

# A Project To Document Maine Jewry

by Harris Gleckman

Six years ago, a group of volunteers undertook to correct years of inconsistent records on the locations of burial plots in an old Jewish cemetery in Portland, Maine. Within two years, Documenting Maine Jewry (DMJ), [www.MaineJews.org](http://www.MaineJews.org), became a project to build a community history of the Jews in Maine. The move involved a number of transitions—from records of the deceased to records of the living and deceased; from a genealogical mind set to a community history orientation; and from the records of one city to the Jewish story of the entire state. This article describes a process that can be employed to document other similar environments.

Currently DMJ's database has records on more than 28,000 Jews with strong ties to Maine and information on more than 900 Jewish, secular and commercial organizations that have had a significant impact on the life of Maine Jews.<sup>1</sup> The website has become a virtual library on Maine Jewry with 500 annotated photographs, 150 oral histories, and 250 documents. DMJ's leadership group (called the DMJ Minyan) meets electronically and in person to coordinate its various activities. One element has not changed. As a largely all-volunteer organization, we want to enjoy memories and have fun.

Each transition had its own challenge. Existing software was oriented toward genealogical information (who be-gat whom). Collecting information for a community history required us to build a record-keeping system that complemented the personal genealogical information with an organizational genealogy (which organizations are related to other organizations and which individuals participated in these organizations). To move from a Portland-only focus to a state-wide focus involved more than expected. Each town/city had its own history and pride in its uniqueness, so the project established local groups and contacts in 10 separate districts and created city/town homepages within the state-wide website. We call local coordinators DMJ *gab-bium*.

The hardest challenge remains how to nurture a historical self-consciousness and a self-reliance in defining ones own community history. Many people say that "they know everything about X town," and DMJ encourages that with a program of oral histories. Not many people are comfortable exploring what is unique about their Jewish experience in a particular place and how this uniqueness fits in to a wider Jewish or secular context. It is this latter awareness that the DMJ will be continuing to explore. A good part of this exploration and development has had unexpected outcomes. DMJ decided to host living room fundraiser events in and

outside of Maine. These DMJ gatherings quickly outgrew living rooms and did not really raise a significant amount of donations, but they did produce gatherings of 75 to 175 Jewish Mainers where attendees exchanged stories and reflections on their Maine Jewish experiences.

As it evolved, the methodology departed from traditional genealogical web approaches in an important manner. Rather than store and index just original documents, DMJ built records for each individual organization and individual that linked together many disparate references. With a relatively limited population, it is possible to build a combined portrait from the available information.<sup>2</sup> This requires name matching, which has its own challenges (with birth names, nicknames, woman recorded as Mrs. Y, Anglicization of names, multiple marriages, to mention just a few), but with an online process, families and friends can (and do) correct mismatched names. Each online registered user is encouraged to revise data interactively on his or her family and friends. (Web access, except to the burial records, is available only to those who provide a reasonable explanation of their interest in Maine Jewry.)

To date, this open-community approach has resulted in contributions from more than 700 individuals.

This experiment in Jewish community history reaps a number of benefits for contemporary Jewish-American

family historians. The major Jewish immigration to the United States occurred more than 100 years ago. Consequently, many Jewish families have resided in North America for three, four or more generations. Members of each of these generations lived in a city or town (or more often in a number of cities and towns); each of these generations has engaged with communities where they lived, and many of them have buried family members where they were living at the time. Of course, we have official records, such as census and naturalization papers, obituaries, and computerized indexes to public documents, such as newspaper obituaries and city directories. A community history project puts in the public domain two new sources of contemporary data—records from Jewish community institutions and the papers and photographs in private attics and basements.

## Community Institutions

On the community institution side, DMJ meets with representatives of individual organizations and helps them reorganize their records for their own use and for greater public access. For example, most Maine *chevra kadishot* (burial societies) and cemetery associations are too small and too old-fashioned to have website listings of burials.

