

Ukrainian Archives in the 21st Century

by Boris Feldblyum

It has been only 12 short years since the Soviet Union fell apart and was relegated, in its own words, “to the dustbin of history.” I still remember our first careful telephone calls to archives in the newly formed independent states. Would they still be afraid to speak with a person from the West, especially an American? Did they have anything at all in their collection that might shed light on Jewish life in Russia (or Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Lithuania, etc.)? If miracles do happen and they did have some Jewish records, what should we do next? How could we research these priceless documents?

Twelve years have passed. We have learned much, and we have retrieved many thousands of pages of our history. Yet surprisingly, many challenges remain. In some ways, the overall archival situation has worsened. There is a silver lining, too, but researchers may need to criss-cross Ukraine searching for it. Conditions vary enormously from one archive to another.

This article reflects recent letters from FAST Genealogy Service’s associates in Ukraine. After reading them, I telephoned several Ukrainian archival directors who assured me that the situation is not too bad, at least not in the archives they manage. Unfortunately, we dare not name the specific archives; such is the situation in Ukraine today. Suppose archive A in the city of B is reasonable and cooperates with genealogists today? If we publicly express our thanks, the staff may become even more forthcoming in helping us. On the other hand, the personnel may be accused of unethical dealings with Westerners and may become inaccessible for years to come. Conversely, if we announce that archive C in the city of D is hard to deal with, their reaction might be: you say that we are not cooperative enough, that we are bad? You don’t know what bad is, and we will show you. Here is a letter I received from one of these associates:

Thanks for your compliments regarding my previous letter. I am ready to write a novel if it helps. There is much to write about. When I arrive at a new archive, I first try to learn their system of charges and fees. They, in turn, try to find out what I, a new customer, want and how much I can be charged—or milked, if you will. You probably cannot imagine such a situation in America, but here it is a daily reality. Keep it in mind when you try to fit me into your business model. The archives often develop their price lists based on charges in other archives, but their own charges are never lower. They make them at least the same or slightly higher. As much as they know my face in the Very Important Regional Archive, I ran into new problems with them recently. They started demanding a fee for each file brought into the reading room.

When I asked, “What’s the basis for these charges?” they simply responded that they’ve started doing it recently and that they supposedly have a letter from the Archival Administration in Kiev that allows them to charge for additional services. They have become good psychologists. I recently found an important document and ordered an official copy. They charged me 20 hrivnas. I then said I was doing it for

my City Administration and they reduced the charge in half and did not ask for proof. But how many times can I play such games?

One of the biggest arguments today is, what is a document? The researchers consider a file a document, but the archivists want to consider each numbered sheet a document. Then they grade documents according to their value. The price list indicates that a valuable document has one price (to copy), a less valuable has another price, but it’s up to them to decide what is valuable and to what degree. Every archive is a different story. So when you ask me to copy the entire file of 1,000 sheets, multiply 37 hrivna (about \$7–9) by 1,000.

Forget about quantity discount. Remember that if a copier breaks down, it may take weeks until it is fixed. That’s why they often are not eager to make a large number of copies. The 37 hrivnas is a relatively recent invention. Sometimes they charge “only” 25 hrivnas. It all depends on the mood of the day. Once I tried to argue with them and asked to show documents that justify such highway robbery. They just said that the Main Archival Administration in Kiev allows commercial activities in archives. They know well there (in Kiev) that genealogists ask to be taken advantage of. They are also guessing that some researchers make a living, and they are mad about it, because they cannot have a cut. That is another reason I try not to copy too much—in order not to make them too suspicious and mad.

While we are on the subject of copying, you remember, I wrote recently that the Very Important Regional Archive in X did not have a copier, and I had to beg them to let me take some registers into town, accompanied by one of the employees. When working on the T project, I have researched all 15 volumes of vital records and marked about 250 records. I had between 10 and 30 bookmarks in each volume, but failed to negotiate a “quantity discount” on copying. The deputy director told me that the financial inspectors suspect everybody makes illegal copies, and since there are no uniform rules and regulations, everybody is scared just in case. He also revealed to me yet another original definition of What is a Document. As of today, they consider a document to be anything signed by an official. Therefore, a birth record register for a given year consists of 12 documents, since rabbis used to sign a monthly statement on the number of newborns. Interestingly enough, despite the plethora of guidelines and price lists, they still called the Archival Administration in Kiev to consult regarding the fee for my perusal and copying of the records.

The work schedule in many archives presents a problem. They like to close during the (Russian Orthodox) Christmas holidays, often between December 30 and January 14, because, as they say, they are underpaid or not paid on time. The biggest problem in the Very Important Regional Archive is the practically complete absence of heat. Researchers must work in coats, when the temperature is 5–10 degrees Celsius (about 42–53 degrees Fahrenheit). After sitting on a chair for eight hours, one starts to shake so much that one wonders whether the money earned is worth one’s lost health. The two other Important Regional Archives where I worked recently are relatively warm. With regard to the Regional Archive in Y, when I worked there on the previous project,

I got a cold in a hotel because the heating season had not started yet.

