

G-SIG FORUM #65

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

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.

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MAGIC IN THE NAME by Gerald Perschbacher

If you expect “magic” to spring from your surnames, think carefully. Example: Schmidt may have been derived from someone who was a blacksmith or someone who assisted the blacksmith or someone who lived in or near the blacksmith. Meyer (or Maier and variations thereof) may have been applied to an ancestor who was a farmer, worked on a farm, or came from near the farm. Get the idea? Occupations are not always connected to a surname.

However, until you can discern otherwise, it’s logical to assume they do.

Every surname had impact. It was a way to differentiate one family from another. It earmarked a clan and family line. It was a determiner of legal importance for tax and land ownership records. Since people often were remembered for what they did or where they lived, surnames became reflective of their place in society.

There are some short names that can be puzzling. Roth may refer to red hair or red fields of flowers or ruddy complexion. It may also have been derived from *Rat*, which was the old German concept of an assembly (from which comes the *Rathaus*, which we interpret today as city hall – originally it was the place where the freemen assembled to decide important matters). So someone named Roth may carry a name that means their ancestors were

reddish or were free to express themselves in the assembly of local Germans. Taking this further, it could also mean that their ancestors worked for the officials who ran the *Rathaus* (a Schultheiss or Burgermeister) and may not reflect any importance.

The vast majority of surnames were applied to people who were in the lower class. Don't be offended by that. In the feudal system that sprang from the first great King of the Germans (Clovis, also called Chlodwig, who was of the Merovingian line and ruled circa 500 A.D.), better than 90 percent of citizens eventually slipped into that land-working, homage-paying, restricted group that had their futures locked to the soil and fenced in by legal strictures. The key to the future was in the hands of a dominant noble class that paid allegiance to the king or emperor. To keep tabs on citizens, their movements, their work, and their abilities, surnames became definitive marks.

You may discover that certain surnames under study seem as though they were a noble moniker. Could be. But researchers in Germany are quick to point out that IF the name WERE of noble origin, your family would NOT have forgotten that. Well, I suppose that is true for those still living in Europe, but many immigrants in America wanted to forget their pasts for more reasons than we can imagine. So, yes, there COULD be nobility in a surname.

More likely, there is CONNECTION to nobility. Example: Herzog. Translated, it means duke. Perhaps the name reflects noble heritage. More likely it was applied to people who served a duke or just lived on his land. The name also could have been applied to someone who was an administrator for the duke or had served in his army. By the way, nobility accounted for about 5 percent of Europeans (the percent varies slightly depending on nation and researcher). The administrative class (called ministerial) was about 3 percent. The rest of society was, sadly, the servant class (serfs).

Go back to Meyer (Maier). Was this someone who administered a farm? That is the idea certain genealogical searchers conclude by simply translating the surname. My reply: could be; then again, maybe not. In select cases there were administrators who oversaw large tracts of land. These administrators seldom dirtied their hands with the work. They allowed lesser folk to do that! But since this surname is so popular, there must have been a wider use. Here it is: a man who farmed a piece of land was in charge of it even though it was owned by a noble family. The "in charge" concept meant he was responsible for the land – maintaining it and raising a crop for income, harvesting, then turning it over to administrators -- or selling crops and handing proceeds to an official. The Meyer also was defender of the plot of land. He and his family were allowed to live on it in order to hold the claim for the noble owner, keep grazing animals from ruining it, chase away wild beasts (bears and boars), and fight off grain robbers. In wartime, these same Meyers were enlisted to fight as foot soldiers, often

supplying their own weapons (hence, you will see old paintings of fighters armed with pikes, pitchforks, and axes which commonly were part of farm life).



TRACING SURNAMES

Michael Peake (thegermansons@yahoo.com) recently communicated with John Marauth (maurath1@juno.com) on this very subject. Let's examine their progress.

Michael's mentor and friend Eberhard is a serious researcher on the subject of surnames and their origins. Eberhard points out that German surnames may indicate points of origin. As Michael puts it, names may go beyond occupation, topographic feature, even a physical description of people. Names may also be a reflection of an ancestor's personality (which might still be in your family's genes today).

Michael and I hold something in common: we are admirers of the *Dictionary of German Names* by Hans Bahlow, translated and revised by Edda Gentry in 2002. Michael adds that the book gives the approximate year of origin of the surname in many cases.

In response to Michael's comments, John Maurath said his contact, a Dr. Maurath in Germany, "told me that this name meant 'wise counselor,' but could also mean 'one from Mauretania' or Mauretaner. He said our ancestors, way back, came from Mauretania." John concludes, "So many of my German friends say that some names simply have no meaning."

I cannot agree with that last statement, John. Surnames were intended to hold a meaning that applied to the family. Of this I have no doubt.

I'll compound these thoughts by adding that John's name could also have been derived from the occupation of Mauer (stone mason or wall builder) or could have been applied to the builder of the stone Rathaus (hence: Maurath, perhaps originally Mauerrat). All this is conjecture, but it gives potential leads that can be tested.

Bear in mind what Thomas Edison said when a reporter asked how it felt to fail in 10,000+ experiments to find a long-lasting filament for the electric light bulb. Edison wryly replied that he had merely discovered 10,000+ things that DID NOT work. So it is with tracing surnames. We try this meaning, then explore that meaning, and add another, until we find sufficient evidence to discount certain ones in favor of others. What remains may be the real meaning!



Maximize your potential -- connect with a **G-SIG Cluster**. Each Cluster brings together a small bunch of people with common interests, varied abilities, and successful tactics. You will not be alone in your hunt for information! Share ideas and successes, too! Contact: Lisa at lmclaughlin@polsinelli.com or Kathy at kathyinwashington@hotmail.com.



