A YOUR EUROPEAN ROOTS GUIDE

Trace Your European Roots

The Complete Guide to Genealogy Research in Europe

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PART I

Finding the Origin

Start at Home: Gathering Family Intelligence

The single most expensive mistake in European genealogy is opening Ancestry before opening the shoebox in your aunt's closet. People burn weeks and dollars searching for "Kowalski from Poland" or "Müller from Germany" when the naturalization paper in a relative's filing cabinet would have named the exact village. Before you touch a database, do the kitchen-table phase: collect every document, photo, and story the family already holds, and interview the people who carry the memories. Get this right and the rest of your research becomes targeted instead of guesswork.

Why the Kitchen-Table Phase Comes First

European records are organized by place, not by surname. There is no master index of every "Schmidt" in the German-speaking world — there are parish registers in one specific village and civil registers in one specific town hall. Until you know that place — a town, a parish, a district — you cannot search efficiently, and online searches return thousands of irrelevant hits. The home phase exists to extract that one missing word: the name of the old-country village.

Two more reasons make this phase urgent rather than optional.

- **Living memory is a wasting asset.** The relatives who knew the immigrant generation are in their 80s and 90s. Every funeral closes a door you cannot reopen. A document can wait; a 92-year-old's recollection of "the town near the big river where Grandma's sister stayed behind" cannot.
- **The artifacts are scattering right now.** Family papers get thrown out during downsizing, divided after a death, or quietly discarded by people who don't know what they're holding. The address on the back of a 1920s letter, the parish stamp on a baptismal certificate — these vanish in a single garage cleanout.

> Treat this as a salvage operation with a deadline. Interview the oldest relatives first, this month, even before you feel "ready." You can always organize and research later; you cannot un-lose a memory.

What to Collect at Home

Hunt through your own house first, then ask relatives to do the same. You are looking for anything that names a place, a date, or a relationship. The richest finds usually sit in shoeboxes, the backs of Bibles, safe-deposit boxes, and the bottoms of dresser drawers.

The highest-value documents — the ones most likely to name a foreign town — are these:

Document	Why it matters	What to capture
Naturalization papers (Declaration of Intent, Petition)	Post-September 1906, U.S. declarations and petitions used standardized federal forms that typically state exact town of birth, physical description, arrival port and date, and last foreign address	Every name, date, place; certificate/petition number

Document	Why it matters	What to capture
Passports & "old country" ID	Foreign passports, internal passports, and military booklets name place of birth and issuing jurisdiction	Place of birth, issuing authority, dates
Passenger manifests & ship receipts	After 1906, federal manifests record last town of European residence and the name and address of the nearest relative in the home country — not just ship and date	Ship name, port, exact arrival date; use these details to pull the full manifest at NARA or Ancestry
Birth, marriage & death certificates	The immigrant's U.S. records frequently list foreign birthplace and parents' names	Full names, maiden names, places, informant
Family Bible	Handwritten birth/marriage/death pages, sometimes in the original language	Photograph every inscribed page; note the Bible's publication date
Funeral/prayer cards & obituaries	Give exact death dates, surviving relatives, and sometimes "born in [village]"	Dates, full text, every name listed

Don't stop at the obvious paperwork. The following are easy to overlook and often carry the decisive clue:

- **Letters and envelopes** — a return address in the old country is pure gold. Keep the envelopes, not just the letters; the postmark and address line are often more useful than the contents.
- **Photographs, and especially their backs** — names, dates, "to my brother in America," and crucially the **photographer's studio imprint**. A studio stamp reading "J. Nowak, Tarnów" places the family in a specific town. Always photograph or scan the reverse of every old picture.
- **Heirlooms with markings** — engraved watches, embroidered linens with initials, religious medals, dowry chests, tools stamped with a maker's town.
- **Prayer books, missals, and devotional items** — frequently inscribed with a name, a parish, and a date of first communion or confirmation.
- **Diplomas, employment records, union and fraternal-society cards, insurance policies** — these list addresses, birth dates, and next of kin.
- **Cemetery information** — where the immigrant is buried, what the headstone says (some immigrant stones carry the birthplace), and which parish or burial society arranged it.

