The collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991 unleashed an archival revolution that inaugurated an unprecedented phase in Jewish genealogical research. Prior to its collapse, Communist rule meant that documents pertaining to national minorities such as the Jews were virtually inaccessible and, indeed, segregated in special storage (spetskhran) to avert use by nationalists and “ethnic conflicts.” Moreover, access to archival materials was almost exclusively restricted to participants in official exchanges, chiefly from the United States and Great Britain. Private citizens, whether Soviet or foreign, had virtually no right to use archival materials, even for private matters like family history.

Independence brought profound changes to the republics of the former Soviet Union, including the declassification of hitherto secret collections. That process encompassed not only classified repositories (such as the Ukrainian Communist Party Archive) but also materials pertaining to Jews, which were gradually transferred from special storage to the main collections. Moreover, many archivists who had once denigrated genealogical research as a “decadent bourgeois pursuit” now take an active interest in assisting individuals to locate family records. This shift in access and attitude has been extended not only to citizens but also to foreigners, including those without formal academic credentials and support. Although conditions and access vary kaleidoscopically (among archives and from time to time), what was once unthinkable is now truly feasible.

To be sure, researchers still face important challenges, especially in Ukraine. The hardships caused by Ukraine’s transition to a market economy have taken a significant toll on the archives and their capacity to service researchers. As Patricia Grimsted warns: “[With the] shortages of staff, lack of technical facilities, storage space limitations, and deteriorating physical condition of many archival repositories…worries abound regarding the adequate preservation of the Ukrainian archival heritage for future generations.” At a rudimentary practical level, the state’s fiscal crisis has meant drastic reductions in archival staff, working hours and duplication facilities—even the occasional unpredictable suspension of operations altogether. If political repression was the main obstacle to research in the past, the severe economic crisis poses the primary threat today.

Although Ukrainian archives are officially open to the public, researchers should anticipate various problems and take a few preparatory measures prior to a trip to Ukraine. First, it is essential to obtain an updated schedule of closings and holidays, especially for those taking short trips. For example, Ukrainian archives often reduce hours or close for staff vacations in the summer; in addition, reading rooms are closed at least once a month for sanitarnyi den’ (cleaning day). More recently, some archives have limited their hours in response to budget cuts and inability to pay staff salaries. Ideally, a local contact should call the pertinent archive for details; in some cases, a fax, e-mail or telephone call might be available to clarify these matters.

Second, it is recommended that one obtain an official letter of introduction, preferably from a Ukrainian institution or at least a sponsoring organization in the United States. Genealogists have found that letters from their mayor or congressperson (with an official stamp or seal) usually satisfy archival directors. Such letters, which should describe your background and the purpose of your visit, should be translated into Ukrainian (as required by the Central
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Kahal Records

Following the partitions of Poland, Empress Catherine II was confronted with the daunting task of extracting taxes from her new subjects. Rather than assign this complicated task to Russian bureaucrats, she elected to utilize the existing Jewish regional council (kahal), which had performed similar functions under Polish–Lithuanian rule. She, therefore, ordered that Jews enroll in their local kahal and that these records be used to assess and collect the poll tax. The kahal was also responsible for issuing passports for internal travel and thus regulating the geographic mobility of the Jewish population.

Kahal records that can be found in Ukrainian archives (dating back to the late eighteenth century) reveal several important details about family members. Whenever Jews were expelled or left a town, they not only had to apply for a passport but also for registration in another kahal. For example, a thick file about the expulsion of Jews from Kiev in 1828 included individual requests for inclusion in the Vasilkov kahal; however, the latter agreed to accept only those who could afford to pay the poll tax or who volunteered their sons for the conscription quota. Given the parental fears about forced conversion in the army and the

SIX COMMON TYPES OF REGISTRATION RECORDS

The Ukrainian and Moldovan archives hold six major types of registration records that constitute an excellent starting place for genealogical research. While this article will focus on documents from Ukraine, similar materials can be found in Moldova. These include: (1) kahal records; (2) poll-tax records; (3) metrical books; (4) social estate registration records; (5) family registers; and (6) recruitment lists. While the adage "God is in the heavens and the Tsar is far away" may have held true in Jewish daily life, it hardly corresponded to the intrusiveness of the state when it concerned registration. Behind this energetic interest was the state's overriding concern to ensure the regular collection of taxes and, after 1827, the military conscription of Jews.

