



Breaking New Ground: The Story of Jewish Records Indexing–Poland Project

by Barbara Krasner-Khait

As of March 2001, the Jewish Records Indexing–Poland project reached one million names in its Internet-based database of indexes to Jewish vital records from more than 200 towns. The purpose of this article is to chronicle the project’s evolution. With so many other indexing projects starting within Jewish genealogy, the experience of JRI-Poland can help others make the most of their efforts and avoid the pitfalls. The “one million” milestone reflects the work of hundreds of volunteers around the world who share a common vision of indexing all the Jewish records of Poland. Project coordinator Stanley Diamond is not surprised that the project has reached this milestone so quickly, but as far as he is concerned, much work remains to be done.

In 1995, a triumvirate of men came together to produce a brew that whetted the appetite of Jewish genealogists all over the world. That triumvirate consisted of three people from three different countries: Steven Zedeck in the United States, Michael Tobias in Scotland and Stanley Diamond in Canada.

In 1993, New Hampshire software engineer Steven Zedeck had bought his first personal computer. He found shareware for genealogy and began to build his family tree. He knew his great-grandparents had come from Łomża. As Zedeck says:

I was looking through LDS films every week or so. Scrolling, scrolling, scrolling, and I kept thinking, there has got to be a better way. I knew it was possible to create a database on some server someplace that would help.

In 1994, Montreal entrepreneur Stanley Diamond had learned that he carried a rare Beta-Thalassemia genetic trait mutation. He set off on a mission to find relatives who might share the trait so he could warn them about the potential risks. He and his wife, Ruth, participated in a Salt Lake City research trip with Gary Mokotoff and Eileen Polakoff. Diamond spent a solid week going through LDS films for towns near Ostrów Mazowiecka in Łomża guberniya, the town where his ancestors had lived. He says:

I was taking a stab in the dark, asking myself whether my family moved to other places. I knew my grandparents moved to Poręba, but Brok records, which included Poręba, made no reference to the family. My arms hurt from cranking the machine so much.

When he returned to Montreal, Diamond wrote a letter to twelve others interested in Łomża guberniya who were listed in the JewishGen Family Finder and asked, “Isn’t there some way we can avoid duplication by sharing research?”

Diamond forwarded this letter to Michael Tobias, an actuary in Glasgow, Scotland, in January 1995. Tobias had been working with his brother, Alan, to find records for Ostrołęka, few of which survived, and had joined the Genealogy Forum on the Internet at Compuserve. Tobias says, “I guess things just fell into place as different researchers with similar views and ideals came together and realized that an organized group had many advantages.” Tobias turned his attention to the records from nearby Łomża, hoping for some success, but found no references to his family in the Polish-language records. He then began looking at 1868–86 Russian-language records, teaching himself how to read the hand-written Cyrillic letters. Because records for many years had no index, he painstakingly examined every record.

Tobias says:

It soon became clear to me as I scanned through the films that my looking for just *my* families was a very selfish thing to do. Many others had traveled this route before me. What a waste of effort!

He decided to create a computerized index of all Russian-language Łomża records on microfilm, eventually including the Polish-language records.

Early in 1995, Diamond’s vision and Zedeck’s and Tobias’s technological prowess spawned the “better way”—the Russian-Era Indexing-Poland Project.

“The experience of JRI-Poland can help others make the most of their efforts and avoid the pitfalls”

Russian-Era Indexing-Poland Project

The Russian-Era Indexing-Poland Project (REIPP) was born with the goal of creating a “comprehensive searchable computer database containing a name index of Jewish vital records from Poland.” Ultimately, using paid translators and more than 100 volunteers found through JewishGen and the Family Finder, REIPP concentrated on translating Cyrillic (Russian language) records for the Russian-era years of 1868–1918, working mostly from LDS (Mormon) microfilms. The first town completed was Łomża, since the project’s founders had mutual interests there. Compilation of indexes for records from other towns soon followed, and volunteers started to come forward as a result of a “call to arms” for photocopies of index pages. Zedeck served as the project coordinator and Tobias as database manager.

In February 1996, the REIPP database was posted on JewishGen—the first searchable online Jewish genealogical database. Searching was conducted by e-mail in those early days. By the time of the 1996 annual Jewish Genealogical Seminar in Boston, the team had produced indexes to about 50,000 records.

