

Documenting the Fate of the Jews of Ostrow Mazowiecka

by Stanley Diamond

When he lectures on how to document the fate of Jews in the Holocaust, Peter Lande, long-time volunteer at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), uses the names Shmuel and Sarah to represent our families. What happened to my Shmuels and Sarahs who lived in our ancestral towns as late as the 1920s and 1930s? Did they perish in the Shoah? Did they emigrate just before World War II? Did they escape to Russia during that window of opportunity and spend years in the far reaches of Siberia? Did they somehow survive and go through the system of displaced persons camps? Did they end up in Argentina or some other country where they were cut off from the main flow of post-Holocaust research? Did they manage to get to Israel and then change their names?

If you are like me, with grandparents who emigrated from Europe before 1900 and who left behind siblings

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and/or hundreds of cousins, the first questions you may need to answer is “Who were my Shmuel and Sarah? What were their names?” Depending on where your family lived, identifying the individual members of a specific family can be almost impossible or, in some cases, remarkably simple.

Because of my genetic research and the good fortune that all the vital records of Ostrow Mazowiecka, Poland, survived, I was able to document virtually all the Shmuels and Sarahs in my paternal grandparents’ families. On the other hand, the apparent lack of records and the difficulty in accessing the 1897 census for Janow Sokolski, Poland, in the Grodno Archives, has prevented me from documenting my maternal grandparents’ family that stayed behind.

One year ago, I did get a little lucky. Starting with an empty 1954 envelope with a Haifa address, and then commissioning the research skills of Batya Unterschatz, the former director of the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives in Jerusalem, I was connected to the family of the sole survivor of my mother’s father’s family. Because of the trauma of losing all his family, he barely talked about them, not even to his wife and children. So, to this day, the members of that branch of my family who were murdered in the Shoah remain simply Shmuels and Sarahs—and with no names, there is no family for whom to say Kaddish, no one to commemorate with a Page of Testimony¹ at Yad Vashem.

Ostrow Mazowiecka Research Family

Does it have to be this way? While the Ostrow Mazowiecka Research Family (OMRF)² has been especially fortunate—and diligent—in its access to materials to help us document the fate of our Holocaust-era families, methodical research of resources available for other towns and areas can also yield meaningful results. In a Spring 1998 AVOTAYNU article, “Shtetl-Based Jewish Genealogical Research,” OMRF was used to illustrate the importance of shtetl-based Jewish genealogical research. The authors outlined the initial steps in researching available material, starting with the indexing of the town’s records in the LDS (Mormon) Family History Library films. But the article’s prime emphasis was on how our combined efforts led to indexing of other sources of information as the years passed and how that put us in the position to document the fate of the Jewish citizens of Ostrow Mazowiecka.

Yizkor Book: Only a Beginning

One of our earliest initiatives taught us how little we really knew about our families in the years surrounding the Holocaust. In the summer of 1995, OMRF member Haim Sidor transliterated from Hebrew the entire three-thousand-name necrology from the Ostrow Mazowiecka yizkor (memorial) book, and Michael Richman converted the surnames to the Polish spelling so we could match the families with the records in Poland. While we were proud of what we had done, we were also left with an emptiness and questions we could not answer.

Three thousand names! But the 1921 Polish census reported 6,812 Jews in the town, and some other pre-war estimates put the Jewish population at 12,000. What happened to the other 9,000 Jews of Ostrow Mazowiecka? Could we ever find out? Could we know who among them were our Shmuels and Sarahs? What was their fate?

A decade ago, OMRF member Judy Baston remembers that looking at a list of Polish Jews from the 1920s or 1930s “felt like looking at a yizkor book necrology. I simply assumed that all of the people from Ostrow named in the 1936–37 Polish telephone directory or 1929 Polish business directory had been killed in the Shoah. But a number of sources since then have shown me that many did survive.”

We discovered several important new sources. By contacting Hillary Chrust, a man who had been active in post-war relief for the Jews of the town, OMRF researcher Judie Goldstein was able to obtain a copy of a September 1946 list entitled, “Ostrower Holocaust Survivors Returned to Poland.” From this document, we learned about 345 families, totaling 947 individuals, including the nicknames they used in Ostrow and their relatives or

other contacts in the U.S. A book issued by Ostrover *landslayt* (people originally from Ostrow) in 1979 to raise funds for a wing at the Tel Hashomer Hospital in Israel memorialized family members who had been murdered in the Shoah. It also listed the names of the donors, names we could then count among those who had not perished. For each of our members, this was new information on which to build our individual research; for the group, it was an opportunity to add to our overall knowledge of the town's Jewish families and extend our creative efforts and networking.

