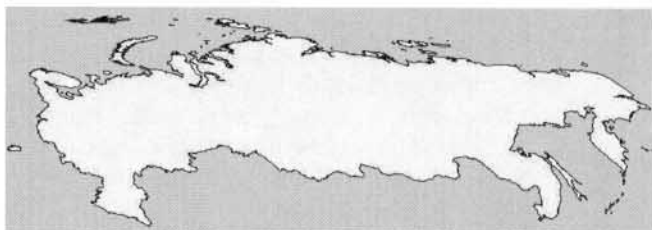
Russia

by Boris Feldblyum



The Russia discussed in this chapter is contemporary, post-Soviet Russia. Most often the country called Russia by our immigrant ancestors circa 1900 was the Imperial Russian Empire, a vastly larger land area. Be sure to read the RUSSIAN EMPIRE *chapter before reading this chapter; relevant information cited in that chapter is not repeated below.*

The 1917 Russian Revolution abolished the Pale of Settlement, the area where most Jews in the empire had been forced to live under czarist rule. Following the revolution, for the first time Jews were permitted to live anywhere in Russia—and they moved in large numbers to big cities. (Also for the first time, Jews were permitted to change their names to more Russian namesy—and many did. Abraham became Alexander, Boruch changed to Boris, and Velvel re-emerged as Vladimir.) But because of the virtual ban on Jewish residence outside the Pale prior to 1917, most Jews do not have roots in contemporary Russia prior to that date. Records kept in that area before 1917—and after, as explained below—have little to reveal about most Jewish families.

Twentieth-century Russian genealogical research has two unique aspects. First, birth, marriage and death records still are held in the archives of the municipal registry offices (called ZAGS), and the records are not deposited into the governmental archival system until they are 100 years old. The registry books generally are closed to researchers, except, perhaps, to fortunate individuals who make a personal appearance in a specific office and are able to convince a local official to search for precise information on a close, direct relative.

Second, a significant number of Soviet Jews were evacuated or lived beyond the reach of the Nazi extermination machine. This means that it is possible for Jewish genealogists with roots in the former Pale of Settlement to find living relatives in Russia today—an option not often pursued by Jewish genealogists. Those who have followed that path have been rewarded by connecting to families after some 70 to 80 years of separation of the branches.

Looking for people who live in Russia today involves an approach somewhat different from pure archival and library research. The first step is similar—to learn a bit about relevant Jewish history. The next step is to follow the methodology suggested below that is based on personal contact by telephone.

Jewish History in Russia

Russian czars acquired their Jews during the three 18th-century partitions of Poland. Before then, Jews were explicitly forbidden from living in the Russian Empire. At the time of the final partition of Poland in 1795, the Jews lived in the so-called "western lands," the territory of contemporary Belarus, Lithuania, central Ukraine and eastern Poland. Those areas comprised the Pale of Settlement in the early 19th century. In the more than 200 years since, many events influenced where the descendants of our former Russian relatives may be found today, or at least where one should look for traces of them. Although many emigrated around the turn of the 20th century (see MIGRATIONS), many others remained behind, and while great numbers of the second group were murdered during the Holocaust, many others who lived beyond the reach of the German army escaped. Sizeable numbers of their descendants may still live in Russia today. The timeline describes the internal movement of Russian Jewry.

Date	Event/Conditions
1765–1795	Poland is partitioned three times by Russia, Prussia and Austria.
1795–1915	Russian Jews are required to live within the Pale of Settlement. Exceptions are merchants of the first and second guilds, professionals and retired soldiers.
1820s–1840s	Jews from the Pale of Settlement migrate to the agricultural colonies of Novorossiya (today southern Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula). From there, many migrate further to such cities as Ekaterinoslav (now Dnipropetrovsk), Nikolaev, Simferopol and others. Odessa, a tax-free zone, is a magnet for many Jews.
1840s	Siberian gold rush. A relatively small number of Jews move east, where they become involved in trade. Many Jews are 1863 as punishment for their participation in the Polish uprising. By 1917, large communities existed in such Siberian cities as Irkutsk, Omsk, Tomsk and others. A page from an Irkutsk Jewish birth register reveals that almost all parents were registered residents of towns in the Pale of Settlement. Kainsk (today Kujbyshev in the Novosibirsk region) was popularly called the Siberian Jerusalem because of its large Jewish population.
1881–1914	First massive wave of Jewish emigration from Russia.
1914–1915	Accused by the czarist government of spying for Germany during World War I, Jews are expelled from the western areas (i.e., from hundreds of towns throughout the Pale of Settlement). Many who settle in southern Ukraine and southern Russia there the war.

