

# 10 Ways to Jumpstart Your Eastern European Research

Lisa A. Alzo, M.F.A.

[lisa@lisaalzo.com](mailto:lisa@lisaalzo.com)

Curious about your East European roots but don't know where to begin? This session will show you how to "jumpstart your genealogy!" Learn the basics and how to investigate your family's history using both traditional and online sources. Learn which records to tap into to identify your ancestral village, how history impacts genealogical research, and ways to utilize the Family History Library. Tips for contacting possible relatives and writing to foreign archives, as well as strategies for overcoming the most common pitfalls and problems will also be discussed.

1. **Talk to your family.** When it comes to talking family history with living relatives, there's no time like the present! Record their stories. Sort through that box of pictures and ask who they can identify. Also, don't forget to ask if anyone knows about a family bible, passports, copies of military service records, other documents held by someone in the family. These documents genealogical goldmines when you're looking to identify an immigrant ancestor's name and hometown—the two most critical pieces of information you need to successfully research across the ocean.
2. **Plant your family tree online.** Sharing your family online increases your chances of finding East European cousins and/or having them find you. Sites such as Ancestry.com, Geni, MyHeritage, and WikiTree let you start your family tree right online, or enable you to upload an existing GEDCOM file. With online family trees, you also have the option to receive notifications when your tree matches someone else's or if someone is trying to contact you.
3. **Map it out.** Finding the name of your ancestral town or village is just the first step in tracing your roots back to the old country. For the most part, just knowing that an ancestor came from Austria or Hungary won't help you. And even knowing that an ancestor came from Budapest, Kiev, or Prague, may still not be enough. In most foreign countries, the majority of record sources were kept on a local (town or parish) level. Therefore, you'll need to know an exact town or village. But, many times, (especially in U.S. sources), immigrants would list a large city as their place of birth simply because it was a more familiar point of reference. You'll also need to know how boundary changes might have affected your family's migration and have a working knowledge of both historical and current geography to know where to look for records. You will the need to locate is location both today and during the time period when your ancestor lived there. During your quest, maps, atlases, and gazetteers will be your best friends. Also, most cities, and even smaller towns or villages, have their own web sites. Try a Google search for town/village name (e.g. "Milpos Slovakia"); add a province or county name, or try advanced search to be more or less specific as needed. **[Tip: If the website does not have an English interface, if you use the Google Chrome Browser you will be asked if you want Google to translate the page into English.]** To pinpoint modern day localities, try Google Earth. Be sure to click the "Images" to narrow in on possible photographs, and other online search tools. . To get more specific, consult gazetteers—

geographical dictionaries listing all the towns in a particular country that tell you about political jurisdictions (provinces, counties, districts), how many residents practiced various religions and where the inhabitants went to church. The Family History Library (FHL) catalog has an extensive collection of gazetteers in print and on microfilm.

4. **Document your work.** When you receive notifications of potential matches for your online tree, or if Ancestry's shaky leaf leads to a record hint, these leads or suggestions need to be analyzed and considered in context to determine if they really pertain to your person (remember the shaky leaves at Ancestry provide hints to only a small percentage of their most popular databases). There will likely be more records for your family members that you will find. It's important to document where you've found your information. Consult the Evidence Explained website (see Websites list) for help with proper source citation.
5. **Utilize FamilySearch.** Before you spend time and money trying to locate records in a foreign archive, surf on over to FamilySearch. Browse or search its large (and ever-growing) collection of digitized records from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, and other countries. Simply, click on the "Continental Europe" link on the FamilySearch main page and then on the left-hand side, you'll a listing of collection names and you can filter by place, date, or type of collection. In the main pane you will see each country listed, number of records available, and the date the collection was last updated. Images may be browse only, index only, or both. Keep checking back as new records are added all the time. In addition, be sure to visit the FamilySearch Wiki. Here you can learn about your countries of interest, view links to digitized records, access free video tutorials, search the catalog for microfilm and microfiche you can order for a small fee to view at a FamilySearch Center or partner library, and get research tips. You can use the search box to search by place or topic, or click on the "All Countries" link in the "Find Records by Place" box to browse by country (they're listed alphabetically). Some countries have more content than others. For example, Slovakia has a full page of information and active links, while Romania has much less. But, you should keep checking back as new and updated content is constantly being uploaded to the site.
6. **Watch a video.** If you aren't quite sure how to find your immigrant ancestors in Ancestry.com's databases there's a video for that. Want to learn how to read Russian, or use online images from different Czech archives? There are videos for these subjects, too. Ancestry.com and FamilySearch have extensive libraries full of helpful videos and tutorials for researchers of all levels. Also, don't forget YouTube where you'll find many videos (and even entire channels) dedicated to genealogy.
7. **Try a new database or search technique.** Many genealogists tend to be creatures of habit. We find certain genealogy databases or websites that we like, and then stick with them for all of our searches. But, I've learned that when I try something new, I usually learn something new and, sometimes, I discover something new as well. Change up your search techniques in a favorite database by experimenting with different fields, or using alternate views to display results (where available). You may find more success using a genealogy search engine like Mocavo that scours millions of hard-to-find genealogy Web

pages, instead of just a broad Google search. Use MyHeritage.com to see what hints their new “Record Detective” technology turns up. Read more on how it works on the MyHeritage.com Blog.

