

# Capturing your family's history

By Barbara Hoff

**LOS ANGELES** – “How absolutely terrifying.”

“That’s wild.”

“I have found what I was looking for.”

Dialogue from yet another TV investigation series? Yes, but the speakers aren’t tracking down criminals – they are Brooke Shields, Sarah Jessica Parker and Emmitt Smith III, and they were looking for themselves on NBC’s *Who Do You Think You Are?*

The program explores the family trees of the “rich and famous,” including Lisa Kudrow, one of its executive producers, as they travel through history. The search is made personal by their ancestors’ experiences during the Salem witch trials, slavery, the Civil War, the Gold Rush, and the Holocaust, to name a few. But on this show the real stars are the historians, genealogists and librarians who comb through public records and archives, uncovering the roots of each week’s guest. Like anyone who learns their family history, they were overwhelmed with emotion.

Who would have thought that genealogy would fly on prime-time network TV? The joys of genealogy proved to be entertaining and popular on the PBS program *Faces of America*, created by historian and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., whose previous PBS programs – *African American Lives* and its sequel, *Oprah’s Roots* – focused on black history.

While some families can trace their lineage across several continents to centuries past, others count theirs in years or decades. Either way, family trees have taken root in America and are laden with memories, so it’s up to you to start the conversations and harvest your history.

So, where to begin? It depends on what you’re looking for. There is a plethora of family history Web sites that can guide you to, and through, the wealth of online information, with each site having links ad infinitum.

Ancestry.com is a popular portal to the past and a good place to start. For a reasonable



COURTESY BARBARA HOFF

Maternal great-grandparents of Barbara Hoff in Torna, Hungary, circa 1912.

monthly fee, with automatic renewal, you can access a broad range of public records, ships’ passenger lists including steerage, US and foreign census, city directories, and more.

Other places to check are [ellisland.org](http://ellisland.org), which is free, as is the Library of Congress. Just Google it to get the websites for specific collections. Also check archives at public and university libraries, though they typically require a card or affiliation for online access.

Then there’s Jewish geography. You’ll find an overwhelming number of online genealogy societies, databases, maps and links to research just about every aspect of Jewish history and life, from the global to the esoteric: specific nationalities, languages, cities, countries, regions such as the Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada, burial grounds, birth and marriage certificates, obituary lists like one from Poland beginning in the late 19th century – you get the picture. Sites such as [jewishwebindex.com](http://jewishwebindex.com) and [jewishlink.net](http://jewishlink.net) seem to have a thousand links to

Jewish history resources and organizations.

Los Angeles is fortunate to have the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California (JHSSC) and a Jewish Genealogical Society. But searching through websites, archives and government records can be daunting, dusty and disappointing if little or nothing is found. And while documents can provide information, they don’t talk. The flip side of genealogy is oral history, given by elderly family members. The surest way to collect and pass on family stories and memories is to hire a professional oral historian who can also dig into the plethora of archives to find missing pieces.

## Oral history

Do we focus so much on our ancient roots that we neglect our own history? Will your treasured family memories and stories be buried with your mothers and fathers? And what about those of your grandparents, aunts and uncles?

The answer is yes, if you haven’t recorded them for future generations.

Elderly family members may wonder what could be so important about their everyday lives – isn’t their history commonplace, like all the other millions of Eastern Europeans or Russians who immigrated to America looking forward, not back? But to us they are one in a million. They lived through much of the 20th century, yet their stories are not found in textbooks. Theirs is the stuff of real history. Viewed in context, ordinary lives can seem quite extraordinary.

Like Nachshon ben Aminadav, they risked the unknown and jumped into a figurative Red Sea. How blessed are we that they did.

You may know some family history, or have decades-old photographs of grand- and great-grand relatives. No doubt they are beautiful, rare and priceless – but they are silent images. We have “talkies” now. Chronicling family stories and memories has never been easier, thanks to modern technology and the availability of professional oral historians.

