

Genealogical search in Poland

Background

In order to understand the challenges of searching for genealogical information in Poland, one must understand the history of that country and the influence of that history on record keeping. Most of the area around Warsaw was part of Czarist Russia during the 19th Century and until the First World War. Under the then existing feudal system, farmers and their families lived on and worked a land that was owned by a local lord or prince. A family could work only a limited amount of land, so under this feudal system the first son would stay on his parents' land and build a family, the daughters would marry out, and younger sons would become servants of the prince or soldiers under his command. Military service for enlisted ranks started at age 15 and lasted 25 years with full pension thereafter, not a big deal since the life expectancy was around 40 years. Usually Jewish people were not farmers. They lived in towns and cities and made a living as merchants, manual workers and professionals. In Jewish families the inheritance was divided among all the sons, but the eldest son received twice as much as the younger sons, daughters received a dowry of 10% of their parents property, in effect receiving their inheritance in their parents lifetime. Jews did everything in their power to avoid sending their sons to the Czar's service as soldiers, because observing most of the Jewish commandments and getting married was impossible during army service. There was also a strong possibility that the Jewish soldier would never be seen again. Very few of the Jewish soldiers managed to return to the town of their birth after the 25 years service.

In order to draft soldiers, officials of the Czar's army would enter a town by surprise, gather all the teenage boys and conscript by force anyone who seemed to be over 15 years old and who could not prove that he was a first born son. There are many stories of boys inventing, on the spot, alternate family names in order to claim that they were first born. In some cases boys said that they were from another town and are visiting relatives, so that the army would need to send someone to the other town to check. They hoped that if there was sufficient number of conscripts the army would give up on them. In 1820 the Czar decreed that each person should have a family name written in all records. Thereafter, many Jewish children were not registered at birth, and they were called "disappeared" ["נעלם"], or boys births were registered with invented family names. Both situations make it difficult to trace a family's history. Affluent families could pay quite a large sum and redeem their sons from the military service, thus making their history easier to trace.

The Russian government imposed a marriage tax on the property of a person who married. As a result, many marriages took place in a religious ceremony without informing the authorities. Records of the birth of a child would list the parents as married only if they registered the marriage with the government. In addition, the parents of the couple who were getting married may or may not be listed as married themselves.

Jewish first names were commonly doubled, a local name and a Hebrew name. For example, the first names may be "Zvi Hersz". A deer is called Zvi in Hebrew, Hersz [pronounced Hersh] in Polish. Sometime the name Nafthaly is listed instead of Zvi, as Nafthaly was the Jewish tribe for which a deer was its symbol. So people may have been named Nafthaly Hersz. Another example, "Dov Ber" means a Bear in Hebrew and Polish. Usually, only the local name was listed in the town's records, and only the Hebrew name was listed on gravestones. In some cases two Hebrew names were used by a person, apparently when one of them was also accepted as local name. Three first names were sometimes used, especially when the names were after very famous grandparents. Additionally, nicknames were used in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, for example: Rabbi Rabbi Simcha Bunim [Simcha = Joyous in Hebrew, Bunim is Yiddish for sons]. When we got hold of his death record, his name was listed as Szymon [Shimon – a Hebrew biblical name] Bonchard [a German name – he was probably born in Germany]. First names were sometime added, usually

when a boy was very sick – Yerachmiel [God will have mercy in Hebrew], Alter [the old person in Yiddish]. Such added names would be listed on gravestones and sometimes were given further down the line to grandchildren.

According to Ashkenazi Jewish tradition, no child may be named after a living relative. Sometimes this helps when trying to find records, since if a birth record is found of a grandson of a person, and the child has the same first name as the person, it is clear that the person must have died before the birth of his grandson.

It was common for families that had only daughters to require that at least one of the grooms that would marry a daughter will change his family name to the bride's family name.

An issue that needs attention is the fact that life expectancy in the 19th century was short, and many men and women died in youth. There were many cases of second marriages and many cases of children being adopted by relatives. This may cause a discrepancy in family names of siblings.

