
Researching Polish Ancestors

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this leaflet is to help people whose families settled in the United Kingdom from Poland and who may wish to trace their ancestors. Millions of people all around the world trace their roots to the area of present-day Poland. Their ancestors might have been of Polish, German, Jewish, or from other ethnic backgrounds and they might have belonged to a number of different faiths - Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, Calvinist or Mennonite Churches, or professed Judaism. For those wanting to begin to trace their Polish ancestry there is a wealth of information on the Internet. www.polishroots.org is an excellent web site which provides a great deal of background information, history, advice and contact details and there are some further websites listed at the end of this leaflet. This is not an exhaustive guide but will provide some pointers, which will help you to make a start on tracing your family.

HISTORY

Between 1772 and 1795, Poland was partitioned between Russia, Austria and Prussia, and ceased to be an independent nation for over 100 years, until it was re-established after the First World War in 1918.

Between the wars, newly independent Poland included parts of former Russian gubernias of Vilna, Grodno and Volhynia, the former Austrian province of Galicia and Prussian Poznan and West Prussia.

After the Second World War nearly a half of inter-war Poland (eastern provinces: Wilno, Nowogródek, Polesie, Wolyn, Tarnopol, Stanisławów and parts of Lwów and Białystok) became part of the Soviet Union - these areas are now part of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. Poland gained former German areas: most of Pommern (Pommerania), Brandenburg, Schlesien (Silesia), West Prussia and half of East Prussia.

Remember: Due to many wars and other catastrophes that Poland suffered, a great many records have been lost. The remaining records may be found in a variety of places.

RESEARCHING POLISH ANCESTRY

- Begin with yourself and work backwards. Get as much information about you and your brothers and sisters, if you have any. Do the same with your parents and continue backward with each previous generation until you reach the immigrant ancestor(s).
- As with any family history research, it is important to find out as much as you can from your relatives, in particular older members of the family. The information which they provide can be invaluable in pointing you in the right direction. As well as recording any family stories, you also need to ask about place of origin and religious denomination or faith. Poland's history is very complex and so any information that you can discover, in particular the name of the town or village of origin, is very important.
- The starting point for much genealogical research is often the second half of the nineteenth century. This was the period of the most massive emigration from Central Europe to the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia. Also the memory of our living ancestors and most of the written data concerning our family history dates back usually to the turn of the century or a little

- earlier. For help with locating ships in which Poles and other immigrants may have travelled to the New World, see <http://www.polishroots.org/immigration.htm>
- It is essential to record all the details which you are given accurately so that you can check them and use them as you begin to trace further information.
- You should also collect together any documents which may be within the family such as certificates of birth, baptism, marriage or death as well as information about work, immigration and education. These will be invaluable in helping to put together an initial picture. Some of the following may also help: personal papers, letters/diaries/scrapbooks, high school yearbooks, awards and recognition/diplomas, identity cards, records of military service, birth/marriage certificates, funeral/mass cards/bibles, mortgage/deeds, newspaper articles and snapshots/photos.
- Depending on when your family came to this country, there may be records in the United Kingdom which can also help you to make a start.

Remember: it is helpful to have some knowledge of Poland's history. The many changes which have taken place over time have affected the organisation and the location of surviving records.

The place names in today's Poland have changed frequently during the last 200 years. Many locations kept their German names until 1945, but now they are no longer used. As the new Polish names are not necessarily even similar, you may need to use a special geographical dictionary and gazetteer to find out the current name for a given town. For useful information about how to pinpoint where a town is and what the parishes and administrative units are see <http://www.polishroots.org/genpoland/where.htm>

Having found the place name, the next step is to try to establish which administrative unit the place of origin falls into. Depending on whether the place was situated originally in the Congress Poland (the 19th century Kingdom of Poland established after the Congress of Vienna in 1815), Austria, Prussia, or Russia, this will determine how it was administered and therefore what records may have been created and may survive. Again the Polishroots site can guide you through what can be quite a complex search.