For every item, your job is the same: capture the information losslessly. Photograph or scan at high resolution, including reverse sides, margins, and any stamps. Do not "summarize" a document and put the original back in a relative's drawer — get a full image while you have it in your hands.

How to Interview Your Relatives

A genealogy interview is not a casual chat. It is a structured conversation aimed at one thing: pulling out names, dates, places, and the leads that point to the old country. Do it deliberately.

Who to ask, and in what order

Start with the oldest living relatives and anyone who knew the immigrant generation personally. Birth order matters less than memory and connection — a daughter-in-law who nursed your great-grandmother for a decade may know more than a grandson who saw her twice a year. Interview people **separately** at first. One dominant relative will otherwise "correct" everyone else into a single smoothed-over version, and you lose the contradictions that are themselves clues.

Record the conversation

Ask permission, then record audio (your phone is fine) so you can listen freely instead of scribbling. People remember more when they're talking without interruption, and a recording lets you catch the place name they mumbled and you couldn't spell. Bring photographs and documents to the interview — handing someone an old picture is the fastest way to unlock a story, and they can often name the people in it.

The essential questions

Open with the facts you most need and the questions an elderly relative can answer most reliably:

- What was our family's surname in Europe? Was it ever spelled differently?
- What **country, region, and town or village** did the family come from? Say the name slowly — can you spell it?
- What language did the immigrant generation speak at home?
- What was the family's religion or congregation? (Roman Catholic, Lutheran/Evangelical, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish?)
- Roughly when did they come over, and did they come alone or with others?
- Do we have any old papers, photos, letters, or a family Bible — and who has them now?
- Did anyone ever go back to visit? Do we still have relatives over there?

The deeper questions

Once the facts are down and the person is comfortable, draw out the texture that hides the best leads:

- What did the ancestor do for a living — in Europe and after arriving?
- Did they settle near other families from the same town? Who were the immigrant's closest friends here? (These **FAN** clues — Friends, Associates, and Neighbors — become powerful later; see Chapter 19.)
- Which church, synagogue, or social club did they belong to in America?
- Why did they leave — work, military conscription, a feud, persecution, a marriage?
- Were there siblings who stayed behind, emigrated elsewhere (Canada, Argentina, Brazil), or died young?
- Has anyone before you written down a family tree, however rough?

Drawing out the place of origin

The town name is the prize, and it is usually the hardest thing to pin down because it has been distorted by accent, memory, and time. Work it from several angles:

- Ask for **anything near** the town, not just the town itself — "the nearest city," "the river," "the mountains you could see," "how far to church."
- Ask the relative to **say it, not spell it**, and record the audio. You'll decode the spelling later against a gazetteer.
- Probe phrases like "Austria," "Russia," or "Prussia" — for pre-1918 emigrants these usually name an **empire**, not today's country. Someone "from Austria" may have lived in what is now Poland, Ukraine, Slovenia, or the Czech Republic. (Decoding place and surname distortions is its own skill, covered in Chapter 3 — for now, just record exactly what was said.)

Handling contradictory and drifted memory

Family stories drift over generations like a game of telephone. The "German" branch turns out to be from Alsace; the "Russian" great-grandfather was a Jewish man from a shtetl in what is now Belarus; "Austria" was really Galicia — a Habsburg crown land that covered much of what is now southern Poland and western Ukraine, and that ceased to exist as a political unit in 1918. Expect contradictions, and treat them as a feature, not a flaw.

- **Write down every version**, including the ones you suspect are wrong, with a note on who said what. A discarded detail often turns out to be the right one.
- **Never argue a relative out of their memory** mid-interview. Record it as given. You verify against documents later, not against another relative's certainty.
- Flag claims as what they are: a **document** ("his certificate says 1887"), a **memory** ("Aunt Mary always said 1885"), or a **guess** ("around the turn of the century"). Keeping these tiers separate stops a family legend from hardening into a tree fact.

Capturing Names and the "Old Country" As Stated

Two pieces of information deserve special discipline because they are the hinges your whole search will turn on.

