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Work Underway on the DoJR Project

by Marlis Humphrey, Stanley Diamond and Sallyann Amdur Sack

Rabbi Malcolm Stern, the father of organized Jewish genealogy used to advise beginners to start by interviewing relatives, saying “The records will be there when you get to them.”

Yes, but will we always be able to find or access them? Some are unknown, others are known but their value is unrecognized; sometimes the records are misfiled. In Ramon’s case, the records were uncatalogued. When you do find that priceless nugget of information, how does a genealogist make sure that others will know about it too?

The International Association for Jewish Genealogical Societies’ (IAJGS) answer to these problems is its Documentation of Jewish Records project (DoJR) tasked with producing JCat, the ultimate catalog and repository for all Jewish genealogy sources of information—unrecognized, misfiled, unknown, uncatalogued, even known!—has left the drawing board and gone to work.

In February 2020, employing experienced professional local researchers, DoJR completed pilot projects (sometimes known as “proof of concept”) in two regional state archives, one in Kielce, Poland, the other in Nikolaev (Mykolaiv), Ukraine. They were designed to test its assumption that archives hold a wealth of genealogically valuable collections in addition to the census and vital statistics data that are the backbone of Jewish genealogical research. A related goal was to evaluate our proposed catalog data collection template. MyHeritage generously funded the effort.

Based on their extensive experience in these archives, the researchers were asked to sample record collections (other than census or vital statistics) that they believed would be rich in Jewish genealogical content, but are seldom seen and used by researchers. We suggested lists of voters, school records, lists of taxpayers, notarial records, population records (e.g., books of permanent residents, list of residents, lists of property owners), passport applications, ID card applications and any other categories their experience suggested might be fruitful. The aim was to identify possible sources of content for Jewish genealogical research that have not been previously located or are insufficiently described in the archives’ catalog. That is, to determine if information relevant to Jewish genealogical research exists that may not be obvious in the current description in the archival inventory. One of the researchers writes:

Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) is a project that perfectly fits the changes that have taken place in genealogical research in the last several years. The widespread use of computers, the digitization of many thousands of sources causes many genealogists to think that information about their ancestors is almost at their fingertips. Nothing could be more wrong. Lack of a detailed description of individual sources or their ambiguous titles make many researchers simply not see so many valuable records and thus not use

them in their own research. The DoJR catalog can solve this problem. In my opinion, the pilot project carried out at the State Archives in Kielce confirmed that archives (and not only archives) still hold masses of undiscovered and/or little known sources useful in Jewish genealogy.

Here are some of the specific entries from the pilot project template reported by the researcher. Note the many notations of misfiled or inaccurately labeled items.

Office of Nikolayev military governor, 1805–1901.

11,962 documents related to the right of residence of Jews in the city, permission for opening Jewish prayer houses, various statistics characterizing the role of Jews in the social-economic life of the city, correspondence with government agencies on Jewish issues. Also included are documents on the attempt to evict Jews at the beginning of the 20th century; documents reflecting all spheres of life of the Jewish community, permission to open trade, medical institutions, pharmacies, theatrical life, publishing newspapers.

Nikolayev state two-grade Jewish men grammar school, 1897–1917. Each volume contains files of the teachers and students, vital records of teachers and students, applications for entering the school and for a job, book of registration of the certificates and payrolls of the teachers. The entire collection is Jewish.

Agricultural colonies. These files hold information about eight Jewish agricultural colonies within the borders of Radom guberniya, Ryczow, Grabki, Ksawerow, Lgota Blotna, Labeledz, Pasturka, Podmiejsk and Wolica. It is an amazing source from which you can learn much about the little-known phenomenon of Jewish farm colonies. These are detailed lists of Jewish settlers, date of birth, often the place from which they migrated. While working for one of my clients, I found information about the members of the Aspis family who were founders of the Pasturka colony. Descendants of these settlers currently live in Brazil.

Identity cards. These applications for identity cards for the inhabitants of Konskie from 1922–1937 include given name and surname, date and place of birth, parents’ names, current address, description, photograph and, usually, birth certificate. These documents can be an excellent starting point for further research. For example, finding addresses allows the researcher to reach the appropriate book of residence with details about other family members.

Book of the permanent residents of the town of Gowarczow, including Jews, 1864–1944. The title of this file is imprecise. The book covers only the Jewish population for the years 1865–1867, about 700 individuals. It is extremely valuable for researchers with ancestors in Gowarczow, but not only there. In Poland before 1939, “permanent residence” was inherited from father to children. If a person moved to another town without changing their permanent residence, as many did, their children would be recorded in the books for

which the father was a permanent resident. Thanks to this, we can track the migrations of ancestors to other towns. Also note that people who did not have birth certificates (and many did not) were recorded here. Thanks to these entries, we can learn about ancestors who might never have been found in vital records.