Archival records reveal that enforcement of these laws was very vigorous in the Ukrainian provinces; authorities there were exceptionally vigilant in their prosecution of Jews (especially men) who failed to register. Ironically, what Ukrainian Jews of the nineteenth century viewed as "a bad plague" (especially those without registration papers) has proven highly advantageous for descendants searching for their roots.
The poll-tax category also entailed various other disabilities—conscription, liability to corporal punishment, restrictions on geographic mobility and travel, and exposure to other forms of discrimination. Thus, in contrast to the privileged groups (clergy, nobility, and civil and military servitors) exempt from this onerous duty, the poll-tax population had to bear this “stigma, conferred by birth” until it was finally abolished in 1883. Although the poll tax receded in relative importance as the state came to rely more on indirect taxes, it nevertheless remained a heavy burden. That was especially true for impoverished Jews who struggled to pay the double poll tax (imposed on Jews and various other groups). Significantly, the government used this tax to induce desired behavior—for example, by granting a tax exemption to persuade Jews to join agricultural colonies and serve as state rabbis.

Of the 10 poll-tax revisions, the fifth revision census (1794–1796) was the first to include the territories of partitioned Poland, and hence of interest to Jewish genealogists (subsequent revision lists were compiled in 1811, 1816, 1834, 1850 and 1858). The poll-tax record followed a standard form, with the male members of the household listed on the left-hand side and females on the right-hand side of the two-page census (see page 18). The left-hand section inquired about the ages of male family members at the last revision census and their current age, the absence of any individual from his primary residence and sometimes the current occupations. Female subjects also provided names, current ages and any “temporary absences” from their residence. Since dates of birth were not recorded, the reported ages must be treated with caution, particularly for records prior to 1835, when the Russian government began to enforce the registration of births more stringently. Until then, oral declarations served as the primary verification of age.

Poll-Tax Census (Reviziya)

The second type of registration was the poll-tax census (reviziya), based on documents called the revizskie skazki. Tsar Peter the Great first ordered a systemic head count of the male population in 1718; his purpose was to establish a direct capitation tax and put his government on a more secure, predictable financial footing. This system divided Russian society into two basic categories: the great mass of unprivileged “poll-tax population” (which later came to include the Jews) and the “non-poll-tax population,” exempt from the capitation tax. Inclusion in the poll-tax category also entailed various other disabilities—conscription, liability to corporal punishment, restrictions on geographic mobility and travel, and exposure to other forms of discrimination. Thus, in contrast to the privileged groups (clergy, nobility, and civil and military servitors) exempt from this onerous duty, the poll-tax population had to bear this “stigma, conferred by birth” until it was finally abolished in 1883. Although the poll tax receded in relative importance as the state came to rely more on indirect taxes, it nevertheless remained a heavy burden. That was especially true for impoverished Jews who struggled to pay the double poll tax (imposed on Jews and various other groups). Significantly, the government used this tax to induce desired behavior—for example, by granting a tax exemption to persuade Jews to join agricultural colonies and serve as state rabbis.

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However, knowledge of one’s age was at best an approximation; as one townsman confessed, “I have lived many years [but] how many years, I do not know.”

The revision record was compiled in two copies: one for the district treasury office, the other for the Provincial Office of the Treasury (Gubernskaia kazennaia palata), which, in turn, sent a summary of the data to the Senate and the Ministry of Finance in St. Petersburg. In most cases, the best-preserved and most easily accessible copy is found in the fond of the Provincial Office of the Treasury. For example, the revision censuses of the Zhitomir Jewish community are located in this collection (State Archive of Zhitomir Oblast, fond 118). For the towns and villages in Kiev Province, numerous records are also found in the State Archive of Kiev Oblast (fond 280). Some revizskie skazki include not only Jewish families but also co-residents from groups such as townspeople and peasants. As a result, one must often search general revision files to locate Jews included with other social groups. To be sure, some files contain only Jewish families—for example, the revision censuses of the Jewish communities of Vasilkov, Belaya Tserkov and Berdichev in Kiev Province. Such records are easier to locate because they included “evreiskii” (“Jewish”) in the title of the file. Revision records are also found under the rubric of podatnye spiski (poll-tax lists), organized by towns; the State Archive of Kiev Oblast, for example, contains 10 census files for the town of Fastov (fond 344).

