Resources for Beginning German Research

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Overview: *Contrary to popular belief, librarians don't know everything. When a patron asks for help with something you aren't an expert in, like German genealogy, you rely on reference tools and other resources. This presentation (and syllabus) is one of those resources, providing a basic overview of how to get started with German genealogy research and a guide to some key resources.*

German Immigration

Tens of millions of people in countries outside of German claim German heritage. The United States has the largest number with ca. 43 million. German immigration to America began in 1607 and peaked in the late 19th and early 20th century. Often German immigrants had their own churches and schools, speaking and writing in German, especially Protestants, for a generation or more, before becoming assimilated.

Tracing German Immigrants

When tracing immigrant origins, follow these fundamental steps:

- Before searching in Germany, use records in the place of *immigration* to:
  - Find clues to the *specific* place of origin.
  - Gather *family context*.
- After you have done your homework in the new country, use resources and records for the country of *origin* to:
  - Study *place* information to verify the place, what records exist, and where.
  - *Verify the origin* by finding the family in original records.

You need to find the specific town because there are no national German censuses available and most original German records are not indexed. Family context (e.g. names of other family members, spelling variants, religion, occupations, birth or other dates, etc.) is important because there are many common names. The more you know about the family, the more likely you are to recognized them in original records.

Records in the Place of Immigration

When tracing immigrants, we look for any records that may give clues to the place of origin and family context, including, but not limited to:

- family records & memories
- passenger lists
- naturalization records
- federal and state censuses
- military draft registration
- social security applications
- passport applications
- vital records
- church records
- newspapers (obituaries, etc.)
- local histories
- compiled genealogies
- cemeteries
- etc.

Note that records prior to the early 20th century often do not include as much information as later records and some records, such as U.S. State vital records, may not have been kept before then. Records may only say "Germany" or "Bavaria" as the place of origin. Church records in the country of immigration, when they can be found, are more likely to give a specific place.

Don't expect to find that one record that gives the answer. You will need to consultant multiple sources. You may need to exhaust every available source to break through that brick wall and connect to the family in Germany. Even if you find one source that does give the specific place of origin, you should not stop there, but gather as much information as possible giving family context before crossing the pond.

Research Methods (German Records)

To find the records in Germany, once you have the specific place and context:

- Use gazetteers or other place reference tools to determine correct spelling of the place and the historical jurisdictions it was part of, where records may be found, such as the location of the civil registration office or religious parish or synagogue, which may be different from the birthplace. Also find out what county and province these places where part of historically.
- Search for the original records for those locations in archives or online.
- It is best to first try to find a birth record in civil registration or religious records. If not found, check several years before and after the reported (or estimated) date in case here is a date discrepancy.
- Next search for the births of siblings and for other records of the family in the same location, such as the parents' marriage record, marriage and death records of other family members. Look for clues of possible other places of origin (other parishes) as you trace the family back.

This class focuses on resources, such as online guides, tools, reference books, etc. to aid in the research process. The next class will focus on sources of original records in Germany. The resource include online and print guides to research, dictionaries, maps and gazetteers, calendar tools, handwriting helps, name lists, and more.

Selected Online Resources
Here are German resources you may want to add to your reference guide for German research.

General Resources

FamilySearch, *Research Wiki*, https://www.familysearch.org/wiki. Includes much info on German research, including records, geography, names, reference resources, especially: "German Gazetteers," "Germany Personal Names", and "German Genealogical Word List." Also, pages for each of the historic German provinces.

Verein für Computergenealogie, *Compgen*, https://www.compgen.de. Besides index databases, includes many other resources, including place database, genealogy wiki, surname map, etc.

Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org. Wikipedia can be a great help with understanding a variety of aspects of German research, including history, geography, culture, language, record types, and more. To name just a few examples, there are articles such as "German Grammar," "German Toponymy" (Info on formation of German place names, with meaning of suffixes, prefixes, and attachments), "German Empire" (also try various historic provinces, kingdoms, duchies, etc.), "German orthography," (Explanation of the German alphabet, writing, pronunciation, etc.)

Calendar Tools Etc.