Jewish Vital Records of Russian Poland

Years	1808–1825	1826–1865	1866–1898 ¹	1899–1940
Type of Records	Roman Catholic civil transcripts	Jewish vital records		
Location of Records	LDS microfilms ²		Polish State Archives (not microfilmed)	Town Civil Record Offices (USC)
Indexing Status	Limited indexing underway	Shtetl CO-OPs are indexing	Polish State Archives project	Not accessible

1. Starting in 1868, records are in the Russian language.

2. Approximately half of the LDS microfilm collection is available in Israel at the Douglas E. Goldman Jewish Genealogy Center at Beth Hatefutsoth in Tel Aviv.

Says Zedeck, “After two years, I thought, ‘Wow, this is really big!’” He was receiving about 50 e-mails a day from all over the world. In early 1997, despite protests, Zedeck stepped down as coordinator, but retained the mantle of webmaster—no small job in itself, because of the increased project activity and constantly changing content of the website.

As the project grew, search capability became possible on the web. Although technology made the project feasible and practical, business acumen was needed to carry the initiative forward. Diamond, who had been working closely with Zedeck, and armed with a Masters in Business Administration from Harvard Business School and 30 years of international business experience, accepted the role of project coordinator.

Engineering manager Hadassah Lipsius, a New Yorker, started as an indexing volunteer for the town of Tomaszów Mazowiecka in 1995. That was just the beginning of her involvement with the project. Based on the good impressions she had made during genealogical research trips to Poland and the quality of her indexing work, she was an ideal candidate to assume the role of transliteration coordinator: prior experience with transliteration, skilled with computers, organized, adept at time management, and the ability to work with and manage a diverse group of people all over the world. While in New York, Diamond met her in September 1997 to recruit her. Diamond says:

This face-to-face interaction was very important to building a solid team. I wanted Hadassah to know me and to see how strongly I felt about JRI-Poland, and I needed to gauge her level of interest.

Diamond’s approach worked, and Lipsius signed on. She says, “I wanted to help out, help the project move and progress.”

LDS (Mormon) Microfilms

Polish archives hold a remarkable collection of Jewish vital record registers that have survived the ravages of time and the upheavals of history. The majority of registers, generally from 1810 to 1865 and in some cases,

beyond, have been microfilmed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, resulting in approximately 2,000 reels of microfilm representing more than 500 cities and towns. Many registers have indexes. JRI-Poland volunteers photocopy the index pages from the films for the towns they are researching and enter the data from the indexes (or, in some cases, the records themselves where no indexes exist) onto a spreadsheet that ultimately is loaded into the database. These volunteers do most of the work on the Polish-language, pre-1867 Russian-era registers. Professionals, whose work is funded by individuals and groups of Jewish genealogists, are hired to transliterate Cyrillic script entries from the post-1867 Russian-era registers.

In addition, volunteers at the Douglas E. Goldman Jewish Genealogy Center at Beth Hatefutsoth in Tel Aviv have extracted records for Białystok, Warsaw, and other important centers of Jewish life. This is a worldwide effort, facilitated by a board of directors of JRI-Poland whose members span the globe—Canada, Israel, Scotland and the United States.

Systematizing the Approach: The Shtetl CO-OP Initiative

According to Diamond, JRI-Poland’s strategy focuses on a basic element of human nature: give people an opportunity to help themselves as they help others. The core group of the project belonged either to the Ostrów Mazowiecka Research Family, a group of researchers with a common interest, a few of whom began shared research in 1993, or had interest in Łomża guberniya. Common interests built a foundation for success.

One of the first steps Diamond took as project coordinator was to use this experience as a basis for continued success, to accelerate progress and to systematize indexing. The Shtetl CO-OP initiative, launched in late 1997, organized groups of volunteers with a common interest in an ancestral town or area. These volunteers share the work and cost of copying index pages in the LDS films for their town(s) and entering the indexes into a spreadsheet. Says Lipsius, “It is not unusual for our Shtetl CO-OP

leaders and volunteers to make discoveries as they are doing data entry, even finding links to other volunteers in the CO-OP." Each file goes through a series of quality checks by the transliteration coordinator, database team and Michael Tobias before it is added to the database. If necessary, the file may also go to a separate quality control team.

Shtetl CO-OPs emphasize cooperative research and sharing. While some towns with one or two microfilm reels have been indexed by a single dedicated volunteer, the team approach is valuable for cities and towns that had large Jewish populations and for which there are many microfilms. Where paid help is required, Shtetl CO-OP leaders pursue fund-raising efforts among other researchers interested in the town's records. According to Lipsius, the concentrated effort through the CO-OPs helped the entire project bloom.

The Shtetl CO-OP initiative was an important precedent for the work yet to come. Volunteers demonstrated excitement and dedication for the work they were doing. "Help yourself while helping others" has become a mantra. To recognize the initiative's core value to the overall goals of JRI-Poland, Diamond insists that it be spelled Shtetl "CO-OP," a clear emphasis on "cooperation." He says, "My years in international marketing have taught me the importance of product or project names that, over time, take on meanings above and beyond the words themselves."

