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Documenting Victims of the Holocaust

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How do you document a member of your family who vanished without a trace, whose immediate family disappeared too, whose religious records were destroyed, who lived in an area where government sources are uncooperative in providing records? Some may conclude that it would be more productive to set the search aside and concentrate on more fertile areas. When the number of family members that fit this profile is one or two, the conclusion might be valid. When the number of family members is in the hundreds, it poses a problem that must be solved. Virtually all Jewish-American genealogists with roots in central and eastern Europe fall into the latter category.

As a second generation American whose ancestors arrived in the United States at the turn of the century from Russia and Poland, my family was safe in the United States during World War II but for those family members who fought during the War; the Holocaust was an event that happened to Jews, but other Jews. This viewpoint ended shortly after I began identifying the descendants of my third-great grandfather Tuvia David Mokotow (c1774–1842), a merchant of Warka, Poland. To date, I have documented over 300 descendants of my ancestor who were murdered during the Holocaust. I have located fewer than twenty survivors.

What is significant to the genealogist is that this is not a list of 300 names. During the past twenty years, I have been able to locate information that has made it possible to determine the birth date, death date, hometown and occupation of many of the victims. I found documentation that described the family structure of the victims: who the parents, the grandparents, and the children were. In certain cases, there was information at the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and U.S. National Archives that allowed tracing of these disappeared branches back to Tuvia David Mokotow. Access to genealogy-related material on the Internet also aided in uncovering additional information.

THE MOKOTOWSKIS OF OTWOCK, POLAND

When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, precipitating World War II, more than fifty men, women, and children named Mokotowski lived in the town of Otwock, Poland, a suburb of Warsaw. When Germany surrendered in April 1945, not one of these people was alive. Those who were not victims of the atrocities committed against Jews in Otwock were deported to Treblinka on August 19, 1942, and immediately gassed to death. My research demonstrated that all persons named Mokotow, Mokotoff, and Mokotowski were descended from Tuvia David Mokotow. Therefore, as Mokotoff family historian, it was my responsibility to document how these persons were part of the family and find as much information about their lives as possible.

FIRST-PERSON SOURCES

Even though many Holocaust victims had no immediate surviving family members, there are still people that remembered them. These remembrances have been documented in two of the most important sources of information about Holocaust victims: yizkor books and Pages of Testimony.
YIZKOR BOOKS

After World War II, the survivors of the Holocaust published books that memorialized the destroyed Jewish communities of Europe, called yizkor books (yizkor means “memorial” or “remembrance” in Hebrew). They commemorate not only the victims but also the Jewish communities themselves. To date, more than 1,200 towns have been commemorated in this manner. The New York Public Library has digitized approximately 700 of these books and placed them on the Internet at http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/jws/yizkorbooks_intro.cfm.

Although each book was written independently of the others, yizkor books have a typical structure. The first section describes the history of the Jewish community of the town from its inception, sometimes hundreds of years ago, to the events of the Holocaust which invariably culminated in the destruction of all Jewish religious property (synagogues, cemeteries, etc.) and the immediate murder of the Jewish population or deportation to labor or extermination camps. For the genealogist, this overview section provides much material about the Jewish community life of the town. The next section is a group of stories that are the personal remembrances of survivors about their individual families. If the family historian is fortunate enough to find an article about the victims of his family, it usually contains a wealth of information, sometimes quite poignant.

For example, the yizkor book of Przedecz, Poland, has a description of Bronka Mokotow, a 17-year-old Holocaust victim who was gassed at Treblinka, written by her brother, who left Poland in the late 1930s for Palestine. “The Purim meal always brings me to sentimental thoughts for my sister Bronka was born at that time. Who wasn’t able to recognize her, with two pigtails on her head? She was charming and noble as well as quiet and serious. People who knew this girl told me that when she grew up, she turned into a very nice and high lady.” Even this statement is of genealogical significance. The brother indicates his sister was born on the Jewish holiday of Purim. In an interview, he told me his sister was four years his junior. This pinpointed Bronka’s birthday as March 11, 1926. It was confirmed a few years later when I was able to get a transcript of her birth record.

The next section of a yizkor book is devoted to families in which there were no survivors. They are usually brief, one- or two-paragraph descriptions headed by the name of the father and mother as well as the names of the children. Where the name of a parent could not be remembered, it is left blank. If the children’s names were not remembered, the notation might be “three children” or “two sons and a daughter.”

