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Tracing Jewish family history in a post-Holocaust world

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ABSTRACT

The growth in online platforms and documentary aggregator sites has revolutionised the process of Jewish family history research. This article records how the loss of EU citizenship rights following Britain's departure from the European Union encouraged the author to investigate their own family history. Drawing upon the author's findings, it describes how communal record books left on the shelves of town halls across Romania for over a century have been given new life thanks to the efforts of community archivists. This article chronicles their efforts to identify, preserve and digitise these documents which help to shed light on the history of the Jewish community of Dorna Watra, now Vatra Dornei, a small town in the former Austrian crownland of Bukovina. This article provides a detailed evaluation of the opportunities facing Jewish family researchers and the strengths and weaknesses of online aggregator sites such as Ancestry.Com and JewishGen.

Introduction

In November 2019, I noticed a stranger had uploaded my grandmother's application for US Social Security on the family history website, Ancestry.com. The document listed her place of birth as 'Dorna Watra, Austria', and was dated 1891. Dorna Watra, now Vatra Dornei, is in present-day Romania, some 285 km south of the Ukrainian city Chernivtsi (also known as Czernowitz), which I always assumed was her place of birth. This fact sparked a new odyssey, which resulted in not only locating mid-19th Century Austrian Jewish birth records I had assumed were lost to time, but precipitated my post-Brexit application for Romanian nationality.

Genealogical research has been credited with being the second most popular use of the internet (Barnwell 2013). For millions, it is a pastime that fulfils a need for identity, authenticity, history and belonging. My initial motivation was more instrumental. Romania confers nationality based on ancestral descent and Romanian nationals benefit from citizenship of the European Union, which provides the rights to freedom of movement and establishment across the EU. For UK nationals who have an ancestral claim, the possibility of acquiring Romanian nationality means re-establishing EU citizenship and recovering rights lost following the UK's departure from the European Union on 31 January 2020.

Yet, the task of applying for nationality poses an evidentiary challenge at the first hurdle. Locating original records is a time-consuming process, especially when family members have been displaced, as is so often the case with Jews. Moreover, even with documents in hand,

demonstrating a link to a state that may grant nationality is far from straightforward and researchers require knowledge of changing geopolitical configurations as well as a detailed understanding of nationality laws, which have temporal and other exclusion clauses. With respect to Romania, the governance of the post-Austro-Hungarian settlement was particularly complicated. Citizenship laws introduced in the successor states were subject to several iterations, and there was an inconsistent approach to the inclusion of Jews in the territories that united the Old Kingdom with former Austrian and Russian lands. But, identity documentation is essential for any application for citizenship, and hence, my inquiry focused on obtaining original records confirming my grandmother's place of birth in Dorna Watra. This ambition prompted me to explore online repositories, including the documentary aggregator sites JewishGen and Ancestry.com.

The popularisation of subscription-based platforms that host vast collections of official documents, including millions of pre-Holocaust personal records, has revolutionised family history research. However, these alone are not always sufficient to complete the paper trail needed to satisfy government requirements for successful determinations of nationality. These sites offer unprecedented access to official documentation, but there are extensive gaps in both geographical and temporal coverage, and trained researchers, archivists and specialist historians are therefore still very much needed. As my investigation snowballed, I was fortunate to be introduced to citizen archivists trained in Jewish and East European history who guided me to birth records that were hinted at but could not be retrieved from any online repository. Only later would I learn that these records had been deposited in the Suceava branch of the National Archives of Romania by the very individuals who had identified and scanned them and who kindly responded to my emails and phone calls. The documents I needed were indexed online, but not digitised, and thus not yet available for retrieval. Moreover, the National Archives denied such records existed even though they were listed on a pdf catalogue they had produced. As one archivist wrote:

> Unfortunately, our Suceava Branch of National Archives did not receive or hold any birth records from Jewish Community from Vatra Dornei. We only have a single death record dated 1877, nothing from birth or marriage records. Further more, I need to make a correction: there was a separated, distinct Jewish Community in Vatra Dornei and another one in town of Câmpulung Moldovenesc. Also, we do not have birth records from Jewish Community in Câmpulung Moldovenesc, Bukovina.

> I and my colleagues, we do not have certain, accurate, proved information that some or any birth, marriage or death records from Vatra Dornei Jewish Community or other Jewish communities located previously in Bukovina were scanned and stored somewhere. It is a local story (not certified) that rabbis from Bukovina took along with them birth, marriage and death records when flew, ran from Romania during the 2nd World War. So, my personal guess is that there were not destroyed during the War but spread at this world, nobody knows where. (MC email to the author dated 5 March 2020)

I was left with a bibliographic call number and the assurance that the volunteer researchers had deposited the Jewish record books in the Suceava branch of the National Archives but was I now struggling with contradictory information about their location and how I would access them.

This article describes my historiographic journey. It chronicles how some 70 years after the Holocaust opportunities for documentary retrieval emerged thanks to the development of digital infrastructure and the unsung activities of community archivists both in the diaspora and among the survivor populations of Eastern Europe. It begins by exploring trends in motivation for Jewish genealogical research, recognising that my inquiry, although personal, was far from unique. It then describes the backstory to the preservation and organisation of the documents I sought before briefly narrating the methods used to obtain my grandmother's birth record. It then seeks to complement our knowledge of the Jewish history of Dorna Watra based on the records I found. This article concludes with a reflection on my search to access records from Austrian Bukovina, evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of online documentary

aggregator sites and assesses the practical challenges facing genealogists interested in Jewish family history research.