In case you are not tired, a few general notes on the conditions. The local power company cut off the heat because the archive did not pay the bill. Both organizations are part of the same government. Go figure. On the last day of my work there, on Friday, they entirely cut off the electricity. So, forget copying at whatever cost and forget the heat. They used to heat with electrical heaters, but even that was no longer possible. To say it was freezing is an understatement. The archivists wanted to close the reading room for the day (but did not). I worked in my overcoat; I just took off my hat. Next time you need to conduct research there, wait until the summer.

However, I am not complaining. A client orders music, and I play. Just tell your customers that it is our Soviet mess. To argue too much leads to higher fees, especially in a strange town, when they know that you have limited time to work. Everything depends on their mood.

After receiving this letter, I decided to review my notes on all Ukrainian archives and to interview a few archivists in different parts of Ukraine. Almost immediately I came upon a note from another researcher:

Statues of Lenin are everywhere. Mrs. X, the Director of the Important Local Archive, is a former party boss. They charge \$11 per copy. Local historians just stopped working in the archive. So it goes.

This "optimistic" note was dated 1998. Since I personally know the writer, I decided to call her, but the telephone lines did not work. I then decided to call other archives and take an informal survey. In one hour, I dialed repeatedly at least 10-15 different archives and reached only one energetic gentleman, with whom we periodically discuss the weather, the perils of raising good children and other subjects seemingly unrelated to Jewish genealogy. Things are just fine, he said. Why don't I visit them? I'll be delighted to see their holdings. Anybody is welcome. My associate from Kiev is just as dear a guest as my friend from Chicago. Yes, it is easier in summer. If they are not closed, for some reason, occasionally. Do they have a uniform research approach and a price structure? Yes, but it's better to discuss it when I have a concrete task. As Dave Barry writes, I am not making this up. Come in summer when we are closed. Which reminds me of yet another regional archive that was closed for researchers for at least two summers recently. The official line was that the archive was busy helping local university students in their research projects. The unofficial and cynical opinion of yet another researcher was that they wanted to avoid the workload associated with genealogists who often come in summer.

So, where do we go from here? After all, the 21st century is outside. We go forward, dear comrades, but not necessarily along a straight path. Dealing with the former Soviets is a complex issue. There is a definite conflict between what we in the West expect and what they in the East deliver. It is the opinion of this writer that every important and unimportant Jewish record that has survived to this day rightfully belongs to us. We shed too much blood to be asked today to shell a few (and often not so few) bucks for the right to see a grand-

An Onsite Researcher Comments

We asked Alexander Dunai, an archival researcher who lives in Ukraine, if Feldblyum's informants are accurate. Here is his reply—Ed.

Regarding Feldblyum's article: In general, the picture is true. It is certainly very frustrating when you don't know how much you pay per copy. In one archive in Kiev, while studying records, I witnessed a discussion of the archivists on what to consider a document: the whole register or each page? The discussion concerned a census for one big city. The census was a collection of volumes; each consisted of numerous spreadsheets. The issue was whether to charge per spreadsheet or per volume.

I would add two caveats to what Feldblyum has written. One needs to speak separately about the situation in each particular archive. There is a big difference between Lviv and Tarnopol, Ivano-Frankivsk and Uzhgorod, Odessa and Lutsk, etc.

Secondly, I am certainly in the same situation as the researcher mentioned in the article. I also am freezing in the archives; but why should archives have priority in the supply of heat if there are maternity hospitals with no hot water? The archives are poor institutions in a poor country.

Fixing up and preserving archival materials costs money, which archives (unfortunately) do not receive from the government. Part of the fees charged to researchers goes for these purposes. At least this is true in L'viv, Ivano-Frankivsk and some other cities, where many Jewish records have been restored. I saw those vital registers several years ago and see them now; there is a big difference. Nothing was done for many decades to preserve and restore the documents (particularly the Jewish documents), and the situation cannot be changed overnight, but overall things generally have changed for the better.

Alexander Dunai

father's birth record and to copy it. However, we deal with people who were largely bypassed by the prosperity of the late 20th century. It is hard for them to catch up. Many of them are wonderful people who I honestly am privileged to know. So, I consider we help them by paying the fee.

On the other hand, Ukraine is not the U.S. or the U.K. They cannot expect fees on a Western level because they do not pay our mortgages or our health insurance. I expect a bumpy road for the foreseeable future. I show the people in Ukraine respect they deserve; I let them know I want to work with them, and I don't let some of them take advantage of me. I win some, I lose some. What is important is that our heritage is coming back to us—one page at a time.

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Boris Feldblyum responds: *Since Avotaynu does not normally provide space for discussions, it might be useful for the reader to know that I agree with Alex Dunai's opinion. The level of cooperation does differ from archive to archive and generalizing the situation for the entire country may look suspicious to a Western reader.*

On the other hand, it is good to remember that a Ukrainian researcher who must work with local archival officials, has little choice but to finish his opinion on a positive and upbeat note.