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The how-to guide to tracing your ancestors

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# Eastern European Research Made Easier!

**Lisa A. Alzo discusses seven strategies to help you trace your East European ancestors**

BOUNDARY CHANGES, SWITCHES in administrative control, and unfamiliar languages can often make research in countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine difficult, but there are ways to get past the hurdles. Thanks to geographic tools, research helps, and many records now being placed online, it's possible to make progress tracking your elusive East European ancestors, something that would have seemed impossible not that long ago. This article will discuss seven strategies for successfully tracing your ancestors in the countries that once made up the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

## 1. Look for Kin

The two most important pieces of information you need to be successful with your searches in Eastern Europe are the immigrant's original name and hometown. In general, your family members are your best bet — especially if they are the immigrant, or if they remember their parents or grandparents mentioning a particular town, village or general locality. More importantly, perhaps they even have documents (baptismal certificates, passports, military papers, letters, etc.) that contain this information. If you haven't done so, you should talk with your oldest living relatives (and record the interview whenever possible) to learn all you can about the family. If the older generation has already passed away, start with your contemporaries (your cousins) and ask if anyone has any photographs or documents stashed away in their attic or basement. Last, but certainly not least, reach out via the internet, using social media to find potential relatives. Start a family website, write a blog (see [Geneabloggers.com](http://Geneabloggers.com), [www.geneabloggers.com](http://www.geneabloggers.com), [www.geneabloggers.com](http://www.geneabloggers.com)),

for a list of nearly 2,000 family history blogs); sign up for Facebook, [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com); LinkedIn, [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com); and Twitter, [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com); to search for surnames in your family tree. Consider posting your family tree to sites such as Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com); Geni.com, [www.geni.com](http://www.geni.com); MyHer-

itage, [www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com); WikiTree, [www.wikitree.com](http://www.wikitree.com); or other similar sites (see back issues of *Internet Genealogy* for suggestions).

to success with foreign record searches. Start searching for those birth, marriage, and death certificates, cemetery census, immigration, military, naturalization, and other records, obituaries, newspaper articles, etc. Many US and Canadian records are available online (some for free, others via fee-based subscription services).



*Failing to reach out to your relatives may prevent you from locating key information or documents such as the passport shown above, which belonged to the author's grandmother. The author used this document to obtain her grandmother's immigration passenger list many years before this information was available in online databases.*

itage, [www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com); WikiTree, [www.wikitree.com](http://www.wikitree.com); or other similar sites (see back issues of *Internet Genealogy* for suggestions).

## 2. Get Those North American Records First!

Most beginning genealogists are so eager to cross the pond to learn more about the previous generations that they miss the important clues in North American records that will make pinpointing the ancestral town or village and lead

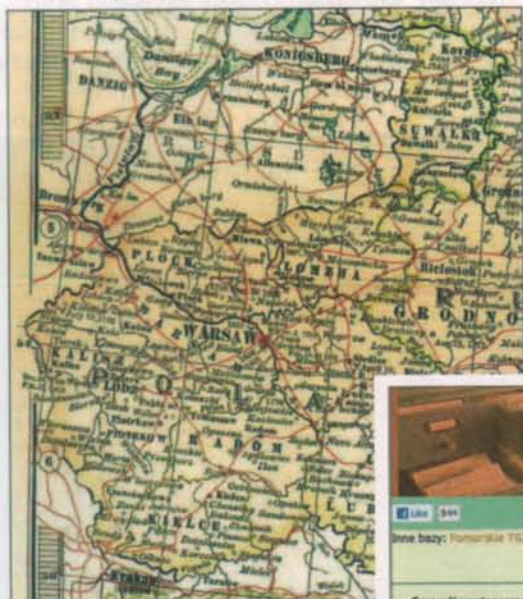
Use Joe Beine's Research Guides, [www.researchguides.net](http://www.researchguides.net), to help get you started. Plan to take research trips to the places your ancestors lived once they arrived in North America, to use microfilm, or correspond by e-mail/snail mail to obtain records that have not been digitized and made available online.