Research context

Dorna Watra and Southern Bukovina

My grandmother was born in Dorna Watra, a small town in the Austrian crownland of Bukovina, the former easternmost province of the Habsburg Empire. Bukovina was a diverse but principally German-speaking territory that was ceded to Romania after World War I. The northern region was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, and following the 1947 Paris peace treaty, Bukovina was partitioned with the north passing to the Soviet Union, now present-day Ukraine, and the south remaining in Romania. Dorna Watra, renamed Vatra Dornei, sat squarely in southern Bukovina.

While there is much written on Jewish life in Austrian Bukovina (Corbea-Hoisie 2010, Gold, 1958, Rechter 2013; Stambrook 2003), including contemporaneous accounts by eminent Jews (See Schulsohn 1927), most studies focus on the northern territory and, in particular, the regional capital of Czernowitz (now Chernivtsi). These include personal accounts, most famously Gregor von Rezzori's (2008) *Memoirs of An Anti-Semite* and Moses Rosenkranz's *Childhood: An Autobiographical Fragment* (Rosenkranz 2008) as well as the poetic works by Paul Celan and Rose Ausländer. By contrast, there are far fewer published works on southern Bukovina.

Until the first decades of the 20th Century, the Jewish presence in Dorna Watra is mentioned obliquely in travel writings, in the context of other towns in Suceava County, or occasionally in the press, for example, in the reporting of cholera epidemics, for which Jews were also occasionally blamed (Sabol and Harieta 2014). There is, however, one short entry by Hermann Sternberg on Dorna Watra in Hugo Gold's anthology *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina* [the history of Jewish of Bukovina] (Gold, 1958) which details the founding of the town and the emergence of a Jewish community. Sternberg describes the development of trade and commerce, community life including the organisation of religious institutions, schooling and the growth of a Zionist movement, before documenting the final hours when the Jewish community was deported to Transnistria. From Sternberg, we learn that until 1896, there was no official Jewish community, and the Jewish population (approximately 80% of the centre of the town) came under the administrative control of the *Kultusgemeinde* of Kimpolung (now Câmpulung Moldovenesc), which itself had broken away from the regional capital Suceava in 1859. There are also clues about inter-ethnic relations as Sternberg recalls that the Great Tempel (synagogue) (1898–1902) was built on land leased to Jews free of charge by the Orthodox Church, which also controlled the forests. For the genealogical researcher, the value added of Sternberg's account, like the Yizkor (memorial) books published after the Holocaust, is in its offering of a first-hand retrospective of Jewish life, including the names of individuals and organisations that were active in Dorna Watra, and which provide leads for further archival research.

There are also some visual resources, including a rich volume of postcards of 'Dorna Watra' or 'Bad Dorna'. These cards are often decorated with greetings in German and Romanian, and occasionally in Russian, and testify to the presence of holidaymakers who visited the spa town after 1870. Most cards feature the grand casino, which Sternberg advises was managed by Jews and which encouraged the growth of several Jewish-run hotels that multiplied with the arrival of the railway in 1902. Several postcards advertise the town's natural beauty, sitting at the confluence of the rivers Bistrița and Dorna and surrounded by rich forests. The majority of cards include multiple images of local sights such as casino, cathedral, river, town hall and other civic buildings alongside hotels and popular spa resorts. Many cards also depict the grand synagogue recorded as the 'tempel' (in German) or 'templul' (in Romanian) and thus illustrate the prominent place of Jews in fin de siècle Dorna Watra.

The Jew presence continued in Southern Bukovina until 1941 and then even after the Holocaust in small numbers. The Jewish community of Vatra Dornei was decimated by deportations to Transnistria, and its demise was accelerated by the mass emigration of survivors to Israel. Today, there is no

organised community in Dorna Watra, but the community of Suceava manages a Facebook page and there are further online discussion groups that unite members and their descendants. Yet, as I detail below, the remaining Bukovinian Jewish community in Romania and in exile helped to preserve the community's ancestral records, which enabled me to conclude my quest.

Trends in motivation

The rationale for my genealogical journey fits within a post-war and especially post-Cold War phenomenon related to the politics of restitution. Restoration of nationality is a recent development, and for most of the post-Holocaust period, the focus has been on *material* claims. Almost from the conclusion of World War II, the idea of restitution emphasised the return of property and monetary compensation, yet efforts to advance claims were constrained by geopolitical considerations, including the immediate liberation from Nazi occupation and the installation of new democratic institutions and policies, and conversely, the closure of European societies in the former Eastern bloc. The two exceptions were Greece, which from October 1944 introduced laws returning confiscated property to Jews, and the Federal Republic of Germany, where the occupying US military government set the stage for the 1947 Military Law No 59 that became the foundation for the restitution of Holocaust assets (United States Department of State 2023).

For Jews born in Germany, and their descendants, it was also possible to have one's nationality restored under Article 116 (paragraph 2) of Germany's 1949 Basic Law which provided that 'Former German citizens who, between 30 January 1933 and 8 May, were deprived of their citizenship on political, racial or religious grounds and their descendants shall, on application, have their citizenship restored (Federal Ministry of Justice 2022). There were some notable exclusions, including gender discriminatory clauses (eligibility rested on descent from the father) and marriage to a foreign national, though these were later corrected (see German Missions in the United Kingdom 2022). In contrast to Germany, there was little engagement with the process of restitution in Hungary, despite the 1947 Treaty of Peace, which provided for the return of property or compensation for 'private, communal and heirless property confiscated from Jews and other victims during the war' (World Jewish Restitution Organization 2017).

The conclusion of the Cold War and the 'return to Europe' following the fall of the Berlin Wall opened a new chapter for those seeking restitution. This applied to both states in the former 'Eastern Bloc' such as Czechoslovakia, which introduced a process for restitution in 1991, as well as its democratic and neutral neighbour Austria, which in 1995 established the National Fund for Victims of National Socialism (The National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism 2023). New laws introduced in Poland and Romania in 1997. These then set the scene for more substantive consideration of non-material claims. The relationship between property restitution claims and citizenship also introduced broader questions of restorative justice for the dispossessed, as evidenced in the text of new nationality laws in Central and East European states, as well as in Spain and Portugal, which declared their commitment to redress the historic expulsions of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 and 1497.

