

Book Reviews

FINDING OUR FATHERS: A GUIDEBOOK TO JEWISH GENEALOGY

DAN ROTTENBERG

New York: Random House, 1977

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Résumé

“En chacun de nous il y a le désir de savoir qui nous sommes et d’où nous venons” avait dit Alex Haley à propos de son livre *Roots*. Il est pourtant difficile pour la moitié des juifs qui habitent l’Amérique du Nord de remonter à leurs origines. Rottenberg refuse d’accepter qu’il soit impossible de dépasser les dernières trois générations et en présumant que 85% des juifs ont leur racine en Europe, surtout dans l’est de l’Europe, il prend l’année 1700 comme point de départ et soutient la thèse que les juifs de nos jours sont tous des descendants directs de la population juive de cette période lointaine. Il trace ainsi les origines des familles et s’appuie sur des documents tels que les licences de mariage, certificats de naissance et de mort, faits historiques, listes de passagers etc. Dans son livre, qui est très utile et facile à lire, Rottenberg donne une liste de 8000 noms de familles juives, leurs origines géographiques et généalogiques. “Nos ancêtres peuvent nous apprendre beaucoup. Il faut seulement les trouver” et Rotenberg nous montre comment.

Asked to explain the phenomenal success of *Roots*, the best-selling story and television dramatization of seven generations of his family, Alex Haley has said the answer is simple: “In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage — to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is still a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness.”

The search for his own roots posed a special problem for Dan Rottenberg, a journalist and writer now living in Philadelphia. For, of the dozens of books on genealogy, none has dealt with the difficulties faced by Jews in tracing their ancestors. Even though ancestor hunting has become

a major North American pastime, very few of the books and articles on genealogy are of any use to those whose background is Jewish. Although he originally set out to compile a book that would offer everything that is known on the subject of Jewish genealogy, Rottenberg eventually settled for one that would be the first word, rather than the last, on the subject. And an excellent first word it is.

The fact that nearly half the world's Jews today are in North America, and that 85 percent of the world's Jews have their roots in Europe, especially Eastern Europe, plus the sheer volume of material available, led Rottenberg to focus his book primarily on American Jews of East European descent. Since the greatest persecutions of Jews, along with the sloppiest record keeping, took place in Eastern Europe, it is there that the problem of tracing ancestors is greatest.

Rottenberg challenges the assumption most Jews make that it is impossible to trace their ancestries back more than two or three generations. As recently as 1700, the world Jewish population was between one and two million, so that almost all the Jews living today are descended from them. This means that it should not be too difficult for Jews to link up their family with the tree of some related family that can trace itself back to 1700 or earlier.

Rottenberg begins his book with instructions on how to get started in genealogical research, by contacting living relatives, by examining marriage licenses, gravestones, ships' passenger lists, birth and death certificates and a variety of other public records in the United States. This is followed by "a quick course in Judaica" which assembles the various bits and pieces of Judaica that one may encounter as one searches further for Jewish ancestors. Included is information on Hebrew dates, consanguinity, naming of children, adoption of family names and sources of Jewish names, as well as a discussion of the interrelationships between Jewish tradition, history and the Bible.

Despite the upheaval and destruction of European Jewry, North American Jews do have some advantages in tracing their family tree. Although many records of European Jewish communities have vanished, the ones that have been preserved can be found in a few centralized locations, chiefly in the United States and Israel. Rottenberg describes Jewish sources available in the libraries and archives in the United States and points out that the best records for Jewish ancestor hunters are not to be found in Jewish institutions but in the Mormon Library of the Genealogical Society of Utah in Salt Lake City. Other principal sources

are to be found in the American Jewish Historical Society in Waltham, Mass. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York and Leo Baeck Institute in New York. Rottenberg also includes a one-page listing of "Sources in Canada" which, although useful, contains two errors in the spelling of street names (Beverly instead of Beverley, and Grainville instead of Granville).

Rottenberg describes Jewish sources available in almost every country of Europe as well as the Soviet Union, Iraq, Turkey, Algeria and Morocco, Argentina, Brazil, the Caribbean, Australia and South Africa. A special chapter is devoted to sources in Israel such as the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, in Jerusalem.

The most important feature of *Finding Our Fathers* is a 234-page "Source Guide for Jewish Genealogies." The guide is an alphabetical list of some 8,000 Jewish family names compiled by Rottenberg using geographical and genealogical information found in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, and the *Encyclopedia Judaica* as well as in hundreds of published and unpublished books of Jewish family histories. Ideally, Jews should be able to look up their family names in this guide and find information about the derivation of the name, some description of families which have carried the name and where they came from, references to family trees, records and histories, and cross-references to families which Rottenberg has found to be interrelated. In order to keep the guide manageable, Rottenberg limited himself to references to family relationships prior to 1900 and outside the United States.

The book's bibliography includes Jewish family histories, genealogical and general reference works, Jewish reference works and books on international Judaica.

Finding Our Fathers is an important and unique contribution to genealogy in general and to Jewish genealogy in particular. Written in a highly readable, light-hearted style, it will be a useful how-to-do-it book for both the beginner and the more sophisticated family historian. Dan Rottenberg demonstrates that genealogy can not only be fun; it can also be spiritually satisfying. For, as he states: "Each time I have uncovered the name of my long-forgotten ancestors. I have been filled with the mystical feeling that I was indeed rescuing that ancestor — not from hellfire, perhaps, but from oblivion. They did walk this earth, our ancestors, once upon a time, and they are still out there, somewhere. There is much they can teach us even now, if we can find them. So let us begin."