

## How To Differentiate Between Two or More Towns with the Same or Similar Names by Steve Stein

### Is This Your Problem?

We often know how the name of an ancestral town sounds, but have difficulty deciding which actual town in a gazetteer or on a map the ancestor came from. The choice is often from among two or more that achieve a credible Soundex match on the JewishGen Community Database. In order to draw the right conclusion, there are various pieces of evidence and additional clues that can be used.

The names of many towns have evolved phonetically, or have actually been changed, as borders realign and political regimes come and go. On other occasions, names for the same town are different depending on who is pronouncing them, since Jews often “Yiddishized” the names from how the Poles, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Germans, or Russians pronounced them. Fortunately, the JewishGen Community Database gives multiple spellings and pronunciations for each town. It also gives multiple spellings for regions, which in this investigation was very helpful.

Following is a description of a problem I had with one of my ancestral towns - what I knew, what I could document, and how I went about convincing myself and others that the result was correct.

### Kupel, Ukraine --- or Kopyl, Belarus?

These two towns are both in what at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Russian Empire. I was told that our family came from Kupel, and one relative said it was in “Volinia Guberniya” (how I heard it), which upon consulting a map, I interpreted as Volhynia Guberniya, a region of the Russian Empire east of Lviv in Galicia and north of Kamenets in Podolia Province, in what is now Ukraine. Kopyl was in Minsk Guberniya, much farther to the north, in what is now Belarus. Both had significant Jewish populations at the time. The towns are about 600 kilometers, or about 350 miles, apart. But would I be able to document which was the correct town?

This became an issue many years after I had decided that we came from Kupel, Ukraine. I was quite familiar with the Kipeler Young Mens Benevolent Association, a landsmanschaft that owns a section in Beth David Cemetery in Elmont, New York where my grandfather and many other relatives are buried. I noticed that YIVO’s catalog stated that the society was from Kopyl, Belarus. Moreover, someone chose to document the YIVO file and attach the information in web page format to the Kopyl page under the Belarus SIG. I was pretty sure this was wrong, but could not sufficiently document that to convince the page author. This is analogous to an individual who says that they (s)he’s from “Portland” in the US. What would you look for to differentiate between Portland, Maine and Portland, Oregon? County name, state name, nearby towns?

I took a number of suggestions from readers of the Ukraine discussion group and “ran with them.” The most productive ones I received were:

- Trace back the genealogies of people in the landsmanschaft
- Locate documents for these people likely to indicate where they came from
- Find the incorporation papers of the society

One resource I chose not to use was the JewishGen Family Finder. It is very possible that individuals post entries to JGFF not being totally sure which town they are actually from. In fact, when I asked of the members of the Ukraine Discussion Group to produce their own documentation, I got no response.

Also, since neither town had a KehillaLinks webpage, that resource was not available to me.

## The Investigation

A few years earlier, I had photographed and catalogued more than 300 graves in the Kipeler Society's section, and submitted them to JOWBR. I used that set of names to identify those that I could probably trace and be confident that I had the right individual – by using a combination of a relatively unique name and an identifiable age that I could use to verify those documents. The documents I chose to focus on were:

- Ship Manifests
- Naturalization Papers
- World War I draft registrations
- Vital Records from the town

Unfortunately, vital records from Kupel are hard to come by, so in this case, I was restricted to United States records.

I identified six individuals for whom I could establish a paper trail that I could use to determine their town. Most documents were available on Ancestry.com. This process used standard genealogical techniques, but had the advantage that I was able to hand-pick the individuals I was going to trace (we usually don't get to do that on our personal genealogies!). This documentation consisted of the following:

- Headstone photograph. This contains the English and usually the Hebrew or Yiddish name of the individual. The Hebrew/Yiddish name is often what will show up in earlier documents. It also contains the age and/or the date of death, allowing me to estimate date of birth; it may also contain an explicit date of birth.
- Petition for Naturalization. This document will usually contain the individual's name and age. It may differ by a year or so from the age I estimated from the headstone. The important piece of evidence was the name of the place of birth and/or last residence before emigrating. Many petitions listed "Kupel" in various close and far spellings; if the petition stated "Volin" or "Wolin" (source: Communities Database entry for "Volhynia," which shows those as alternate spellings) at some point, I considered that to be solid documentation that this person was from Ukraine.
- World War I Draft Registration. This also could indicate that the person was from Kupel and/or Volin.
- Ellis Island Database (EIDB) entry. This provided two benefits:
  - If the Petition or Draft Registration had indicated only Volin, and the EIDB indicated Kupel, I could use it to tie the two together.
  - If I had not yet been able to identify an origin in Volin, it might have the location of a relative left behind in the "old country." In one case, it gave the location *Bazaliya*, and in another, *Starokonstantinov*. Both towns are not far from Kupel, Ukraine.

Other “standard” genealogical methods would include knowing that the given names “Mojsesz” and “Meschel” would be equivalent to “Moses” and might correspond in English to “Morris.” Experience in genealogical research also includes not being fooled by outright misspellings of the town name (one document actually had the spelling “Kopyl”, but clearly from the other clues meant Kupel).

It is also important to know the political history of each candidate town – which guberniya or even which country it was in at critical times, such as when an individual left or when (s)he filed her/his Petition.

It should be noted that I often found individuals buried in the cemetery who were not quite from Kupel; either they married a Kipeler, or in some other way had an indirect association. I chose not to consider these individuals as candidates.

After this documentation was compiled, I received a copy of the papers that the society had filed with the City of New York at the time of its incorporation in 1925. The papers clearly indicated that the ancestral town of the society was in “Ukrainia,” which had been established as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic at the end of World War I. These case histories, combined with the incorporation papers, constitute definitive proof that my Kupel, and the Kupel of the Kipeler Young Mens Benevolent Association, are the same Ukrainian town.

## Conclusion

Though everyone’s situation will be different, and some distinctions will be harder to prove than others, I have outlined some techniques which may be used in various combinations to differentiate among towns. The key is knowing enough about your candidate towns – neighboring cities and towns, language, changing borders – to recognize the clues when they present themselves.