RECORDS IN POLAND

Civil Registration Records of Births, Marriages and Deaths

Arrangements for Civil Registration depended upon the occupying power:

- Russian Poland (Kingdom of Poland):
1808: Civil registration established by Napoleon. (Jews and others were included in Catholic registers).
1826: Separate registers were kept for each religious community: Roman Catholic, Jewish, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, etc.
1868: Record keeping switches from the Polish to Russian language.
- Austrian Poland (Galicia):
Civil registration began in 1787, but was not enforced until the mid-19th century. Most records were kept in Latin. Some records were kept in German and some in Polish.
- Prussian Poland:
Civil registration began in 1874. Most records were kept in German or Latin, though some were kept in Polish.

After Poland had become independent in 1918, the Civil Registration Offices still existed in the former Prussian provinces, whereas the other areas retained the older practice of producing duplicates separately for every religion. After WWII, Civil Registration Offices were established throughout the rest of Poland.

Remember:

- Most of the Civil Registration Office records from the formerly Prussian parts of present-day Poland still remain there. Records older than 100 years are relocated to the State Archives.

After WWII the Civil Registration Offices were incorporated into the town halls and these offices may contain records of up to 5 former Prussian Civil Registration Offices. Sometimes you need to do a lot of detective work to identify the actual place where records from a given former office are currently stored.

- Civil birth, death and marriage records for Warsaw are held at the Warsaw State Archives, and Jewish entries in these registers are transcribed in the online database Jewish Records Indexing – Poland (<http://xman.strictlyhosting.co.uk/lj/feldgendler.html>) These records document births, marriages and deaths in the community, and include information such as names, addresses and occupations of parents, as well as dates and places of birth, death and marriage of individuals.
- Some of the pre-WWII Civil Registration Office records from the former German provinces were taken to Germany.

Church Records

The information contained in Church records varies depending on the time period, area and religion. Until the late 1700s they provide relatively little detail, but gradually they began to contain some additional information about the parents (e.g. father's profession) in the birth and death records, age in the marriage and death records, and cause of death in the death records. A list of the surviving family is often provided. From 1784 parish priests had to keep three separate registers for each of the villages of the parish. Until 1781 Protestant records were kept by Catholic priests but after that date they were kept separately. Beginning in 1782, parish priests kept registers of persons of non-Christian faith, thus, entries concerning the Jews may be found in church records. Jewish registers were also drawn up by rabbis.

Remember: Church records may be in a number of different languages: you may find records written in Latin, Polish, German or Russian depending on the religion, location or date. Parishes continue to keep registers and are not obliged to transfer them to the State Archives.

Where to find Church records

- The Roman Catholic Church records before the early 1900s are usually stored in the diocesan archives, although sometimes it is necessary to contact the pastor directly by mail to obtain a record; it is advisable to write in Polish.
- Since many Lutheran churches from the former German provinces were transferred to the Catholics after 1945, some of the Protestant church records can also be found in the Catholic archives.
- Many Catholic Church records, especially from the former provinces of [West](#) and [East Prussia](#), were taken to Germany in 1945.
- A large number of Catholic and Lutheran church records, as well as some Jewish ones, are stored at the [State Archives](#). Most of these records are the 19th century civil duplicates. Many Lutheran church records were taken to Germany with the escaping Germans in 1945.
- Some Polish registers can be searched at <http://www.familysearch.org> the website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Remember: <http://www.polishroots.org/genpoland/certif.htm> has a set of guidelines on how to write letters to Polish archives (State and Ecclesiastical), Civil Registration Offices and parishes. There is a list of addresses and contact details for archives in Poland at <http://archiwa.gov.pl/?CIDA=809>

The Polish State Archives

Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych
ul. Długa 6
Skr. Poczтовая Nr 1005
00-950 Warszawa
Poland

Records over 100 years old are located in several dozen regional archives, located throughout the country, but you need to write to the main archive in Warsaw, listed above.

Archives in Poland provide free access to the documents, either the originals or microfilm copies. Charges are made for searching and for making copies. Each of the archives has its own price list of services which may be found at relevant websites.

