

# G-SIG FORUM #54

...from the German Special Interest Group. G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society ([www.stlgs.org/](http://www.stlgs.org/)) and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis, Mo. ([www.gahs-stlouis.org](http://www.gahs-stlouis.org)).

This forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher is *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

You may submit a notice or request for information in condensed form for the *EXCHANGE!* section (limit 50 words). *EXCHANGE!* notices run only once, but you may resubmit, within reason. We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your *EXCHANGE!* submission to [persch3@hotmail.com](mailto:persch3@hotmail.com).



## Words of Importance by Gerald Perschbacher

This time around, we'll have fun (and enjoy the discovery) of German word usage relating to historical and genealogical study.

Why? There is nothing more discouraging than finding a reference to an ancestor but being unable to decipher the German words. We're not talking about handwriting styles (which is a subject all its own). We're aiming at the words and their meanings.

Even if you are a novice, you probably know that *Mutter* means mother and *Vater* stands for father. But there are many words also appearing in family listings. Without further delay, here are examples.

**If you see the word *Adoptiert***, it means the child was adopted. You can guess this one, just by concentrating on the German word since "adopt" is included. It gets a little tougher if *angenommenes Kind* is written alongside a name. Simply stated, it means "adopted child" or "accepted by adoption" and implies that the child had an earlier name (changed by adoption).

*Blutsverwandschaft* stands for a direct relationship by blood and direct lineage. A bunch of words connect with this idea. *Enkel* means grandson but

*Onkel* means uncle so be careful how you translate, especially if the document is handwritten. *Enkelkind* stands for grandchild while *Enkelin* is granddaughter. If you understand the feminine ending of “-in” you will make a major step in understanding word usage. Sometimes you may see a surname with the “-in” ending. Example: I have seen my surname written as “*Perschbacher*” and “*Perschbacherin*.” The latter stands for an unmarried woman (sometimes “spinster,” hence the “-in” at the end). Not a different name, mind you—but a reflection on the marital status of the individual.

**You may see the word *Frau*** used often, with or without the person’s first name. This may have had legal implications at the time of entry to indicate that this married woman was a direct relation to a particular husband and had whatever rights or privileges as a result (which may not have been many advantages, given the era of German history and the local traditions of inheritance). At times, *Gatte* stood for husband; *Gattin* for wife (notice the “-in” ending); *Erbe* meant heir. *Kusine* = cousin, and *Base* = a female cousin. But *Base* also could stand for another type of female relative such as an aunt. There are variations, too. *Liebliche Base* may mean the most cherished female cousin, or even a first-cousin who is female. The context of the document may refine your understanding. Stretching our understanding a bit further, we encounter *lieblicher Vetter* which means a cherished or first male cousin.

Some words can throw a real curveball at interpreters. If you are unfamiliar with the term, then *Gevatterin* may be one of them. You would think this related to a father since *vater* is in the word. But remember my commentary on “-in”? In effect, this makes the person a “female father” which means “mother.” Confused? Not too hard to understand once you grasp the German usage of words. The “Ge-” prefix, however, swings the word to a different dimension. Ultimately, *Gevatterin* means godmother. Watch for this word, since it means this person has a special relationship to the individual. This may be a favorite aunt to the child being baptized or a close friend or the family. This woman may be a sister to the father or to mother of the baptized! Hence, a godmother or baptismal sponsor is always a name to remember. If you find that an ancestor was baptized soon after your family arrived in America, watch very carefully for any surname relating to baptismal sponsorship. That relative may be the reason your family “came over” and settled in a certain part of the country. Few immigrants lived away from “their own” when they arrived.

**I'll bet you have already** come across the words *Nicht bekannt*. Didn't know? That's right. The person entering the information simply did not know the relationship. Pastors often wrote the entries in family ledger pages of the church books, and they had enough on their hands without tracing all sorts of family connections of their church members. This entry (we would say "unknown") baffles researchers who dearly want information.

Let's see how many of these you already know: (1) *Schwiegermutter*, (2) *Stiefmutter*, (3) *Tante*, (4) *Taufpate*, (5) *Urenkelkind*, and (6) *Vorkind*.

Now check your score. (1) mother-in-law, (2) step-mother, (3) aunt, (4) godfather, (5) great-grandchild, and (6) step-child from some previous union.

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## Regiments?

Cindy Jacob ([cjjacob@earthlink.net](mailto:cjjacob@earthlink.net)) has shared information via [GermanSpecialinterest@yahoo.com](mailto:GermanSpecialinterest@yahoo.com). Here is her idea:

"In researching some of my ancestors in the Herford area, I have run across references in the village church records during that time frame that will say specifically that a particular male was a soldier, his rank, and sometimes the regiment for which he was serving -- <http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=de&u=http://www.preussenweb.de/regiment1.htm&prev=/search%3Fq%3D%2522Infanterie%2BRegiment%2522%2BBielefeld%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26sa%3DG>."

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## Searching for Key Words

If you have the opportunity to examine copies of actual German records, do it. That's because occasionally a translated document will carry errors. If you know some key German words relating to your study, it could put you ahead in the game. Also, as you read professionally printed books on German ancestry, know the meanings behind important phrases. Here are some German words to ponder, in case you need them:

*Ahnen* means ancestor. You may encounter this word in printed compilations of church or civic records. An *Ahnentafel* is a chart that outlines your ancestry or pedigree. You will probably encounter the word *auswandern* = to emigrate. Watch if the name of the country is shown. *Amerika* is easy to determine!