## 3. Get Familiar with Family-Search.

If there's one website you should be bookmarking, it is [www.family](http://www.family)

Polish Provinces 1902

From Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedic Atlas 1902, Scale: 1:5,128,200 or one inch equals 80.9 miles



Above: This map, showing Polish Provinces 1902, is just one of many great maps of Eastern Europe you can access for free from the Federation of East European Family History Societies (FEEFHS) Map Library at [www.feeffhs.org/maplibrary.html](http://www.feeffhs.org/maplibrary.html). Right: Main screen for the online database Geneteka — a Polish language website that houses church records from the various territories within Poland that have been indexed. The site is currently available only in Polish. For an in-depth look at this site, read more on Al's Polish-American Genealogy Blog, <http://tinyurl.com/3bfmxm7>.

FamilySearch Center, [www.familysearch.org/locations](http://www.familysearch.org/locations) — part of a network of 4,500 facilities located worldwide. In addition, use the FamilySearch Wiki, <http://wiki.familysearch.org>, as the place to learn about the countries you're interested in and what resources are available from FamilySearch, and elsewhere.

many historical map collections you can use to overlay with Google. In addition, take some time to explore the Federation of East European Family History Societies (FEEFHS) Map Library, [www.feeffhs.org/maplibrary.html](http://www.feeffhs.org/maplibrary.html), for historical maps of the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires, and other areas of Eastern Europe. You may also want to consider picking up a copy of the *Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Eastern Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, \$21.95 USD), on [www.amazon.com/Palgrave-Concise-](http://www.amazon.com/Palgrave-Concise-)

Tereny	Parafie	Rejestry	Wpisy
kujawsko-pomorskie	90	196	297.570
lubelskie	70	128	247.776
łódzkie	110	217	490.804
świętokrzyskie	34	46	79.601
mazowieckie	195	461	1.402.020
warszawskie	22	45	362.606
opolskie	7	7	2.129
podkarpackie	5	7	9.813
podlaskie	20	40	93.076
pomorskie	85	188	999.606
śląskie	16	28	43.379
świętokrzyskie	49	115	503.854
warmińsko-mazurskie	1	3	2.198
wielkopolskie	84	140	235.595
zachodniopomorskie	1	1	128
ukraina	52	134	37.897
białoruś	15	20	5.622
litwa	6	9	9.235
rosja	2	3	121
<b>Razem</b>	<b>864</b>	<b>1780</b>	<b>5.522.190</b>

search.org. This site of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is bringing records from the Family History Library online for users to access free of charge. Included in their worldwide digitization and indexing projects are records from many countries in Central and Eastern Europe: including Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Keep checking back as new records are added all the time. You can also use the site to search the Family History Library Catalog for microfilms and other materials you can access either in person during a visit to the main library in Salt Lake City, Utah, or order (for a small fee) to view at your nearest

4. Use Geographical Tools.

Your success in tracking down great-grandpa's birthplace will depend on your use of various geographic tools — maps, atlases and gazetteers to find the correct location. Keep in mind, both borders and place names may have changed (sometimes multiple times) over the years, so you'll want to consult both historical and modern day maps. Study geography (use historical maps, atlases, and gazetteers). There are plenty of excellent resources available both online and in print. You can use Google Earth, <http://earth.google.com>, to get a bird's eye view of many locations, and there are

*Historical-EasternEurope/dp/0312239858*. The Family History Library has a large collection of maps, atlases and gazetteers available in print, and on microfiche or microfilm. Search the FHL catalog using "gazetteer" as a subject or keyword, or do a place search for the country and then gazetteer. Consult the FamilySearch Wiki for the country and look for the link to gazetteers (e.g., for Slovakia, I would go to [https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Slovakia\\_Gazetteers](https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Slovakia_Gazetteers)).

