

# Jewish Records Indexing-Poland: The Effect of Reaching Critical Mass

by Stanley Diamond

*This article is excerpted from a presentation at the IAJGS conference in Warsaw—Ed.*

With a database of 5.4 million records, Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland.org) has reached “critical mass,” that is, the majority of researchers are able to benefit immediately from its data by performing searches. Not only can researchers find a grandparent or even a parent in the search results, they often follow the trail of record indexes, extracts and scans from town to town, each step adding generations to their ancestral tree—and multiple branches of what may have been previously unknown family.

While its largest segment is made up of vital records, the JRI-Poland database also includes extracts of documents such as *raptularz* (separate books created from or kept parallel to the vital records but not considered as official birth,

---

*With a database of 5.4 million records, Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland.org) has reached “critical mass.”*

---

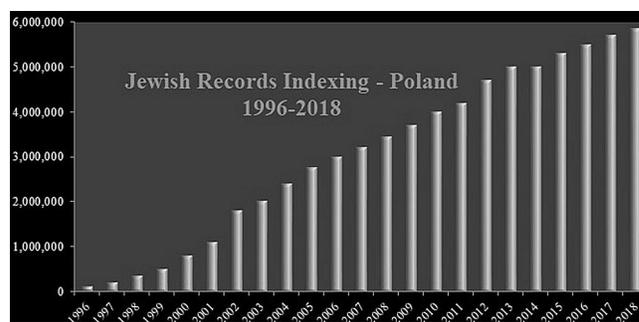
marriage and death records); books of residents; registration cards; censuses; military and school records; cemetery records; passports; ghetto death records; birth, marriage and death announcements in Polish newspapers; and even post-war court and legal announcements in *Monitor Polski*, the official government gazette.

Because Poland today includes areas formerly part of the Galician province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Grodno guberniya of the Russian Empire and the Prussian territories of Germany, the database includes three basic types of vital records, the Napoleonic narrative records of Congress Poland, the Galician and Grodno guberniya columnar records, and the pre-printed Prussian narrative records.

## Early Years

When JRI-Poland was formed in 1995, its objective was to index the Jewish vital records in the LDS microfilms, generally starting in 1826 and ending between 1865 and 1880. Volunteers performed the majority of the data entry using the Polish language index pages in the microfilmed record books. With few exceptions, these index pages included only the year, act number, surname, and given name. Indexing those microfilmed records was Phase 1 of the project.

A 1997 agreement with the Polish State Archives (PSA) enabled JRI-Poland to purchase photocopies of record book



*Growth of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland in the past 22 years*

index pages from more than 500 towns. These were mostly years of Russian language records not filmed by the LDS and accessible only in archive branches across Poland. With these additional years of indexed records, researchers were finding family references up to the end of the 19th century. This was Phase 2.

Most of what follows describes JRI-Poland’s Phase 3 records from Congress Poland. Congress Poland was Russian Poland. The areas of Poland that were under Austro-Hungarian or Prussian rule have slightly different project development strategies.

## Phase 3 Objectives

Launched in 2015, the long-term objective of Phase 3 has been to make access to and analysis of records as convenient as possible for the researcher. To accomplish this, JRI-Poland is extracting all genealogically relevant information for the records in its database and, when possible, linking these search results to online digital images. This applies to both newly available years of records as well as supplementing the original Phase 1 indexes that often included only basic information about the subject of the record—without additional names or dates.

For example, important genealogical data in a birth record includes the child’s name and date of birth, names and ages of parents, mother’s maiden name and the town of birth or the town where parents are living. Marriage records identify the groom’s town. Death records often list the spouse and children left behind. Sometimes, names of sons and daughters identified in death records are the only known references for children whose births were never registered. Records from 1808 to about 1850 typically include three generations in one document, the subject of the record (baby, bride/groom or decedent); the father and/or mother of that person; and often, the father’s father and the mother’s father. Death records from this time period often enable researchers to estimate the birth of ancestors born in the early 1700s. Yiddish signatures in the records may provide

a patronymic that does not appear in the Polish or Russian text or uncover an alternate version of the permanent surname.

Full extracts often reveal records thought to be lost. Thus, in early 2018, JRI-Poland discovered that the Ostrołęka register books include the long-missing 19th-century records of nearby Goworowo, a town in which this author had family.

