

Belarus: Jewish Family History Research Guide

Timeline

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which was united with Poland, ruled most of Byelorussia (“White Russia”) until the reign of Catherine the Great in Russia. Upon the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Russia acquired the eastern portion of present-day Belarus, including the towns of Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Gomel. The Second Partition in 1793 gave Minsk and the central region to Russia, and in 1795 the Third Partition incorporated the remainder of Byelorussia into the Russian Empire. Under Russian rule the area was divided administratively into the provinces, or gubernias, of Grodno, Minsk, Mogilev, Vilna, and Vitebsk. In 1921, this territory was divided between Poland and Soviet Russia along the lines of the First Partition of Poland. In 1922, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was one of four founding republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R., or Soviet Union). In 1924 Russia transferred to the Byelorussian S.S.R. the regions of Polotsk, Vitebsk, Orsha, and Mogilev, which had large Byelorussian populations. Gomel and Rechitsa followed in 1926. The Byelorussian S.S.R. declared sovereignty from the U.S.S.R. in 1990 and independence in 1991, changing its name to the Republic of Belarus.

Finding Your Ancestral Town

Once you have identified the name of your ancestral town, you can locate it on a map using the following sources.

Mokotoff, Gary and Sallyann Amdur Sack. *Where Once We Walked: A Guide to the Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust—Revised Edition* (Avotaynu, 2002). This gazetteer, available in the **Genealogy Institute**, lists towns according to variant spellings and provides the present-day country and map coordinates of the town, as well as an estimate of the pre-WWII Jewish population.

ShtetlSeeker Database (www.jewishgen.org/ShtetlSeeker/). This database allows you to search for towns using either the exact spelling or the Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex. Soundex searches find similar sounding names with variant spellings. Links on the database connect each town name to online maps, where the town location is identified with a red star.

It is also important to identify the uezd (district) and gubernia (province) in which the town was located, in order to identify relevant documents. To learn the district and province, visit the web site of the Belarus Special Interest Group (see below) and click on the “Shtetls of Belarus” link, which leads to a database that provides the information.

Vital Records

There are three main sources of information about vital records from towns in Belarus—the National Historical Archives of Belarus, the Routes to Roots Foundation, and the Family History Library (FHL) of the Church of Latter-day Saints. The records housed in archives in Belarus are incomplete and may be time-consuming to access. See the web sites below for current information:

National Historical Archives of Belarus

55, Kropotkina St.,
Minsk, 220002
Republic of Belarus
Telephone: (+375-17) 268-65-22, 268-65-23
Fax: 268-65-20
E-mail: niab@solo.by, niab@belsonet.net
Director: Alla K. Golubovich
www.archives.gov.by/EArh/E_naz_ist.htm

Routes to Roots Foundation, Inc.

www.rtrfoundation.org

Full-length articles on archives in Minsk and Grodno

www.rtrfoundation.org/archps5.html

Searchable database of archives documents by town name

www.rtrfoundation.org/archdta.html

Web sites, addresses, telephone & fax numbers of archives holding records from towns in Belarus

www.rtrfoundation.org/archdta2.html

Family History Library

The Family History Library (FHL) has microfilmed revision lists (poll tax records or census lists) for the Minsk province, 1795-1874, and 19th to early 20th century vital records for some towns in the provinces of Minsk, Vitebsk and Mogilev. To identify the relevant microfilms, do a "Place Search" in the Family History Library Online Catalog, **www.familysearch.org/Eng/Library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp**, first using the town name, and then using the province name. For a list of microfilms on long-term loan at the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute, see **www.jgsny.org/microfiche.htm**. Additional films are available through our short-term loan program, or at any LDS Family History Center (FHC).

Other Sources

Town History

To research the more general history and character of your town's Jewish community, consult yizkor books, memoirs and biographies. Yizkor books (memorial books) recollect Eastern European Jewish communities. To learn whether there is one for your town, consult the bibliography in Appendix B of *Genealogical Resources in New York*, edited by Estelle Guzik (Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc., 2003), available in the **Genealogy Institute**. The JewishGen Yizkor Book Project database at **www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/database.html** is searchable by town and indicates which libraries have copies. To find out what resources on your town are available at the Center for Jewish History, search our online catalog at **<http://catalog.cjh.org>**.

For Further Information

Belarus Special Interest Group

E-mail discussion list, searchable on-line databases, provincial and district research groups, map links, landsmanshaftn membership lists, and many other resources.

www.Jewishgen.org/Belarus