In general, the revision censuses are valuable not only because they provide data on the structure of the household (e.g., the number of children and, sometimes, the occupation of individuals), but also because they indicate if an individual left the town. Hence, these files can also provide critical clues to help locate those who left their permanent place of residence. Finally, one must keep in mind that not all revision census records are entirely accurate and may include Jewish males from other families. As archival records indicate, it was not uncommon for the kahal to recruit a poor boy as a substitute for a wealthier family; thus the former’s name would appear with a different family, not with his own.

**Metrical Books (Metricheskie Knigi)**

In 1826, the Russian state extended the system of metrical books (the communal records of births, deaths, marriages, and divorces) to the Jews and made the state rabbi (better known as the rabbiner, in Yiddish) responsible for record-keeping. The state or crown rabbis were not regarded by their communities as authentic rabbis but as mere official registrars. As Sholom Aleichem once wrote, “To old-country Jews I don’t have to explain what a rabbi of the crown is. They know the breed.… He fills out birth certificates, officiates at circumcisions…. To take it for granted that among our people a rabbiner is well-loved—let’s not say any more.” Given the dearth of qualified Jewish “rabbits” for the task of recordkeeping in the early nineteenth century and the disincentives to register (taxation and conscription), it is hardly surprising that the early records were incomplete and unreliable. Such evasion and error, predictably, caught the attention of the government and impelled it to adopt a new strategy to ensure registration.

The government took the first step in 1835 when it issued published bound volumes with individual entry numbers to standardize recordkeeping and prevent ex post facto tampering. The new standard format made it all but impossible to “doctor” the records by ripping out (numbered!) pages or inserting retroactive entries. Moreover, each year the rabbi was required to deposit one copy of the metrical book with the provincial board (gubernskaia uprava), thereby making it possible to detect retroactive alterations and prevent future additions. To be sure, the inefficient and venal Russian administration admitted some errors. Thus, some Jews still neglected—or dared to ignore—the legal obligation to register; eventually, some requested their state rabbi to insert the information under a later date. Although most state rabbis were reluctant to accommodate such requests (the harsh penalties included fines, imprisonment and conscription), some—either out of compassion or greed—acquiesced. For example, five years after his daughter was born, a certain Gurvich in Odessa realized that he must register her birth. His local rabbi declined...
to amend the oversight but advised him to visit a so-called Rabbi Kagan, who had a reputation for “fixing” such problems. Much to the father’s surprise, the state rabbi recorded the birth in the metrical books of Varvarova (Kherson Province) without any hesitation. For genealogists, the lesson is clear: Given such opportunities, especially in the new areas of settlement like Odessa, Kherson and Ekaterinoslav, relatives (in particular, females) may have registered in a different town under a wrong date—if they bothered to register at all.

To ensure the accurate identification of subjects, the tsarist state insisted on the consistent spelling and transliteration of names. Inconsistencies and errors such as the omission of letters were cause for punishment. That included a strict ban—an extension of the general policy to prevent fraud and deception—an “any corrections in Jewish metrical books, with the exception of errors made by the clerk [the state rabbi].” But the burden of demonstrating that “exception” rested on the victim, and the resolution of such cases was subject to the caprice of local officials. For example, when the provincial board of Kiev fined Sheina Beila Zatulovskaya 300 rubles in 1912 because her son failed to report for military service, she could hardly have been more astonished: her son had died almost 10 years earlier. A brief inquiry revealed the cause of the misunderstanding; the state rabbi had recorded the death of “Moise Khazan” instead of “Moi she Khazan.” And once made, the mistake proved impossible to rectify. Despite the mother’s repeated attempts to confirm his death (e.g., pictures of his tombstone and family poll-tax records), the provincial board stubbornly refused to rescind the fine, evidently convinced that Moishe was not dead or, at least, determined to punish his kin and community for failing to keep proper records.

As this case indicates, the government used the metrical books to compile essential information for taxation and recruitment. For researchers, however, this impulse meant that the data invited verification and included valuable personal data. As Peter Czap, Jr., once observed about analogous records for the Russian Orthodox Church, they “reflect identifiable individuals whose lives can be traced from beginning to end.” The standard form for the registration of birth, for example, included details about the child’s sex, the mohel who performed the circumcision, the date and place of birth, and the names and social status of the parents and the infant. Marital registers recorded the ages and names of the bride and groom, the name of the rabbi who performed the ceremony, the date of marriage, obligations of the marital contract (usually the amount of the ketubah) and the signatures of two witnesses. The entries for divorce included the names and ages of the spouses, the name of the rabbi who supervised the divorce or halitsah (levirate divorce), the “reason” for the dissolution of the marriage and the date of the final divorce. The form for deaths provided the name and age of the deceased, burial site (e.g., the town and sometimes the cemetery), and the date and presumed cause of death. For genealogists, details about the place of burial can be very valuable, especially if the cemetery is still intact.