## Two Major Changes

Phase 3 was born as the result of two major changes in access to the records in Poland.

Foremost was the Polish State Archive's decision to undertake a massive digitization initiative of vital records and make them available online. In addition, the change in Polish privacy laws in 2015 opened up the possibility of accessing 20 additional years of marriage and death records in Urząd Stanu Cywilnego (USC—municipal/civil records offices). The decision about whether to allow record access rests with each individual USC manager, but JRI-Poland has been successful in arranging scanning of records for many towns. The change in the law also gave us access to marriage and death records up to 1937 that had been transferred to PSA branches from USCs many years ago.

The 2013 multi-year agreement between JRI-Poland and the PSA (renewed in 2018), and the decision by the PSA to put vital records online, created an historic opportunity for genealogists with Polish ancestry. The new agreement and the easy access to digitized images have had a dramatic impact on the ability to build the JRI-Poland database. Instead of traveling to archives, volunteers and hired professionals can work on data creation for JRI-Poland in their own homes.

While it is gratifying to have millions of records already online, and an inventory of data not yet uploaded and record scans not yet extracted (because of lack of funding), JRI-Poland recognizes that researchers want to know the status of specific record groups for their towns. When asked, JRI-Poland leadership tries to provide that information.

## Finding Ways to Manage and Expand Databases

Finding ways to manage and expand its accessible database is JRI-Poland's core goal going forward. More than 2.3 million entries in the JRI-Poland database from about 200 towns are already directly linked to digital images or to folders on the PSA website containing the images of the town records. A large portion of the entries is the Galician data housed in the AGAD Archives Warsaw.

Millions more records are not yet linked because record images are not yet online. In fact, at this time, only 2.2 percent of all archival material has been scanned by the Polish State Archives. The number one priority for the PSA's National Digitalization Project is to scan books at risk or ancient volumes for which security is an important consideration. Prior to scanning, books may have to be repaired and

rebound, and sometimes fumigated. Since 2018 is the 100th anniversary of Polish independence, the archives also has focused on scanning materials related to the country's history, which is of no direct genealogical benefit to researchers. The process for putting scans online is complex; genealogists must be patient as they wait for additional town scans to appear.

On the other hand, this situation brings some good news. Because of the obstacles in carrying out the massive scanning project, the PSA has allowed some outside foundations and organizations to scan and share images to accelerate their progress. JRI-Poland is one of the approved organizations. It is focusing on Jewish vital records and books of residence while not ignoring other sources with important genealogical content as they are discovered.

Over the past few years, JRI-Poland's scanning team has worked on Russian-era records in a number of archive branches, most recently in Katowice and Częstochowa. When financial support is available, an extraction project immediately is assigned to professionals. In addition to its own scanning, JRI-Poland has acquired images of records of all towns in seven other branches of the PSA.

Although the revised access laws make marriage and death records publicly available after 80 years, access to birth records remains unchanged at 100 years. With permission from individual USC managers, this significant change is allowing JRI-Poland to scan and extract marriage and death records up to 1937 in the local municipal offices. Obtaining permission to carry out this work is complicated, however, because birth, marriage and death records are typically all in the same *Duplikat* register book. (Original individual registers of births, marriages or deaths, known as *Unikats*, span a number of years and were retained by the synagogues. *Duplikats*, also known as metrical registers, were created for the civil authorities and include births, marriages and deaths in one book.) As a result, the restriction on access to birth records not yet 100 years old may provide USC managers with reasons to refuse cooperation. Notwithstanding the complexities, JRI-Poland already has scanned records in more than 200 USCs and most have already been extracted.

While there are more than 600 towns in Poland for which Jewish records were kept, some USCs delivered all their Jewish registers to a branch of the Polish State Archives, so JRI-Poland does not actually face negotiating 600 individual agreements, but the contact development and negotiating process remains time-consuming.

## Finding Key to Access

Phase 3 so far has been a smashing success, but while the extraction activity is ongoing, digital images of records are becoming available at a much faster pace than JRI-Poland can fund and that presents a dilemma. JRI-Poland has few volunteers with the skills needed to extract the 1868 to 1915 Russian-language records and almost always must engage experienced professionals with knowledge of

JRI-Poland is extracting all genealogically relevant information for the records in its database, and when possible, linking these search results to online digital images.

