

# Some Problems in Researching Eastern European Records

by Boris Feldblyum and Yakov Shadovich

Genealogists often assume that their Russian ancestors seldom moved from one place to another; they are imagined to have spent their lives in little shtetls, desperately struggling to make a living, hiding from pogroms and eventually emigrating to other shores. Documents recently obtained from former Soviet archives suggest that Jewish genealogists may need to alter their perceptions and research strategies substantially if they are to succeed in finding family data.

In the course of our work obtaining copies of Jewish vital records from the former Soviet Union, we have been both surprised and distressed by the fact that no records turned up in many cases where both the information supplied by customers looked accurate and we had access to the records in question. For example, one search for a family supposedly from the area around Taurage, Lithuania, uncovered no records. All evidence indicated the family had lived in this place, including a listing in a 1930s telephone directory showing family members in the town. About two months later, we accidentally came across a record for the very family. They were in a different town in southern Lithuania, one that was never mentioned by anyone in the family. What had happened? Apparently, the family had either moved to, or away from, Taurage sometime during the period in question, but the information was not preserved in the family's memory.

In another case, we tried to locate records for a family given only the first names of a group of ancestors. The names came from several successive generations. No name combinations were found in the town where the ancestors lived, but several possible matching names were discovered in the records of a larger nearby town.

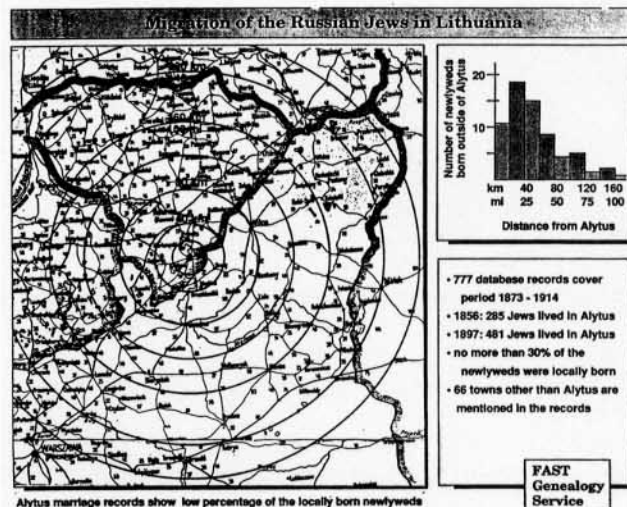
A study of several hundred Jewish marriage records from the turn of the century for Alytus, Lithuania, suggests a possible explanation. The persistent presence of "out-of-town" relatives in these records stimulated us to study the documents

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statistically. Preliminary findings show that at least 80 percent of the spouses whose names appear in the marriage records were not born in Alytus! This meant the town was home to only one generation for the typical Jewish family; the search for grandparents and other branches of the families would have to be expanded to other communities in almost all cases. Remarkably in about four percent of the cases, 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 these couples married in Alytus is a mystery.

The same pattern emerges when studying birth and marriage records from Mogilev in Belarus, Odessa in southern Ukraine, the village of Rudki in western Ukraine (formerly Galicia) and from virtually any other town for which we obtained documents. It does not seem to matter if the communities were virtually stagnant, as were Rudki or Marijampole, or a vibrant, cosmopolitan city, such as Odessa, which attracted energetic people of all faiths. In every case, the results are exactly the same: brides and grooms typically came from areas within 150 kilometers (about 100 miles) of one another. In the Alytus marriage records, the most distant spouse came from the city of Lutsk in the Ukraine.

Today, some Jewish records in Ukraine come not only from towns within the former Pale of Settlement, but also from eastern Galicia, an area of Poland that was ruled by Austria-Hungary from the end of the 18th century until 1919. After World War II, eastern Galicia was annexed by the USSR and called Western Ukraine. Many surviving records from this area are in the Lviv archives. Jewish birth and death records obtained from Lviv, along with several types of financial documents, reveal the same pattern as do records from the former Russia-Poland.

About four to five percent of the birth records are like the Mendelsohn family record. In 1859, a baby was born in a village of Benkowa Wisznia to Moises and Slieve Mendelsohn, but the record is entered in the Rudki vital records birth book. Austrian authorities kept all Jewish vital records from the same district in a single book in the district town. Thus, it is not surprising to find births, marriages and deaths from surrounding different villages and towns all recorded in one place. Jewish genealogists must be aware of this and search accordingly [See "Polish-Jewish Genealogical Research—A Primer, AVOTAYNU, Vol. IX, No. 2, Summer 1993, for a

description of Jewish record keeping in Austria-Poland and the microfiche of Galician record keeping districts.—Ed.]

