The Past in the Present: How the Polish Partitions Shape Jewish Heritage Work Today

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Source: https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Poland/GeoRegions.htm. Map shows the administrative subdivisions (gubernia) of Congress Poland from 1867-1918.[1]

Timeline of Polish Partitions: Poland annexed by Prussian, Russian, and Austrian Empires

1772-First Partition

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[1] For more detailed information about the changes in administrative subdivisions from 1795-1918, see: https://www.jewishgen.org/InfoFiles/Poland/Q2.htm#q15. Historical subdivisions help to explain why the genealogical records of some towns are housed in various branches of the Polish National Archive.

1793-Second Partition

1795-Third Partition: Poland loses its sovereignty

1808-Napoleon establishes Duchy of Warsaw. Civil vital registration began, all records (including Jews and others) in Roman Catholic register.

1815-Congress Poland established-under Russian authority, but with some autonomy.

1826-Separate civil registries for different religions

1863-Polish insurrection against foreign rule

1868-Loss of autonomy in Congress Poland; official language of registration changes from Polish to Russian.[2]

1918-Poland regains sovereignty, extends east into Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania (Russian Pale and Eastern Galicia).

1945-Poland's borders shift west after World War II, including former German lands to the west and excluding Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuanian lands to the east.

Prussian Partition

- Official language was German.
- Main city was Poznań/Posen. Gdańsk/Danzig was a free city.
- Until 1815, Prussia controlled Warsaw and surrounding region.

Generally, Poznan and other urban centers in the Prussian partition had more industrial development than the regions under Russian and Austrian rule. In Prussia, Jews had limited rights unless they were German Jews, so Jews identified increasingly with German culture. If there was a second language on Jewish tombstones within this region, it was German. As the 19th century progressed, many Jews migrated west to larger German cities where they had more opportunities for education and employment. Some continued to the US. When Poland regained sovereignty in 1918, migration accelerated, in part due to the rise of Polish nationalism. By 1939 when the Nazis invaded, very few Jews remained. Western Poland was absorbed into the 3rd Reich.

The history of the Prussian partition poses particular challenges for contemporary Jewish heritage work. First, Jewish residence is historically more distant; most Jewish institutions had closed before the war, and fewer postwar residents knew or remembered prewar Jewish residents. Second, the link between Jewish culture and German culture complicate memory work. German institutions are hesitant to fund projects for fear of seeming to threaten Polish

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[2] Russian records often have two dates. The earlier one was based on the Julian (used by Russia) calendar and the later one was based on the Gregorian (used by Poland and the rest of Europe) calendar. Today, we use the Gregorian calendar.

rights to territory, and some Polish institutions avoid projects that remind current residents of the region's historical connections with Germany.

Russian Partition

- Important to distinguish between Congress Poland and the Russian Pale.
- Official language was Russian, but until 1868 vital records in Congress Poland were in Polish.
- Main cities in Congress Poland include Warsaw, and by the late 19th century Łódź. Vilnius was a major city in the Russian Pale, important for Lithuanian, Jewish, and Polish national movements.

The region under Russian rule was poor overall, with sharp distinctions between urban and rural residents. 19th century industrial development concentrated in Congress Poland around Warsaw and Łódź, where Jews were involved in industry, business, professions, and the arts. From the end of the 19th century into the early 20th century, diverse Jewish organizations flourished, including Zionists, Orthodox groups, and the socialist Bund. In Congress Poland, an influential minority of Jews adopted Polish language and culture, while others championed Yiddish literature and newspapers. Shtetls in the Russian Pale were generally poor; some had a Jewish population of 50% or more. Pogroms were more common in the Russian Pale than in Congress Poland. During World War II, most of Congress Poland was part of the *Generalgouvernement*, where Jews were initially placed in Ghettos, and then sent to death camps. In the Russian Pale, Jews were rounded up and shot.

Heritage work in this region of Poland is complicated by the difficult legacy of the Holocaust. Local residents have worked with national and international supporters to commemorate the sites of mass atrocity, and also to teach residents about the Jewish history and culture that used to be integral to their communities. Institutions like ŻIH and the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews are important allies in these efforts.

Austrian Partition

- Vital records are generally in Polish.
- The region was called Galicia
- Main city was Kraków (an autonomous city from 1815-1846). Other cities include Lviv/Lwów (now in Ukraine).

The Austrian Empire showed greater tolerance for ethnic and religious differences than did the other partition empires. Most Jews lived in towns and cities due to restrictions on ownership of agricultural lands. Sztetls were generally poor; they had populations of mixed ethnic and religious backgrounds and in some the Jewish population reached well above 50%. Most Jewish residents spoke Yiddish; those engaged in business spoke other languages, as well. Hasidism originated in the region that is now Western Ukraine, and by the second half of the 19th century spread west and north.

Some extraordinary synagogues and cemeteries survived World War II, but the devastation of the Holocaust was profound due to the murder of so many prewar Jewish residents. The immediacy of memories of death camps and mass murder contributed to the taboo that kept many postwar residents silent about local Jewish history. Some heritage work highlights important Hasidic sites, publicized through the Galician Hasidic Trail. Local foundations cooperate with local government in many locations.

Resources for Genealogists

Virtual Shtetl: https://sztetl.org.pl/en includes information about nearly 2000 towns and cities that had Jewish residents. Provides historical information, maps, testimonies, and information about heritage sites and contemporary Jewish heritage projects.

JewishGen https://www.jewishgen.org/ includes Jewish genealogical information indexed from archival records. Through "family finder," researchers interested in the same surnames can get in touch and share information. http://www.jri-poland.org/ contains records for Poland.

Ancestry.com, MyHeritage.com, and Geni.com index US and international records, and allows limited searches of family trees posted by other subscribers. Their DNA service offers another way to locate relatives.

https://szukajwarchiwach.pl/ is the search engine for records in the Polish National Archives. It has an English version, but is tricky to navigate. Nevertheless, more and more records have been scanned and are available electronically. The site also provides information about resources only available at the archives themselves.

Polish National Archives (for a list of branches, see: https://www.archiwa.gov.pl/pl/o-nas/archiwa-pa%C5%84stwowe/archiwa-pa%C5%84stwowe). Vital records (birth, marriage, and death) are made available after 100 years. Those that are not digitized can be viewed at the various branches of the Polish National Archives throughout Poland. It is best to call or write before visiting to make sure the desired records are available. The days and hours the archives are open are posted on the website. It is best to arrive early in the day because sometimes it takes time for requested materials to be located, and requests are not accepted later in the day. Most archivists do not speak English, so having a Polish speaker to assist you is often necessary.

Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH): http://www.jhi.pl/en has an archive, as well as a genealogical division that can help get you started on your search for ancestors.

POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews has a resource center (http://www.polin.pl/en/resource-center) that includes a library, historical maps, and free access to a wide range of databases with records about Poland's Jews.

Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage (FODŻ): http://fodz.pl/?d=1&l=en has numerous projects restoring synagogues and cemeteries, as well as educational programs.