Heimat Found:
Researching in Germany

Overview

The purpose of this beginning-level lecture is to cover the key concepts for researching in Germany once the town of origin is identified.

Research Challenges

- Language: Researching in records in Germany can be challenging if you don't know the language. While it is not necessary to be conversant in German, it is helpful to have guides and tools to assist in translating the records. German records may be formatted in columns which can facilitate an easier deciphering of key words; however, many are also arranged in paragraphs that will require a more advanced ability to translate the language to better understand the record. Some key references are provided in the bibliography below.

- Old German Script or Gothic Handwriting: The handwriting styles were also called *Kurrentschrift* or later *Sütterlin* and can be difficult to read and requires practice reading German records to become proficient. As with all handwritten records, the neatness of the scribe determines the level of challenge. There are books, online guides, webinars, workshops, and courses to get started, but it is working with the records that provides proficiency. Again, some key references are provided in the bibliography below. There are also professional translators that can provide this skill and should be used, as necessary. It is crucial that the records are accurately translated and understood to accurately further research goals.

- Geography: Researching in Germany is challenging because until 1871, Germany consisted of numerous free cities, (e.g., Bremen, Hamburg), independent kingdoms, duchies, principalities, and states. Boundary changes have occurred throughout time notably when the German Empire was created in 1871, after World War I, and after World War II. Importantly, the FamilySearch Catalog is based on German jurisdictions as they existed from 1871 until World War I, so it is necessary to understand how the location being researched looked at that time to access records through the FamilySearch Catalog. Researchers can use *Meyers Orts* as well as historical atlases and gazetteers to learn more about the location.

- Records: Unlike the Federal census records available in the United States, there are no indexed records that cover all of Germany.

- Church Records: When researching in Germany, church books are a key record group because records, like the census, are not available. A basic understanding of religious history can assist the researcher. The Roman Catholic faith was predominant until 1531 when the Evangelical or Lutheran Church was established as a result of the Protestant Reformation. After the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), the only recognized religions were Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed. Other religions (e.g., Jews, Mennonites, Huguenots) were still persecuted and likely impacted the availability of their records. Roman Catholics are predominant in southern Germany, while

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Lutherans are predominant in northern Germany. German states also may have required the creation of church book duplicates, which required the clergy to provide an annual transcript to be submitted to the state. When accessing church books, determine whether it is an original or a duplicate as the act of creating the duplicate could have introduced errors. However, sometimes that may be the only record that is extant and they are sometimes more legible.

- Civil Registration: Civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths became mandatory in Germany on 1 January 1876 and are kept by the civil registrar at the civil registry office. They may contain more information than church records and are estimated to cover the majority of the population. Civil registration may have started as early as 1792 in some parts of Germany due to French influence. Typically, *Meyers Orts* can be used to determine the location of the registry office; however, jurisdictions may have changed over time. There may be access restrictions on the records. Currently, birth records are public after 110 years, marriages after 80 years, and deaths after 30 years.

Methodology

- Identify and research the whole family. Identify each child and follow them from birth to death. Births usually occurred about every 2 years. You may find children given the same name in the same family, oftentimes due to the death of an earlier child. Identify family groups and trace collateral relatives as well as direct descendants. You never know which line will provide the genealogical information you need.

- Sort out same-name individuals and note identifying characteristics that make each individual unique (e.g., occupations, family relationships, baptismal sponsors, etc.). Also know the history of the area and whether you may be dealing with patronymics or farm names. This will impact researching surnames.

- Locate the correct place as there are same-name places just like there are same-name individuals. Research the location to understand its history and its jurisdictions to be able to effectively locate the records. A good place to start once a place of origin has been identified is *Meyersgaz* (https://www.meyersgaz.org). Check to see if there is a published town genealogy for the location. While it is a derived source and may contain errors and/or omissions, it can be verified with original sources.