Other Records

These may include educational records, records of population (Censuses), taxation and residence records and records of landownership.

RECORDS IN THE UK

UK Census Returns

The census has been taken every 10 years since 1801 and the first detailed census was taken in 1841. Census information records the names of all people living in a particular household on the night of the census, together with information about age, marital status, relationship and employment and is a very useful source for family history. The latest available census return is 1911. The census returns (1841-1901) can be consulted at any Suffolk library or Record Office free of charge at www.ancestrylibrary.com where they can easily be searched by name.

Birth, marriage and death records in England and Wales

Registration of births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales began in 1837. This information is recorded in the General Register Office records. The General Registry Office has prepared complete indexes of all the certificates issued in England and Wales. The quarterly indexes are in alphabetical order of surname and provide a Volume number and Page number. With this information you can order a copy certificate from the General Register Office in Southport (www.gro.gov.uk/gro/). There are two significant resources on the internet to search these indexes:

- www.findmypast.com

This site provides access to digitised images of the General Registry Office index. Each page view costs a small amount of money.

- www.freebmd.org.uk

This site is the product of the time of many hundreds of volunteers and is still not complete. It provides a searchable transcription of the General Registry Office indexes. Its coverage is currently strongest in the latter years of the nineteenth century and better for marriages than deaths or births.

Records at the National Archives

After the Second World War many Polish troops who had fought alongside the western allies preferred not to return Poland and were allowed to stay in Great Britain. A Polish Resettlement Corps (PRC) was established, which vetted applicants and discharged them from the Polish armed forces. Records of the PRC are at the National Archives in series WO 315. Some of the records are in Polish, although English translations are provided in most cases. WO315/8 contains PRC army lists and nominal rolls and WO315/13-14 are records relating to nursing officers in Polish military hospitals and PRC medical officers, dentists and field ambulance officers. The majority of aliens arriving between 1940 and 1948 were Poles who eventually applied for naturalisation. Series HO405 in the National Archives contains a high proportion of applications from ex-PRC men.

The Polish Resettlement Act was passed in 1947 and the National Archives also has Polish Resettlement Registered Files containing records dealing with the problems arising from resettlement.

ED128 contains the records of the Committee for the Education of Poles in Great Britain and LAB/26 contains files relating to housing estates for Polish workers.

FURTHER READING

Hoskins, Janina W, *Genealogy and Heraldry: An Introduction to Research* (Hippocrene Books 1990)

Kershaw, Roger and Pearsall Mark, *Immigrants and Aliens 2nd edition* (The National Archives, 2004)

Kershaw, Roger and Pearsall Mark, *Family History on the Move* (The National Archives, 2006)

USEFUL WEBSITES

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~polwgw/polandgen.html> - hosting the **PolandGenWeb** site

<http://www.polishroots.org/genpoland/>

<http://www.polishroots.com/>

<http://www.polishjews.org/>

<http://www.zem.co.uk/polish/history.htm>

<http://geocities.com/SiliconValley/Haven/1538/Polishpg.html>

<http://www.archiwa.gov.pl/?CIDA=43> - The Polish State Archives

<http://www.polishemb-trade.co.uk/en/Poland.htm>

<http://feefhs.org/> - The Federation of East European Family History Societies

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

<http://www.rtrfoundation.org/archdta.html> - the Eastern European archive database

<http://www.familysearch.org> – has lists of polish genealogical words, numbers, dates etc and their English translations.

Bury Record Office, 77 Raingate Street, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 2AR

Telephone: 01284 741212

Email: bury.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Ipswich Record Office, Gatacre Road, Ipswich, IP1 2LQ

Telephone: 01473 584541

Fax: 01473 584533

Email: ipswich.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Lowestoft Record Office, Clapham Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1DR

Telephone: 01502 405357

Fax: 01502 405350

Email: lowestoft.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Suffolk Record Office web site: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/sro>

Suffolk Heritage Direct website: <http://www.suffolkheritagedirect.org.uk>