Preserving Your New York Story: Developing Your Jewish Family History

Emily H. Garber ✦ extrayad@gmail.com

Jewish family history research has challenges like research into other ethnic groups, plus a few definite distinctions. Two pieces of information are critical for building our plans for researching Jewish ancestors across the pond: our immigrant relatives' original names and their places of origin. Without this information searches into old country records will be frustrating and, likely, fruitless.

In this regard, the most importantly strategy for genealogists is exhaustively researching for relevant information in documents associated with immigrants and their family members where they settled. If the subjects of your research lived in New York, you may be in luck. This presentation will outline methods, information, and records in the New York and Jewish genealogy toolbox. Several records sets common to family historians, such as census records, vital records, and draft records may help us find the information and evidence we seek. Additional Jewish-specific records may help as well.

Names of Jewish People

Many (although not all) Jewish immigrants to the United States changed their first names and/or last names after arrival. They did this themselves (i.e., no government authority forced them to accept a new name). There were no rules for deciding upon a new name. While we might see patterns (i.e., many people took new, more easily pronounced new names that started with the same sounds, like Feiga to Fannie, Shmuel to Sam, Wilensky to Wilson; and Gurevich to Gure), we cannot make assumptions about what our ancestors' original names might have been. Here are some real-life name changes that we probably would not have predicted: Tschertok became Wagner; Kholmyansky became Smith. Research is key to solving these mysteries.

First name naming *customs* (i.e., not religious laws) are often embraced by Jewish communities. Sephardic Jews typically name their children after living relatives. Ashkenazic Jews usually name newborns for deceased relatives. The result is that cousins may have the same or similar names. This can complicate locating our relatives in records, especially in the old country.

Nearly every Jewish immigrant might have had two or three (or more) first names in his/her lifetimes. They (especially men) had Hebrew names conferred on them for participation in religious rites; Yiddish or Ladino names used within their families and the Jewish community;

and sometimes they had names by which they were known in the language of the country or area in which they lived.[1] When people immigrated to a new country with a different dominant language, they often altered their secular name or modified their Jewish vernacular name for use in official records. Their Hebrew name was unchanged. Their family and friends might still refer to them by their Jewish vernacular name or a nickname derived from that.

Religious name: Hebrew	Name in Vernacular: Yiddish/Ladino	Secular name: Local language (Russian, Polish, German, etc.)
Synagogue use Bris (circumcision) Ketubah (marriage contract) Get (divorce)	Everyday use & Gov't records • family • friends • community	Government records
Gravestone inscriptions	Often on gravestone inscriptions	Recently on gravestone inscriptions

Things to consider about names
- Names may not have been changed.
- Family stories about names and name changes might be faulty.
- Don't believe everything you see in a record.   Parents' names supplied in vital records of immigrants were often Anglicized by their immigrant descendants. In some cases, the Anglicized names of people who had never immigrated may be clues to names adopted by other family members who had immigrated and changed their names. This could help identify previously unknown relatives in the United States.
- Spelling of names is often irrelevant - even on passenger lists.
  - Spelling was not necessarily regularized or static
  - If our ancestors knew the spelling of their names, it was likely in a language/alphabet (e.g., Hebrew or Cyrillic) foreign to us.
  - Passenger lists may show a name spelled with the spelling conventions of the language of the departure port. For example, the Hebrew letter צ, which in Russian would have been the letter ц or in English ts, might have been written as c in some Slavic languages (like Croatian) that use the Roman alphabet.
- No one record will provide the answer. But taken together, several records may provide the clues necessary to solve genealogical puzzles.

Towns of Origin

If our ancestors said that they were from "Russia" or "Poland" or "Austria" it did not mean that they were from within the boundaries of the countries that we know today.

---

[1] This was especially true in the Austrian Empire where the government required that Jews adopt German first and last names. So, a child had a Hebrew name, as well as a Yiddish and a German name recorded in government and legal documents.

Political boundaries in central and eastern Europe have changed several times since 1772. After Russia, Austria, Prussia completed their partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, Poland did not exist as a country again until after World War I. In the twentieth century political boundaries in central and eastern Europe changed several times.

