Polish Archives and Other Sources

You may have heard that all of the records in Poland were destroyed in the wars. Fortunately, this is not true. Some records were lost but a rich store remains for your research. This course will look at the Polish National Archives, including the main archives and the regional branches; the digitization project; how to use the index of holdings; and how to get information from the archives. We will also discuss local archives, administrative offices, civil registries, church and diocesan archives, and little-known types of documents that include information of great value. And we will look at Polish archival materials available in the United States and online. We will also discuss some strategies for maximizing your results when you contact these repositories.

Part 1 - General Information

A. **Know before you go.** Most of Poland’s archival and other records are not indexed by name. You must first know where the event you are looking for, e.g., birth or marriage, took place. Once you have found the records for that location, you must also know the Polish name of the person whose information you are seeking, and the approximate date of the event. For many records of genealogical interest, you will also have to know the person’s religion. These topics are not covered in this class; the assumption is that you have this information, or most of it, before starting your search in Poland.

B. Some information is available online, but only a very limited number of actual record images can be found there. Here are some examples of online resources.
   - The Polish National Archives catalog of holdings is available for searching.
   - You can also find some transcribed information at various websites.
   - Addresses of churches and local registry offices can also be found, although most of these websites do not have an English option.
   - Genealogical sites (Family Search and Ancestry, for example) may have some records of interest.
   - The Family Search catalog lists microfilmed records from many locations in Poland that can be lent to local Family History Centers.

C. **Privacy laws have a significant impact on archival research and other research involving personal records.** In general, records must be more than 100 years old before they can be released. In some instances, you will receive only a transcription or certificate of the record’s contents, not an actual copy of the record.

D. Many archives and other record sources will require proof of your relationship to the person whose information you are seeking. Bring along copies of any relevant documents if you go in person. Be explicit about your relationship if you are writing for information.

E. **For requesting information, there are four basic options:**
   - Be sure you don’t already have access to the records, either online or in the films provided through the Family History Center.
• Write or email the holder of the records. Except for the most remote rural areas, you can write in English, but the response may be in Polish.
• Hire a local researcher.
• Go in person to do your research.

F. There may be fees involved. In general the Polish Archives websites, both national and regional, include price lists. These include direct costs for copies, whether paper or scanned, and a charge for the time spent in research. If you have specific information, the charge is minimal. If your question requires much searching, expect to pay much more. The Archives generally require the payment to be wired to the bank account of the Archives. An estimated advance payment may be required, and if additional payment is needed you will be asked to send it before the information is released. I have found the researchers to be very efficient, knowledgeable, and helpful. I have not seen any occasion in which they tried to take advantage of people looking for information. This is not necessarily true of local researchers, so if you are using them, vet them as much as you can and get agreement on rates in advance.

Part 2 - Archives

G. The Polish National Archives websites hold a wealth of information.
• The catalog of holdings allows a text search as well as a precise search for a place or (if your ancestors were famous enough to get their names into the records) people.
• Files of primary interest to genealogists (birth, marriage, and death records) are listed in a separate table, although some other records with valuable information can be found in the general sections.
• Clicking on one of the items provides much more detail, such as the exact records available for each year and, if the records are physically located at one of the regional archives, the name of the archive and its contact information.
• Archival records are being digitized. This project is ongoing. Unfortunately, the priority is not records of genealogical interest but rather those of historical interest. However, some records are available, primarily from Lublin, Poznan, and Radom.

The primary website for the National Archives of Poland is:

The simple search is the most useful to find out if the archives has records for a place of interest (you do not have to use Polish characters):

The site for searching records is:
www.szukajwarchiwach.pl/search
H. **Caution:** some Polish records of interest are in the archives of other countries.

- Many of the Evangelical/Lutheran church records were moved to the church’s headquarters in Germany, and many of these records are in German national or regional civil archives.
- Some of the Roman Catholic parish records from the former Sejny diocese are in the Lithuanian archives.
- Many Greek Catholic and Orthodox records are in national archives in Belarus and Ukraine.
- And conversely, some records from those countries are in Polish archives!

**Part 3 – Other Sources of Metrical or Similar Records**

I. Archives are not the only sources of metrical records. They are also found in local civil registration offices, central offices of various religions (dioceses or consistories), local churches or religious communities, and on rare occasions in libraries or private collections. In Poland, the general rule is that records are kept locally for 100 years and are then sent to a central archive. This rule is not always followed, and sometimes local copies are kept. However, it's the general practice.

J. Local civil records may not be kept in the same village or even town in which your ancestor was born, was married, or died. Most are found at the powiat level (similar to counties in the U.S.) rather than at the gmina level (similar to townships in the U.S. Once you the exact location from which your ancestors came, you may be able to find the powiat from – believe it or not – Wikipedia. Failing that, gazetteers and detailed maps will generally indicate the location of the powiat. Then you can search that town’s website to find the civil records office and contact information. Nowadays, this information is almost always available.

K. Religious records are located in various places.

- Many have been microfilmed and are available from Family Search. You generally must search for the location where the records are, that is, the parish or the consistory. In some cases the indexing extends to the villages within the parish.
- Some are actually in civil archives, especially where the Roman Catholic or Lutheran church was the general registrar and sent copies to the civil authorities.
- Some are in central religious locations such as diocese or consistories. It may take a good bit of research to figure out the jurisdiction to which a particular parish or church belongs. Many now have websites where the contact information for the archive is listed, and you can generally request information by email.
- For metrical records which remain in churches, it's important to remember that the pastor and staff have a primary mission, and it is not to provide genealogical information to Americans or others. Be gracious and be patient. You may
contact the church directly and in my experience you will probably get a response eventually, but sometimes daily duties will just not allow time to be spent on your request. Also recall that in most cases, any records more than 100 years old will not be at the parish.

I. Other sources of information may exist but are harder to find. They may be in local libraries, universities, or private collections. Some may also be in archive but are not as easy to identify as metrical records. Here are two examples:

- Estate records were kept during feudal times (which extended well into the 19th century). They include day to day operational details but often include lists of persons who worked and/or lived on the estate or those who paid shares of their crops and livestock to the lord of the manor.
- “Lists of Soul” or Status Animarum in Latin or “Spis Dusz” in Polish or family books in the German partition are lists of each household. A new page was started when a new household was formed, e.g., by marriage. Children were listed with birth dates, marriage information, deaths, and depending on the writer, sometimes emigration dates and destinations, occupations, and other facts.

Part 4 – Other Resources

M. Here are some selected links to resources that can help in locating information. These do not include the websites of archives, churches, local jurisdictions, and similar sources. For those, it will be necessary to determine where your records are likely to be and go on from there.

- Here is a list of databases, some of which were already mentioned above. Note that the entire url must be included.
  
  http://genealogy.about.com/od/poland/tp/Polish-Genealogy-Databases-Online.htm?nl=1

- Although done primarily for Jewish records, Miriam Weiner’s site is of special value because she has tried to find out exactly what records are available for a particular location and where those records are. On the page you will get from the link below, you can go directly to the “Search by town” section and click the Archive Documents button.
  
  http://www.rtrfoundation.org/index.shtml

- The Poznan project is a link of marriages performed in the Poznan area. It is easy to use and is a quick way to find out if the name you are searching for appears in this region.
  
  http://poznan-project.psnc.pl/

Part 5 – Conclusion

As you can see, many records are available for the finding. I wish you success in your quest!