Surname spellings. Record every spelling you encounter — on documents, headstones, and from each relative — exactly as found, and keep them all. A name was never "misspelled"; it was transliterated by a clerk who heard it through an unfamiliar accent and wrote it in a foreign alphabet. *Kowalczyk* might appear as Kowalchik, Kowalczik, or Kovalcik. *Schäfer* becomes Schaefer or Shafer. Treat the variants as a set of search terms, not as errors to correct.

The "old country" as stated. Write the place of origin down in the exact words the relative or document used, then label its era. "Posen" is the German name for Poznań (then in the Prussian partition of Poland); "Galicia" and "Bohemia" no longer exist as political jurisdictions. Capture the literal phrase ("she always said *Posen*"), and separately note your working interpretation ("German name for Poznań, then in Prussian-controlled Poland"). Do not overwrite the original term — the historical place name is what you'll match against period maps and gazetteers, and it tells you which archive and which record language to expect.

Organize and Cite From Day One

The most common regret experienced genealogists voice is not citing sources early. Six months in, you'll have a date with no idea whether it came from a death certificate or from Aunt Mary, and you'll have to redo the work. Build the habit on day one — it costs seconds now and saves days later.

A workable starting system:

- **Keep originals untouched; work from copies.** Scan or photograph everything and label each image file with a person, type, and date — `Kozlowski_Jan_naturalization_1922.jpg` beats `IMG_4471.jpg`.
- **Record where each fact came from, attached to the fact itself.** For a document: who holds it, what it is, and any reference number ("Petition for Naturalization No. 14237, U.S. District Court, Buffalo NY — original held by cousin Dave"). For an interview: who, when, and that it was a recollection ("interview with Helen Nowak, 14 May 2026, recalled from memory").
- **Separate evidence from conclusion.** A column or note that says "this is what the source says" kept apart from "this is what I think it means" stops a guess from hardening into a fact.
- **One person, one file.** Whether you use genealogy software, a spreadsheet, or a binder, give each individual a single home where their documents, dates, and source notes live together.

Citing every source from day one is not bureaucratic fussiness. It is what lets you resolve the inevitable conflict between a record that says 1887 and an aunt who swears 1885 — because you'll know exactly how reliable each one is.

Frame a Focused Research Question

You cannot research "my family." You can research one specific question, and a good one points straight at a record you can go find. Vague goals produce vague, expensive flailing; a sharp question produces a search plan.

Turn the fog of "where did we come from?" into something concrete:

- Too broad: *Where is my family from?*
- Focused: *In which town was my great-grandfather Jan Kozłowski born, given that his 1922 naturalization petition says "born in Russia" and the 1910 census lists his arrival as 1903?*

A strong research question names a **specific person**, states **what you already know and from which source**, and identifies the **single fact you're trying to establish next** — usually a place or a date. Answer one such question, and the answer hands you the inputs for the next one. That is how a tree grows: not in one sweep, but one well-framed question at a time.

Action Plan

1. **Schedule your oldest relative this week.** Set up a recorded interview (with permission) with the eldest person who knew the immigrant generation. Don't wait until you feel prepared — this is the perishable part.

2. **Run the home document sweep.** Search your own house and ask every relative to check shoeboxes, drawers, Bibles, and safe-deposit boxes for naturalization papers, passports, letters with envelopes, photos, and funeral cards.
3. **Photograph everything, front and back.** Capture every document, photo reverse, Bible page, and headstone at high resolution while the items are in your hands. Name each file with person, type, and year.
4. **Build a source-linked file per ancestor.** Start a spreadsheet, software tree, or binder. For every fact, write down its source — document plus reference number, or interview plus date — right next to the fact.
5. **Record names and places exactly as found.** List every surname spelling you encounter, and write the "old country" in the literal words given, with a separate note on your working interpretation and its era.
6. **Write one focused research question.** Name a specific ancestor, the facts you already have and their sources, and the single place-or-date you need to establish next. That question is your launch point into the records chapters ahead.