JUMPING TO GERMANY

Marlene Olson (genealogy777@yahoo.com) has done it! She says that she does not speak German, but played around online for some interesting results. I followed her example and came up with some intriguing sources:

http://blog.eogn.com/eastmans_online_genealogy/2004/06/find_igi_entrie.html is a fun place to explore German sites by town and city.

If you know a bit of German and catch the English explanations tucked in, try your hand at: <http://www.igi-index.de/index/>.

Marlene tried her hand at:

http://www.igi-index.de/?page_id=167&na=c&ni=&nt=916ebcc174ccac

She adds, "If you know your German town, you can go into this site. It will lead you to microfilms of that town. Then it will show you the alphabetical listing of births and marriages for people in that town during the years of that film.... I was able to discover a lot of information before the film came into the library. So I moved faster to make copies by date and family register number from family group sheets."



ANOTHER WIN FOR G-SIG'S YAHOO GROUP

GermanSpecialinterest@yahoogroups.com is working! Take the following example as a good case.

One man in the Yahoo Group wondered if anyone "in the group can provide a translation of a vocation for an ancestor. I recently received a response...(from) a church in Crimmitschau, Germany, where I had requested information from the church books of the local Evangelical Lutheran Church...(the 1840s and 1850s)....I was provided transcripts of the marriage of my great-great-grandparents, as well as the births of six siblings of my great-grandfather. This represented a breakthrough for me since I was finally able to positively identify a child....

"In the transcript, my great-great-grandfather's occupations were variously listed under his marriage transcription and the transcriptions of the births of his six children born in Germany.

"The various occupations were listed as: 1. Leineweber, 2. Tuch-, Lein-, und Wollenweber, 3. Leineweber und Schnitthandler (the 'a' in Schnitthandler an umlaut), 4. Leinwebermstr. (Leinwebermeister?) und Schnitthandler, 5. Webermstr. (Webermeister?) und Schnitthandler. My attempts at translating are as follows: 1. Ropeweaver, 2. Cloth-, rope, and wool weaver, 3. Rope weaver and cloth merchant, 4. Rope weaver foreman and cloth merchant, 5. Weaver

foreman and cloth merchant. In the case of the translating 'rope weaver' this is a literal translation and I am not really sure I got it right. Perhaps its more like yarn or thread weaver?...The occupations listed in the Kirchenbuch don't agree with stories passed down by word-of-mouth (surprise! surprise!) which stated that my great-great-grandfather was a wool dyer, but they are related. Can anyone confirm whether or not my translations are accurate? Thank you."

I responded: "I offer this explanation: the occupation was 'linen weaver' which fits much better with the 'weaver of wool' that also appears. Yes, this could mean the person also sold the items they made, or that they made them for some business that sold them. Linen weaving was an in-demand job over the centuries, at least back to the 1500s. Ropes could also have been made by workers of linen (flax) but I think the evidence leans toward cloth-making. If this does not fit with what your family tradition previously indicated, it could be that the jobs changed over the years, that your ancestors preferred not to be known for this type of work, or that more important work came in later years. Linen making was not a high-level job, but it wasn't as low as a 'day laborer.'

"Why trying to determine jobs like this, don't rely merely on translation of the words. Check online and in books re: the jobs themselves to see how these fit with society and the centuries. Gerry."

A reply followed: "Mr. Perschbacher, thank you for your input. I am inclined to agree that linen weaver is a more appropriate translation. I have been searching online and researching available texts to get a better translation. I also consulted the Beolingus on-line dictionary because often it gives a number of variations on the meaning of terms which give better meanings. Being nearly 30 years out of practice speaking German...I have lost a lot of vocabulary through disuse. Also, given how meanings may change over the years, it's always a bit dicey when translating documents over 160 years old using modern dictionaries. Given that our oral family traditions were that my great-great-grandfather was a wool dyer, I believe you are correct in saying the linen weaver fits that description better. Clearly he was involved in textiles if our oral traditions are correct and given the other vocations that appeared in the Taufbuch and Traubuch that these transcriptions came out of. Once again, thank you for your valuable comments."

Each month there are good uses of the Yahoo Group communication system. If interested, write: GermanSpecialinterest@yahogroups.com.

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MORE ON WEAVERS

G-SIG's Karl Daubel went right to work on the question of weavers in Germany. As a result, references were outlined:

Noted by Sir Adolphus William Ward and George Walter Prothero -- 1907 -- History -- Even in the 1840s "not four percent of the cotton-loom in Prussia were automatic ; and there ... were three linen-weaving businesses in Berlin in 1846. books.google.com/books?id=ndcsAAAAIAAJ...

Silesian linen weavers suffered as Prussia's free trade ...for more, check en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Silesia

There is a long history of linen in Ireland, so the job was not restricted to Germany. The discovery of dyed flax ... en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linen

Now try this string of Google search words: Prussian linen weaving guild.

Karl didn't stop there. He continued searching and discovered that towns realized a progressive power increase in the late Middle Ages. This related to trade routes and allowed textile industries to grow. Gaining importance was the guild of linen weavers, followed by the guild of wool weavers. In some cases, woolen cloth was exported to the Netherlands. New weaver techniques came to parts of Germany in 1475. By the end of the 16th century, German weavers had difficulty competing with English textile makers.

Karl concludes by encouraging readers to check the weaving section at: <http://www.engr.sjsu.edu/pabacker/history/middle.htm>.

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Exchange! G-SIG Comments, ideas, and requests

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