

FORSCHUNGSHILFE

Research Tips And Techniques For Finding Your Germanic Speaking Ancestor

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NO. 27 – ANSWERS TO SOME OFTEN ASKED GENEALOGICAL QUESTIONS

Many of the questions arising during German genealogical research can be placed in categories and possibly solved by executing a few properly chosen and well-proven research steps.

Both experienced researcher and beginner should benefit from a study of the examples below. Most will find the answers amusing and some may identify with those who once faced similar problems, and thereby circumvent their dead-ends before they are encountered.

"I have spent hours searching but can't find my ancestral village on any map."

Unless you already know the village location within a few miles *and* have a sufficiently detailed map, the chances of finding the correct village are extremely small. Search first for the name of your village in an *alphabetized* list (minimum of 60,000 place names for modern Germany). An *alphabetized* list will reveal villages with the same or similar names. After looking in such a list you may need to reconsider your version of the spelling and do some further unscrambling and "deanglicizing" of the village name. *After* you have found the postulated name in the list, then locate it on a detailed map of scale no greater than 1:100,000.

"Unfortunately the Family History Library does not have any information on my German ancestor."

Initial visits to your neighborhood Family History Center may have only included use of the computerized databases. These databases include data collected by others in addition to extracted records from *some* of the villages in which our ancestors may have lived. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Become familiar with the vast *primary* and *topical* resources available via the FHL.

Learn the organization of the German *Locality Catalog*, which includes a village index (first 6 fiche), and the *Author Title Catalog*. These catalogs list and describe books, periodicals, and *primary records*, available in printed form, or on tens of thousands of reels of microfilm and fiche.

If you do not make progress with your research you may need to do further research on the later families who lived in America before attempting to cross the ocean.

"My ancestor came from Berlin (or Frankfurt or Hanover) but it's such a large city I don't suppose I'll be able to find records of his family".

The name of a larger, well-known German city may have somehow crept into the family story. It is more likely that the ancestor actually immigrated from, or was born in, a small village *near* the city mentioned. Most early immigrants came from smaller villages, but when telling their story said they were from a nearby larger city. Without additional clues as to the village of origin it may be necessary to perform an area search for the family name, and this should include the surrounding villages.

If clues, such as the occupation of the ancestor, indicate he may have lived in a large city, then research should be directed toward one or more of the parishes in the city. Large cities are made up of numerous civil divisions and church parishes, for which the records, if they survive, may be more numerous, more accessible, and of better quality than those for outlying villages.

"All the records for my ancestral village were lost during the war".

This conclusion is analogous to "Burned in the Courthouse fire of 1908". Although easily believed, this conclusion could be only an assumption made by some well-meaning family member, researcher, archivist, pastor, or civic official. Many records, particularly from eastern Germany, were destroyed, wound up in foreign lands, in local offices, obscure or poorly organized archives, or private collections, and some are slowly being "found" and made accessible.

Don't accept "destroyed in the war" without some determined research and written answers from several reliable sources.

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"My ancestor came from Pasta (or other village name), near Stolp, but I cannot find it, even in a detailed gazetteer." (Actual case)

Surnames and place-names from foreign languages, are often "Anglicized", and in the process take on familiar English syllables, pronunciation and spelling.

Ask someone who is fluent in *both* German and English, and has a working knowledge of geographical and surname patterns, to consider the possibilities. In the above case the village under question, found by examining a *provincial* gazetteer for Pommern, was **Paschke**, in Kreis Stolp.

"My Aunt has some old letters which have been in the family for years, but no one can read them because my ancestors were just farmers, and their hand writing was very poor."

The schooling of our later ancestors was often better than we imagine. Tagged as illiterate in English, their hand writing in German may have contained dialectic or antiquated spelling and vocabulary, or been written in what appears as terrible penmanship, but was quite acceptable by other Germans at the time it was written.

By all means have your letters, picture captions, mailing envelopes, and other documents concerning your ancestor read and translated. They frequently contain invaluable genealogical clues and information not available from other sources.

"We are leaving for Germany next Tuesday and would like to visit our ancestral village."

It sometimes is possible to send the short-fuse traveler on his way, sufficiently well prepared to at least visit his ancestral village. A few months of correspondence, study and research, in preparation for your trip, will give you much more confidence but, if you haven't done so, ask for help from someone familiar with German travel, language and customs, and--to ensure you will visit the correct village--German history, geography, and genealogical research.

To ease the task for your consultant, share as much detail as you can about the European background of your immigrant family, including the facts or fables, and where you learned them, regarding geographic location.

"The USA census returns say my grandfather came from Prussia, but I don't think they are correct, because family stories mention the Rhein River."

During the mid 1800's the area known as "Prussia" included most of the area that became Germany in 1871. If the census data was accurate, your ancestor could have migrated from the province of Brandenburg, Hannover, Hessen-Nassau, Hohenzollern, Ostpreussen, Pommern, Posen, Rheinland, Sachsen, Schlesien, Schleswig-Holstein, Westfalen, or West Preussen.

German political and military turmoil may have been only partially understood by average USA citizens, including census enumerators. Unless those with Germanic origin insisted on naming a province, the census taker might have willingly assumed "Prussia" to be their origin.

Even the relatively vague clue of "Rhein River" may be of value. Of the Prussian provinces listed above only Hessen-Nassau, Westfalen, and Rheinland are near, or on, the Rhein, narrowing somewhat your search area.

"The Census Returns, Naturalization papers, and family tradition all indicate my ancestor, Johann Schmidt (or Müller or Meyer), came from the province of Hesse. Every source I look at has so many Johann Schmidts I am at a loss what to do."

To positively identify an ancestor with a common name like Johann Schmidt you will need reliable knowledge of an exact *date*, and an exact *place*. If you are unable to find these you may find it easier to trace the origin of an in-law immigrant, a neighbor or close associate, or someone named Schmidt of a different generation, for whom you have specific *date* and *place* information.