8. **Share your brick wall.** Have you posted your perplexing research problems to the appropriate surname or locality message board? (See section on Message Boards and Social Media under Websites in this syllabus). By engaging in the simple process of writing out what you know, how you know it, and what you are trying to find out, you might just see your genealogy challenge in a new light. Posting a problem to a message board gives you the opportunity to interact with thousands of others who are researching that same surname or that same small village in Galicia. You never know who may have the information you need.
9. **Attend a genealogy conference.** There are plenty of opportunities to learn from interact with others who are interested in genealogy and to learn new skills from the experts at larger conferences, and smaller all-day workshops.
10. **Hire a Pro.** Contrary to popular belief, not all records are online. In fact, many of the key documents you will likely need to trace your East European ancestry are tucked away in the basements of foreign archives. Sure you can submit a research request, but be prepared for a very long wait. A better option to hire professional based in that country (who knows the language and is familiar with the archives) to get what you can't. You'll likely save both time and money in the long run. Just be sure to exhaust all of your North American sources first, so you don't spend money on records you could have obtained through FHL microfilm or digitized records, or another online collection. You can often find the best researchers by asking fellow genealogists, getting referrals from ethnic genealogical societies, or talking to experts at conferences.

## One Final Step

If it is financially feasible and you are able to travel, nothing beats a trip back to the ancestral homeland to walk in your ancestors' footsteps, and perhaps meet up with long-lost cousins. Such a journey back to your origins helps to bring your research full circle. Sure, tracing your East European ancestors can be a challenge, but it is well worth the work. Follow the steps above you'll be cruising along the routes to your roots in no time!

## Websites

### Online Family Trees and Databases

Ancestry.com <http://www.ancestry.com>

FamilySearch <http://www.familysearch.org>

Geni, <http://www.geni.com>

Mocavo <http://www.mocavo.com>

MyHeritage <http://www.myheritage.com>

MyHeritage.com Blog <http://tinyurl.com/bz4nexp>.

WikiTree <http://wikitree.org>

## Maps and Gazetteers

Fuzzy Gazetteer (“Fuzzy G”) <http://isodp.hof-university.de/fuzzyg/query>

Google Earth <http://earth.google.com>

JewishGen Communities Database <http://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/Search.asp>

Lazarus Maps <http://lazarus.elte.hu/hun/maps/1910/vmlista.htm>

## Societies and Organizations

Association of Professional Genealogists [www.apgen.org](http://www.apgen.org)

Board for Certification of Genealogists <http://www.bcgcertification.org>

Cyndi’s List Societies & Groups <http://www.cyndislist.com/societies>

Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International <http://www.cgsi.org>

Federation of East European Family History Societies <http://www.feefhs.org>

The Polish Genealogical Society of America <http://www.pgasa.org>

## Message Boards and Social Media

Ancestry Message Boards <http://boards.ancestry.com>

Yahoo! [http://dir.yahoo.com/arts/humanities/history/genealogy/regional\\_and\\_ethnic\\_resources](http://dir.yahoo.com/arts/humanities/history/genealogy/regional_and_ethnic_resources),

FEEFHS Mailing List

[http://lists.rootsweb.ancestry.com/index/other/Genealogical\\_Societies/FEEFHS.html](http://lists.rootsweb.ancestry.com/index/other/Genealogical_Societies/FEEFHS.html)

YouTube <http://www.youtube.com>

FamilySearch Research Communities on Facebook

[https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Research\\_Communities\\_on\\_Facebook](https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Research_Communities_on_Facebook)

## Miscellaneous

Cyndi’s List <http://www.cyndislist.com/professionals>

Evidence Explained <http://www.evidenceexplained.com>

WorldCat <http://www.worldcat.org>

## Additional Resources

“Ten Ways to Jumpstart Your Eastern European Research” by Lisa A. Alzo, *Internet Genealogy Tracing Your Eastern European Ancestors*, 2013. Material for this syllabus has been excerpted from this article and used with permission. [http://internet-genealogy.com/Tracing\\_Eastern\\_European\\_LA.htm](http://internet-genealogy.com/Tracing_Eastern_European_LA.htm)

*The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Eastern Europe*. Dennis P. Hupchick and Harold E. Cox. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

## Legacy QuickGuides™

Czech Genealogy, Croatian Genealogy, Hungarian Genealogy, Germans from Russia, Slovak Genealogy, Ukrainian Genealogy

<http://www.legacyfamilytreestore.com/searchresults.asp?cat=81>

Legacy Family Tree Webinars <http://www.legacyfamilytree.com/Webinars.asp>

**\*Note:** Syllabus materials are submitted months in advance of the conference. For additional or revised content for this presentation, please visit: <http://www.lisaalzo.com>.

Copyright, 2014, Lisa A. Alzo. All Rights Reserved.