SOURCES FOR THE GENEALOGY OF BELORUSSIAN JEWS

by
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Every nation has its own national fond (collection) of "historical memory."

The documents constituting this "historical memory" form the history of Belarus from the fifteenth century to the early twentieth century. The National Historical Archives of Belarus was established on July 5, 1938 the town of Mogilev. Subsequently, the Mogilev Historical Archives was reorganized into the Central State Archives of Belarus (CSAB), where all archival materials of the Republic were stored. The archives preserved the documents initially held by court institutions of the Great Principality of Lithuania, *Rzeczpospolita* of Poland (after the merger of Belarus with the Russian empire) in the civil courts, archival magistrates, town halls, regional courts, private individuals, and also the Vilno Archives of Ancient Records and Vitebsk Archives of Ancient Records.

After 1917, documents of the Historical Archives were kept at the Central Archives of Belarus, the Vitebsk, Minsk and Mogilev Historical Archives and later in regional archives.

From 1992 until June 1995, the archives were a part of the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus. In accordance with the decision of the State Committee of Archives of the Republic of Belarus of June 12, 1995, the archives were reorganized as extracted the independent National Historical Archives of Belarus (NHAB). The Archives also moved to 55 Kropotkin Street in Minsk.

At present, the archives stores 3,091 fonds, more than one million files, most of which are unique monuments of national culture created during the fifteenth-twentieth centuries. These fonds include documents about the political, social-economical and cultural life of the Belorussian people. The oldest of these documents are record books of court institutions from the fifteenth-eighteenth centuries which are the most important resource for studying different aspects of the history of Belarus during the period of feudalism.
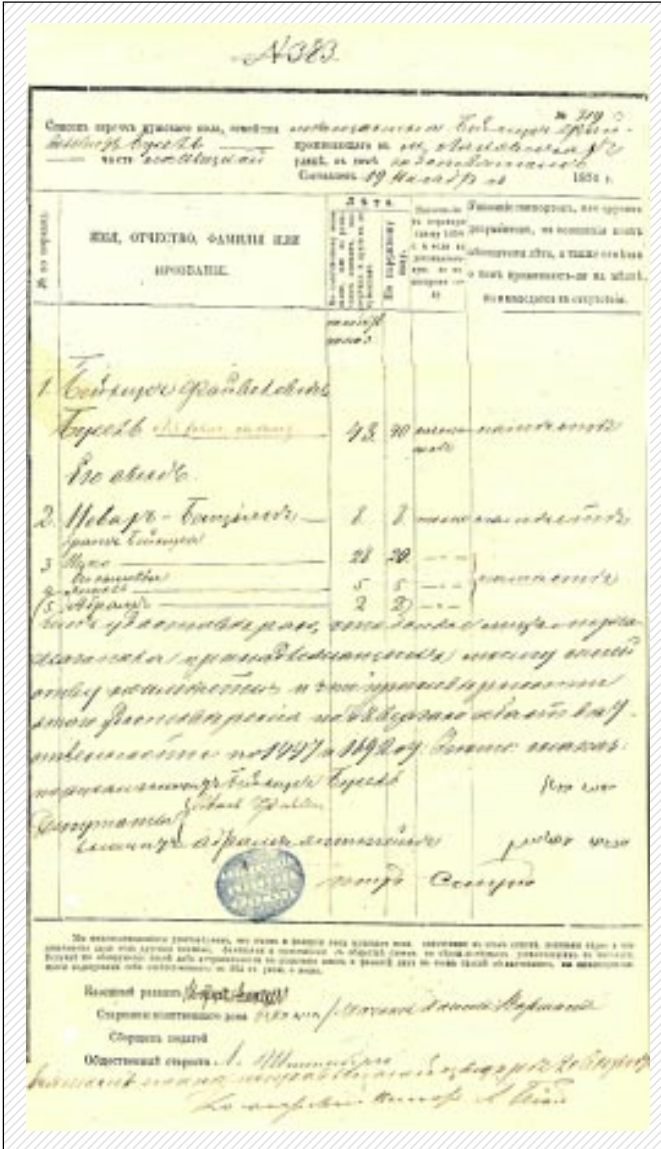
The archive fonds contain original parchment manuscripts from the fifteenth-seventeenth centuries, written in ancient Belorussian, ancient Polish and Latin languages.

Among the archival documents, one can find unique sources of private origin. These include family fonds of princes Radzivill, Drutsky-Lubetsky, Lubomir, Paskevich-Erivansky, Counts Pliater-Ziberg, Rumiantsev-Zadunaysky and others.

In the last decade, people have grown more interested in their past, partly because of the uniting of family relationships

Synagogue in Nowogrodek, pre–1939 (source: *Polska Akademia Naun Instytut Sztuki*)

List of Jewish Men in Lyakhovichi (Slutsk Uezd, Minsk Guberniya), 1874
Benis Faivelovich Busel (born 1834), his son, Nevach-Benzion (born 1866); Benis'
brother, Itsko (born 1850); and Itsko's sons, Yankel (born 1869) and Abram
born 1872). **Source:** National Archives of Belarus in Minsk, Fond 330, Opis 1, File 111

destroyed by the historical cataclysms of the twentieth century. More and more people from neighboring and far countries turn to the archives for genealogical information. This information is kept in the fonds of religious institutions, nobleman's deputy assemblies, treasury chambers, merchant's administrations, statistical committees and family fonds.