Historians rightly guard against the pitfalls of presentism, but in practice, few individuals applied for citizenship of their ancestral homelands until very recently. One irrefutable turning point was the completion of the European Single Market in 1993, and more importantly, the introduction of the Citizens' Rights Directive 2004/38/EC, which elaborated on the conditions for the exercise of the right of free movement and included provisions for third-country national dependents who also benefitted. The development of an EU citizenship regime provided a greater incentive to those living outside the EU, above all Israelis.

For British Jews, restitution entailed the return of or compensation for property seized during the Holocaust. There was little reason for those whose parents and grandparents had fled or survived the Nazis to take up the offer from the German government – that is until 2016, following the UK's Referendum on remaining in the European Union (Lipshiz 2019;

University of Reading 2022; Wyatt 2019). Since the UK decided to leave the European Union (also known as 'Brexit'), more than 8,000 British Jews have applied for German citizenship. We note a similar trend among the descendants of Austrian Jews who responded to the reform of the 2019 Nationality Act. Since 1 September 2020, some 17,000 descendants of Austrian Holocaust refugees and survivors have applied for Austrian citizenship, including 3,000 UK nationals (Ebner 2022). Though numbers are smaller, other EU states including Hungary, Poland and Lithuania have also seen an increase in requests for citizenship from the descendants of former Jewish citizens.

In addition to these Holocaust-related claims, the introduction of new laws in Spain and Portugal was justified in terms of both righting a wrong and attracting Jewish investment and tourism (Liphshiz 2013). The uptake in citizenship applications was truly remarkable and also raised questions about how others, including non-Sephardi Jews, might profit from a loophole in these laws. Journalist Raphaëlle Rérolle describes long overnight queues in Lisbon in August 2022 dominated by lawyers seeking to obtain Portuguese passports for clients scattered around the world (Rérolle 2023). To date, at least 90,000 descendants of Sephardic Jews have acquired Portuguese (54,000) or Spanish (36,000) citizenship since 2015 (with Spain receiving approximately 153,000 applications and Portugal 86,000) (Schengen News 2022).

Tracing family history

Until the advent of online platforms, scholars turned to reference works, and where possible archival sources or oral histories which were collected retrospectively, especially in Israel, the USA and Australia, and can now be found in major repositories such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC and in Yad Vashem in Israel. For non-specialist researchers, however, the most useful starting point tended to be encyclopaedia and thematic volumes on Jewish communities and the Holocaust, with many sources translated from German and other languages. This reference work helps to clarify locations and the multiple spellings of towns which reflects the multilingual life among East European Jewry. Several reference books borrow the format of Yizkor books, which document the history of Jewish communities destroyed in the Holocaust and provide often detailed, factual and descriptive accounts, in Yiddish or Hebrew. *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* is among the most comprehensive introductory sources which the editor, Historian of Early Modern Polish Jewry Gershon David Hundert describes as a work that neither seeks to celebrate nor eulogise the past but to recover and represent it (Hundert 2008).

For contemporary researchers, access to primary materials in the Jewish heartlands of Eastern Europe has until recently been severely limited as a result of the destruction of communal infrastructure during the Nazi regime and Soviet occupation. Mass emigration, in addition to the antisemitic policies of East European governments, militated against the preservation of Jewish records. The growth in online databases, which are adding documents at a pace, however, demonstrates that much documentation did survive and can be made available for genealogical research.

The preservation of documentary materials on Jewish life in pre-war Eastern Europe is part of a story of inter-communal collaboration between survivor communities and Jewish genealogical interest groups in North America, Israel and Europe. Like post-war Hungary, Romania had a significant survivor population (estimated at 190,000 in 1950, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2023) and quickly established relations with Israel. Yet, while Hungary broke off diplomatic relations with Israel after the Six Day War, Romania never did and also enjoyed good relations with American Jewish communal institutions, which paved the way for the Communist state to receive Most Favored Nation status in 1975. Romania saw large outflows of Jews to Israel after the war and throughout the 1960s and 70s thanks to the leadership of Rabbi Moses Rosen, who endured a close working relationship with the Communist governments of Nicolae Ceaușescu and Ion Gheorghe Maurer. As a result of Rosen's diplomacy, Romanian Jewry enjoyed much contact with Israel from 1956, which controversially encouraged the emigration of the dwindling Jewish community by

paying the government a fee per head for each immigrant. This relationship also enabled the transfer of Judaica from Romania to Israel (see: Moses Alfred 2018).

The existence of survivor communities inside Romania further served to bridge the documentary divide between pre- and post-Holocaust Europe. Former Bucharest resident, Edgar Hauster records how, after his father's death he came across more than 150 letters, some of which detailed the deportations of Jews from Bukovina to Transnistria in 1941 and also the return of survivors and their reintegration into post-war Romania (Edgar Hauster interview with the author, 1 April 2022). Similarly, field archivist and researcher Julie Dawson describes how in 2008 she 'stumbled upon' a *genizah*, a store of damaged Jewish books and texts in the town of Medias in Central Romania where she found personal items including diaries written *after* the Second World War (Julie Dawson, interview with the author, 9 August 2022).