An additional issue that makes research difficult is the use of a previous city name instead of a last name: in the Polish format "Citynameski", which means "from Cityname", even when a different last name was already established. Sometimes the name of the city will be set as a family name for future generations. But sometimes people alternately used the name of the city and a different family name before family names were stable, thus causing confusion for researchers. In addition, in many cases, the father's name is used in place of a surname, according to the Russian and Jewish customs, and later the father's name became a surname. In Jewish books printed in Poland, the term "Rabbi of town X" may be used instead of the name of that rabbi, and sometimes a name of book he wrote instead of his name. Also known are nicknames such as "the visionary", "the Sharaf" [a kind of an angel], "the old Rabbi", initials of a name and more - all cause difficulties in research.

Another difficulty is presented by name changes when emigrating to a country with different language, where the pronunciation of a name is difficult, or commonly used differently. "Icek" in Poland may be changed to "Issac" in the USA, "Yitzchak" in Israel and "itzik" may be used in Israel as a nickname. "Sochaczewki" may be changed to "Sochachevsky" in the USA, to "Chester" in Australia and to a Hebrew variation such as "Sivan" in Israel. Tchorek was changed to Chorek in the USA, to Tahori or Tirza [pure or Linden tree in Hebrew] in Israel. Many Jews changed their family name to a Hebrew name in Israel, sometime with a similar sound, sometime with a similar meaning.

In most Polish towns the Jewish graveyards were destroyed during the Nazi occupation, and gravestones were used for walkways. In the 1960's and the 1970's in many towns the gravestones were returned, in some towns just placed in the graveyard, in some cases a few gravestones are shown in a local historical museum. We know of a case, in Pultusk, that broken parts of gravestones were collected and were built into a memorial, a case in Drobin where all the returned gravestones were piled in the graveyard, covered with dirt and a memorial stone was placed on top. In Warsaw, where the walkways were already built, the Nazis left the graveyard intact.

Records made under Napoleon's Civil Code

The most valuable information for genealogical research in Poland can be found in the town's record books. Such books began to be used in 1808, after Napoleon conquered Poland. Napoleon installed a Civil Code, that included record keeping by each town, of births, marriages, divorces and deaths. The records were written as a "story" on a half to a full page, telling the location, date and time that the record was written, the event that happened, the names of the people involved, their birth place, their ages and some information about their profession. There are separate books for Jewish people and for Polish Catholics.

In the early records, people were named by first name and father's name. In 1820 the Russian Czar Alexander I, who controlled most of what is now central Poland, decreed that family names be used. He wanted to make it easier to identify people for taxation and military conscription purposes. So people were identified by: first name, father's name and family name. In Prussian controlled area that is now Poland, family names were required earlier. Family names were taken using the profession of the family head, the town of his birth if different from where he was living at the time, and many other sources.

Records were written in Polish, which uses Latin letters, with some combinations used to designate sounds that do not exist in Latin. For example "sz" designate the sound that in English is written as "sh", and "cz" designate the sound "ch". Jews were allowed to sign in Hebrew letters (usually in Yiddish pronunciation) and in some cases it is noted in a record that the people signing are illiterate, that they cannot read and write in Polish. Reading and writing in Hebrew/Yiddish was not considered literacy for the purpose of the records. In some records it was noted that the record was read to the participants.

In 1868 the Czar Alexander II decreed that all records be written in Russian, in Cyrillic letters. This makes reading names much more difficult for anyone who cannot read Russian, Signatures with Hebrew letters were no longer allowed and illiteracy meant in Russian. As a result, some family names got changed as, for example, the Russian language does not have the letter H, and Russian speakers can not pronounce that sound. Examples of names that underwent changes: Cohen was written as Kon or Kagan, Mohel was written as Mogil, Tehillim was written as Tilem, Hersz as Gersz, etc. Note that Cohen, Kon and Kagan sounds differently, and phonetic search engines may not find all versions with a single search. In a few records the names are listed in Russian and Polish, with an underline, so it is easier to locate the names within the cursive text. In Russian, family names are different for males: Sochaczewski and females: Sochaczewska.

