

Library as a Bridge between the Past and the Present

Genealogy as a Library Service

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The practice of preserving the memory of one's ancestors through genealogy dates back to ancient times when societies were divided into clans or tribes, and documenting membership in a particular group was essential to justifying the rights granted to an individual (Synowiec 2003). For this reason, the Old Testament contains extensive genealogical sections, indicating direct kinship with patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This was not so much a historical function but a religious one—demonstrating the continuity of the covenant with God and the associated blessings, thus illustrating a person's participation in the history of salvation. Although the New Testament clearly presents that ethnic origin is not necessary for salvation, as “there is neither Jew nor Gentile” (Galatians 3:28), and that all people are—through Christ—descendants of Abraham and heirs to the promises made to him (Galatians 3:29), the Gospels of Luke and Matthew continue the Jewish tradition

by presenting the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38) (cf. Rosik 2007).

The same applies to conducting genealogical research today. On the one hand, it is about preserving memory; on the other hand, it should not be limited to searching for and adding names and dates, but rather be an attempt to understand the ancestors and the times in which they lived. In this approach to personifying research, theological libraries should play a significant role. Due to their religious nature, they better understand the danger of uprooting individuals and depriving them of identification with the community. Most important, they know the necessity of seeing oneself as part of a larger whole—a divine plan, like a link in the entire chain of generations. By organizing various workshops or genealogical events, these libraries become places of local community integration, encouraging the cultivation of intergenerational bonds and traditions.

Theological libraries have another advantage over similar institutions due to their connection to church archives, as part of their structure or close enough that cooperation between these two institutions seems natural. Additionally, local publications concerning small parishes and towns are often issued in limited print runs, rendering them difficult to access; nevertheless, libraries systematically seek to collect such materials relevant to their regions and dioceses.

Genealogical Services in Theological Libraries: Current Status

A survey was conducted in 2025 among forty Polish theological libraries affiliated with the Federation of Polish Church Libraries “Fides” regarding the provision of genealogical services. These are libraries of various types, including academic (found at universities and higher education institutions), seminary, monastic, and parish libraries. Exactly half declared themselves as seminary libraries, with the next largest group being academic libraries (35%), the least represented were monastic libraries (10%) and parish libraries (2.5%), while others did not fit into any of these categories. More than half (60%) reported conducting research, including searches for information about ancestors/parishes, etc. Only 18.8% of respondents

reported not having encountered such requests in the past year. The interest of readers is illustrated in Figure 1.

