

# Kensington Author Devoted to Tracing Family Roots

By ROBERT L. COHEN

Remember when Dorothy opened the door of her Kansas home and instantly entered another world — in this case, the magical land of Oz — as the screen, and Dorothy's and our vista, was lit with gorgeous color? Talking with Kensington resident Arthur Kurzweil, one gets the sense that when he researches his family history he enters another world, the world of his Polish and Hungarian grandparents and several centuries of great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents as well — and for him, it is an enchanted one.

For Kurzweil, this journey represents not only a genealogical tour de force but a spiritual pilgrimage, bringing him closer to a religious universe — that of his ancestors and of his contemporary "ultra-Orthodox" cousins in Israel — in which he feels far more at home, in some respects, than in 1980s America.

It has brought him to Jewish cemeteries in Poland and to the reconstruction, by means of documents and stories, of the texture of the lives of relatives murdered in the Holocaust.

It has led him to discover living relatives as close as Williamsburg and Brooklyn, and as far away as South America, Australia and Switzerland, and to establish close friendships — which he now numbers among his most valued relationships — with many of them.

## A Spiritual Pursuit

It has enabled him to meet two of world Jewry's literary and intellectual giants: Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust writer, and Adin Steinsaltz, perhaps the most brilliant living scholar of Talmud.

And it has transformed his personal and professional life. Once a film librarian in Plainfield, N.J., his life is now tied up with the study of Judaica — as one of the busiest Jewish speakers in the country; as an editor at a Jewish educational publishing house; and as the author of *From Generation to Generation: How To Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Personal History*, recently reissued in paperback by



For Kensington author Arthur Kurzweil, tracing his family history is a spiritual pilgrimage that brings him closer to the lost world of his ancestors in Eastern Europe. Photo by Mike Stein.

Schocken Books, and the just-published *My Generations: A Course in Jewish Family History* (Behrman House).

Genealogy was also a spiritual pursuit for America's most celebrated genealogist, Alex Haley. But Kurzweil does not take kindly to the suggestion that his family researches (which began well before *Roots* was published) are something of a fad. As he points out, genealogy is a time-honored Jewish tradition, going back to the Bible itself, with its incantatory enumerations of who begat whom, and since reflected in everything from the names customarily given Jewish children at birth to the tombstone inscriptions that mark their deaths. Often, a Jewish author's family tree would be included in the front matter of his book.

Kurzweil's curiosity about his roots was nurtured in childhood: in the stories his father told him about Arthur's grandparents in Dobromil (a town in Galicia, which

was variously part of Austria, Russia and Poland), and in the songs his father sang for him, whose lyrics he in turn had learned from his ancestors. But in the spring of 1970, Dobromil ceased to be "the mythical kingdom where my father's stories took place" and became in reality what it had long been, for Kurzweil, in fantasy: an object of obsession and passionate historical romance, and the definer of a new vocation for one of its descendants.

## Piece By Piece

In a "memorial book" produced in New York by former residents of the town, Arthur found a photograph, familiar to him, of his great-grandfather, Yudl the tinsmith (a.k.a. Julius Kurzweil), posed with other Dobromil members of the artisan's guild to which he belonged. Judging by Arthur's recounting of it in *From Generation to Generation*, this discovery was nothing less than transfixing. Finding that photograph in the book brought home to him that he had a past and a history, and that they were there for him to reclaim if he wished to.

His memory jogged by the map, his father provided more details and stories about life in Dobromil. Members of the society that had produced the book provided other data: names of members of the Kurzweil family, details and stories about their life in Dobromil, names of other people who would know more.

Kurzweil was launched on a spiritual journey: one that would take him through hours of poring over ship manifests (passenger lists); immigration and naturalization papers; birth, marriage, and death certificates; and even telephone books from Eastern Europe. Through dozens of calls to "Kurzweils" listed in out-of-state telephone directories. Through hours of talking to his relatives and to people who knew his grandparents and great-grandparents.

## From Recipe to Ritual

His new book, *My Generations*, which is addressed primarily to pre-bar and bat mitzvah Jewish children but which he hopes will reach people of every age, reflects the dual nature of his obsession with genealogy: It is both a hobby — he researches family history like other people collect stamps — and a mission, a calling.

In a pleasant, "scrapbook" style, the book invites readers to collect and record a rich variety of information about their relations and ancestors: family stories and sayings, ancestors' occupations, heirlooms, even recipes. All are seen as points of connection not only to "your roots" — in this case, to the history of Jewish families and communities — but to Jewish culture and traditions generally, to "how they lived" in previous generations.

A recipe in the Kurzweil family for several generations calls for "one glass of milk," without specifying the size of the glass: Is it six ounces, eight ounces, 10 ounces? The explanation: This branch of the Kurzweil family was poor, and like many other poor Jews, they used standard-sized "yahrtzeit" glasses — designed to hold 24-hour memorial candles — for drinking and measuring as well. So understanding a recipe can teach you something about Jewish rituals.

*My Generations* is not merely a "hobby" book; it is, in Kurzweil's words, "an attempt to give Jewish teachers in America a tool with which to help young people make certain kinds of discoveries." And it's in that spirit that Kurzweil encourages people to become genealogists themselves, finding out things that matter to them about their own family histories. For Kurzweil this has meant delving primarily into his family's religious life; for others it might mean uncovering their family's occupational or artistic past, or a history of political activism.

For a start, Kurzweil encourages readers to learn what their names mean. His originally meant "jester" or "storyteller" — which, given Arthur's proclivity for both pursuits, confirms for him a saying quoted in both of his books, that "All our ancestors are in each of us."