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Genealogy in a Dust Bowl

Lots of people are interested in genealogy for very personal reasons, to track the origins of their own families, to track the very origins of their own being on this Earth. Me too. But, I have a problem that is like reaching into a dust bowl of time. My origins were obliterated by World War II, and even before that, by family trees broken by czars and the first World War. So, we can wonder how to deal with that kind of thing, maybe in some less immediately personal way? There is one perhaps almost as satisfying way, and that is reading great books of historical genre, of course.

That brings me to Timothy Snyder, of whom I have written a little before in this space (December 14, 2022). He is the Richard C. Levin Professor of History at Yale University; author/editor of more than a dozen books on European history; and recipient of the literature award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Hannah Arendt Prize, and the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding. He has written books in Russian, Ukrainian, and Czech as well as English.

Two of his books in particular come with some insight into family origins if your family descent is eastern European. The books are: (1) Snyder, Timothy, "The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus 1569-1999" (2003); and (2) Snyder, Timothy, "Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning" (2013).

About the first, the book cover captures its essence: "Timothy Snyder traces the emergence of four rival modern nationalist ideologies from common medieval notions of citizenship. He presents the ideological innovations and ethnic cleansings that abetted the spread of modern nationalism but also examines recent statesmanship that has allowed national interests to be channeled toward peace." The various maps right at the outset, for the years 1569, 1914, 1938, 1942, 1945, and 1999, tell the reader a lot about this book, and about how national boundaries in this region of the world have shifted about dramatically over time.

So, how exactly does this bear on genealogy? My paternal family, for example, comes from rural Poland or Lithuania depending on viewpoint and time of reference. Timothy Snyder fills in all the temporal nuances of this apparent confusion, in great detail, and that is a lot to know even if it is not a particular family tree of one's personal origins. Thank you Professor Snyder.

As to the second book, "Black Earth," it is a story of "forgotten testimonies" from survivors of mass murder and of disruption in the worst way, one that surely undermined the record of an otherwise stable society flourishing in place. My own maternal family apparently perished in Kiev with whatever it knew or held in record about those who came before. I say "apparently" because one cannot even know that for sure except by the silence of the letter pen at just the historical moment of slaughter at Babi Yar (Kuznetsov, A. Anatoli, "Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel" [1970 uncensored and translated version]). "Black Earth" marks the historical account as the only genealogical account still possible.

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So, if this is your circumstance, too, this short introduction to Professor Timothy Snyder's good works is my invitation to you to seek what you can of your origins through his outstanding historical accounts, and to seek it in books by others as well. Reading good books is sometimes about just this.

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Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation