

# JRI-Poland—Review and New Developments

by Stanley Diamond

This article reviews the origins and early development of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland), the home of Jewish records of Poland on the Internet; outlines some of its most significant achievements over the years; and demonstrates how it has become the family historian's indispensable partner for researching Jewish roots in Poland. As well, I share plans and expectations for what lies ahead as a result of a new agreement reached with the Polish State Archives.

## The News

On February 15, 2013, JRI-Poland ([www.jri-poland.org](http://www.jri-poland.org)) and the Polish State Archives (PSA) entered into a new multi-year agreement that will significantly and dramatically expand access to records for family historians tracing their Jewish roots to Poland.

The new agreement enables JRI-Poland to expand rapidly its current online database of indexes of five million records. With the support of family historians researching more than 550 towns with records in the PSA, indexes to more than one million additional records are expected to become available by the end of 2014.

The agreement reflects the resumption of cooperation between the PSA and JRI-Poland, whose landmark agreement from 1997–2006 resulted in the indexing of more than four million records; the listings are searchable in the JRI-Poland database.

In addition, the agreement also reflects the importance of technology for today's researchers. JRI-Poland and the PSA will institute a new Order Processing System to facilitate online processing of orders for records with payment by credit card. In addition, the PSA has begun a massive effort to digitize all vital records in their more than 30 regional archives and make them freely available online. JRI-Poland has already started to link its search results to the PSA's digital images of the Jewish records. On April 17, 2012, images of the first major batch of previously unindexed records became available online. The Order Processing System eventually will be phased out as digitized records become available online.

## Early Years

Poland, home to the largest percentage of world Jewry in the 19th century, has been the most fertile ground in Eastern Europe for genealogists researching their Jewish roots. Despite family stories that “nothing is left,” the volume of records surviving the upheavals of history and carefully preserved by the Polish State Archives is staggering.

The indexing proposal I sent to fellow genealogists on December 3, 1994, starts with: “ALL researchers with Polish roots dream about having access to ALL extracts, of EVERY record in the LDS microfilms for their area of



*Polish Consul General Andrzej Szydło and Stanley Diamond of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland sign agreement.*

interest. We know this is a dream that is unlikely to come to life quickly...” and later declares, “...if we don't try, we will be doomed to continue the duplication of work, as well as see time shoot by without these invaluable resources becoming much more accessible.” Now, in its *Chai* year (18 years since its founding), that early dream is a distant memory as JRI-Poland has entered an era of dramatic change that makes digital images of actual records instantly available on the Internet.

From its inception in 1995, the goal of JRI-Poland has been to create searchable, online indexes of Jewish records from current and former territories of Poland. Where such records are available, they may include towns that are now part of Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine. When the founders of JRI-Poland stated this ambitious objective as the organization was first evolving, they did not foresee the spectacular changes in technology that not only would facilitate its early success, but also would be the foundation for the dramatic new features introduced this year, specifically the linking of database search results to digital images of actual records.

Each year, the JRI-Poland presentation at the annual IAJGS conference on Jewish Genealogy includes a brief narrative on the birth of JRI-Poland, coupled with a deep sense of appreciation for my colleagues and co-founders, in addition to a description of JRI-Poland's latest developments and achievements.

The germ of the idea is directly related to my first visit to Salt Lake City in October 1994 as a participant in the annual Jewish Genealogical Research Trip with AVOTAYNU publisher Gary Mokotoff and professional genealogist Eileen Polakoff. After a week of scrolling through LDS (Mormon) microfilms of Jewish vital records of Poland in

search of relatives who might be carriers of my family's beta thalassemia genetic trait, I knew that I was repeating what so many others had done in the past and that a better way to do such research had to exist.<sup>1</sup>

In a December 1994 letter, I shared my frustrations and suggestions for a collaborative project with ten fellow genealogists interested in Poland. The letter struck a deep chord with Michael Tobias and Steve Zedek. Some months later, the Russian-Era Indexing-Poland project (REIPP) was born. From the beginning, Tobias has been the database manager while Zedek was the original project coordinator and webmaster. In what has turned out to be a life-changing decision, I agreed to take over as executive director in 1997 and renamed the project Jewish Records Indexing-Poland. While the huge database far exceeds what we imagined in 1995, it was Tobias' and Zedek's response to an embryo of an idea that laid the foundation on which the organization is built.

Since its modest beginnings in 1995, JRI-Poland has been the leader in providing country-based indexes for the Jewish genealogical world through the development of an ever-growing database incorporating vital records and a wide variety of other sources

Since those early days, JRI-Poland has gone from indexing records in the LDS microfilms to indexing vital and other types of Jewish records in various branches of the Polish State Archives (PSA) not filmed by the LDS. In addition, it has expanded to many other sources including censuses, army draft records, cemetery records, post-war family searches advertised in the *Monitor Polski* (Polish Gazette), marriage and death announcements in Polish newspapers, and even Polish-Jews wounded, killed or missing in the Russian Army in World War I. Researchers, the Polish State Archives and Poland as a whole has benefited from this unique project, one that became a model in the genealogical world.