Polish State Archives (PSA) Agreement

While the LDS microfilms contained about two million Jewish vital records, estimates predicted that another five million later 19th-century records are not available on microfilm. These records give researchers the connection to their immigrant ancestors. The practicality of indexing non-filmed records was tested in 1995 as part of Diamond's genetic research in Ostrów Mazowiecka. Ongoing conversations with the late Polish State Archivist Director, General Professor Jerszy Skowronek, whom Diamond met at the 1994 annual Jewish genealogical conference in Jerusalem, Israel, helped establish a relationship and convinced Skowronek to allow indexing of the town's records.

When Diamond visited Poland in the fall of 1995, data entry was well underway. In January 1996, Diamond returned to Poland and presented a completed indexing database to Skowronek and Deputy Director Dr. Andrzej Biernat. "It blew them away," says Diamond. "Seeing actual hard copy, a printout, was quite a surprise to them." At that point, Diamond suggested, "Wouldn't it be nice to do this for all of Poland?" He stressed the importance of reconstructing families. "People who think they are alone in the world can quickly find out otherwise."

Biernat, who became PSA executive director following Skowronek's death in 1996, came to understand that the project was more than genealogy. In 1999 he stated:

My conversations with him [Diamond] helped me realize that Jewish genealogical research is not merely an ordinary hobby for amateur enthusiasts searching for their roots or

retirees looking for something to do with their time (as was the case in many situations that I had been familiar with). For a person of Jewish ancestry, the search for information about his or her roots is also one of the ways of dealing with the Holocaust syndrome, where big families whose members had been frequently in touch with one another before the war may have had only one surviving member, who may have felt lost in the post-war world. Mr. Diamond helped me realize that in Jewish culture the model of family and family relationships was different from, for example, [the model] in Polish culture. The relationships in Jewish families were strong and widespread. One can say that, for Jews living in the Diaspora, genealogical research is a form of reconstructing family connections that were destroyed by the atrocities.

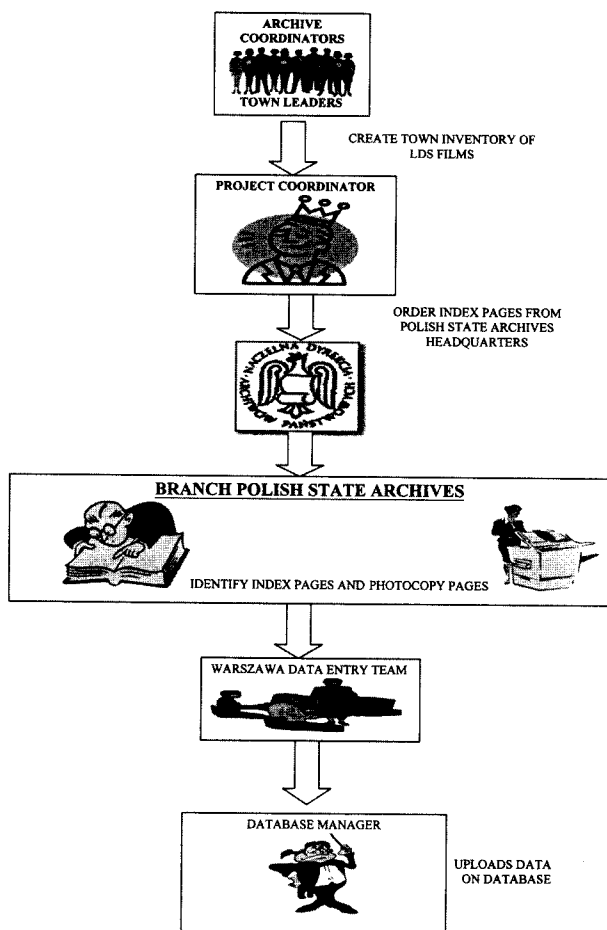
In July 1997, the milestone agreement with the PSA to index its holdings of Jewish vital records not filmed by LDS transformed REIPP into Jewish Records Indexing-Poland. The scope expanded, as did the project's potential contribution to genealogists everywhere. The agreement called for an archive-by-archive approach, beginning with Pułusk, Mława and Nowy Dwór Mazowiecka. Experience defined the process: Work begins on a specific archive only after a volunteer agrees to become the Archive Coordinator. The volunteer then receives a list of all Jewish vital record register holdings in the specific archive and recruits Town Leaders, who in turn are responsible for raising funds to cover the indexing costs for their respective towns. For towns that had small Jewish populations, a few hundred dollars is all that is needed to acquire the indexes from the archives. For Łódź, more than \$7,000 was raised.