“Video cameras, camcorders and tape

recorders are accessible to us, giving our generation the phenomenal opportunity to record the family stories to hand down,” said JHSSC President Stephen Sass. “It’s our obligation to take advantage of this.”

Oral tradition, he said, is “an important part of our culture. So much Jewish history is based on our families moving from place to place. They may have had few belongings, but they did possess a collective vision, folk history and records that were passed on orally.”

Delving into and preserving family members’ personal experiences is especially vital today, as handwritten letters have been replaced by communications distilled in e-mails, texts and tweets.

A sure way to collect and pass on your stories is to work with an oral historian who will document the past in the words of the family members who lived it.

“We kept meaning to have Mother record her stories and memories, but we never got around to it, and now it’s too late.” This lament is all too common,” said oral historian Ellie Kahn, who founded Living Legacies Family Histories in 1988 ([www.livinglegaciesfamilyhistories.com](http://www.livinglegaciesfamilyhistories.com)).

Kahn said more and more families, businesses, organizations and institutions are retaining historians to delve into the past beyond names, dates and documents. A historian can videotape or record interviews and conversations, particularly with the ill or elderly, guiding them through cumulative experiences to the heart of a story.

They discover long-ago memories filed away, never shared or nearly forgotten. They talk back into time and take us with them.

The stories Kahn collects are then edited, organized and crafted into hardbound books, CDs or DVDs that include copies of photos, documents, letters and all kinds of memorabilia. Individuals’ stories give voice to Jewish families’ history that is otherwise being lost. In a race against time to chronicle living history, the JHSSC and Kahn collaborated – first with her documentary, *Meet Me at Brooklyn and Soto*, an oral history of Jewish



COURTESY ELLIE KAHN

Ellie Kahn of Living Legacies Family Histories conducting an oral history interview with Louise Polansky.

Boyle Heights, 1920-1950, and now on *Tell Me Your Stories* – to collect memories from the broader community.

Ellie created *Tell Me Your Stories* ([www.tellyourstories.org](http://www.tellyourstories.org)) to teach students to conduct oral histories with their older relatives as well as the broader community. What could be more inspiring to future generations than to have recordings of grandparents telling their stories in their own voices, or read their words in a book of family history.

Kahn’s interviews are now conducted by Zoom as well as in person. As one memory triggers another, family members each offer their own versions of events. They may speak of fears and hardships while seeking the dream America promised. Through their voices, grandchildren will visit shtetls and shuls, mansions filled with music and art, farms and factories; they’ll meet family left behind, some never to be seen again; and eventually understand the desperation inflicted by antisemitism.

These sentiments were shared recently by documentary filmmaker Gabriel Nussbaum, as he eulogized his grandmother, the renowned Reform movement leader Ruth Nussbaum. He assumed he knew all about his grandmother, given her prominence, but during three years of filming conversations with her, he and his wife, Elizabeth Wood, both New York-based, saw a transformation:

“[I]n the process of exploring Ruth’s life... Ruth got younger.”

He said she shared that she “never felt fully grown-up; that inside her very old shell was still a young woman, with exactly the same passion and hunger for life that she had when she was 15 in Berlin, or 26 in Holland, or 29 in America.”

“Young” Ruth became “a peer, a confidant, a co-conspirator who was endlessly curious and provocative and entertaining and opinionated. [They] shared dinners, and went to concerts, and gossiped, and talked politics.”

To get started, Kahn suggests putting a tape recorder on the table at your next gathering with extended family, and start the questions.

An oral history of family memories and stories is a gift like no other. It is a living legacy that will “honor thy father and thy mother,” welcome *bnai mitzvah* or commemorate an occasion. It’s an heirloom that will grow in value as future grandchildren add their experiences and traditions.

Sass suggests that “the true gift is from an oral history; it’s what we can learn from our elders to live more meaningful lives.” ■

*Barbara Hoff is an architectural historian and preservationist and a granddaughter of the 19th century. A version of this article was previously published in the Los Angeles Jewish Journal and is reprinted with permission.*