

Finding Eastern European Vital Records  
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I. Definition of Eastern Europe for purposes of this talk

- A. Former Austro-Hungarian Empire  
(Most of) Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, most of Croatia, most of the Czech Republic, Hungary, parts of Italy, part of Montenegro, part of Poland [Galicia], part of Romania, part of Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, part of Ukraine [Galicia, Bukovina, and Transcarpathia]
- B. Former Russian Empire  
Russia, (most of) Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, part of Poland, Moldova, and much of the Caucasus and Central Asia
- C. (parts of) Former German Empire  
Parts of the Czech Republic, part of Lithuania, part of Russia, part of Poland

The focus will be on the former Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, with an emphasis on modern Poland and Ukraine with some examples from Czechia, but the principles are generally applicable to other places.

II. Background of Vital Records

- A. Records of birth, marriage, and death (sometimes divorce)
- B. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, most vital records in Eastern Europe were created by religious authorities of churches that were recognized by the state to perform this function
  1. Following the Protestant Reformation (starting in 1517), Lutheran and Reformed Churches began keeping registers of baptisms, usually marriages, and sometimes burials in the 1500s. Again, comparatively few early registers have survived.
  2. The Catholic Church mandated the keeping of registers of baptism and marriage in 1563, and registers of burial in 1614. Not many have survived that far back.
  3. The Russian Orthodox Church mandated the keeping of registers of baptisms, marriages, and burials following a decree of Tsar Peter I in 1722. Many surviving registers begin in the mid- or late-1700s.
  4. Jewish vital records in the former Russian and Austrian Empires generally begin much later, in the 1820s and 1830s.
- C. Austria-Hungary: Emperor Joseph II issued a decree on Feb. 20, 1784, requiring each pastor to keep three separate registers, in columnar format, for marriages, births, and deaths, to be written in Latin, with the events for each village within a parish to be recorded separately by village.
  1. Some pre-1784 registers exist in various formats, but are quite scattered. Roman Catholic registers will be in Latin. Some early Greek Catholic registers start in the 1760s or 1770s and are often written in Slavonic.

2. Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and Armenian Catholic priests were given the status of civil record keepers; from 1849 this was extended to Protestant clergy and in 1868 to Jewish record keepers.
3. In addition to parishes, military units often kept their own vital registers.
4. Birth Registers: These were to include the date of birth and date of baptism, the house number, the name of the child, whether legitimate or illegitimate, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, the names and social status of the parents (and, from about the mid-1830s, the names of both sets of grandparents), the names and social status of the godparents. From 1825, the name of the midwife was to be added. The name of the officiating priest would be noted somewhere on the page, usually at the bottom. If a child was born out-of-wedlock, the name of the father was not to be entered into the register, even if known, unless he himself acknowledged paternity.
5. Marriage Registers: These were to include the date of marriage, the house number (sometimes of both parties, sometimes of one or the other), the name of the groom, often including his parents as time went on, his status, religion (Catholic or non-Catholic), age (by the early 20th century the birthdate was usually noted), whether single or widowed, and the same information regarding the bride, the names of the witnesses and their social status. Sometimes underneath the entry will be a written statement indicating, in the case of a minor, a parent or in some cases the orphans' court if a parent were not available, had given consent to the marriage. The name of the officiating priest would be noted somewhere on the page.
6. Death Registers: These were to include the date of death and burial, the house number, the name of the deceased, sometimes with name of spouse or parents, marital status, the age (by the 20th century the birthdate was usually noted), and the cause of death (early on, these were often written simply as ordinary or natural causes).
7. Copies: Copies of the metrical registers (births, marriages, and deaths) were to be sent annually to the eparchial consistory. They were used for civil and statistical purposes and also for purposes of military conscription. The requirement to submit death registers began only in 1836, although it seems that many parishes only sent birth and marriage registers at that time, having a copyist start from 1784 and copy up through 1835 for submission. These records were kept in a very similar fashion through the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. In some regions, permission was granted to make entries in Ukrainian from the late 19th century forward. The records continued to be kept in a similar fashion during the Second Polish Republic (1919-1939) and in interwar Czechoslovakia (1919-1939), and into the first years of World War II. After the areas were incorporated into, or became satellites of, the USSR by the end of World War II, churches were often closed, records confiscated and placed in archives, and record-keeping taken over by civil registrars. In Transcarpathia (part of the pre-war Kingdom of Hungary) civil record keeping began in 1895 and supplements the church records.

