

How do I find my great-grandfather's ancestral town?
Part 6 - Introduction to Records from Eastern Europe
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The fall of the iron curtain in the early 1990s was more than an important geopolitical event. To Jewish genealogists, it meant a fairly rapid opening to resources that could only be imagined in wild, genealogical fantasies ... treasures that were long hidden in dusty archives and in fading memories. As the doors of many of these archives opened, individuals and organizations of various kinds began identifying these treasures and took actions to make them accessible. This process continues today. Researchers and archivists constantly uncover new caches of records. We are dealing with a system that is a "work-in-progress" although finding, cataloging and making accessible these long-lost documents require skills and funds that, too often, are not available. This month, I will describe the most important of these resources. In subsequent columns I will discuss ways you can delve into these records and what you might find in them.

First, it is important to understand a little about the history of the region. Wars and nationalistic uprisings resulted in centuries of shifting boundaries and changes in governance. Until recently, four major powers contended for the lands of this region: Prussia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Russian Empire. The Polish-Lithuanian Empire was huge. It extended from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south and served as a buffer between Russia and the western powers. It was home to the largest number of Jews in Europe. Jews were oppressed and restricted to a greater or lesser extent under all governing powers, but under Polish rule, Jewish communities were largely self-governing *Kahals*. *Kahal* leadership was obliged to comply with State requirements involving tax collection and military conscription, both of which required extensive recordkeeping.

Between 1772 and 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned; its lands divided among the other three powers. The Austro-Hungarian Empire got the southwestern lands known as Galicia. Russia took all of central and eastern Poland, including what are now Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. With these lands, Russia acquired a large and largely unwelcome Jewish population. Catherine the Great created the Pale of Settlement in the newly acquired lands in order to keep Jews out of the Russian heartland. For a while, the *Kahal* system of Jewish self-governance was left intact, although it was gradually eroded as the State took greater control.

From the middle ages to the mid 1800s, governance in most of this area was based on feudal systems. Royalty, minor nobility, and wealthy magnates owned the land, and the people. Kings and Emperors ruled with varying levels of authority. Class structure was rigid.

Wars, revolts, and shifting power alliances continued to change governance and boundaries. With each shift there were changes in the way records were kept, changes in language, and changes in rights and restrictions of Jews. Not long after the partitions, the area again was racked by war as Napoleon conquered much of Europe and marched eastward into Russia. With his advance, he instituted numerous civil reforms, granting Jews rights that had been withheld under other regimes. One reform is particularly important: the adoption of permanent family surnames. Previously each person was known by his/her given name and name of his/her father. This patronymic system resulted in names like Yakov ben Yitschak (Yakov, son of Yitschak). Very few families had permanent surnames. Nevertheless, it was decades before the transition from patronymics to surnames became almost universal. Even today, however, we find modern-era gravestones that give only patronymics, not surnames. This can make it difficult to trace a family back in time.

Each governing power required recordkeeping. Written records had several purposes. They provided information the government needed to control the movements of its inhabitants and to determine their legal status. Most important, recordkeeping was needed for taxation and military conscription. Recordkeeping was done by church clergy, by state-appointed rabbis, and/or by civil authorities. Here is a short list of the kinds of records/resources available from various East European archives.

- Vital records (births, marriages, deaths, and divorces)
- Census records (*Revizskie Skazki*) and the 1895-1897 Russian All-Empire Census
- Family lists
- Kahal documents, including tax lists
- Magnate documents
- Police records
- Conscription registers
- Registers of community members
- Registers of permission to leave
- Military records
- Business directories
- Cemetery gravestones

Miriam Weiner, a professional genealogist, has published two books (*Jewish Roots in Poland* and *Jewish Roots in Moldova and Ukraine*) that identify the types of records available in each of the many archives in modern Poland, Ukraine, and Moldova. Both are in the library of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon (JGSO) at Neveh Shalom Congregation's Library. The best way to access Weiner's updated lists is on her website (<http://www.rtrfoundation.org/>). The website also includes descriptions of documents available from archives in Lithuania and Belarus. Click on the "Archive Database" and "Archive Chapters" links on the left side of her home page.

