How do I find my great-grandfather's ancestral town?
Part 7 – How to obtain records from Eastern Europe
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In 1992, at a family dinner at my mother's home, I casually asked what I thought was a simple question, "Where was Grandpa born?" "Russia", said my mother. "Latvia", said one of my aunts. "Ukraine", said another aunt. And so, my genealogical journey began.

Doing Jewish genealogy is like working on a couple of mixed up jigsaw puzzles. First, you have to sort out the pieces. Then you try to fit the pieces of each puzzle together. Sometimes you have a piece from the wrong puzzle and it just doesn't fit. Sometimes pieces are missing and you have to work around them. If you have sufficient pieces, you can complete enough of the puzzle so that you can see the whole picture, even with a few holes in it. That's the way it is with Eastern European records. Some of the pieces are wrong … same name, different person. Some of the pieces are missing … lost through war, intentional destruction, and neglect. But, with a little luck, we can find enough pieces of data to re-construct at least a partial picture of our family history in the old country. In this month's column, I'll explain how you can begin collecting the old country pieces of your family history. I'll focus on Eastern Europe, but I'll provide some information about other areas as well.

Last month I listed the kinds of records that are available in Eastern Europe. The most important are vital records (births, marriages, deaths, divorces) and Censuses or Family Lists. There are 6 primary ways to obtain records for your ancestral town:

1. **Travel to the old country** and visit the archives that hold your town's records. Unless you speak the language, you will need a skilled researcher and translator to accompany you. My first trip to Ukraine in 2002 was successful beyond my wildest dreams. You can read about my experiences in my "Ukraine Journal: A Genealogical Journey to Warsaw and Ukraine". It is on the Kremenets Shtetlinks web page (http://tinyurl.com/yf8pm4l).

2. **Hire a researcher** who specializes in the country or region of your ancestors. The best way to find a researcher is by personal recommendation. Post a query on the JewishGen Discussion Groups or on one of the country-specific discussion groups (http://www.jewishgen.org/JewishGen/DiscussionGroup.htm). I guarantee that you will get many replies. Follow up by calling or writing to the replies that look most useful.

3. **Request records by writing directly to the Archive** that is most likely to hold records for your town. Miriam Weiner's website (http://www.rtrfoundation.org/) is a

good place to find out what exists for your town. She provides addresses for all Eastern European archives and suggestions for writing your letter. You also can find archive addresses and advice on country-specific web pages of JewishGen's Special Interest Groups (http://www.jewishgen.org/JewishGen/sigs.htm and http://www.jewishgen.org/JewishGen/hosted.htm).

If you write in English, a reply may be delayed. Several books in the JGSO Library provide letter writing guides in the language of each country. The books by Shea and Hoffman are particularly useful. See the sidebar for annotated bibliographic citations. Also, Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland) provides instructions for ordering records from the Polish State Archives (http://www.jewishgen.org/jri-pl/psa/neworder.htm). When you write to an archive you will have to provide specific names and approximate dates. The archives will do a search and will respond by giving you a general description of what they have found and how much the records will cost. You must send payment before they will ship the records. This is a bit risky since it is likely to be expensive and you don't know if the records they found really are for your family. Some archives are better at dealing with American queries than others.

4. **Check JewishGen country and town-specific translation projects** and Shtetlinks webpages for projects that already are underway for your town. JRI-Poland alone is indexing records for more than 500 Polish towns and has more than 3.5 million records online and searchable (http://www.jri-poland.org/). JewishGen has many hundreds of other town projects online. In addition to the JewishGen webpages listed above, check out the Shtetlinks pages (http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/).

5. **Check the LDS for microfilmed records** for your town (www.familysearch.org). Do a "Place" search in the "Library Catalog". If the Mormons have microfilmed records for your town they will be listed. You can order the microfilms into a local LDS Family History Center. Once you learn how to identify your surnames in the language of the film, you can browse the films, frame-by-frame. This is tedious, but when you find family, the result is exhilarating. You also should post messages on JewishGen's discussion groups asking if anyone has already indexed the microfilms for your town. If not, then consider starting a town-based group so that others who are interested can join in a cooperative translation project. If you get to this point, contact me. I will help you get started.

