

Town Counsel: Finding Your Ancestor's European Town of Origin

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The basic building block of Jewish genealogy research is determining our ancestors' communities of origin, especially where those places are on today's maps. Discovering an ancestor's town of origin (either birthplace or last residence) may be one of our most exciting research findings because it could be the portal to allow us to push our family tree back several generations.

Because records were (and are) often kept at local, municipal level or regional levels, successful genealogical research depends upon knowing our ancestors' correct communities of residence. One cannot successfully jump the pond to Eastern Europe with one's research until one has established location information from immigrant ancestors' and relatives' records in their adopted countries.

The most important principle of this research issue is *context*:

- Exhaustive research into family and personal *context* of our immigrant ancestor in his or her place of immigration, and
- Understanding of historical, cultural, religious and political *context* of the place of origin

Truths to grasp

If our ancestors said that they were from "Russia" or "Poland" or "Austria" it did not mean that they were from within the boundaries of the countries that we know today.

There may have been several versions of a community's name in different languages

- Polish, Russian, Yiddish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Hungarian, German, etc.
- In our relatives' lifetimes, political boundaries may have changed more than once
 - Community names changed with changes in national boundaries/languages
 - Nostalgia for or identification with the *old* Old Country? – late 19th and early 20th century immigrants may have identified their country of origin as "Poland" even though Poland did not exist between about 1795 and 1919. And the Poland they may have been referring to was much larger than present day Poland.

There may be several communities of the same or similar names in Eastern Europe.

There are ample chances to mix them up without additional clarifying info. It could also be that:

- Transliteration from one alphabet to another was faulty
- The person writing it down on the record misheard the name

- The person indexing the information for the database misread the name

People may not have been from just one community. Know the names of surrounding towns.

- Our Eastern European relatives moved around much more than we think. Many were born one community and later resided in another. Some were registered with the government in one community, but lived elsewhere. Their families may have moved for jobs. Which community did they identify when asked where they were “from?”
- Over time relatives may have dispersed among several nearby communities. Therefore, close family members may not have been from the same towns.

There were layers of political entities in Europe (just like in most countries). Immigrants may have specified any and all of these in different documents. In order of size (smallest to largest):

- Russian Empire: community, district (uyezd), province (gubernia)
 - e.g., Labun, Zaslav uyezd, Volhynia gubernia
- Austrian Empire (i.e., Galicia): community, administrative district, province
 - e.g., Uściczko, Zaleszczyki district, Tarnopol (or Galicia) province

And remember, these political divisions changed when national boundaries changed. So, what was once Labun, Zaslav uyezd, Volhynia gubernia, Russian Empire is now Yurovshchina, Khmel’nyts’kyi oblast, Ukraine.

Records lie! It is possible that no one record may provide the answer. But taken together, several records may provide the clues necessary to solve the puzzle.

Guidelines

- Work Backwards
- One record is never enough
- When in doubt, broaden out
- Take several routes to the treasure

Steps to take

Talk with your relatives – *all* of them (parents, siblings, aunts & uncles, cousins)

- Collect all the stories. Some may be true, some partially true, and some may be false. All may provide help in identifying town of origin.
- Look at home and with your relatives for documents/letters/photographs/family trees
- Home documents may be the “tip of the iceberg” –what the government hold? For example:
 - Naturalization: a naturalization certificate may be the only document a family has, but the court in which the person naturalized (or its archive) will likely have the full application that contains much more information.
 - Passports: applications for U.S. passports likely contain much more information (sometimes including father’s name and origins) than the passport, itself. Similar

documents from the Old Country may be excellent sources of information of place of residence.

Create a timeline for your ancestor. About when did they immigrate? For each record in which you find your ancestor, identify where they said they were from in the Old Country. It may vary from record to record and through time. Use this information to evaluate a general location.

Search for **passenger manifests, border crossing records** and **naturalization records**. 19th Century manifests and naturalization records for people who arrived before 1906 often have scant info on immigrant origins. Look for them anyway!

- If immigrant arrived in USA *after* 1906 determining place of origin may be easier
 - Standard forms were required
 - information on form may be more accurate because manifest listings were checked by U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization.
- Earlier passenger manifests and naturalization records were variable, but there could be useful clues. It may be difficult to locate the court in which people naturalized.
- If your immigrants came to the United States from Bremen or Hamburg, Germany; Rotterdam, Netherlands; or the United Kingdom, make sure to check for emigration manifests created and archived in those countries. Often, these records do not contain additional information, but they might.
- Cannot find a passenger manifest? Consider Canadian ports.
 - Travel to United States destinations by disembarking in Canada and then crossing the border may have been less expensive.
 - While The U.S. did not keep U.S.-Canada border crossing records until 1895 and records were not consistently kept for several years after that, border crossing record collections may prove useful.
 - Check Canadian immigration records (Library and Archives of Canada)
- Cannot find passenger manifests for your subject person? Consider alternative sources. Some passenger manifests were damaged and names may have been lost.
 - Cross reference with departure manifests (Bremen, Hamburg, Rotterdam, UK)
 - Check Philadelphia immigrant bank records.
 - Check Boston HIAS records.

Never stop with one record

This is especially true when the community name one has located cannot be easily identified on a map. Find as many records as possible – there may be several spellings of the community name or more than one place identified for the same person or multiple people.

- Alien registrations may have been required of immigrants who had not naturalized after 1940. These may be available via the National Archives or the US Citizenship and Immigration Service.