In the Russian Empire, Jews were overwhelmingly confined to the Pale of Settlement - which encompassed much of what is now eastern Europe. Before 1867 in the Austrian Empire, Jews were also limited in where they could reside. Most Jews lived within the Austrian province of Galicia - an area that is now in western Ukraine and southern Poland.

In the Europe, records are not centralized in one location or searchable in one databse. Because records were (and are) often kept at local, municipal level or regional levels in the old country, successful genealogical research that will allow us to research overseas depends upon knowing our ancestors' correct communities of residence. But it's complicated.

- Due to political boundary changes, a community may have had several different names in different languages during the last 200 or more years
- Records from communities that are today in Ukraine, might be held in Polish archives.
- Yiddish speakers often had their own names for communities that did not always track with community names in other languages
- Several communities in the old country may share the same or similar names
- Mistakes may have been introduced by clerks when records were created
- As records have been indexed for our ease of use, transliterations from one alphabet to another may have been faulty

Research Steps

- Write down what you recall about your relative.
- Talk to/record relatives. By what name(s) did they know the subject ancestor/relative? Do they recall the name of the community the subject ancestor/relative was from?
- Find records that may provide evidence for past names/places. Never stop with one record!
- Create a timeline. For each record in which the subject is found, identify what name/location was identified in the record. Did they use different names with family/friends vs. on official records? Could the place name provided be a district or a province rather than a specific town? Were the responses consistent?

- Never stop with one person. Include your subject's family members in your research. Their records may provide useful information. Note other people identified in documents. These people might have been relatives. Knowing family members and family structure (e.g., age relationships) may help identify family members in old country records. Where were these people from in the old country? Was the town the same or nearby your subject ancestor's community?

Where to Find Records that Might Have Information

Census records. Information collected varied from census to census, but for genealogists, they are basic for establishing family structure. Usually, the birthplace is shown at the country level. However, occasionally an enumerator wrote in the community's name. So, it's always a good idea to find all the census records for a subject and family. Most of the 1890 U.S. census was destroyed after a fire. The 1950 U.S. census is the most recent U.S. census available for the public viewing. New York and New York City also took their own censuses. See, "U.S. & NY Census Records 1880-1950," table, below, for relevant information for place of origin.

Every major company provides indices and images of U.S. census records.

Vital records. Marriage records in NYC provided names of bride and groom, their birthplaces, and the names of their parents. Death records provided the name of deceased and the names of his/her parents, as well as birthplaces for all three. Birth records provided the name of the child and the name of the parents (usually, but not always, with the mother's maiden name). Usually, birthplaces are reported at the country level. As noted, above, immigrants often Anglicized their parents' names - even if their parents never moved to the USA and changed their names. So, be careful.

Both indices and images are available for NYC vital records. Sometimes the indices are on other website. So, it helps to know who has what indices/records and where to look. Public access to New York City records (digitized or not) is limited compared to some other cities and states. No records beyond the dates listed below have been digitized by any organization or company. Access to records outside the parameters listed below will depend upon your relationship with the people in the records and the NYC Dept of Health (for birth and death records) and the NYC Clerk (for marriage records).
- Birth records are only available through 1909.
- Death records are available through 1949.
- Marriage certificates and licenses are available through 1949

New York City Municipal Archives (Dept. of Records and Information Services) "Historical Vital Records," https://a860-historicalvitalrecords.nyc.gov/ They have digitized 77% of 13.3 million records. See "Digital Vital Records" https://a860-historicalvitalrecords.nyc.gov/digital-vital-records for up-to-date information on what has been digitized. There are currently a few annoyingly large gaps (e.g., Manhattan deaths from 1876-1919).

German and Italian Genealogy Groups. They provide indices to all NYC vital records. Elements indexed: names, dates of events and certificate numbers.
https://www.germangenealogygroup.com/ ; https://www.italiangen.org/

Ancestry has NYC vital records indices but no images. These include: Birth Certificates 1866-1909 (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61779/); Birth Index 1910-1965 (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61457/); Death Certificates 1862-1948 (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61778/); Death Index 1949-1965 (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61461/); and Marriage License Index 1907-2018 (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61406/).

