

A Brief History of Poland For the Genealogist

1721 Poland is very large. Size is deceptive; Poland is headed toward extinction

- Elected king. Power in the hands of the nobility
- No national army or fortresses
- Constant interference by neighbors: Russia, Prussia & Austria
- Survives only because neighbors can't agree how to carve it up

Early Polish History

- Kingdom of Poland 960 ACE
- Persecuted Jews from Western Europe welcomed 1333 – 1370
- Kingdom of Poland and Grand Duchy of Lithuania unite 1385; formally 1569
- 1400 – 1600: Poland at its height; problems as power shifts from King to nobles.
- 1600s: several major wars; general period of decline for Poland
- 1700s: Period of steady decay. King is powerless.

18th Century

- War of the Polish Succession 1733-1735
- Poniatowski elected to Polish throne 1764. He is the last King of Poland.
 - Government reform efforts lead to revolt of nobility and Russian intervention
 - Frederick the Great (Prussia) proposes partition of Poland to keep the peace

The Partitions of Poland

- First Partition, 1772: Poland loses 1/4 of its territory and 35% of its population
 - Prussia: all of Pomerelia except Danzig
 - Galicia to Austria
 - Russia: slice of Byelorussia/Lithuania
- Second Partition 1793 after King's attempt to reform Polish constitution
 - Russia: Additional land in Byelorussia & part of Ukraine
 - Prussia: Western Poland & Danzig
- Third Partition 1795
 - Austria: Krakow and region
 - Prussia: Central Poland & Warsaw
 - Russia: Eastern Poland

The Napoleonic Wars 1800 – 1815

Russia, Prussia, Austria & Great Britain against France from 1792 to 1815.

- Napoleon is victorious until 1812 invasion of Russia. Sections of former Polish lands change hands
 - 1806-7: Prussia defeated. Grand Duchy of Warsaw formed out of Prussian Poland.
 - 1809: Austria defeated. West Galicia from Austria → Grand Duchy of Warsaw
 - 1812: Napoleon invades Russia
 - 1813-14: Prussia, Russia & Austria defeat Napoleon, who is exiled to Elba
 - 1815: Napoleon defeated at Waterloo and exiled to St. Helena
- French revolutionary influence expands across Europe to the borders of Russia
 - Formal adoption of surnames required for Jews
 - Standardization of birth, marriage and death records
 - Separation of church and state. Legal equality and citizenship to all
 - Nobility loses privileges; career access in government and military based on talent

The Congress of Vienna 1814-1815

- Follows Napoleon's defeat; attempts to eradicate French revolutionary ideas
- Major territorial changes in Eastern Europe
 - Grand Duchy of Warsaw replaced by Kingdom of Poland, ruled by Russia
 - Prussia & Austria cede large areas in Central Poland to Russia
 - Austria retains Galicia; Prussia retains Posen and West Prussia
 - Krakow becomes a Free city
 - Russian Tsar is now ruler of most of Poland
- Long period of international stability: no major wars from 1815 to 1853

- Period of massive social upheavals; Industrial revolution, abolition of serfdom; Popular uprisings 1830 and 1848; nationalism becomes political force
- Major wars from 1853 to 1871 as Congress breaks down. Map of Europe redrawn
- Another long period of stability from 1871 to 1914
 - Continuing social problems lead to massive migrations to USA from Eastern Europe

Poland in the 19th Century

- Poland is divided between Prussia, Austria and Russia
 - Kingdom of Poland (Congress Poland) is ruled by Russia; Tsar is King of Poland
 - Austria controls Galicia; Krakow becomes Free City
 - Baltic coast (West Prussia) and Poznan region are controlled by Prussia
- Polish history deeply intertwined with individual histories of partitioning powers
 - Austrians allow moderate level of autonomy to Poles, mainly nobles & landowners
 - Prussia's liberal attitude toward Poland before 1848 becomes tougher from 1848 on
 - Russians are most repressive; conditions worsen after each uprising
- "November Rising" in 1830 is suppressed by Russians in 1831
 - Most of Polish autonomy is abolished; Russia rules Poland by decree
 - Civil Service is purged; Polish institutions & army are abolished
 - Great Emigration of liberal Poles to west (German States & France)
- Rebellion in Galicia & Krakow in 1846 is crushed by Russians and Austrians
 - Rebellion degenerates into slaughter of landowners by peasants
 - Free City of Krakow is annexed to Austria
- "January Rising" in 1863-64 is crushed by Russians
 - Tsar Alexander II abolishes Kingdom of Poland, incorporated into Russia as Vistula Provinces
 - Effort to forcibly Russify Poland; Russian becomes the language of education & government
 - Effort to Germanize Polish lands in the new German Empire, especially after 1871
- Prussia & Austria go to war in 1863. Austria is defeated and becomes Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary. 1867 full rights granted to all minorities

World War I 1914 – 1918

- 1915 German & Austrian offensive drives Russians completely out of Poland
- 1917 Russian Revolution (March) and Bolshevik Revolution (November). By Treaty Russia loses Poland & Ukraine
- 1918 German offensive on Western Front fails → Armistice 1918. Austria-Hungary falls.