- World War I (1917-1918) and World War II (1942) Draft Registration Cards sometimes provide community names or province identifications.
- Social Security card applications (form SS-5), which may be ordered online through the Social Security Administration, provides birthplace.
- Census (state and federal), vital records, probate records
- Newspaper articles (including obituaries)
- Check Jewish name dictionary books to see if a particular unusual surname seems associated with particular communities or areas. A few examples:
 - Alexander Beider, *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from Galicia* (Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2004).
 - Alexander Beider, *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire* (Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2008).
 - Lars Menk, *A Dictionary of German-Jewish Surnames* (Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2005).

Never stop with one person (*When in doubt, broaden out!*)

- Friends/Family, Acquaintances and Neighbors (**FANs**). Conduct a reasonably exhaustive search for vital and census records of children, siblings, parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, friends, co-workers, witnesses on documents who may have come from the same place or nearby, find their records, too. Even if children were born in the U.S., their records may provide useful information on their parents origins.
- If you cannot find a passenger manifest for your subject, look for those of other family members. You might find your ancestor traveling with a relative or friend from the same community.
- If your family belonged to a landsmanshaft organization, figure out if it was associated with a particular town. Many of these organizations purchased burial plots. Gravestone inscriptions may provide additional clues. The organization may also have produced yearbooks or anniversary booklets that may provide clues to the associated Old World community.

Use maps and gazetteers to locate nearby communities where one's relatives may have lived. This may give you an idea where your ancestor's community was located. If you still cannot geographically locate the village, try Googling its name.

You have a town name and location. Now confirm it!

- Collect info on relatives who came from the same or nearby towns
- Yizkor books – they often list prominent residents as well as Holocaust victims
- Holocaust records (*Yad Vashem* POTs, *International Tracing Service*, etc.)
- Project records from the *American Joint Distribution Committee Archive* – name and text files
- Synagogue (or a Rabbi's personal) records
- Landsmanshaft burial plots – even if your ancestors were not buried there, were any of their relatives in it?

- Find records for immigrant and family members in Old World community records. Records may include: Censuses (e.g., Russian Revision Lists, Russian 1897 Census), Residence Lists, Voters' Lists, vital records, burials, Holocaust databases, internal passports, land transactions, notarial records, and military conscription lists.

RESOURCES

Good Basic Sources

"Finding Your Ancestral Town," Ackman and Ziff Family Genealogical Institute, *Center for Jewish History* <<http://www.cjh.org/pdfs/FindingYourAncestralTown07.pdf>>.

Warren Blatt, "Finding Your Ancestral Town," *JewishGen* FAQ
<<http://www.jewishgen.org/Infofiles/faq.html> - Towns

Gazetteers/Encyclopedias

Auslander, Jordan. *Genealogical Gazetteer for the Kingdom of Hungary*. Avotaynu, 2004.

Gesher Galicia, "Galician Town Locator"
<<https://www.geshergalicia.org/galician-town-locator/>>

FamilySearch Wiki. "Gazetteers" <<https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Gazetteers>>

JewishGen "Communities Database" *JewishGen* "Gazetteer"
<<https://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/>>

JewishGen "Gazetteer" <<https://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/LocTown.asp> >

Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust (3 volumes). Yad Vashem and NYU, 2001.

Mokotoff, Gary, SallyAnn Amdur Sack and Alexander Sharon. *Where Once We Walked*. Avotaynu, 2002.

Maps

Archiwum Map Wojskowego Instytutu Geograficznego 1919-1939 [Eastern and central Europe]
<<http://english.mapywig.org/news.php>>

David Rumsey Map Collection <<https://www.davidrumsey.com/>>

Foundation of East European Family History Studies, "Map Library"
<<https://feefhs.org/map/library>>

Google Maps <https://www.google.com/maps> and *Google Earth* <<https://www.google.com/earth/>>

Meyers Gazetteer [Germany] <<https://www.meyersgaz.org/>>

Perry-Casteneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas, Austin
<<https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/> >

Third Military Mapping Survey of Austria-Hungary (ca. 1910)
<<http://lazarus.elte.hu/hun/digkonyv/topo/3felmeres.htm>>

Topographic Maps of Eastern Europe <<http://easteurotopo.org>>

U.S. Board on Geographic Names, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency
<https://www.nga.mil/resources/1597167691514_US_Board_on_Geographic_Names_.html>

Yizkor Books

JewishGen Yizkor Book Project <<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/>>

New York Public Library, "Yizkor Books" <<https://libguides.nypl.org/yizkorbooks>>

Emigration Manifests (collections may also be available via *Ancestry* and *MyHeritage*)

"Emigration and Immigration Records and Resources," *GermanRoots*

<<https://www.germanroots.com/ei.html>>

"Jewish Emigration and Immigration," *FamilySearch*

<https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Jewish_Emigration_and_Immigration#Rotterdam_Departure_Lists>

"Bremen Passenger Lists," *Staats Archiv Bremen* <<http://www.passengerlists.de/>>

"Bremen Emigration/Immigration," *FamilySearch*

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Bremen_Emigration/Immigration

"Hamburg Passenger Lists," *FamilySearch*

<https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Hamburg_Passenger_Lists>

"Netherlands Passenger Lists Holland-America Line," *FamilySearch*

<https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Netherlands_Passenger_Lists_Holland-America_Line_-_FamilySearch_Historical_Records>

Holland-America Line Passenger Lists, *Stadsarchief Rotterdam*

<https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/over-ons/nieuwsoverzicht/eerste-hal-passagierslijfs/>

"Passenger Lists," *Library and Archives of Canada* <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/immigration-records/passenger-lists/Pages/introduction.aspx>

U.K. Outward (1890-1960) and Incoming (1878-1960) Passenger Lists, *FamilySearch*

<https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/England_Emigration_and_Immigration>

Joel Weintraub, "Finding Difficult Passengers on Ellis Island Manifests," *YouTube*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dzaug6_pdo>