

Tips for Locating the Ancestral Village

By: Claire Gene Esker, MSc, PLCGS, QG

Claire Gene Esker is a professional genealogist and owner of Past Forward Family History in Highwood, Illinois. She is a specialist in Polish and Polish American records and holds an MSc with merit in Genealogical, Paleographic, and Heraldic Studies, as well as a Professional Learning Certificate in American Records and Methodology from the International Institute of Genealogical Studies.

www.pastforwardfamilyhistory.com

claire@pastforwardfamilyhistory.com

Determining a Polish ancestral town may be one of the most complex and, at times, frustrating tasks in Polish genealogy. Locating one, however, can be deeply satisfying. It connects us with not only our ancestors but our larger historical community and cultural heritage. However, after two or three generations, unless documentation has been preserved the knowledge of the ancestral home much too often is lost. To ease way of the researcher to locating their ancestral towns and villages, the following resources have been compiled that may guide you to the places you are seeking.

Petitions for Naturalization and Oaths of Allegiance

Naturalization records, especially Petitions for Naturalization and Oaths of Allegiance, can be a particularly rich source of records for Polish-American and Polish research. They often contain information not only on the arrival of an ancestor, thus making it possible to find a passenger manifest, but also data on where the immigrant was born, any court mandated name changes from Polish variants, and birth information. Naturalization records can also be helpful in narrowing the challenge with villages or towns whose name appears in multiple Polish administrative districts. Because the applicant had to renounce their allegiance to any former governmental authority prior to becoming an American citizen, watch for references to Germany, Russia and Austria or Austria-Hungary when examining a naturalization record to place a town or village in a specific partition. Furthermore, the petition could contain the name of the village of birth or residence before immigration.

Fraternal Insurance Records

Fraternal records, such as those of the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America which is available through the PGSA, or the Polish Women's Alliance of America, can be extremely precise when it comes to the location and family members that will help to identify an ancestor in Polish records. Fraternal records often identify not only the father and mother, but sometimes list the maiden name of the mother along with dates of birth and significant relatives. Additionally, early fraternal records, such as insurance applications, may be very precise in listing a village, gmina, powiat and partition, thus easing the search. Some caution, though, must be exercised with later records, especially those in the 1910's, as they may only list the nearest familiar city or, in some cases, additional generations need to be worked through to find the first immigrant ancestors.

World War I Military Records

While World War I draft cards can be a bit inconsistent, but they are not without value in the search for an ancestral town. Some men, when completing their draft card, were very specific about the partition

where they originated. If you are lucky, many also included the name of their home village or city. Be aware that the city or village might be the Polish version if, for example, it was in Lithuania; or in the German name at that time if in the German or Austrian partition.

Haller's Army

If an ancestor served in Haller's Army, these records usually contain the place of birth on Form C. The PGSA website, under Surname Databases > US, provides the searchable index of Haller's Army records. With that information, the records themselves are available from the Polish Museum of America. American records from World War I and World War II can also include this information.

United States Polish Parish Marriage Records

Throughout most of Catholic history there was no standardized way of keeping records. This allowed Polish parishes in the United States to be particularly detailed, especially through the 19th century, about including identifying details concerning the bride, groom, their origins and families. If one or both of your immigrant ancestors were married in the United States, many of these parish marriage records include the parish-town in Poland where the bride and groom were born or baptized. Also, if their child is being wed, the birth/baptismal parish of the parents could be listed.

RECORD OF MARRIAGES,	
1896.	St. John's Cantius CHURCH. Chicago 1896.
FAMILY NAMES.	I, the undersigned, joined in marriage Joseph Pietrzykowski of Jacob et Francisca, n. w Bukowo, pow. Stuczyn Gub. Łom.
Józef Pietrzykowski Apł. Łączka	and Apoloniam Łączka.
	this Twenty seventh day of May 1896.
	Witnesses Fr. Giniński, Fr. Kwasiński, p. A. Babiński Priest.

In the marriage record above from 1896, of Józef Pietrzykowski and Apolonia Łączka from St. John Cantius Church in Chicago, you note Józef is the son of Jakob and Franciszka from the town of Bukowo in the powiat of Stuczyn in the Russian partition gubernia of Łomża.

Geneteka Shotgun Searching

Some Polish surnames, especially those that are uncommon, are often clustered in a geographic region; sometimes in and around one or a few villages. Geneteka, a volunteer-led index of Polish birth, marriage, and death records, as well as Polish records in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, can be particularly helpful in this respect. Searching for only one surname at a time and examining the results for a cluster in one or two województwa can be helpful in narrowing the area of future, detailed research. If you know the general area – such as southwestern Poland or near the Baltic Sea – start with

those województwa. If you only know they came from Poland, you will need to search each województwo one by one. If the surname is regional and clustered, it could be focused on only one, two or three parishes identified by the search.

Family Letters, Postcards, Photographs, and Other Artifacts

Sometimes, families are lucky enough to have preserved correspondence or family photographs from Poland. Letters and postcards may record village names and geographic locations, while antique photographs were often impressed with the location of the photographer. Thus, if a photograph is impressed with the name of a studio in a larger city, it provides a clue as to the geographic area a family may have lived, particularly if they were visiting specifically to have the photograph taken. Occasionally, family members may have recorded notations on the back of family photographs that reveal where the location.

Summary

Remember, it is always necessary to build a full, comprehensive picture of a family's life in America before trying to make the jump to Poland. Original documents are always preferable to derivative data and family stories. However, indexes and family stories often carry particles of truth that can lead to solid discoveries. Of course, even original records should be carefully analyzed for accuracy, reliability, and correlated against other data to ensure the best possible chance of success. The PGSA hopes these resources are helpful in understanding how to find your ancestral hometown and wishes readers of *Rodziny* a happy and fruitful search.

RESOURCES

For Naturalization Records

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

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

United States Customs and Immigration Service for Post-1906 Documentation

<https://www.uscis.gov/records/genealogy>

National Archives <https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/naturalization>

For Fraternal Insurance Records

Polish Roman Catholic Union of America <https://pgsa.org/prcua-insurance-claim-file-index/>

Polish Women's Alliance of America at the Newberry Library in Chicago

<https://archives.newberry.org/repositories/2/resources/453>

For World War I Military Records

FamilySearch at <https://www.familysearch.org>, specifically...

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1968530>.

Haller's Army <https://pgsa.org/hallers-army-index/>

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

Fold3 <https://www.fold3.com>

National Records & Archives <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/genealogy>

Geneteka <https://geneteka.genealodzy.pl/index.php>.