

EASTERN EUROPEAN FAMILY HISTORY ONLINE

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Genealogical charts alone do not tell the stories of your ancestors; to produce meaningful research, you need to understand the local geography and history of the areas where they lived. Your ancestors were affected by local events, after all – they were not living in isolation.

That is true of research anywhere in the world, but it is hard to imagine a region with more twists and turns than Eastern Europe. In the past couple of centuries, every ethnic group has suffered, some much more than others. History has witnessed such horrors in our ancestral areas that it is difficult to understand how such things could happen. It can also be difficult to get to the truth when examining the lives of our ancestors.

The usual genealogical sources – church registers, census returns, civil registration and so on – might be hard to find, if not impossible to get. Maybe the records have been lost or intentionally destroyed. Or maybe they never existed at all. But here is a crucial point: While it is nice to know the precise details that are used to flesh out a genealogical chart, that information does not lead to a greater understanding of their lives.

Online resources

The most useful websites will depend on where your family was from. It is highly unlikely that a single website will provide all that you need – more likely you will search through a wide variety of sites, large and small, some in languages other than English, to gather the information that you are looking for. With Eastern Europe, you need to go beyond the established genealogy sites.

Researchers in Eastern Europe also need to understand the history of their ancestral regions, and how the events over the past couple of centuries caused borders to change many times. The records that will help in a genealogical project will depend on the time frame involved, which country the region is in today, which country it was in a century or more ago, and the family's religion. Social standing might also have an impact.

Look beyond the basic genealogy sites. The greatest results might come from academic sources and digitized books. Be sure to check the [Internet Archive](#), the [Hathi Trust Digital Library](#), [Google Books](#) and [JSTOR](#), using a variety of search terms to increase the likelihood that you will find what you need. (Remember to use the Google site search; for example “Kyiv site:archive.org” to increase your results.

FamilySearch has an extensive digitization program and is committed to placing online, for free, the world's largest collection of genealogical source material. Also, try Ancestry and

MyHeritage. With all these sites, be careful with any family tree information submitted by other users. (The usual stern cautions apply; assume, until you see evidence to the contrary, that the people responsible for these trees do not have a clue what they are doing. Use what they have posted as hints and clues, and double-check everything.)

Before leaping across the ocean, gather all that you can from sources in North America. It will make your further work much easier because it will give you comfort with the sources and, in some cases, the languages used. Learn what you can about the history of your ancestral areas, because that will help you understand the conditions faced by your family members. Become familiar, basically at least, with the languages in the records you will encounter.

Location, location, location

One of the best sites for finding locations in Eastern Europe is a Polish one, Pilot.pl, which leads to Mapa.Szukacs.pl. It is based on modern mapping, but much more detail is included. One of the best features is the way you can calculate distances: Once you have identified your location of interest, move your cursor to a nearby village, then check the bottom right for the distance in kilometres. (One mile is about 1.6 kilometres.) That information can help you envision how far your ancestors might have walked for school, church, markets or romance.

You can use Pilot.pl to find locations in every country, although you might need to enter a country code if you are searching outside Poland. The codes are on the adjacent chart.

Other map websites include Google, ViaMichelin and OpenStreetMap. Use the site of your choice to find your areas of interest. Some sites allow you to create your own maps; for example, you could create a map that would show only the villages where you ancestors lived.

There are also comprehensive printed maps and atlases for all countries in Europe, often through government mapping departments or cartography printers.

The best maps for determining changed names in former German areas are in a series published by Höfer Verlag in Germany. For each place, these maps include the original German name as well as the name used today.

For all areas in Eastern Europe, try the JewishGen Gazetteer, which will help you deal with name changes and mistranslations.

Country (kraj) codes for mapa.szukacz.pl

Armenia	Armenia	AM
Azerbaijan	Azerbejdzan	AZ
Belarus	Bialorus	BY
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Bosnia i Hercegowina	BA
Bulgaria	Bulgaria	BG
Croatia	Chorwacja	HR
Czechia	Czechy	CZ
Georgia	Gruzja	CR
Germany	Niemcy	DE
Hungary	Węgry	HU
Kazakhstan	Kazachstan	KZ
Kosovo	Kosowo	XK
Kyrgyzstan	Kirgistan	KG
Latvia	Lotwa	LV
Lithuania	Litwa	LT
Moldova	Moldawia	MD
Montenegro	Czarnogóra	ME
Poland	Polska	PL
Romania	Rumunia	RO
Russia	Rosja	RU
Slovakia	Słowacja	SK
Slovenia	Słowenia	SI
Tajikistan	Tadżykistan	TJ
Ukraine	Ukraina	UK

Gazetteers could have key information about administrative districts, churches, populations, proximity to railways, telegraph offices, post offices and more. In European research, the most well-known gazetteer is known as [Meyers Orts](#), short for Meyers Orts- und Verkehrslexikon des Deutschen Reiches, for German locations. Many others are available online; a handy [summary](#) is on the website of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.