As the years passed, we each did our own research. Some of us ordered Pages of Testimony by surname from Yad Vashem for the families we knew had lived in Ostrow, and some of us tried to track the submitters of these pages who were also family members. In some cases, we used information from the Pages of Testimony to augment a yizkor book listing that merely listed "two children" after the mother's and father's names. A few of us looked at the difficult-to-research microfilms of a partial collection of the International Tracing Service (ITS)³ index cards at Yad Vashem and then wrote to ITS in Arolsen, Germany, and waited years for a reply. We wrote to the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw⁴ and learned about survivors with our family names from our shtetl or nearby shtetls. Many of us traveled to Poland to do additional research, but there was never enough time, and often we found resistance to our efforts at detailed research at some of the *Urząd Stanu Cywilnego* (USC—civil records) offices. At the end of it all, we knew there was more information on our families—if we only could access it.

Pages of Testimony Project

An important turning point was the recent computerization of the Pages of Testimony at Yad Vashem. At the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy in Salt Lake City in 2000, I proposed a special trial project to Hall of Names Director Alex Abraham. With access to all the Pages that showed Ostrow Mazowiecka as the home or birthplace of an individual, the OMRF could then integrate this information with the three-thousand-name yizkor book necrology, determine who had not been memorialized and create Pages of Testimony for them. Even though Abraham emphasized to me that the search features of the computerization of Pages of Testimony were still undergoing technical refinement, he agreed to provide such a list as a test of the system. Indeed, when the list arrived, several OMRF researchers saw that a few Ostroveres for whom they had previously obtained Pages of Testimony were not on the list, and the researchers are preparing a supplementary list to submit to Yad Vashem as an additional test of their system.

After we received the list from Yad Vashem, Judie Goldstein created an integrated spreadsheet. Combining both sources, we now could document 3,673 victims of the Shoah from our town. By tagging and re-sorting the new spreadsheet, we were able to determine quickly that

there were no Pages of Testimony for more than one-quarter of the names in the Ostrow Mazowiecka yizkor book. Within weeks, Judie filed 64 additional Pages of Testimony for various members of her family. Other researchers have done the same.

Many of those individuals who submitted the Pages of Testimony are the survivors we have been seeking to document and locate. Our next initiative will be to order the more than six hundred Pages of Testimony and cull them for the names of the informants and their relationships. We hope this will yield hundreds of the missing names.

Ostrow Mazowiecka Residents in 1939

The Pages of Testimony and the yizkor book necrology now account for 3,673 individuals. But what of the others? Who are they and how do we determine their fate? To understand how we will be able to pinpoint who they are, let's go back six years.

In 1995, OMRF co-founders Stanley Diamond and Michael Richman set out to index all the Jewish vital records of Ostrow Mazowiecka for Diamond's Beta-Thalassemia genetic research project.⁵ With the cooperation and encouragement of Professor Dr. Jerszy Skowronek, then director of the Polish State Archives, and Bogumil Brzoska, the former mayor of Ostrow Mazowiecka, and with the support of a group of fellow researchers, the work was completed by the end of that year. In 1999, the OMRF contracted with the Polish State Archives to microfilm the 24-volume Ostrow Mazowiecka Books of Residents (*Księga stalej ludnoscie miasta Ostrow Mazowiecka*) for Ostrow Mazowiecka (variously called *Miasto*, *Ksiengo Mieszkocow* or *Kziegi Ludnosci*). These records are a house-by-house census of the families in the town. Preliminary research of these huge volumes indicated that births had never been registered in the civil records for many who were living in the town. In addition, these books documented families that had emigrated or moved to other towns, as well as those that moved into Ostrow Mazowiecka. The films were digitized and volunteers Judie Goldstein and Michael Richman spent months extracting and computerizing the information for all the Jewish residents from about 1890 to 1929. In a number of cases, this database also enabled us to add the names of wives and children where the yizkor book only referred to "wife and (number of) children."