The process begins with an inventory of all LDS micro-filmed records for the towns within a branch archive. Any records not captured by these films then can become part of the Polish State Archives (PSA) project. JRI-Poland purchases the index pages for non-microfilmed years for all the towns in the branch archive. When sufficient funds are raised, work begins by the JRI-Poland team in Warsaw to index the records. Post-1867 records are entered in Cyrillic, which are then converted to Latin characters using a program developed by Tobias and reflecting transliteration standards developed in cooperation with the PSA.

In September 1999, Houston-based Shirley Rotbein Flaum agreed to head up the Łódź PSA project, the largest archive project JRI-Poland had undertaken to date. The city of Łódź is the largest of the 50 towns whose records are held in the Łódź archives. For the city of Łódź, funded in May 2000, the project included about 50,000 indexes from the latter part of the 19th century. Flaum says:

A lot of people had breakthroughs in their research. Because of delayed civil registrations years after the actual events, these records would have otherwise been impossible to locate.

Flaum, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, knew little about her family while she was growing up. Her father was from Łódź, the only survivor of his family of 11 brothers and sisters. She says, "I was deprived of any real



family history growing up. The fastest way I could get at these records was by volunteering to be Archive Coordinator." Flaum learned through the project that her family was in Łódź only after 1905.

In addition to the archive project, Flaum also is coordinating a Łódź cemetery project. The "old" cemetery was established in 1811 and closed in 1892, although some burials continued until 1922. Although the cemetery no longer exists, a rare 1938 book containing Polish and Hebrew lists of more than 3,000 tombstones and 300 biographies is extant. A team is hard at work computerizing the list, aided by a standardized approach to Hebrew transliteration developed by Tobias.

AGAD Agreement

One important arm of the archival system in Poland is the *Archiwum Głowne Akt Dawnych* or Archives of Ancient Acts (AGAD), which houses vital records more than 100 years old for towns formerly in Poland and now in Ukraine (Eastern Galicia). The connection between AGAD and JRI-Poland began with a presentation and request in October 1999, a pilot project, and the summer 2000 agreement to proceed on a full scale. Says Diamond:

I was fortunate that my 30 years in international business and dealings in more than 50 Western and Third World countries gave me the experience in how to proceed in the

discussions and implementation.

The agreement calls for indexing an estimated two million records in the registers for the 93 Galician towns now in Ukraine but held in AGAD's Warsaw archives. Seven members of the AGAD staff, in their off-duty hours, now are working directly for JRI-Poland to index this huge collection. As of this writing, the records for 10 towns in the Tarnopol region, including more than 30,000 records from Tarnopol itself, have been indexed and are searchable on the JRI-Poland website.

Mark Halpern serves as coordinator for the AGAD initiative. He became involved in the JRI-Poland project at the end of 1997 and early 1998, entering data for the Białystok Shtetl CO-OP. He says, "I became impatient waiting for things to happen, so I got involved. I received my on-the-job-training in Białystok, and it gave me a taste of what was possible." Halpern was anxious to begin working on AGAD records. "I kept asking Stan when he was going to AGAD. At the annual Jewish genealogy conference in Salt Lake City in 2000, I cornered Stan and Shelley Pollero, coordinator of the Geshet Galicia SIG. It turned out they were making an announcement at the meeting."

Criteria for Success

Annual Trips to Poland to Meet with PSA's Executive Director and Managers of Regional Archive Branches.

Says Diamond:

Face-to-face meetings made it possible to convey with emotion the value of the project to everyone concerned and the urgency associated with helping Holocaust survivors and their families find flesh and blood that they might never have been able to do before. I never miss an opportunity to relate a JRI-Poland success story.

One major benefit of the meetings has been the opportunity to resolve issues before the start of a project and build trust in the relationship.

Diamond says, "Because there are so many steps and people involved on the Polish side, the meetings have been critical to solving the little problems and to preventing little ones from becoming big ones.

The agreement with PSA to work with regional branches provides an example of the process in motion. The initial plan was to complete one archive before starting on the next. After Pułusk, photocopies were ordered of all the index pages from ten towns in the Mława archive. It kept the staff busy for a month, and they were upset because they fell behind in their regular work. Stories travel fast in these circles as archive managers are constantly in touch with each other and meet on a regular basis. This could have created big problems for both PSA headquarters and JRI-Poland, but we were on the scene to resolve concerns.

