

G-SIG FORUM #72

...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. (www.gahs-stlouis.org). This forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry.

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Advocating an Understanding of Their Era

By Gerald Perschbacher

Being a diehard on history and research means I am also an advocate on knowing the situation, culture, history, and daily situations in which our ancestors lived. By learning such things we can commensurate with those long-gone family members and might even get into their brains to discern why they did certain things--such as come to America!

Ursula C. Krause lives in Berlin, Germany, and is involved in an effort called *rootseekers*. I think she would agree. She is doing something about it that can help German American researchers.

She wrote *An Underestimated Village Chronicle* and set forth ideas all researchers should consider if they wish to hold a balanced view of the past.

She says, "On the long and winding road to finding our German ancestors we all work with German church records. We look through the pages, trying to find a trace of our forebears, their siblings, their parents and cousins. If we get lucky, we find them. We learn a lot of names, dates, residences and – most important in German society – their occupations. Still, it often feels as if something is missing. We want some information on their daily lives and the circumstances they lived in, a sense of the small things that happened around them which determined the course of their lives. "

Some researchers take the easy path and look for a published work (book or magazine article) that expounds on the way life was in their ancestral village when their family left for America or other destinations. A small percentage of those seekers may find it, if they are fortunate. Most aren't.

What our contact Ursula promotes is the concept that the church book of an ancestral village may unlock a series of circumstances that can be deciphered by using a good German-English dictionary. I'll add that some very old phrases or cultural concepts need more research, so a second opinion from other scholarly sources (such as co-lateral works from that period) may provide special nuances for clear translation.

I'll take that a step farther. If you establish a contact with a German historian in or near your ancestral village, do not hesitate to ask questions (via mail, e-mail, or phone--yes, sometimes the cost for calling Germany is reasonable). Also, consider contracting with a researcher in Germany.

When a German researcher-friend came to town here in the States, I hosted him for a day. Toward the end of that experience while seated in the reference area of an archive, I produced some photocopied pages compiled from church records and civic files in my ancestral village. He glanced through the entries and quickly settled on one. "Here! This ancestor marched with Napoleon." I asked, "How can you tell?" He reiterated by noting the date of the entry. My ancestor died in a military hospital in Danzig, early in 1813. Knowing history, he realized that was a route of retreat for Napoleon's army escaping from the harsh winter of Russia in late 1812 and early 1813. This individual also knew that Danzig was a strongly German city with a mighty walled garrison that held the Cossacks at bay. Here was a single, simple book entry with high impact!

"You will read about families and follow them through the years. The records will tell you who's who in the village," Ursula adds, including occupations and trades such as farmers, day laborers, serfs, craftsmen, a railroad worker, a street builder, even a noble landlord, pastor, or teacher.

This same type of thinking has led researchers (myself included) to study much more than a single lineage. When you think about it, you may carry an old surname, but you were derived from a veritable village of people (two parents, four grandparents, eight great-great grandparents, and so forth, all in the breadth of a couple hundred years). If your family line can be traced for at least a hundred years in the same German village, then it is beneficial to learn about the WHOLE village from which you were derived. You may discover that half or more of the villagers were related at one time -- and may STILL be related!

On my first trip to Germany, I spoke briefly with a woman who came to hear my ancestral presentation tracing my line from the time they left Germany in 1833 up to the mid 20th century. I sighed, "Your village is a wonderful place. I have seen more than a dozen people who share my name!" She replied, "Ach, jah, Perschbachers are like Schmidts here!"

Well, not quite -- but you get the idea. With such a wealth of background information just waiting to be mined, I set to the task by "digging" into book

after book in the village archive. I did it with prior permission, of course, and with the guidance of two local historians who maximized my time and energy.

I'll pause at this point. If you want to read more, you can see Ursula's paper on the subject by going to:

<http://www.rootseekers.com/VillageChronicle.pdf>

She adds, "While reading, you will grow closer and closer to the families you are following...."

Ursula may be reached at stories@rootseekers.com.

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How Long Should You Stick With a Surname?

Building on this line of thought, it is good to stick to a surname and hunt it down as much as possible. Some researchers use a scattered approach, trying to unearth every point possible on each level of generational branches on their tree. I prefer sticking to a single branch (carrying my surname) until I have exhausted the options.

Why? In my case, the wealth of information is substantial; the documents are available (although sometimes I must head to Germany to see them or rely on a friendly researcher over there to assist long-distance); and the discoveries never seem to end.

My ancestry evidently was not of noble birth but of "ministerial service," not in the sense of a religious position (although some in my line were pastors) but in the sense of being administrators. This type of work involved about THREE PERCENT of the population, and since administrators needed to write and preserve files, the surname is well documented. Their posts stretched back more than 400 years through 20 consecutive generations. With such positions came land ownership and a degree of wealth that put my ancestors at or near the head of their village at any given time -- until the wealth was lost as the region slid into hard times in the 1700s and 1800s. Even so, one of my distant relatives was Burgermeister (mayor) of the village in the 1960s!

