Displaced Person:

(noun)—a person who is forced to leave their home country because of war, persecution, or natural disaster; a refugee.

In my experience, the typical genealogy research project involves reaching back to the 19th century and earlier in pursuit of long lost generations of family. In those cases, people are usually able to provide at least the names of their grandparents and the country where their immigrant ancestors lived before arriving in the United States. From those facts and clues, a searcher reconstructs a family history timeline including names, dates, and places. Recently, I had a very different research experience.

I had my first request to piece together the origins of a family that arrived in the U.S. in the early 1950s. I wondered why such a recent immigrant family was unsure of its origins and what I could add to the knowledge they would already have. That question was answered by a family history research journey that led to sources of information I had never used before. That investigative journey also revealed a poignant story of a Polish husband and father named Tadeusz, his family fractured by war, taken from his homeland and ultimately reduced to classification as a "stateless" refugee. Connecting Tadeusz back to his homeland would mean reconstructing not only his family history but, as importantly, the world history and events that caused and defined his family odyssey.

World War II began with the invasion of Poland by Germany on September 1, 1939. A massive surprise air attack destroyed most of Poland's air forces along with key bridges and roads. As Polish troops marshalled, German aircraft mowed them down from above. At the same time, a huge German ground force entered Poland. The crippled Polish military defended the country but were no match for the much larger and more well-equipped German forces. Britain and France immediately gave Germany an ultimatum: withdraw from Poland or they would declare war on Germany. Germany ignored the ultimatum and, on September 3, 1939, Britain and France did declare war on Germany. Thus, World War II had begun.

The brutal occupation of Poland by Germany lasted six years until the end of World War II. Orchestrated ethnic cleansing aimed at both Polish Jews and Christians resulted in millions of deaths as part of the Nazi plan to "Germanize" the territories under their control. Thousands of others living in Poland became forced laborers, some in Poland and others taken to Germany. After the war ended borders were redrawn and territory was divided, resulting in much of Eastern Europe, including Poland, being

Baltic Sea
Border of Republic of Latvia (as of 1 September 1939)
Border of Republic of Lithuania (as of 1 September 1939)
REICHSKOMMISSARIAT OSTLAND (Established in December 1941)
Wilno (Vilnius)
(Reichskommissariat Ostland)
Nowogródek
Gdynia
Gdańsk (Danzig)
PROVINCE EAST PRUSSIA
(Provinz Ostpreußen)
(Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreußen)
REICH DISTRICT DANZIG-WEST PRUSSIA
DISTRICT BIALYSTOK
(Incorporated to East Prussia Province, 22 July 1941)
Białystok (Bialystok)
(Bezirk Bialystok)
Bydgoszcz
Toruń
Warta
Inowrocław
Ciechanów
Narew
Wisła
Poznań
REICH DISTRICT LAND OF WARTA RIVER
(Reichsgau Wartheland)
WARSZAWA (WARSAW)
Brześć nad Bugiem (Brest Litovsk)
Kalisz
Łódź
LOWER SILESIA
(Provinz Niederschlesien)
REICHSKOMMISSARIAT UKRAINE
(Established 1 September 1941)
(Reichskommissariat Ukraine)
Radom
Lublin
Bug
GENERAL GOVERNMENT
(Generalgouvernement)
Kielce
Łuck (Lutsk)
UPPER SILESIA
(Provinz Oberschlesien)
Katowice
(Distrikt Galizien)
Kraków (Krakow)
Lwów (Lvov)
DISTRICT GALICIA
(Included to General Government 1 August 1941)
Tarnopol
Stanisławów
PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA
SLOVAKIA
KINGDOM OF HUNGARY
Borders of Poland before 1 September 1939
Borders of Free City of Danzig before 1 September 1939
Borders of other states before 1 September 1939
Line of partition of Poland between III Reich and USSR before 22 June 1941
Territories ceded by the III Reich to Slovakia
Border of Romanian Kingdom of 1 September 1939

Pre-war Rawa Ruska

condemned to Soviet control and Communism . . . and more deliberate systematic ethnic and religious persecution and brutality.

Tadeusz had lived in what was eastern Poland prior to World War II. His home was in the Rawa Ruska/Zurawce area. In 1939, Rawa Ruska was a multi-ethnic and multi-faith community of about 12,000 people, the population including ethnic Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and even Germans. With the arrival of the German occupiers in Rawa Ruska came the 1941 construction of a concentration camp nearby, operated by the German SS. Local men were forced labor for the construction of that camp, Belzec, and local Jews were among its victims. Belzec, as horrific as Auschwitz, is less known and documented for the simple reason that there were less than a dozen known survivors of Belzec and so virtually no one to describe the horrific events at the camp.

Records obtained from the U.S. National Archives indicate that Tadeusz was born in Rawa Ruska in 1893. His parents, members of the local Eastern Orthodox Church, were also born there. He served in the Austrian Army during World War I, was captured in battle and was a prisoner of war held in Odessa, Russia until 1918 when he was released and made his way back to Zurawce. He remained in Zurawce until 1944 when, during the German occupation, he was taken to Germany. He stated that between 1944 and 1955, he and his family lived in at least five different German cities, most likely in what were called displaced persons camps. Tadeusz's National Archives "alien" file includes documentation from the post-war German government categorizing Tadeusz and his family as "stateless" refugees. In fact, at the end of the war when borders were redrawn, Rawa Ruska, the place where generations of Tadeusz's family had lived, was no longer in Poland

SS at Belzec

and became a part of Ukraine. The remaining Poles living there were forced to leave and be "repatriated" to Western Poland, leaving their homes, family roots, and local culture behind.

In 1955, as refugees sponsored by an Eastern Orthodox organization, Tadeusz and his family were approved for relocation to the United States under the 1953 U.S. Refugee Relief Act. They arrived in February 1956, living first in New York City and soon in New Jersey, beginning a new life and closing the door on a painful past. It was my privilege to be able to tell Tadeusz's descendants the story of his life, an odyssey that spanned two world wars and took him from rural Poland to a Russian POW camp, to years as a "displaced person" in Germany and, finally, to America as a refugee immigrant.

In another case of genealogical coincidence, just weeks after finishing my research on Tadeusz, my husband and I traveled to Poland for a family wedding, spending most of our time there in Krakow, a stunning historic European city. Krakow had served as the central hub of administrative operations for the German occupation of Poland during World War II, a fact that spared it from the destruction that befell Warsaw, Poland's capital, at the hands of Germany. As we walked the beautiful streets of Krakow, including the historic Kazimierz Jewish district, I remembered that many of the Jews transported to the Belzec extermination camp near Rawa Ruska came from Krakow. I also recalled the heartbreaking stories of the people of Rawa Ruska who had lived together peacefully despite different religions and ethnicity, only to fall prey to monstrous inhumanity. It is something I will never forget.