Throughout Eastern Europe, there are similar accounts of historians and locals discovering troves of documents that had been left behind. Artefacts would resurface often in distant places. Rescued scrolls and religious texts would appear in Israel, or auction houses in the USA (Edwards 2021). While they attracted attention from the US and other governments on account of being looted by the Nazis (Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York 2021), sometimes their recovery by Jewish organisations encouraged the re-establishment of community histories and creative rededication activities. Rescued Torah scrolls, described as memorial or Holocaust scrolls, would be offered to 'adopted' communities to encourage new modes of memorialisation. For example, the UK-based Memorial Scrolls Trust was founded after 1,564 Czech scrolls were brought to London in 1964 where they were repaired and loaned to communities in North America and Western Europe, on the proviso that they remained identified with their former towns and villages to teach new generations about survivor legacies and preserve the history of the Holocaust (Memorial Scroll Trust 2022).

In the case of Romania, beyond the remaining communities in Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj, Timişoara, Targu Mureş, Bacau and Braşov, pre-Holocaust documents survived in remote locations where they had been ignored. Dawson argues that while the new regimes established in the aftermath of the Holocaust sought to centralise control over religious practice, large volumes of communal records were left as they were before the war, often in town halls where they were generally overlooked. Even at the turn of the 21st Century, Jewish record books could still be found on the shelves of town halls where few had access to them. Their discovery would lead to much activity by teams of community archivists, who created new digital repositories.

Digital sources

Over the past 20 years, Jewish genealogical researchers have benefitted from the creation of digitised resources which include (i) national archives and sponsored sites and (ii) aggregator sites and standalone special interest databases.

National archives and government-sponsored sites

In addition to the digitisation of national archives, several governments have created specialist databases including online libraries of newspapers that inform our understanding of Jewish life during periods of political development. These sources provide an insight into the dynamics of emancipation and dislocation during periods of upheaval, for example, the late 19th Century and inter-war period. Many of these are organised by linguistic categories and relate to the organisation of now-defunct territories. For example, *Digitale Forum Mittel-und Osteuropa (DiFMOE)* provides access to resources for those interested in German-speaking peoples across the former German and Austrian empires, including in territories that were later Sovietised or repopulated after the war with more homogenous communities. Similarly, Austrian Newspaper Online (ANNO) enables users to access historical periodicals and newspapers from the Habsburg lands. More recently, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media in Germany initiated *Copernico*, an online resource

based in the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe in Marburg that provides access to biographies, oral and video histories, as well as documentaries and podcasts. Like the state-sponsored Austrian ANNO, *Copernico* also provides access to historical and contemporary information on the former German-speaking lands and peoples of Eastern Europe.

Documentation aggregator sites

The role of private and not-for-profit subscription services has been especially important to the development of Jewish genealogical research and has complemented the growth in state-sponsored digital resources. Their expansion is linked to both the creation of new opportunities with the 'reopening' of Europe and the emergence of digital platforms. One of the first to take off was the pioneering Avoytanu Inc which in the mid-1980s began systematically organising materials, publishing magazines and anthologies and eventually developing online search features. Now, three decade years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a significant body of community archives has come to light thanks to second-generation digital methodologies which in turn have informed our knowledge of past events and peoples (Shkurovich 2017).

The distinctive feature of these resources is the shift to a non-specialist market. The process of genealogical research has in effect been democratised, with these platforms enabling users to construct personal connections and elaborate family trees with links to disparate archival sources. Yakel and Torres describe this transition from a mechanistic research tool to the creation of a 'community of records' (Yakel and Torres, 2007) to denote how citizen archivists may engage with both the creation of and repurposing of data. Such activities not only advance our understanding by providing greater contextualisation of Jewish life in ancestral communities but also support existing Jewish communities by building capacity for archival research and documentation, for example, by fostering networks, and generating opportunities for memorialisation and commemoration between generations and linking distant geographies.

For Jewish genealogists, the principal resources include JewishGen and JRI Poland, online platforms, which plug into Ancestry.com and provide access to specialist databases containing information from countries that previously housed major Jewish populations, notably Austria, Belarus, Germany, Hungary Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania, Poland, the Czechia and Ukraine.

Supported by approximately 1000 volunteers, JewishGen bills itself as 'the global home for Jewish Genealogy' and provides access to more than 3.69 million Holocaust-related documents and more than 4.1 million burial records. Most importantly, JewishGen maintains the Online Worldwide Burial Registry that includes names and other identifying information from Jewish cemeteries and burial records. Friedman (2018) maintains the value of this database is that it protects information as a lasting record, even when gravestones have been vandalised or destroyed. Hence, the organisers are creating 'virtual cemeteries' which are memorialized for future generations. The 'unified search' function permits users to search by name, data type, town, or enter a free word search. Options include exact spelling, exact date, as well as approximated spellings and dates. There are some 35 drop-down countries though some include pairs of present-day countries, like Austria and Czechia and other categories refer to entire continents like Latin America, or defunct states like Yugoslavia. Users can access transcribed versions of communal record books, which generally provide basic demographic information including name of child, date of birth, name of parents, midwife and *mohel* (person who performs circumcision) and maternal grandparents. These tools enable non-specialists to explore family lineage (and connect subscribers to those who share DNA, a service provided by Ancestry) and also encourage more horizontal flows of information between users. Individuals who upload records, such as marriage certificates, copies of census data and even personal photographs and letters, may therefore help others fill in gaps regarding their family history.

A second major resource, JRI Poland (also known as Jewish Records Indexing-Poland) established in 1995 now advertises itself as 'preserving our history together, sharing more than 250 years of Jewish life in Poland, one record at a time'. In February 2013, JRI-Poland signed an agreement with the Polish State Archives to make more records available in digitized form. With 4.2 million records

and 13.6 thousand images online and supported on Ancestry.Com, JRI-Poland is one of the most important online resources for Jewish family history research.

Also, worthy of mention is Gesher Galicia, a standalone and subscription-based platform which works to acquire and index vital records, including census books, landowner, school, voter and tax records and reproducing cadastral maps. Their databases also contain information from other ethnic and religious communities and the organisation aims to support networking through online discussion groups and courses. In addition, it produces a quarterly research journal about Galicia, *The Galitzianer*.