Genealogy-related requests submitted to the NHAB (National Historical Archives of Belarus) are an eloquent illustration of the growing interest in the past. Today, everyone is trying to learn: Who are we? Who are our ancestors, what was their station in life, how did they live? Genealogy (in Russian *rodoslovije*) — the systematic collection of information

on the origin, succession and kinship of clans and families — is responding to this and other questions related to our past.

The times are obviously dictating the necessity of researching Belorussian genealogy, including the genealogy of Belorussian Jews.

Accordingly, an effort is being made in the Archives under the program "Our Genealogy," which calls for building a nationwide database. Completion of this program will make it possible for every citizen to obtain definitive genealogical information regardless of class.

As for Jewish genealogy, we must note that the research is mainly being done with documents from the nineteenth/early twentieth centuries (up to 1917), from that period when Belarus became a part of the Russian Empire as a result of the three partitions of the Lithuanian-Polish union known as the *Rzeczpospolita* [Republic] (in 1772, 1793, and 1795) and when Russia's legislation began to extend onto its territory.

In that period, Belarus (within the borders of the present state) consisted of five guberniyas: Vileika, Vitebsk, Grodno, Minsk, and Mogilev. At the present time, then, genealogical sources for these regions are to be found as follows: for Vileika Guberniya, in the Lithuanian State Historical Archives; for Grodno Guberniya, in the NHAB in Grodno; and for Vitebsk, Minsk and Mogilev guberniyas, in the NHAB in Minsk.

In the *Rzeczpospolita*, Jews had no specific class status; they possessed autonomy. In the Russian Empire, however, at the end of the eighteenth century, the government categorized and standardized the estates. The Jews were accordingly assigned (throughout the first half of the nineteenth century) to the following estates: merchants, tradesmen, guild craftsmen, and Jewish farmers.

Under the 1804 Statute on the Jews, family names were assigned to them, since in the *Rzeczpospolita* the material (inventories and the like) containing genealogical information provided only the first name or also the father's first name (although, it must be noted that in [some of] the documents of the 1811 and 1816 censuses, Jews were still listed without last names).

The principal sources for researching the genealogy of Jews are as follows:

1. Birth records: rules for keeping them were established for the Jewish faith in 1835. Birth records of the Jews were kept in two languages: Russian and Hebrew. The entries were moreover set up alongside one another, with the Russian text on the left, on the back of the sheet, and the Hebrew on the right, on the front of the next sheet.

2. Census records or revision lists (*Reviskiy Skaskiy*). The NHAB has material of the following censuses: the 5th (1795), the 6th (1811), the 7th (1816), the 8th (1833–1834), the 9th (1850) and the 10th (1857–1858). The census was not taken in Russia after 1858. That is why the supplemental census in 1870 and the census of Jewish males in 1874 are the principal genealogical

sources for that period. The conduct of the reform in the early 1870s and implementation of the new statute and universal military service created new sources for genealogy in the period 1874–1917.

3. Family lists
4. Draft records.

An additional genealogical source consists of passport records for foreign travel which include the following information: last name, father's first name, place of residence, age, estate, makeup of the family and a notation about the departure abroad.

These foregoing materials represent only some of the sources for researching Jewish genealogy.

In addition to these materials, documents in the repositories of city, trade or guild administrations, Jewish communities, city assemblies, administrations and guberniya governments are sources for researching Jewish genealogy.

The volume of archival documents is so large that time must be budgeted in the fulfillment of research requests. It takes between one and three months to fulfill a request. Therefore, the NHAB are in the process of creating a database in order to speed up the fulfillment of research requests.

A beginning has already been made. The NHAB has concluded a contract with the Routes to Roots Foundation,Inc. (RTRF), represented in the USA by its president, Miriam Weiner. The agreement relates to the RTRF publication of the Consolidated Eastern European Archival Database to include a town-by-town listing of documents from Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, Moldova and Poland. I look forward to our continuing cooperation.

Gubernatorska Street in Minsk, c. 1915 (source: Miriam Weiner Archives)

Alla Kupriyanovna Golubovich graduated from the Belarussian National University with a degree in history. She is also a certified archivist. She has been an archivist for 26 years and in 1988, when genealogical research was permitted in Belarus, she joined this department and continues in this area to the present. Her articles and research papers have been published in various noted magazines and scholarly journals, which were subsequently used in related television programs and films. Her husband is a professor of economics. Her daughter and son-in-law are practicing psychiatrists. She is currently director of the National Historical Archives of Belarus in Minsk.

Synagogue in Minsk, c. 1920 (source: Miriam Weiner Archives)