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DNA testing: a new tool in Jewish geneology

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This month, Chicago will host the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy.

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Image Caption:

The Peltzer Pekarsky family poses for a photograph in Ukraine in 1913. The family includes the father of Mike Karsen, president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois.

Image Credit:

Courtesy of Mike Karsen

When a North suburban Jewish genealogy group began encouraging its members to undergo DNA tests to search for family connections, Mike Karsen said he did it because he's the group's president.

Karsen, who has been researching his family's history since the mid-1990s, traced his roots to Eastern Europe. But his cheek swab solved a mystery for another man whose only known background was in the southern United States.

Jack Kane, a Wisconsin computer programmer, completed the DNA test two years ago. His father, Gordon, was abandoned as a toddler in a New York City office building in 1926 and later adopted. Gordon Kane, now 82, had no information about his biological family until Jack made a strong match with Karsen two months ago.

Karsen and the younger Kane are likely cousins, but testing can't determine how many generations back the connection was made.

While Gordon Kane's family had guessed from his appearance that he was of Jewish background, he was "really astounded" when he heard the news of the match, according to his son.

"It gives me more of a sense of completion," Jack Kane said. "My mother's from the South, and we know our heritage very well. But with my dad, it was always kind of a black hole. It gave me a sense of clarity, to say, 'Yes, that's the part of the world I'm from.'"

Genealogy research has become popular in recent years as online services and the digitization of immigration and other records have made searching easier. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, in 2006 a quarter of Internet users had researched their genealogy or family history online. The hobby is particularly growing among those with Jewish roots; the database at the popular Jewishgen.org is searched more than 40,000 times per month.

One of the newest tools for uncovering family connections is DNA testing, which uses a sample of DNA to identify family connections between people in a database, like that of Texas-based Family Tree DNA, used by Kane and Karsen. Only a fraction of hobby genealogists have had the testing, which costs about \$200 for a reliable test, Karsen said.

While it's obvious more people are interested in genealogy today, it doesn't mean family history groups are seeing an influx of new members, said Karsen, president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois.

"Local societies don't feel the boom because people think they can do [research] on their own," he said. "Most societies are losing members and battling to keep people interested."

The Illinois society is still growing, but not as quickly as it could be, Karsen said. It's responding by trying to build a "virtual society" by offering online services to people across the country with Chicago Jewish roots.

The group, founded in 1981, also operates a genealogical research library and holds

monthly meetings at the Skokie synagogue Temple Beth Israel. The society has 250 members, of which 10 or 20 percent are Skokie residents, Karsen said.

Jewish people stayed away from genealogy for years because they thought all Jewish records from before the Holocaust and records from Eastern Europe had been destroyed, according to Karsen, who said those are myths.

"There's a certain point in genealogy when people get the bug," he said. "You find something and say to yourself, 'Now I know my grandmother's maiden name.' It encourages you. Like a crossword puzzle, you find a clue and get excited and think, 'Now I can do the whole thing.'"

This month, Chicago will host the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, co-sponsored by the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies. About 650 people are expected to attend.

Skokie resident Thelma Ross, a member of the Illinois society, said Jewish people are drawn to genealogy because of their long history, but she doesn't think their interest is unique.

"It's like detective work. It's addicting," she said.

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