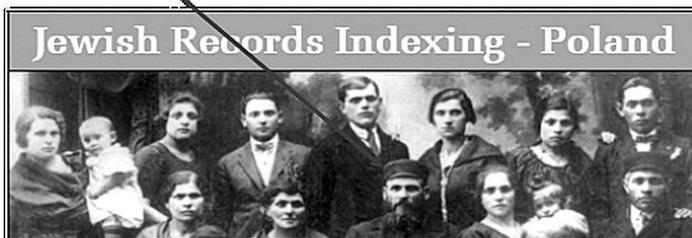
Please Read our Conditions of Use  
[jri-poland.org](http://jri-poland.org)  
©Jewish Records Indexing - Poland

**Brok PSA Births, Deaths**  
**1826-30,33-1910 Marriages**  
**1826-28,30,33-1910**

**Brok**  
 Łomża Gubernia  
 (records in Fond 135  
 Pułtusk Archives  
 Located at 52°42'  
 21°51')

Last Updated December 2014  
Click Here to 106641 Empty Columns

Click to View	Surname	Given Name	Year	Type	Akta
<a href="#">View Image</a>	WIDELEC	leek Ajzak	1873	B	1



Jewish given names and Polish towns to enter the data from Cyrillic records into the database.

JRI-Poland has acquired its own copies of digital images from the Częstochowa, Grodzisk Mazowiecki, Katowice, Kielce, Łomża, Łowicz, Mława, Płock, Pułtusk, Radom, Sandomierz, Siedlce and Włocławek branches to accelerate the related Phase 3 projects. For some towns, it has scans of every record going back to 1808. Until images appear online, interested readers should contact Town Leaders to see what is available for a town of interest.

Ready access to scans has many benefits, including the discovery of records for which there were no index pages when indexes were the only source of data. By working with actual records, researchers are discovering those missed when year-end index pages were created in the 19th century, and names that were read incorrectly either by the registrars who created the index pages or by volunteers who had not yet become fully familiar with Polish handwriting and diacritical marks or accents. For example, a family name in one index was misread as Kugier when it was, in fact, Ungier. Even with such errors, the original indexes show an approximately 90 percent accuracy rate. Phase 3 is reducing the error rate even more.

With full Phase 3 data sets, researchers can sort files by fathers' and mothers' given names and finally identify an entry that had defied deciphering or spot those families that used two names or two spellings interchangeably, spellings that are not sound-alike compatible. They may help discover entries for ancestors in the pre-1826 patronymic records era. Genealogists not only can conjecture mothers' surnames that do not appear in the records, but also establish standardized given names and surnames that reveal records that might have been overlooked.

### Łódź Is Greatest Challenge

Because more records survive for Łódź than any other town in Poland, the Łódź Phase 3 project is JRI-Poland's

greatest challenge, both in raising funds and in coordinating data entry. Upon acquiring scans of all birth, marriage and death records from 1871 to 1917, JRI-Poland partnered with Israel's Beit Hatfutsot Museum. Its volunteers entered the 80,000 Polish marriage and death indexes for the years 1916–35, and these are already online. JRI-Poland hired Russian professionals to create basic indexes to the 75,000 Cyrillic records from 1907–15. Creating full extracts of all 253,000 1868–1915 Russian records is the single largest challenge JRI-Poland has ever had. Success depends on the generous support of all Łódź researchers.

A test made using the 5,500 Łódź birth, marriage and death records from 1906 revealed an important aspect of the records. The full extracts mention 884 places of birth or residence other than Łódź. This is not a surprise as Łódź was an industrial center. Starting in the 1860s, it attracted Jews from a wide area, leading to an explosion in the size of the Jewish population. This is yet another illustration why the Łódź project is relevant to all researchers and deserves broad-based support.

### Qualifying Contributions

JRI-Poland occasionally receives major donations, but they have been for a limited number of towns, usually reflecting the donor's personal research interests. For the others, it depends on the long-standing Qualifying Contribution incentive. JRI-Poland always has emphasized the benefits of working with a personal copy of the Excel spreadsheet with all the entries for a town's records, making it possible to find hidden gems by browsing through the file or sorting it in various ways. Initially, these Excel files included only the post 1870–80 records not filmed by the Mormons. Now JRI-Poland is combining all of a town's data and making the resulting Excel files available to Qualified Contributors with certain conditions to protect its rights. In many cases, the files ultimately will include extended indexes from 1826 to 1915 and for some, 1810–1915.