1917–1939	The 1917 Russian Revolution abolishes the Pale of Settlement. Jews migrate to big cities in large numbers—not only to Moscow and Leningrad (today St. Petersburg), but to many industrial cities where employment was easier to obtain. Jews with higher education diplomas are assigned to work in factories throughout the Soviet Union.
1917–1920s	Many Jews, primarily from Siberia, emigrate to China, forming large communities in Harbin and elsewhere.
1934	The Jewish Autonomous Region is founded in 1934 in the Khabarovsk region as a "homeland" for Soviet Jews. Thousands migrate at first, but many subsequently return or relocate elsewhere.
1939	Poland is divided, once again, this time between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in the early days of World War II. The Soviet Union occupies Western Belarus, Bessarabia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and western Ukraine. Many Jewish professionals, business people, and individuals suspected of less-than-sympathetic attitudes toward the Soviet regime are arrested and deported to Siberia. Many die along the way. Some return in the late 1950s and 1960s. Many Polish Jews who manage to escape east are accused of espionage and sent to the GULAG (GULAG is a Russian acronym for *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerej* or The Main Camp Administration.) Those not arrested often end up in Siberia and Middle Asia.
1941–1945	Soviet Jews and non-Jewish refugees settle throughout Siberia, the Far East and Middle Asia. Many return.
1945–1950s	Jews from the former USSR, primarily those from the Baltic States, go to displaced persons camps and from there to Palestine, the United States and elsewhere in the West. Surviving Jews from small towns move to larger cities.
1945–1946	Jews from Harbin, China, escape to Australia and the United States ahead of the advancing Soviets.
1950s	Soviet Union allows "former citizens of the Polish Republic" to resettle in Socialist Poland. Many Jews from formerly Polish areas of western Ukraine and Belarus, and those from southern Lithuania, as well as some who manage to obtain forged documents, move to Poland. Many go on to Israel and the West. The vast majority of the remaining Polish Jews emigrate in 1968 during the campaign of then-President Gomulka in which Jews were openly accused of being a "fifth column."
1960s	Jewish emigration to Israel in small numbers allowed from the Baltic republics.
1971–1979	Mass Jewish emigration takes place to Israel and, from about 1975, to the United States.
1991–present	Following the demise of the Soviet Union, mass Jewish migration takes place from the former USSR throughout the world.

Methodology

Traditional genealogical methods do not lend themselves to finding relatives living in Russia today for a number of reasons which are described below. The techniques suggested in this chapter, based on establishing personal contacts with living people, reflect the author's personal experience.

Preparation. The steps to take will depend on the researcher's goals and the information possessed. More people are alive today than were alive a hundred years ago, and as much as one might like to subject everyone to a "relative test," it is not feasible. To engage the individuals who are contacted, prepare in advance a concise version of the family tree, one that can be described in little more than 30 seconds.

Suggested Steps. Analyze known information. Extract names, dates and town names from documents gathered about the family. When the Russian names used are unknown, think about names people would have used in the old country. No Russian Jew was ever named Morris Cohen, for example, but the anglicized name Morris Cohen provides clues. Once outside Russia, many Jews adopted names that were more easily spelled or recognizable in their new country. Thus, the Russian version of Morris Cohen might have been Moishe-Leib Kogan or something similar (see GIVEN NAMES).

When the name of the ancestral town is not known, hope to have the good fortune to be searching for an uncommon surname. In such a case, consider contacting every person found with that name.