Another example was photocopying. The lack of explicit instructions on the photocopying procedures—such simple things as batching and noting the records by types and years—created problems in the Mława project. To solve the problem, Diamond offered to write a detailed set of instructions. Biernat agreed, but asked for them in Polish.

JRI-Poland needed a steady stream of index pages to

keep the data entry team in Warsaw busy and not to lose momentum. That opened the door to allowing them to place orders on more than one archives at a time and to indicate that the work should be done on a town-by-town basis. Partial orders of index pages were not only welcome but encouraged. As a result, JRI-Poland now has a flow from a number of archives.

As Diamond knows from his many years as a successful entrepreneur, gaining trust is a long process and a small slip can destroy years of hard effort. At the beginning of the relationship, JRI-Poland had to transfer money to PSA before the JRI-Poland team in Warsaw was allowed to pick up the pages. JRI-Poland treasurer, Sheila Salo in Maryland, paid every invoice immediately. Now JRI-Poland pays after they receive the index pages, and when the invoice is small, payment can be delayed to save on the bank-to-bank transfer cost.

Says Diamond:

One of the most important reflections of the excellent relationship and spirit of cooperation is PSA's decision to allow JRI-Poland to hire branch archive staff members to index the years for which there are no index pages. This also applies to the columnar format records in the Bialystok and former Galician area of current-day Poland.

Existence of LDS Microfilms

JRI-Poland began as an initiative to transliterate and index records from the Russian-era from the more than 2,000 reels of LDS microfilm. The sheer number of filmed records, accessible to most, provided the project with a unique advantage. Prior to the project, many researchers had become familiar with the LDS records from their ancestral towns. REIPP focused on the Polish years because it was easier to work with the Roman alphabet than with the Cyrillic alphabet. Books like Judith Frazin's *Translation Guide to 19th-Century Polish Language Civil Registration Documents* helped them navigate through the narrative records and enabled them to extract important information. But, says JRI-Poland board member Judy Baston, "We saw that many researchers would just stop when they got to the Russian years." Add to this the fact that most, but not all, of the narrative records were accompanied by an alphabetical index at the end of the year's records that made it possible to photocopy the index pages for faster data entry.

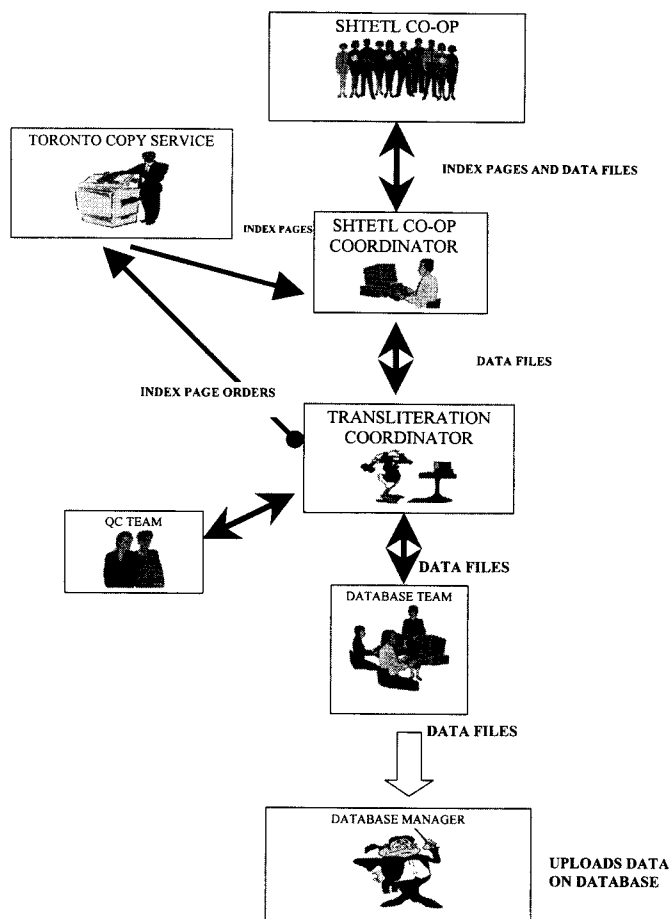
Language and Local Knowledge

Diamond's experience in international business has made him sensitive to subtleties in foreign relationships. He says:

I know only too well that when key issues are on the table, one must avoid misunderstanding due to translation, particularly when you don't know how the document may be passed around and its potential impact down the road.