One-Step Webpages by Stephen P. Morse," *Stevemorse.org*, https://stevemorse.org. Includes many useful tools, including calendar converters for French Republican, Jewish, Julian, etc., Easter calculator, determining time between two events (e.g. calculating birthdate from death date and age), Ahnentafel Calculator, German to America search, German Kurrent/Suetterlin Print/Cursive convertor, and much more.

Dictionaries

Dict.cc Deutsch-Englisch-Wörterbuch, https://www.dict.cc. Comprehensive German-English, English-German online dictionary, including archaic terms, abbreviations, and phrases. Includes links to numerous other language sources.

FamilySearch, "German Genealogical Word List," *FamilySearch Research Wiki*, https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/German_Genealogical_Word_List.

FamilySearch, "Latin Genealogical Word List," *FamilySearch Research Wiki*, https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Latin_Genealogical_Word_List. As many German records include Latin terms, this word list also comes in handy.

Gazetteers

MeyersGaz.org, https://www.meyersgaz.org. Database version of Meyers Orts gazetteer of the German Empire. Includes wildcard search, maps, and info on parishes.)

Gazetteer of Austrian, Czech, Slovak and Slovenian Republic, Genteam, https://www.genteam.at/. This site includes indexes to records from the Austrian Empire as well as tools, including this gazetteer. Requires registration, which is free. Read the instructions carefully when registering, as it requires waiting for an email confirmation with further instructions.

Kartenmeister, http://www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp – Online gazetteer of the areas of Germany now in Poland, Russia, or Lithuania. Includes the German and modern names and location of parishes and civil registration.

Handwriting

BYU Center for Family History & Genealogy. *Script Tutorial.* https://script.byu.edu. Includes instructions and examples for reading old German in handwriting and print.

Dörling, Peter. *Sütterlinschrift lessen / Frakturshcrift lessen.* http://www.suetterlinschrift.de/.

Nülken, Michael. *Öffentlich bestellter und vereidigeter Sachverständiger für alte deutsche Handschriften.* http://www.deutsche-handschrift.de/.

Maps

Mapire, https://mapire.eu. Detailed historic maps of 19th century Europe overlayed over a modern map. Includes nearly the full German Empire as well as most of the rest of Europe.

University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, *Ravenstein Atlas des Deutschen Reichs,* https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/ARavenAtlas. Atlas of the German Empire for the late 19th and early 20th century.

Names

Behind the Name, https://www.behindthename.com – Database of given name. Tells origin of names and equivalent forms in other languages. Starting to add surnames as well.

Geogen Surname Mapping, https://legacy.stoepel.net – Look up surnames in Germany to see the relative and absolute distribution on a map, based on telephone data from ca. 2002.

Additional Resources

Here are additional resources that you may want to add to your physical collection.

Beidler, James M. *The Family Tree Historical Atlas of Germany*. Blue Ash, OH: Family Tree Books , 2019.

Hansen, Kevan. *Map Guide to German Parish Registers, Vols. 1-67*. Orting, Wash.: Family Roots Pub., 2022.

Minert, Roger P. *Spelling Variations in German Names: Solving Family History Problems Through Applications of German and English Phonetics*. Orting, Wash.: Family Roots, 2000.

Minert, Roger P. *Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents: Analyzing German, Latin, and French in Historical Manuscripts* . Orting, Wash.: Family Roots, 2013.

Minert, Roger P. and Joseph B. Everett, eds. *German Immigrants in American Church Records, Vols 1-38.* Orting, Wash.: Family Roots Pub., 2005-2022.

Minert, Roger P. *Germany Place Name Index* (Series*).* Family Roots Publishing. Includes alphabetical and reverse sort place name lists for each historical region of Germany. Useful in resolving spelling variations or difficult to read handwriting for German places.

Thode, Ernest. *German-English Genealogical Dictionary*. Baltimore: Genealogical Pub., 2008.

Where are Genealogical Records in Germany?

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The simple answer is: EVERYWHERE ... but let's take a closer look.

