

Using Facebook as a Genealogy Tool

by Arnon Hershkovitz

Ever since I undertook genealogy research more than a decade ago, I have used the Internet extensively as an enormous repository of sources and resources, an important means of communication, and a major facilitator for connecting with relatives, colleagues, and other nice people from around the globe. Clearly, the Internet is not a trend but an integral part of our lives today. A recent trend on the Internet scene—the formation of social network websites—may enrich all online genealogy research in a variety of ways. In this article, we discuss how Facebook—currently the most popular social networking website and one of the Internet’s most popular websites—may be used effectively for genealogical research on a daily basis.

Readers unfamiliar with Facebook may learn the terminology in the sidebar.

Social Networking and the Importance of Facebook

Social networking existed prior to the Internet era. Any group of individuals with an underlying set of connections between them forms a social network. Such connections may be based on friendship, common interest, family relationships, or some other attribute. Once the Internet burst into everyone’s lives, however, it was just a matter of time before social networks also had an online presence.

Launched as a closed social network in early 2004 and made public in late 2006, Facebook currently has the greatest number of users of any social networking website—400 million active users in more than 180 countries.¹ Nearly one-quarter of the world’s Internet users² and almost six percent of the world’s population³ is active on Facebook, representing more than 92 percent of the countries in the world.⁴ In early 2010, Facebook became the most-visited website in the United States.⁵

More than ranking and popularity make Facebook a valuable website for genealogists worldwide; users’ activity within the site demonstrates that Facebook is not just another website. The average Facebook user has 130 friends on the site, spends almost an hour per day on the site, and creates 70 pieces of content each month (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photograph albums, and more).⁶ Put simply: Facebook is not just a site on which to register; its users are active within it on a daily basis, and it is more than a children’s game. Facebook users’ average age is ever-growing; the average U.S. Facebook user is 38 years old.⁷

With much of the world engaged actively with Facebook, the site has considerable potential to support genealogical research. In the following sections, some of the most useful applications of Facebook to genealogy research are reviewed. Facebook may ease many genealogical tasks,

such as contacting and/or finding new or “lost” relatives, connecting with colleagues based on common interests in order to obtain and/or suggest help, sharing information with relatives and colleagues, and acquiring new information.

Connect with Relatives

Facebook is like a treasure island on which many of the people from your family tree reside. To reunite virtually with relatives with whom you communicated for a long time, or—even better—to find “lost” relatives, Facebook may help, even if you have only scanty information.

The first step in finding people is simply to search their names using the search box at the top of the screen (see Figure 1). Search for a full name, only a part of it, and even in reversed order. Lists of users with that name or a similar one will appear. For example, a search for “Arnon Hershkovici” will produce a “Did you mean...” reference to two possible matches: Arnon Hershkovitz, and Arnon Hershkovich. Although Facebook has no soundex-based search, the “did you mean?” mechanism may help with the problem of different spellings. The site’s search box implements an AutoComplete mechanism which suggests completions of the query while you are typing it and permits jumping to a user profile without going through the results table. This mechanism selects users from your friends list to appear in the suggestions. If none are found in the friends list, then it searches among those with whom you have mutual friends. If still suitable matches are not found, then the mechanism searches among popular users, groups, and/or pages. A Facebook search for a rare or unique surname may instantly generate results in tracing people with that name.

Finding users in Facebook may be a nightmare when looking for common names or when no clues permit filtering the results. Two features, however, allow easy finding of friends and contacts. Individuals fortunate enough to know a person’s e-mail address may type it in the same search box. If a user with that e-mail address exists in the system, Facebook will find it immediately. In addition, Facebook can help find people to whom you send e-mail or with whom you use Instant Messaging. You can upload an imported contacts file. Sometimes, users from non-English-speaking countries will appear on Facebook with their native language (usually relatively young and relatively old people). If you have been unsuccessful finding an Israeli relative, search for him or her in Hebrew, too.

Search Strategies

As a result of a name search, a table of possible matches



Figure 1. Facebook Search Box at the top of the site’s screen

appears in the form of a table showing the profile picture (if one exists and the user permits it to be seen by non-“friends”), the name, and some basic location/affiliation details (according to privacy settings) of the people who match the query inserted. Sometimes, this is enough to find the person being sought; otherwise some filtering should be done. In looking for the right person in a long list of possible matches, filtering may involve intuition or trial and error strategies, for example. Here is a list of possible actions for filtering:

Browse the results table. Look for a familiar face, perhaps recognize a unique name or a certain combination of a name and location/affiliation details.

