

Shtetl-Based Jewish Genealogical Research

by Judy R. Baston, Stanley M. Diamond and Michael B. Richman

One day before the summer seminar on Jewish genealogy opened in Washington in 1995, we convened the first meeting of the Ostrow Mazowiecka Research Family (OMRF), a group whose purpose is to bring together people with an interest in the Jewish families and history of that Polish town and the towns and villages in its immediate vicinity. The group met again at the Boston seminar in 1996 and expects to do so in Los Angeles this summer. By cooperating in our research, we have made remarkable strides in documenting our individual and common families' intertwined history. We think that lessons learned from our experience may be valuable to others. From an original small number of dedicated researchers, we now number more than 50 individuals from all over the world.

Shtetl-based cooperative research, while not a new phenomenon, has become more practical and, thus, more popular because of technology, the research tools that technology has made possible, and the marvels of the Internet for communication and dissemination of information.

It seems like only yesterday that organizing handwritten or typewritten notes and making charts consumed most of a genealogist's time. Each piece of new information often significantly affected what had been written or drawn; sometimes it meant an almost fresh start. Long distance calls were relatively expensive, and personal meetings not always practical; instead, we waited anxiously each day for the postman to arrive. Locating people with specific surnames was a chore. Long hours spent at the library leafing through telephone books from all over the United States and many foreign cities were not unusual.

If you could not find someone with your name, locating *landsleit* (townspeople) from your families' earlier places of residence was even more difficult. Then finding someone—or anyone—among them with a serious interest in family history research was even more problematic. There were few resources to act as a common denominator and, even if your town had a *yizkor* (memorial) book, finding translators was not easy.

The availability of the LDS (Mormon) microfilms of Jewish vital records of Poland, Germany, and Hungary was a key factor in opening our eyes to the possibilities of tracing our ancestors from the "Old Country." While this led to in-depth study by individual researchers, often we were duplicating the work of others. The need to reach out and share was dramatic and obvious.

Not so long ago, many researchers found it impossible to benefit from the microfilms of Jewish vital records, because they still had not been able to pin down the actual place their family lived, or—to complicate matters even further—they did not know the original spelling of the surnames.



Michael Richman and Stanley Diamond examining an Ostrow Mazowiecka tenant register at the civil registration office in Ostrow Mazowiecka.

One key solution to this problem was the development of the Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex System and the publication of several milestone research aids. *Where Once We Walked* was the first, and it unlocked the mystery of many town names that had been muddled by awkward transliterations, the use of Yiddish versions, or just plain bad handwriting. Later, the publication of Alexander Beider's *Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire* and *Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Kingdom of Poland* helped us identify the most likely original spellings, as well as possible towns and areas where surnames had appeared in various records, thus providing clues to where our families may have lived.

Family Finding Becomes Easier

While "Family Finder" columns in the early Jewish genealogical newsletters provided the initial opportunity to unite researchers with common interests, the primary focus was on families rather than towns. Introduction in 1982 of the Jewish Genealogical Family Finder (JGFF), produced an explosion of opportunities to bring together researchers with shared interests, in particular family names and towns. JGFF (now the JewishGen Family Finder) probably was the single most important factor

leading to and sustaining the growth of shtetl-based research (i.e., research focused on a single town or region of interest). For the first time, a list of names and their genealogical researchers was paired with towns of origin.

In 1990, the first Special Interest Group (SIG) was formed. Its goal was to be a gathering point for those who could trace their family roots to a specific geographical area. That group was the Suwalk-Lomza SIG; its *Landsmen* journal not only brought together those with a common interest, but it provided a platform from which to share individual efforts that could benefit fellow researchers.

A family finder listing in the first edition of *Landsmen* brought together two of the authors, Stanley M. Diamond and Michael B. Richman, in November 1993 and ultimately led to the creation of the OMRF. Judy Baston's initial connection to Ostrow Mazowiecka was merely the burial of a great-granduncle in the Ostrover Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. Among records that were indexed and published in *Landsmen*, she found a record for the marriage of her great-great-grandparents. This, in turn, led to the discovery of dozens of other ancestral connections in the town.

Above all, the catalyst that optimized our use of all these wonderful tools was the rapid development of the JewishGen Discussion Group on the Internet. The subsequent and interrelated explosion in the use of e-mail in the Jewish genealogical world totally changed the nature of cooperative research. The combination meant that it not only has become possible to advertise your interest or ask for help from a broad audience, but the nearly instant replies give responses a new sense of immediacy.

