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IN THIS ISSUE

Subtleties in Using the One-Step 1930 Census Website	<i>Stephen P. Morse</i>	3
Here Today, Saved for Tomorrow?	<i>Andrew Blumberg</i>	7
Bukovina Cemeteries, Archives and Oral History	<i>Alti Rodal</i>	9
Records From Northern Bukovina	<i>David M. Fox</i>	17
Using the Red Cross to Learn about Holocaust Victims	<i>Arline Sachs</i>	19
Internet Subscription Databases for Genealogical Research	<i>Edward David Luft</i>	20
The 1897 All-Empire Russian Census	<i>Howard Margol with Peggy Friedman</i>	23
Toronto Points Way to New Thoughts about Jewish Genealogy Conferences	<i>Sallyann Amdur Sack</i>	25
Research Materials and Opportunities at the USHMM at 2003 Jewish Genealogy Conference	<i>Peter Lande</i>	27
Call for Proposals: 23rd IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy July 20–25, 2003—Washington, D.C.		29
Project to Research Turkish and Balkan Jewry at Diaspora Research Institute	<i>Minna Rosen</i>	30
The 1915–1932 Canadian Naturalization Index	<i>Stanley Diamond, Donna Dinberg and Alan Greenberg</i>	31
Wills and Probate Estates in the United States	<i>Charles B. Bernstein</i>	36
Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy Planned for 2003		37
Venezuelan Jewry: A Brief History	<i>Ignacio Sternberg</i>	42
From Our Contributing Editors		46
Yad Vashem Still Needs Yizkor Books		49
U.S. Update	<i>Marlene Zakai</i>	53
New Yizkor Books at Yad Vashem		57
Ask the Experts	<i>Randy Daitch and Eileen Polakoff</i>	60
Book Reviews: <i>The Holocaust in Lithuania 1941–1945: A Book of Remembrance; Names of the Deported Jews from Zala County; Portraits of Our Past: Jews of the German Countryside; Jewish Officers in the Polish Armed Forces, 1939–1945</i>		62
From Our Mail Box: Books about Jewish Legion of WWI; <i>New York Times</i> Backfile Reveals Gravesite of Ancestor; Comments on Jacobi's Genealogies as a Family History Source; AJEX Phone Number Changed		67

The 1915–1932 Canadian Naturalization Index

by Stanley Diamond, Donna Dinberg and Alan Greenberg

Genealogists researching their Canadian families, both Jewish and non-Jewish, soon will be the beneficiaries of a new research tool created from data that has been hidden for years: a treasure trove of Canadian federal government lists of naturalization records spanning the years 1915–32.

It was December 6, 1997. It was an innocent telephone call from a political science professor to a genealogist. And it was a simple question: “Are you familiar with the *Sessional Papers* and the yearly lists of Canadian naturalizations?” Stanley Diamond, president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Montreal, wasn’t sure he had heard correctly and immediately asked Professor Mel Hymes some questions: “Where did you see these volumes? Are you sure these refer to naturalizations? What years? Starting when? Alphabetical? How much information in each listing?” Hymes said he would send some sample pages.

The pages duly arrived. The first was page 320 of the report of the “Department of the Secretary of State,” one

*“It was a simple question: Are you familiar with the *Sessional Papers* and the yearly lists of Canadian naturalizations?”*

of many reports in the 1922 *Dominion of Canada (Parliamentary) Sessional Papers*. The page title was “Schedule II,” and the description read, “List of Aliens to whom Certificates of Naturalization under the Naturalization Act, 1919, and the Naturalization Acts, 1914–1920, were granted by the Secretary of State of Canada during the Fiscal Year ended the 31st March, 1921.”

On the page were columns headed:

- Name
- Country (of Origin)
- Date of Certificate
- Date of Oath of Allegiance
- Occupation
- Residence
- Naturalization Certificate Series and Number

The list of names on the page started with Henry Aaby, U.S.A., and ended with John Oscar Abrahamson, Sweden. The three other pages Hymes had sent were the front covers of the Reports of 1921 and 1922 and a page with the total number of naturalizations by country of origin for the year ending March 31, 1921. A total of 10,507 naturalizations were listed for that year!

With the Naturalization Certificate Series and Number in hand, an Access to Information request can be sent to the Canadian government requesting the entire naturalization file for the person, including application forms and affidavits regarding the person. Currently only Canadian

citizens or residents may submit these requests.

