



Creating Our Family Tree Book

by Len Traubman

I have just finished. (“Thank God,” my wife says) the hardcover illustrated story of my mother’s Russian Jewish family that came from the rich farmland between Odessa and Kiev to Duluth, Minnesota in the early 1880s, then moved out across America. The research and preparation was a huge, co-operative project involving many relatives, old and new friends, Jews and gentiles.

People asked: “Why did you do it?” They next inquire: “How did you organise it, involve other family members, and publish, all in just two years?” Within the 300 pages are some answers to the whys and hows. On the copyright page: “A project of the heart, prompted by the need for story in these times, inspired by those who loved enough to keep the stories and photographs, compiled in thousands of hours with the generous cooperation of many, finished with the support of my dear wife, Libby, and by grace.” In the introduction: “‘Story’ is important. It is about lives lived, lessons learned, and wisdom gained. It communicates who we are, what we value, what we are made of. Our collective story binds us together with each other and the whole human family.”

Further exploring my own heart and motives, I embarked on this realising that the elders with their knowledge would soon be gone; my own character and soul had been forged in great part by the people and their stories; and if I did not do it, it looked as if it would never be done. The story would be lost for all time. I could not tolerate that possibility.

Since the 1960s, when in my twenties, I had been keeping family information, photos, memorabilia and old interview notes on scraps of paper. Exactly two years ago I discovered computer genealogy software (PAF and NoteTools) and began entering family tree information — names, dates, places, narratives. Within a few months, my goal became to write a book. It was as if a mission had been handed to me; to be honest, I am missionary minded by nature, a “one” if you know the Enneagram personality chart.

I went to my first meeting of our San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society, scratching lecture notes furiously about research methods: U.S. National Archives, Library of Congress maps, state and county vital records, city directories, court documents, old newspapers. I did it all, nights and days and weekends, when I was not treating patients in my paediatric dental practice or continuing our volunteer efforts with Israeli-Palestinian and Armenia-Azerbaijan peace dialogues.

Early mornings before Cheerios (Ed: a breakfast cereal) and bananas were great times to phone from San Francisco to the East Coast for oral history interviews with the elders, and to ask for old photos. Evenings were best for West Coast relatives. Days were mostly for libraries, evenings for transferring notes to the computer.

There was other help. During the two years, copies of old photos flew back and forth across the country, as relatives and friends identified long-gone faces, and translated Hebrew and Yiddish writing; I could do the Russian. The task of gathering, duplicating and safely returning the original precious photographs added no small dimension of responsibility, even anxiety.

With my home computer and modem, I logged on to Roots, the local genealogy BBS, through which helpful data and research ideas flowed in from helpers all over North America. Near the end, I made computer electronic mail contact with a young Jewish journalist living near our shtetl. In his Ukrainian archives he found old 1800s Russian documents about our family. He sent photocopies with a traveler, and more data by e-mail.

I had to decide if I should live a reasonably normal life and do the project in a prolonged five or so years, or do all the research, interviews, writing, graphics, and 200 photos in an intense, unnatural two years. I chose the latter. Promising the family a deadline and delivery date helped the book happen. I guess the decision depends on one's personality. For me, total focus helps my creativity and problem-solving process. The result, exhausted satisfaction, in search of sleep.

The scary part was anticipating the mechanics and cost of printing a book. This was a whole new world unknown to me. I gained knowledge by first getting estimates from several printers. Fortunately I found a friend who knew graphics, and a skilled, supportive printer's representative finally to hold my hand and guide me through the steps.

More decisions. Hard or soft cover? Regular or coated paper? Print just enough or a surplus? Seeing the richness of the photographs and stories, I chose a beautiful red linen hardcover, coated paper to honour the photos, and an excess of books for the children who follow in our footsteps, proving it was a project of the heart (and not just of rational economics).

People ask, "What did you leave out?" To limit the book in size and cost, I chose to focus on the stories and photos of only those born in the 1800s and very early 1900s. The newer generations are recorded in the last half of the book, but it will be for another time and author to tell and illustrate their stories.

The 600 books arrived from the printer this December, 1994. My thoughts were that I wish my grandmother, Mary Oreckovsky Oxman, who cared so deeply about family and kept so many photographs, could be alive to see it and that the money to research and publish, not a trivial amount, now seemed very little in proportion to the significance of this gift to posterity. Finally, what a great use of one's life and time, to discover, record, and pass people's stories and roots to them — to have forever.

The day before I sent the manuscript to the printer, I was moved to add a portion of text in a small box on the book's last page. It summarised what this genealogy exploration, discovery, and reporting activity means to me, and perhaps to you.

*"From those women and men
of great spirit, intelligence, and strength
who came before us and said 'Yes' to life,
may we embody the best of their qualities.
In gratitude for their lives lived,
let us now continue to build a world
based on love, and on our inherited wisdom
about the oneness of the Creator and of the Creation
in all its fabulous diversity of nations, races, religions, species.
As sure as the Oreckovskys and families like them were
pioneer people with vision and courage in changing times,
so can we follow in their footsteps, living our lives
in awe of all that has come before us,
and in devotion to each other and our
precious global living community,
knowing who we are."*