



How to prepare for Genealogy Tour in Poland?

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It can be said that there are four factors for a successful genealogy tour: a bit of luck, and preparation, preparation, preparation :) As always, we take a big part of that on ourselves, however, a lot still depends on you!

From our experience, the more you know about your family, prior to your arrival, the greater your chances of success in finding new records, ancestral villages, or your ancestor's homesteads and maybe even some relatives living in Poland today.

Most of our guests have worked on their family history for years. You might ask yourself if it makes sense to come if you are just a genealogy beginner? Of course it does, however, in this case we will still need your involvement in the preparation!

With the help of our genealogy guides and researchers, you can also achieve some of your goals and with a little bit of luck, surpass your expectations!

Do not put it off for tomorrow. The sooner you start preparation, the better!

Here is our small tutorial about what you should definitely do before you begin your journey to your ancestral land.

Set your goals

Remember: you will never know everything about your ancestors, you will not even manage to trace all of them during just one journey. Genealogy is such an endless passion, the more you have, the more you want, or as we say in Poland: "apetyt rośnie w miarę jedzenia" (The appetite grows with what it feeds on"). Do not let yourself get too distracted by so many different facts, places and desires.

First, you need to determine which ancestors are the most important for you to research, their geographic locations, cities, villages and what your goals are. Ask yourself what are your expectations from the tour? What is your minimal and maximal plan? What would you like to do? To focus on the past and get to the earliest existing sources about your family? Maternal line, paternal line or both? Or maybe what is most important for you is just to find the place where your ancestors house used to stand? Maybe your dream is to meet your distant cousins still living in some small Polish village? Of course you can do much of this during one tour, however you should know your MAIN GOAL.

Gather as much information about your ancestors as you can

If you have been doing your family research for years, you probably have already discovered a great deal of information. But what about the beginners?

First and foremost, you need to **discover the place of origin** (a town or most often a tiny village) where your forefathers were born in the "old country". This is the crucial first step. You can learn about your family place of origin by talking with the oldest members of your family, old letters from Poland (if there were any), ship passenger list, censuses, extract from the church records from Poland (lucky you if you have them!) or indexes of vital records found online. But even if you think that you found the name of the village of your ancestors, you have to be careful. There might be several villages with the same names! You found out that your great grandfather came from the village of Nowa Wieś? Well, there are exactly 50 Nowa Wieś in today's Poland! And there is no guarantee that "your" Nowa Wieś is located in today's Poland. It may well be in Ukraine, Belarus or Germany, where for centuries, people of Polish origin have lived,

because of the constant changing of country land borders that has taken place over hundreds of years.

So how do you determine which village is the right one? It would be perfect if you knew the name of the parish or the county. Usually, it will be enough if you found out the name of the town near your village. For many older records, from the time of the partitions of Poland (the entire 19th century), even the language in which the document is written (Polish Russian, Latin or German) and the form of recording records, may be very helpful.

Try to find any old letters written by your ancestors to or from Poland, **photographs** (check the reverse for any names, dates and places names). You might find old addresses from Poland on the envelopes. **Check the smallest details** - all of this information might be priceless for your research process.

"The slightest little hint might reveal big rewards"
Adam

Search for some documents online: birth, marriage, death records, censuses, ship manifests etc.

Below, are some useful online resources that can help you find places of residence , based on known (or at least presumable) surnames and dates:

<https://familysearch.org/>

<http://ancestry.com>

<http://ellisland.org>

<http://geneteka.genealodzy.pl>

<http://poznan-project.psnc.pl/>

<https://www.genealogiawarchiwach.pl/>

"What surprised me? The amount of documents the LDS church has scanned and indexed. I then researched the village and church just to make sure it all still existed."
Susanne

On the **PolishOrigins Forum** there is a section entitled "Research in the USA and other countries outside Poland". You might find some useful information about ports of entry, local institutes, websites and other ways to research your roots, before coming to Poland.

But first and foremost: **interview your relatives!** The oldest people in your family have valuable information you just have to ask the right questions. And listen carefully.



Do not be afraid to ask others

Subscribe to **PolishOrigins Forum** or other genealogy websites and groups. Post a message about your ancestral places and surnames. You might receive some useful tips from other users and even find people interested in the same names.

On PolishOrigins forum you can create your personal page, adding your ancestral villages and ancestors' names. This way you can find other people with similar area interest. See examples of PO Personal Pages of others:

<http://polishorigins.com/shellie>

<http://polishorigins.com/Zenon>

You can also post a message describing your case and ask specific questions.