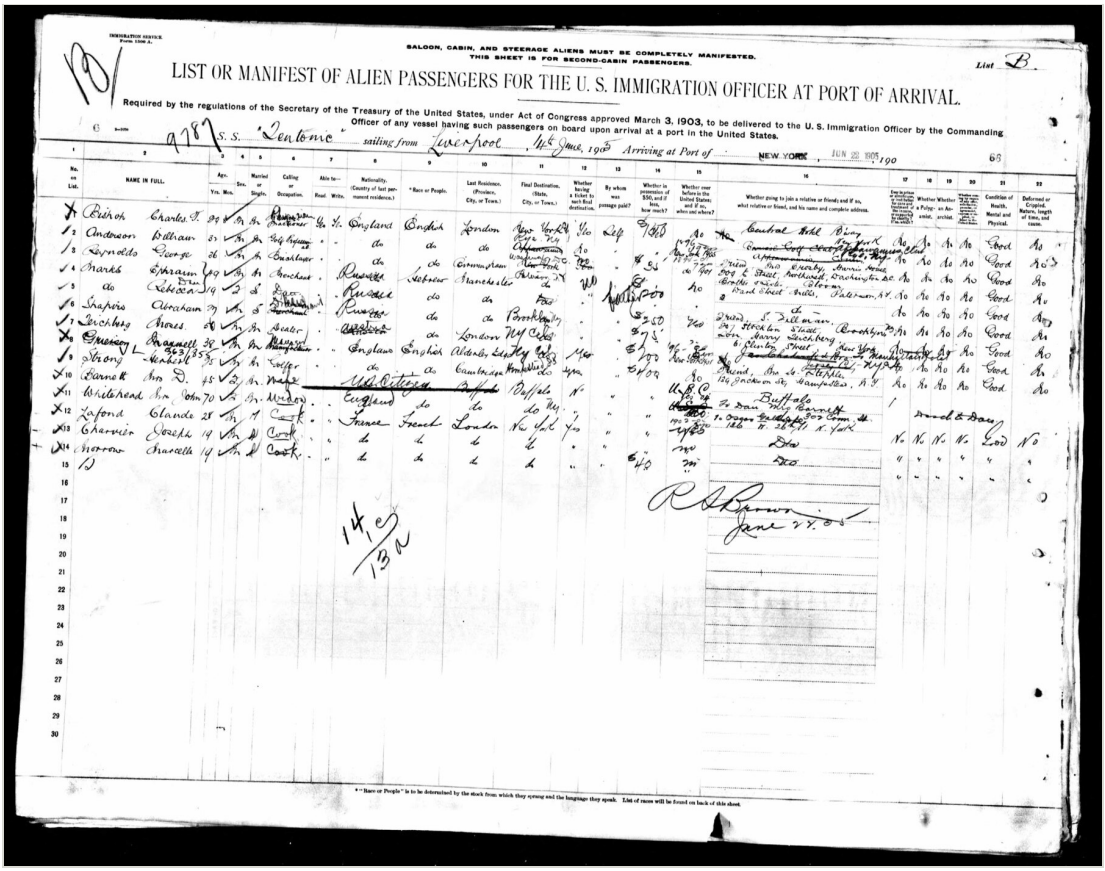
U.S. Records That Name the Town

Most beginners make the same expensive mistake: they jump straight to European archives armed with nothing but "Grandma came from Poland." Poland has thousands of parishes. Italy has roughly 8,000 *comuni*. Germany before 1871 was 300-plus independent states. Without a specific town you cannot search overseas — you can only guess.

The town is almost always sitting in an American record. Your immigrant lived here for decades, and that life generated paperwork: a ship manifest, a naturalization petition, a draft card, a death certificate, a Social Security application, a parish baptism. Each one had a blank for where the person was born. Your job in this chapter is to find that place name before you spend a dollar or an hour on the European side.

Work through these sources roughly in the order below. When two records disagree on the town, collect every version — the European search later will tell you which spelling was correct.

Passenger Arrival Manifests



LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE U. S. IMMIGRATION OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL.

A U.S. immigration passenger manifest — the SS Teutonic, arriving New York from Liverpool, 22 June 1905. The arrival form recorded each passenger's last place of residence and, after the 1906 reform, birthplace and nearest relative in the old country. U.S. Department of Labor — public domain (PD-USGov).

The ship manifest is the single most important origin document for most immigrant families, because post-1906 forms ask for the birthplace outright. What a manifest tells you depends entirely on when the ship arrived.