**Wonder about your ancestor's line of work?** Look for the word *Beruf* (occupation). When *Ehe* appears, it simply means marriage. However, if you see *ehelich*, it means legitimate, and *unehelich* means illegitimate. *Gestorben* (or the abbreviated *gest.*) means the person died. Followed by the date, it means the day or date of passing. If you study German-language headstones in a old cemetery, you probably have seen *gest.* quite a few times. Here are a few more notable entry words:

*Ehescheidung* = divorce, *freie Verbindung* = a common-law union, but probably not an actual marriage in the eyes of the Church, *Friedhof* = cemetery, *getraut* = wedded, and *Heirat* = marriage. *Hochzeit* is the act of being married. This type of entry is accompanied by the date of the wedding ceremony. *Witwe* means widow, and *witwer* = widower (man)

What makes investigation of old files very challenging is the change in handwriting . As one pastor or scribe gave way to another, sometimes the entries are clearer, sometimes more difficult to read. But when a researcher sticks with it and “breaks the code” (so to speak) by understanding how the writer formed certain letters and words, then the barrier is overcome.

**One way to do this is to photocopy** an old document, then ask a German expert to decipher a good handful of words representative of the piece. Write the English equivalent nearby. Study the strokes of the scribe's pen. With practice, you may become quite good at it! You may become so good that others will ask you for help with THEIR documents!

Also consider linguistic shifts between territories. You have probably heard of High German and Low German. But there are seemingly countless variants beyond them. We might call this “slang” in America. If you make contact with German researchers, ask if there are lists (or books and pamphlets) on the language shifts in the area, plus the years those were in use.

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## Abbreviation: A Shortcut

Americans like to do things quickly. So did Germans, although not at the cost of clarity. So a system of abbreviations were applied to official entries. Here is a selection of words you may encounter.

Geb. = *geboren* (born), verl. = *verlobt* (meaning engaged), T.d. = *Tochter der* or *Tochter des* (daughter of), N.N = *nomen nescio* (Latin for “name unknown”), S.d. = *Sohn des* (son of, and sometimes you may see S.v. which also means “son of” (*Sohn von*), Jud. = Jew, Jfr. = a maiden (*Jungfrau*), and d.d. stands for *de dato* in Latin (on this day). When you come across Pfr., it is short for *Parrer* (pastor or minister). When led. appears, it means *ledig* or single.

Evan. = *evangelisch*, which is an interesting term. We understand it in light of the imperial decree of 1817 on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Since the emperor and his wife were of different Protestant persuasion, the emperor decreed that all Protestants were to be combined under one definition: *evangelisch* (evangelical). With one decree, the emperor made his wife the same faith. Clearly a political move, it brought resentment in many German sectors. One way in which this was balanced was to allow the leading authorities (usually noblemen) to make the decision for their land as to which brand of Protestantism they preferred under the term *evangelisch*. It was a religious solution to avoid a major political storm.

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## Know the ‘Church Year’

When studying church and civic files from Germany, you will benefit greatly if you have a grasp of the liturgical year, so to speak. This means you know the key dates for religious celebrations and worship cycles. Most everyone knows about Easter and Christmas. Some people realize the importance most ancestral Germans put behind Lent and Advent. But there are feast days in the church year that many Americans have forgotten.

Perhaps your ancestor was born (or died) on St. Mark’s Day, but you have no idea when that was until you check a list of festival days (April 25). Some

festival days were moveable from year to year (depending on Easter, for example). These religious days were highly important to Catholics, generally important to Lutherans, and mildly significant to other Protestants (some of whom discarded them almost completely).

How do you find these dates? Check online sources from American church bodies, contact German researchers, or obtain copies of religious festival days from books (such as a Catholic or Lutheran hymnal). You can check with genealogical societies and research centers, too. I suggest you start with the St. Louis Genealogical Society for books containing sections on this and related topics.

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### **Exchange! G-SIG Comments, ideas, and requests**

+ Still Available: *Venne in America* by Udo Thörner. *The 19th century Mass Emigration to America of Tenants and Small cottage Farmers from a Rural Village in the Region of Osnabrueck*. Only \$28 from the St. Louis Genealogical Society or contact Kathy Wurth at [kathyinwashington@hotmail.com](mailto:kathyinwashington@hotmail.com).

+ When Kathy Wurth (see note above) was trying to get more people to go on a Bavarian tour, she made Middle Franconia part of the deal. Wally Kern ([wakern@sbcglobal.net](mailto:wakern@sbcglobal.net)) adds, "I had her put an ad in the *Frankenmuth News* (in his Michigan hometown)." To reinforce the publicity, she submitted an article to the same publication.

+ Visit the St. Louis - Stuttgart Sister City Web site: [www.slssc.org](http://www.slssc.org). The Sister City program is celebrating its 50th Anniversary! Check their calendar!

+ Speaking about information, have you recently checked the Web sites of our two parent organizations? Find out more about the German American Heritage Society and the St. Louis Genealogical Society by visiting the sites shown in the opening comments in this *FORUM*.

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