Each record had two witnesses. In many cases, the profession of the witnesses was listed as "people of the school". In Russian the word is "Shkolnik" - that is, a man of the Shkol [school in Russian]. This means that it can be a teacher or a student in a synagogue or a Beit Midrash [Hebrew school]. In addition to the teachers, it was common for those who could not work anymore to spend their time studying in the Beit Midrash. This was also true of people who retired from the Russian army after 25 years of service and did not need to work, as they were given a pension. The witnesses, the father/groom and the clerk who wrote the record signed at the bottom of the record.

Dates were listed by the Russian calendar and by the common calendar, which have a difference of eleven days. For example "1/12 March" means March 1st according to the Russian Slavic calendar and March 12th according to the Gregorian Catholic calendar [the common calendar]. Note a possible issue with conversion between Jewish records, where dates are listed under the Jewish calendar with days starts on sunset for 24 hours, and the common calendar where days starts on midnight for 24 hours. This is usually noted when comparing death date as listed in the official record and on the gravestone where dates are according to the Hebrew calendar only.

Some marriage records state that marriage announcements were made and posters hung in synagogues at the bride and groom's towns. The dates of the declarations are according to the Russian calendar. An educated guess is that there was a Russian law requiring the announcement and placement of posters of a wedding before the wedding takes place in order to prevent a marriage of already married people. This was a problem that the Christian system in Europe had suffered for centuries - since a divorce was forbidden in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, people would marry again while concealing the fact that they are already married to someone else.

Jewish marriages usually took place in the bride's family home town, and the marriage was recorded there. Usually the couple lived with the bride's family for a few years, as a part of the financial marriage agreement. In Jewish marriages, financial issues were negotiated, as well as

agreements on financial terms in case of divorce or death. The town's marriage records does not list the terms, but may state that there was a verbal agreement between the families or that there was a notarized agreement, and the name of the notary.

Due to the Jewish custom to name a boy at the circumcision ceremony on his eighth day, and a girl within thirty days of her birth, in some records there is a long blank space for the first name. The name was later filled in and two long vertical lines were added before and after the name so it could not be changed. Alternatively, the record was written only after the eight day of birth of a boy. We know of a case of a birth record for a girl that was made only a couple of years after birth, and the record included explanation that she was very ill when born.

People's professions are an important part of the records. We can learn that someone was a tailor, which is a very specific profession, but a listing as a merchant is very vague. Sometimes a record will tell that a family owned a house.

Ages of people in town records are estimates only, especially during the first half of the 19th Century, apparently estimated by the clerk who wrote the record. However, in some records the ages are accurate.

Searching the town records

Early on, searching in the town records required traveling to the various towns and searching the physical record books.

In the 1970's, the Mormon church filmed all available records in Europe, for their religious purposes. The microfilms includes only records from before 1870's, as the then Polish law allowed only records over one hundred years old to be available to the public. The microfilms were available to be ordered for viewing in many Mormon churches. Today the microfilms are available only in a library in Salt Lake, Utah, USA and web search of these is not available.

Currently the best search tool is the free web site JRI-Poland.org (See the Appendix below) which has millions of records scanned in high resolution, and most of these are indexed by converting the names to computer text that is searchable on JRI-Poland's web page. In many cases there is a link to the record's scan, which makes it possible to have a copy and translate it. Search for names is possible in exact form, fuzzy text form, in phonetic form and more. When a sought for record is found, a direct link to a scan may show in the first column of the table of results. A number of the Mormon's microfilm may be listed on the last column (but not the location on the film – there are no frame numbers). Also, in the search results page, under the town name, there may be a link (in blue and underlined) to scans of all of the available town records books. More search tools are listed in the appendix below.