Create your family tree

Sketch at least the most basic family tree. Paper version will be useful on the way, however we recommend the use of some website for online trees, such as Ancestry, MyHeritage etc. or a family tree software.

Later, you will be able to work on it as your research project will develop, either on your own or with your genealogy guide.

Make multiple copies of important documents,

pictures and other other information you have on your family, to be able to leave a copy with your relatives. Having pre- printed genealogy charts is very useful to share with relatives (and to explain how you are related).

You can also **prepare small cards** to leave your address with people you meet. This might be useful in case they think of something after you leave they can write back to you.

General preparation for travelling in Poland

Sometimes minor cultural differences and ways of everyday functioning, might play a toll on someone who is not used to them. Do not let yourself to be surprised by any details and do not let small inconveniences distract you.

Here's a list of general tips from our dear guests:

Contact your **credit card** companies to inform you will be traveling to Poland. Ask to unblock your card for the use of **ATM** (cash machines) which are easily accessible in all bigger towns in Poland. Have a credit card with a PIN - it is the most popular type used



in Poland (however the one with just magnetic stripe and signature authorization will also work).

Phone: If you would like to have the Polish number check with your cell phone company to see if your phone is unlocked (if it doesn't have sim lock). With an unlocked cell phone you can buy a prepaid Polish sim card and you would just change out the sim card in your phone. Your phone has to be compatible with GSM network sprint (American phones use the CDMA network). Check this with your carrier. Installing Skype on your mobile phone might help in communicating with your family (**there are free WiFi networks in most of the hotels and B+B's** in Poland).

Leave all pertinent information with your family at home (you will receive from us the detailed itinerary with hotel addresses and guide contact - make a copy of it for your relatives)

Make a **copy of your passport** and keep it separately.

While travelling **keep small change** of Polish zlotys in your pocket for the WC, tips in the restaurants, cabs, etc.

If you are travelling for a long time you have to think about your **laundry**. In Poland, there are very few public laundries and they are mostly in the bigger cities. Laundry service is not offered by all of the hotels. Sometimes a good solution might be to book an apartment, instead of a hotel (apartments have the equipment such as washing machine). You can bring some detergent specifically made for washing in the hotel sink or Tide Pods (recommended by our guests). Also be aware, that in Poland, the laundry usually dries hung on a wood rack, or just a string, since automatic dryers are very rare.

Have some clothing in your carry on luggage, in case your checked luggage is lost.

Be prepared for walking quite a lot, especially in cities such as Kraków and Warsaw. Of course, we often organize trips for our elderly guests who may have some mobility problems. Comfortable shoes is a must in any case!

Interaction with the local people may well be a very rewarding experience, however, to do this, you should first **learn some basic Polish phrases**. Even such basic phrases as: dzień dobry (good morning), dziękuję (thank

you), some family words such as *babcia* (granny) will help you a lot. Our guests recommend the website with free language courses: [Duolingo](#), you might try their Polish for English speakers online course. You might have a translation app. downloaded to your phone, like the most popular google translate (which also works off-line if you download given language package on your phone).

Some books about Poland? Our guests recommended "[The Essential Guide to Being Polish](#)" written by Anna Spysz & Marta Turek and of course [Rick's Steves guide to Eastern Europe](#).

See also the section [Books and Movies on PolishOrigins Forum](#)

What to take with you?

First and foremost: **try not to overpack!**

Make your luggage as light as you can.

During our Genealogy Tours you will be probably moving around quite a lot.

Traveling light will make this a far better experience. Also, the less you bring with you, the more souvenirs you can bring back :-).

Think about outer garments that are lightweight, easy to pack, water resistant and warm. You do not have to worry about official and elegant clothes (unless you plan to go to the opera or a wedding).

Take with you a **digital camera** and **voice recorder**. Such basic equipment is nowadays in each mobile phone device.

A portable **scanner** might be useful during the family meetings to scan old photographs and documents. Most probably you will not be allowed to scan any records in parish or state archives, so do not count on this (sometimes they let to use digital camera, or you have to pay to get some pages scanned by the archivists, sometimes you cannot copy the records at all).

Our guides are usually also copying the documents for you, taking pictures and sometimes documenting the important moments - you will receive such files after the tour's end.

You might take a **portable hard drive** for the storage of photos, scans and other files, however there are also many technologies for online resources storage (so-called cloud storage solutions), such as Google Drive,

Dropbox, etc.