1. When introducing yourself to these persons, it is a good idea to have an opening phrase such as, "I am looking for descendants of Moishe Kogan who lived in Ovruch near Zhitomir and emigrated in 1910. Is your family from that area?"
2. Learn how to read, write and pronounce the ancestral family name in Russian, Yiddish, Polish, Lithuanian or any other language that might have been used.
3. Gather information on the whereabouts of the surname under investigation. Even if one knows for a fact that an ancestral family lived in Ovruch near Zhitomir, that fact is probably about one hundred years old. The person with whom a researcher today may be trying to establish a link possibly knows of only one other nearby town, Korosten, for example, where family lived after Ovruch.

   It is possible to discover where in Russia and/or the Soviet Union an ancestral family name was known to exist. One way is to review old city, business and telephone directories for Russia available in the West (see DIRECTORIES). If, for example, the name Kogan was found in 12 Russian cities and towns before 1917, check Soviet telephone directories for these cities for all years. With luck, such a search will unearth published directories for two or three cities—but telephone directories for a large number

of former Soviet cities are available on the Internet today, almost all written in Cyrillic.

Another source is Alexander Beider's *Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire.* The book is based largely on Russian voter registers of the early 1900s and may include family names not listed in directories.

Still another source is the various indexes available on the Internet, including cemetery lists (see JEWISHGEN.ORG and the indexes posted by JRI-Poland at WWW.JRI-P.ORG, as well as any search engine, such as GOOGLE.COM or ALTAVISTA.COM.) The Ellis Island Data Base (WWW.ELLISISLANDRECORDS.ORG) is a "must" source to consult, but because it includes so many errors, it is necessary to search it creatively. Consult Steven Morse's One-Step program (WWW.STEVEMORSE.ORG) for assistance.

Compile lists of names from the U.S. and other western telephone directories posted on the web. Pay special attention to foreign versions of given names (e.g., Mikhail instead of Michael, or Yelena instead of Helen). Contact the people with foreign spellings first; most likely they emigrated from the former Soviet Union and they speak English. Call them and see where the conversation goes. Typically, people born in the former Soviet Union are less likely to be irritated by an "invasion of privacy" than are many westerners; chances are good that they will be willing to speak with a caller.

4. Prepare a list of family names and cities where the family lived. Compiling a list of specific, family-related questions is premature at this stage.
5. The most productive approach is to ask someone who speaks the appropriate language fluently to conduct the telephone search. Second best is to have an interpreter join the conversations on an extension telephone. Verbal communication is preferable to either e-mail or postal mail. A person is most likely to answer a letter only if the information sent matches almost exactly what he knows—and the letter motivates him to answer. A telephone call is more likely to jolt a person into thinking about what he knows regarding the family. Whether or not he is a "match," the primary goal is to let him talk. He may recall a bit of information that is irrelevant to him—but vital to you (see the discussion of the Morokhovsky search below).

Remember that only about one in ten e-mail messages these days is a real letter; the rest are advertisements. Since most computer users have become proficient at scanning long lists of incoming e-mail and deleting "junk" without reading it, carefully consider what to write in the subject line. It must stand out and be noticed. A suggested subject line might read, "Seeking Kogan (Kagan) family from Zhitomir, Ukraine, area." Avoid too specific a message, because the recipient might not recognize town names and, therefore, delete the message. Be brief, businesslike and formal in the introductory letter. Excessive details may scare the recipient. Address and sign the letter properly. If an old photograph of the Russian family is available, include a scan, about 50–60Kb in size. Ask the recipient to respond briefly, even if he or she does not think a relationship exists. If the e-mail is not answered within a month, send a postal service letter. Make it brief, include a photograph or two, if available, and a self-addressed stamped envelope.

How to Conduct a Conversation To Gain New Knowledge

The first priority is to elicit general information. Remember that the person on the other end of the line may know next to nothing about his or her family's past or may consider her own knowledge insignificant. The main goal is to listen. It is helpful to ask short, probing questions to which the answer is likely to produce a story. For example, rather than asking, "Did you have relatives in Odessa, Minsk, or Vilnius?" inquire about one city at a time. Avoid questions, especially in the beginning of a conversation, that can be answered "yes" or "no." "Did you have relatives ... ?" is one such question. A better version might be, "Do you remember if your parents ever talked about their Odessa relatives?" Although the immediate answer may be "no," the individual's memory will have started working on the subconscious level, and two minutes later he may exclaim, "I just remembered!"