Sticking to a single surname has provided a slice of the past similar to a deep trench at an excavation site at some ancient city. Hundreds of years can be "dug into" through documents, revealing the advance of my ancestry, positions they held, and challenges they met.

Example: one of my ancestors was declared a witch in 1581. "WOW!" I thought when the news sank in. Then it dawned on me that nearly 15 years prior

to that year there was a pastor in my line, who was followed by his son into the same profession -- with the "witch" (likely to have been their aunt) in between. Imagine the tension that must have brought! Was there dissent in the family over this? Perhaps, but I have not found it in written records. It is more likely that the family pulled together to bolster the accused "witch" during her trial and torture.

Later I discovered that when a person was found guilty of being a witch, then the family lost its position in society, potentially including their jobs, their land holdings, their wealth, and their future benefits in the village. Interestingly, my ancestor was declared "not guilty," was released, and -- even amid the skeptics -- she continued to live in the village.

So I studied the history of witch hunts in Europe and Germany, finding curdling facts and sad tales of man's inhumanity to man. Eventually I even found a copy of the official papers that charged my ancestor as a witch! What an intriguing document! Thanks to some German friend, a basic translation was made. This in itself was not easy based on the scribe's handwriting style, his ability to spell, and his capability of conveying thoughts -- let alone the gap of more than 400 years in language shifts and altered nuances.

Conclusion: People accused of being witches probably were the target of disgruntled villagers that (out of jealousy or other motives) were prone to discrediting a prominent family!

Such conclusions can be made with a high degree of probability if you search, research, and search anew; thinking while you go, applying an understanding of the eras and lifestyles, and directing your imagination!

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Share in the Findings of Others

OK; you've hit a brick wall in your genealogical study. At least, it seems so. You don't know what to do next or where to turn.

Suggestion: ***Help someone in their hunt!***

Two can have a party of wholesome discover and revelation if they build on each other's findings and keep pressing forward. In so doing, you may suddenly come up with an idea to help break down the wall hindering your own research!

This "team concept" can bring many moments of exciting (maybe sometimes dull but fruitful) exploration. As you learn, you understand the time

frames, life settings, and family matters. Those insights might provide you with the tools and energy to break through your obstacle!

This is why G-SIG has Clusters. Groups of people with a common bond of Germanic ancestry band together to share their successes and seek new venues of information. It is not unusual for a Cluster to meet (or communicate among its parties by mail or e-mail) and settle on some solid approaches to overcoming research roadblocks.

If you are not in a Cluster, or if distance is a problem for you to attend a Cluster or even the big G-SIG Gatherings, then get into the G-SIG Yahoo Group. Here's how: Go to www.yahoo.com . Click on Groups, carefully search for germanspecialinterest (all one word), click on "Join This Group" and follow the prompts to sign up. Then you may post messages, ask questions, send in a neat Website link, or connect with a fellow researcher. If you need more guidance on using this resource, contact Karen Ridgeway at deutschgene@yahoo.com or drop a quick note to Kathy Wurth who also has been sharing keen insights (kathyinwashington@hotmail.com).

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If you want to appreciate and comprehend the role German Americans played in wars involving the United States up to 1886, look at *The German Soldier in the Wars of the United States* by J.G. Rosengarten. If you do a short web search, you should be able to find it as part of a free educational service. You probably will be taken to www.archive.org/details/germansoldierinw00rose where you can download a pdf file or read it online. Some fascinating facts are included! Books like these can be uncovered with a minimum of searching.

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Exchange! G-SIG Comments, ideas, and requests

You may share your discovery or offer ideas for others in this section (limit 150 words). We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your submission to: persch3@hotmail.com.

+ From bdzesch@att.net: Looking for Zesch family with ancestors from Berlin and/or Halle on the Saale River. My great grandfather, Robert Zesch, came from Halle (Saale) in 1854 to Texas. He was born in Berlin (his father Carl Zesch was born there on the 15th of May, 1799). Looking for parents and siblings of Carl. His family moved from there on Sept. 12, 1836. He was a "Koniglicher Kreis-Kassenrendant" (taxation officer).

+ **John Maurath** (maurath1@juno.com) encourages us to check URL : <http://www.gaic.info> of the German American Internee Coalition that focuses on the history of internment of German Americans and Latin Americans during World War II. The site lists more than 7,000 civilians forcibly removed from Latin America by the U.S., interned in the U.S., and/or sent to Germany. Manifests of some of the ships used to transport these prisoners to the U.S. or Germany are included.

+ **Spend time** searching options at www.emersonkent.com and your eyes will be opened to all sorts of historical discoveries from outstanding maps to historical facts, dictionary of terms, milestones, and pictures. It's all free, too! Honestly, anyone with an interest in lineage and history will enjoy the site!



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