Content creation: community researchers and remote lands

While the above sites have expanded in large part due to agreements with national archives, there has been little written about the 'back end' of these databases. What is missing are the personal accounts of the researchers and archivists, in many cases, volunteers, who took it upon themselves to locate, index and organise thousands of documents to create the online content one finds today on these aggregator platforms. This work includes making existing materials user-friendly for non-specialists which entails both adding content and curating existing materials located in national repositories, which as Julie Dawson describes is often far from organised. In interview, Dawson explained that post-war archivists bundled up documents in boxes, which lacked a detailed system of classification, and hence the contents remained unknown. For example, official records might include requests from Jewish communal institutions for police permits to hold a picnic or host a speaking event, but these documents sat alone devoid of context – they were simply police reports. Dawson argues that the situation facing researchers today is indicative of the conditions facing archivists in the surveillance state that was Communist Romania. Archivists, like all government officials, were not immune from political bias. Policies aimed towards the cultural assimilation of minority ethnic groups, including Jews, Roma and Hungarians, trickled down into the process of managing historical records, which was organised to reflect growing Romanisation. Hence, there is little evidence that archivists working in the 1950s and 1960s showed any interest in evidencing the multicultural nature of pre-war Romanian society where Jews had existed alongside other minorities. Rather, they put Romanian history at the forefront, while the documentary history of Jewish life remained in storage (Dawson interview with the author 8 August 2022).

In some cases, community researchers took it upon themselves to index records and create their own digital archives. Edgar Hauster, for example, describes his experience scanning thousands of documents in the Chernivtsi National Archives which included birth records and taxation data for Jewish Families for the Years 1786/87 and locating materials that had evaded the attention of government archivists (Hauster 2014). Posting images on his blog, Hauster announced his findings:

> Once again we come across 'A Sunken Treasure of Czernowitz', as discovered and reported by us in April 2013. Included in more than one hundred volumes are the census data entry forms for Czernowitz for the years 1869/70, 1880/81, 1890/91 and in part for 1900. In total, there are 126 volumes – 33 more than initially stipulated - each containing about 500 large-size double-pages (Hauster 2015).

Later, Hauster scanned Radauti police records which he organised by theme: 'Jewish properties', 'Apprentices and For[e]men', 'the Elias Eisig Case', 'Ghettos and Hostages', 'Star or No Star', 'Inter-Ethnic Marriage', 'The Story of the Siret Jews', 'Deportation and Suicide', 'the Milk, the Mayor and the Jews', 'Consequences of Deportation', 'the Aaron Wolf Schaffer Case', 'How to Use Jews', 'King Antonescu and the Jews', 'Firing Order', 'Repatriates March/April 1946' (see Hauster 2008). The process of sorting these documents illuminated the history of the Holocaust in Romania. This personal archive describes life during some of the darkest moments for Bukovinian Jews, but it also shows Jews resisting unlawful transfers and the demolition of personal property, as recorded in the Elias Eisig case. Hauster's archive also complements our knowledge of official antisemitic

attitudes in post-war Romania, with returning Jews described as 'the enemies of the Romanian homeland' and accused of the surrender of Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina (Hauster 2009).

Dawson records that much material existed outside the reach of the national archives or had yet to attract their interest. Materials could be found in disparate locations, including in buildings that once housed former communal and civic records. Their discovery by researchers and Jewish community leaders *before* they were transferred to government control created new opportunities to organise the material, so it could be used by subsequent researchers to inform Romania's multicultural past. Some of this material is now referenced in detailed academic studies of Romania's nationality struggles and inter-ethnic relations (see Iordachi 2019; Motta 2019; van Drunen 2013).

The production of the Bukovina database on JewishGen further illustrates some of the processes used by community researchers working on this, and other archives, which has resulted in making previously unknown vital records, religious and communal artefacts publicly available. Much of the current content on Bukovina in JewishGen including the database on births, marriage and divorce and death records is due to the conscientious activities of a special interest group that included teams of 'transliterators' and 'validators' who checked over the documents. Edgar Hauster recalls his involvement in the discovery and digitisation of the communal archive of Radautz (now Radauti) dating from 1859 to 1929. He notes how he was fortunate to gain access to this archive thanks to his family connection and the assistance he received from local Jewish community leader and Professor of Music, Dorin Fränkel (see Hauster 2016). Working in 12-hour shifts, Hauster and Fränkel photographed some 10,000 entries, which were then transcribed from Old German Gothic script by Hauster's wife, Martina. These photographs were then passed to Cornell University professor Bruce Reisch, who managed an online Czernowitz discussion group. With the help of some students and other volunteers, Reisch then catalogued the scanned images, before the JewishGen coordinator uploaded them onto the Romania/Ukraine database that housed information on Bukovina, both north and south. After Radautz, Hauster and Frankel visited other town halls, where they applied the same methods. The original record books were then deposited in the Suceava branch of the National Archives of Romania where the tomes can now be found bearing both the original German language title 'Geburts-Matrix', years of coverage, as well as the titles in Romanian, 'Nascuit everi', denoting Jewish births. The cover of these volumes also bears the handwritten word 'Mosaici' – the Romanian translation of a Habsburg throwback for Jews, which denoted German speakers of the 'Mosaic Faith'.

Methods

The one piece of information I had that recorded my grandmother's place of birth prompted me to complete her profile by using US documentary repositories, which I accessed via Ancestry.Com. These enabled me to locate census records (1901, 1910 and 1921) for both the US and state governments, in this case, New York and Massachusetts, as well as the Ellis Island passenger lists that helped me to verify my grandmother's full name and date of birth. I then searched JewishGen by name, range of years and location.