Shortly after Eastern Europe opened up to the West, the Mormons began microfilming original records in archives throughout the region. To find out if microfilms exist for your town, go to the LDS FamilySearch website (www.familysearch.org). Click on the "Search Records" tab. In the dropdown menu, click on "Library Catalog" and then, the "Place Search" button. Type your town name in the "Place" entry box and the country name in the "part of" entry box.

Of course, all of these records are in languages other than English; they are handwritten in unfamiliar scripts; and they are voluminous (see photo). In a future column, I will discuss ways you can get some of the essential information from these records even if you don't know the language. Fortunately, there are many people and groups in the Jewish genealogy community who are helping to translate records obtained from Eastern European archives. Here are a few you should try:

- *Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland)*, <http://www.jewishgen.org/JRI-PL/>. JRI-Poland, together with the JewishGen All-Poland database (<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Poland/>), gives you searchable access to more than 4.3 million records.
- *Litvak Special Interest Group All-Lithuania Database* (<http://www.jewishgen.org/Litvak/all.htm>), and *JewishGen Lithuania database* (<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Lithuania/>) together have more than 830,000 records.
- Belarus Special Interest Group, All-Belarus database has more than 430,000 records (<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Belarus/>)
- Ukraine Special Interest Group, All-Ukraine database has more than 1 million records (<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Ukraine/>).
- The JewishGen Hungary Database has more than 800,000 records (<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Hungary/>). It includes Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, northern Serbia, northwestern Romania, and subcarpathian Ukraine.

JewishGen has other, slightly less extensive databases of translated European records arranged by country (<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases>). Individual "Shtetlink" projects also provide translated eastern European records for specific towns and regions. For example, take a look at the Kremenets (Ukraine) Shtetlinks website (<http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Kremenets/web-pages/about-kremenets.html>), and the Lyakhovichi (Belarus) Shtetlinks website (<http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/lyakhovichi/lyakhovichi.html>). Records are constantly added to all of these databases as they are obtained, translated and proofread.

The "*Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy*" (Sallyann Amdur Sack and Gary Mokotoff, editors, 2004) is an excellent starting point for information about country-specific resources. This 608 page large format book has almost 400 pages devoted to country-by-country descriptions of genealogical resources in 52 nations outside of the US. It is available in the JGSO Library.

Next month, we'll dig deeper into Eastern European archives and the documents they hold.

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SIDEBAR

Eastern European Records on the Web

Archival Inventories, town-by-town

Miriam Weiner's Routes-to-Roots Foundation

<http://www.rtrfoundation.org/>

LDS Family History Library

Catalog Search page

http://www.familysearch.org/eng/Library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp

Belarus

Belarus Special Interest Group, All-Belarus Database

<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Belarus/>

Hungary

JewishGen Hungary Database

<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Hungary/>

Lithuania

Litvak Special Interest Group All-Lithuania Database

<http://www.jewishgen.org/Litvak/all.htm>

JewishGen Lithuania database

<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Lithuania/>

Poland:

Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland)

<http://www.jewishgen.org/JRI-PL/>.

JewishGen All-Poland database

<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Poland/>

Ukraine

Ukraine Special Interest Group, All-Ukraine Database

<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Ukraine/>

Other databases of translated European records (arranged by country)

<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases>

Town-based translation projects (examples):

Kremenets, Ukraine

<http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Kremenets/web-pages/about-kremenets.html>), or

Lyakhovichi, Belarus

<http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/lyakhovichi/lyakhovichi.html>

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An archivist delivers part of the 1858 Kremenets Census to Ron Doctor
Central State Archives, Ternopil Oblast (Province), Ukraine, 2002