Now, 12 years later, the JRI-Poland database includes indexes and extracts for more than five million birth, marriage, death and other records from more than 550 towns. The major component of the database is these vital records—and they constitute the world's largest online database of Jewish vital records.

### **Accomplishments and Acknowledgements**

At the 1999 International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) Conference on Jewish Genealogy, JRI-Poland was presented with the Outstanding Contribution via the Internet Award:

In recognition of an extraordinary database available via the Internet, which recently reached a half-million entries and continues to grow. This database not only helps countless researchers but also demonstrates what can be accomplished

through the cooperative energy of many volunteers and is an inspiration and model for databases covering other geographical areas.

In her article, "Breaking New Ground: The Story Of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland Project," Barbara Krasner-Khait wrote, "As of March 2001, the Jewish Records Indexing-Poland project reached one million names in its Internet-based database of indexes to Jewish records from more than 200 towns."<sup>2</sup> Khait continued, "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."

### **Those Who Have Benefitted**

JRI-Poland's database and knowledgeable volunteers have been invaluable in helping Hidden Children (those who were given to Polish families or convents by doomed Jewish neighbors) to trace their Jewish lineage, and, in some cases, actually to discover their own identity. Others have been helped to identify family members—sometimes even half-siblings—children of a father's first wife, for example, who perished in the Holocaust, and to memorialize them with Pages of Testimony at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

When a Jewish person with roots in Poland requires help in finding genetic matches, for example, to effect a bone marrow or tissue transplant or some other life-saving medical procedure, organizations and scientists in Poland have looked to JRI-Poland for help. The indexing of Jewish records facilitates the search for unknown relatives who could provide a genetic match to save a life.

Being able to locate quickly family records for proof of kinship has been another unanticipated benefit such as for descendants of Jewish-Polish families seeking to re-acquire Polish citizenship, providing information to governmental agencies representing potential heirs to estates located outside Poland, and even locating records to enable an Israeli woman to prove her Jewish heritage and therefore eligibility for a religious marriage.

JRI-Poland's database and its experts have contributed to the NBC documentary series, "Who Do You Think You Are?" that traces the roots of famous people, an example of which is the episode featuring Academy Award winner Gwyneth Paltrow. It began with the discovery of scores of JRI-Poland entries of her Paltrowicz ancestors from northern Poland.

JRI-Poland indexes and record extracts also are being used by Polish academics, the most recent being the historical demography study "Family and Kinship in the Jewish City of Piotrków Trybunalski in the 19th Century," by Tomasz Jankowski of the Wrocław University Institute of

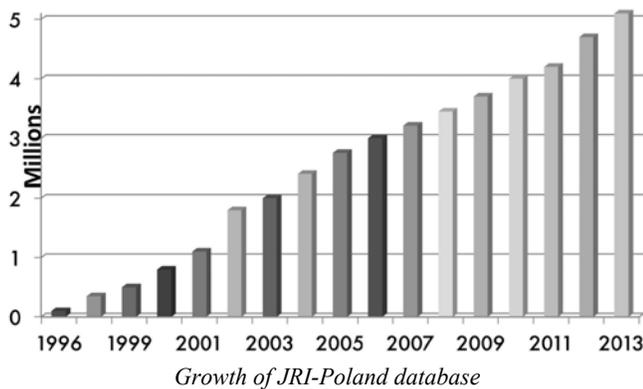
*Since its modest beginnings in 1995, JRI-Poland has been the leader in providing country-based indexes for the Jewish genealogical world.*

History, funded in part by a grant from the International Institute of Jewish Genealogy in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

The JRI-Poland database has been acknowledged by international award-winning author Alexander Beider as an important source for his three volumes on Jewish onomastics, the science or study of the origin and forms of proper names of persons or places, and a fourth volume on the etymology of Ashkenazi given names.<sup>4</sup>

Surnames in the JRI-Poland database constitute one-third of all surnames appearing in the 699,084 name Avotaynu Consolidated Jewish Surname Index (CJSI) developed from 42 different databases. The JRI-Poland component constitutes three times more surnames (than the next largest contributor).

JRI-Poland has helped foster good relations between Poland and the Jewish Diaspora and made people aware that all the records were not destroyed and of how carefully they have been preserved by the Polish State Archives and town civil records offices that hold the records



less than 100-years old.<sup>3</sup> In turn, this has been the inspiration for countless genealogists to make “roots” trips to Poland.

