

# A Simple Guide to Estonian Jewish Genealogy

by Patrick Monson

Prepared with the help of Mark Rybak from the Estonian Jewish Museum as part of a project for the Brigham Young University Family History-Genealogy Bachelor's degree.

This guide will help you with the basics of Estonian Jewish research. Assuming that you have already written down what you already know, collected information from your own home, and talked with relatives, begin your research by learning about **Estonia's history**. This will help you understand the historical context in which your ancestors lived. For example, it is important to know that from 1710 to 1918, Estonia was in the Russian Empire. The area which is now consists of Estonia was formed from the provinces of Estland and part of Livland in 1918-1920.<sup>1</sup>

Estonia as of 1991<sup>2</sup>



Estonia as of 1882<sup>3</sup>



You will also want to learn about **Estonia's Jewish history**. Knowing the history of Estonia and its Jews will help you know where to search, what to look for, etc. Few Jews lived in Estonia prior to the early 1800s, because Estonia was outside the Pale of Settlement, the region of Russia in which Jews were allowed permanent residence. In 1828, the czar ordered the conscription of all Jewish males over age twelve. Later these Jewish soldiers (Nicolai soldiers or cantonists) and their families were allowed to settle anywhere in Russia. Many of those, who served in Estonia, settled there. From 1856 to 1867, the czar permitted some other classes of Jews to live outside the Pale of Settlement (e.g. university graduates, first guild merchants, professional craftsmen). Congregations were formed in Tallinn in 1830, Tartu in 1867, Pärnu in 1869, Valga in 1871, Viljandi in 1876, Narva in 1877, Saaremaa in 1882, Rakvere in 1887, and Võru in 1887.<sup>4</sup> For more history, see the "History" and "Catalogue" in the Estonian Jewish Museum website (<http://eja.pri.ee>). For Holocaust history, see Anton Weiss Wendt's recently published book.<sup>5</sup> Although focusing on Estonians, Aadu Must's guide emphasizes history that affected records.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Toivo Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "Estonia," 1991; Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection (<http://www.lib.utexas.edu> : accessed 9 July 2011).

<sup>3</sup> "Baltics: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1882," *The Comprehensive Atlas and Geography of the World*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Blackie and Sons, 1882); *Federation of East European Family History Societies* (<http://www.feehfs.org>).

<sup>4</sup> Mark Rybak, "Catalogue," *Estonian Jewish Museum* (<http://www.eja.pri.ee> : accessed 9 July 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Anton Weiss Wendt, *Murder Without Hatred*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Aadu Must, *Eestlaste perekonnaloos allikad*, (Tartu, Estonia: Kleio, 2000).

**Find out if somebody else has researched your ancestors.** A valuable genealogical tool is the Estonian Jews Database. At the Museum’s main page, click “EJA Site,” “Genealogy,” “Estonian Jews data base.” You can then search by name and birth place and year. Also in the “Genealogy” section of the Museum’s website is a collection of family trees. Images from Jewish cemeteries are accessible through the site’s main page. Other sites containing family trees and name indices include *Ancestry.com*, *Jewishgen.org*, and *FamilySearch.org*.

Look at **maps** to learn specific information about the place where your ancestors lived. In regard to Estonian Jewish research, most records were created at the city level, but some were created at the county, provincial, or national level. Maps can help you understand boundaries these different levels of government. Digitized maps for Estonia are available at “Saaga,” a collection of digital images from Estonian archives. It can be accessed at <http://www.ra.ee>. Register (free) to view the images. Click on “Register of maps in the Estonian Historical Archives.” You can “Search only maps that have images available.”

**Gazetteers** also help you learn about the place where your ancestors lived. The best gazetteer for Estonia is the *Baltisches Historisches Ortslexikon*, part 1 for Estland.<sup>7</sup> Many major libraries hold this book. Part of it is available online in Google Books; search for “Estland (Einschliesslich Nordlivland).” This gazetteer will tell you what the city’s German name was, what its jurisdictions (city, district, county, province, nation) were in various years, etc. *JewishGen.org*’s “Town Finder” is also helpful for learning about city name changes and what a city’s jurisdictions were. Learning about the locality (place) and its jurisdictions will help you learn what records are available to research your ancestors.

Now you can begin looking for **original records**. If you don’t know the city in which your ancestors lived (most Jews lived in cities), you will need to look at records from all cities; because Tallinn and Tartu had the largest Jewish populations, focus on these cities. If you know the city (or cities), focus on records for that city and county. Focus on records which contain vital information (birth, marriage, and death), which were created by either civil authorities or the Jewish community. Keep in mind that information from one record can lead to other record sources. The following table gives a brief overview of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century records that you can use to trace your ancestors backwards in time. A short explanation of each line follows the table. More information will be given in a forthcoming, more detailed guide.

Time Period	Record Type	Where to Find
After June 1926	Vital statistics	Vital Statistics offices
Turn of century-June 1926	Estonia metrical	SAAGA, microfilm, Estonian Historical Archives
Late 1800s-early 1900s (for Livland cities)	Riga metrical	Raduraksti, microfilm, Latvian Historical Archives
All years (civil records)	Police, court, passport	Estonian Historical Archives, Estonian State Archives
Mid-1800s and before	Revision lists	Saaga, Raduraksti
All years (all cities)	Jewish community records	Estonian Jewish Museum, Estonian Historical Archives, Estonian State Archives
All years (Tallinn)	Jewish community, metrical records	Tallinn City Archives

<sup>7</sup> Hans Feldman, Heinz von Zur Mühlen, and Gertrud Westermann, *Baltisches Historisches Ortslexikon* (Baltic Historical Place-name Dictionary), Teil 1, Estland, (Köln; Wien: Böhlau, 1985).