A Treasure before Our Eyes

Diamond recognized that he was looking at a treasure. Suddenly, there were many more questions to ask. Hymes had mentioned that he had discovered the volumes in the McGill University library in Montreal, but where else were they available? Do other genealogists know about this publication and its contents or perhaps other sources? If so, who and what action have they taken? If not, what should be done about it?

Other thoughts were spinning. Up to now, there were no publicly available documents related to Canadian naturalizations—all one could do was send in a request to the government and hope for a positive reply. Diamond recalled the frustration fellow genealogists had reported on occasion when Citizenship Canada advised that their ancestor’s naturalization papers could not be found. Others had commented from time to time, “I know my grandfather was naturalized, but he later changed his name, and I don’t know the original name or spelling.” Finally, there would be a place to look for possible alternate spellings. Still others were certain that an ancestor had been naturalized but did not realize the naturalization might have been many years after immigration or taking the oath of allegiance. Therefore, researchers who had assumed that their ancestors were naturalized prior to 1918 (in provincial courts)—a time period for which only the index cards were microfilmed and the original records destroyed, now can check for later naturalizations.

Needing some feedback on this discovery, Diamond confided in Alan Greenberg, a member of the JGS of Montreal executive board and a person with whom he had previously worked closely. Greenberg located and studied the *Sessional Papers* volumes at McGill and created a spreadsheet representing year-by-year summaries of the published data. He discovered nearly 4,000 pages of naturalizations for the period roughly covering 1914–32.¹ The pages held approximately 200,000 names; based on countries of origin, Greenberg estimated that 60,000 to 100,000 were Jewish. About 55 percent were actual naturalizations, while 45 percent were dependents who were automatically naturalized as a result (primarily children, but some wives as well in later years). These pages in the obscure *Sessional Reports* were a gold mine.²

In the meantime, Diamond telephoned the Reference and Information Services Division of the National Library of Canada in Ottawa seeking more information on the extent and availability of the publication. As he fired off question after question, something clicked for the librarian at the other end. “You had better speak to Donna Dinberg,” she said. This was not the usual “let-me-refer-

you-to-that-department” kind of response. Who was Donna Dinberg? Diamond immediately telephoned and found out.

Parallel Knowledge

Donna Dinberg is a systems librarian at the National Library and the volunteer librarian of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Ottawa (JGS-O). Diamond introduced himself and explained why he had called and what he and Greenberg were doing. At the mention of the name Alan Greenberg, Donna exclaimed, “Alan! He was my computer science professor at McGill!”

After some hesitation, but becoming reassured that Diamond and Greenberg were not intending to broadcast news of the discovery to the world, Dinberg admitted that she also knew about this treasure—but from a parallel source.

Since the 1970s, Lawrence Tapper, an archivist at the National Archives of Canada (and the founding president of the JGS-O), and his colleagues had known about the lists of naturalizations and had recognized their genealogical significance for Canadians whose ancestors had immigrated to Canada during the last century.

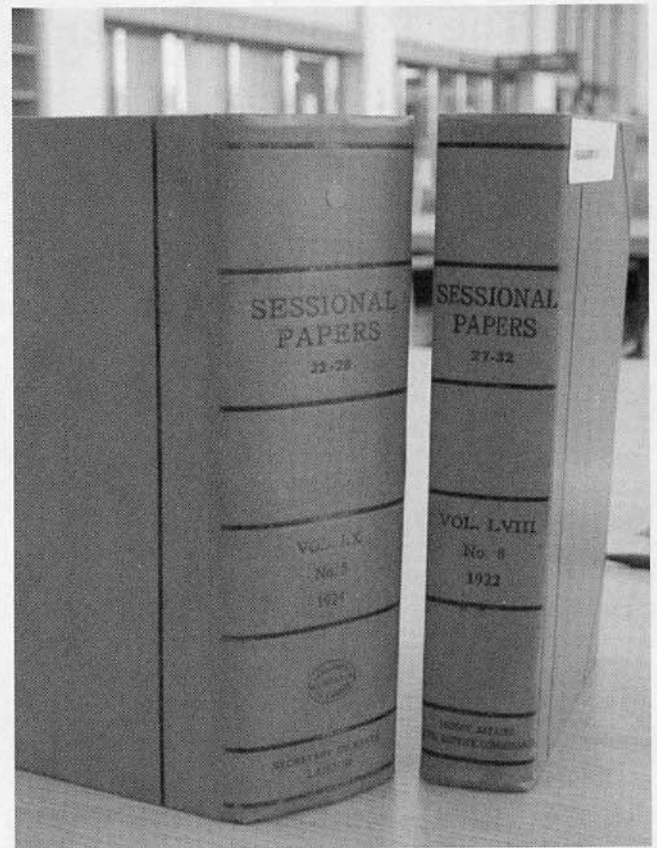
The data was unindexed and, therefore, not easily accessible. Archives staff knew genealogists would find searches in the original volumes time-consuming and laborious. On the other hand, although the publication had been issued in microform, many researchers find it laborious to use microfilm or microfiche. Archives staff, therefore, were understandably concerned that demand for use of the original print volumes could damage them through excessive use and handling and leave them open to other types of abuse and theft.