The situation is the same for the death records. For example, the death of Khane Rifke Hoch is listed in the Rudki vital records death book under November 2, 1863, but she died in Oszezanice, not in Rudki.

Most puzzling of all are the few birth records to which death information has been added. In the Rudki book of births from 1858 is the notation of the birth of Beile Goldshtein. On the same line, someone later recorded the fact that Beile died March 3, 1936. Only two to four percent of the birth records are altered this way. Why? Was such a notation left to the whim of a clerk, or was it mandatory to do this? It might seem reasonable to assume that Beile died in Rudki, and, hence, the information was known to whomever was responsible for the records. But what of the vast majority of other birth records that remain unaltered? Does this mean that almost all of those whose births were recorded in Rudki died someplace else?

Increasingly, it is becoming clear that one must take many factors into account when trying to locate the records of your ancestors. There was mobility in portions of the 19th-century Jewish population. Perhaps the town your ancestor left from was not the town of birth. When primary source (given to us by a genealogist) documents, such as a ship arrival record, passport or naturalization document, are available, information such as birth place is likely to be accurate. Most valuable are documents that originated in Russia, written in Russian, Polish, German, etc., before the information was translated and possibly changed. They usually show the correct spelling of the town name and will show the name of the immigrant before it was changed in his/her country of destination.

In closing, we would like to share another thought on a slightly different topic. In our greater capacities as researchers any archival documents, who want every document to be accessible to all interested parties, we offer the following consideration. It often happens that our researchers, as well as others, often go to the same archives and page through the same vital record books. The frequency is limited only by the number of requests received. This might not be a problem if the books were not in fragile condition, but they are. As a result, such limited access can only result ultimately in the complete deterioration of the records. Already some old style former Soviet archive managers are talking about reverting to restricted access, something we find completely unacceptable.

Much more desirable would be to protect the books and normalize access. This could be accomplished through the creation of a non-profit Jewish Genealogical Fund that would carefully organize photocopying of all Jewish genealogical materials from the former Soviet archives and would catalog them as was done with the Russian consular records once stored at the U.S. National Archives.

Two objectives would be achieved. First would be the physical safety of the records; no matter how badly the original books deteriorated, one would always have microfilmed copies. Second would be independence of access that would not depend on changes of governments, parliamentary crises or other vagaries of government. If such a database is created and stored in reasonable places, any search would be easier, more productive and, of course, much less expensive.

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## DP Card File at the Central Archives in Heidelberg

by Elke-Helen Szarf

In March 1992, the *Jüdische Gemeinde Berlin* (Jewish Community of Berlin) presented a card file of Displaced Persons (DPs) consisting of 11,139 cards to the *Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* (Central Archives for Research on the History of Jews in Germany) located in Heidelberg. Until then, the file was stored for almost 50 years in wooden and cardboard boxes in the community's basement. The collection dates from the years 1945-47 and will now remain in Heidelberg.

Subsequent to the liberation of the survivors from concentration camps, thousands were brought to transit camps in Berlin, where they held the status of "displaced persons" (DP). Most later emigrated to Israel or the United States. In the Berlin transit camps, an official record was kept of each DP, listing name, date and place of birth, nationality, occupation and religion. In addition, the last permanent address and most recent residence—usually a concentration camp—were added to the record card, along with a photograph of the DP, when available. The cards also include the dates when the DP was admitted to the transit camp and when he left.

The main task of the *Zentralarchiv*, which was established

in 1987 by the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland* (Central Council of Jews in Germany), is to trace documents on the history of the Jews in Germany, to collect them, to prepare them for archival purposes and then to store them at the archives. Until recently, the stacks of the *Zentralarchiv* consisted primarily of outdated files of Jewish communities, organizations and of the *Zentralrat*. In addition to these records, the archives possess photographic collections of

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Jewish gravestones in Baden-Württemberg, community newsletters and personal papers of postwar German-Jewish writers.

To prepare the DP card file for archival usage, each individual card had to be dusted off, sorted in rough alphabet-