One initial challenge was identifying her actual place of birth. I consulted special interest websites for Bukovina, including some mentioned above to learn more about the political geography. Most importantly, Sternberg's entry in Gold's anthology enabled me to fill in some crucial gaps regarding the administrative history of the Jewish communities and their relationship to each other. Sternberg notes that until 1896 there was no official Jewish community and I therefore turn my attention to the aggregated records under of heading of 'Kimpulung' (now Câmpulung Moldovenesc) (see Table 1). Using JewishGen, I quickly located my great-grandmother's birth record dated 1861 but could not find my grandmother. While the 1861 birth record for my great-grandmother was fascinating in itself, for the government of Romania the relationship is considered too distant to qualify for citizenship by descent, and I therefore needed to continue the search for my grandmother.

JewishGen provided a link to a downloadable pdf index of records held in the National Archives, but I noticed that the birth record books for Kimpolung that covered Dorna Watra

were incomplete. Three decades of material, including the decade relevant to my grand-mother, appeared to be missing. I, therefore, approached the administrators of the JewishGen site and simultaneously contacted professors of history at the Ştefan cel Mare University of Suceava. I also wrote to the chief archivist in the Suceava branch of the National Archives and continued to search for secondary sources online in the hope they would provide more clues. Rechter's (2013) *Becoming Habsburg: The Jews of Austrian Bukovina*, 1774–1918, provided an important overview of the political development of Bukovina that clarified how the Austrian civil apparatus had expanded over time. In addition, Jeroen van Drunen's (2013) exceptionally detailed thesis provided further necessary context regarding the social position of Jews in Bukovinian society, which encouraged me to keep searching.

Other primary sources, including records of deaths, proved inaccessible. The JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR) yielded no results. However, as my inquiries snowballed, the administrators of JewishGen put me in touch with Julie Dawson and Edgar Hauster, both of whom independently narrated their own experiences of locating and organising documents in southern Bukovina. After an email exchange, I received a call from Dawson, who excitedly informed me that she had seen the lost record books. Hauster then advised that the photographic copies of the birth record books for the missing decades that he had taken with Fränkel, had been sent to Bruce Reisch, whom I then contacted with my grandmother's name and date of birth. Reisch located the birth records for Kimpolung (Câmpulung Moldovenesc) for 1889–1893 and searching by year and sex, found the birth record for my grandmother, Anna Stark. The scanned birth record I received from Reisch would eventually be sent to a lawyer in Bucharest who filed a formal request for the original document from the National Archives. The first request, which only recorded the call number, was refused with the excuse that the documentation did not exist. At my insistence, the lawyer then sent the National Archives the scanned copy Reisch had provided, which proved successful. I finally received a certified copy of my grandmother's birth record on 7 July 2020.

Findings

In the absence of contemporaneous accounts of the late nineteenth Century Dorna Watra, JewishGen helped to fill in a small part of this puzzle. It provides 145 records listing Dorna Watra as a place of birth which provides a basis for further searches. Yet, there are significant gaps in this dataset with decades missing, and at times, it is unclear if records refer to Dorna Watra town or the administrative district of Kimpolung.

JewishGen proved most useful where it provided clues to the social conditions facing Jewish inhabitants who were explicitly recorded as living in Dorna Watra. For example, there are entries recording causes of death, including the diphtheria epidemic of 1875–1876, as well as recurring typhus, TB and other infectious diseases which paints a different picture from the overwhelmingly bourgeois depiction of Bukovina as seen in literary and other accounts of Czernowitz. The archive also provides further useful information evidencing the growth of the town. We note the baseline figure for the Jewish presence in the 1880 census, which presents Dorna Watra as a town of 3980 inhabitants, of whom 494 were Jews. In the first two decades of emancipation (after 1867), the annual number of Jewish births in Dorna Watra rarely appears in double figures and the population does not grow significantly.

Yet, the 1910 census records a remarkable increase in the Jewish population, which is not supported from the data on births. From this census, we find the city housing 15,529 residents including a Jewish population that had quadrupled to 1,924 (Sternberg 1958). This statistic is, therefore, best explained by inward migration (Rechter 2013) and is consistent with Dorna Watra's expansion as a spa town and the arrival of the railway in 1902.

The Dorna Watra records for the three-decade period I sought show some remarkably consistent demographic trends including the incidence of premature death and its causes.

Table 1. Jewish Births Recorded in Kimpolung 1857−1893.

Year	Indexed Records
1857	36
1858	30
1859	38
1860	42
1861	25
1862	29
1863	34
1864	26
1865	38
1866	37
1867	30
1868	27
1869	26
1870	53
1871	33
1872	52
1873	187
1874	51
1875	57
1876	52
1877	50
1878	100
1879	75
1880	102
1881	100
1882	115
1883	49
1883	62
1884	136
1885	97
1886	110
1887	105
1888	130
1889	23

Related to this, they also provide some basic geographical information including the number of houses in the town and the proximity of family members often living next door to each other. The spatial concentration of Jewish life in Dorna Watra informs the spread of disease as recorded elsewhere in reports of cholera epidemics (see Sabol and Harieta 2014) and in the reports of infectious diseases as noted above.

JewishGen also provides some other clues about Jewish life which help to fill out the picture of the growing town two generations after emancipation (Stambrook 2003). For example, in the Bukovina databases on JewishGen and tragically in the Holocaust lists we find a handful of entries that indicate Dorna Watra housed a diverse range of professions, some going back to the mid−19th century. This includes timber merchants and one professor, among the 2650 Jews transported from Dorna Watra and their neighbouring villages to Transnistria, following the 1941 Antonescu order.[1] The Yizkor book for Dorna Watra, published as the *Memorial Book of the Jewish Community in Vatra Dornei and Surroundings, Bucovina, Romania*, accessed via JewishGen provides a link to a site, 'Necrology 825–850' which includes a 'list of martyrs from Vatra Dornei, Romania', but provides little contextual information beyond the causes of death during the Holocaust and place of death. While superficial, this site offers leads to hundreds of names, as well as some insight into the range of deportations, whether to Transnistria (principally to Mogilev) or to Auschwitz and in some cases those who disappeared in the USSR.