Most state rabbis provided only the required information and, often, resorted to stereotypical phrases. Perhaps the best examples are descriptions such as “mutual hatred” or “mutual agreement” as grounds for divorce, or “illness” as the cause of death in every single record. There were exceptions, however. For example, in the 1870s, the state rabbi of Kharkov conscientiously recorded more specific causes for marital dissolution (e.g., infidelity, childlessness, conversion or “extreme poverty”). He even noted when the wife received the get (bill of divorce) through an official courier, not the husband.

How reliable are these sources? For the earlier period at least, the “forgeable” forms and disincentives unquestionably encouraged distortion and evasion. Those who married off their children prior to the minimum age (set by the state in 1830 as 16 for girls and 18 for boys) entered an older age to avoid punishment. To all this must be added the sheer cost of registration (one to five rubles). Increasingly, however, Jews had strong incentives to comply and file accurate data, precisely because the metrical books could prove social origins, marital status and the identity of legal heirs. For example, Russian gymnasiuims (high schools) required students to present a copy of a birth certificate (e.g., a copy from the metrical book) in order to receive a diploma, state courts demanded written documentation of death before executing a will and the military required a marriage certificate for Jewish widows to claim the army pensions of their deceased husbands. In one
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poignant case involving Lipa Froima Goldberg, a widow, the state denied her application for a military pension on the grounds that the couple had failed to register their marriage in a metrical book.

Various recently published guides provide a list of metrical books in the archives of the former Soviet Union. To be sure, they do not always include the phrase metricheskie knigi (metrical books) in the descriptions. In Dmitrii A. Elyashevich’s guide, for example, archival collections include metrical books when they refer to: (1) a Jewish ravvinat (rabbinate), such as the Kotostyshevskii ravvinat in the Central State Historical Archive of Ukraine, Kiev (fond 663 with 203 files dating from 1840 to 1916); (2) a Jewish obshchestvo (society or community); and (3) an obshchina (commune). Some fondy described as synagogue or kahal records may also include metrical books.

For researchers whose families lived in very small shtetlach, records were usually kept by the state rabbi of the closest town. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were bitter debates among Jews in small towns whether to maintain their own state rabbi, whose salary was paid from the tax on kosher meat (known as the korobochnyi sbor), or to unite into a single rabbinical district (ravvinskii uchastok) with a neighboring town, thereby sharing the cost of supporting the unpopular registrar. But the latter option could be highly inconvenient. The Jews of Bukov (Kiev Province), for instance, requested permission to elect their own official because it was very difficult to persuade the state rabbi—who lived more than 20 miles away—to perform the duties of registration. Hence, archive guides sometimes overlook small towns; that is especially likely if the town was combined with another for registration. Thus, it is sometimes worthwhile to locate the closest town with extant metrical books.

Social Estate Registration Records

According to the Statute of 1804, the Jews were to register under one of four social categories: (1) “agriculturalists” (zemledeltsy); (2) manufacturers and artisans; (3) merchants (kuptsy); and (4) petty townspeople (meshchane). The latter was a catch-all term to encompass those outside the three more specific status categories. After 1832, Jews (like other subjects) who had rendered exceptional service could be inscribed in the privileged status group of “honorary citizen” (pochetnyi grazhdanin), who enjoyed a host of special rights, including exemption from the poll tax and conscription.

Registration served both to identify taxpayers and to assign them to a specific town and administrative jurisdiction. Given the critical importance of registration, the state imposed severe consequences for evasion or deception. In the words of the law: “Jews who cannot present a written document in standard legal form, certifying their membership in a class, will be regarded as vagrants and will be treated according to the full severity of the law.” In the case of a Jewish woman, the law automatically assigned her to the social status of her father and, after marriage, to that of her husband. In the event of divorce, she retained the status of her former husband. When a Jew planned to move to another town, his local town council had to confirm that he had paid all outstanding taxes and dues. Only then was the district police administration able to authorize his departure and make the necessary insertions into his internal passport.

