

Jewish Family Research Challenges

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Jews have lived in every corner of the world. However, when we look to research our family history and go back several generations, we eventually come to only a handful of geographic areas. When genealogists want to learn of their roots they need to keep in mind history and geography along with their immediate family stories.

This lecture touches on those Jewish families we can trace back to Lithuania, Poland and Galicia. There are, of course, many more geographic areas – with some similarities and some differences in research strategies.

We begin with geography and history by looking at some maps of the changing European borders with the help of worldology.com (website not currently active). There are cities that belonged within the borders of different countries in various years. With these changes we also see that the name of the communities differed from time to time as well. Keeping this in mind, your research will, most likely, take you to several countries looking for documents.

Laws requiring families to take on a family name differed from country to country. Laws regulating the registration of life cycle events also varied from community to community. During many time periods Jews were treated differently than the rest of the population, sometimes their registrations were within the Jewish community and others were in the general community registrations. Add to these the additional challenges of language and you can begin to understand how complex our mission is to unravel the history of our family.

Besides hearing from stories passed down through the generations we do have some tools available to assist us in documenting our family. If you had family who entered the United States after 1906 by ship, the ship manifest has a column where those traveling had to declare where they were born and their last residence along with a family member who was still in the “old country” and where they were living. These questions are added to those required on earlier manifests giving us clues as to the amount of money they arrived with, who paid for their passage, where they were headed for and who was awaiting their arrival. These declarations are a wonderful window into our family history.

A variety of websites can help you locate ship manifests and Steve Morse has a tool on his [website](#) that improves your chances of locating the record you are looking for (there are many additional tools on his site that are valuable to your research as well).

Sites that we'll touch upon are the following:

[JewishGen](#) is a non-profit organization providing its resources online as a public service. JewishGen hosts more than 20 million records and provides a myriad of resources and search tools designed to assist those researching their Jewish ancestry. An in depth look at all that JewishGen has to offer is a separate and much longer lecture. We'll touch on some of the highlights. Free registration is required in order to search for records.

[LitvakSIG](#) (Lithuanian-Jewish Special Interest Group) and its resources are available on their dedicated website and through the JewishGen portal. There is free access to the [All Lithuania Database](#) (over 2,500,000 records). Records have been located in a variety of archives in Lithuania and also a number of archives outside Lithuania that have Litvak holdings. These records have been indexed and are available to the public.

[Gesher Galicia](#) is a non-profit organization carrying out Jewish genealogical and historical research on Galicia. They have a variety of unique projects and are also involved in indexing archival vital records and census books which are then uploaded to their [searchable online database](#).

[JRI-Poland](#) has created indices/extractions to more than 5 million Jewish birth, marriage and death records from current and former territories of Poland that are housed in Poland today. These records are available on their website and also through the portal of JewishGen. JRI-Poland has additional aids and resources on their website.

[Routes to Roots](#) does not have online records. However, there is a consolidation of the archival inventories from many regions that can direct you to the locations where you may find the records you are searching for. By noting the years that records are available in each location you will better understand why you may not always find certain documents.

[BillionGraves](#) is an important resource when looking for tombstones around the world. BillionGraves has searchable GPS cemetery data. Cemeteries are being digitized and transcribed each day by volunteers using their smart phone app! Check back frequently for additions and help by documenting the cemeteries in your community (if they are not currently available).

Other cemetery/tombstone resources are [JOWBR](#) (JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry), a blog article by Philip Trauring about [Jewish Gravestone Symbols](#) and a short video by the Jewish Genealogy Society of Long Island – [7 Popular Symbols on Jewish Headstones](#).

Two additional websites will be mentioned –

The [IGRA](#) (Israel Genealogy Research Association) website has Research Guides, recorded webinars, publications and a database with over 1,000,000 records. Some of their holdings deal with people connected with the areas we are concentrating on in this lecture. Free registration is required to access some sections of the website.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) played a major role in sustaining Jews in Palestine and rebuilding the devastated communities of Eastern Europe. They have a [variety of collections](#) that should be checked when researching family from Eastern Europe.

We'll examine how to locate an ancestral village, experience the search for vital records in Galicia, Lithuania and Poland and look at how to understand tombstone information. At the end of the session I hope that you'll have a better understanding of the kinds of records that are available and why others are not, strategies to interpret the records you find and important clues to building a Jewish family history.