- The key records used in researching in Germany are church and civil records. It is important to understand what records are available and how they are organized. Some records were filmed with left-hand pages first followed by right-hand pages. As you are reviewing try to determine if there any pages missing or if they may have been filmed out of order. Sometimes there has been more than one filming of a record set. If church and civil records are available, check both as they were created for different reasons and likely contain different information.

- Watch your assumptions. You may encounter illegitimacy, later marriages, mobility, different first and last names, etc. It is important to conduct through analysis and correlation on any record found.

German Gazetteers

Researchers use gazetteers to study locations. Gazetteers are dictionaries of place names and describe towns, parishes, states, and geographical features. Note that is describes the towns, parishes, and states that were in existence at the time of its publications. That changes over time. The names are usually in alphabetical order and can be very helpful in determining both civil and church jurisdictions. They also can assist in differentiating between same or similar names.
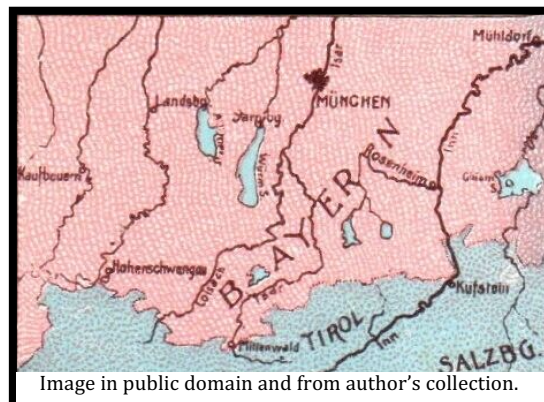

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The most familiar and the one that the Family History Library uses for listing German places in their catalog is *Meyers Orts- und Verkehrs-Lexikon des Deutschen Reichs* or better known as "Meyers Orts." It was published in 1912–3 and listed places that existed from 1871 to 1912. It is now available in digital form, which is a real boon to researchers.

The standard gazetteer for Prussia is the *Gemeindelexikon für das Königreich Preußen,* which is based on a 1905 census. It is available online at *Ancestry*. Some volumes may also be found on *Google Books*. *Kartenmeister* is the gazetteer for areas east of the Oder and Neisse rivers.

German Church Directories

German church directories provide the earliest dates for parish church records, historical parish information, list of district parishes, parish church addresses, and contact information for diocese headquarters. The *FamilySearch Wiki* provides information on directories for Roman Catholic Dioceses and for Protestant churches under "Germany Church Directories." The webpage also provides a searchable PDF Archive Inventory with accompanying addresses. Another helpful resource is Kevan Hansen's published *Map Guides* volumes that provide parish boundaries. There are links on the same webpage to instruction videos and guides to using the resource.

The Family History Library provides access to many microfilmed German church records, which can be located by searching for the place in the FHL catalog. Besides the Family History Library for accessing church records, two other noteworthy websites are *Matricula* and *Archion.*

Selected Bibliography:

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Archion
https://www.archion.de
Archion is a subscription website offering access to digitized

Cyndi's List, Germany/Deutschland – How To
http://www.cyndislist.com/germany/how-to/

FamilySearch Wiki:
https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Main_Page
The FamilySearch Wiki provides much information on German Genealogy. Search on topics such as "Germany Languages," "German Genealogy," "Germany Historical Geography," etc.

Geogen v4
https://geogen.stoepel.net
This is a German Surname Distribution Map website.

Kartenmeister
http://www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp
This is a gazetteer for those areas east of the Oder and Neisse rivers.

Matricula Online
https://data.matricula-online.eu/en/
Matricula provides digitized church records available online of both Catholic and Evangelical churches.

On the Trail of Germanic Ancestors:
http://sites.rootsweb.com/~rwguide/lesson26.htm

SK Translations
https://sktranslations.com
Katherine Schober provides German-English translation services. She is also the author of two books on working with German handwriting as well as the creator of the online "German Handwriting Class."

Wordmine.info
https://wordmine.info
This website helps in determining words when you only decipher part of the word.