Filter by location, school, or work place (depending upon the details available in the user profiles).

Peek at potential relatives’ profiles and check the available information, such as birthday, hometown, current city, workplace, education (present and past), schools, and relationship status. Perhaps find photographs that might help with the filtering. Such information may be available to friends only, but often at least some details are public. Only a bit of information may be enough to determine if this person is the one sought.

Look at Friends lists of potential relatives. This is a powerful tool for finding a person since it relies upon one of the social networks’ principal ideas—connections between people. If you have a lost branch of the family on which you have a few names—and even if some of these names are partial or obviously misspelled—they may be friends of one another. For example, once you look at my friends list, you may search it (with a built-in search box) for the name “Herskovitz,” where you will see that I have five other Herskovitz friends. A search only for “Hershko,” produces a relative who spells her name Herskovizh (see Figure 2). If someone has me on their family tree, they also have a few more of these people, and when you see them on my friends list, you will know that you probably found the right person.

Peruse lists of mutual friends that appear on Facebook personal profiles and search results. Results may reveal that you are indeed related to the subject person. Indication for mutual friends will appear when you search for people using the general search box, as well as when you read a specific profile.

Acquire Information About Your Relatives

Once you have found a person you were seeking, ask the person to be “Friends.” As mentioned above, friendship is the basis of any social network. In the case of Facebook, being someone’s “Friend” normally will allow access to all that is in the person’s profile (e.g., personal information, photographs, activity within the site, and more). This is what we need in order to facilitate communication with that user and more importantly to maintain contact with him or her. If the person found does not necessarily know you, it is best to send a message first, explaining the presumed connection between both of you. Only after receiving a reply (if it is friendly), ask to be Facebook friends. The message



Figure 2. Results of a Search of author’s Friends List for the string “Hershko” will result in all the friends whose names contain this string; note that the last friend on the list spells his surname differently from the others.

should be short and clear, explaining how you found this person and adding a little bit of personal information (to show that your message is not a scam).

Adding someone as a friend permits access to his or her complete profile, offering an opportunity to learn a good deal of personal information, such as birth date, place of residence, and relationship status. In addition, you may be referred from this profile to profiles of other family members since Facebook easily permits the mention of one’s spouse, children, and siblings. A person’s photograph may also be available for those who want to add profile pictures of family members to their family tree software. Always request permission before copying someone’s photographs from an album. Note that photographs often are tagged, which means that the user has added automatically generated captions for the people in the picture—even if they are not on Facebook. If a Facebook user is tagged, a hyperlink to his/her profile automatically is added.

Stay in Touch with Relatives and Even Find More

Using Facebook is a great way of staying in touch with relatives once you have become Facebook friends. The activities of all of your friends appear on your News Feed, so you automatically become aware of the important events in lives that they share. Facebook will also notify users about friends’ upcoming birthdays in a special box dedicated for that. The site allows every user to create groups of friends; each friend may belong to as many groups as desired. Groups of friends are useful for messages (such as when you want to send family news), to determine privacy settings, to send invitations to events published on Facebook and for watching the News Feed (as you can choose to see updates by friends’ groups). Consider putting all your friends who are the descendants of a common ancestor into a single group in order to facilitate communication with them.

Facebook Terminology

An **Application** is a piece of software accessed from within Facebook. Applications may be developed by anyone for doing anything.

A **Network** is a definition of a person about their location or affiliation in order to easily communicate with other users from within it.

News Feed is a continuously and automatically updated list that reflects one's friends' activities. The News Feed is located in the middle column of the three-column home page. In this main section of the website, the News Feed invites friends to comment on the content. Hence, it is an important means of communication between users.

Pages and Groups are Facebook features to which any user may belong and/or initiate. They usually promote a specific person, organization, topic, or idea, and they serve to facilitate gathering together mutually interested users. Users can "like" a page or "join" a group, two features that offer slightly different means of communication between the administrator of the page or group and users. Both pages and groups may be found via the site's search engine.