The final section is a necrology—a list of all the victims from the town.

Almost all yizkor books are written in Hebrew and Yiddish. This creates a challenge to most genealogists because they are confronted not only with an unfamiliar language but an unfamiliar alphabet. Remarkably, it is an obstacle that is not that difficult to overcome. This is because the genealogist is not attempting to read the book but is looking for something very specific: people’s names.

Turn to the table of contents of a yizkor book and you see a sequence of words, flush left, and another, flush right. It becomes obvious to the reader that the flush left words are the author’s name and the flush right words are the title of the article. This may seem backwards, but remember, Hebrew is written right to left. Leaf through the book and look at the captions of pictures. A picture of a single person has two or three words below the picture: the person’s name. The caption of a picture of ten persons has many sets of two or three words separated by commas: the names of the persons in the picture. The back of the book has pages in table form. It is observed that the table is in sections where the first letter of the last word of each section is identical. It is the necrology listed in alphabetical order.
How do you find information about specific individuals? Again, the genealogist has the advantage that the search is only for people’s names. The name Mokotowski, whether it is in Hebrew, Cyrillic, or the Roman alphabet is written phonetically as mukutuvski. I have successfully located information about family members written in Cyrillic by transliterating the family name into this alphabet and searching vital statistics registers looking for the Cyrillic pattern that looks like mukutuvski.

Scanning the table of contents of the book, no person named Mokotowski was found. Scanning the captions of pictures, the word Mokotowski was not found, despite the claim of an Israeli relative that there was a picture with a caption that included the name “Joshua Mokotowski.” However, the necrology portion of the book had a wealth of information. Under the Hebrew equivalent of the letter “M” were the names of no less than fifty Mokotowskis. They are listed on pages 106 and 107 in the following manner:

Mokotowski, Esther Raizel, Bela(?) Shmuel (slaughterer) and their children;
Mokotowski, Yrachmiel Yizhak, Chava Leah;
Mokotowski, Leibel, wife and children;
Mokotowski, Yehoshua, wife and two daughters;
Mokotowski, Pinchas, wife and their sons;
Mokotowski, Yente;
Mokotowski, Leizer and his daughters;
Mokotowski, Itshe (daughter of Idel);
Mokotowski, Tshurna Sheindel, Aron Shmuel;
Mokotowski, Tuvia, Masha;
Mokotowski, Idel, wife, children and grandchildren;
Mokotowski, Esther, Migdal, her husband and five children;
Mokotowski, Leah, her husband and two children;
Mokotowski, Leibel, his wife and four children

Each set of names appears to be a family unit. Note the occupation of Shmuel Mokotowski. It seemed unreasonable that the book would contain no information about Mokotowskis given the number that lived in the town. I therefore very carefully read every story title and subtitle and finally achieved success. On page 52 was an article, written in Yiddish, with the entitled “Mein Vater Eliezer Mokotowski” (My Father Eliezer Mokotowski). The author was not named Mokotowski, because the author was a woman, Sarah Landau. I allowed my male chauvinist bias to get the best of me by assuming that all Mokotowskis would be named Mokotowski and had
excluded married women. On page 73, I located as part of a greater story about the Jewish citizens of Otwock a paragraph devoted to a man named Yitzhak Mokotowski. Since I do not understand Hebrew, I copied both articles and had them translated. Of genealogical significance was that Eliezer was born in Karczew, Poland, in 1865 and died on the 7th day of the Jewish month of Tishri, 1936. Using a Hebrew/Secular date converter, I was able to determine that the date was equivalent to September 23 of that year. There are many such calendar converters on the Internet. Yitzhak Mokotowski was a food store owner. He was described as rich and short, with bushy eyebrows and a short temper.

PAGES OF TESTIMONY

The major archive and documentation center for the Holocaust is Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel. Since 1955, Yad Vashem has been attempting to document every one of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust on six million pieces of paper called Pages of Testimony. They have requested persons to come forward and submit on this preprinted form a host of information about the victim including name; place and year of birth; place, date and circumstances of death; name of mother, father and spouse; and in some cases, names and ages of children. Each submitter is required to sign this Page of Testimony showing submitter’s name, address, and relationship to deceased. In signing the document, the submitter is testifying—hence its name—to the accuracy of the information. To date, three million victims have been documented. Despite the tragic event that caused their creation, these documents are a genealogist’s gold mine, given the wealth of information provided. In 2004, these documents were placed on the Internet at http://www.yadvashem.org with a search engine that allows retrieval of documents based on any or all of the above data fields.