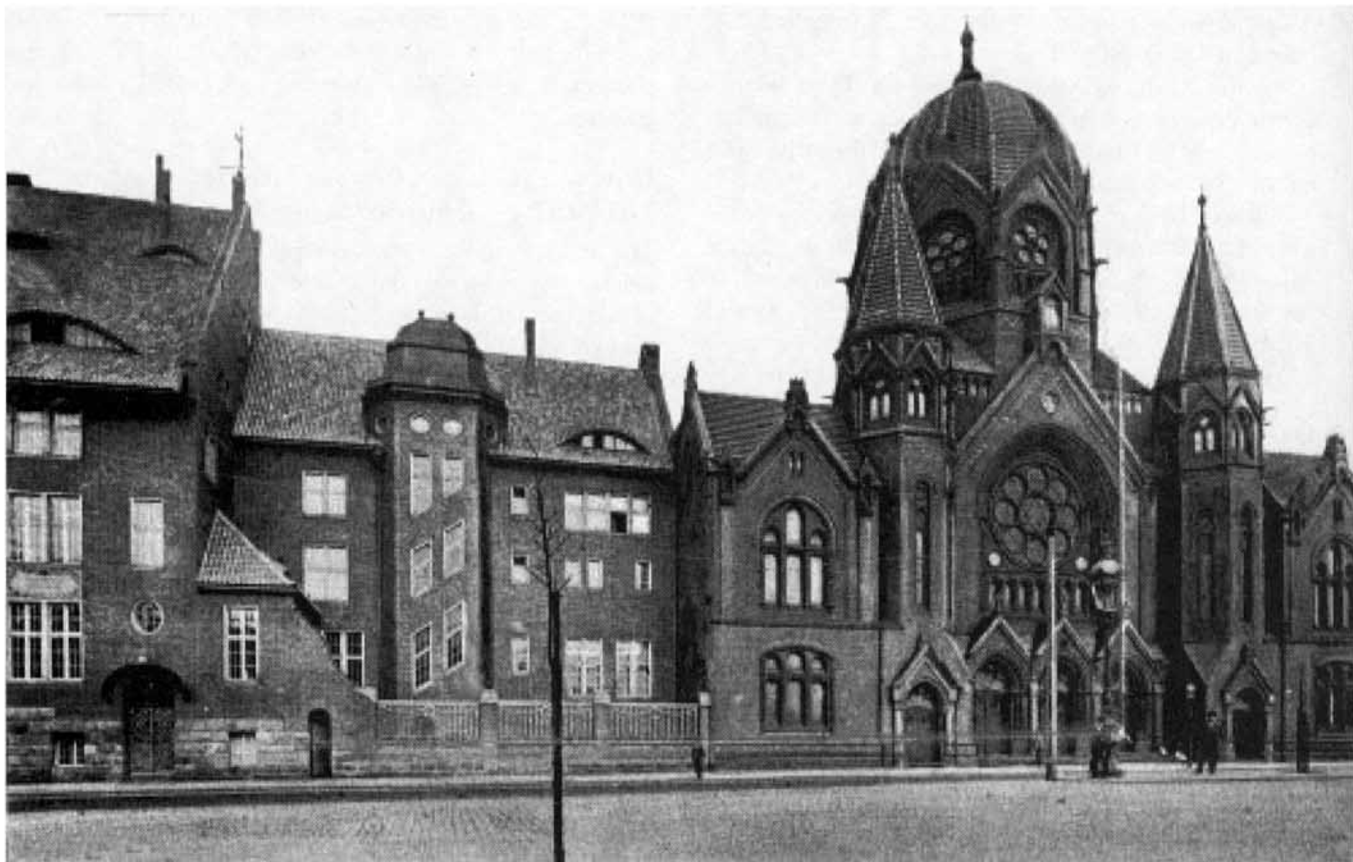
Ask the person for names of parents and grandparents. These may provide clues to the family naming pattern. For example, Sergei Feldman may say that his father was Alexandr Mikhailovich, without realizing that a researcher (simultaneously and analytically) hears the "Abram ben Mikhoel or "Abram ben Moshe" patronymic combination. Patronymics are powerful clues.

