

## **FAST Genealogy Service is Looking for Missing Ancestors**

But why there are so many of them?

by Yakov Shadevich and Boris Feldblyum

We often assume that our ancestors in Russia hardly ever moved from one place to another. We imagine them spending their lives in little shtetls, while desperately trying to make living, hiding from pogroms and eventually emigrating to the shores of America.

FAST, in operation for a year, gained some valuable experience while locating documents for our numerous customers. Some of it we would like to share in this article. In the course of our work, we were both surprised and upset by the fact that in seemingly too many cases no records turned up, even when the information supplied by the customers looked accurate. We initially suspected negligence on the part of our associates in the former Soviet Union or simply bad luck. The growing pattern of such cases suggests however that the real reason may be quite different. We are coming to a conclusion that we, the genealogists ought to doubt the "facts" about our ancestors' life in Russia more often than we had thought before.

Not long ago, a gentleman from Texas requested a comprehensive search for records in a specific, small area around Taurage in Lithuania. He was certain that his ancestors had come from this place. FAST also felt comfortable with the request, for we had checked and found a listing in a 1930's telephone directory indicating that the last known residence of some members of this family was indeed in the same town. Strangely enough, after a complete, comprehensive search was finished, no evidence could be found of that family in Taurage records.

About two months later, while working on a different request, we accidentally came across a record for the very people that the Texas genealogist was looking for. The records originated in a different town in Southern Lithuania of which the Texas family had never heard. What had happened? Apparently, the ancestral family had either moved to Taurage or from it at one time but the information was never preserved in the memory of this family.

Right now we are finishing work on an unusual case, where a customer knew only the first names of a group of her ancestors. The names belonged to several successive generations. She asked us to find records for anybody from that town with given combinations of the first names and patronymics. The case proved to be more difficult than we all had hoped for. The results: no name combinations were found for the town, but several possible matching names were discovered in the other bigger town nearby.

Data being accumulated in the expanding FAST computerized database suggests a possible answer. Work on yet another project required us recently to computerize several hundred marriage records from Alytus, a town of about 700 Jewish population on the turn of the century. The records covered a span of about 30 years. The persistent presence in the records of the out of town relatives stimulated us to statistically study the documents. While the work is not complete yet, we can report on some preliminary findings. Perhaps the most intriguing of them

is the fact that at least 80% of the spouses whose names appear in marriage records were not born in Alytus. In other words, a given town was home to only one generation for an average Jewish family. Therefore, the search for grandparents and additional branches of the families should be expanded into other areas in almost all cases. Strangest of all is the fact that in about four per cent of the documents, neither the bride nor the groom came from Alytus, the town in which their marriages were registered and as far as could be determined from the records, neither did any other family members. Why did these couple marry where they did? We may never know this. The fact of the matter is that it makes the search far more complicated if not only exciting.

The same pattern emerges when studying birth and marriage records from Mogilev in Belarus, Odessa in southern Ukraine, village of Rudki in Galitsia, presently Western Ukraine and from virtually any other town for which we obtained the documents. Never mind the fact that Rudki in Galitsia or say Marijampole in Lithuania were virtually stagnant communities when compared to a vibrant cosmopolitan city of Odessa which attracted energetic people of all fates, not just the Jews.

What is becoming clear to us is the importance of asking the right questions and giving the best possible information when engaging FAST's services--or those of any other genealogical service dealing with the archives of the former Czarist Empire. The request must take into account the apparent mobility of the 19th century Jewish population. Some genealogists have only oral tradition about where the family lived prior to emigration. Others may have a ship arrival record, a passport or a naturalization document indicating a birthplace. If so, then of course, list this place on the research request. Best of all is to send a photocopy of the document with the research request. The most valuable help to us are the documents originated in Russia and written in Russian, Polish, etc. languages, before the information was translated and possibly changed.

Case in point. We just received a request to look for a birth record for a man whose name may have been Mathew Bartasvage, accompanied by approximate date of birth and (distorted) geographic area name. Along with the request the customer sent us a copy of some travel document that may belong to the family. The some document turned out to be a Russian passport issued to Matvei Bartashevich, providing the exact birth date and the residence place.

Documents found in the Russian archives will often point to a previous place of residence of a person recorded there. Thus the Alytus marriage records commonly say that the bride or groom or their parents were born in other communities. When this occurs, the subsequent research should shift to that previous place of residence.

Experience has shown that the best results may be obtained if one refuses to consider a case closed, but is always alert for data that pops up in the wrong place, as it happened with the gentleman from Texas. We at FAST have established a procedure of checking all newly acquired information against old requests in our database. It may sound like looking for a needle in a hay stack -- and it is, indeed, but some genealogists have the Lady Luck on their side.

Not every case is as complicated as those we just described. Some researchers know beyond any doubt that the information they already possess is correct and it should take minimum time to locate a document. We are not here to advocate using us or any of our competitors over trying to deal individually with former Soviet archives. Some people have dealt with the archives directly and some even were lucky. We do however see the value of hiring an on-site researcher. Normal cooperation with archives worldwide involves either simple written application and a paid fee for known services, or free access to anyone if the data requested is not recent and/or closed for privacy or national security reasons. Unfortunately, the approach to archives in the former USSR must be different. The FAST Genealogy Service came into being as a continuation on a commercial basis of our attempts to assist Jewish genealogists with their direct inquiries to archives of the newly-independent states themselves, usually editing the requests and translating them into Russian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian languages. In nearly every case, the results were embarrassingly poor.

In the best case, the particular request took about 14 months to process and required seven additional letters for various clarifications, reminders, approvals, pledges, etc. One letter from the ex-USSR demanded proof from the client's bank that he could pay \$60. In another letter the reason for not processing the request was stated plainly: The archive is undergoing privatization. Whatever that means. With a few exceptions, all the cases are still not resolved after two years. We don't think they will ever be answered. Although all of the countries newly-created from the former Soviet Union, proclaim openness and democracy, it does not seem that this description extends to the operation of most historical archives. Genealogy as a family matter is still a foreign idea over there...

When in the end of a search we provide genealogists with information from places they had not heard of or with names that look unfamiliar at a first glance, they sometimes wonder if the material actually belongs to their family. We do not have a solution to this puzzle just yet. However, analysis of our growing database suggests that a wise Jewish family historian should keep his mind open, collect and save ambiguous data, and hope that future discoveries will clarify today's mysteries. To initiate a search, one needs only a family name and a place of residence. Knowledge of the time period that family was known to have lived in a particular place is very useful as well. As to what information is discovered and how relevant it is, depends on the aforementioned Lady Luck. Our ancestors spent their lives looking for her. That is why, perhaps they are missing from the places we expected them to be in.