JRI-Poland “Your Town” pages and the “Virtual Shtetl” pages ([www.sztetl.org.pl/?lang=en\\_GB](http://www.sztetl.org.pl/?lang=en_GB)) of the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw are directly linked, town-by-town. The “Virtual Shtetl” pages commemorate and build research resources for more than 1,000 Polish *shtetlach*. JRI-Poland has Jewish record indexes from the birth, marriage, death and census records for the Jewish families that lived in many of these same towns. By using the two websites together, researchers are able not only to get names, dates and sources of family records from JRI-Poland, but also are able to learn about town histories and view town photographs from the Museum’s Virtual Shtetl pages. JRI-Poland is partnering with the museum to develop tools enabling the Museum’s resource center to provide guidance to visitors who are inspired to research their roots.

JRI-Poland has been internationally recognized and honored and is considered a model for other genealogical indexing projects. A key factor in its success has been the shtetl-specific fundraising model it created that encourages

researchers to fund the indexing of records for their towns.

Commenting on the recent multi-year agreement between the Polish State Archives and JRI-Poland, PSA’s General Director, Professor Wladyslaw Stepniak, observed:

The signing of this agreement will open a new phase in the cooperation between JRI-Poland and State Archives in Poland. I am convinced that the results of our mutual efforts will be helpful for many people interested in the centuries-old Polish-Jewish relations, shared history, and family history research.

While there have been countless JRI-Poland “success stories,” most too lengthy and dramatic to be described adequately here, one recent e-mail from Esther Minars reflects the essence of Director Stepniak’s words and in a way speaks for many of the heartfelt messages that my colleagues and I have received over the years. It reads in part:

My appreciation for Jewish Records Indexing-Poland is greater than the total contributions I have made. The benefits and friendships I gained are more than I could ever have dreamed. My parents came from a Jewish community that basically was erased from the face of the earth; then here comes Jewish Records Indexing-Poland to bring forth a small part of what remains of Jewish Lublin.

When I first found JRI-Poland on the Internet, it was like winning a lottery. My mother gave me all the names of her immediate and extended family going back to her great-grandparents. I found them all in the database... couldn’t believe my eyes. All this information, free on the Internet, wow, my mother’s family did exist, it wasn’t just a story, a legend. For me, a second generation Lubliner, whose parents were the only survivors of their large Lublin families, it was very emotional, I still get teary-eyed.

Not only did I benefit, my mother did too. My mother was a storyteller, blessed with an unusually strong memory. She remembered names of people in her vast extended family but could not tell me how they were related. Each time I would say to my mother, “Wait, I have to get on the computer, and I will tell you how this person was related to your mother,” I always found the family relationship in the JRI-Poland database, truly a gift.

I also have much to thank JRI-Poland in a very personal way, finding (my connection) to JRI-Poland’s Lublin expert Robinn Magid, not only a relation by marriage but now a dear friend.

### Future of JRI-Poland

As the management of JRI-Poland thinks of the almost inconceivable journey of the past 18 years and looks to the future, it recognizes the responsibility to preserve and manage properly all the data it has indexed—at the same time organizing for the huge task of indexing and image-linking the hundreds of thousands of additional records that become available each year as records reach one hundred years old and are moved from local civil registry offices to the PSA. To fulfill this responsibility, JRI-Poland will need the continued support of both individuals and organizations, friends and devoted volunteers and researchers who share its vision and feel so passionately

about the importance of both preserving and sharing JRI-Poland's data and ensuring that the indexing mission will continue.

As I near my 80th birthday, my new challenge is to plan for and arrange an orderly transition of management to a younger generation. However, the complexity of a large international Internet-based volunteer organization that has "grown like Topsy," and the ongoing indexing of records from more than 600 towns may well require hiring a full-time administrator to work with the new Executive Director. For the first time, fundraising will be for more than just indexing records. Fortunately, Jewish Records Indexing-Poland has established the credibility to make that possible and with it, to insure that in the end, all surviving Jewish vital and related records of Poland will have been documented.

#### Notes

1. "How I Traced the Beta Thalassemia Trait," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXII, No. 4, Winter 2006.

2. AVOTAYNU, Vol. XVII, No. 1, Spring 2001),

3. Jankowski's next study, "Beyond Eastern and Western Demographic Model. Age at Marriage and Infant Mortality among Eastern European Jews in the 19th and 20th Century," will tap JRI-Poland records from six to ten towns. In his research proposal, Jankowski stated that "Historical demography of the Jews has been neglected because of the huge amount of work needed to collect a sufficient data-

base." He also commented, "There also are more cultural reasons. Researchers interested in Jews tend to focus on religious and cultural issues, while demographers tend to neglect cultural issues as hard to convert into language of statistics. Unique and rich databases collected by JRI-Poland will significantly help to develop our knowledge of this field."

4. The Polish Act on Personal Data Protection of August 29, 1997, signalled an increasing interest in the rights of individual citizens that has accompanied the progressive democratization of public life in Poland. This is also reflected in Articles 47 and 51 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. Article 47 ensures the legal protection of the private and family life of citizens. Article 51 limits the circumstances in which the state can gather the personal data, and confers basic rights upon citizens, for instance the right to have the information pertaining to him/her protected.

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# Who? When? Where? Why?

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