

## Pierre Hahn, *Généalogiste Extraordinaire*

Barbara Toby Stack

SFBAJGS board member Barbara Stack has been researching her family roots in Poland and Ukraine off and on since the late 1980's. Her most recent genealogical pleasures have come from reintroducing members of long-separated branches of the family. With a B.A. in Economics (Brandeis University) and an M.A. in Linguistics (University of Massachusetts at Amherst), Barbara has worked as a systems analyst, a fiddler, a youth orchestra ED, and most recently archivist, editor, and writing coach.

Veteran SFBAJGS Board member and indefatigable genealogist, researcher, librarian, project leader, transcriber, and large-scale data aggregator Pierre Hahn recently saw JewishGen publish extracts of 22,000 Jewish marriage records from Alsace, France between 1792 and 1899. For this major contribution to French Jewish genealogy, from inspiration to publication, Pierre has been honored by JewishGen, where he also serves with our own Rosanne Leeson as Coordinators of the French SIG. In addition to these long-term projects, Pierre has served as steward of SFBAJGS's own Cemetery Project, which has entailed, in addition to organizing transcriptions, substantial intellectual property and diplomatic negotiations. And this was all accomplished during his retirement!

I spoke with Pierre in May 2017 and he graciously added some additional written comments after our interview.

Pierre Hahn was born in Paris in 1928, and most fortunately his family was able to depart France in August 1941 and settle in New York City. After the war, Pierre's family decided to stay in the United States: his parents in New York City, Pierre not far away, and his brother Roger on the West Coast. Pierre wrote me:

In France my mother collected birth, death, and marriage announcements of family and friends in a small box. She also sent for a few birth certificates of ancestors. My father wrote down notes for a few family trees. It was a very helter-skelter summation of what they knew. Then my father passed away and my brother Roger and I thought that my mother shouldn't be left alone in New York. So when we emptied her apartment we found all the bits of

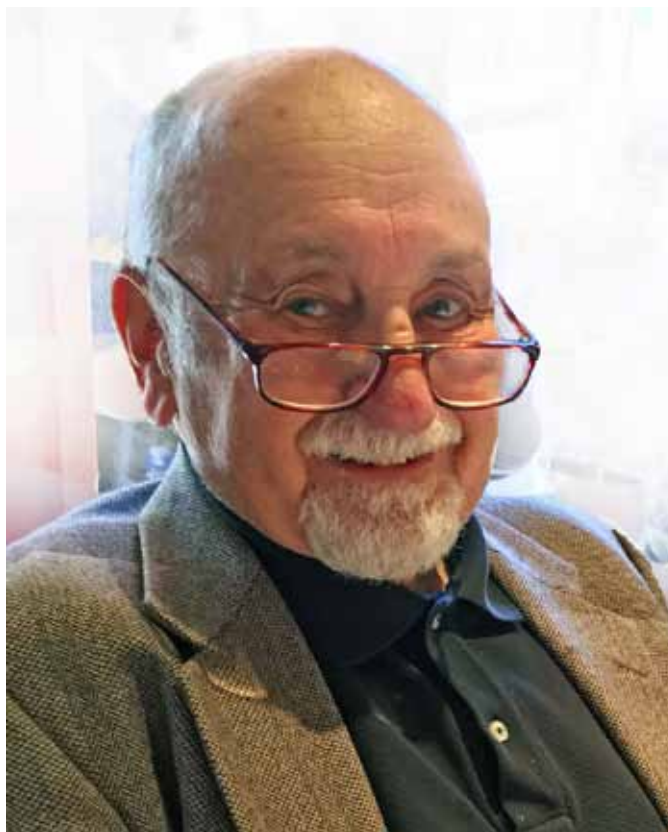
paper. We began to wonder what our family was really like. My brother was a professor of history of science at UCB. I was in the Department of Psychiatry as a graduate civil engineer at SUNY Stony Brook.