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DMJ provides a common statewide repository for burial records from Maine's 16 Jewish cemeteries. DMJ volunteers have been photographing, indexing, and transcribing headstones around the state, so in addition to the burial records from the cemetery associations, the website includes images of 3,200 headstones. When these images initially were uploaded to help work on transcriptions, DMJ discovered that users were delighted to see, while sitting in their homes, digitized images of the headstones of loved ones. DMJ then added to the headstone images pages of the prayer *el moleh rachamin* in Hebrew, in transliteration, and in English. This makes it possible to pay a "virtual visit" to the cemetery—something appreciated by Jewish Mainers, particularly those highly migratory families that no longer live in New England, or those unable to travel to the cemetery.

All 17 currently functioning synagogues in the state have two other valuable resources with information about deceased Jews: their memorial boards and their *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death) records. (About memorial boards, see "Synagogue Memorial Tablets; An Overlooked Genealogical Resource" in AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, Spring 2011—Ed.) DMJ is working congregation-by-congregation to integrate this information into a single file. Currently, we have images of memorial boards from almost all the synagogues on MaineJews.org. Names are displayed in the same order as they appear on the congregational walls. This allows families to see names that are adjacent to known family members. Because the *yahrzeit* information also includes living members of the congregation, this data is not posted as a self-standing list; rather it is integrated into records of the individual and accessible only to registered DMJ users.

Synagogues and Jewish communal organizations also provide information on living Jews. DMJ is working with organizations to help them digitize newsletters, anniversary memorial books, and birth, wedding, bar mitzvah and other announcements. Oddly, for a religion that emphasizes life over death, Jews have not created an ethos of showcasing *mitzvah* (good deeds) and life cycle information in any way comparable to memorial boards and *yahrzeits*. Digitizing congregational records of *simchas* (joyful occasions) is one step in that direction. When someone says, "I went to Hebrew school there" and "I attended Jewish camp there," they are indicating the importance they attach to their strong community ties. Digitizing these contemporary life cycle records is a benefit to the current community organization and an important part of developing a sense of community history.

Another community history feature involves collection and documentation of Jewish businesses (as part of the economic foundation of Jewish life), of Jewish camps (a part of the building of Jewish identity process), and of Jewish involvement in secular institutions (a part of the Jewish-Gentile American experience). Collecting information on organizations creates a way to build records about these

businesses, camps, government agencies, colleges, and sport teams. The primary resources used to access this information have been families, oral histories, obituaries and photographs.

### Private "Attic" Sources

DMJ has been remarkably successful in gaining access to data that has resided in people's attics. People want a way to share their stories, and the digitization involved in a community-based project allows them to share their personal photographs and documents while at the same time retaining the originals as family heirlooms. Three types of records tend to be available from these private collections:

- Papers of defunct organizations to which a parent or grandparent belonged
- Photographs and memorabilia from the family's earlier days in North America
- Childhood scrapbooks that reflect the important events of the day

Photographs have been an unexpected route into family and community histories. DMJ recently surveyed its registered online users as a part of its three-year forward planning process, to ask what they wanted from the DMJ community history effort. The most popular feature of the website was the availability of photographs and the opportunity to identify people in the photographs. Currently DMJ uploads between 50 and 75 new annotated photographs each month. The scanned photographs, both those donated by individuals and those from the basements of community organizations, provide both a visual record of an event and a list of members of the family or community organization of the time.

A similar unexpected development occurred with DMJ's oral history project. A group of Portland Jews wanted to broaden its understanding of the Maine Jewish immigrant experience, preserve the voice of the older generation and gain an insight into what Maine was like for Jews in the early 20th century. With the support of the Maine Humanities Council, DMJ volunteers undertook some 40 oral history interviews. At the same time, DMJ discovered that 40 years earlier the Portland Jewish Community Center had commissioned another 40 interviews as its contribution to the U.S. Bicentennial celebrations. These 1977 interviews on old tape diskettes were located in the archives of the Portland Public Library. The library has now posted digitized versions of the combined collection on its website, [www.portlandlibrary.com/Jewry](http://www.portlandlibrary.com/Jewry). With the addition of written oral histories discovered in other libraries around the state and personal recollections recorded by family members, MaineJews.org now has an index to more than 140 personal stories.

The community history approach also opened doors to collaboration with the Maine Historical Society which co-sponsored with DMJ the first Maine Jewish history conference at Bates College, Lewiston, October 2009, with Colby

College in Waterville. Colby now sponsors a mini-course on the history of the Waterville Jewish community and has hosted the second Maine Jewish history conference in March 2011 with the Maine Jewish Museum, which commissioned DMJ to curate its first exhibition, and with the Bangor Public Library, which has been scanning its archived collection of Jewish organizational documents as donations to DMJ website.