Pages of Testimony of Otwock

In 1984, a letter was sent to Yad Vashem asking for copies of Pages of Testimony of all persons named Mokotow or Mokotowski. Many weeks later, 23 documents arrived including nine documenting persons named Mokotowski from Otwock. They listed:

- Pina Mokotowski, daughter of Yitzhak and Chava, born 1906, died Treblinka.
- Yenta Mokotowski, daughter of Yitzhak and Chava, born 1908, died Treblinka.
- Leibl Mokotowski, son of Yitzhak and Chava, born 1902, died Treblinka, wife Golda.
- Yenta Mokotowksi, daughter of Leibel and Rachel, born 1920, died Treblinka
- Rachel Mokotowski, daughter of Bezalel and Helena, born 1899, died Treblinka, husband Aryeh.
- Yitzhak Mokotowski, son of Eliezer and Idel Tsurna, born 1890, death unknown, wife Chava
- Leibel Mokotowski, son of Eliezer and Idel Tsurna, born 1889, died Warsaw, wife Rachel.

Note that the last two Pages of Testimony were for the same family. The first was submitted by a cousin who did not know as much information as the second person, a brother-in-law.

Two of the Pages of Testimony, the ones for Yitzhak and the last one listed above were submitted on June 1, 1955 by Abraham Dov Landau, Kiryat Shalom, Israel. This document created
a link between the victim and a living relative. A check of the Tel Aviv telephone book showed no person named Abraham, Dov or Sarah Landau. This was reasonable. The Page of Testimony was submitted in 1955. It was likely that neither party was alive in 1984.

How do you locate a person or descendants of a person in Israel? This question led to one of the most remarkable tracing organizations in the world: the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives in Jerusalem.

SEARCH BUREAU FOR MISSING RELATIVES

Shortly after World War II, the Jewish Agency, an international Jewish help organization, established a division to assist Holocaust survivors in locating relatives. Situated in Jerusalem, it is known as the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives. This department would be destined for obscurity except for the individual who was its one-person operation: Batya Unterschatz. Batya, a native of Vilnius, Lithuania, immigrated to Israel in 1971. In 1972, she joined the Search Bureau. Her warm personality, dedication to her job, knowledge of seven languages and access to Israeli government records have made her a legend in locating persons living in Israel. I sent her a copy of the Page of Testimony for Leib Mokotowski written by Abraham Landau in 1955, and some weeks later, she responded that neither Sarah nor Abraham Landau were alive, but that their son, Moshe Landau, lived in Holon. This led to the breakthrough that allowed me to document the Mokotowskis of Otwock. In January 1985, Avi Landau, son of Moshe, came to the United States on a business trip and brought with him the complete family tree of his branch of the Mokotow family.

Otwock Page of Testimony for Leib Mokotowski.

Most Pages of Testimony are written in Hebrew because they were submitted by Israelis. The Internet site that displays these documents will display an English language version of each document. Among the data on the document is: (1) Last name: Mokotowski; (2) First name: Leib; (3) Father’s name: Elizur; (4) Mother’s name: Czarna Aidel; (5) Family: four children; (6) Birthplace: Kolbeil, Poland; (7) Spouse’s name: Rachel Finkelstein; (8) Children: Yenta, Hinda, Tzvi, Feiga. It is signed by Abraham Dov Landau, Tel Aviv, Kiryat Shalom 108, his brother-in-law.
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