JRI-Poland translates any important letter to PSA into Polish. When dealing in another part of the world, it is important to have people on the team who know that language and culture. Two members of the JRI-Poland

JRI-Poland LDS Data Process Flow



board of directors, Peter Jassem and Vlady Rosenbaum, are natives of Poland. The project also has a Warsaw local resource, Krzysztof Malczewski. They push the cause. Says Diamond:

Without Krzysztof at the beginning with the Ostrów Mazowiecka Research Family and then handling the myriad of JRI details on the ground in Poland, we would not be where we are today.

Standardized Approaches

A standardized approach to ordering photocopies of records from the PSA eliminates potential language problems and simplifies the process for researchers. The bilingual order form, available from the JRI-Poland website, can be printed out, filled in and sent to the PSA requesting photocopies of a record. "Don't bother sending a cover letter," Diamond says, "Not only is it unnecessary, but getting it translated will delay the order."

When the flow of orders started to bog down PSA's International Department in Warsaw, which was processing them and sending them to regional archives, PSA decided to decentralize order handling and asked that researchers send orders directly to the branches. Says Diamond, "Once again, we reacted by redesigning the online order form, and the changeover went very smoothly."

In addition, Robinn Magid, Shtetl CO-OP leader for Lublin, introduced a detailed, step-by-step guide for other leaders and data-entry volunteers at the 1998 Summer Seminar in Los Angeles. Cumulative experience could be applied to get new people up the learning curve more quickly.

Creating a Win-Win Situation

Every agreement and understanding “has to be win-win,” says Diamond. In fact, JRI-Poland has even achieved a “win-win-win.” As Diamond and Biernat searched for ways to index unfiled records, Biernat suggested using archive staff in their off-hours. Now three groups benefit: JRI-Poland gets the indexes, PSA gets the orders, and PSA staff members have an opportunity to augment their income.

Another benefit is record preservation. Says Diamond:

Money from our orders has contributed directly to the PSA preservation program. Fumigation and repairs have already been made to a number of registers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, including all the Warsaw registers that were in very poor condition. This work continues.

Patience

By his own admission, Diamond is not a patient man. He says:

While it is not my nature to be patient, I have found it has worked best to introduce ideas and then sit back while PSA has time to consider all aspects. We have several future projects under discussion with PSA. While we would like to see them all start immediately, the timing has to be right for both parties.

A Clear Vision

Says Baston:

We had a clear vision of what we wanted to do that arose from the challenge of using Cyrillic records. We also wanted to avoid duplication. We knew that different people were working on the same town records, and, just at this time, the Internet became possible.

Adds Diamond: “One of the things you learn in business is to develop a vision and a mission to guide what it will take to get the work done.” The fact that JRI-Poland has reached one million records is not a surprise to him at all. He says, “The mission was for all records, and what started out as regional eventually expanded to all of Poland.” Perhaps even more important than having a vision is to have a shared vision. Says Diamond, “We put together a team of people who share and understand the value of the finished project for themselves and for everyone else.”

Part of the vision included indexing records rather than extracting. Using the JRI-Poland database is a way to “kick-start” research, but it is not a substitute for using filmed records or ordering the records themselves. Using the JRI-Poland indexes was also a way to ensure that a researcher did not miss any records, particularly for those years not indexed. Moreover, an index may be mislead-

ing, as for example, when a researcher finds that one set of parents reported three or four births in a given year. It is more likely that this represents a delayed registration of the births, rather than the births of triplets or quadruplets.

JRI-Poland also recognized another basic element of human nature: A researcher is most interested in his or her own town. This understanding was critical to the formation of the Shtetl CO-OPs, getting volunteers for coordinators and town leaders, fund-raising and data entry.

Basic to the continued growth of the project is the foundation of trust, supported by face-to-face meetings by volunteers at conferences. Says Diamond, “The face-to-face interaction instills spirit and creates an infrastructure of support and opportunity to network.”

Changing Expectation

The more that researchers have used the JRI-Poland database, the more they have learned that their families were more mobile than they originally thought. “The majority of people entering Jewish genealogy today do so through the Internet,” says Baston. “Expectations are different; they want to find all they seek on the web.” Baston again cautions researchers not to use the JRI-Poland database as a substitute for good, solid genealogical research. “The indexes are just the first step,” she says.

Partnering with Other Institutions

Diamond is quick to point out that every genealogical project needs a good partner, typically related to the source of the data, whether that be a silent or active ally. For JRI-Poland and the early records, LDS was a silent partner. For later years, PSA became the project’s very active partner. Diamond says: It is the whole philosophy of partnerships that has made JRI-Poland so successful. Partnerships exist with the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) in Warsaw; the Douglas E. Goldman Genealogy Center at Beth Hatefutsoth, Israel; the management of the Warsaw Cemetery, Krzysztof; archive coordinators; Shtetl CO-OP leaders and others.