Concerning my grandmother, the personal records I found confirm some rather ordinary trends. While her mother Dora Pächt was born in Bukovina in 1861, the records for her father Aba Stark are not included in this archive, suggesting that he may have come from one of the neighbouring territories, most probably Galicia or Bessarabia, which corresponds with migration trends of the time (Rechter 2013). From Sternberg's entry on Dorna Watra, however, I was able to explore other relationships and identify family members. These records show that on Anna's maternal side, the family had established roots in Dorna Watra, with the Pächts (recorded as Paechts), surfacing on multiple occasions as business owners and community leaders. Sternberg notes the sawmill of Moses Paecht [Pächt], among other important Jewish-owned lumber companies and lists Isak Paecht appearing on the executive committee of the Jewish community even after Bukovina passed to Romania (Sternberg 1958). This fact further helped me to explore the family trees on JewishGen and establish some migration patterns within the family. While poorer members, including widows like my great-grandmother, moved to the USA, the industrialists identified by Sternberg moved to Czernowitz and later Vienna and eventually settled in Israel just before the war.

Evaluation

The above inquiry illustrates some of the challenges and opportunities facing genealogical researchers today. One of the most significant findings of this study regards the extensive documentation on Jewish worlds that survived the Holocaust despite the extinction of so many Jewish communities. In this context, the resources provided by JewishGen are truly remarkable.

By providing access to multiple databases, that aggregate information, JewishGen helps researchers to triangulate sources, for example, by comparing birth and death records with census data. This is particularly important given the ambiguous status of Jews in Habsburg Austria who were largely described as German-language speakers and squeezed into an ethnic bloc, on account of their *habitual* use of language. These records are more accurate than census data that relies on self-completed questionnaires and whose accuracy depends on participants' knowledge of their status, and other personal information, such as dates of birth, the spelling of names and so on. Not surprisingly, requests for citizenship demand certified proof of birth, and this is where JewishGen is invaluable.

While family histories provide a glimpse into distant worlds, they cannot be understood outside the legal and historical foundations in which our ancestors lived and thus users of online search sites like Ancestry.Com often need much contextual information to guide their search. This is especially true for those seeking records relating to the newly independent states carved out of the post-Habsburg mosaic.

For family history researchers, one of the first obstacles is methodological, namely how to define and narrow one's search. Yet, this entails understanding how names and places were recorded, including from Yiddish to vernacular languages. I was fortunate that the names I used were simple and the official spelling was close to the phonetic sounding. Users also need to be aware of geographic and state-centric categories which may be in use today or may no longer be applicable, including the description of territories once defined as belonging to defunct empires. Hence, the need to search across multiple databases, for example, between Ukraine and Romania or between Poland. In the case of Bukovina, whose Jewish population included thousands of immigrants from neighbouring territories in Poland (Galicia) and Russia (Bessarabia), the challenge of documenting Jewish life is further complicated by the transfer of the territory and records to competing governments before the Holocaust – passing between Austrian, Romanian, Russian, Soviet Union and back to Romanian control. Consequently, historical archives are now divided between present-day Ukraine in Chernovtsi and Suceava, with other vital documents from earlier periods in Vienna. Family researchers, therefore, need to have an understanding of both the historical and geographical contexts before they can meaningfully launch their inquiries.

In my case, my search was simpler given the fact that my grandmother was born decades before Dorn Watra passed from Austria to Romania and that JewishGen offers an integrated database for the region, which allows users to access in one place materials that might be housed between Ukraine and Romania. Moreover, there was no question of my grandmother's citizenship status since she, like Jews in Austria–Hungary, enjoyed full civil rights since 1867, as opposed to her co-religionists in the Old Kingdom of Romania for who nationality did not come until after the 1923 Constitution. For Jews born and resident in the former Austrian Bukovina, their status as citizens was further evidenced by the extensive personal records that the Habsburg rulers had mandated local administrations keep, including the census.

Contemporaneous sources help to clarify context, which may make searching easier – as we see, for example, in Sternberg's short entry, which most importantly confirmed the relationship between Dorna Watra and the larger administrative centre of Kimpolung, under which my family's records were archived. Yet, such leads do not necessarily indicate that documentation is readily available online, including on aggregator sites like Ancestry.Com and JewishGen. We note that the Yizkor books for Vatra Dornei (Dorna Watra) which are listed on JewishGen only provide a 'necrology' recording deaths of former residents. The original documentation in hard copy is located in the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Equally, materials deposited with national archives may remain unindexed or stored *en bloc*, as Dawson notes, and this still requires considerable organisation before they can be used. The call to 'decolonise' or 'democratise' archives to reflect the inclusion of ethnonational minorities is also relevant to Jewish genealogical research.

This article also highlights limitations in the existing databases that emphasise the need for more regional studies. Published testimonials, literary accounts and secondary sources may provide useful context but equally may also generate biases, privileging accounts of cities and authors, or over-representing certain groups. This remains a major challenge for the non-specialist researcher, working on the history of Bukovina online or abroad. As detailed above, while there is a significant record of Jewish life in Bukovina that centres on Czernowitz, southern Bukovina remains under-researched and as a result, my inquiry could only progress based on primary sources, which in my case meant interviews with community archivists working on the JewishGen Bukovina database.

