

## How do I find my great-grandfather's ancestral town?

### Part 1 - Census and Burial Records

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Finding our ancestors among the tens of millions who immigrated from the mid 1800s through the early 1920s can seem like looking for a needle in the proverbial haystack. Fortunately, America, like the countries of Europe had bureaucracies that created paper trails. These help us track the movement of our ancestors as they left the old country and migrated to America. Our goal is to figure out where our ancestors came from ... what country and what town or village.

First you need the name of your immigrant ancestor, both the Americanized name and his/her "Jewish" name, the name the immigrant used in the old country. The Jewish name is what will appear on the passenger ship manifest that documents the immigrant's arrival in the U.S. You can get these names from family stories and by interviewing older family members. (See my February 15<sup>th</sup> Jewish Review column.) You also can get names from gravestones. Gravestone inscriptions usually have both Hebrew and Americanized names, as well as the Hebrew name of the father or spouse.

Once in America, our immigrant ancestors often associated with others who came from their towns. They formed synagogues and social organizations, called *landsmanshaftn*. These *landsmanshaftn* purchased sections of Jewish cemeteries for burial of their members. The name of the *landsmanshaft* is a good clue to the name of your ancestral village. For example, I'm researching a potential ancestor who is buried in the *Kamenets-Podolier* section of a New York Jewish cemetery. So, he probably was from the town of Kamenets-Podolskiy, Ukraine. Many of his relatives are buried near him. This helps me figure out how he is related to my family and where in Eastern Europe I must look for additional records.

Some Jewish cemeteries now have their burial databases online ... free. A list of cemeteries in the greater NYC area is on the Web (<http://www.jgsny.org/nycem.htm>). Some include links to their burial databases. Most will provide the name of the *landsmanshaft* that owns the burial section. The Center for Jewish History in NYC has information about *landsmanshaftn* (<http://www.cjh.org/pdfs/Landsmanschaftn.pdf>). Many cemeteries will send you a digital photo of the gravestone. All you have to do is ask ... and sometimes pay a small fee (typically \$5-\$10). You can find Jewish cemeteries in other cities by doing a Google search. For example, if you search for <Jewish Cemeteries Chicago>, the first item on the "results" list is a JewishGen webpage with links to 24 cemeteries, many of which have online burial databases. Also, search the JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry, JOWBR, (<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery>). It lists more than 1 million burials in 2,033 cemeteries worldwide, including 8,439 Oregon burials from 1809-2002. Some database entries include a gravestone photo and the *landsmanshaft* name. All include the cemetery name. Hopefully, these searches will give you the Hebrew name of your ancestor and they may provide clues to his/her ancestral town.

The next thing to do is to figure out when your ancestor immigrated, and to gather more clues to his/her ancestral town. There are several ways to do this. For now, I'll focus on U.S. Census records. They are easy to search and provide a wealth of immigration and naturalization information:

- the year each person immigrated and number of years in the US (1900, 1910, 1920 and 1930 Censuses);
- naturalization status (1910, 1920, 1930) and year naturalized (1870, 1920, 1930);
- whether or not the parents were of foreign birth (1870);
- birthplace of person and parents (1900, 1910, 1920, 1930)... usually pretty general, like "Russian Poland".

You can access US Census records free from the computers at Multnomah County Library branches and from your home computer. All you need is a Multnomah County library card or a card from a cooperating library. Go online to <http://www.multcolib.org/ref/a2z.html>. Scroll down to "Heritage Quest Online" and left click. Select "Search Census" and fill out the search boxes. You'll see actual images of the Census forms. Look for your ancestor's name in the left hand column.

With this information, you can begin following your ancestor's paper trail back to the old country. In my next article, I'll show you how to use your new information to get your ancestor's passenger ship manifest and naturalization documents. These often provide detailed information about where your ancestor came from, who he/she left behind, and who was waiting for him/her at his American destination.

Try the searches I've outlined in this article. Pick one or two of your immigrant ancestors and search for information about them in the sources I've mentioned. Then write to me ([rondoctor@earthlink.net](mailto:rondoctor@earthlink.net)) and let me know about your successes ... and, if you've had any problems, I'll try to help.

Don't forget to record the information you find. Genealogy software programs are excellent for systematically recording and organizing this information. You can learn more about genealogy software at the March 17<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon (JGSO). The meeting is from 7:00 to 9:00 pm at Ahavat Achim Congregation on Barbur Blvd. More information is on JGSO's website (<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~orjgs/>).