5. Utilize Archival Websites.

To learn more about archives all over the world, consult Reposito-

## Research

ries of Primary sources, [www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other-Repositories.html](http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other-Repositories.html) — a listing of over 5,000 websites describing holdings of manuscripts, archives, rare books, historical photographs, and other primary sources available to researchers. In addition, some archives and repositories in Eastern European countries are bringing records from various collections online. Some offer free access to databases with registration, others may require a fee. A few websites to check out are: Czech Regional Archives in Brno, Moravia (site is in Czech): [www.actapublica.eu](http://www.actapublica.eu); Geneteka (Polish Church records indexing project. Note: site is only in Polish), [www.geneteka.genealogizy.pl](http://www.geneteka.genealogizy.pl); The Estonian Historical Archives, [www.eha.ee/english/english.htm](http://www.eha.ee/english/english.htm); and The State Archives of Latvia, [www.arhivi.lv/index.php?&1374](http://www.arhivi.lv/index.php?&1374). Since we're not even close to having all (or even many) records from Eastern Europe available online, you will still need to either write to the archives, or plan a visit to them to research in person. FamilySearch has a few Letter Writing Guides available (Czech and Slovak, Polish, German) under its "Research Helps" section, <http://tinyurl.com/3m8ndqz>. In addition, for additional tips, consult the website for the Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI), [www.cgsi.org/research/intro](http://www.cgsi.org/research/intro).

### 6. Learn the Lingo.

Once you dive into foreign records, you may be surprised to learn that they are not written in



Find research guidance on East European countries on the FamilySearch Wiki, <http://wiki.familysearch.org>. This screenshot shows the Portal page for Slovakia.

English, but rather in any number of languages, including German, Hungarian, Latin, Russian, Slovak, among others. Bypass foreign-language barriers by using translation aids to read and interpret records. Find resources online such as Google Translate, <http://translate.google.com>; Church Record Translations (John Jaso), [www.bmi.net/jjaso/index.html](http://www.bmi.net/jjaso/index.html) — a free resource that offers examples on how to translate birth, marriage, and death records from Hungarian, Latin, or Slovak languages; and Word lists from FamilySearch, <http://tinyurl.com/66604gj>.

### 7. Go with the Pros

Don't be afraid to consult with professionals. In the long run, it could possibly save you both time and money to seek the services of a professional researcher based in your ancestral homeland to get what you can't, since they are familiar with the languages and the archival systems. Get recommendations from fellow genealogists or consult sites, such as the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), [www.apgen.org/directory](http://www.apgen.org/directory); Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG), [www.bcgcertification.org](http://www.bcgcertification.org); Cyndi's List, [www.cyndislist.com/professionals/hiring](http://www.cyndislist.com/professionals/hiring), or the Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI) Website, [www.cgsi.org/research/professionals](http://www.cgsi.org/research/professionals).

Tracking down your family in Eastern Europe is no longer the impossible task it once was some 10 or 20 years ago. It takes persistence and patience, but you can be successful if you know where to look for the information, and what tools and connections to use. With more and more Internet resources, better access to key records, and the ability to quickly and easily connect with a large network of fellow researchers across the globe, getting back to Grandma's place of origin just got a whole lot easier.

FC

Interested in taking an online course, Research: Eastern European Ancestors, conducted by Lisa Alzo? The National Institute for



Genealogical Studies offers the course as part of its comprehensive line of online Genealogical studies. Smartphone and tablet users can scan the QR code at left to visit the National Institute for Genealogical Studies information page for the course. Or visit, <http://tinyurl.com/3wadqju>, to view the same page.

Author, lecturer, and instructor, Lisa A. Alzo has been tracking her East European ancestors for over 20 years. She is a frequent contributor to Family Chronicle and Internet Genealogy. Smartphone and tablet users can scan the QR code at right to watch a free presentation by Lisa Alzo on finding your elusive East European ancestors, or by visiting her website at [www.lisaalzo.com](http://www.lisaalzo.com).