Friends and neighbors of Holocaust victims can often provide valuable information. In 1985, more than 5,000 Holocaust survivors from throughout the United States gathered in Philadelphia to remember the Holocaust. The Jewish Genealogical Society of Philadelphia participated to assist survivors who were still trying to determine the fate of their loved ones. At the event, I met a woman from New York, who told me the tragic story of how she had to abandon her six-year-old son on a street in Warsaw during World War II and was looking for advice on how to locate him today. All survivors wore name tags showing their name and European town of origin. She was from Otwock. After discussing her plight, I commented that I had relatives named Mokotowski from Otwock. Her face lit up. “Do you mean Yitzhak Mokotowski?” she asked. “He and his family were neighbors of mine.” This meeting was a chance encounter, but other interviews have occurred on a more formal basis. At the Eighth Summer Seminar on Jewish Genealogy in 1989, genealogists were matched with Holocaust survivors who lived in the towns of their ancestors. In some cases, these survivors were able to provide information about the fate of those members of the genealogists’ families who did not survive the Holocaust. An organization called the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors maintains a registry of more than 100,000 Holocaust survivors and their descendants living in the United States. They honor genealogical inquiries. This registry is now located at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. For privacy reasons, it is not available on the Internet.

GERMAN WAR RECORDS

There is much documentation of World War II. The extermination of Jews, gypsies, and other “undesirables” is no exception. The level of documentation falls into three categories: those events for which information about individuals was documented, those events that were documented but the specific names of the individuals were not recorded, and those events for which there was no documentation. Those persons who went to concentration camps or labor camps and were assigned to forced labor were documented. Rosters have survived which show individuals’ names, places of birth, birth dates, and the identification numbers tattooed on their arms. Some of these documents were captured by United States and British forces and are available to American genealogists through the National Archives. These include registers from Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps. Others, captured by the Russians, are only today being made available to the public. Where deaths from disease, starvation, and abuse did not occur on a massive basis, even deaths of individuals were recorded. In the category of events which were documented but the specific names of the individuals were not recorded, the records of the Einsatzgruppen provide the death dates of more than one million Jews. After Germany invaded Russia in 1942, these special squads of the German SS had the responsibility of killing every Jew, gypsy, and Bolshevik in the towns captured by the regular German army. Consequently, their reports provide the death dates for the Jews of the town. In the category where there is no documentation fall the millions of people who were immediately gassed at the various extermination camps. No attempt was made to document these people. However, in some instances, deportation lists exist today that provide useful information to the genealogist. The best-known lists were published in book form under the title “Memorial to the Jews Deported from France.” It lists more than 70,000 individuals, their names, places of birth, and birth dates. Because it is organized by train convoy and date on which the convoy left France, it is possible to determine the arrival date at Auschwitz and, consequently, the death dates of individuals who fell into the category of those immediately gassed, namely children under fourteen, elderly over fifty,
and mothers with children under fourteen. Similar books exist for Belgium\textsuperscript{10} and Germany.\textsuperscript{11} These deportation lists have been integrated into the Pages of Testimony database and are available on the Internet at the Yad Vashem site.

**German Records of Otwock**

The archives at Yad Vashem have a number of documents relating to the fate of the Jews of Otwock\textsuperscript{12}. None had information pertaining specifically to persons named Mokotowski. However, one interesting artifact from Otwock is a broadside which was posted in Otwock shortly after the Germans occupied the town, demanding the Jews raise 100,000 zlotys. The poster named fifteen persons responsible to raise the money. One of the names was Tobiasz (Tuvia) Mokotowski.

**Otwock Marriage Record**

Portion of the 1864 marriage record of Szaja Ephraim Mankotow showing his name and the names of his parents—Isaac and Esther. It linked the Mokotowski family to the Mokotow family tree.

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**VITAL STATISTICS RECORDS**

Although everything Jewish was destroyed in the Holocaust, government records, specifically vital records, for the most part were not. It is a credit to the archivists of the world that despite the attempts by the human race over the centuries to destroy each other, our archivists have been conscientious in trying to preserve the original source material of our history. Vital statistics records for Poland, Hungary, and Germany have been readily available to the public for many years. With the fall of the iron curtain, other countries have opened their doors to genealogical inquiries. Genealogists have made contact with many communities in the countries of the former Soviet Union and family history information is flowing east to west.