Territorial aspects

- Germany is a federal system today and has been as well as in the past
- This leads to very different historically grown structures and traditions in the regions in general as well as in the archives
- Archives can be found on every level of public administration: the country (Bund), the federal states (Bundesländer) as well as the municipalities (Gemeinden)
- Especially the lowest levels of administration (municipalities) can organize themselves in multiple ways: on the level of single

    municipalities, municipality associations (Gemeindeverbände) or districts (Kreise)
- City-states as special cases

Figure 1: Administrative map of Germany, source: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verwaltungsgliederung_Deutschlands#/media/Datei:Germany,_administrative_divisions_(+districts)_-_de_-_colored.svg

Other genres of archives

Besides administrative archives there are a lot of other genres of archives in Germany:

- Church archives of different confessions
- Family and nobel archives
- Archives of clubs, associations and political parties,
- Enterprise archives
- University archives
- And many more ....

Which archive could be in charge?

- The archives of every federal state, municipality, diocese etc. can have their own legal basis, software, traditions of cataloging etc.
- Common web portals on a European (https://www.europeana.eu/de) and national (https://www.archivportal-d.de/) level share general information and selected catalog entries of German archives
- Some archives also have cooperations with service providers such as ancestry, myheritage, familysearch etc.
- A recommended first step is to get in touch with regional genealogical societies: https://www.dagv.org/?Die_DAGV___Mitgliedsvereine

Primary sources

Civil registries

- In some areas they exist since Napoleon times, in Prussian territories since Oct 1874 and in the rest of Germany since Jan 1876
- New civil registry law in 2009: registers to be given to the archives after certain years:
  - Births after 110,
  - Marriages after 80,
  - Deaths after 30 years
- Originals stored in the archives on the lowest administrative level, copies in the archives of the federal states
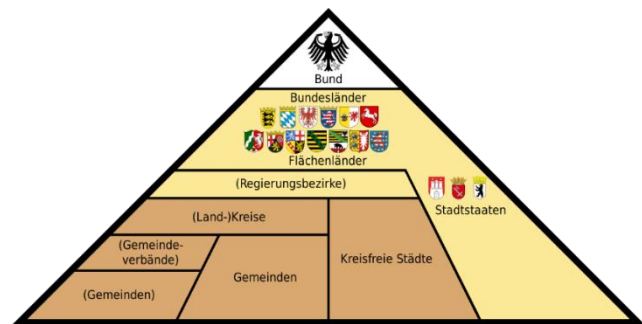

Figure 2: Administrative divisions of Germany, source: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Administrative_divisions_of _Germany.svg

Church books

- Generally stored in the archives of the two biggest confessions
  - Catholic web portal: https://data.matricula-online.eu/de/
  - Protestant web portal: https://www.archion.de/
- In some territories (especially those formerly belonging to Prussia) churchbooks were concentrated in the archives of the civil administration in the 1920s and 1930s, so that the older ones can be found there
- The "Evangelische Zentralarchiv in Berlin" (EZAB) also stores church records from former German territories, today belonging to Poland and Russia

Spotlights on secondary sources

- Pedigrees and family books
- Inhabitant card files (Einwohnermeldeunterlagen)
- Testaments
- Personnel, denazification and recompensation files
- land registers
- Passenger lists
  - o Bremen (only fragments): https://passagierlisten.de/
  - o Hamburg -> ancestry

Figure 3: Inhabitant card file, source: Staatsarchiv Bremen, StAB 4,82/1 - 4182

Some special collections

- Records of the former "Zentralstelle für Genealogie", today part of the „Sächsische Staatsarchiv, Abteilung 3 (Staatsarchiv Leipzig)"
- Bundesarchiv Berlin, f.e.: documentation on members of Nazi organizations, German soldiers of WW2 (former Deutsche Dienststelle (WASt)) and ethnic German resettlers from Easter Europe (EWZ files)
- Bundesarchiv Bayreuth: sources about flight and expulsion of Germans from Eastern Europe
- Martin-Opitz-Bibliothek in Herne: Sources of former German territories and settlements in Eastern Europe
- Landesarchiv Berlin also stores sources from evacuated civil registers from former German territories (Standesamt I)
- Archives of the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen on victims of Nazi persecution

Communicating
with Archives in Europe

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Learn when to contact an archive in Europe, which archive to contact, and how to contact and reply to them.