For most towns, a minimum Qualifying Contribution for access to the data in an expanded Excel file is \$180 or \$200. In some cases, it is less and for a few towns more depending on the project's revenue/expense profile. By adding on to their previous donation for a specific town project, researchers will now qualify for access to the new expanded files data as they develop.

Full extracts offer countless opportunities for creative ways to help to identify gravestones in Jewish cemeteries in Poland with only the name of the deceased and fathers' patronymics. For further insight into the often surprising information to be gleaned from full extracts of a town's records, read papers by Judy Golan, Tomasz Jankowski and Heshel Teitelbaum linked from JRI-Poland's home-page "Learn" button.

### **New Discoveries**

Most genealogists know about the records in the Polish State Archives and Town Civil Records Offices, but every year new resources appear in various locations in Poland including museums, municipal offices, libraries, and even in the personal collections of historians and aspiring historians. Here are some examples:

- Earlier this year JRI-Poland learned that the Olsztyn Archives had catalogued and scanned the records for the small town of Janowo which is 20 km NW of Chorzele. The whereabouts of these records always has been a mystery; and so it immediately acquired scans and fully extracted those for 1826–1912.

- In June, a professional researcher discovered a file with detailed 1885 Nowy Targ birth records among the Krościenko vital records. This has now been brought to the attention of the Kraków archives.

- At the opening ceremonies of the IAJGS Warsaw conference, Mark Halpern presented Polish State Archives Director, Wojciech Woźniak, with a magnificently preserved 1815 family register from Miedzchod, the former Prussian town of Berenbaum. The book was donated to JRI-Poland by Larry Teitz whose family had lived in Berenbaum for 200 years.

Over the years, JRI-Poland has acquired and donated many other such books to the PSA, relying on town researchers like Larry Teitz to report their finds from bookstores, aging schoolmasters, self-appointed town historians and other unusual collectors of surviving Jewish records.

- A few months ago, JRI-Poland board member Jeff Cymbler encouraged ProQuest to donate four microfilms with the 1926–39 *Zaglebyer Tzaytung* Yiddish newspaper to JRI-Poland. These have now been scanned and volunteers will be indexing the birth, marriage and death announcements.

### **Cooperation with Other Organizations**

JRI-Poland values cooperation and developing trust between organizations to bring the researcher access to the largest collection of data possible. For example, more than

100,000 entries of the Foundation for the Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries in Poland Database can be searched directly through JRI-Poland's database searches. In 2017, JRI-Poland added links to 8,200 entries in the Joint Distribution Committee's Warsaw Office Emigration Service Index Cards from 1945–49. This year it will add links to 7,000 Vilna refugee cards, most for Polish citizens.

### **Grodno Archives**

Researchers who knew about census-type records from Polish towns in the Grodno archives have been frustrated by the high cost of hiring private researchers to access them. Because the 19th-century revision lists are often the only sources for these towns, JRI-Poland hired professionals to extract all relevant genealogical data for these communities formerly in Grodno guberniya and now in Poland. So far it has more than 32,000 entries from 27 towns near Bialystok, Bielsk Podlaski, and Sokółka with more to come.

### **Pre-1826 Jewish Records in the Kingdom of Poland**

Pre-1826 Jewish records may be found in the Roman Catholic civil transcripts for many hundreds of towns for which there are no separate, later Jewish records. When regulations were enacted in 1826 mandating separate Jewish community recordkeeping, the Jews in small villages administratively became part of a nearby larger Jewish community and their vital events were recorded at the synagogues in those larger towns. To find other pre-1826 records for a family, make a list of the villages near the synagogue town where the family is recorded and search the online PSA listings <https://szukajwarchiwach.pl> for Catholic parish registers from those villages.

The 1808–22 parish registers rarely include surnames for the Jewish entries, so they are difficult to search in the JRI-Poland database. As a result, JRI-Poland makes spreadsheets available to download by town or village for more in-depth analysis. They may be found on the "Source" button on the JRI-Poland Home Page.

More than 100 of these smaller parishes already have been extracted for the Lublin area and will be available on the JRI-Poland website late in 2018. Many more will follow since Jewish entries may be found not only in the Roman Catholic parish records, but other denominations as well. Combing these village parish records has turned up many interesting finds for Jewish researchers and more volunteers are needed to work on similar records for hundreds of additional towns.

