

A look at the conference

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood (08/01/2008)

The International Conference on Jewish Genealogy taking place in Chicago from Aug. 17-22 is so packed with talks, workshops, tours, films, discussions and more that attendees might need a preparatory week just to figure out which events to attend.

Pick a day at random and it includes programs on "Transformative Family Reunions: The Important Role of YOU, the Family Genealogist"; "The Jews of Sing Sing"; "The Jewish Agriculturists' Aid Society: Philanthropy and Jewish Farm Settlement in the Heartland"; a "Chicago Jewish Roots" tour of the city's North and Northwest Sides; close to a dozen films, including "A Tour of Hasidic Williamsburg" and "Mahjong and Chicken Feet"; a computer workshop in using spreadsheets in genealogy research; and supervised cemetery visits.

This 28th annual conference is co-hosted by the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois and the Illiana Jewish Genealogical Society and takes place at the Chicago Marriott Downtown Magnificent Mile in downtown Chicago.

A Web site, www.Chicago2008.org, lists every event at the conference.

Amid all this, there will be a distinct focus on Chicago and the Midwest. One of the most intriguing sessions is called "The Musical 'Chicago' and All That Genealogical Jazz," a demonstration by well-known Chicago genealogists Mike Karsen and Ron Arons.

The popular musical, Karsen explains, was based on an earlier book and play about two actual Chicago women who had murdered their lovers. He investigated the cases further and separated the truth from the editorial license that the book's author, a Chicago Tribune reporter, had taken.

The presentation, besides being entertaining, will offer a lesson for genealogists, Karsen says: "This happens in families too. You can never really trust that something you've heard about really did happen. Genealogists take this little family tale and go back and find the records. We did that in the context of the play and found living descendents of both of the women." And if you go back far enough in your own family history, "everybody has some intrigue, murder or violent gangsters," Karsen says.

Several other sessions relating to Chicago and Midwestern genealogy research will also be presented, including a program by Karsen on "Resources for Jewish Genealogy in Chicagoland" and a presentation on Illinois genealogical records by Phillip Costello, clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County Archives.

Jeanne Larzalere Bloom, a professional researcher specializing in Chicago and Cook County, will give two presentations, titled "Polished Gems: Property Records of Cook County, Illinois" and "But ... It's Not Where it's Supposed to Be: Unpolished Gems."

Researching at the Newberry Library, famed for its genealogy collection, will be the focus of a presentation by Jack Simpson, the library's curator of local and family history. And Israeli researcher Rony Golan will tell the story of his mother, a Holocaust survivor who wanted to find her lost aunt, in "How I Almost Didn't Find Doda Channa from 'Tshikago.'"

A number of other programs will focus on Midwestern resources outside of Chicago for Jewish genealogical research.

Other highlights of the conference will include:

The keynote speech by E. Randol Schoenberg on "Recovering Nazi-Looted Art - A Genealogist's Tale" at 8 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 17. Schoenberg is a Los Angeles-based attorney who has successfully litigated several high-profile Nazi-looted art cases, including negotiating the return of six Gustav Klimt paintings to Maria Altmann, whose family had owned them before the Holocaust.

Entertainment at the conference banquet on Thursday, Aug. 21 will be by Lisa Lipkin, a professional storyteller, writer and educator. Her presentation is titled "Who Towed Noah's Ark? An Evening of Urban Stories that Bring the Bible to Life." Lipkin will also present a session on "Professional Storyteller's Tips and Tricks for Collecting Family Stories."

A film festival, offering feature films, shorts and documentaries with family history themes, is also included, with some films shown each day of the conference. Attendees can register for the film festival alone.

In addition, the conference schedule is packed with workshops, tours and opportunities for participants to work on their own research. Many special interest groups, known as SIGS, will gather to discuss materials and projects relevant to their members' interest, for instance, research in Belarus or Lithuania, or topics like Early American, Rabbinic or Sephardic research.

Daily registration is available for local residents who may not want to attend the entire conference. See the Web site for details.