Pages of Testimony memorializing Dr. Czellitzer, one from a relative, Frank Czellitzer, submitted in 1957 in Tel Aviv, and the other submitted from the United States in 2007 by Czellitzer's grandson, Thomas Stevens.¹³

When he was arrested, Czellitzer asked Dutch friends to look after the *Gesellschaft* archive and to deposit it at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem after the war. Unfortunately, the archive was destroyed during the war.¹⁴

Siegfried Ascher, Jerusalem, 1939

Dr. Czellitzer was not the only German Jew of his generation who was passionate about Jewish genealogy. Unofficially, the *Gesellschaft* had a successor organization in Eretz Israel, after one of its members, Dr. Siegfried Ascher, immigrated to Jerusalem, probably in the late 1930s.¹⁵ Until recently, little was known about this organization, but online databases now offer new details about the organization established almost 40 years before the "first" New York-based society.

In 2003, Chanan Rapaport published a short article in *Sharsheret HaDorot*, the publication of the Israel Genealogical Society, in which he mentioned learning for the first time about the activity of "The Jewish Genealogical Research Society of Palestine" and its president, Dr. Siegfried Ascher. Rapaport mentioned that he had evidence of the society's activity as of 1942, and he asked the readers for information about Ascher's descendants. Eventually, Rapaport made contact with Ascher's relatives, but they couldn't shed any new light on his genealogical activity.¹⁶

Details about Siegfried Ascher may be found in David Tidhar's *Entsiklopedyah Le-halutse Ha-yishuv U-vonav* (Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel).¹⁷ Also, an article was published in the Israeli newspaper, *Maariv*, mentioning Dr. Ascher's 80th birthday.¹⁸ According to these sources, Siegfried Ascher was born in 1877 in Berlin and immigrated to Jerusalem in 1939, first living in Jerusalem and later moving to Haifa. He was an architect and land expert, and he continued working in these fields after his immigration, but he is best known as a world expert in stamp collection and philately (the study of stamps and postal history). Soon after Ascher arrived in Jerusalem, on September 29, 1940, he was mentioned, along with the new Jewish genealogy society, in a short article entitled "Jewish Genealogical Research: New Studies in Palestine," published in the *Palestine Post* (predecessor of today's *Jerusalem Post*).¹⁹ The reporter speaks of his meeting with Ascher, "president of the Jewish Genealogical Society in Jerusalem," in which the latter "revealed [to me] some of the secrets of genealogical research, a useful source for the furtherance of Jewish and world history." In this article, Ascher explains the connection to the Berlin society:

Some 150,000 names have been dealt with by the Society founded as the *Gesellschaft, fuer Juedische Familienforschung* in Berlin 20 years ago. Lists of names, marriage certificates, citizenship papers and the entire archives of the Society are now in Jerusalem, where the work is being continued.

The reference to the German archive comes as a surprise after reading Dr. Czellitzer's memories described above. Is it possible that part of the Berlin archives arrived in Palestine with Ascher, and that Czellitzer carried only a part of the collection to the Netherlands (and to an ultimate destruction)? The *Palestine Post* reporter further notes, "a valuable service is rendered by the Society quarterly, which published the whereabouts of many of the refugees from

Germany and helped members of scattered families make contact with one another again.” A short notice in the *Palestine Post* on April 25, 1940, also refers to the Jerusalem society’s quarterly:

Dr. Herman Mayer, residing in Jerusalem, has been granted a permit to publish four times a year at the Lychtenheim and Son printing press, situated at the Valero Lane, Jerusalem, a newspaper in the English, French and German languages, entitled *The Jewish Genealogist*, treating the history of Jewish families, and under the editorship of Mr. Siegfried Ascher of Jerusalem.²⁰

These are the only references to the possible existence of such a quarterly. Exhaustive searches of library catalogues and online sources reveal no evidence that it ever came into being.

The earliest evidence of the existence of the Jerusalem-based society comes from a December 24, 1939, *Palestine Post* article reporting on a new exhibition.²¹ According to the article, this exhibition holds “a collection of photographs and manuscripts of the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelsohn...lent by Dr. Herman Meier.” This exhibition, “was held in conjunction with the Genealogical Research Society.” Again Dr. Meier (although his name is spelled differently) is associated with the Jerusalem genealogy society, although this time with regards to a collection of Moses Mendelsohn portraits. Fortunately, the mention of this collection allows us to identify Dr. Meier and, furthermore, to thicken the line connecting the activity of the Jerusalem-based genealogical society to that of the society in Berlin. The missing link is an article published in *AJR Information*, the journal of the Association of Jewish Refugees in Great Britain that demonstrates the connection between the Berlin society and the one in Palestine. It shows that the Jerusalem organization was an almost natural continuation of the destroyed Berlin society. Published in June 1965, this article, “Mendelssohn Archives in Berlin,” tells the story of the Mendelsohn family archives (three-quarters of which refer to the composer Felix Mendelsohn, the other one-quarter to Moses Mendelsohn), which was “built up by the former Berlin lawyer, Hermann Meyer. In 1933, it was removed to Jerusalem.”²²