Ancestry.Com and JewishGen helped me to access my great-grandmother's records from 1861 that would otherwise be beyond my research, especially during a period of national lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic when I could not consider searching among the archives in Suceava. Furthermore, the gaps in coverage for Bukovina were significant and would have put an immediate halt to my inquiry. Had I not been able to reach the above administrators and archivists, I would not have been able to access the pre-digitised birth record. Moreover, without hearing directly from the community archivists listed above, I would have been left with a discouraging response from the National Archives that would have ended my search. There was no substitute for the rich contextual knowledge the archivists could offer nor the scanned copy of the birth record they had obtained.

Limitations regarding regional coverage no doubt apply to both secondary and primary sources, including several databases on JewishGen where sets of archives may have been aggregated or where dropdown categories are too large to provide much insight into sub-national regions where Jewish communities existed. JewishGen is constantly improving but one might question why some countries are connected, like Austria and Czechia, and not say Hungary, Slovakia and Ukraine which also existed within the Austro-Hungarian system, as did large parts of Yugoslavia, a country whose history is further complicated by the population transfers that took place between its constitutive kingdoms with the neighbouring states of Italy and Bulgaria (see Ahonen et al., 2008). Hence, in addition to the problem of coverage, again family researchers need to start with sufficient historical and geographical knowledge of the periods they are searching.

There are still substantive gaps in the presentation of data on aggregator sites. One feature of the JewishGen databases is that they present Jews as a homogenous religious demographic. Yet, from contemporaneous accounts, we find considerable diversity. Even Sternberg's short entry notes the

competing communal groups. Similarly, the postcards of Dorna Watra indicate important social differences, as well as the use of multiple or preferred languages, for example, German over Yiddish, which also reflected a major fault line between liberal assimilationists and Zionists and between Reform and Orthodox Jews, though those divisions are not evident from JewishGen.

One counter-intuitive finding of this research is that while gaps in coverage provide practical challenges for genealogists, they nonetheless raise useful questions about contemporary biases in favour of recording the activities of city Jews, over *shtetl* life (of villages), which in turn informs our knowledge about the reach of administrative systems and the role of occupying powers with respect to civil registration and records management. In the case of Bukovina, these omissions shine a light on both imperial and repressive Communist state practices. As chronicled above, the limited references to Dorna Watra's Jewish community reflect its subservience to Kimpolung (now Câmpulung Moldovenesc); the small town was only brought into the Austrian system of administration in 1896 as its population grew. Later, as the region was integrated into Romania, the force of Romanian nationalism influenced the development of archival practices, which minimised the Jewish historical record, and consequently, as Dawson records, documents on Jewish life were frequently bundled together and the history of Jewish communities in small towns like Dorna Watra went unnoticed.

Conclusion

This article chronicles the efforts to retrieve 19th century Jewish birth records for one individual and presents an embryonic micro-history of Jewish life in a small town in Austrian Bukovina. While I successfully located the birth record for my grandmother, what quickly became clear is that the Jewish history of Dorna Watra, and Southern Bukovina in general, remains under-researched, despite the discovery of original documents and recent attempts to organise them online.

There are several explanations for the lack of historical accounts of Jewish life in Southern Bukovina which go beyond the primary assumption that so much had been destroyed in the Holocaust. In the case of Romania, the significant continuity of the Jewish community, and extensive relations with Israeli and American Jewish organisations, suggests other reasons hold more analytical weight. Certainly, the devastation of so many communities in the Holocaust and the mass emigration of survivors to Israel undermined the task of preserving community records but so did official state policies, which saw efforts at records management directed elsewhere. As discussed above, thousands of records were simply left on shelves for decades. Moreover, much writing on Jewish life in Bukovina focused on Czernowitz, and other large cities in the north, with remarkably few accounts of *shtetl* life in the south. The choices made about which histories to record therefore reflected other choices, as well as political biases.

In the process of my search, I learned much about the methods of Jewish genealogical research available and the documentary context in which family historians are working. As this article records, even with the advent of online aggregator sites like Ancestry.Com and specialist platforms like JewishGen, the task of locating birth records is far from straightforward. While these sites make the task of locating materials much simpler, eliminating the need for travel and providing additional search functions, much contextual information is required in order to use the digital resources to good effect. This includes substantial education on the history of Jewish communities, as well as European geography, which makes the case for more – not less – engagement with skilled archivists and regional experts. My search for my grandmother's birth record only proved successful thanks to extensive communication with the community researchers who are directly involved in the production of the Bukovina database on JewishGen and whose contribution to the location and preservation of Jewish heritage materials is detailed in this article.

The growing interest in Jewish genealogy detailed above fits into a wider trend that speaks to both the search for identity and connection, as well as instrumental reasons which

highlight new catalysing factors including the possibility of acquiring citizenship of a European state. For British Jews exploring their options in the aftermath of Brexit, the attraction of recovering EU citizenship rights, without forfeiting others such as access to the NHS and free schooling, may explain in part the upturn in applications for German and Austrian nationality. My quest for Romanian nationality was primarily motivated by a similar logic. These facts reflect a new trend in the politics of restitution, previously associated with the Holocaust.

This article contributes to the study of family history by shining a light on the personal efforts undertaken by community archivists to identify and preserve Jewish materials online. The backstory to the recovery and digitisation of personal records from southern Bukovina and their publication on JewishGen further challenges the assumption that in the aftermath of war and Communist repression, states had a monopoly over the preservation of communal records and histories. As this article on one family search illustrates, the preservation and presentation of such materials has been far from consistent. This criticism applies across the board to national registries as well as to online documentary aggregator sites. Where they add the most value is above all in their ability to promote data sharing among any community on the grid and in the process build capacity for Jewish family history research.

Note

1. Sternberg records that 2650 Jews were deported from Dorna-Watra and the surrounding villages in 1941, citing, M. Carp: Breviar pentru Cartea neagra Vol III (1941, p. 131). In Sternberg op.cit.

Disclosure statement

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