A **Profile** is the online representation of the user, including all of the information he or she wants to share. According to privacy settings, each user selects, each piece of information on the profile may be available to different audiences, e.g., "everyone," "friends only," "friends and friends of friends," a customized list of people, or no one but you.

A **Status** is a user message sent to their users' friends (and to others, depending on privacy settings). A status update, i.e., the act of changing status is an important "one-to-many" in Facebook.

The **Wall** is a central part of any profile. Primarily because it is public, everyone (considering privacy settings) can see it, and friends can post messages on it. The wall incorporates all of the user's activity within Facebook and within any site connected to Facebook.

Another useful Facebook feature is the suggestion box (normally located on the top right), which suggests possible friends selected electronically by Facebook based on such information as mutual friends and school/work information. This tool may help identify family members who are new Facebook users or help to find family members whose names were missed when initially searched.

Applications play a central role on Facebook. New applications are developed frequently and spread via the users' network. Accessing an application means that you permit access to your profile electronically. After accessing an application such as FamilyLink.com, for example, you can mark people from your friends list as "family." Subsequently, the application accessed will identify potential new family members on Facebook by comparing your informa-

tion with your "family" friends. This might be a great tool for finding new Facebook relatives. Your use of a certain application is indicated on your "wall," and your friends see it on their own News Feeds. That way, for example, any family-related question you have (e.g., "Where is Uncle Willie actually buried?") will be available for all your family member friends to see. They, in turn, may help you find the answer or, at a minimum, will be aware of your activity. Applications (also searchable via the general search box) may help find new relatives. The most popular application for that purpose probably is the one developed by Family Link.com, but others of that type, such as Family Tree, Relatively Me, and One Family Tree also are popular.

Family Groups: Share, Be Shared, Be Discovered

The use of groups or pages (defined in the sidebar), offer considerable opportunities to share family information, let others from the family share their knowledge, and even to be discovered by individuals who are interested in your family. To initiate a group, use the "+ Create a Group" button at the top of the Groups view, available via the left menu on Facebook's main page. Consider opening a group to "collect" all descendants of an ancestral couple, taking care to name your group concisely and informatively. Joining groups requires registration to the site, but accessing them—not necessarily as Facebook groups have three possible access options:

- **Open.** Anyone may view its content, join, and invite others to join.
- **Closed.** Membership must be approved by the administrator. The group initiator is the first administrator. Later, the administrator may appoint other administrators. Only group members may see the group's content.
- **Secret.** The group will not appear in site searches. (The same search box one uses to look for people is used to look for groups—and with the same AutoComplete mechanism mentioned above.) Look for "Haim Yehoshua and Esther Itta GOLDBERG," "JANAs of the Facebook, unite!" or "Getraide Family" to see some of the family groups I have created. The groups are closed; only the description of them may be read. Others who may be interested in your group must request "admission."

A family group is a place to reunite all the relatives virtually, to share information, and to learn about one another. Such groups may be used to discover new information, primarily in two ways: Encourage others to share their information about their family and about common ancestors (including uploading photographs) with the group, and allow other relatives to find the group when they search their family on Facebook. You may easily discover new or long-lost relatives. Creating a group on Facebook is much like adding a name to the JewishGen Family Finder. In both cases, the hope is that someone eventually will find you.

Connect with Other Genealogists

As every genealogist knows, many questions arise in the

course of conducting the research, and frequent communication with colleagues is a “must.” We use JewishGen and other mailing lists; many are members of a geographically based genealogy society. We maintain contact in a variety of ways. Genealogy-related groups on Facebook are another means to meet other colleagues with similar interests and to communicate with the relevant community. “Genealogy Fun,” for example, is an open group whose purpose is to “share tips on genealogy.” As of spring 2010, the group had somewhat more than 400 members, a list of 400 genealogists in one place.⁸ If this is not enough, the “International Genealogy” group has more than 6,400 members. For more specific interests, consider the Dutch Genealogy group with 304 members; JewishGen profile,⁹ 563 friends; Ohio Genealogical Society group, 270 members; Northern Ireland Genealogy group, 264 members; Australian Genealogy, 468 members; Cemetery Explorers group, 1,742 members; Genealogy Photos group, 568 members—not to mention the Ancestry.com page with 57,255 “likers.” Since any registered user can initiate a group or open a page, the existence of several groups or pages discussing the same topic certainly is possible.