FamilySearch has images and the most comprehensive index. One must visit a FamilySearch Center to view the images. For further information see: "New York City Vital Records."

MyHeritage. Images and indices (may be searched by parents' names). Images are limited to what NYC Municipal Archives already has online. New York City Births 1866-1909 (https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-20810/new-york-city-births-1866-1909); New York City Marriages, 1866-1949 (https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-20807/new-york-city-marriages-1866-1949); New York City Deaths, 1866-1948 (https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-20808/new-york-city-deaths-1866-1948). MyHeritage also has indices that cover greater time periods.

Cemetery records. Jewish gravestone inscriptions are special because they traditionally include the deceased person's and their father's names in Hebrew (sometimes Yiddish). In later stones, a mother's Hebrew/Yiddish name may be included, as well. In New York, as in other large cities in the United States, many Jewish immigrants joined landsmanshaften (social and benevolent organizations of immigrants from specific old world communities). Landsmanshaften often purchased cemetery plots for their members. If one can determine the associated community, a grave located within a landsmanshaft plot may be a great clue to origins. Caveats include: spouses, in-laws, and other relatives may have been allowed a gravesite, even though they were not from the in-common community. In addition, as immigrant communities aged, some landsmanshaften merged with others. So, there might be one or more communities represented among the burials.

In addition to the standard sites such as Find A Grave and Billion Graves, specifically Jewish grave inventories may be found at:
- JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery/). Their cemetery inventory is at: https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery/tree/CemList.php
- Jewish Data (https://jewishdata.com/). This is a fee website. But JGS (NY) provides member-only free access. https://jgsny.org/

To locate a specific Landsmanshaft plot in New York City area cemeteries, use the JGS(NY) Burial Society Database (https://jgsny.org/searchable-databases/burial-society-databases/burialsoc-joodb).

Passenger lists (manifests and border crossing records). If you find a passenger list that includes your subject relative, it will include a version of their original name and may include their community of origin (either where they resided, where they were born, or both). See table below: "Increasing Information on Ship Passenger Manifests, as Required by Law."

Ancestry, MyHeritage, FamilySearch, and The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation (https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/passenger) all have passenger manifests from 1820-1957. Steve Morse's Gold Form (https://stevemorse.org/ellis2/ellisgold.html) provides a robust search box for searching records on The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation website.

Naturalization records. While the new citizen went home with a Certificate of Naturalization - a document that your family may have at home - the government archived supporting documents from the naturalization process. That paperwork, especially if processed after September 1906, may include information on your relative's original name; arrival date, place, and ship; and a list of immediate family members and their dates and places of birth. Most New York City citizenship paperwork whether from local or U.S. courts is readily available online. FamilySearch has made this particularly easy.

Naturalization records before September 1906 were variable in the information included. Generally, they do not provide much more than current name and address, perhaps occupation, country of origin, and approximate date of arrival. But occasionally more useful information is included. So, look for early records and you might be pleasantly surprised.

Prior to September 1906, naturalization (a generally two-step court process that involved a declaration of intent to naturalize, a wait three years, and then a petition of the court for citizenship) could take place in almost any court.

Starting in September 1906, the federal government limited the courts in which naturalization could occur. Most took place in federal District Courts. For NYC, that meant the Southern District (Manhattan and the Bronx) or the Eastern District (Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island). These records are held by the National Archives (NARA). And they have been digitized and are online on Ancestry and FamilySearch. MyHeritage has indices. With permission, the Supreme Courts of New York, Bronx, Kings, Queens, and Richmond Counties continued to naturalize after 1906.

- FamilySearch
  - o Wiki: "New York, County Naturalization Records - FamilySearch Historical Records" (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/New_York,_County_Naturalization_Records_-_FamilySearch_Historical_Records) [includes a links to District Court indices and images and Richmond County (with no index)]

- o New York County Naturalization Records: COLLECTION RECORD, 1791-1980 (https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1999177) [includes Bronx, Kings, New York, and Queens Counties]
  - o Also search for collections by county in the FamilySearch catalogue
- Ancestry has a NY Supreme Court naturalization petition index, 1907-1924 (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4653/).
- Bronx (1914-1952) and Queens (1795-1952) Naturalizations: free site launched in 2023. https://nynaturalizations.com/
- Brooklyn Naturalizations, 1907-1924 (https://jgsny.org/searchable-databases/brooklyn-naturalizations/search-brooknats-1907-1924): indexed by JGS(NY)
- Both the German and the Italian Genealogy Groups have indexed many NY US District Court and local court records.