#### D. Russian Empire

1. Tsar Peter I mandated the registering of births, marriages, and deaths in 1722, as part of his imperial reforms; some earlier records survive. Unlike in Austria-Hungary, these records are generally written in Russian Cyrillic and in cursive, making them challenging to decipher for the uninitiated.
2. Additional laws standardized the format of the registers in 1779 and 1837; by 1840, most were in printed volumes of columnar forms.
3. Originally, only the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church served as registrars for the state; later, registration faculties were extended to Roman Catholics (1826), Evangelical Lutherans (1832), Jews (1835), Old Believers (1874), and Baptists (1879).
4. Eventually, legislation required the sending of copies each year to the eparchial consistory, so that two copies (theoretically) have a chance of surviving.
5. In 1919, following the October Revolution, a law in the new Soviet states required the transfer of parish registers for a certain look-back period (varied) to the local civil registration (ZAGS) office, and earlier registers were to be transferred to the corresponding state archives. Churches were aggressively closed under a policy of state atheism, and civil registrars assumed the responsibility of record-keeping.
6. There was much upheaval in the early years of the USSR and during World War II; registers were combined, rebound, transferred from place to place, duplicates were discarded, and many records were lost. But many have survived, although it sometimes takes some detective work to find them.
7. Birth Registers: In their standardized form, these include the number of the entry within the year, the month and day of birth and baptism, the name of the child, the social estate (soslovie) of the parents, their given, patronymic, and surname (no maiden name for mother), their religious affiliation, the same information about the godparents, the name of the priest, and the signature of the witnesses upon request.
8. Marriage Registers: In their standardized form, these include the number of the entry within the year, the month and day of marriage, the social estate, given, patronymic, and surname of the groom, his religious affiliation, whether married before, his age, the same information for the bride, the name of the officiant, and the social estate, given, patronymic, and surname of the witnesses. There is also a field for comments.
9. Death Registers: In their standardized form, these include the number of the entry within the year, the month and day of death and burial, the social estate, given, patronymic and surname of the decedent, his or her age, the cause of death, who administered the last rites (extreme unction – anointing of the dying), who conducted the funeral, and where buried.

#### E. 20<sup>th</sup> century

1. The Kingdom of Hungary began keeping civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths in 1895
2. The Soviet Union switched to civil registration of births, marriages, divorces, and deaths in 1922

3. Poland switched to civil vital records in 1944

III. Finding Vital Records from Your Ancestral Community

- A. Determine the parish or religious community to which your village/town belonged; many parishes included multiple villages
1. For Austria-Hungary, there are regular shematisms [directories] which contained this information.
    - a. The Greek Catholic shematisms for Galicia have been compiled by Fr. Dmytro Blazejowskyj for the Greek Catholic Eparchies of L'viv, Przemysl, and Stanislaviv (now Ivano-Frankivs'k) in a series of books.
    - b. Brian Lenius's Genealogical Gazetteer of Galicia is an excellent source for this type of information for both Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic parishes. <http://lenius.ca/Gazetteer/Gazetteer.htm>
    - c. For Greek Catholics from Transcarpathia, one can consult many annual shematisms on the website Byzantino Hungarica. <https://byzantinohungarica.com/index.php/sematizmusok-osszeirasok>
    - d. For the Kingdom of Hungary, there is the Genealogical Gazetteer of the Kingdom of Hungary, available at <https://www.avotaynu.com/books/Hungary.htm>
  2. Directories of parishes in the Russian Empire also exist and are catalogued in Reference Publications of the Dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church (1861-1915): Union Catalog and Index of Contents, by A. I. Razdorsky.
  3. Finding Vital Records Once You Have Identified the Parish
    - a. FamilySearch.org: Go to the catalog and search by place. <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>
    - b. FamilySearch.org: Go to specific record collections [Search "Records," "Search by Place," enter country]
    - c. Archival Resources in Various Countries
      - (1) Szukajwarchiwach.gov.pl – "Search in the Archives," Polish Archival website (includes territories formerly part of Poland but now in Ukraine and Belarus)
      - (2) Geneteka - <http://geneteka.genealodzy.pl/> (extracted records from all over Poland)
      - (3) Diocesan Archives for the diocese covering your area of origin, often separate from state archives
      - (4) Ukraine archives are being rapidly digitized. Several sources of information:
        - a. Guide to location of vital records in Ukrainian archives (whether or not online) <https://genealogia.com.ua/>
        - b. Alex Krakovsky's digitization project, <https://uk.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%90%D1%80%D1%85%D1%96%D0%B2:%D0%90%D1%80%D1%85%D1%96%D0%B2%D0%B8> These are sorted by archival fond/file number.