Apart from photos of your ancestors and old documents that you might have in your collection, **take some pictures of your living family members**. Some of our guests have even prepared the albums or photo books - these were very useful during the meetings with relatives.

"Pictures are worth 1,000 words (especially because I don't speak Polish!). Having photos of our common ancestors, the 'American cousins', and my own family really allowed me to connect with my relatives. There was one magical moment when my Polish relative had the same exact wedding photo as I had brought - it was amazing and that moment clearly demonstrated the connection we shared"
Brian

You can bring **some small gifts** with you, like some copies of your ancestors photo. You can get some inexpensive photos made at Walgreens. Some postcards, music or some specialities from the area where you live might be good idea. To limit your luggage you may also buy some small gifts in Poland: chocolates, pastries from local bakery or just a bottle of vodka (beware: you will have to probably take part in drinking it :-))

Other useful equipment: compression

hosiery for the plane and decompression ear plugs, electric adapters (220v/50 cycles. All-purpose transformer and 2 - prong adapter is required for U.S. appliances).

If you are visiting churches be prepared for some donations (50 - 100 Polish zlotys). Although it is not required, however it is very often expected and opens the door to effective research in parish archives. You will need some cash for this.

Sometimes supplies for cleaning headstones might be useful, such as tooth brushes, small containers of soap, gardening supplies to cut down weeds. Of course , you can buy these things in Poland, should they be needed).

Documenting your trip

Write a daily journal to document your travel and genealogy discoveries. You will no believe how fast things can happen during the tour! One minute you might feel that all is lost , and the next moment you are sitting in a garden with your distant relatives, aunts,uncles and cousins and there are more people on the way who want to meet you. Do not let the moment escape. It is hard to have this self-discipline, especially when you

are tired after a busy day, but it always pays off!

We also encourage our guests to publish memories and travel notes on our [blog](#). This is a wonderful souvenir and your story is being read and commented by other people interested in genealogy, sharing similar memories or just by your newly met relatives.

And what about coming alone?

You have a huge travelling experience, you like independence and you feel at ease in genealogy? Maybe you are considering organising the genealogy tour on your own. Of course we do not want to discourage you, however here are several aspects worth consideration.

Firstly: during genealogy tour you are usually going to visit small villages. Driving there might be a problem for someone not familiar with Polish roads (which might be both in perfect or very poor condition, even paved or dirt). The roads in countryside are not well marked.

Be aware that most of the cars in Poland have manual gearbox (transmission). You have to get used to this or you need to rent a

car with automatic gearbox (transmission) (check with the car rental company first).

Although in bigger cities, most people working in the services sector speak some English, this is very unlikely in the smaller villages, parishes and local state archives. Doing genealogy research on your own will only be possible if you speak fluent Polish and can read historical records on your own. These records are usually written in Polish, Russian, German, and Latin.

Usually the language barrier is the main reason why guests are choosing the organised genealogy tour with an English speaking guide and researcher.

"A trip to Poland to research family may not always be successful - there is no guarantee that you will find the information that you are looking for. Sometimes the church won't cooperate with you or grant you access to records. Or sometimes your family information is not available. However, if you do your homework before planning your trip, you will greatly increase your chances of success and you will be more likely to find family in Poland. Having a good Polish guide is probably the most important part of your trip once you arrive in Poland. A personal tour guide who has experience visiting small villages and viewing records is worth every penny! "
Shellie

To sum up:

Regardless of how advanced your research is, or how vast your travel experiences are, or how accurate your knowledge of Polish history, geography and culture, the most important thing is to **have clear objectives, be aware of the limitations** you may encounter, and most of all to **have the motivation** to fulfil your dream.

We hope that this article will help you in making decisions which may bring lifetime memories for you and breakthrough discoveries for your whole family.

If your decision about coming to Poland is already made, maybe these few tips will help to make your trip one of the most wonderful experiences of your life!

If you still have questions or if you need help

in preparing your Genealogy Tour, do not hesitate to contact us at tours@polishorigins.com.

To find out more about our Genealogy Tours visit [our website](#).

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Special thanks to our honorable guests: Susanne, Luann, Janina, Jim, Mike, Annemarie, Sharon, Rick, Carol, Adam, Brian, Shellie and James whose experiences and help in writing this article was invaluable.

Read Mike's article about travelling in Poland (not only very useful but very well and pointedly written) <http://mierzwagenealogy.com/mgs/traveling-to-poland/>