Without knowing where your family was from, research is impossible. Start with the present and work back, checking for every reference to a family's arrival in North America, and for the first records generated on this side of the Atlantic.

Look for clues about the place of origin in documents such as marriage records, church records, naturalization papers, obituaries, and census returns. Look for siblings and cousins, because collateral lines might provide information that would not otherwise be available. Find out about friends who came from the same area. Sometimes, clues about a person's origin can be found by determining where their neighbors were from.

The basic rules for finding places are the same no matter what area you are dealing with. Virtually every city, town and village in Europe can be found on a map or in a gazetteer. It is just a matter of sorting out where the place is, then finding the document that proves its existence.

The most common problem? Researchers do not have the correct place name. Gather as much information as possible, using every source at your disposal. Double-check. Do not rely on printed transcripts, no matter which site you are using; always check the handwritten name. And if you are looking for immigrants, check for other people from the same village.

Many place names have changed over the years, so determine the time frame of your source document. Some places have disappeared entirely, either swallowed up by larger communities nearby, or simply gone.

Records indicate a province, an area or a village name, and it's hard to determine which is which. Five different names might all refer to one place – and every different one can be a clue to help you find the correct location. The more names you find, the easier the search will be.

If you know the name of the nearby villages, it will be easier to pinpoint the village you are looking for. A cluster of villages can be like a fingerprint, creating a unique map reference. (Remember, many names were used many times, in many areas. The record is likely held by Alexandrowka; there are at least 800 places with that name in the former Soviet Union.)

Getting the context

Check local sources to find more about what was happening in your areas of interest. These sources include local histories and newspapers – but remember that the newspapers do not always need to be local, since big events would have been covered in newspapers across the country and around the world.

Information on external forces, such as events in a community, will give you context that will place your family in the bigger picture. It is easier to understand the lives of ancestors when you know about their communities, and the changes taking place in the world at the time they lived. Context is looking out from the family, at the influences that affected it. Context will often help us determine why our ancestors might have made the decisions they made. For national and international events, check timelines – chronological lists of events.

You might not be able to find specific information about an ancestor, so look for general information. This helps, for example, when trying to tell the story of a migration within Europe. Odds are that you will not find a mention of an ancestor – but how much does that matter?

Yes, it is nice to say that Gottfried arrived on a certain date, but it is far more valuable to understand why he made the move. The “why?” question is often the toughest one to answer, but there are many clues if you look.

Look into local history books for information on a community such as: What kinds of crops were grown there? What was the climate? What was the environment like? What was the quality of the water supply? What was the crime rate? Always read the pages at the front of a local history book – they provide general information about the community.

Languages

Try to use the local language as much as possible, which means understanding the way each letter sounds. That can be a key to sorting out how a town name might have been spelled in an old record.

Researchers might find a variety of languages, sometimes with alphabets that bear no resemblance to ours. If you are lucky, you will only need to deal with German or Hungarian or Polish, and there are handy guides online to help you sort your way through genealogical documents.

Cyrillic lettering is easy to decipher if you set your mind to it. As shown on the chart adjacent, if you learn the sounds of twenty-three Russian letters, you will be able to find villages on most Russian maps.

А а (A)	Р р (R)
Б б (B)	С с (S)
В в (V)	Т т (T)
Г г (G)	У у (U)
Д д (D)	Ф ф (F)
Е е (E)	Х х (KH)
Ё ё (YO)	Ц ц (TS)
Ж ж (ZH)	Ч ч (CH)
З з (Z)	Ш ш (SH)
И и (I)	Щ щ (SHCH)
Й й (Y)	Ъ (-)
К к (K)	Ы (Y)
Л л (L)	Ь (')
М м (M)	Э э (E)
Н н (N)	Ю ю (YU or IU)
О о (O)	Я я (YA or IA)
П п (P)	