The society met in Café Tavor at 4 Ben Yehuda Street, Jerusalem. A notice from March 31, 1940, announces, “Dr. Brillling will lecture about ‘The history of Silesian Jews,’ and Dr. Ascher about ‘Pedigrees of Silesian Families.’”²³ The mention of Dr. Brillling further demonstrates the relationship of the Israeli society to the society in Berlin. Rabbi Dr. Bernhard Brillling (born in 1906 in Trzemeszno, Poland, died in 1987 in Münster, Germany) was one of the most prominent genealogists in Germany during the 20th century [and the first AVOTAYNU contributing editor for Germany—Ed.]. After World War II, Brillling conducted major studies about the Jews of the historic German land of Westphalia and built a large archive for this purpose. Before the war, Dr. Brillling emigrated to Palestine, where he lost most of the materials collected by him up to that time.²⁴

From Chanan Rapaport

When I became aware that a “Palestine Jewish Genealogical Society” was active in Eretz Yisrael before World War II, and that it was presided over by Dr. Siegfried Ascher, I embarked upon the search for its remnants. After much investigation, I found Dr. Ascher’s granddaughter who was already very old. She told me that his archives were sold—by his wife—to the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt.

I sent someone who visited Europe to look for that archive. He informed me that Dr. Ascher’s archives are kept in the cellar of the museum, unused and untouched, in their original cartons. I approached the museum’s authorities and suggested that the archive be sent to Jerusalem to be lodged within the International Institute for Research in Jewish Genealogy named after another *yekke* (German Jew) Dr. Paul Jacobi, which is lodged within the National Jewish Library. The response was negative.

Then I mobilized the head of the German-Jewish Landsmanschaft in Israel, an important and respected lawyer, but, again, no success. I assumed that, because the museum paid money for that archive, they were not ready to part with their trophy. Of course, I do not know what was included in the purchased archive.

Mr. Hershkovitz tells me that the museum wrote to him about buying that archive from the widow of Rabbi Brillling, who received it from Dr. Ascher (apparently, a close friend of Dr. Ascher). They also informed him that the archive holds only Dr. Ascher’s genealogical research about German Jewry. It seems plausible that the museum was not interested in the Palestine Jewish Genealogical Society.

The author found the details about the activity of the Jerusalem-based Jewish Genealogical Society of the late 1930s and early 1940s reported above via the Historical Jewish Press Project of Tel Aviv University and the National Library of Israel, accessible at www.jpress.org.il/view-english.asp. This important resource allows for a full textual search in both old and modern Jewish newspapers from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, thanks to advanced scanning and optical character recognition (OCR) technologies. The available newspapers are written in various languages (most in Hebrew) and come from different periods of time and different regions of the world. The author used various keywords (both in Hebrew and English) such as Jewish genealogy, genealogical, or Ascher that might be related to the activity of the Jerusalem Society to find the articles cited above. The latest item that mentions the society dates from a June 27, 1949, *Palestine Post* article, that reports, “Dr. S. Ascher has moved from Jerusalem to...Haifa, with the Jewish Genealogical Archives.” Leaving Jerusalem was probably a result of the death of Dr. Ascher’s wife, Bettina (born 1878), in 1948.²⁵ We are left with two or three unanswered questions. Did the society’s activities cease after Dr. Ascher left

Jerusalem? More importantly: What happened to the society's archives—and did they include any documents from the Berlin society's archive?

Mystery of the Archives

Dr. Siegfried Ascher died in Haifa on June 22, 1962.²⁶ The obituaries about Dr. Ascher do not mention his interest in genealogy, and the fate of Ascher's archives remains a mystery. According to Chanan Rapaport (see below), the Jerusalem Society's archives made their way to the Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt (Jewish museum in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany). In recent correspondence with this author, however, museum curator Michael Lenarz explained:

The information which you had heard about Dr. Ascher's archive is not completely correct. A part of Dr. Ascher's collection with family trees, family notes etc. was given to his fellow genealogist the late Rabbi Bernhard Brillung who later donated his collections to our museum. The documents Rabbi Brillung received from Dr. Ascher do NOT contain the society's archive. There is also no personal correspondence of Dr. Ascher in the collection which regards the society. I suppose the archive of the society is either in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (<http://sites.huji.ac.il/cahjp/>) or is held by the Israel Genealogical Society (www.isragen.org.il/).