Before 1893, U.S. arrival manifests (called *Customs Passenger Lists*) are thin. They typically record name, age, sex, occupation, and the country — sometimes only the country — of origin, plus the U.S. destination. You will rarely get a town. Federal arrival records survive from 1820 onward, so these early lists exist; they just won't usually name the village.

From 1893, the expanded *Immigration Passenger Lists* record the immigrant's **last place of residence** (frequently the specific town), final U.S. destination, and the name of a contact they were joining.

From 1906 onward, the manifest becomes a genealogical goldmine. The standardized two-page form — officially the *List or Manifest of Alien Passengers* — adds columns that name the old country directly:

Column	What it gives you
Place of birth (town and country)	The actual birthplace, added 1906
Name and address of nearest relative in country of origin	A relative still living in the village, with the village name
Last place of residence	Town the immigrant left from
Personal description (height, eyes, hair, marks)	Confirms identity across records
Final destination + person joining in U.S.	Confirms it's your family

> The two-page form trips up beginners. Many online images show only the left page (name, age, occupation). The birthplace and nearest-relative columns are on the **right page** of the spread, which often loads as a separate image. If you don't see a birthplace, you are almost certainly looking at half the document. Always click forward and back to find the matching page with the same line numbers.

That **nearest relative in the old country** column is the one to circle in red. It frequently reads something like "father, Jan Kowalczyk, Wola Rzędzińska, Austria" — handing you not only the village but a named relative to look for in European records.

Detained and Special Inquiry pages: at the back of each manifest are extra pages listing passengers held for medical inspection, missing money, or because the relative meeting them hadn't shown up. If your ancestor was detained — very common for women and children traveling to join a husband — these pages add the name and address of the person who finally collected them, often a clue found nowhere else. Always check whether your ancestor's line number appears on a detained list at the back.

Where to find manifests:

- **The Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation** (libertyellisfoundation.org) — free; New York arrivals 1820–1957, including the peak Ellis Island years 1892–1924 (the station remained open until 1954 but processed far fewer arrivals after the 1924 quota laws).

- **Castle Garden** (castlegarden.org) — free; New York arrivals 1820–1892 (records predate and include the Castle Garden depot, which operated 1855–1890 as the predecessor to Ellis Island).
- **FamilySearch.org** — free; large and growing manifest collections for New York and other ports.
- **Ancestry.com** — subscription; the most complete indexed collection, with manifests for New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, Galveston, San Francisco, and more.

Index transcriptions are full of errors because the handwriting is difficult and the names are foreign. Always click through to the actual image and read the line yourself. Search every port — your family did not necessarily land in New York.

Naturalization Records

Becoming a U.S. citizen generated paperwork that asks pointed questions about origin. The amount of detail depends on one pivotal date: **September 27, 1906**, when the Basic Naturalization Act took effect and standardized the process under federal supervision.

Naturalization was typically a two-step process producing three documents:

- **Declaration of Intention** ("first papers") — filed when the immigrant declared intent to become a citizen.
- **Petition for Naturalization** ("second" or "final papers") — filed years later, formally requesting citizenship.
- **Certificate of Naturalization** — issued once citizenship was granted; the copy the immigrant kept at home.

Before September 27, 1906: an immigrant could naturalize in *any* court — federal, state, county, even some city courts. Forms were brief and varied wildly. Many name only "Germany" or "Russia," not a town. Pre-1906 records are scattered across thousands of local courthouses; search county and state archives. FamilySearch and Ancestry have indexed many.

From September 27, 1906 onward: the new Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization created uniform nationwide forms requiring far more detail. A post-1906 Declaration or Petition typically states the **exact town and country of birth**, date of birth, physical description, the ship name and exact arrival date and port, the spouse's name and birthplace, and the names, birthdates, and birthplaces of all children. Petitions filed after 1929 include a photograph.

How to order post-1906 records — USCIS Genealogy Program: the post-1906 case files are held by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Their **Genealogy Program** (uscis.gov/genealogy) sells copies of historical records to the public. Submit an **Index Search Request** to get the file number, then a **Records Request** to order the file; both steps are done online for a fee. The richest document is the **C-File** (Certificate File), which holds the complete naturalization case — Declaration, Petition, certificate, and supporting papers — for naturalizations from late September 1906 onward. USCIS also holds **A-Files** (Alien Files, the master immigration file used after 1940) and **Visa Files**.

> Always look for the home copy first. Naturalization certificates and “first papers” are the documents families kept in the bottom drawer for generations. The certificate alone often names the town. Ask relatives before you pay an archive.

U.S. Federal Census, 1900–1950

The census won’t name the village, but it pins down the *year of immigration* and *naturalization status* — the two facts you need to find the manifest and naturalization file that do name the village. It also tracks the family decade by decade and surfaces neighbors from the same town (the FAN — family, associates, neighbors — principle).

The censuses that matter most for immigrant origins:

Census	Immigration-related columns
1900	Birthplace; year of immigration; naturalization status; birth month and year
1910	Birthplace; year of immigration; naturalization status; mother tongue
1920	Birthplace; year of immigration; **year of naturalization**; mother tongue (and parents’ mother tongues)
1930	Birthplace; year of immigration; naturalization status; age at first marriage
1940	Birthplace; citizenship; residence in 1935; highest grade of school
1950	Birthplace; if foreign born, naturalized?

The **year of immigration** column tells you which year’s manifests to search. Naturalization-status codes read: *Al* = alien (not naturalized), *Pa* = papers filed (declaration of intent), *Na* = naturalized. If your ancestor shows “Na” in the 1920 census with a year of naturalization, you have a date to hunt the petition by. The **birthplace** column rarely gives a town, but it sometimes says “Prussia,” “Bavaria,” “Galicia,” or “Bohemia” rather than just “Germany” or “Austria,” which narrows your search dramatically.

All federal censuses 1790–1950 are on Ancestry and FamilySearch; the 1950 census is also free at the National Archives’ dedicated site (1950census.archives.gov). The 1890 census was almost entirely lost — a January 1921 fire in the Commerce Department building in Washington, D.C. destroyed most of it, and Congress ordered the damaged remainder destroyed in 1933 — so expect a gap between 1880 and 1900.

Draft Registration Cards

Two world wars required nearly every man of a certain age to register for the draft, and each filled out a card with his birth date and frequently his birthplace.

World War I (1917–1918): roughly 24 million men registered across three rounds. The cards ask for full name, address, date and **place of birth**, citizenship status, and the name and address of nearest relative. For an immigrant, the place-of-birth line can name the town outright, and the citizenship question reveals whether he

was a naturalized citizen, had declared intent, or was still an alien. Find them free on FamilySearch and by subscription on Ancestry.

World War II (1942) — the "Old Man's Registration": the **Fourth Registration** of April 27, 1942 enrolled men born between **April 28, 1877, and February 16, 1897** — roughly ages 45 to 64, too old to be drafted but surveyed for the home-front workforce. This is the registration genealogists prize, because these older men were often the immigrants themselves. The card records date and **place of birth**, residence, employer, and a contact person. The Fourth Registration cards are indexed on Ancestry and FamilySearch.

Vital Records and Delayed Birth Certificates

State-issued birth, marriage, and death records can name the European birthplace, and one type is especially valuable.

Delayed birth certificates: immigrants born overseas had no U.S. birth certificate, but when they needed proof of age in adulthood — to claim Social Security, get a passport, or start a pension — they filed for a **delayed certificate of birth** with their state. Because the applicant had to *prove* when and where they were born, these often name the **exact town and country of birth** and cite the supporting evidence (a baptismal record, an older relative's affidavit, a family Bible entry). A delayed birth certificate is among the most reliable origin documents you can find.

Death certificates record birthplace as reported by the informant — often a grieving relative who may write only "Italy," but sometimes the actual town. They also list the deceased's parents and their birthplaces, extending you back another generation. Treat the informant's knowledge with care: a daughter-in-law guessing at a town is less reliable than a sibling.

Marriage records for an immigrant marrying in America frequently list each spouse's birthplace and parents' names. Order state vital records from the relevant state vital-records office or county clerk; older records are also indexed on FamilySearch and Ancestry.

Sacramental Records of the Immigrant Parish

The church your immigrant joined in America is one of the most underused origin sources, especially for Catholic families. Immigrant congregations clustered by nationality — a Polish parish, a Slovak parish, a German Lutheran church — and the clergy who served them often recorded more detail than the state did, sometimes in the old-country language.

What to look for in American sacramental registers:

- **Marriage records** noting where each party was born or baptized — occasionally naming the exact European parish.

- **Baptism records** of the immigrants' American-born children, which sometimes record the parents' birthplaces and which name godparents who were frequently siblings or fellow villagers (FAN clues).
- **Burial records** that may state the deceased's place of birth.

These registers are usually held by the parish itself or transferred to the **Catholic diocesan archive** for the diocese. Lutheran, Orthodox, and other immigrant denominations have their own regional archives and synods. If the original parish has closed or merged, the diocese or denominational archive will know where the books went.

Cemeteries, Tombstones, and Online Memorials

Immigrant headstones sometimes carry what no government form bothered to record: the town of birth, carved in stone, occasionally in the old-country language or alphabet. Eastern European Jewish stones frequently give the Hebrew name and the father's name; some Polish and Italian stones name the birth village.

Photograph the stone yourself if you can, and check the back and base — birthplaces are often inscribed where you wouldn't first look. If you can't visit:

- **Find a Grave** (findagrave.com) — free; the largest collection of memorials and headstone photos, with free volunteer photo requests.
- **BillionGraves** (billiongraves.com) — free; GPS-tagged headstone photos, strong in regions where Find a Grave is thin.

Cross-check both, because coverage of any given cemetery differs between them. Also look at *who is buried nearby*: immigrant families and fellow villagers were often buried in the same plot, section, or society lot, and a neighboring stone may carry the town name when your ancestor's doesn't.

Obituaries and the Ethnic Press

A newspaper obituary can name the birthplace, surviving family in Europe and America, the church, the lodge, and the year of arrival — a research roadmap in a few column inches. Obituaries in the **foreign-language and ethnic press** are even richer, written for a community that cared exactly which village someone came from.

Hundreds of immigrant newspapers appeared in the U.S. — Polish, Italian, German, Yiddish, Czech, Hungarian, Norwegian, and more — and many are digitized:

- **Chronicling America** (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov) — free; the Library of Congress's full-text searchable newspaper archive, including a substantial set of foreign-language titles. Search surname variants in the relevant language and decade.
- Subscription databases (Newspapers.com, GenealogyBank) extend coverage, especially for the mid-20th century.

Search beyond the obituary itself: funeral notices, death announcements, and fraternal or lodge notices sometimes ran separately with additional detail.

Fraternal and Mutual-Aid Societies

Immigrants joined ethnic fraternal organizations and mutual-aid societies for sick pay, death benefits, and community — and these groups kept membership and insurance records loaded with origin details. Many large ones were **fraternal benefit societies**: the Polish National Alliance, the Polish Roman Catholic Union, the Order Sons of Italy in America, Slovak and Czech sokols, the Croatian Fraternal Union, German *Vereine*, Scandinavian lodges, and Jewish *landsmanshaftn* (hometown societies).

The prize document is the **fraternal life-insurance application**. To take out a policy, the member stated his full name, date and **place of birth**, parents' names, beneficiary, and often the home-country address. A *landsmanshaft* is even more direct: these were organized by town of origin, so the very name of the society — and its records — points to the village.

Where these records survive varies. Some are with the organization's national headquarters; some have been deposited in ethnic heritage archives (the **Immigration History Research Center** at the University of Minnesota holds extensive fraternal-society collections); lodge minute books sometimes end up in local historical societies.

City Directories

Before phone books, **city directories** listed residents annually by name, address, and occupation. They won't name a European town, but they tell you *where the family lived in a given year* — which fixes the right parish to search, the right county courthouse for the naturalization, the right cemetery, and which neighbors to check. Tracking a name through directories year by year reveals when an immigrant arrived (first appearance) and when they died or moved (when "widow of" appears, or the name drops out). Find directories on Ancestry's U.S. City Directories collection and in many public-library digital collections.