My mother moved to Oakland and lived there another eight or nine years before she passed away in 2002. It was then that my brother and I decided that we needed to organize all these papers, and we started to enter data from the collected bits into *Family Tree Maker (FTM)*. And after we had entered all the info, even for people who seemed to

have no family connection, we started to search for any genealogical connections which might exist between the many people in the announcements. Now, 15 years later, it has grown to a little more than 20,000 names. In my *FTM* database about two thirds of the people are connected in some manner to each other. Some people we knew as friends of our parents were found to be related. The family tree is now a family forest. For example, my parents were lifelong friends of another couple, and they took trips together later in life. To this day the families have remained close. Only after they had passed away did we discover that they had a

common Alsatian ancestor seven generations back. But neither the "friends" nor my parents learned of the family relationship.

In 2002 I made a trip to the Luxembourg Civil Records building and researched birth and marriage manuscripts for some of my ancestors. And there were trips to France as well, to the Archives de Paris. And I return to France



every two or three years. Of course, now much of the data are available online.

For the past 10 years or so I have been comoderator of the JewishGen French SIG with Rosanne Leeson. During this period I have been made aware of research problems and solutions for French-speaking Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, and the former French colonies and protectorates. Many of the questions over the years concerned finding vital records. In France there is no national database, so the only way to obtain such a record is to know the exact town where the event occurred.

After my brother died in 2011, a cousin found me on the Internet—Jean-Christophe Leveque (JCL), whose mother had changed their name from Lévy. He also had done systematic Internet research on his family and created various spreadsheets of a single family name across many towns. We agreed that since a marriage record gives the most amount of data, most researchers would like a national database with this information. We determined that a national database of Jewish marriages in France was not a feasible project for the two of us, so we agreed to start with Alsace because both of our ancestors were Alsatian and following the war of 1871–1872 many Alsatian Jews moved to Paris or to central France so as to remain French.

So we began with Lévy marriages for one town in Alsace and then decided to record all the Jewish marriages from that one town, making informed personal judgments as to who was Jewish. It grew from one patronymic to many and one town to all of the towns in one department. We estimate a  $\pm 10\%$  error rate, either in Jews omitted or non-Jews erroneously included. This might also include mixed marriages. We both sat at our computers for a couple of years and used to Skype two to three times a week. I figure Jean-Christophe did 75% of the work. [Note: Pierre is a very modest man.]

The only additional thing I wanted was to find a home for the data where it would be freely accessible. We didn't want to leave it in France because the French, since the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, do not note religion in public records. The database is derived from the civil records of the two departments whose unindexed record images are online—Department 68, Haut-Rhin,

and Department 67, Bas-Rhin. Right now the database stands at 22,000 marriages. We are finishing a third set of records, Department 57, Moselle, in Lorraine; we now have 5,000 marriages, two thirds of the total. Metz, which has a large Jewish population, will be the last city, and Jean-Christophe has begun the work.

At the 2016 Seattle IAJGS meeting I asked the governing body of JewishGen whether they were interested in these data. If there are errors or omissions I'd be interested in hearing from users. We know it will be useful. We don't need validation.

On 30 March 2017 JewishGenners received an e-mail from Managing Director Warren Blatt announcing the "JewishGen France Database" at <http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/France/>. The database was created specifically to accommodate the marriage data contributed by Pierre and his cousin, which so far are the only collection of information on the site composed solely of French records.

I asked Pierre about his motivations:

I would call myself an enabler for people who are trying to do their genealogy. You have to have a dedication to what you want to get done. There is no path that is impossible; it just takes longer.

If there are people out there who would like to pick a department and continue this work, this would be very nice. Then we could have a national database for France.

At the 2017 International Association of Jewish Genealogy Societies (IAJGS) Conference in Orlando Pierre's contributions to genealogy were officially recognized. We have a treasure here and note that Pierre often attends SFBAJGS sessions in San Francisco and Oakland.

### **Genealogy Lessons from Pierre's Work**

- The enterprise of genealogy often functions best in a community and over generations.
- It is possible to get through the whole box of family papers.
- One can enter names into a genealogy program without connecting them to the main tree and wire them up later.
- Spreadsheets are a very useful organizing tool.



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