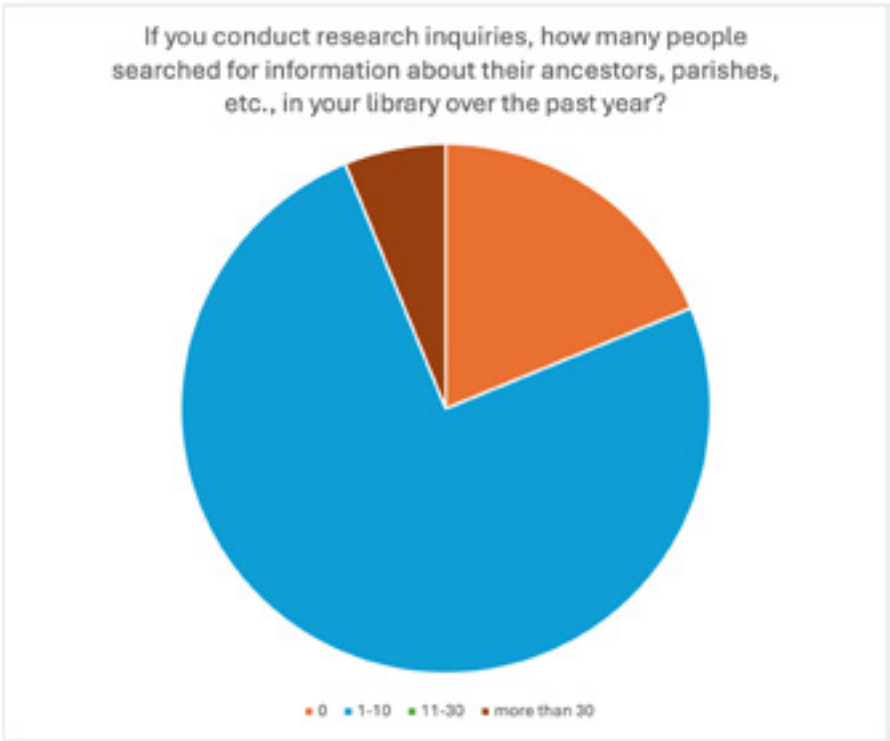


Fig. 1. Interest in genealogical inquiries.

The vast majority of theological libraries (90%) do not organize any genealogy or local history events, arguing this is due to the lack of interest among readers (61.1%), lack of staff for organizing (38.9%), lack of experience (30.6%), lack of funds (25%), or other factors—this is illustrated in Figure 2.



Fig. 2. Reasons for not organizing genealogical events.

Libraries that confirmed organizing such events (10%) were asked to indicate the types of events they organize. Figure 3 shows the types of events they held.



Fig. 3. Types of genealogical events in libraries.

All events were organized with the institution's own resources and drew considerable interest, with half of the respondents

reporting that more than fifty people attended. The attendance of readers is illustrated in Figure 4.

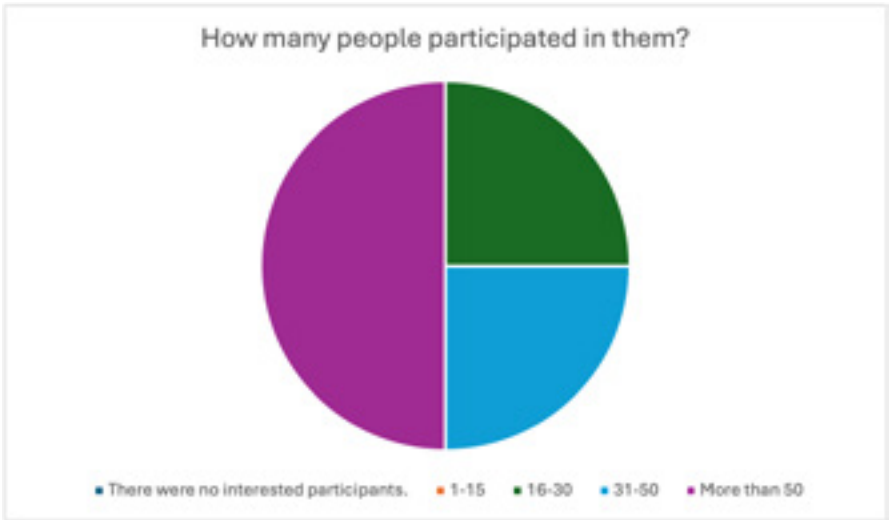


Fig. 4. Number of attending participants at events.

Based on the survey, it follows that most libraries do not organize any genealogical events, mainly due to the belief that there is a lack of interest among readers; however, the experiences of others clearly indicate that attendance is high. Could this be based on a false assumption? Especially considering the decline in readership (and vocations, particularly affecting seminary and monastic libraries), this opens up new opportunities to attract more people to our institutions.

Genealogical Services in Theological Libraries: Perspectives

The role of libraries in society is changing. Libraries are no longer just places providing access to literature and source materials but true cultural centers playing an increasingly important role in integrating local communities, combating digital exclusion, and promoting regional education. Theological libraries are also facing the unique challenge of adapting to the expectations of their current users. It is no longer enough to provide religious literature; it is necessary to

create spaces for organizing lectures, debates, seminars, and workshops that will enable interfaith dialogue, spread theological knowledge, and engage and integrate the local community.