Passport Applications

Immigrants who became citizens and later traveled back to visit family applied for **U.S. passports**. Applications before 1925 are particularly useful: they typically state the applicant's date and **place of birth**, and for naturalized citizens they cite the **date, court, and place of naturalization** plus the ship and date of original arrival. Post-1906 applications often include a photograph. U.S. passport applications from 1795 to 1925 are held by the National Archives and indexed on Ancestry and FamilySearch.

The Social Security Application (SS-5)

When your immigrant ancestor applied for a Social Security number — the program began issuing numbers in late 1936 — they filled out **Form SS-5**, the original application. The SS-5 records the applicant's full name, date and **place of birth** (city and state or foreign country), and the **parents' full names including the mother's maiden**

name. For an immigrant born overseas, the place-of-birth line can name the town, and the parents' names are gold for the European search.

Order a copy from the **Social Security Administration** (ssa.gov, under Freedom of Information Act requests) for a fee, for any deceased person. Before you order, check the **Social Security Death Index (SSDI)** on FamilySearch or Ancestry to confirm the death and the SSN — this makes the SS-5 request faster and cheaper.

1940 Alien Registration (Form AR-2)

The Alien Registration Act of 1940 required every non-citizen in the United States over age 14 to register, regardless of how long they had lived here. Between August and December 1940, roughly **5 million** aliens completed **Form AR-2**. The form is remarkably detailed: full name, date and **place of birth**, citizenship/nationality, date and port and ship of U.S. arrival, length of residence, address, and occupation.

This is a powerful catch-all for the immigrant who *never naturalized* and therefore left no naturalization file. The AR-2 forms are held by USCIS and ordered through the same **USCIS Genealogy Program** described above — index search first, then records request.

Border Crossings: Canada and Mexico

Not every European immigrant sailed directly into a U.S. seaport. Many landed first in Canada — often because fares to Canadian ports like Halifax, Quebec City, and Saint John were cheaper — and then crossed into the United States by train or on foot. Others entered from Mexico.

- **St. Albans Lists (U.S.–Canada border, 1895–1956):** named for the Vermont district office that filed them, these record arrivals crossing from Canada into the U.S. across the entire northern border, not just Vermont. Later forms carry the same kind of detail as seaport manifests — including **place of birth** and **nearest relative in the home country**. If you cannot find an ancestor on any seaport manifest, search the St. Albans Lists. They are indexed on Ancestry and FamilySearch.
- **U.S.–Mexico border crossings (late 1800s–mid-1900s):** records of arrivals at southern land ports, also indexed on Ancestry and FamilySearch. Relevant for European immigrants who reached the U.S. via Mexican ports such as Veracruz.

Action Plan

1. **Build a one-page fact sheet** for your immigrant ancestor: every name and spelling variant, estimated birth year, the U.S. towns they lived in, religion, and approximate arrival year. You will reuse it in every search below.

2. **Pull the U.S. census record closest to their arrival** (1900 or 1910 on FamilySearch or Ancestry). Note the **year of immigration** and **naturalization status** — these point you to the right manifest and naturalization file.
3. **Find the post-1906 passenger manifest** on libertyellisfoundation.org, FamilySearch, or Ancestry. Open the actual image, locate the **right-hand page**, and copy out the **place of birth** and the **name and address of nearest relative in the old country**. Check the detained/special-inquiry pages at the back.
4. **Track down the naturalization papers.** If after September 27, 1906, order the **C-File** (or an A-File / AR-2 for someone who never naturalized) through the USCIS Genealogy Program at uscis.gov/genealogy — index search first, then records request.
5. **Order the SS-5 and a delayed birth certificate** if either might exist — both routinely name the birthplace and the parents, including the mother's maiden name.
6. **Search the immigrant parish, Find a Grave / BillionGraves, and Chronicling America** for sacramental records, a headstone birthplace, and an ethnic-press obituary — the three sources most likely to give the village name in plain sight.
7. **Make a master list of every town spelling** these records produce. Carry the most-cited spelling, plus the nearest relative's name, into Part II — that is the key that unlocks the European archives.

This is a free preview.

The complete guide runs to four parts — finding the origin, the European records toolkit, country-by-country playbooks for nine origins, and a deep section on breaking brick walls — plus worksheets, archive-request letters, and a glossary.

Get the full guide at **youreuropeanroots.com**