Sometime a scan of a town book is available on-line, but there is no direct link to the record being searched. It is important to note that for each year the books starts with a full page that shows the year. Then births are listed, usually half or a third of a page for each birth. Each birth starts with a serial number. The same serial number is listed in the search tools as Bxx, for example birth record number 19 will be listed on JRI-Poland as B19. After the last birth of the year there is an index of all the births, one line per birth. The book continues with marriages, with a full page for each, followed by a marriage index. Then there are listed a few divorces and a short index. Last comes records of deaths, half page each, and an index. This organization was probably made possible by binding the book after the end of the year. However, it makes search for a specific record possible even if one cannot read the text. For example, finding a marriage record from Town X, year 1900, record M35 entails finding the scan of the 1900 book from town X, skipping the first group of 1/2-1/3 page texts and index, and then following the serial numbers of the full pages text to number 35. Please remember that Jewish records are listed in separate books.

When a scan of a record is shown on the computer screen, the way to get the best copy is by downloading the scan. Another option is using CTRL+C [the control key pressed at the same time as the C letter key] to transfer the scan to the clipboard. Then using CTRL+V to paste the scan into a graphic program of your choice. Taking a screen shot will reduce the quality of the scan substantially. If the scan of a record is found in a search engine, it is also important to copy the link from the top line of the browser. This link may be needed to allow translators to see the original scan in the highest quality.

A manual records search is also possible. All records younger than 100 years are kept at the town halls, and any record older than 100 years is kept at a central archive in Warsaw. Birth records more than a hundred years old and marriage and death records more than 80 years old are available to the public. For younger records, there is a need to make a notarized declaration (in Polish, with a Polish lawyer, they have a standard form for this) that the person wanting to search for a record is a descendant of the person(s) who is(are) referred to in the record. Many town books are scanned and available on-line at the central Polish archive, but it is rather difficult to navigate the web page.

Translation is possible with the “Genealogical Translations” group in Facebook, which is free and useful for translating a few records. This group requires that the person asking for a translation will provide a link to the high quality scan. Professional translators can be found in that group as well.

Hebrew records

There were tens of thousands of books printed in Hebrew and Yiddish before the Holocaust. In some books there are family stories among other texts. There are books that are wholly committed to the genealogy of a family. At the end of some books there is a listing of donors who helped with the publication costs, and their relations to the author. All such information is important and may be useful.

Most Hebrew books of the 18TH and 19TH Century were printed with “Rash”i” font, because the Hebrew biblical font was considered holy. There are special programs that perform transliteration, but if a good quality scan is available it is possible to do a conversion by copying from a PDF and pasting into a word processor program. Also, opening a PDF file and saving it as a TXT or DOCX file may work.

Famous rabbis are usually referred to by the name of a book they wrote - the “Yismach Israel” is used for the naming the rabbi whose teachings were collected in a book by that name [his full name is Israel Yizchak Yerachmiel Dancyger, the nephew of the wives of our ancestor Rabbi Yehonatan]. Also, rabbis may be named after the city where they were the rabbis of the congregation, as in “Rabbi of Cityname”.

Google search will find a name in Hebrew books, if you type the searched name in Hebrew letters. Even if you suspect that the book is printed in Rash”i font, it is OK to use any Hebrew font in the search, as Google search considers Rash”i font as a font of the Hebrew language. After getting the name of the book and page number, it is possible to have a copy available from several web libraries (see below), where scans are of much better quality compared to Google books.

Note that in the Jewish society of the 19th century and before, it was common to call “grandfather” a person who was actually a g-g-grandfather, so all male direct ancestors are called “Grandfather”. “Uncle” may be a great uncle or actually a g-g-great uncle. The Initial ר reads “Reb” and is equivalent to writing in English “Mr.” before a name. It does not represent a Rabbi. For a Rabbi, he would be referred to as Rabbi R' Name [רבי ר' משה or הרב ר' משה]. When it is written “our Rabbi” [רבנו] it definitely means a Rabbi.

Books and gravestones includes great amount of initials, and anyone who does not know Hebrew will need help in deciphering what is written. Common gravestone examples: ל"ז = May his memory be a blessing. פ"נ = here is buried. ת'נ'צ'ב'ה' = May his/her soul be bound up in the bonds of life. More complex examples from gravestones and books are: מהו"ר means "our teacher the Rabbi and our Rabbi". אדמו"ר = Our lord, teacher and Rabbi (leader of a Hasidic congregation, may or may not be a rabbi). שליט"א = May he have a good and long life.