Jews sometimes are recorded in the 16th- through 18th-century Polish court proceedings, but Jewish vital record registration began only in 1810 in eastern Poland and in 1808 in western Poland. Jews were recorded in 18th-century tax lists and early 19th-century notarized business records, without surnames. As JRI-Poland's projects to extract the vital records between 1810 and 1825 progress, some families also may be able to find notary records to bridge the generation gap between Jews mentioned in early court and tax records and the Jews mentioned in vital re-

ords. The development of these more expensive projects is ongoing, and JRI-Poland looks forward to announcing its findings as test projects progress.

### Galician Records in the AGAD Archives

The AGAD branch of the Polish State Archives in Warsaw continues to provide researchers of eastern Galicia towns (predominately in Ukraine today) with new record sources. AGAD houses Jewish vital records for 108 towns, available for data entry by JRI-Poland. As a result of the 2015 law reducing privacy restrictions for marriage and death records, registers with data from 1918 through 1937 for 79 towns have been transferred from the Warsaw Civil Records Office to AGAD; JRI-Poland already is indexing these records. For the following towns, surviving pre-World War I records have become accessible for the first time: Bohorodczany, Buczacz, Dunajow, Grzymalow, Halicz, Lysiec, Pomorzany, Solotwina, Touste, and Turka. Contact the Town Leader or AGAD Archive Coordinator Mark Halpern for information about the status of a specific Galician town.

### Notary Records

The notary records for Lublin offer an opportunity to explore the value of this historic source. JRI-Poland is partnering with the Brama Grodzka/TeatrNN, a cultural center in Lublin, which currently is extracting entries of Jews in the early notary records. When Robinn Magid was in Poland two years ago assessing the feasibility of this initiative, she stumbled upon a business receipt for her sixth great-grandfather, Aron Lewkowicz Frydliber, which revealed his previously unknown patronymic, Lewko, yielding the name of her seventh great-grandfather, born in approximately 1735. For more information on notary records, read Anna Wiernicka's paper linked from the JRI-Poland "Learn" button. [See also "Polish Laws Regulating Use of Court Files in Genealogical Research" this issue.—Ed.]

### Advantage of Using the JRI-Poland Database Directly

New researchers may not be aware of some distinctive features of the JRI-Poland database. It may be searched by surname, given name and town or a combination of these items. Researchers also can search by year ranges and record types. Also, by searching through the JRI-Poland portal only, researchers can specify a radius of 50 or 100 kilometers from certain geographical coordinates. This can still focus a search, but also yield results from several different guberniyas. The Surname Mapper provides a unique decade-by-decade picture of where a family name appeared and then spread around Poland.

These extras are available as a standard feature only for searches initiated from the JRI-Poland.org website. JRI-Poland is an independent, non-profit organization hosted by JewishGen, and JRI-Poland indexes are displayed on, and form the major component of, the JewishGen All-Poland Database. The additional features described above, however, are available as a standard option only on the JRI-Poland

search page. Note also that some JRI-Poland data was shared with Ancestry.com many years ago, but this was limited to a span of years in LDS films.

### Conclusion

Reaching critical mass has taken the efforts of hundreds of JRI-Poland volunteers and the support of thousands of researchers. The organization looks forward to even greater involvement and support to ensure the continued growth of its database and, thereby, the growing ability to help researchers find previously elusive records and family information.

*Stanley M. Diamond, winner of the 2002 IAJGS Lifetime Achievement Award, is co-founder and executive director of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland and founding president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Montreal. His interest in genealogical research related to genetics led to the creation of JRI-Poland. Diamond is a recipient of the Canadian Meritorious Service Medal for his "work in documenting Jewish genealogy and particularly for establishing and directing Jewish Records Indexing-Poland." He lives in Montreal, Canada.*

<http://www.avotaynu.com>

We're on the Web! Come visit us as a gateway to the wonderful Web world of Jewish genealogical research.

www. **BILL** Writer Genealogist Publisher **GLADSTONE.CA**

GENEALOGICAL SLEUTH

“This man’s a real detective.”  
— Rabbi N. B.,  
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Based in  
Toronto  
Canada

Email [bg@billgladstone.ca](mailto:bg@billgladstone.ca)