Actions undertaken by public libraries, particularly in the context of genealogical services, can serve as an inspiration and an example for theological libraries in adapting to the contemporary needs of the community. One effective (and low-effort) action is to create a listing of sources for genealogists on the library's website, as seen in the Brooklyn Public Library Association (Brooklyn Public Library n.d.). Another simple yet effective option is to establish cooperation with the US-based genealogy organization FamilySearch (n.d.) and become an affiliated library. This necessitates only the provision of Internet-connected computers, enabling users to access high-quality digital scans of vital records from diverse regions that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Furthermore, cooperation with local genealogical societies, archives, museums, and cultural institutions can contribute to organizing various workshops, events, exhibitions, and meetings promoting the history and heritage of the local community. As a result, even beginners can embark on their genealogical journey and explore the history of their family.

It is essential to remain open to collaboration and to engage with local creators and institutions. A good example might be contacting a local photographer and offering to organize retro-style photo sessions for readers in the library space. Interested participants, dressed in vintage clothes, will have the opportunity to embody their grandparents or great-grandparents and, for a lower price than at a traditional studio, receive black-and-white photos. If combined with a lecture from an archivist on caring for old photographs and documents, a historian's talk about 1920s fashion, and scrapbooking workshops for children and youth to create their own albums, an event would be created that appeals to people with diverse interests, attracting a broad audience to the institution.

Additionally, initiatives like meetings with seniors, during which they share memories of their lives or the history and appearance of the town, are excellent opportunities not only to show the youth the past but also to build intergenerational bonds. These are even more appealing to young people or students when linked to journalism workshops or the creation of board games or mobile apps (especially location-based). Thus following the motto, "Popularization is as important as scientific research," as stated by Wrocław-based

scholar Professor Jerzy Łanowski (Jasińska 2017, 14), knowledge is shared in an engaging and accessible way with others.

Few libraries organize film screenings, due to equipment limitations and associated costs. The most expensive option involves virtual reality (VR), which enables immersive historical experiences and appeals to a broad audience beyond genealogy or history enthusiasts. While many educational VR films are free to access, the necessary equipment remains costly and typically serves only one user at a time. A more affordable solution is a traditional screening using a projector and screen, provided appropriate film licenses are secured and the library can offer a space that does not disrupt regular activities. Libraries should creatively leverage available resources. Older devices, such as slide projectors or record players, can support nostalgic or intergenerational programming, like screenings of vintage animated films or music evenings featuring vinyl records.

It is essential not to abandon organizing such events due to concerns about costs. There are many ways to raise funds for these initiatives. Options include organizing a book sale or selling books to secondhand bookstores. Another option is to apply for grants and funding, such as those from government institutions or other foundations that support education and social activities. It is also worth noting that many companies involved in multimedia equipment sales or organizing workshops for library staff and readers offer help in obtaining such funding for project implementation. In the Polish market, institutions such as the Institute of National Remembrance also have funds. They are open to cooperation with libraries, supporting them in organizing various cultural and educational events. It is worth seeking various opportunities that can help develop activities for local communities without generating high costs.

Modern Technology in the Service of Genealogy

The computerization of libraries, particularly the shift of data to online platforms, has rendered non-collaborative institutions largely uncompetitive and invisible to readers. Today's cooperation is possible thanks to metadata, which exists mainly in electronic form. The most obvious form of this involves the exchange of bibliographic data (Nahotko 2019).

Union Catalogs

The amount of information available on the Internet can be both an advantage and an overwhelming task when looking for something very specific, like a book published in a small edition or grey literature¹. Union catalogs can also be of great value for users researching their roots for genealogical purposes. Especially theological catalogs, which gather publications—often scarce ones—about parishes, cemeteries, and generally speaking, local history, should be a first choice in this kind of research.

