



JewishGen

MYTHBUSTERS

Myth #1: Your family surname can be traced to BEFORE the 18th century —

RESPONSE: Most Jews did not have fixed hereditary surnames until the early 19th century. Before that, people were known only by their first name and a *patronymic*, i.e., their father's first name, e.g.: “Yaakov ben Shmuel” (in Hebrew), or “Yaakov Shmulovich” (in Russian), both meaning “Yaakov, the son of Shmuel”. In general, surname adoption for Jews began to be required by the various governments during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Austrian Empire (1787) was the first to require this, and was followed by edicts from the Russian Tzar for the Pale of Settlement (in 1804, and again in 1835 and 1845), and for the Russian Kingdom of Poland (1821). Napoleon inspired France (1808) to take this modern step, which was followed by various German states: Frankfurt (1807), Baden (1809), Westphalia (1812), Prussia (1812), Bavaria (1813), Württemberg (1828), Posen (1833), and Saxony (1834). Jewish surnames were not required in Romania until the 1870s, or in the Ottoman Empire in 1934.

Myth #2: Spelling of surnames is important —

RESPONSE: Spelling is irrelevant in genealogy, as the consistent spelling of names is a 20th-century invention and obsession. Names were almost never spelled in a standard way in earlier records. For example, it is not unusual for the same person's name to be spelled Meyerson, Meirzon, Majersohn, etc. — they're all the same name. Transliteration from one language to another creates infinite spelling variances, e.g., there is no “H” sound in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, so Jewish names such as “Hersh” might become “Gersh”, utilizing the “G” sound instead.

Myth #3: We have the same last name, so we are probably related —

RESPONSE: Just because two people have the same surname, it does not necessarily mean that they are related. Very few Jewish surnames are *monogenetic*, i.e., having only a single progenitor with that surname. Many Jewish surnames (e.g.: Cohen, Levine, Katz, Kaplan, Weiss, Klein, Feldman, Greenberg, Friedman, Finkelstein, Epstein, most patronymics, etc.) are extremely common, each perhaps having hundreds of separate progenitors. Surnames derived from patronymics and occupations arose independently in towns throughout Eastern Europe, among non-related families. So attempting to undertake genealogy based on surname matches alone is not always productive. Geographic-based matches are often more important than the surname matches.

Myth #4: Our family surname changed at Ellis Island —

RESPONSE: No, it was not. Passenger lists were filled out at the port of embarkation by clerks hired by the steamship lines, or by the ship's purser, and then checked by U.S. customs or immigration authorities upon arrival. Thus, the names on these passenger lists are the European, pre-Americanized versions of names. No names were changed at Ellis Island. Immigrants changed their own names afterwards, to more easily recognized surnames, those which might match their already arrived relatives, or the name of someone who sponsored them to come to America, or even a name with perceived greater “yichus” or renown.

Myth #5: All of the vital and other family records were destroyed in the Holocaust —

RESPONSE: Yes, some records were destroyed due to wartime conditions, but on the whole, the majority of records have survived and are available in archives throughout Europe and other areas of the Jewish diaspora. Particularly, there are large amounts of records available on JewishGen, as well as through a number of organizations that also have collected and preserved Holocaust-related documents, as well as the large

accumulations of records in Israel, those that have been microfilmed by the Mormon Family History Library, and many that are available through commercial entities.

Myth #6: Our ancestral town no longer exists —

RESPONSE: Today, your ancestral town may not have a Jewish community which has survived, but it most likely still does exist. It might be in a different country, or have a different name. More than 6,000 known Jewish communities can be searched in the [JewishGen Communities Database](#). Once you have identified your ancestral town and its present-day name, it is possible to locate records, visit the place, and involve yourself in learning more about your ancestors' lives, with the assistance of JewishGen and its various tools such as [Yizkor Books](#), [KehilaLinks](#), and the like.

Myth #7: People knew their birthdates —

RESPONSE: Wrong, many immigrants did not know their birthdates. Entering the U.S. before 1924 required no documentation, just a ticket. Many brought no identification papers with them. Even if they knew their birthdates, it was usually in relation to a Jewish holiday (“the third day of Chanukah”), or a Hebrew date (“12th of Adar”). They had no easy way of translating this Jewish calendar date into the secular Gregorian calendar date. Many individuals decided to use American holidays, such as January 1st or July 4th, as their birthday. Also, some people adjusted their ages for various reasons: to avoid conscription into the military, to be eligible to vote, to enable them to obtain pensions, or to marry a younger person. It is said that the average woman's age decreased over seven years between every Federal census from 1900 through 1940.

Myth #8: Family Stories (“bubbe meises”) are absolutely true —

RESPONSE: While many stories have germs of truth and should be investigated, often the stories are exaggerated. For example, “my great-grandfather was the tailor to the Tsar” (probably he sewed uniforms for the Tsar's army); “my great-grandfather played in the Emperor's band” (perhaps the local band dedicated to the Emperor?); or “my great-grandfather was the chief rabbi of our ancestral town” (many men were ‘qualified’ as rabbis, but in daily life were milkmen, butchers, etc.). There are also *bubbe-meises* about the black sheep in families, and these too may be tracked down due to the prevalence of available records and knowledge about how to obtain documentation.

Myth #9: DNA Analysis is THE way to find out who is in your family —

RESPONSE: DNA analysis is a science in its infancy. Autosomal DNA research can accurately predict if two people are related within about 4-5 generations; but without a specific goal, for Jewish genealogists, it presents many “false positives”, and assumptions must be investigated before any conclusions are drawn. For Y-DNA and mt-DNA tests, the results are more scientific, but to establish solid relationships assumes that folks can accurately go back at least 4 or 5 generations in order to connect via a particular person. In summary, DNA testing can **prove** a connection — even if you can't find it using historical records.

Myth #10: The United States Census provides the Truth about your American family —

RESPONSE: Sometimes, the census is correct. However, the enumerator came to the door and questioned whomever he found there; be it a child or neighbor (he was paid by the line). It is important to compare multiple years of the census and other key records — such as birth, marriage and death records; passenger manifests; military draft records; naturalization documents, etc. — in order to approach “the truth” about your family, how they came to America, and what they did once they arrived. This part of genealogy research is one of the most rewarding for the information it can provide on your ancestors.

That's it! You now have enough information to show who really knows their family history. Just don't forget to print this page before the next family gathering!

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