

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

SILVER LAKE HISTORY ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Please join us for an informal roundtable discussion on Silver Lake, McLeod County history and genealogy research. Bring your family tree information and any old photographs or stories about the 'olden days' that you would like to show and tell.

Saturday April 9, 2011, 1:30PM -4PM,
McLeod County Historical Museum
380 School Road NW, Hutchinson, MN

FINDING YOUR POLISH ANCESTORS PART 1 OF 2

By Lisa A. Alzo

I am pleased to present this guest column by Lisa Alzo, member of the CGSI Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International board of directors.

Polish, German, Ruthenian—millions of people around the world today can trace their roots to the territory of present-day Poland. But even with the vast numbers of people of Polish descent, researching a Polish ancestral line can sometimes seem like an uphill battle.

Politics, wars, and a changing state of independence have wreaked havoc on some records. Shifting borders and disputes that divided the country may make pinpointing place equally tough. And oft-repeated fallacies about research roadblocks can make a tricky task appear downright impossible.

But researching your Polish ancestry doesn't have to be difficult. With a little deeper understanding of the unique circumstances surrounding your effort, as well as a quick review of some of the resources available to you, you might even find that your uphill battle isn't so steep after all.

Starting Your Research

Two of the most difficult areas of research are determining the correct surname and given names in Polish, and identifying the region and village where ancestors lived in Poland. Family members may be able to assist you with both, but learning more about names, naming patterns, and places can take you even farther.

Names

A common misconception among researchers searching for Polish ancestors is that a surname has a connection to the village from which the family emigrated (e.g., Nowakowski came from the village of Nowakow). As the world's population increased, surnames, in general, were developed to help distinguish between several people in the same town with the same given name.

For example, if your Polish ancestor was named Michal, the Polish equivalent of Michael, he would have been assigned a surname to distinguish which Michal he was. You may also encounter patronymic surnames (those derived from the father's name), surnames that reflect social status or personal features, trade or occupation, places of residence, or those derived from other sources.

Given-name practices are interesting to note, too. Polish Roman Catholics, for example, may have named their child after a saint or baptized the infant with the name of a saint whose feast day was celebrated on or near the date the child was born or baptized.

In the Russian and Austrian (Galician) partitions of Poland, children were usually baptized with only one name. In the Prussian partition (depending on the Germanic influence), children may have been baptized with two given names: the first given name in honor of a relative, and the second name for use by the immediate family. Thus, when researching parish or civil records for an immigrant, the given name used in North America might actually be the second given name listed on a birth or baptismal record.

Many immigrants Americanized their names upon arrival. Some adopted the English equivalent, while others made the spelling appear more American or chose a similar-sounding name. Despite common myth, Ellis Island immigration officials did not purposely change people's names.

Some Polish surnames were "updated" by the family when they arrived, says genealogist Ceil Wendt Jensen, a specialist in Polish research. For example, Przytula became Przytulski, or the surname "Zdziebko," which now has branches using Jepko, Japko, and Zipko. First names were also sometimes changed. The names Valentine and Nicolas in the United States were once Walenty and Mikolaj in Poland.

Got a tough name? Exotic-sounding names may be deciphered via tools like those developed by Steven Morse (www.stevemorse.org) that permit "sounds like" searches on last names and towns. William Fred Hoffman's books *Polish Surnames: Origins and Meanings* and *First Names of the Polish Commonwealth: Origins & Meanings* can help with given names in Latin, Polish, and German, and for finding the proper spelling of surnames.

Towns/Villages

Most Poles who immigrated to the United States arrived while Poland was governed by the German, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Documents may indicate these individuals are German, Russia, or Austrian when really they were ethnic Poles from East or West Prussia, Posen, Silesia, Galicia, or Kongress Poland (Russian Poland).

To address this, says Jensen, researchers should first identify the area and then focus on the village. Poland has many villages with the same name, so knowing, for instance, that you are researching Zarzeczce in Galicia narrows the list of villages.

Once the name of the ancestral town or village is identified, the next step is to determine its location both pre- and post-World War I, using a selection of maps, atlases, and gazetteers. There are a number of online maps and gazetteers that can be consulted along with printed versions. Check the Federation of Eastern European Family History Societies Map room (www.feefhs.org/maplibrary.html). Also, the Family History Library Catalog (FHLC) has an extensive collection of books and microfilms of maps and gazetteers. Also, check Kartenmeister (www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp) and the gazetteer (www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp).

Another way to find a place is to use Shtetlseeker (www.jewishgen.org). Although many towns will appear, along with a link to MapQuest, you may find similar town names occurring in more than one district. Also, Shtetlseeker does not contain all places, and you may need to convert between old language and contemporary place names.

If your search points to Western Ukraine/Eastern Galicia, you may want to consult Matthew Bielawa's

HalGal (www.halgall.com). HalGal stands for Halychyna/Galicja and provides information on Halychyna/Eastern Galicia, a region that is often misunderstood or ignored in the United States. Many of the pages may also be useful for Polish researchers of Western Galicia.

Building a Foundation

Today approximately 10 million Americans are of Polish descent, making U.S. records one of the best places to start searching for information on Polish ancestors.

Census Records. The U.S. census provides a good picture of a family at a specific time period. Since it was common for ancestors to move to communities comprised of other families from the same region of Poland, it may also be helpful to note the neighbors.

Civil Records. Birth, marriage, death, and divorce records may contain information about specific towns of origin. Access and availability will vary. Church records (baptism, wedding, and funeral) often list the ancestral town or village and are especially useful if the civil equivalent is unavailable. Also, don't overlook cemetery, burial, or funeral home records; obituaries in community or fraternal organization newspapers; and state, county, or town histories.

World War I draft registration cards are also good documents to check for the place of birth. You can view a number of WWI draft registration cards online at Ancestry.com. Those records not viewable online may be viewed on microfilm through the Family History Library (www.familysearch.org/) or the National Archives Records Administration website (www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/index.html).

Naturalization Records. Check naturalization records, especially the "declaration of intent" (first papers), for ancestral town information, but remember that they may not always be accurate.

It's important to note that after 1922, the federal government began keeping separate naturalization records for married women. Children under age sixteen will be listed on the father's naturalization records. Also, if your ancestor was over the age of fourteen and in the United States in 1940, but not naturalized, he or she was required to complete an Alien Registration form.

Copies of post-1906 naturalization records as well as Alien Registration forms may be obtained under The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), by submitting a written request to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The required Form G-639 may be downloaded here: www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis.

Next week: Finding Polish Immigration Records

If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: tkadlec@gmail.com or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1408 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. See this article online at: www.kadlecovi.com Děkuji! Tony Kadlec