

A VERY AMERICAN STORY: INTRODUCING YOUR CHILD TO GENEALOGY

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Many Jews settled on the Lower East Side in New York City, c. 1910
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We walked into a crowded room, and it kept getting more and more crowded the longer we stayed.

There was Marie Rosina, Jean-Baptiste, Renee, and Marguerite. There was Chiah Elka, Anna, Yechiel, Frieda, and Eli. There was James, Amos Earl, Phoebe, Henry, and Sarah. There was Channah, Hillel, Ruth, and Hyman.

We couldn't understand what many of them were saying: they were speaking so many different languages—Yiddish, French,

Russian, Lithuanian, English, and more.

This room was a virtual one on ancestry.com, and it held all of my daughter's ancestors as well as my own.

Ten-year old Alison was the one who initiated the research into our family's past. Looking for something fun to do on-line, she found ancestry.com and asked if we could work on genealogy together.

I jumped at the opportunity. When I was around her age, I had interviewed my elderly relatives,

written my notes by hand on loose leaf paper, and carefully put those pages into a three-ring binder. I hoped that the digital databases on ancestry.com would allow me to go back further in time and learn more. Plus, my husband's heritage is so very different from my own that I was curious to investigate his story as well.

Together Alison and I followed ancestry.com's directions and typed information into our newly created on-line family tree. As we did so, what ancestry.com calls "hints" popped up. These

These hints reveal matches in census, immigration, and other archival records, as well as the family trees of other ancestry.com members that might include some of our relatives. A little at a time, we clicked on these hints and found out more about our family.

The amount of information we were able to access in a short time was overwhelming—in a good way. With each hint, the room we entered grew more crowded and interesting.

We discovered the naturalization record of Anna Katz, Alison’s great-great-grandmother. Alison and I saw her signature and the date that she and my great-grandfather married. We learned that she and her oldest three children, including my grandfather, came from Vilna, Lithuania to New York City via Rotterdam, Holland on a ship called the *Noordam* in December 1916.

I had barely known Anna Katz, only remembering that when she died, my grandfather participated in the Jewish ritual of mourning, wearing a torn piece of clothing on his jacket—over his heart—to express his grief.

My daughter, like many Americans, has a rich mixed heritage. While her Jewish grandfather was following centuries old Jewish traditions, her French-Canadian ancestors were following Christian traditions.

We discovered Alison’s great-grandmother’s—my husband’s



The other side of the family tree: Montreal, c. 1910, Public Domain

grandmother’s—baptismal record from Ste. Barbe, Quebec in 1914. Born Marie Rosina, she was known as Rose. Alison reveled in looking at the handwriting on Rose’s baptismal record. Though the record was on-line, she said that she felt like she was touching something really old. She also noted that the French cursive made it hard to read.

In honor of my husband’s grandmother, we had given Alison the middle name Rose. So, in the Jewish tradition of naming a child for a dead relative, my husband and I memorialized a much-loved French Canadian woman whose baptismal record her namesake and I now touched.

In fact, Alison saw, as we reviewed the documents, that we named her for two beloved great-grandmothers with a Rose in their name. The second great-grandmother was from my side of the family; Frieda Rose was born

in Brooklyn with ancestors from the Jewish community in Kroskienko, Poland.

When Alison and I typed “Amos Earl Denio,” my husband’s great-grandfather, into the tree, we became wide-eyed. We found a potential match with a family tree from another ancestry.com member. That tree brought us back to possible ancestors from very long ago—in Quebec in the seventeenth century and in France in the fifteenth century. Amos Earl Denio had lived his whole life in a tiny village in upstate New York, but many of his ancestors appeared to have come from distant lands.

This great-great grandfather, Amos Earl Denio, built a camp (the Adirondack region’s term for a country cottage) on Chateaugay Lake in the 1920s. Our family enjoys spending time at that camp, which is still in the family, every summer. It was exciting to realize



High Falls at Chateaugay Lake, NY, A.B. Buell c. 1875

that Amos Earl belonged to a long tradition of French Canadians settled near Chateaugay. Laura Ingalls Wilder describes this group in her book **Farmer Boy**, loosely based on her husband, Almanzo Wilder's childhood during the 1860's.

"They were Frenchmen who lived in little log houses in the woods. They had no farms. They hunted and trapped and fished, they sang and joked and danced, and they drank red wine instead of cider."

This distinction between the English-Americans who drank cider (and presumably, didn't dance so much) and the French Canadians, added life to the growing portrait of our family.

Because we want our family portrait to be accurate as well as interesting, Alison and I talked about the fact that ancestry.com's information may not always be

completely correct. After all, it's like Wikipedia, which Alison had already been cautioned about in school, in that anyone can put up whatever information they'd like without any fact-checking. We both know that we will have to check all of that information against available census data, baptismal records, and other archival materials. Still the possibilities there are very exciting.

It wasn't just the past that interested my daughter. By researching our family's history, Alison came to realize that her descendants might be interested in *her* story. She began putting up photos and recording audio stories about her own experiences. She interviewed her younger sister, and she plans to do audio interviews with her grandparents the next time they come to visit. Alison became aware that she is creating a historical archive for future generations.

Doing genealogical research with my child has had many benefits for both of us. My daughter learned about the excitement and challenges involved in historical research, as well as about the very different heritages of her parents.

My own story grew. It's no longer just the story of Jewish immigrants to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, but also the story of farmers in rural upstate New York and French Canadian Catholics in Quebec. I've also learned things about my side of the family that are easier to discover now, as a result of the internet, than they were when I was Alison's age.

And I learned that navigating digital databases is easier with the help of my ten-year old—though I probably already knew that.

For Further Reading:

George G. Morgan, *The Official Guide to Ancestry.com*
Marsha Hoffman Rising, *The Family Tree Problem Solver: Tried and True Tactics for Tracing Elusive Ancestors*

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Baptismal Record, St. Barbe, Quebec