Draft registrations. During World War I and World War II, all U.S. resident men within certain age parameters, whether citizens or not, were required to register for the military draft. Both draft registration forms required information about date and place of birth. Usually, the registrant offered their country of nativity. But sometimes they provided a province or community name. The World War II cards seem more likely to yield community names.

Ancestry, My Heritage and FamilySearch all carry U.S., WWI & WWII draft card collections.

Social Security Card Applications (SS-5). Social Security was started in 1936. If you have found your relative in the Social Security Death Index (located on all the major genealogy websites), it is easy to order the form (SS-5) they submitted to join the program. Note their name, birth and death dates and Social Security number.

Go to the Social Security Administrations Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) page at https://www.ssa.gov/foia/request.html. Select "Request a copy of Deceased Person's Original Application for a Social Security Card (SS-5)." You may order via mail or online. You want to request the copy of the original application. *You do not want the Numident Record.* Currently the fee for the SS-5 is $27.

JewishGen Communities Database: online gazetteer.
https://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/Search.asp

Voter registration records. For many years, voters in New York had to register to vote every year. They had to provide their names and addresses, ages, birthplaces, occupation, and, if naturalized, the dates and places of naturalization. If they derived their naturalization from a parent or spouse, they had to provide that person's naturalization information. Ledgers of registered voters for each year were organized by Assembly and Election Districts. Ancestry has recently digitized and indexed the ledger pages and put them online. Similar records should exist in the archives or at the Board of Elections for Queens and Staten Island. We can hope someone is working to get access for digitization.

Ancestry: Manhattan, New York, New York, U.S., Voter registers, 1915-1956 (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/62363/)

Newspapers articles. Obituaries are the main type of articles that might include immigrants' of communities of origin. But there may also have been profiles written during an immigrant's life that identified that information.

In addition to the usual newspaper sites (Chronicling America, Newspapers.com, GenealogyBank, NewspaperArchive, and Old News), there are freely available NY-specific newspaper sites: Old Fulton New York (https://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html) and NYS Historic Newspapers (https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/).

Synagogue records in the U.S.A. There were hundreds of synagogues in New York City. Most were not very good about keeping records. In many cases, when an officer of the synagogue who might have kept records, left their post, they took their records with them. If a congregation still exists, contact them to see whether they still have their records or have sent them to an archive. Some Reform temples have archived their records with the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio. Some synagogues may have stored their records with local historical societies.

JewishGen's USA Research Division has started "Shul Records America" (https://usa.jewishgen.org/synagogue-research/shul-records-america) to locate and inventory synagogue records. They have created a finding aid to records from 1217 synagogues in about 124 repositories throughout the United States.

Name changes in court records? Most names were changed without a legal procedure. Some were codified during the naturalization process, which was a court procedure. Generally, those who went through formal court procedures for name changes were children of immigrants. If your family members processed a name change through the courts (outside of naturalization procedures), search local newspapers. A local newspaper would have posted a legal notice of the intent to change names.

Name changes could have been processed through Supreme and County Courts or New York City Civil Courts. Either the courts or County Clerks might have these records.

Continuing Education

Overall, the methodology of Jewish family history is the same as non-Jewish family history. So, most genealogy blogs, webinars, podcasts, courses, and conferences should be fine for improving research skills. But Jewish genealogy organizations do offer educational offerings.

- JewishGen Education (https://www.jewishgen.org/Education/) offers online classes.
- Jewish Gen Discussion Group: https://groups.jewishgen.org/g/main

- Local Jewish genealogy societies provide online and in-person presentations by invited speakers, as well as other educational offerings. https://www.iajgs.org/membership/member-societies/
- The International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (https://www.iajgs.org/) holds an annual conference. This year it will be in Fort Wayne, Indiana, from August 10-14, 2025 (https://iajgs2025.org/). Early bird registration ends June 15, 2025.