c. Information organized by Alex Krakovsky for Jewish documents,  
[https://uk.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%90%D1%80%D1%85%D1%96%D0%B2:%D0%84%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B5\\_%D0%BC%D1%96%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%87%D0%BA%D0%BE](https://uk.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%90%D1%80%D1%85%D1%96%D0%B2:%D0%84%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B5_%D0%BC%D1%96%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%87%D0%BA%D0%BE)

d. FamilySearch Images, recent information not yet organized, <https://www.familysearch.org/records/images/beta>

(5) JewishGen has indexed many vital records from Eastern Europe

a. <http://www.jewishgen.org>

b. Jewish Record Indexing – Poland, <https://www.jri-poland.org/>

(6) Russian State Historical Archive, <https://rgia.su/>

(7) St. Petersburg Evangelical Lutheran Consistory had oversight of all Lutherans (mostly Germans) in the Russian Empire. Records from 1833 to 1885 are in St. Petersburg archives and are now available on FamilySearch. Post-1885 records for what is now Ukraine can often be found in Ukrainian provincial archives. See here for a helpful guide: <https://www.volhynia.com/res-lutheran.html>

(8) Germans from Russia Heritage Society has a lot of good materials for that ethnic group, <https://www.grhs.org/pages/research>

(9) If the parish registers that you seek are not found in the provincial archives system, check subordinate archives (such as city archives), contact the local civil records office, called the Urzad Stanu Cywilnego (Poland) or the Reyestratsiya aktiv Tsivil'noho Stanu (Ukraine)

(a) Privacy restrictions: Poland (births, 100 years; marriages and deaths, 80 years); Ukraine (births, marriages, and deaths 75 years) - transfer to the archive goes by the latest date in the book

(b) List of RATS offices in Ukraine, under the authority of the Ministry of Justice  
<https://minjust.gov.ua/dep/ddr/viddili-derjavnoi-reestratsii-aktiv-tsivilnogo-stanu>

(c) List of USC offices in Poland, under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration

<https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/urzed-y-stanu-cywilnego>

You may need to hire a researcher to obtain best results

(10) In some cases, records may still be at the parish or a neighboring parish, but you should start with the archives/civil records offices first.

(11) FamilySearch Wiki

#### IV. Interpreting Vital Records

## A. Online Groups for Queries, Discussion

### 1. Facebook Groups

Czech Genealogy - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/czechgenealogy>

Eastern European Genealogy - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/18363917912>

Find Your Lost Russian & Ukrainian Family -

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/123801448493>

Galicia Family History Group - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/644292589109006>

Galizien German Genealogy Group - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/4810727069>

Germans from Ukraine - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/17546939272>

Lemko Ancestry & DNA - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/319572048241913>

Poland & Genealogy - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/28612817545/>

Prussian Genealogy and Heritage -

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/prussiogenealogy/>

Slovak Genealogy - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/slovakiogenealogy>

Tracing the Tribe – Jewish Genealogy on Facebook -

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/tracingthetribe>

Ukrainian Genealogy: Our Ancestors – Nashi Predky

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1385723818339063>

Genealogical Translations - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/361690548110384>

### 2. Societies and Organizations

American Historical Society of Germans from Russia - <https://ahsgr.org/>

Carpatho-Rusyn Society - <https://c-rs.org/>

Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International - <https://cgsi.org/>

East European Genealogical Society - <https://eegsociety.org/>

Foundation for East European Family History Studies - <https://feefhs.org/>

Polish Genealogical Society of America - <https://pgsa.org/>

Polish Genealogical Society of Connecticut and the Northeast - <https://pgsctne.org/>

Ukrainian History and Education Center – [www.ukrhec.org](http://www.ukrhec.org)

## V. Presumptions

- A. You have identified the name, approximate birth date, and town/village of origin for your immigrant ancestor from Eastern Europe. You should also identify their religious affiliation too and have performed a reasonably exhaustive search for records about them in North America to verify as much data about them as possible and get clues to their “FAN” club before you search European records.