According to Hadassah Assouline, director of the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP), however, her archives does not hold any material catalogued under the name of the Jerusalem genealogical society. Neither does the Israel Genealogical Society have any records from Ascher. Mrs. Assouline referred the author to the Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt! Until such time as someone inventories the Brillung and Ascher material in the Frankfurt Jewish Museum, we cannot be certain that the archives are not in that repository. If they are not, where might they be? Perhaps no archives ever did exist for the Palestine society and all that was in Ascher's archives were only personal materials.

Notes

1. Sack, S. (2004). Jewish genealogy: The past 25 years. *AVOTAYNU*, XX(2), 3–7.
2. Sack, S. (2008). Evolution of Jewish genealogical studies. In M.A. Ehrlich (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora: Origins, experiences, and culture, Volume 3* (pp. 292–294). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
3. Private correspondence with Dr. Sallyann Amdur Sack, March 2011.
4. Reissner, H.G. (1977). Gesellschaft für jüdische Familienforschung, *Toledot, The Journal of Jewish Genealogy*, 7–9.)
5. See Issues 20, 21 of *Stammbaum: The journal of German-Jewish genealogical research*, 20, 31–33. These issues are available for reading online on Leo Baeck Institute website, www.lbi.org/Stammbaum.html. They include JF membership lists from 1925, 1926, including names and locations of the members (in 1926 they count 314, including corporate) in Germany and abroad; name indexes for the “Searching For” (*Suchblatt*) section of JF, in which readers submitted questions about surnames and individuals they were researching, and sometimes replies to previ-

ously-published questions and a full author index for JF, including translations of the titles into English.

6. As translated in D. S. Hertz. *How Jews became Germans: The History of Conversion and Assimilation in Berlin*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

7. As mentioned in Rottenberg, D. (1977). *Finding Our Fathers: A guidebook to Jewish genealogy*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co.

8. As told in the newsletter of San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society, February 1988.

9. These reforms, implemented in Prussia from 1807 to 1814 by governments headed by Baron vom Stein and K. A. von Hardenberg, allowed burghers and peasants to acquire land.

10. Fiche #6001495 holds issues 1–25, fiche #6001496 holds issues 26–50.

11. Czellitzer, M. Story of your Childhood 1938–1945, Leo Baeck Institute Archives (Memoir Collection), DOI:371877.

12. His details appear in In Memoriam – Nederlandse oorlogsslachtoffers, Nederlandse Oorlogsgravenstichting (Dutch War Victims Authority), 's-Gravenhage (courtesy of the Association of Yad Vashem Friends in Netherlands, Amsterdam).

13. Records no. 531245 and 6868841, respectively.

14. As was reported in AJR Information (the newspaper of the Association of Jewish Refugees in Great Britain) August 1947, Volume II, Issue 8.

15. In 1937, 1938 – “Ascher Siegfried Dr. Phil Archit” still appears in the official Berlin phone directory (“Amtliches Fernsprechbuch für den Bezirk der Reichspostdirektion Berlin”).

16. Private correspondence with Dr. Chanan Rapaport, March 2011..

17. D. Tidhar. (1965). *Entsiklopedyah le-halutse ha-yishuv u- vonav (Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel)* (Vol. 14, pp. 4537-4538). Retrieved from www.tidhar.tourolib.org/tidhar/view/14/4537 [June 2011].

18. Dr. Siegfried Ascher – 80 years old. *Maariv*, 14 June 1957, p. 15.

19. Jewish Genealogical Research: New studies in Palestine, *Palestine Post*, 29 September 1940, p. 4.

20. News in the Gazette (Genealogy), *Palestine Post*, 25 April 1940, p. 2.

21. Three exhibitions in Jerusalem, *Palestine Post*, 24 December 1939, p. 2.

22. Published in Volume XX, issue 6, p. 10.

23. In “Today” section, *Palestine Post*, 31 March 1940, p. 6.

24. As being told in an introduction by Peter W. Landé to the online database “Westphalian Jews” stored in JewishGen.org. <http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/germany/westphalia.htm> [accessed March 2011].

25. Based on a profile in Geni.com, added by Thomas Joski, <http://www.geni.com/people/Bettina-Ascher/600000005455775002> [accessed June 2011].

26. Death details were given by Hevra Kadisha of Haifa, March 2011.

Arnon Hershkovitz, PhD, is the founder and leader of the Israeli Family Roots Forum, and has been involved in genealogical research for the past 12 years. He is an expert genealogist and a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists. Hershkovitz served as the Head Genealogy Consultant to the Israeli production of the television show “Who Do You Think You Are?”