If you visit a cemetery and take a photo of a grave that is important to you, first make sure that there is no piling of dirt or shrubs that obscure the lower part of the text. ת'נ'צ'ב'ה' would always be the last line of the text. Take photos from several directions. If the sun is behind the grave, or if it is overcast day, use a strong flashlight aimed from one direction onto the text, and take the photograph from another direction, making sure that the frame is limited to the text area so as not to flood the camera with sunlight. Shade the lens from direct sunlight. Check the back of the gravestone for additional text.

Hebrew text on gravestones during the 19th Century and before had only the Hebrew first name of the person and his/her father and a Jewish death date. Gravestones of famous persons include some more details. In some areas, gravestones may show a person to be a Rabbi even if he was not.

Searching notary records

Another search tool is notary records. Prenuptial agreements were made before marriages when the families were wealthy. Wealthy people would make wills on their death-beds. Purchase of property and other business deals were also notarized. The notaries' names were mentioned in the town records if, for example, a married couple did make a notarized prenuptial agreement. The notarized records were written in books, and the books were kept by the notaries and their descendants. Many notary records includes names of parents, spouses, children and children-in-law. Wills may include profession in more detail than other records, for example "fur merchant" or "restaurant owner". Researchers can contact the holders of the books (usually a descendant of the notary), call ahead for names in the indexes, visit and see the records, and for a fee take photos/scans. Hopefully, over time notary records would become available on-line.

Other records

Tax records are sometime available, separated for the Jewish community. These may have been kept at the same location as the birth, marriage and death records, and sometime the birth, marriage and death records are lost but tax records survived. Lists of people voting for the Duma, – the Russian parliament under the Czar - are available. These include profession, house ownership and estimated personal worth, but stem only from 1905, after the revolution that year.

Lists of residents of towns are available, some already coded for search by JRI-Poland.org. These are grouped for families in an apartment address and include professions and date of birth.

Lists of residents of ghettos are available, some already coded for search by the Washington Holocaust Museum. These are grouped for families in an apartment address and include professions and date of birth.

Lists of graves, some already coded for search by JRI-Poland.org. are available. Many photos of graves are available on Billiongraves. (See the Appendix below).

In general, most records are available today, but due to fires, wars etc. there are gaps where the whole or a part of the history of a town or a notary is lost.

Appendix: Search tools

DNA search

There are several companies that do DNA testing. For example:

www.FamilyTreeDNA.com

However, each of these companies search for possible family connection only among their own customers. To compare among many companies, one need to upload his DNA test results and any available family tree onto:

www.gedmatch.com

To upload a family tree, it should be in a special format. Filling up names of ancestors in some web pages, one may then request the generation of a family tree in the correct format. For example, use:

www.geni.com

GedMatch may be used by police to search for suspects in serious crimes, and when uploading your info you will be asked if you allow such use.

Note that the Jews lived in segregated communities in Europe for many years. Using common relational standards used in Europe every Jewish person will find thousands of Jewish relatives. It is recommended to consider only a match of at least 100 CM [Centi-Morgan] in total and a longer snippet of at least 20 CM and only then search the family tree to look for a family name and town match.

Internet Genealogy search sites

Jewish Records Indexing - Poland, Inc.	www.jri-poland.org
JewishGen	www.jewishgen.org
Ancestry – needs paid subscription	www.ancestry.com
Geni - Was free, now part of Ancestry	www.geni.com

Museums

Washington Holocaust Museum	www.ushmm.org
Including many records from Lodz that are searchable.	
Search tool:	www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_advance_search.php
Museum of the History of Polish Jews	sztetl.org.pl
Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute	www.jhi.pl

Archives

Arolsen Archives [on nazi persecution]	collections.arolsen-archives.org
Very extensive collection, but only partially available on-line. However, one can submit a request to search for the records of a specific person.	