Eastern Europe 1918 – 1921

- Republic of Poland is proclaimed in November 1918
- Collapse of Russia, Prussia & Austria leaves power vacuum in Eastern Europe
The Polish question: Big Poland or Little Poland?
- Russo-Poland War; 1919-1920
 - Poland forms alliance with Ukrainian nationalists & overruns Ukraine in 1920
 - Red Army attack reaches outskirts of Warsaw in August 1920
 - Polish counterattack forces Russians to retreat
 - Treaty of Riga in 1921: large portions of Byelorussia & Ukraine go to Poland
- Polish-Lithuanian dispute over Vilna → Finally occupied by Poland in Nov 1920; annexed in 1923

The Paris Peace Conference Spring 1919

- Victorious powers meet to draft peace treaties. Russia not invited. Germans attend but not allowed to negotiate peace terms.
- Treaty of Versailles with Germany signed June 1919
 - German war gains in Eastern Europe are overturned
 - Posen & West Prussia go to Poland; Danzig becomes a Free City
- Austro-Hungarian Empire is dismembered
 - Galicia is annexed by Poland

Europe Between the Wars

- Widespread dissatisfaction in many countries over post WW I peace settlements
- Rising tide of anti-semitism in 1930s
- German demands for Polish concessions in summer of 1939 bring Europe to brink of war

Map 1



Partitions of Poland

Annexed areas:

First Partition of Poland

R1 By Russia in 1772
P1 By Prussia in 1772
A1 By Austria in 1772

Second Partition of Poland

R2 By Russia in 1793
P2 By Prussia in 1793

Third Partition of Poland

R3 By Russia in 1795
P3 By Prussia in 1795
A3 By Austria in 1795

Organizations and Resources for Polish Genealogy

Organizations

East European Genealogical Society (EEGS) <http://www.eegsociety.org/Home.aspx>

Federation of East European Family History Societies (FEEFHS) <http://feefhs.org/>

Polish Genealogical Society of America <http://www.pgsa.org/> - databases, Polish history and culture, *Rodziny* (quarterly journal)

Polish National Alliance

• 1627 Eastern Ave # 1 Baltimore, MD 21231-2337 410) 732-1100

• Cultural activities and Polish language classes

Polish Roots - <http://www.polishroots.com/> - research, geography & maps, culture & customs, immigration, Gen Dobry! (monthly newsletter)

Slownik Geograficzny - Geographical dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and other Slavonic countries. Translation Guide

Gesher Galicia - www.geshergalicia.org - The Special Interest Group for those with Jewish roots in the former Austrian province of Galicia.

PolishGen Web - hosted by rootsweb.com

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~polwqw/addresses.html>

Other Resources of interest to Polish researchers

• **A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Kingdom of Poland** by Alexander Beider.
<http://www.avotaynu.com>

• **Cyndi's List** www.cyndislist.com Links to everything!

• **Family Search - LDS web site** - online library catalog - local Family History Libraries: Annapolis, Columbia, <http://www.familysearch.org/eng/default.asp>

• **Historical Polish Directories** - Genealogy Indexer - Poland (42 links), Poland regions (148 links) <http://genealogyindexer.org/directories>

• **In Their Words: A Genealogist's Translation Guide to Polish, German, Latin, and Russian Documents** Vol. I Polish - by Jonathan D. Shea & William F. Hoffman

• **In Their Words: A Genealogist's Translation Guide to Polish, German, Latin, and Russian Documents**: Vol. II Russian

• **JewishGen ShtetlSeeker** - helps find locations - including name changes and misspellings <http://www.jewishgen.org>

• **Jewish Records Indexing - Poland** <http://www.jri-poland.org/>

• 1929 Polish Directory Project <http://www.jri-poland.org/>

• **Kartenmeister** <http://www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp> - helps find locations whose names have changed German/Polish/Russian

• **Poland Euro Atlas** - published by American Map, Maspeth, N.Y.

• **Polish State Archives** - SEZAM Archival Holdings - searchable database

http://archiwa.gov.pl/lang-en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=386&catid=107&Itemid=184

• **The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names** - Search for names of victims, submit unrecorded names and information on Pages of Testimony (special forms containing biographical details of individual victims), send photos of victims, learn about the Shoah. <http://www.yadvashem.org>

• **Yizkor Books** - Memorial books for towns written by Holocaust survivors and people from the town who emigrated before the war. Some of these have been translated.

<http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/translations.htm#Communities>