When to Contact Archives in Europe

When the needed records are not online. Before contacting an archive to ask for copies of a record, look in the following locations to check whether the record is online:

- General genealogical websites (such as *FamilySearch*, *Ancestry*, and *MyHeritage*)

- Websites specific to the region (national, regional, and local)

- Websites of religious repositories (diocesan, synodal, or local parish archives)

Before traveling there. If you are planning a trip, be sure to contact the archives a while in advance. In addition, note the following:

- Look up their hours (posted on their website), days open (many archives are open only a few days a week), and holidays to avoid showing up to a set of locked doors.

- Contact them regarding the records you would like to look at, as they often need to be ordered to the reading room in advance.

- Always make an appointment with the archive. Many places require this (particularly regional, local, and religious archives), and you might not be allowed in without one. The archive may not have space to accommodate walk-ins (such as if a microfilm reader is needed), and many places have health safety measures limiting the number of researchers at any given time.

- You may have to pay a usage fee, though usually not for state or national archives.

- The archives may permit you to take pictures, or they may require you to order copies that the archive will send after your visit.

Writing to Archives in Europe

Determining which archive to contact. Depending on the record type, you may have to visit different archives. A state archive, for example, usually will not have church records, and a local parish office will not have civil registration records. Many smaller archives (such as parish offices) may keep their records for a set number of years and then pass them on to a larger archive. Best practice is to send an initial email inquiring as to whether they have the records of interest or whether they are in a different location before sending them a request regarding a specific record.

On a country page in the *FamilySearch* Wiki, click on "Archives & Libraries" in the Wiki Topics box on the right-hand side for a list of archives and their contact information. If contact information is not included, look up the archive's website and locate their email there (on German websites, look for "Kontakt").

Look for lists of holdings on archival and parish websites.

Look for similar records in online catalogs and contact the archive listed as the recordholder.

If wanting to write for copies of civil records in Germany, go to Standesamt.com and search for the town of the relevant civil registration office. If the location does not match what is listed as a town's *Standesamt* on www.MeyersGaz.org, determine the location of the current civil registration office by typing the *Standesamt* location from MeyersGaz into German Wikipedia and looking for what municipality it says the town currently belongs to.

If one archive does not have the needed record(s), ask them for recommendations as to which archive to contact.

Determining the language to write in. If possible, formulate the email in the language of the archive you are contacting (note that some countries are bilingual or multilingual; for example, Switzerland has four official languages—in cases like this, write in the language of the specific region). However, it is better to write in clear English than to send a bad translation.

Formulating the email. Use the following tools to create your email:

- Letter Writing Guide of the relevant language in the *FamilySearch* Wiki (see, for example, the German Letter Writing Guide).

- What to include:
    o Length: short

    o Detail: to the point (no background story, but if you are requesting a record for a direct ancestor, be sure to mention this)

    o Number of requests: one per email

    o Sentences: simple; no expressions, as they don't generally translate well; for phrases not in the Letter Writing Guide, use an online translator (such as Google Translate or DeepL), then translate it back to English to check whether the phrases still makes sense

    o Fee: make it clear you are willing to pay the usual fee (and ask how much it is, if you do not know), or give a donation if communicating with a parish; if your request is more complicated and will require research, ask whether they provide research services and what their fee for that would be

    o What to request: ask for a copy (not an abstract, as it may contain errors and not include all information from the record)

- If writing in a language other than your own, you can include an English version of the email below the in-language email.

Responding to an archive. Once you receive a reply to your email (which may take a few weeks to a few months):

- You may be asked to send payment up front. Most European archives will request a wire transfer through your bank (which can be expensive to arrange from non-EU banks) and will provide their routing and bank account information so you can deposit the money. However, they will usually accept Wise or similar methods, so be sure to ask. Most European archives do not accept credit cards.
- If the search was successful and the archive sent you a scan of your record, be sure to send them payment if you have not already done so.
- If the archive responded saying they cannot complete the search, ask for a recommendation of a local researcher you may be able to hire, or plan a trip to search for the record in-person.
- If the archive does not have the record, ask them for a recommendation as to which archive or office is likely to have it.
- If the search was unsuccessful, consider modifying your research plan (and asking for a different record), asking them which archive or office is likely to have the records, asking whether the records still exist, or hiring a local researcher.