If you are looking for records that were created after June 1926, contact a **Vital Statistics office**. Look for the details of local Vital Statistics offices (*Eesti perekonnaseisuamet*) at <http://pereliit.eu>. Click on “Kontakt,” and choose a county or city. You can write to, call, or visit an office. Websites for each county government, which house the Vital Statistics offices, are also available at <http://pereliit.eu>. The archivists will do a search for free. They will send digital copies for free, but will likely request information regarding your proof of relation or legal authorization to obtain copies of the documents. Official, printed copies cost between \$2.00-5.00. For Tallinn, Estonian citizens can enter their individual code (isikukood) to request their own certificates at <http://www.eesti.ee/portaal/portaal.sisene?level=30&loc=rrteenus.index>. Regarding document contents, family lists (perekonnakirjad) should contain dates and places of vital events as well as names of relations. Certificates for individual vital events (aktid) should contain dates and place names, as well as family relations.

If you are looking for records from approximately the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to June 1926, search **Jewish metrical books created in Estonia**. These books, which exist for major Estonian cities, contain records for birth, marriage, divorce (rare), and death. Many digitized copies of metrical books are available online at “Saaga.” Go to <http://ra.ee>, click on Saaga, click on “Church records,” “Other confessions,” and choose a congregation. You can then choose from birth, marriage, divorce, and death records for various years. Register or sign in to view the records. The original records are held at the Estonian Historical Archives. The Tallinn metrical records, which exist from 1872, are available in the Tallinn City Archives. Most of the Estonian metrical records are microfilmed and can be viewed in one of the many Family History Centers. For a list of microfilmed Estonian Jewish vital records, see “LDS Microfilms Index” in the Museum website under “Genealogy.” You can find family history centers at <http://familysearch.org>; search in “FamilySearch Centers.”

If you are looking for records from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, and for cities in the Livland province (e.g. Tartu, Pärnu, Viljandi, Võru), search the **Riga metrical books** (as Riga was the capital of Livland). You can search these in Raduraksti, the Latvian Historical Archive’s equivalent of Saaga. The URL is <http://www.lvva-raduraksti.lv>. Click on “Contents” and then register (free). Click on “Church Books,” “Jews,” “Rabbinats,” and finally “RĪGAS.” You can then choose a year and event. Jews from Estonian cities can usually be found at the end of the month or year.

If you cannot find your family in metrical records, look for them in **civil records, especially court, police, and passport records**. Civil records may be helpful for all years, but they are especially useful during the years between the last revision (about 1858) and the late 1800s, years for which metrical records are hard to find. Of particular use for pre-WWI Jewish research are police records. The police kept a careful watch on Jews, insomuch that they created or obtained copies of resident lists, metrical records, and especially records regarding permission for Jews to reside and work in Estonia. The fonds (similar to collections) are usually labeled “[city] linna politseivalitsus.” In **AIŠ** (see below) search for “переписка” (correspondence), and do a keyword search for “евреев” (Jews). Some civil records are available online at “Saaga,” including the indexed “Lists of residents of Tallinn,” which contains records for Jews in Tallinn and other Estonian cities. The majority of civil record research, however, requires writing to or visiting archives (see below).

Regarding **archives**, the Estonian Historical Archives in Tartu generally holds records created prior to the first period of Estonian independence (beginning 1918). The Estonian State Archives in

Tallinn holds records created after this period. The Tallinn City Archives holds records for Tallinn covering all years.

A "Fondiloend" (fond register) of the Estonian Historical Archives is available at URL [http://www.eha.ee/fondiloend/frames/fond\\_find.php](http://www.eha.ee/fondiloend/frames/fond_find.php).

A fond register for the Estonian State Archives is available online at <http://riigi.arhiiv.ee>.

You can search the catalog for all these archives in "AIS," at <http://ais.ra.ee>. You can search for individual records by keyword alone, or in the "Detailotsing." Records can be in German, Russian, Estonian, Hebrew, and Yiddish, although Estonian is the main language of use in cataloging. Contact information can be found at <http://www.ra.ee> on the right-hand side of the page. Contact the archives for information about viewing the records of your choice, and make sure you know what their opening hours and holidays are before you visit the archives.

The Family History Library Catalog (<http://familysearch.org>) contains information regarding microfilmed Estonian resources.

If you are looking for records created in the mid-1800s and before, look for your family in **revision lists**. Revision lists were created for the main purpose of taxing the population. For Estonia, they are available in Saaga under "Revision lists." Not many Jews, however, lived in Estonia prior to the last revision in 1858, and even if they were living in Estonia, the majority of the Jewish population was recorded in revision lists elsewhere in the Russian Empire. If you know what area they came from, then you might find them in that area's revision lists. Because many Estonian Jews came from areas of what is now Latvia, you will most likely need to search revision lists at <http://www.lvva-raduraksti.lv> under "Revision lists" (see section on Riga rabbinate records). Place of residence and place of previous registration (if needed) should also exist in the lists, allowing you to trace your family from place to place.

Covering all years are various **records created by the Jewish community**. For fond numbers and fond summaries of various Jewish communal records, go to VAU (an online help center located at <http://www.ra.ee/vau>); click on "Genealogy" and then "Jews." These collections contain many records of value to the genealogist, including vital certificates, burial society records, photo albums, and more. As was previously mentioned, more information will be given in a forthcoming, more detailed guide.