Topics of interest for genealogical research, such as making a “friend” connection among related profiles, joining groups, or “liking a page” keep users updated with news and announcements. For example, those who use the public family tree program Geni.com, may find it useful to “friend” the Geni.com profile, while those who use the online/offline software of MyHeritage may “friend” the company profile and “like” their page (both entitled with the company name). By doing this, updates from the group/page appear in your News Feed. In addition, the action provides an opportunity to meet other users (i.e., other friends/likers) and to discuss with them topics related to the relevant software.

Just as others have created groups and pages for gathering people with the same research interest, you can do it, too. For example, a group created to discuss a certain *shtetl* (town), might be a good way to gather researchers and descendants of that village to deepen knowledge about it. Such a group/page can enrich a JewishGen ShtetlLinks page for the memory of that place, as the former easily allows constant communication between people interested in the group. For example, the Jewish Krasilov group I recently created, devoted to the research of my maternal grandfather’s *shtetl*, already includes some interesting stories, links, and photographs uploaded by the group members, including the Krasilov ShtetlLink webmaster.

Get Help Anywhere in the World

Since Facebook is a global phenomenon, and as Jewish genealogical research by its very nature requires help worldwide, people from almost anywhere can help with almost any task. Need information about a local office in a certain city? Want to take a photograph of your ancestor’s tombstone in a distant cemetery? Want help with sending a

letter to a non-English-speaking person in a foreign country? Look for such help on a geographical and/or same-interest basis, by finding members of a relevant group/page. For example, to look for local help in a specific city/country/institute, simply search the largest group/page of that place, and publicly ask for help or personally contact active members.

Another useful method for finding people from a specific locality or with a specific affiliation is to search for a common name (by the destination), and to filter it for more specific results.

Is Facebook Safe?

Although a few searches may be done without being a registered member of the site, most of the activities on the website (e.g., sending messages to users, creating or joining groups) require registration—which is easy and free. Almost from Facebook’s inauguration, voices have raised privacy issues. Some expressed concerns include difficulties involved in deleting accounts and/or the sale of users’ data to private companies. Huge amounts of personal information are uploaded to Facebook every day—more than any other website. Presumably the data is available only to designated “friends,” but who else can access the data? In the final analysis, every user must carefully examine the possible consequences of publishing personal information on the Internet, even in a “closed” scenario within social networking websites.

Conclusion

Participation in Facebook is fun. Like any other social networking website, it helps you to connect with people with whom you share something, but it has two major benefits over other similar websites. The number of users is huge (and growing), and its users are extremely active. Readers may use this “everybody’s there” website for our genealogy needs in ways described in this article. Finding long-lost relatives and discovering new ones is always a great challenge, but using Facebook for these tasks may make them relatively easy. Using groups and pages is a good way both to meet colleagues and to form family/topical mini-communities.

The Internet changes continuously. In a few months, a new online trend may be the center of attraction to millions of surfers who will significantly decrease the time they spend on Facebook. For that reason, act now and strike while the Facebook iron is still hot.

Notes

1. According to Facebook.com’s Statistics page, <www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>, accessed April 20, 2010.

2. Considering about 1.8 billion Internet users, as reported by Internet Usage Statistics, <www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed April 22, 2010.

3. Considering a world population of 6,816,028,270, as projected by the U.S. Census Bureau World POPClock Pro-

jection, <www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html>, accessed April 20, 2010.

4. When counting 194 independent countries recognized by the U.S. Department of State. See: Independent States in the World, Fact Sheet, by Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Washington, DC), July 29, 2009. Available at <www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/4250.htm>, accessed April 20, 2010.

5. Hitwise report, March 15, 2010, "Facebook Reaches Top Ranking in U.S.," available at <weblogs.hitwise.com/heather-dougherty/2010/03/facebook_reaches_top_ranking_i.html>, accessed April 20, 2010.

6. Facebook.com's Statistics page, <www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>, accessed April 20, 2010.

7. Released by Pingdom, a web monitoring provider, on February 16th, 2010, see <royal.pingdom.com/2010/02/16/study-ages-of-social-network-users>, accessed April 30, 2010.

8. Here and in the rest of this section—group counts are updated as of May 1, 2010.

9. Profiles are often set up also for organizations or ideas, not just for people.

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