How do I find my great-grandfather's ancestral town?
Part 8 – How to "read" records from Eastern Europe (when you don't know the language)
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When I first began tracing my family history, the only things I knew about my paternal grandparents were their Americanized names, Abram and Rose Doctor, and the names of my grandmother's sisters. I did not even know my grandmother's maiden name. By the time I began my research all the old folks had passed away. None of my family were able to help me. Today, I can trace my grandfather's line back to the 1760s and my grandmother's to the 1730s. How was I able to do this? That's the story for this month and next month.

This month, I'll show you how to get useful information from foreign language records even if you don't know the language. I will focus on records from the 19th century Russian Empire, but the basic techniques apply equally to records from other nations. In some ways, the Russian records are more difficult than others because they use the Cyrillic alphabet (and sometimes Hebrew). Getting familiar with these alphabets requires a little more effort than dealing with records that are written in a Latin alphabet.

Vital records (birth, marriage, divorce and death) for Jews from much of the Russian Empire usually are in two languages, Russian and Hebrew (often with a little Yiddish thrown in). Sometimes the information in one language differs from that in the other. Except for records from the 1920s or later, they are handwritten. You can glean useful information from these documents if you take a little time to learn the alphabets and how to sound out the letters of the language. The Kremenets website has some aides to help you in this effort. Go to http://tinyurl.com/yetcexk. On that webpage, Joe Armata's guide to handwritten Cyrillic is especially useful. JRI-Poland's guide to Polish, Russian, and German is more comprehensive; and Al Bell's illustrations of actual records serve as an excellent guide when you are getting started.

I'll focus on my grandmother, Reizl Vurer, her sisters and her ancestors. Figure 1 shows an 1879 Kremenets birth record for Reizl's sister Yehudit.

Figure 1 – 1879 Kremenets birth record for Yehudit Vurir

The left side of the ledger page is in Russian; the right side is in Hebrew. The right column for each is the name of the newborn. The next to last column gives the names of the father, sometimes his patronymic, his registration town, and, often, but not always, the same kind of information for the mother. In this case, both Russian and Hebrew give the same information, although sometimes one language gives more information than the other and names are in different forms. Figure 2 is a closer look at the two name columns of the Russian record.

Figure 2 – The names part of the Russian birth record of Ides (Yehudit) daughter of Duvid Shulimov Vurir from Yampol and Sura Korenfeld from Poritsk

Even if you don't know Russian, can you identify the names in this record? Try using the language aides that I mentioned earlier. To help you further, I have developed a number of tables that show images of handwritten given names, surnames, and keywords extracted from the Kremenets vital records and censuses. The image files (showing Russian and Hebrew/Yiddish) along with transliterations and translations are on the web:

(http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Kremenets/web-pages/transliteration.html). These images can help you by showing how names actually were written. Then, by "pattern matching" you can begin to pick out names in your own documents. Let's try this. Figure 3 is the entry for Yehudit in the Female Given Names document.
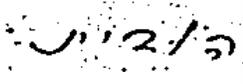
Hebrew Given Name		Russian Given Name	
	Yehudit		Ides
			Idis
			Idys
			Iegudis
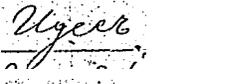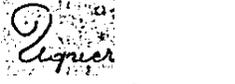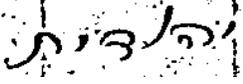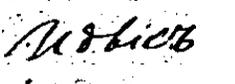
Figure 3 – **An extract from the Female Given Names Image file on the Kremenets website**

Can you do the "pattern matching" for the Russian name *Ides*? (Hint: Look at the first name on the Russian list.) Now try the other names in the record: Duvid, Shulim, Sore, Ester, Meyer, Vurir, and Korenfeld. Use the male and female given names lists and the surnames list on the Kremenets website to find these. Figure 4 shows two male names.

Hebrew Given Name		Russian Given Name	
	Duvid		David
			Duvid
	Meir		Meyer
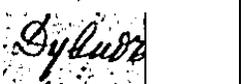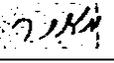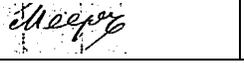
**Figure 4 – An extract from the Male Given Names Image file
on the Kremenets website**
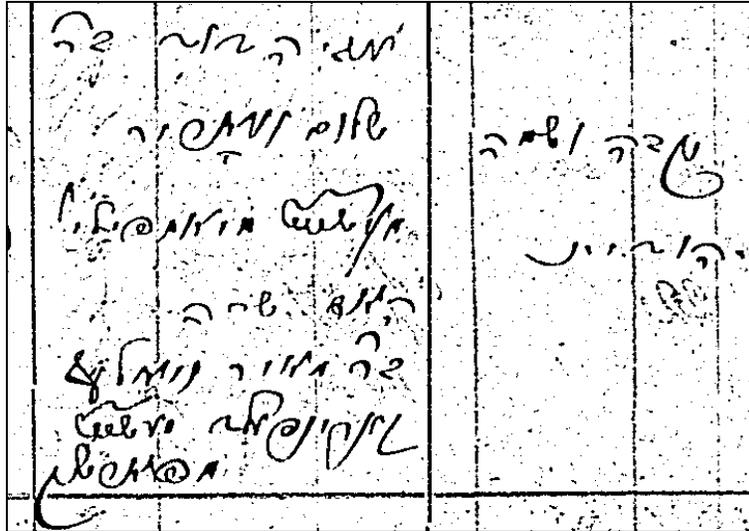
**Figure 5 – The names part of the Hebrew birth record of Yehudit daughter
of Duvid b"r Shalom Vorir townsman from Yampol and Sore Ester b"r Meir
Korenfeld townsman from Poritsk**

Figure 5 is the names part of the Hebrew record. Use the Male Given Names image file on the Kremenets website to find the names Duvid, Shalom, and Meir. Then try the same methods to identify the surnames.

This method of name identification is difficult, but it works. If you do not know the language this is a way to extract the names of your ancestors from otherwise unintelligible documents. With practice, your task becomes much, much easier.

For the past year, we have explored sources and methods you can use to build your family history. Next month, I will show you how I put together my information, piece by piece to trace my family lines back to the early 1700s. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please write to me at rondoctor@earthlink.net.