As a mostly all-volunteer network, DMJ is rethinking how it wants to manage the blessings of discovering a large amount of information on Maine's small Jewish community and support reflections on the uniqueness and common features of Maine's Jewish life. As DMJ does this, it remains more than willing to share its software, methodology, and experiences with other regional community history projects.

What makes this effort worthwhile to the DMJ volunteers is their own enjoyment of their Maine Jewish recollections, their pleasure in reuniting Maine Jewish families and childhood friends, and their sense of mitzvah in building a virtual museum for others to enjoy. This sense of connection is best captured not in the online world, however, but in the real world. The DMJ regional gatherings outside the borders of the state have become contemporary versions of landsmanschaft associations. The landsmanschaft brought together people who migrated to America from the same shtetl in the Old Country for mutual support and good company. DMJ's out-of-state Gatherings seem to capture similar emotional ties as participants attend to find lost cousins and friends and to share a piece of their own earlier life. At the same time, the in-state DMJ Gathering has served to unite present Maine life with old Maine Jewish memories. Each of these events has helped to build a stronger collection of records for others to use to create their family biographies and to build their own sense of the Maine Jewish experience.

#### Notes

1. The debate, "Who-is-a-Mainer?" is about as complicated as "Who-is-a-Jew?" DMJ explicitly sidesteps both issues and makes this clear on its homepage. The expression "strong ties" has become the phrase DMJ users use to avoid these issues.

2. Estimating the size of the Maine Jewish population is a current research question in the state. It has been pushed to the fore by two events. First, a recent commissioned survey by the Jewish Community Alliance (the local Federation) of Jews in the two southern counties that found a far greater number of Jews than the JCA imagined (and incidentally the highest documented intermarriage rate in the country) and second, a preliminary comparison of the *American Jewish Yearbook* estimates of Maine Jews from 1907/1908 to 1930 that are not even close to the relevant Federal Census records. The AJY estimate ranges from 5,000 in 1907/1908 to 10,315 in 2005. The commissioned JCA two-county study resulted in estimates that were double the consensus view of the JCA before the study. DMJ

## It Happened at the Documenting Maine Jewry Gathering

At the DMJ Newton gathering, I was approached by Ellen Lerman Ward, a woman in her early 60s with whom I had grown up in Portland. Ellen had been going through some old things at her home in Wayland, Massachusetts, and had brought a few of her finds with her to the gathering. One item she came across was a well-worn, clearly well-used, small leather drafting kit. She carefully folded back the green leather flaps of the case and there, inscribed in ink, was the name Kornetsky. Kornetsky was my maiden name. She thought I might like to have the kit.

I recognized the name, of course, but I was interested in the origin of the kit and wondered how Ellen happened to have it. She said that it had belonged to her husband, Don Ward, and that he had used it 40-plus years ago when he was an engineering student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. That still didn't connect the dots for me. Then Ellen moved her hand a bit, and I noticed the initial "C." It read "C. Kornetsky," and I immediately thought of my uncle Conan Kornetsky, now in his mid-80s. He had attended the University of Maine and had taken science courses there. He very well might have had a drafting kit. What was really terrific was that my Uncle Conan was at the gathering, too! I quickly located him in the crowd (of 130) and beckoned to him to come see what Ellen had found. My hope was that he could add to the kit's genealogy. The moment he laid eyes on the drafting kit, he was overcome with emotion and incredulity. "That's my drafting kit," he said. "I had it when I was a student at the University of Maine."

We are not sure how Don Ward became owner of the drafting kit. With a relatively small Jewish population in Portland 60-some years ago, the Jewish community there often functioned as a big extended family. It was probably the frugality of parents who had lived through the Great Depression that was operating when the then-20-year-old drafting kit, originally Conan's, was passed down to the college-bound son of a family friend. It wasn't only relatives and old friends who found one another that day. A drafting kit and its original owner were reunited after more than 60 years.

*Karen Kornetsky Levine*

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and Colby College currently are extracting all the relevant census data to produce a better estimate for the 1870-1930 period.

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