Shortly after the JGS-O was founded in 1995, Tapper shared his knowledge of the naturalization index data with his executive board which earmarked the data as a potential indexing project. Deciding that assistance was needed and recognizing that the documents were Canadian federal publications, Tapper and Dinberg approached the National Library of Canada in March 1997 with a proposal to collaborate in making this remarkable information accessible to the public. The National Library was interested in such a project, and discussions with several NL staff members took place through December 1997 regarding how such a project might proceed. This all came to naught, however, as the Library could not, at that time, free sufficient human resources to participate.

A Preservation Nightmare

In relating this saga, Dinberg had revealed to Diamond the reason for not previously publicizing the treasure at that time, no matter how important the data might be for genealogists.

The *Sessional Papers* are items of national historic importance, and not many copies exist in libraries across the country. Although some of the *Papers* are on microfiche or microfilm, not many libraries in Canada (and few



Bound volumes of the Sessional Papers of the Canadian Parliament contain information about individuals who became Canadian naturalized citizens.

elsewhere in the world) hold the microforms. Moreover, the quality of some of the microfilm images was quite poor. The printed volumes of the *Sessional Papers* are in fair to good condition, although the bindings of many volumes are disintegrating, but it was clear that they would not hold up to heavy use.

Examining Options

Assessing their collective expertise, the JGS-O and JGS-M executive boards began examining options to making this resource more widely available. All agreed on the fragility of the original source material and on its overall importance (over and above the genealogical significance), and they recognized that premature announcement could result in a flood of researchers and possible permanent damage to these books. What, then, could they do?

The first option considered was simple: Can the microforms of these publications be scanned quickly and economically, and will the quality be good enough to permit capture of the data using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology? In both Montreal and Ottawa, the team examined the available microfilms and microfiches of the *Sessional Papers* and sought better-quality copies that could be borrowed or purchased.

Dinberg took a selection of microfilm to a commercial scanning firm in Ottawa for testing using professional scanners coupled with robust OCR technology. The results were disappointing. The background visual “noise” in the test images was high in the microfilmed pages. The scans would likely be human-readable, but not easily.³ Also the low resolution prevented the OCR software from doing an adequate job of font recognition from the “noisy” images.

In Montreal, Greenberg experimented with OCR technologies using the printed form of the *Sessional Papers*. Michael Tobias of Glasgow, Scotland, the computer guru behind the technology driving the JewishGen and Jewish Records Indexing-Poland databases, also tried his hand with the latest OCR software with which he had been experimenting. His results matched Greenberg’s. Using a newly discovered OCR program,⁴ OCR was possible from the paper copies. They would need to be scanned at a very high resolution; however, and even then, people would need to correct numerous errors.

Various options were investigated to scan the *Sessional Papers*. Commercial prices for such scanning were high, and it was questionable whether any library would allow the volumes to be removed from their premises for scanning. Greenberg suggested that McGill University’s Rare Books and Special Collections Division might agree to scan and digitize the images from the source volumes. Since the paper volumes were already available in the library, access was not an issue, and the Rare Books and Special Collections Division had recently purchased state-of-the-art digital scanning equipment, so it seemed like a good fit. Unlike flatbed scanners, this camera-based scanner would not injure the delicate book bindings. Working closely with McGill, the team knew they would have professional and knowledgeable allies if problems should arise.