Technology has profoundly affected even the short history of the OMRF. In 1993, we used postal services, telephone and fax. Soon, almost everyone had e-mail, and a research suggestion, a family note, or a hint and/or observation to one individual could be shared with 20

others, or more—all with a click of a button.

If the JewishGen Discussion Group was the catalyst, the World Wide Web, the JewishGen website, and the introduction of searchable databases enabled us to achieve research goals that could never have been imagined just a few short years earlier. It opened the door to personal and shtetl-based websites (typically linked to the JewishGen's Shtetlinks page), which for some became meeting places in cyberspace. Our own website, <<http://members.aol.com/gmpalgon/ostrow.html>>, while still in a fledgling stage, has brought new researchers into the family.

Value of Shtetl-Based Research

Numerous benefits have come from coordinating research activities, sharing costs, and "talking" to one another. Cooperation has allowed the OMRF to assemble an extensive collection of information about Jewish life in Ostrow Mazowiecka. We have indexed vital records, survivors' lists, business directory listings, and Holocaust memorial book necrologies; unearthed books and articles; and tracked down unpublished manuscripts, photographs, family recollections, and the personal experiences of individual researchers.

From these names on paper, researchers have made innumerable connections between families thought to have disappeared in the Holocaust and survivors throughout the world. They have found previously unknown third, fourth, and fifth cousins and provided for them information about their ancestors that has brought tears to their eyes.

For Stanley Diamond, it was the discovery that his grandmother had left three younger brothers behind when she emigrated in 1892; it led him to sit in the shop of an elderly blacksmith in nearby Poreba, listening to the story of how his father's first cousin, Moszek Widelic, was murdered by German soldiers as he sought to deliver food to the Goworowo ghetto. The blacksmith Szimanski had been Moszek's apprentice, and, as a parting gesture to Stanley, he reached below a counter and showed Stanley the tools sold to him by the grieving widow before she was consumed by the Nazi machine.

Most exciting was how researchers discovered relationships. As each new document is discovered, translated or indexed, and as new records emerge, we discover just how many of us are related directly or through marriages made in the 19th or even 18th century. Now plans are underway to create a giant tree with all our families included.

One of us, Michael Richman, extracted from the LDS films and documented the records for almost 200 Jewish families in Ostrow Mazowiecka. This individual effort provided valuable information for every serious researcher in the OMRF. He also noted and recorded all towns mentioned in the records. This list of about 50 towns and villages was an eye-opener. Just as airlines establish "hubs" and "spokes," this list made it clear that Ostrow

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Mazowiecka was a hub, and its families had ties in every direction, from Plock in the west to Ciechanowiec in the east, from Lomza in the north down to Warsaw in the south. A study of the surnames and towns being researched by OMRF members (available on our website) reveals that individual researchers have ties to an average of five towns in the area. [See Rhode article this issue—Ed.] In one case, a member is searching in 15 nearby places.

Ostrow Mazowiecka researchers have known for years that our families did not remain in one place and that there were often many branches in nearby towns and villages; focusing on one town was obviously limiting. The knowledge and experience gained in working with the LDS microfilms and the many documents gathered for Ostrow Mazowiecka research has spurred OMRF members to become involved in and cooperate in other areas, in the research of nearby shtetls and in much broader efforts. It started with dialogue among a few researchers stemming from town names listed in the OMRF family finder. This led to the formation of groups for Zareby Koscielne, Wyszokow, Goworowo, and other nearby towns.

The benefits of cooperation are many. Individuals in our group have all enjoyed remarkable personal successes as our broad-based group of shtetl friends study records and notice names, events, trends, idiosyncrasies, etc. When we have reached a dead end, we have not only had a knowledgeable co-researcher to turn to, but someone with a matching interest on many levels. When there has been a special need, volunteers have stepped forward. Judie Ostroff Goldstein, the OMRF's most active indexer, actually went back to school to hone up her Yiddish primarily so she could translate articles from the Ostrow Yizkor Book. Our group's accomplishments can provide a guide to others; better still, we hope they will inspire the isolated or tentative researchers to realize what they can achieve by working together.