Although the law did not specify precisely how one was to register in a social estate, such registration was based in principle on the poll-tax revisions. More difficult was the problem of those who had changed their status. For example, one case in the Kiev State-City Archive, which dragged on for two years (1875–1877), involved a certain “A. Berenshtain” who sought to register as a new “honorary citizen” in Kiev, but he encountered long delays as state bureaucrats sought to verify his new status and wealth. It is also worthwhile to look at files in the meshchanskiia uprava (townsmen’s administrative board) collections, which have lists of registered townspeople. For instance, the State Archive of Kiev Oblast holds 46 such fondy, which cover many of the major towns in Kiev Province, such as Belaya Tserkov (fond 948) and Fastov (fond 344).
Family Registers (Posemeinyi Spisok)

The fifth category of registration documents was the family register (posemeinyi spisok). State laws required that the male head of each household enter the same name that he used in the poll-tax census for the family register and supplementary "alphabetical register." Each record included the individual's social status (e.g., merchant or townsman), name, age, poll-tax registration number, place of permanent residence, primary occupation, current locus of residence, and finally a notation on the kosher-meat tax that paid the state rabbi's salary.

Recruitment Lists

The final type of registration record was the recruitment list for each town. Like the family register, this record usually excluded women (although there were a few exceptions) and drew upon the previous poll-tax census. From left to right, the standard form included: (1) the registration numbers of each household for the current list, the last poll-tax census and previous recruitment list; (2) the names of male members of the household, including sons and brothers; and, finally, (3) the ages at the last poll-tax census, as well as the current ages.

CREATIVE SOURCES FOR JEWISH GENEALOGY

Unlike registration records, which provide minimal biographical data, invaluable information can be gleaned from archival materials such as court, educational and administrative records, which offer rich detail about the daily lives of family members and their communities. However, this type of advanced research requires intensive preliminary study of family recollections and oral histories. Thus, prior to my research trip to Ukraine in 1994, Professor Marvin Fox of blessed memory asked me to be alert for materials about his family in Korostyshev. Without his "map" of family stories, the search would have been fruitless. He had told me, for instance, about the election of the state rabbi (a dentist by the name of Aron Ratner) in his parents' hometown. My search led to a file on the "election of the Korostyshev state rabbi" (located in the State Archive of Kiev Oblast), which included signatures of his grandfather and uncle, who had participated in this contentious election, as well as the names of other members of their bet midrash (house of study). Extraordinary material about his family emerged from these files—from their role in town politics to their position on the kosher-meat tax that paid the state rabbi's salary.

Court Records

Court records are an important, if difficult, source for learning about Jewish life in Ukraine and finding relatives who failed to register. Following the judicial reforms of 1864, Jews turned increasingly to the secular state courts rather than the traditional bet din (rabbinical court) to resolve their disputes, especially over financial matters. The latter gradually lost the capacity to enforce its rulings, forcing litigants to appeal to state courts for justice. As a result, state authorities came to prevail, even on private, family matters: traditional use of the herem (excommunication) or flogging to force Jews to comply with rabbinical injunctions gave way to fines, imprisonment or military conscription. In the end, the rabbi had but one means at their disposal—"persuasion and exhortation." The erosion of the bet din's authority also stemmed from the decline in popular veneration of rabbinic authority and the fear of communal ostracism among some Jews. Moreover, the judicial reforms of 1864 made state courts not only accessible but affordable even for ordinary Jews. To be sure, the penchant for litigation did not guarantee justice. Indeed, as the courts complained, the profusion of litigation encouraged widespread corruption; despite attempts to combat this, bribery was still rampant and successful.

What types of issues brought Jews into the state courts? First, in some matters, only state courts had jurisdiction. That was most notable in the difficult question of registration. Some Jews—despite all the government’s injunctions on registration—nevertheless sought to procrastinate or to evade this obligation altogether. That noncompliance was particularly true of Jewish girls, whose parents had little incentive to pay for the registration of births, especially in view of the high rates of infant and child mortality. However, parents soon discovered that the state treated unregistered offspring as “illegitimate children”—a status fraught with severe restrictions and discrimination. In response, some parents attempted to undo the damage caused by their negligence, whether intentional or accidental. The problem was that the state rabbi could not amend the metrical books from previous years, since the originals were preserved by local civil authorities. Nor was "adoption" an easy alternative: legal adoption required the personal consent of the tsar himself. A Senate ruling in 1900 sought to facilitate the correction of records by permitting Jews to file suit in district court to alter their status, but this procedure was neither cheap nor guaranteed.