- Belgium State archive of search.arch.be/en/
 One of the employees spent several hours of his break time to search in over a hundred paper files for a photo, eventually recognizing the face of a relative I was searching!
- Israel central archive www.archives.gov.il
 The archive is searchable for people's citizenship applications with the British mandate. Such records include dates of arrival to Palestine.
- Mormon church www.familysearch.org
 Currently microfilms are available for search only at an archive in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. Maybe in the future Mormon family records will be searchable on the internet.
- Polish record books on-line <http://metryki.genbaza.pl/index/list>
 Need to search for the area, then town, then year, then manual search. Change to English on the top-right. It is difficult to find the Jewish books.
- Yad Vashem, Jerusalem (only partially on line) www.yadvashem.org
 Witness pages listing people that perished in the holocaust can be searched on-line. Personal files of Holocaust prisoners are available for search on the computer in the library. Volunteers are available on site to help in searching and translating from German to English.

Genealogists and Translations

- Association of Professional Genealogists www.apgen.org
 List of Translators:
www.apgen.org/directory/search_results.html?search=true&related_services=18
- Polish Genealogical Society of America pgsa.org
 List of Translators pgsa.org/how-to/frequently-asked-questions/translators/
- Cyndi's List – Languages & Translations > Professionals, Volunteers & Other Research Services,
www.cyndislist.com/languages/professionals/
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/GenealogicalTranslations>
 This group offers free translation, one document at a time. Easy to become member and simple rules for applying for a translation.
- Facebook genealogy group: www.facebook.com/groups/genealogysquad/

Hebrew / Yiddish books

- Hasidut books www.daat.ac.il/daat/bibliogr/allbooks.asp?sub=21
- Jewish Digital Library www.otzar.org
- Hebrew books (~50,000): www.hebrewbooks.org
- Yizkor books on line (memorial books per town, mostly in Yiddish, some sections in Hebrew)
legacy.www.nypl.org/research/chss/jws/yizkorbookonline.cfm
- Translated Yizkor books (~150) www.jewishgen.org
- Dictionary of Initials in Hebrew www.daat.ac.il/daat/vl/tohen.asp?id=9

Obituaries

- Mostly in the United States www.legacy.com

Cemeteries

Billion Graves. Photos of Graves.

www.billiongraves.com

List of Jewish cemeteries in New York, USA

www.jgsny.org/index.php/ny-area-research/jgs-cemetery-guides/19-cemetery-directory

Note: the health department of New York State will disclose the burial site of a person only to a direct descendant. Calling and sending inquiry letters to all of the cemeteries was useful. Only few are on-line.

International Jewish Cemetery Project

www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org

Cemeteries in Jerusalem:

חברה קדישא הראשית והכללית (פרושים), רח' פינס 15 (ליד הדוידקה) ירושלים טל': 02-5384144
חברה קדישא – חסידים, רח' המביט 21 (שכונת גאולה) ירושלים טל': 02-5384518/89

Search graves in Israel – English

gravez.me/en/

This is also available as an app

Search graves in Israel – Hebrew

[http://wikigenia.org.il/index.php?title=רישומי_קבורה_בישראל_\(ובתי_עלמין\)_-_חיפוש_מקוון](http://wikigenia.org.il/index.php?title=רישומי_קבורה_בישראל_(ובתי_עלמין)_-_חיפוש_מקוון)

Dictionary of family names

A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Kingdom of Poland. By Alexander Beider, Avotaynu, Inc., 1996. There are several more dictionaries by the same author for other areas, see:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Beider.

Family trees on line and in books

The Unbroken Chain – Descendants of Saul Wahl [King of Poland for one night]. By Neik Rosenstein

Baal Shem Tov

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baal_Shem_Tov_family_tree

Town groups

Pultusk group on Facebook:

www.facebook.com/groups/jpultusk/

There must be many more.

Translation between Jewish dates and Gregorian (common) dates

Text in English

www.hebcal.com/converter/

Note: the conversion from Hebrew to Gregorian does not take into consideration the issue of when the day starts, so there may be an error of one day.

Text in Hebrew

www.shoresh.org.il/dates/

Note: Needs Hebrew keyboard to insert Jewish months and years.

Note: If the reader finds any useful search tool that is not listed above, please contact us with the information: info@Tchorek-Sochaczewski.org