Book of permanent residents of the village of Baszowic, Nowa Slupia commune, 1873–1954. This file is incorrectly titled. In fact, it is the missing book of permanent residents of the town of Nowa Slupia with all the usual information included in these books. In my opinion, books of permanent residents are one of the best genealogical sources. Thanks to them, we learn many details about our ancestors, including emigration to foreign countries, movement to other towns, marriages, army service and more. We also find information not included in Jewish vital records.

Books of population movement, 1889–1954. This title is incorrect. These actually are books of the permanent population of the Niewachlow commune, a valuable source for researchers with ancestors in Kielce. Before 1862, Jews could not settle in Kielce. Therefore, they lived in nearby villages such as Bialogon, Czarnow, Niewachlow and many others, all now absorbed into the city of Kielce.

Acts of Dyminy Commune, 1820–1932. Title incorrect. These actually are the books of the permanent residents of the commune of Dyminy.

Over the years, the JRI-Poland presentations at the annual IAJGS conferences have reported on discoveries of other books of residents in unexpected locations. A few examples are the 24 volumes in the Olkusz Fire Brigade Museum, the 29 volumes in the Międzyrzec Podlaski municipal offices and the books in the Opocznow and Przeworsk museums and one book in the Zalishchyky (Zaleszczyki), Ukraine, museum. The story of the Dynów books of residents is even more unusual. An elderly resident of Dynów had them in his home for many years and was inspired to donate the books to the town museum.

Other Sources

Other unanticipated sources discovered were: lists of army draft evaders published in provincial newspapers with information similar to birth records—each listing surname, first name, father’s and mother’s first names, date and place of birth, and registers of all tenants in large apartment buildings in Bedzin (with detailed genealogical information). The discovery of 10,000 pages of school records for three Oswiecim schools, surprisingly going back to the 1870s and up to the immediate pre-World War I years, hold untold treasures.

JRI-Poland executive director, Stanley Diamond, is quick to point out that these, and most such discoveries, were not a result of an organized search. As he pointed out, the JRI-Poland representative in Poland (Chris Malczewski), is a highly competent tour guide, interpreter and researcher. As he tours the country with overseas visitors, they drop in at state archives branches and various town

Positive Results

As we wished and expected, the results confirmed our expectations. In just one month, the two researchers identified more than 116,500 individual Jews in genealogically valuable records in 54 files or record collections with non-obvious Jewish genealogical data.

Only two of the 54 files that hold the documentation of these 116,500-plus individual Jews were previously known to the genealogy community. 52 of the 54 files are not included in the collections covered by Routes to Roots, FamilySearch Catalog, JRI-Poland or JewishGen. They were hidden in plain sight.

Marlis Humphrey

offices, museums, and libraries. At the first opportunity, he asks about records in their holdings of potential interest to Jewish researchers.

Many years ago, Professor Shmuel Spektor, editor of Yad Vashem’s *Encyclopedia of the Destroyed Communities*, sadly told AVOTAYNU publisher and editor, Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Sack, that “our biggest gap in the Pages of Testimony are the names no one remembers of the small children who were murdered.” As the item from the pilot project demonstrates, DoJR’s JCat may help fill in many of the missing names.

Taxes from the inhabitants of the Topolice commune, August 1940.* This file includes a list of all Jews over the age of 18 who lived in the Topolice commune, most of them in the town of Zarnow. This is probably one of the last records of those on the list before the Holocaust. From it, we can determine in detail the number of Jews living in Zarnow before creation of the ghetto and to accurately reconstruct the Zarnow population with given names, surnames and professions.

Genealogy research often has been likened to working a jigsaw puzzle. It is composed of small, individual bits of data, and only when the last piece—the keystone for the arch—is laid in place, can the whole picture be seen; only at those rare “ah ha” moments do we generally experience The Big High. A catalog in itself doesn’t sound terribly exciting, but when we authors focus on the potential of its individual items, The Big High descends upon us. We trust it will for you too. JCat will serve as a repository that will continue to accumulate and preserve an ever-growing treasure trove of keys to those puzzle pieces.

Note

* In Poland, a “commune” (*gmina*) is the principal administrative division, including villages and surrounding countryside. It is similar to a municipality in the United States.

The authors form the DoJR Project Steering Committee. Marlis Humphrey is chair of the Documentation of Jewish Records Project (DoJR) and immediate past president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS). Stanley Diamond is founder and director of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland. Sallyann Amdur Sack is editor of AVOTAYNU.