The profusion of Jewish names (e.g., Finkelshtein, Zilberman, Groisman, Shpilberg) in the archival registers demonstrates how widespread the problem had become. In the State Archive of Zhitomir Oblast, a typical petition to
legitimize a birth reads as follows: “On June 10, 1886, I was born in Zhitomir to my parents Shamai Froimovich and Rakhel Josevna Libavich, who were legally married in August 1874 in the same town, but my parents completely forgot to record my birth in the metrical book ... and without a copy of the metrical registration of my birth, I cannot receive a certificate that I have completed [my studies] at the Kopropovich gymnasium in Berdichev.” The costs for such an oversight could be astronomical, especially in contested cases where the litigant required a lawyer, the compilation of numerous documents, and—as so often was reported—a generous flow of bribes. In 1908, for example, Khava Abramovna Drakh discovered that her name had not been recorded in the metrical book of births for 1862. To correct the error, she hired a lawyer to demonstrate that her birth was indeed legitimate. She later claimed that the total legal costs amounted to 500 rubles—several times the average annual income of the lower social classes. These files often include the marriage certificate of parents or oral depositions (transcribed by the court investigator into Russian) to support the case.

Second, Jews turned to the state civil courts with suits to confirm or contest last wills and testaments of deceased family members. Not even the fear of interacting with the state could intimidate an individual who was intent on claiming a bequest. However, such litigation could sometimes boomerang, especially in the case of plaintiffs who proved to be unregistered and could not produce valid documentation of their identity. Such suits typically involved widows seeking legal recognition of their claims to control their husbands’ estates. These cases include a copy of the last testament (usually translated into Russian), which stipulated how the assets must be divided. Interestingly, many if not most records provided for a monetary bequest to a local synagogue, prayer house or charitable institution. Other family members also filed suits to localize their claim to inheritance, as in the case involving Saul–Aron and David Gershkovich Radinov, who claimed that their grandfather had left them 10 percent of his immovable property (viz., a plot of land in Zhitomir). This file included a copy of the grandfather’s will, the marriage certificate of their parents (Gersh Moshkovich and Rakhelia Khelimer) and their birth certificates—all to prove their claim and identity. In other cases, family members waged legal battles to contest the validity of a will or to ask the court to adjudicate the distribution of assets. Such legal challenges sometimes prevailed; thus, in a lawsuit involving Abus Bronshtein and his relatives, the state court referred the case back to the local beit din with an order that it review the inheritance and order a division of property.

The third type of civil suits—accusations of misdemeanors—contains fascinating detail about the lives of ordinary Jews who struggled to eke out a living in small towns. Another example from the State Archive of Zhitomir Oblast is a complaint from a domestic servant against an employer who failed to pay the promised wages. Brukha Gintsburg, who lived on Malaya Berdichevskaya Ulitsa (Little Berdichev Street) in Zhitomir, informed the court: “I worked for 10 months as a cook for Dveira Model at 50 rubles per year according to our contract. On June 6, Dveira Model dismissed me from work and did not pay my salary for half a year [25 rubles]; thus I am bringing this suit against her.” The cook cited the names of witnesses to support her but apparently did not prevail—the file breaks off without a resolution. Some suits describe the daily routines and tasks of an ordinary domestic servant. In the case of Khaya Sura Shtatland, resident of Khlebnaya Ulitsa (Bread Street), the plaintiff argued that her 13-year-old daughter had worked for the Maizlish family, sewing linens, and that her contract stipulated a wage of 20 rubles per year. The plaintiff claimed that the Maizlishes still owed her daughter 7.50 rubles for work she performed during the winter months. Her employers denied these allegations, claiming that they had paid the girl early so that she could buy a pair of shoes. They also accused her of failing to perform her duties during the second half of the year.

The garment industry seemed especially prone to litigation in state courts. Some consumers lodged suits against tailors for failing to complete the work on time or for ruining their
clothing. Conflicts between competitors also ended up in court. For instance, Hersh Mermilstein, a tailor, lodged a complaint against Khaya Laiman, a seamstress, on the grounds that she had opened her own store without first obtaining permission from the state artisan board.

Minor civil cases involving Jewish traders and small business owners revolved around such matters as fraudulent promissory notes, unpaid debts, improper sales, and property claims (e.g., the case of Tykman vs. Gersheingorn over the use of a forest under lesseeship). The oblast archives hold thousands upon thousands of such cases, especially in towns with a large Jewish population, such as Zhitomir and Odessa. These records—although serendipitous and difficult to search—can contain a gold mine of documents and data.