While the database of Ostrow Mazowiecka residents has continued to grow, another important piece of the puzzle has yet to be researched fully. These are the later (post-1929) series of Books of Residents that will confirm the names of virtually everyone living in the town at the outbreak of World War II.

Fate of the Residents of Ostrow Mazowiecka

The massacre of 600 Jewish Ostroveres on November 11, 1939, not only has been well documented, but German army photographs⁶ survive to underscore the horrors

of that day. To drive the point home, a copy of the original German poster announcing the fate of the murdered residents lays in a drawer in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The dates of death in some Pages of Testimony tell us that some of these victims have been memorialized. But when an entire family was murdered, was anyone left to record what happened to them? We may never know.

We know the fate of many; family interviews, articles in the yizkor book and extensive research have told us about the hundreds who escaped to Russia and others who survived under the most remarkable circumstances.

We hope that within the coming year the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw will complete indexing the nearly 300,000 individuals registered in the survivor cards created by Jews returning to Poland after the Nazis were expelled. The Ostroverers will be documented and integrated into our database.

We have also indexed 1,220 graves in 15 Ostrover sections in cemeteries in New York, New Jersey and Chicago. A number of these graves are of individuals who left Ostrow Mazowiecka just before World War II or who survived in Europe and emigrated after the war. Where possible, information about these individuals will be matched with the town's birth and marriage records to ensure that their fate is not incorrectly documented in Ostrow Mazowiecka Holocaust records.

Future Plans

So where does that leave us? What else can we do to find the Ostrover Shmuels and Sarahs? A number of additional sources can be researched on a piecemeal basis. For example, some smaller lists in Yad Vashem and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Records of the United Restitution Organization in Frankfurt document many people who survived and received some compensation, but information from these records is only available for specific individuals. It is not possible to request a search of this resource for all persons from a specific town. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has 194,000 pages of captured German documents with transport lists, work details and other similar categories. Some day when these records are indexed, we may be able to learn the fate of some others. On the other hand, we share the awful awareness that the end of the road for many Ostroverers was the nearby Treblinka extermination camp (21 km SSE), for which no records were kept.

What other source, then, can help us complete the picture for our families from Ostrow Mazowiecka? There is only one—the more than 47 million files of the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Arolsen, Germany. Why the ITS? Because the ITS is:

- The largest source of Holocaust-related documentation
- The most important source of information on millions of survivors—where they went and the names and locations of families overseas

- A major source of information on millions of victims
- The most important source of names of individuals and families who wrote to the ITS in search of their families. While the number of new inquiries received is not published, in its 1999 Annual Report, ITS stated that more than 250,000 responses were given that year.

For the OMRF and any group or individual seeking to document what happened to their Shmuels and Sarahs the ITS is, as Sallyann Amdur Sack (AVOTAYNU Vol. XVI, No. 4, Winter 2000) and Peter Lande (AVOTAYNU Vol. XVII, No. 2, Summer 2001) described it, the “mother lode” of Holocaust information.

Our work will not be complete until we have tapped all the sources, and we know that we can never hope to detail as much as possible about the fate of the Jews of Ostrow Mazowiecka until we are able to research the ITS files thoroughly. Only then will we be able to say that we know what happened to our Shumels and Sarahs.

Notes

1. Page of Testimony. Records of those known to have died in the Resistance or who perished in the Holocaust. On file at Yad Vashem Hall of Names, Jerusalem. Usually the Pages have been placed on file by someone who knew the individuals identified in them, most often a relative.

2. Ostrow Mazowiecka Research Family. A group of genealogical researchers with an interest in the Jewish families of that Polish town.

3. International Tracing Service (ITS). The repository of more than 47 million files with information about victims and survivors of the Holocaust. Located at Arolsen, Germany. See “International Tracing Service: Mother Lode of Holocaust Information,” Avotaynu, Winter 2000.

4. Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Repository for numerous collections on the Jewish presence in Poland from the 17th century until today. Address: Archiwum Zydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego; ul. Tlomacki 3/5; 00-090 Warszawa, Poland.

5. Beta-Thalassemia genetic research project. An international effort to locate carriers of Diamond's family's novel mutation of the beta-thalassemia genetic trait. See “Probable Identity by Descent and Discovery of Familial Relationships by Means of a Rare Beta-Thalassemia Haplotype” *Human Mutation* 9:86–87 (1997).

6. U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives. Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes. 483.92 Ostrow Mazowiecka, Poland.

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