### Further Reading

Antonova, Irina A. and Dmitri Antonov. “Метрические книги России XVII-нач. XX в.” (Register Books in Russia from the 17th to the Beginning of the 20th c.). Lubelskie Towarzystwo Genealogiczne, 2010(2): 143-164. Available online at [https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Rocznik\\_Lubelskiego\\_Towarzystwa\\_Genealogicznego/Rocznik\\_Lubelskiego\\_Towarzystwa\\_Genealogicznego-r2010-t2/Rocznik\\_Lubelskiego\\_Towarzystwa\\_Genealogicznego-r2010-t2-s143-164/Rocznik\\_Lubelskiego\\_Towarzystwa\\_Genealogicznego-r2010-t2-s143-164.pdf](https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Rocznik_Lubelskiego_Towarzystwa_Genealogicznego/Rocznik_Lubelskiego_Towarzystwa_Genealogicznego-r2010-t2/Rocznik_Lubelskiego_Towarzystwa_Genealogicznego-r2010-t2-s143-164/Rocznik_Lubelskiego_Towarzystwa_Genealogicznego-r2010-t2-s143-164.pdf)

Bielawa, Matthew R. "Catholic Vital Records of Galicia/Halychyna." Federation of East European Family History Societies Journal. Vol. XI, pp. 36-45. Available online at [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/img\\_auth.php/b/bf/Catholic\\_Vital\\_Records\\_of\\_Galicia-Halychyna\\_by\\_Matthew\\_R.\\_Bielawa.pdf](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/img_auth.php/b/bf/Catholic_Vital_Records_of_Galicia-Halychyna_by_Matthew_R._Bielawa.pdf).

Blazejowskyj, Dmytro. Historical Šematism of the Eparchy of Peremyšl including the Apostolic Administration of Lemkivščyna (1828-1939). L'viv 1995.

Blazejowskyj, Dmytro. Historical Šematism of the Eparchy of Stanislaviv from Its Establishment until the Outbreak of World War II (1885-1938). L'viv 2002.

Blazejowskyj, Dmytro. Historical Šematism of the Archeparchy of L'viv (1832-1944), vol. I – Administration and Parishes, vol. II – Clergy and Religious Congregations. Kyiv 2004.

Hoffman, William F. and Jonathan Shea. In Their Words: A Genealogist's Translation Guide. Vol. I - Polish; Vol. II - Russian; Vol. III - Latin. Available from Polish Genealogical Society of America, [www.pgsa.org](http://www.pgsa.org). These three volumes contain valuable guides, with many examples, to translating specialized and archaic words of genealogical importance which one may come across in old documents from Eastern Europe.

Koval's'ka, Areta. "Evolution of Metrical Records in Galicia (1760-1830)." Forgotten Galicia (Sept. 28, 2017). <https://forgottengalicia.com/evolution-of-metrical-records-in-galicia-1760-1830/>

Lenius, Brian. Genealogical Gazetteer of Galicia. Comprehensive guide to thousands of communities in Austrian Galicia with references to the religious parishes associated with each, and references to many more smaller place names. Available at <http://www.lenius.ca/GazetteerOrder/GazetteerOrderForm.htm>.

Pihach, John D. Ukrainian Genealogy: A Beginner's Guide. Excellent overview of how to do Ukrainian genealogy both in North America and in Europe. Many examples of documents. Available at <https://www.ciuspress.com/catalogue/reference-and-genealogy/112/ukrainian-genealogy--a-beginner's-guide>.

Razdorskij, A. I. Справочные издания епархий Русской православной церкви (1861—1915): Сводный каталог и указатель содержания (Reference publications of the dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church (1861-1915): Summary catalog and content index). St. Petersburg: Dmitryj Bulanin, 2002. See <http://www.petergen.com/sources/eparchyrpc.shtml>

Shea, Jonathan D. "The Keeping of Vital Records in the Austrian Partition." Pathways and Passages. East European Genealogical Society. Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 1992). Available online at <http://www.halgal.com/vitalrecordsaustria.html>

Transcarpathia Research - This site has a very helpful cross-reference listing for villages in Transcarpathia and their old Hungarian names. <http://transcarpathia-research.com/read.php?4,38>