Finally, the criminal courts prosecuted Jews for a variety of offenses ranging from petty crime (e.g., theft, false scales and the production and sale of moonshine) to more serious crimes like homicide and rape. Some of these “crimes” would hardly fit in any modern classification but were specific to the Russian Empire—such as vagrancy or lack of valid documents, an offense regarded as important and treated severely by the tsarist government. Another offense was alleged self-mutilation (chlenovreditelstvo), prosecuted by the state as an attempt to avoid military conscription. This desperate act was not uncommon among religious Jews, who lived in dread of forced conversion in the tsarist military. If the long list of files in the Zhitomir criminal court is any indicator, such cases were anything but rare. In 1880, for example, the state brought a case against Iosi Bronshten from the village of Kodin (Volynia Province), alleging that he had willfully injured his eye to escape the draft. His neighbors sought to rebut that accusation and testified that, in fact, his eye had been deformed since birth. One witness, Moshko Dubov, claimed that as long as he remembered, the accused did not have a healthy right eye. Notwithstanding such depositions, Iosi Bronshtein was found guilty and sentenced to prison.

### Educational Records

During the reign of Tsar Nicholas I, the government and maskilim (enlightened Jews) sought to propagate secular education among the Jewish population. Initially, these plans met with strong resistance. As one observer put it, “The greatest indignation against the proposed reforms of the schools was unanimously manifested. The leading members of the beit ha-midrash threatened with banishment and excommunication anyone who dared support such a frivolous scheme…” Gradually, however, the state schools gained “acceptance” both among poor families (seeking to shield their sons from conscription) and enlightened families (desiring to broaden economic and social opportunities for their children). The Universal Military Conscription Act (1874) provided a significant additional incentive by reducing the term of military service in direct proportion to one’s education. Institutions for women’s secondary education also expanded dramatically beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century; by 1914, the women’s gymnasiums had approximately 40,805 Jewish students. Moreover, trade and artisan schools for both men and women gained popularity among the Jews and showed a similar pattern of geometric growth.

The records of educational institutions preserve valuable information about family members who attended a state or private school. The richness of such files is evident from the records of Jewish students in the Moscow and Odessa women’s gymnasiums: (1) applications from prospective students, providing basic biographical data—name, place and date of birth, and names and social status of parents; (2) a short essay of the student’s intentions and plans; and (3) a small photograph (not present in all files). Most archival collections also include the by-laws of the school and information about the curriculum, which can shed light on the goals of the instructors. If the school records are well-preserved, the collection may also contain student grades, disciplinary files, and the service records of faculty (including Jewish teachers). A sample report card of Leya Fuksman from Korostyshew lists the courses she took (such as history, science, calligraphy, drawing and other classes) as well as her final marks.

Where can one find these records? First see Chapter 12 of this book. Also, some of the private Jewish schools are listed...
in Dmitrii Elyashevich’s guide (see p. 561), but by no means is his list complete. One must also look in the collection of each educational district or the Chancellery of the Administrator of . . . School District (Kantseliariya popechiteliia . . . uchebnoogo okruga). In principle, one should search for educational records in the oblast archive closest to the town where the family members resided.

**Administrative Records**

Administrative records relevant to Jewish genealogical research consist—first and foremost—of documents filed by Jews at various government offices. These consist of petitions to the general-governor about matters that could not be satisfactorily resolved by a local institution and records of the state rabbinate elections.

The general-governor received letters from Jews petitioning for a revision of metrical books. These letters address mistakes made by the state rabbi in the spelling of names, birth dates and the omission of entries. Unfortunately, such Jewish files are scattered throughout various administrative fondy and may take time to find; still, they can be valuable for locating “missing relatives.” For instance, the State Archive of Kiev Oblast holds numerous revision letters, including a 72-page file about the mistakes made by the state rabbi of Kiev in 1899, along with petitions from Jews demanding corrections in their registrations.