Always ask if the person has relatives in the United States and/or other countries. After noting the names, ask whom to call next for more information. Ask who are the eldest relatives. Ask, in a very general manner, if the person has heard of relatives who emigrated from Russia before the Revolution. Most likely everyone had such relatives, even if the knowledge has been lost. In the 1930s, Soviet citizens with relatives abroad often were accused of espionage and imprisoned for 20 years—or even executed. Therefore, such information about relatives abroad was kept from children—who have since became grandparents themselves, often with only a vague notion of their family's past. If the person has a connection to the city of your interest, ask who else from that city emigrated to the West. These people may be related without being aware of it.

When making telephone calls to the former Soviet Union, be aware that the person who answers the telephone may not be the one whose name is listed in the directory. A telephone is a commodity that remains with the apartment, listed under the original name. The apartment may have been exchanged, rented, or sold more than once, while the telephone has remained listed under the original family name.

The first question should be, "Is this the Kogan residence?" The response may vary from "yes" to "no" to "Who are you calling?" to "What do you want?" to "Who are you?"

Take care not to rush the pace of the conversation. The quality of the connection may not be good; conversations often are relayed via satellite, which introduces a few seconds'



Jewish synagogue in Koenigsburg (today Kaliningrad) in the early 20th century

delay and an echo. Moreover, people in the former Soviet Union often answer before you have had a chance to ask your question in full. If you are not satisfied with the answer, blame the poor quality of the connection and ask your question again.

Ask if the person has any family photographs. Do not ask for copies unless he offers. Copying facilities are not as plentiful in Russia as they are in the West, and a seemingly simple task may be a half-day chore.

Ask if the person has access to the Internet and an e-mail address. You may want to establish a special account that is simple to convey over the phone (e.g., 22222@YAHOO.COM) or that consists of letters that also exist in the Cyrillic alphabet (e.g., a, e, k, m). The @ symbol does not exist in Russian and is often called *sobachka* (little doggie).

It is impossible to predict how the conversation will develop after the first question. The primary goal is to establish contact and a relationship with the person.

The following case illustrates some of the techniques described above. It started with an e-mail inquiry from Adrian in Australia:

> I am trying to find out if there are any surviving relatives from my grandmother's family in the former USSR. We know they originated from Dnipropetrovsk in the Ukraine in the early 1900s; several then moved to Moscow around World War II, and nothing has been heard of since. We have names of about 11 families and addresses of a few. We have some correspondence in old Russian that could help define the spelling of names. We are in Australia.

In response to my willingness to help him, Adrian sent a long list of family names, including Gorodetsky, Boltyansky, Tarnopolsky, Umansky, Volynsky, Morokhovsky and a few others. The list was not promising. With the exception of Morokhovsky from Dnipropetrovsk, the names were too common. Adrian provided details about one uncle Sasha, a doctor, his daughter, Mira, and son, Lyusik—university students in the early 1930s.

The first step was to sample names from U.S. telephone directories. This is preferable to an online search where telephone directory names appear in groups of 10; to copy all of them takes too long. Phone Disc, used at a local library, produced approximately 650 names. Every name was well represented except Morokhovsky. The 150 Gorodetskys and 55 Umanskys were ignored, reasoning that if one Morokhovsky were found, chances were good that he was related. A logical step, but as events later showed, it was wrong.

Next all known online directories on the web were searched for Morokhovsky—they yielded nothing. An unusual source for names was then searched: the Library of Congress catalogue (WWW.LOC.GOV). (The search feature on the AMAZON.COM website is another good source for finding a person with a given surname.) The Library of Congress catalogue revealed

two books, both about the English language and both published in Kiev in the 1970s. One of the authors may have had a Jewish given name; the other almost certainly did not.