NUKAT (Polish National Union Catalog)

For Polish readers, the best catalog to start research is NUKAT (n.d.), which contains descriptions of documents held by many Polish libraries as well as those from around the world. It was launched in 2002 as an initiative of several academic libraries and the National Library of Poland, today connecting more than 170 libraries in a shared task of simplifying access to information. NUKAT holds descriptions of books, journals, sound recordings, printed music, movies, maps, iconographic documents, ephemera, and early imprints.

Fides Catalog

The Central Catalog of the Federation of Church Libraries “Fides” was created on June 14, 2014. Currently, Fides (n.d.) contains bibliographic records from nineteen university libraries and higher seminaries, four diocesan libraries, and eleven religious congregations. The catalog contains information on the collections of forty-one libraries. It contains over 820,000 bibliographic records and encompasses more than three million books and periodicals.

Digital Libraries

Unlike many commercial services, digital libraries often offer free access. Furthermore, for church libraries, this kind of free and widespread provision of collections via the Internet fulfills their mission of evangelization (Witczak 2009). The availability of digital

libraries significantly enhances the efficiency and scope of genealogical research. Digital libraries collect materials, including local newspapers and records, that reflect everyday social life. A notable example is POLONA, the most extensive Polish digital library. Materials available on its platform include, among many others, digitized books, magazines, graphics, maps, music, leaflets, and manuscripts (Biblioteka Narodowa n.d.). It provides access to the cultural treasures gathered in the collections of the National Library of Poland and institutions with which it collaborates. Genealogy-oriented users can find many valuable source materials, such as archived issues of the Polish local press, or address and telephone books.

Pushing in the Right Direction

A key part of a librarian's work is to provide access to information and guide readers to the sources they need. It is not about presenting them with a ready solution, but rather about explaining strategies for finding the necessary information themselves. This approach is equally important when dealing with users researching their roots.

Numerous websites dedicated to creating family trees offer access to various databases of vital records, censuses, immigration documents (including passenger and crew lists), and military records. The most popular options include Ancestry, MyHeritage, and FamilySearch, which also offer a range of additional tools to facilitate family history research.

Several smaller projects contain indexes of vital records and search engines covering specific countries, provinces, or social groups. In the case of Poland, the most extensive database is Geneteka, which includes data from birth, marriage, and death records, often with links to scanned documents collected in the associated Skanoteka. Digitized vital records can also be found in GenBaza and the most comprehensive service, Szukaj w Archiwach. The latter also contains other documents, lists, cadastral maps, and photographs stored in state archives, as well as instructional videos to facilitate use of the platform.

Conclusion

Despite significant progress in the field of genealogy, challenges remain that make researching one's ancestry difficult. Language barriers, limited access to certain archives, difficulties in interpreting old documents, simply not knowing where to look for information, or lacking historical context are just a few of the obstacles genealogy researchers face. This is where libraries play an invaluable role—not only by providing access to a variety of sources and research assistance, but also by serving as meeting places for knowledge exchange through workshops and events that promote awareness of the past.

For theological libraries, these activities align not only with their educational mandate but primarily with their inherent missionary role within the broader framework of religious institutions. Ultimately, genealogical passion is not just about “collecting” ancestors; by creating a space for sharing knowledge and experiences, it can become a way to preserve memory and tradition. It is also a way to integrate the local community and include groups who are at risk of exclusion (such as seniors).

Libraries should collaborate with local genealogical associations and experts in the field to provide readers with the most up-to-date and reliable knowledge. As a result, genealogy becomes accessible and appealing to everyone interested in discovering their family history and exploring the secrets of the past. Ultimately, every newly “discovered” ancestor is not just a name in a record, but a glimpse into the life of a real person whose story holds value beyond bare facts. After all, “Tickets to the afterlife are paid by our collective memory” (Szyborska 2015, 36).

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Notes

- 1 A term describing publications that meet one of the conditions: they are difficult to access, not intended for commercial book trade, or not included in the national bibliographic register.