The archival collections of the general-governor also contain important files on personal matters that the beit din, state courts, or police authorities had been unable to resolve. An example from the State Archive of Kiev Oblast concerns Vera Portugalov of Poltava Province, who appealed to the general-governor of Kiev for assistance in locating her husband: “Four months ago, my husband, Avraham Portugalov, deserted me and my children in the town of Lubny, and we have not received any word of his location or money to support myself and my children.” She had heard rumors that her husband was living on a street in Kiev called Malaya Vasilkovskaya, without a passport, and asked that the police assist in locating him and bring him to accountability. Other Jewish women petitioned the general-governor of Kiev for assistance and intercession in a broad variety of cases involving kidnapped sons in the tsarist army, innocent husbands incarcerated in prison, abuse by police and a plethora of other personal matters.

Finally, the records of the state rabbinate also provide useful information about religious organizations and politics in Ukrainian towns. As a rule, the male members of each prayer house and synagogue (the franchise normally being restricted to males over age 25) elected 10 delegates, who in turn cast votes to choose the state rabbi. Sholom Aleichem, who once served as the state rabbi of Kiev, described the procedures as follows: “Every three years, a proclamation is sent to us: ‘Na osnovanii predpisaniya …’ [‘On the basis of the order . . .’]. Or, as we would say: Your Lord, the Governor, orders you to come together in the synagogue, poor little Jews, and pick out a rabbiner for yourself…. Then the campaign begins. Candidates, hot discussions, brandy, maybe even a bribe or two…. That was life!”

Researchers who are fortunate enough to find their relatives on these lists will not only learn what prayer house they belonged to (i.e., prayer houses of the butchers, tailors, shoemakers or the Hasidic kloiz of a certain rebbe), but also the names of other families with whom they may have been closely associated. Moreover, these records indicate the prices for registration reached after extensive negotiations between the new state rabbi and town residents.

As this overview of archival materials suggests, the opportunities for genealogical research in Ukraine are immense and exciting. Numerous registration records, even for small towns, have remained intact despite the destructive legacy of war on Ukrainian soil. In addition, researchers should not overlook the rich store of materials in collections bequeathed by the state courts, schools and various administrative institutions. The latter files, moreover, are not mere lists of names but contain a wealth of detail that can greatly complement family memories and help reconstruct life and relations in the Ukrainian shtetl.

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![Diploma from a school in Rovno, dated 1933, issued to Chaia-Frejda Finkielsztejn, born in 1914](image)

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INTRODUCTION

ChaeRan Y. Freeze is an assistant professor of East European Jewish History at Brandeis University and an associate at the International Research Institute on Jewish Women. Since 1993, she has worked in the central, provincial and city archives in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, Zhitomir, Lvov, Vilnius and Kaunas. Professor Freeze is currently preparing for publication a book on the history of Jewish marriages and divorces in Tsarist Russia.

Key Russian Terms for Genealogical Research

- archival notations:
  - fond, fondy or fonds (collection, collections; record group[s])
  - opis, opisi (inventory, inventories, subdivisions of the collection)
  - delo, dela (file, files)
- list, listy (list, lists)
- administrative or geographic divisions in Imperial Russia:
  - guberniya (province); uezd (district); volost (township) or gorod (town)
- administrative or geographic divisions in the Soviet Union and in Russia:
  - oblast (province or district); raion (region); gorod (town)
- duma (a representative council in Russia; Russian legislature)
- Evreï (Jew)
- evreiskaia sinagoga (Jewish synagogue)
- gubernskaya kazennaya palata (provincial or guberniya Office of the Treasury)
- metricheskie knigi (metrical books/registers of births, deaths, marriages and divorces)
- molitvennaya doma (prayer house)
- podatnye spiski (poll-tax lists)
- posemeinyi spisok (family register)
- putevoditeli (published archival guides to fonds and collections)
- rasxodnye sledstviia (tax census)
- soslovie (social estate)
- meshchanstvo (petty townpeople)
- kupechnostvo (merchant)
- remeslennik (artisan, often included with the meshchanstvo)
- pochetnoe grazhinstvo (honorary citizen)
- zemledelci (agriculturists)

ZAGS Archive or Department of ZAGS (Otdel Zapisi Aktov Grazhdanskogo Sostoyaniya): where vital records are registered, usually located in the local town hall or mayor's office

Notes


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Editor's Note: The following words appear on the subscription form of the Kyiv Post: "Those interested may well ask: how do you spell the name of this city? Kiev or Kyiv? The issue of how to spell the name of this city is not fully resolved, with linguists, historians, traditionalists, Ukrainian nationalists, Russophiles, the Ukrainian Diaspora, legalists and many other parties weighing in. At present in Ukraine, both spellings are in use; however, the national government has stated, in legislation, its preference for Kyiv."