Within the past four years, the OMRF has:

- Indexed all Jewish birth, marriage, and death records in Ostrow Mazowiecka registers using LDS microfilms (1808 to 1865) and index pages provided by the Polish State Archives for Stanley Diamond's beta-thalassemia genetic research project (1866-97).
- Indexed 1826-65 Jewish birth, marriage, and death records of Brok township, an area just south and south-east of Ostrow Mazowiecka.
- Indexed more than 1,000 listings for Ostrow Mazowiecka in the 1928 Polish business directory.
- Indexed all 3,000 memorialized individuals in the yizkor book for the town and converted the names to Polish spellings to enable us to match vital records of

those who perished.

- Indexed all burials in all Ostrover sections of cemeteries in New York.
- Approached the Waldheim Cemetery in Chicago with a view to indexing the three Ostrover sections.
- Submitted hundreds of Pages of Testimony to Yad Vashem.
- Translated more than half the yizkor book, starting with the list of articles and contributors—and from the list of authors, additional family connections were made.
- Acquired photographs from the yizkor book, family collections and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

A map of the town has enabled researchers to understand that, for example, an address on Krolowy Bony Street was only one block from an address on Pultuska Street, so apparently disparate listings might well be for the same family. Some researchers made important discoveries through matching house numbers noted in various record sources. They often provided the initial hint of a relationship between families or indicated that

a married daughter had not moved away but remained in the same house with her husband, under her husband's name.

Each addition to the OMRF has the potential for unexpected surprises; recently a new member from England revealed that her father had written hundreds of pages of unpublished Yiddish-language personal recollections and stories about the town. Others, during trips to Ostrow

Mazowiecka, have interviewed the mayor, the head of the town's historical society, and a number of its older citizens. These meetings, as well as dialogue with school principals, the local librarian, newspaper publisher, and museum director, all have the long-term goal of providing historical information on Jewish life for the people of the town and future generations of students. We want to document everything as part of our ongoing efforts to build the broadest picture of the town's Jewish life, something that is almost totally unknown to its citizens today.

While relatively little has been found about landsmanshaftn organized by former residents of Ostrow Mazowiecka, we continue to search for records in private or archived collections. Indeed, Judie Ostroff Goldstein, one of OMRF's most active members, was able to find records relating to Ostrow through a friendship she developed with an elderly survivor of the town, underscoring the importance of extending efforts beyond the community of genealogists whenever possible.

If there is one area of frustration for all Ostrow researchers, it is the total absence of visible gravestones in the Jewish cemeteries of the town. The old cemetery is now an empty parking lot, often used as fairgrounds. A

"By doing research as a group, costs have been kept to a reasonable level for everyone."

newer cemetery on the outskirts has become a forest.

Funding

Where costs have been incurred—largely for research and related charges in Poland—funds have come from contributions and research fees from group members and their relatives. By doing research as a group, costs have been kept to a reasonable level for everyone. New members are urged to make their own donations, if they are in a position to do so, so that they may feel comfortable about the equal access they have to the databases and the many vital records already extracted.

When asked, for this article, "Why do you think we have enjoyed such success, such camaraderie, such a joy of sharing?" Goldstein suggested, "The group has a good number of serious researchers who are also steeped in *yiddishkeit*, in Jewish heritage and history. One thing is certain—the level of cooperation between researchers is incredible; we always seem to be in touch, helping each other in any way we can, and genuinely sharing in each of our successes." Despite all the connections made through e-mail, face-to-face meetings also have played an important role in promoting the level of contact and sharing.

We believe that the ultimate challenge of shtetl-based cooperation is the creation of an easily accessible data-

base that combines all the basic information acquired for every Jewish resident of the town, whether the sources be vital records, tenant registers, yizkor book necrologies, cemetery records, or names from individual family research.

Members of the landsmanshaftn of yesterday were trying to preserve the Old World friendships, customs, traditions, religious feelings and practices that they knew, and looked to one another for support in doing so. Our modern groups are concerned with learning about and documenting these very things which we never knew and, thereby, in some way bringing back this life that is in danger of being lost forever.

Judy R. Baston, who has been researching her Polish and Lithuanian family histories for the last decade, is involved with the Jewish Community Library and is librarian of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society.

Stanley M. Diamond is president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Montreal, coordinator of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland, and genealogist for the team doing research related to a mutation of the beta-thalassemia trait.

Michael B. Richman, a lawyer in the Washington, DC, area, is a frequent contributor to Landsman, the publication of the Suwalk-Lomza SIG, and is a member of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington.

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How to Organize a Shtetl Co-op

Find One Another. Search the JewishGen Family Finder (JGFF) on the Internet at <http://www.jewishgen.org/jgff> for other researchers with connections to your town or nearby villages. Send them a message inviting them to join together to discover and share information about the town. Post a message about your efforts on JewishGen to find those who have not listed themselves in the JGFF. If a Special Interest Group (SIG) covers that area, send your message to their newsletters or discussion groups as well. Search the JewishGen Discussion Group Archives using the name of the town as a keyword. If the town has a number of spellings, add the word "like" to your keyword search to find all variant spellings. To reach beyond active genealogical researchers, check the printed register of Holocaust survivors (available at most Holocaust education centers, as well as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC), which lists survivors by town of origin. Write a letter or press release to the editors of local Jewish newspapers or national journals.

Take a Preliminary Inventory. In your initial message, ask fellow researchers what they know about your town and what materials they have, such as old photographs or letters; a *yizkor* (memorial) book; anniversary books; a map or inventory of burials in *landmanshaftn* (town societies) cemetery plots; vital records for researchers' (or other) families from the town; census lists; pages from business directories listing town residents; survivor lists; articles about the history of the town; a map that shows the town and surroundings and/or photographs from a recent visit. Suggest that researchers check with their family members or *landsleit* (individuals from the same town) for items they may not have. Do not forget to list what you have; remember that it is cooperative research. Check the town listing in *Where Once We Walked* (Avotaynu, 1991), particularly the list of references that have information about the town.

Make Assignments. Based on where people live, their level of interest, commitment, and available time, make some assignments. A researcher in the Washington, DC, area, for example, could obtain large-scale maps for the town and the surrounding area from the U.S. Library of Congress. Researchers in cities whose cemeteries have plots for *landmanshaftn* from that town or neighboring villages could seek maps of the graves or make their own inventories of the burials. A researcher in Israel could check at Yad Vashem for items connected to the town in their archives or for Pages of Testimony with researchers' surnames of interest from the town. You may find living relatives who can help provide new connections and sources of information. A researcher in the New York area could check at YIVO Institute. Ask group members to investigate any article in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* or to compile the names of towns-

people from books cited in Berl Kagan's *Hebrew Subscription Lists*. Check the index to *AVOTAYNU* at <http://www.avotaynu.com> for the town. Also check the CD-ROM version of *AVOTAYNU*, which may be searched for any reference to the town in one of the journal's back issues.

Tasks may be apportioned by a researcher's skills. Translations will always be needed. See who can read Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Hungarian, Polish, etc. Who is comfortable with creating a database? Who can put up a website? Little tasks are often the key to involving the non-genealogists in your family. As in every family, a "research family" also needs one person who will "nudge" a bit from time to time, keep the family relationship going, and keep tabs on the research.

Reach Out to Neighbors. We frequently begin research believing that our families came from one particular town, only to find that they lived in a network of surrounding villages. To find researchers who may have a secondary interest in your town, but an important connection nevertheless, invite the participation of researchers from surrounding villages. You can use *WOWW Companion* (Teaneck, N.J.: Avotaynu, 1995) or the JewishGen ShtetlSeeker <http://www.jewishgen.org/ShtetlSeeker> to create a list of towns near yours. Post a message on the JewishGen and SIG discussion groups. If you have a list of surnames from your town, perhaps from the *yizkor* book, a business directory, or even a miniature family finder created by your research group, you can also post that in a message or on a website. Researchers from nearby villages who never thought they had a connection with your town may be surprised to see their distinctive surname on a list, and they will become involved with your group.

Set Goals. Available resources vary considerably; goals must flow from an assessment of what is available. If no vital records for the town are available either in the LDS microfilm collection or in any European archive, but a *yizkor* book exists, then the first goal of the group might be to translate the list of authors and the necrology. If vital records exist in abundance, the group should first index the records either for an existing database like that of JRI-Poland <http://www1.jewishgen.org/jri-pl> or for a database that can be searched on the shtetl group's website. Extracting as many records as possible could be the next step. Some groups photograph and index cemeteries in their ancestral towns, help reclaim the cemetery ground or perhaps erect a monument on the site. Others translate articles from the towns' *yizkor* books. Some groups have established home pages connected to ShtetlLinks on JewishGen; others have e-mail discussion groups. Still others have printed newsletters.