Introductions to both books were copied at the Library of Congress. Aside from the obligatory praises to the Communist Party's contribution and its wise guidance in whatever field a book was about, books published in the Soviet Union also included the names of reviewers, editors and other information potentially valuable to genealogists.

The next step was to call Kiev telephone information—but no Morokhovskys were listed. After carefully re-reading the introductions to both books, we called Kiev information again. The operator produced the telephone number of a man listed as a reviewer in one of the books.

The subsequent conversation went as follows. The opening question was, "May I talk to Professor Zhluktenko?" Reply: "He died several years ago. I am his daughter."

"I am trying to help a man who does not speak Russian to find traces of his family." Yes, she had known both Morokhovskys, husband and wife. They also had died, and no, they did not have children. We talked a bit more and she said, "Call me back in half an hour. I will talk to the woman who assumed the chairmanship of the university department when Professor Morokhovsky died."

Half an hour later she said, "You know, they did have a son. Here is his telephone number." After I wondered aloud why I had not gotten the number from information, she replied, "It is probably listed under the previous owner's name." How could I have forgotten! The telephone is a commodity in the former Soviet Union.

After several weeks, I reached Nikolai Morokhovsky—another disappointment. His family had come from Kursk province; his grandfather was a railroad engineer. Kursk province is in the heartland of Russia, outside the Pale of Settlement, and railroad engineer was not exactly a Jewish occupation. We continued to talk, and eventually he said that there was an aunt in Vologda, a city a few hundred miles north of Moscow. "Yes, you can call her. Here is the number. By the way, she spells her name Marakhovsky."

That was a little shocker. I, who preach to others that spellings do not matter, had not thought about other spelling possibilities.

I called Vologda. "I am calling from America to look for relatives." The woman on the other end of the line was delighted to hear from me. "How nice and noble it is. People treat each other like animals, and here you are doing such a nice thing." I probed with my questions. No leads. The family is from Kursk, as Russian as they come. There are no Jews in the family. Well, actually, one grandfather's brother had married a Jew, and the family excommunicated him; 30 years later they reconciled. Another dead end. We talked a bit more, and she recalled that many years ago in Donetsk (Ukraine), she was surprised to see their family name in the telephone book.

Back to Ukraine. I called information. There is indeed one Morokhovsky listing. The man was polite, but that was about it. No Uncle Sasha, no connections to Dnipropetrovsk. He had a very Russian-sounding name and patronymics, but his manner of speech reminded me a lot of my own uncle, and I did not rush to hang up—or maybe it was because I had no other leads. I kept the conversation going. "Can I talk to anybody else in your family?"

"Well," he answered, "There is a sister." "Is she also in Donetsk?" "No, she lives in Haifa(!)" "Can I call her?" "Sure. Here is the number."

I was elated. He was Jewish! I thanked him and immediately dialed Haifa. His sister was an extremely curious and talkative woman. It turned out that she was not a sister, but a niece. "What do you mean, Uncle Sergei did not know about Dnipropetrovsk connection? They emigrated from there just three years ago; did he forget or what?" Of course, they know the Morokhovskys I am seeking. They were relatives, and Mira Morokhovsky used to visit them frequently. She never married, lived in Dnipropetrovsk. No, she does not remember Mira's address, but I am welcome to call later when the mother is home.

After several more weeks of research, telephone calls and letters to archives, the Jewish community and various individuals revealed that Mira Morokhovsky had died. Her death certificate showed she had died three years before the family emigrated to Haifa. The woman in Haifa had left Dnipropetrovsk only three years earlier, but the timeline of her memory was already skewed. Adrian was happy to establish contact with the family in Haifa and with their help later was successful in searching for other members of his family.

There were several parallel investigations of other Morokhovskys. The most memorable was a short exchange of letters with a college professor found via the Internet. He wrote a sad letter, saying that his father had adopted this family name for unknown reasons. He always had been too busy to talk to his father about the past and the family history, and now the father is dead and he was alone in the world.

This project was the first one in a series of similar searches. Fortunately, most of them were successful, producing a tremendous feeling of satisfaction at being able to reconnect families after so many decades.