Diamond’s relationship with Yale Reisner of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation Genealogy Project at the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) began at the 1995 Jewish genealogy Summer Seminar in Washington, DC, when he introduced Reisner as a speaker. Diamond says, “Reisner called me nearly a year later to inform me that JHI had records for Zaręby Koscielnie, having remembered that I had told him that my grandfather came from this shtetl.” An inventory of the available records began and indexing followed. This became the first of several projects with the JHI, which now includes indexing of the Warsaw and Breslau (Wrocław) cemeteries and of Kraków marriages.

Discussions began with the Goldman Center in Tel Aviv in 1996 when Center director Diana Sommer told Zedeck that the Center had some handwritten “databases” for

Towns Currently Included in the Jewish Records Indexing-Poland Database

Indexes to birth, marriage and death records from the following towns are already in the JRI-Poland database. More are added each month, so keep checking the website at www.jewishgen.org/jri-pl.

Andrzejewo	Izbica	Lublin	Pułusk	Trembowła
Bakańczewo	Jabłonka	Lutomiersk	Puńsk	Trzcianne
Będzin	Jasienica	Lututów	Raciąż	Turobin
Bełchatów	Jędrzejów	Maków Mazowiecki	Radom	Tuszyn
Berżniki	Jedwabne	Małogoszcz	Radomsko	Tyczyn
Biała Rawska	Jeleniewo	Mariampol	Radoszyce	Tykocin
Białystok	Józefów nad Wisłą	Metele	Radzanów	Ujazd
Bielawy	Kaletniki	Michów Lubartowski	Radziłów	Warka
Biezuń	Kalisz	Mława	Radzymin	Warszawa
Błaszki	Kazimierz Dolny	Mstów	Radzyń Podlaski	Warta
Bodzentyn	Kępno	Nasielsk	Rajgród	Wąsosz
Bogoria	Kielce	Nowe Miasto	Rozprza	Wąwolnica
Bolesławiec	Kleczew	Nowogród	Rutki	Węgrów
Bolimów	Klimontów	Nowy Dwór	Rzeszów	Weisieje
Brok	Kłobuck	Nur	Sarnaki	Widawa
Brzeziny	Kodeń	Okuniew	Sejny	Wieluń
Brzeźnica	Końno	Olita	Sereje	Wieniawa
Bychawa	Koło	Olkusz	Serock	Wieruszów
Bytom	Komarów	Opatów	Skalat	Wierzbica
Chęciny	Konin	Opoczno	Skulsk	Wierzbicz
Chmielnik	Końskie	Opole Lubelskie	Ślesin	Wilczyn
Choroszcz	Konstantynów Łódzki	Ostrołęka	Ślupca	Wiślica
Chorzele	Kosów Lacki	Ostrów Mazowiecka	Śniadowo	Wiżajny
Ciechanów	Kozienice	Ożarów	Sobków	Wizna
Ciechanowiec	Kraków	Pabianice	Sochocin	Włoszczowa
Czemiernicki	Kraśniczyn	Pajęczno	Sokołów Podlaski	Wolanów
Czerwińsk	Kraśnik	Piatek	Sokoły	Wolbrom
Częstochowa	Krasnopol	Piątnica	Sompolno	Wysokie Mazowieckie
Czyzewo	Krasnystaw	Pińczów	Staszów	Wyszków
Dąbie	Kremenets	Piotrków Trybunalski	Stawiski	Wyszogród
Daleszyce	Krotoszyn	Pławno	Stawiszyn	Zakroczym
Drobin	Krzepice	Płock	Suwałki	Zambrów
Działoszyn	Krzyszów	Płońsk	Szaki	Zamość
Dzyatlava	Książ Wielki	Podwoleczyńska	Szczecbrzeszyn	Zaręby Koscielne
Filipów	Kuczubork	Praszka	Szczekociny	Żarki
Gąbin	Kurów	Przasnysz	Szczuczyn	Zawichost
Głowno	Łódź	Przedbórz	Szreńsk	Zborov
Golina	Łomża	Przerośl	Tarnopol	Zduńska Wola
Grajewo	Łosice	Przyrów	Tarnów	Zgierz
Hrubieszów	Łowicz	Przytyk	Tomaszów Lubelski	Żuromin
Iłża	Łozdzieje	Puławy	Tomaszów Mazowiecki	Żychlin

several towns. These “databases,” actually oversized, detailed ledger sheets with extracted records from the LDS films, formed the basis of work on Warsaw, Białystok, Tarnów and other Jewish communities. How the heavy packages of handwritten extracts were relayed from Israel to volunteers around the world in an effort to save on postage costs is another example of the contributions of so many unseen individuals to the project.