**OTHER**

The Holocaust is called the most documented event in Western history. There are tens of thousands of books written on the subject. Consequently, a number of bibliographies exist on the topic. In a book titled *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman*\textsuperscript{13} the author recounts the events in Otwock during the Holocaust. There are two references to Mokotowskis. He relates how, after the majority of the Jews were deported to Treblinka, two Mokotowski sisters—given names not provided—were marched to a wall and shot as they were holding hands. A similar fate befell Tobiasz Mokotowski, described above, who, while walking to the wall, was approached by a local townsman who asked him for his coat, since he would not need it anymore. Mokotowski responded that he would not give up his coat because he wanted to die with dignity. This book provides two more stories to add to the Mokotow family history.
LUCK

We genealogists like to attribute some of our successes to luck. I propose that there is no such thing as luck. In an article in *Avotaynu*, I note that luck is the product of trying. A genealogist will try and try, often thousands of times. Most tries are unsuccessful; the few that do succeed we attribute to luck. This essay ends with a story of luck: how I linked the Mokotowskis of Otwock to the main tree of the Mokotow family. The veteran genealogist will see that, in truth, it was nothing more than taking all the resources available to the researcher and piecing them together to come to a successful conclusion.

The vast majority of information I had about the Mokotowskis of Otwock was from the Otwock yizkor book and the recollections of living persons that had secondary information. A letter to the Polish State Archives in Warsaw indicated that there were no vital statistics records for Otwock from the nineteenth century; therefore, it was not possible to go back in time through that path. It was at the Second Seminar on Jewish Genealogy, held in Washington, DC, in 1983 that I located the Otwock yizkor book and had a person translate for me the article “My Father Eliezer Mokotowski.” Toward the end of the seminar, while sitting in the Jewish division of the Library of Congress, convincing myself that I had done everything possible that could be done at the Library, I recalled that the article stated that Eliezer Mokotowski was born in Karczew. There is a book called *Shtetl Finder* which lists about 2,100 towns in Eastern Europe where Jews lived in the nineteenth century. To give the book more substance, the author included the names of individuals from the town that were prepublication subscribers to books written in Yiddish during that era. Under the description of Karczew was the entry “In 1879, advanced subscribers to the book *Da’at Moshe* were…Yehosie Efraim Monkitow…” Monkitow is the Yiddish pronunciation of Mokotow. At that moment, I recalled that I had a marriage record from Karczew of a Mokotow.

Some months earlier, I devoted a full week at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City searching the vital statistics records of the Mokotow ancestral town of Warka, located about thirty miles south of Otwock. After completing that task, in ever-widening concentric circles, I searched records of adjacent towns. This included Karczew, for which there was only one Mokotow record, a marriage record. I had brought my LDS findings to the seminar and opened my file folder to the Karczew record. The name of the groom was Efraim, but the previous word was not Yehosie until I realized the registrar did something I had seen on other documents. He had come to the end of the line when he wrote the groom’s name and, not having enough room, arbitrarily hyphenated the name. The groom’s name was “Szaja Efraim.” The yizkor book article about Eliezer Mokotowski said his father’s name was Yehoshua, *The Shtetl Finder* noted a Yehosie Monkitow from Karczew, and the marriage record found at the LDS library had the name Szaja Efraim. Yehoshua, Yehosie, Szaja; all these names are Yiddish/Hebrew variants of the name Joshua. All the documents were talking about the same man! The marriage record had the name of the groom’s parents. The father’s name was Icek (Isaac). The founder of the Mokotow family had a son Isaac. Through an incredible set of slender threads, I had linked the Mokotowskis of Otwock to the Mokotow family tree. Sarah Landau’s father, Eliezer Mokotowski, was the son of Joshua Efraim Mokotow, son of Isaac Mokotow, son of Tuvia David Mokotow.

Notes
1. *Luach Ha‘Shoah M’Polin* (Calendar of the Holocaust in Poland).
is not in public view. It has a search engine that will indicate whether the named town has a yizkor book, but it is not possible to list all towns at once.


5. Yad Vashem, PO Box 3477, 91034 Jerusalem, Israel. For e-mail contact, go to www.yadvashem.org and click the “Contact Us” link. This will display a variety of e-mail addresses organized by nature of the inquiry.

6. Unfortunately, this service closed down in 2001 when Batya retired.


8. For a list of collections, go to the National Archives Web site at www.nara.gov and search for “Holocaust-Era Assets.”


12. For a detailed list by town of the holdings of the Yad Vashem archives, see *Guide to the Unpublished Works of the Holocaust*, Volumes 3–6 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, various years).


15. Karczew, Poland, Jewish Marriage Register, 1864, Document #17. Family History Library microfilm #702,444.


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