6. **Check the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People** (in Jerusalem). They have been actively acquiring documents from all over Europe, especially Eastern Europe. Some of these documents are almost impossible for individuals to locate and obtain. Their website is at http://sites.huji.ac.il/cahjp/. *Polish sources at the Central*

Archives for the History of the Jewish People, published in 2004, lists their holdings at the time. This book is in JGSO's Library. Unfortunately, there is no up-to-date catalog of their holdings. Contact them via e-mail or hire a researcher from the Israel Genealogical Society (http://www.isragen.org.il) to check for your town's documents.

Documents you receive from Eastern European archives will be handwritten in the language of the governing power when the record was created. The first thing you should do is to become familiar with the handwritten alphabet and sounds of your ancestral country's language, and with the Hebrew alphabet. At first, deciphering your records may appear hopeless. But, once you get used to the handwriting and the relatively constant format of the records, you will be able to pick out names and keywords. The books by Shea and Hoffman and by Franzin are particularly helpful in showing you how to do this. In addition, I have developed a number of transliteration and translation aides for my Kremenets project. These include files that show images of handwritten given names, surnames, and keywords extracted from the Kremenets vital records and censuses. The image files (showing Russian and Hebrew/Yiddish) along with transliterations and translations are on the web: (http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Kremenets/web-pages/transliteration.html). These images can help you by showing how names actually were written. Then, by "pattern matching" you can begin to pick out names in your own documents. Take a look at the "image files" and then try to decipher either the Russian part or the Hebrew part of this 1879 birth record.

Next month, I'll explain what is in this record and will show you other actual documents and their translations. And, I'll give you some tips for doing your own research.

Sidebar
Key References and Websites

Franzin, Judith R. (2009). *A Translation Guide to 19th-Century Polish-Language Civil-Registration Documents (including Birth, Marriage and Death Records)*. 3rd ed. Northbook, IL: Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois. 472 pages. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780961351229. Available at <http:www.jewishgen.org/jgsi/TheGuide.html>
An excellent guide to Polish documents. Includes samples and model sentences in Polish for genealogical correspondence.

Sack, Sallyann Amdur and Gary Mokotoff (2004). *Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy.* Bergenfield, N.J.: Avotaynu. ISBN: 1-886223-17-3. 608 pp. Hard cover.
Most complete Jewish genealogy book available. Individual chapters written by specialists. Includes almost 400 pages devoted to country-by-country research, extensive and useful maps, and presentation of German, Hebrew, Polish, Russian and Yiddish alphabets.

Shea, Jonathan D. and William F. Hoffman (1994). *Following the paper trail: A multilingual translation guide.* Teaneck, NJ: Avotaynu, Inc. ISBN: 0-9626373. 241 pages. Hardcover.
Presents and describes a variety of records types (with illustrations) from German, Swedish, Romance languages, French, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Slavic languages, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, and Lithuanian. Includes alphabets , useful terms, and selected personal names. Excellent reference work.

Shea, Jonathan D. and William F. Hoffman (2000). *In their words:A genealogist's translation guide to Polish, German, Latin, and Russian Documents, Volume I: Polish*. New Britain, CT: Language and Lineage Press. ISBN: 0-9631579-3-0. 392 pages. Softcover. Index plus detailed table of contents.
Updated and greatly expanded version of their 1994 book, *Following the paper trail*. This book focuses on Poland. It has an excellent overview of the Polish language. It includes maps, gazetteers, a wider variety of record types and illustrated samples, plus an excellent letter reading and writing guide for corresponding with Polish archives in Polish. I highly recommend it.

Shea, Jonathan D. and William F. Hoffman (2002). *In their words:A genealogist's translation guide to Polish, German, Latin, and Russian Documents, Volume I: Russian*. New Britain, CT: Language and Lineage Press. ISBN: 0-9631579-4-9. 486 pages. Softcover. Index plus detailed table of contents.
Focuses on documents that are written in the Russian language and covers Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania and parts of Poland. It includes maps, gazetteers, every known document type and illustrated samples, plus an excellent letter writing guide for corresponding with archives in Russian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian. I highly recommend it.

Volovici, Hanna, Witold Medykowski, Hadassah Assouline, and Benyamin Lukin (compilers/editors) (2004). *Polish sources at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People.* Bergenfield, NJ : Avotaynu Foundation, 2004. ISBN: 0-9668021-4-4. 300 pp. Softcover.
Annotated catalog of microfilms and documents acquired from archives throughout Europe and Russia. Arranged by town name. Focus is on Polish Jewry, broadly construed. Includes many archaic documents as well as documents from the interwar years. The Central Archives has acquired many more documents since this book was published.