Volunteerism at Its Best

JRI-Poland builds on the talents and dedication of

more than 250 volunteers worldwide. These volunteers make the difference, helping each other trace their family histories and sharing discoveries. Says Flaum, “Stan Diamond inspires people to volunteer, and so many volunteers are extremely committed. It is a long process, and it is easy to lose focus or give up entirely.”

So many people bring tremendous experience along the way. Lipsius points out, “Many of us have corporate experience and that helps. In some ways, this is a business organization.” Many volunteers start out with one project and then go on to bigger projects, contributing in

a wider sense. Sheila Salo started out transliterating her town's records in the REIPP days and now handles one of the most important aspects of the project—she is now the organization's treasurer. Key has been the belief that any call to action will be successful if there is an opportunity for researchers to help themselves while they help others.

Commitment to Continuous Learning

The project is not without its disappointments and, as the project matures, it applies the hard lessons learned. Diamond says:

Some initiatives have been stalled, because after all, this is a volunteer project. We still have not funded the cost of indexing Przasnysz almost three years after the indexing was done. The cost was \$1,100 and we have raised only a fraction of that. The reason is simple—we released the indexes for the first project—Pułtusk Archives—before the project was funded. Sad to say, researchers got “something for nothing,” and JRI-Poland is still short the cost of the indexing work. That taught us an important lesson: Hold the release of indexes until funding for the group has been received.

But there was no reason why contributors couldn't receive the data. The JRI-Poland team revised its policies. Says Diamond:

In order to give researchers the opportunity to do creative searching not possible through the use of the JRI-Poland search engine, we have made the complete Excel file for a town's records available to researchers who contribute a qualifying amount, calculated as a percentage of the total cost of a town's indexing. This practice has been a key ingredient in speeding up the funding for many towns and illustrates that as we move forward, we must constantly look for new ideas to make the project work better.

Says Tobias, “We have much to teach others about the organization of such a project. We have developed gradually over time, fine-tuning and adjusting the way we operate.” Tobias has been instrumental in developing techniques to handle foreign character sets and transliteration rules. He adds, “We have learned a lot about foreign archival institutions and their needs and expectations.”

Challenges Still Ahead

According to Baston, “The biggest challenge JRI-Poland faces is securing the human and financial resources to continue all of this work and to ensure that all records are indexed.” In his Białystok efforts, Halpern wrote a letter—now an example for other shtetl groups to follow—to raise requisite funds. Two of his addressees responded with contributions that covered 50 percent of the total cost. “Do not always assume that interested people are on the Internet,” Baston says. “Mark's letter made the initiative more tangible and weightier. Every fund raiser should send a snail-mail letter with a reply envelope.”

While some archive projects have been enormously successful, like Łomża, for which fundraising was intense and quick, others have had difficulty. Says Diamond:

We are a victim of our own history. Some shtetls, like Węgrów, have relatively few survivors. The number of people in the world with an interest in the shtetl clearly does not

match the previous Jewish population.

For Tobias, the greatest challenge is to keep the dedicated band of workers together as the project moves forward. He says:

The pace is increasing. We hope that funding will increase likewise, and we will have to cope with the faster pace of growth. We will need to find more volunteers as we expand.

Greater Good

The usefulness of the JRI-Poland database extends beyond the traditional genealogical circle. In the genetic and medical community, Diamond would not have been able to present “the cleanest gene pool ever” for his Beta-Thalassemia trait, had it not been for JRI-Poland. The bone marrow match for Jeffrey Bornstein would not have been possible. The database has also helped find descendants to resolve inheritance claims and to provide proof of age for pensioners.

Clearly, JRI-Poland has inspired database development among genealogists with an interest in geographical areas outside of Poland, as demonstrated by the existence of several other wb-based indexes.

Various border changes and migration patterns established Poland as a major center of European Jewish history, and a large proportion of Jewish genealogists with Eastern European roots have some connection to it. That makes the JRI-Poland database even more important.

Lipsius talks of several instances where Holocaust survivors have been able to find family, thanks to JRI-Poland and the ability to search for maiden names, since the married names may be unknown. “These are the rewards,” she says.

Barbara Krasner-Khait serves on JRI-Poland's board of directors and is a member of the Ostrów Mazowiecka Research Family. She served as a Shtetl CO-OP leader for Warsaw and a fund raiser for Brok. She writes frequently about JRI-Poland and about researching family medical history.

Professional Translations

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