Joining Forces to Save a Fragile Resource

Greenberg succeeded in his discussions with McGill. Time on the high-end scanner would be available later that summer and, since students would be employed to

do the actual scanning, costs were quite reasonable. In the meantime, Diamond, Greenberg and Tapper drafted a formal project proposal and budget that were presented to both JGS executive boards for approval on March 1, 2001. Ratification by both groups was immediate and enthusiastic.

The partnership agreed that:

- The objective was to create a new resource, the Canadian Naturalization Database, for all researchers worldwide.
- The project would be managed by the JGS of Montreal and funded by the JGS of Ottawa.
- The JGS of Montreal would start the indexing project as soon as the images arrived.
- The data and images would be a gift to a Canadian institution under certain conditions.

On May 2, 2001, JGS-M entered into a contract with the Digital Collections Group of McGill University Libraries to scan the naturalizations listed in the 1915–32 *Sessional Papers*. Scanning got underway in early June 2001.

Indexing the Images

For all but the first volume, the records were published in alphabetical order by the surname of the person being naturalized, followed by the names of dependent children and/or wife. Each year had a large list of “normal” naturalizations plus several other lists (each separately alphabetized) covering special cases such as certificates re-issued, British subjects and naturalizations revoked. The 1920 publication of the naturalizations included five years of records, plus a few records from the late 1800s. These lists were not in alphabetical order, but rather by issue-date order.

Once the scanning was completed, Ruth Diamond used two computers—one displaying the graphic images and another with an Excel spreadsheet for data entry—to index quickly the 5,000 unalphabetized entries covering the years 1915 to 1920. For 1921 to 1932, which were alphabetical by year, she created an index of the first and last surname on each page. This list of first/last surnames was ultimately incorporated into a finding aid, allowing researchers to find quickly their family names in the one large and several small alphabetical lists for each year.

As indexing progressed, Ruth made some interesting observations:

- The word “wife” is not seen until the 1925–26 records. Until then, men listed alone received A-series certificates. Men listing children received a B-series certificate, but wives were not mentioned. It seems unlikely that all these fathers were also widowers!
- Starting with 1926–27 a man with or without a wife was granted an A-series certificate. Those listing children also were given B-series certificates.
- Reading through the lists is like finding oneself in a time capsule. Some countries have not existed for almost a century, and others no longer hold the territory that

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was listed under their names: Montenegro, Palestine, Volhynia (Russia), Turkey (Syria), Turkey (Greece), Turkey (Armenia), Serbia, Russia, Turkey (Mesopotamia), Austria (Hungary), Austria (Ukraine).

- Entries include "Retentions of British Nationality," "Resumptions of British Nationality," "Revocations of Canadian Naturalization," and "Re-admissions." Re-admissions seem to be mainly women with children who, one assumes, left Canada to follow a spouse but then separated from him and returned to Canada.

Every anomaly left Ruth wondering about the human side of the entry, what happened, what went on here?

- Reading through hundreds of pages of names gives one insight into other human factors. It is obvious that the clerks of the day got tired from time to time, and this shows up in the transcriptions. Those responsible for proofreading were also less than perfect. We notice the countries of "Blegium," "Sewden" and "Polland." (Which is it, Holland or Poland? The family name gives a clue: Dutch names do not have the letter combination *szcz*.)

- From the earliest to the later years, data includes the country of origin, the date the oath was given or the certificate issued, the profession and the place of residence at the time the aturalization was issued. Earlier records include the entire address, sometimes even apartment numbers. Pre-1926 entries report the professions in much more detail, e.g., "manager of the—," in contrast with later records which report simply "manager."

- The number of U.S. citizens being naturalized was at times almost as high as the number of Russian citizens. Eighty-four countries are listed as countries of origin. The largest, in order, are: Russia (including the Pale of Settlement), United States of America, Poland, Italy, Austria, Romania, Sweden, Germany, Norway and Hungary.

Following the completion of the first/last index, a simple finding aid was created. It allows a researcher to input the family name and receive a list of possible pages on which the name might occur. For instance, a search for the name Hymovitch reveals that for 1922/23, the name could appear on page 393 (which contains names Hupczak to Isenbaum) or on page 520 (with the names Dubas to Zubach). The second page obviously has a small number of irregular naturalizations (since it covers such a large range of names on a single page). Indeed, on inspection of page 393, Joseph Hymovitch, Alan Greenberg's grandfather, is listed. The entry is curious in several ways. It indicates that Joseph is from Roumania, whereas he was born and lived in Kishinev, Bessarabia. Bessarabia was part of Roumania from 1920 to 1939, however, and the naturalization used the then-current 1922 national boundaries to identify country of origin. At the time, Joseph had a wife and three minor children, but none are listed.