Transliteration, Translation & Interpretation Help

Tracing the Tribe - https://www.facebook.com/groups/20364215746
Jewish Genealogy Portal - https://www.facebook.com/groups/JewishGenealogyPortal
Genealogical Translations - https://www.facebook.com/groups/361690548110384
JewishGen.org – ViewMate - https://www.jewishgen.org/ViewMate/

Increasing Information on Ship Passenger Manifests, as Required by Law

Data compiled and formatted by Marian L. Smith (used with permission)

	3/3/1891	3/3/1893	3/3/1903	6/29/06 (Natz Act)	2/20/07	2/5/17	1924	[1935]
Section	§8	§1	§12		§12	§12		
Age	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Date of Arrival	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Destination	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Last residence	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Name	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Name of Vessel	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Nationality	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Occupation	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Sex/Gender	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Funds in possession		$30	$50		$50	$50	$50	X
Contract labor?		X	X		X	X	X	X
Destination Port of Entry		X	X		X	X	X	X
Ever institutionalized?		X	X		X	X	X	X
Health condition		X	X		X	X	X	X
In US before?		X	X		X	X	X	X
Intended residence/destination		X	X		X	X	X	X
Literacy		X	X		X	X	X	X
Marital status		X	X		X	X	X	X
Physical deformities?		X	X		X	X	X	X
Polygamist?		X	X		X	X	X	X
Relative in US (name & address)		X	X		X	X	X	X
Ticketed through?		X	X		X	X	X	X
Who paid passage?		X	X		X	X	X	X
Anarchist?			X		X	X	X	X
Race or People			X		X	X	X	X
Arrested & deported at any time				X	X	X	X	X
Coming for temp. labor?				X	X	X	X	X
Complexion				X	X	X	X	X
Excluded/deported within 1 year				X	X	X	X	X
Eye color & Hair color				X	X	X	X	X
Head Tax status					X	X	X	X
Height						X	X	X
How long intending to stay?						X	X	X
Intend to become a USC?						X	X	X
Intending to return to home country?						X	X	X
Literacy Language						X	X	X
Marks of identification						X	X	X
Opposition to organized gov't?						X	X	X
Place of birth						X	X	
Previously deported within 1 year?							X	X
Relative in home country						x	X	X
Travel Doc issuance date & place							X	X
Visa or Travel Doc number							X	X
Verification data								X

[arrows added]

U.S. & NY Census Records 1880-1950 - Immigration & Citizenship Info

Census Year	Birthplace			Immigration	Citizenship	When Naturalized
	Subject	Father	Mother	Year/Years in US		
1880 US	X	X	X	-	-	-
1890 NY Co. Police	-	-	-	-	-	-
1892 NYS (Kings Co.)	X	-	-	-	X	-
1900 US	X	X	X	X	X	-
1905 NYS	X	-	-	X	X	-
1910 US	X	X	X	X	X	-
1915 NYS	X	-	-	X	X	-
1920 US	X	X	X	X	X	X
1925 NYS	X	-	-	X	X	X (& which court)
1930 US	X	X	X	X	X	-
1940 US	X	suppl	suppl	-	X	-
1950 US	X	suppl	suppl	-	X	-

1890 New York Police census: https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/SO_813511e6-f171-4e16-b00e-5938e92e160c/

https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2381996

1892 NY State census: New York, State Census, 1892 - FamilySearch Historical Records (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/New_York,_State_Census,_1892_-_FamilySearch_Historical_Records), *FamilySearch* Wiki.

New York State Censuses: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/New_York_Census_State_Censuses

"Questions from Each New York State Census,"(https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/genealogy/censusq.htm), New York State Library.

If you cannot locate a specific person but have a possible address, use Steve Morse's tools (https://www.stevemorse.org/) to located address in census records.

Unified [U.S.] Census ED Finder: https://www.stevemorse.org/census/unified.html

AD/ED for 1890-1925 New York State Census: https://www.stevemorse.org/nyc/nyc.php