In April 2002, The Jewish Genealogical Society of Montreal tested the newly created indexes at a special members evening. Although seeing the occupation "huck-

ster" for one ancestor was the big laugh of the evening, it was the results of the searching that will be remembered. Many members were quickly able to confirm naturalization dates and numbers for direct ancestors or their siblings. Without having to look at the file in a far-off repository, some members learned that relatives were naturalized 20 or 30 years after arrival. In studying the scanned images of pages linked from the indexes, other members spotted alternate spellings that had previously not been considered. Although the long-term intention is to provide online soundex searching, the dramatic changes in some surnames emphasize the need to be able to scan the list of all surnames in the naturalization records. Researchers will be able to scan the list for the elusive "original" family name or have their memories awakened at the sight of long-forgotten names.

As one can see from these observations, the Canadian Naturalization Index will be an invaluable resource not only for genealogists but also for historians, demographers, social scientists, specialists tracing family genetic traits—in short, for anyone with an interest in those who came here and proclaimed allegiance to Canada during the first half of the 20th century.

Finding a Host and Building a Website

With the scanning and indexing completed, it was time to find a host website. On February 21, 2002, the JGS-O executive board met with representatives of the National Library's Digital Library of Canada Task Force (DLCTF) to explain the Canadian Naturalization Database (CND) project and to ask if the National Library would be interested in hosting such Canadian digital content.

Everyone involved in the project felt that the images and indexes should be hosted on a Canadian website—and that the National Library's website was an appropriate place. The National Library is one of the few repositories holding a complete run of the *Sessional Papers*. DLCTF replied that because of the large number of digitization projects planned for the Task Force, they would not be able to work on the CND images and index for some months and that a firm date for making the information publicly available could not be made at that time.

At about the same time, however, another opportunity presented itself. Genealogy specialists at the National Library and the National Archives of Canada had been working together to create a new joint service: the Canadian Genealogy Centre (CGC). The Centre, planned to be primarily a virtual service supported by the genealogy activities of both institutions, is due to debut on the web in February 2003. The JGS-O executive approached the CGC planning committee with the proposal for hosting the CND project and received an enthusiastic reception. Talks began immediately on how to fine tune the indexing, create the database of images, and present the CND on the CGC website. On September 4, 2002, the signing of the JGS-CGC agreement created the first CGC partner-

ship with a genealogy society.

Looking Back

Much has been learned from this experience. Certainly the JGS-M and JGS-O teams never anticipated such twists and turns along the way or the need for such detailed collaboration with the many individuals and groups. It became evident very early, however, that while others had known about the resource and some had shown various levels of interest, the project needed people who recognized the importance of getting it done coupled with the availability of appropriate technology. Knowing that our efforts will be of benefit to genealogists of all backgrounds for years to come leaves us with a sense of both pride and fulfillment. We hope others will be inspired to find hidden or not easily accessible resources in their cities and countries and will be encouraged to follow our path.

Notes

1. We say "roughly" 1914–32 because the lists also include a small number of naturalizations going back to the late 1800s.

2. The first five annual sets of volumes containing these naturalization records were called "Sessional Reports." In later years, the volumes are entitled "Annual Departmental Reports." In this article, we use the name "Sessional Reports" to describe the entire series. Each

year's publication contains reports from all government departments and spans several volumes and many thousands of pages.

3. The latest image processing techniques could now be used to improve image quality, but such processing was not an option at the time.

4. ABBY FineReader, an OCR program developed in Ukraine, which has the ability to handle virtually all eastern European and Cyrillic fonts.

Ruth Diamond, Mel Hymes and Lawrence Tapper contributed to this story.

Stanley Diamond is president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Montreal. His extensive contributions to Jewish genealogy earned him the 2002 Lifetime Achievement Award of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies. Donna Dinberg, a professional systems librarian with 33 years experience, is involved in developing international collaborative virtual reference networks. She is librarian for the Jewish Genealogical Society of Ottawa. Alan Greenberg has 35 years experience in computing and networking technologies and currently works with developing countries helping them upgrade their technological infrastructure. He recently participated in creating the JGS-Montreal's database of Montreal and Quebec Jewish vital records.

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