

G-SIG FORUM #84

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. (check the site at www.gahs-stlouis.org). This forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights plus ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.) is *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

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We lead off this edition with two informative articles by G-SIG participant Fred Held, who is active in research -- including a G-SIG Cluster. --GP

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Seelenregister and Familienregister

By Fred Held, Librarian, St. Louis North Family History Center

Once you have found a village in Germany that contains a branch of your family, you need to rent the microfilmed records for that village to obtain the actual documentation of Birth, Marriage, Death (BMD) events in the family. The FamilySearch indices only contain a selected group of predetermined information about a person. The actual record may contain much more information.

The microfilmed village church records in the LDS Family History Library catalog usually show birth/baptism (geboren/taufen), marriage (heiraten), death (tote), and confirmation (Konfirmationen) information. In addition, there is often other data identified as "Seelenregister" and "Familienregister" and sometimes "Familienbücher."

Seelenregister (register of souls) and Familienregister (register of families) are a great place to start your research into the families of a village. Consider finding three generations of every family on a single sheet, much like a modern family sheet produced by a genealogy database program. The Familienregister is also the place where notes were written with extraneous information, such as when a person or family emigrated to somewhere else in the world. Seelenregisters are from the era before the preprinted Familienregister forms were used and are a little more crude, but still contain a couple generations of a family. Familienbücher are even earlier and are prose descriptions of the families much like a biographic sketch.

Family registers in Württemberg started with the issuance at the beginning of the 19th century of a new form of preprinted church registers one each for taufen, heiraten, tote, and family registers. Previously the pastor may have kept a Seelenregister. It is my assumption that these registers were an aid to the pastor

when he was requested by the government to issue a census, a task he was paid to do by them. The reason I make that assumption is it was common to have names struck through if the person died or if they had emigrated to somewhere else in the world. So this made it easier for the pastor to make his census report. (The census was not as we know it, but rather a simple accounting for the number of Evangelische, Evangelische-reformiert, Katholische, and Jewish in the village.)

I recommend that, when you are looking at a village of interest with microfilms, you first look for the microfilm that contains Familienregister or Seelenregister. This will allow you to quickly get a snapshot of all the families in the village. Warning: Keep in mind the data shown on a familienregister have been transcribed from the BDM registers, and there is always the possibility of transcription error. The actual BMD register is the documentation of the BMD event.

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Ortssippenbücher and Ortfamilienbücher

By Fred Held

Many German villages have published books about the village. Usually these books are commissioned as a part of a special village celebration. The books take a couple forms.

One form is the village chronicles: a history of the village with some details about its members. Many times it will have lists of the public office holders and pastors and when they served. It usually has photos of events that occurred over the years. Of interest to the family researcher was that it was common to have lists of the people and families that emigrated to other parts of the world and when they left.

A more valuable form of these books to the researcher is an ortsfamilienbuch (previously called an ortssippenbuch). In an OFB or OSB all the families in the area are recorded in alphabetic order of their surname and each is assigned a family number. Each family group gives as much information as known about the family: It contains all the vital statistics of each person, including the parents of the father and mother, and each child. The connections between the families are also given. They commonly use a long list of standard symbolic abbreviations, including these for the standard BMD events: *-birth, oo-marriage, +-death. Even referenced local villages will be abbreviated. The abbreviation explanations for both events and villages are listed at the beginning of the book.

If your ancestral village had an OFB/OSB published you have a gold mine. There are several websites that have lists of what villages have a published OFB/OSB. One is <http://www.immigrantgensoc.org/searches/igs-orts.html>. (Note: this appears to be several years out of date.)

There are several ways you can get access to an OFB/OSB. One is to visit the St. Louis County Library - Special Collections where they have been gathering OFB volumes for some time. If the library does not have a copy, the LDS Family History Library may have a copy on microfilm that can be sent to your local LDS Family History Center or participating library. (Books will not be sent to local FHCs.) You may also post a query on the regional mail list where your village is located to see if someone is willing to part with a copy, or at least send you scans of pages with families of interest to you. Failing all those you could try to purchase a personal copy. The best way to find if one is for sale is to use a standard search engine, using the proper complete name of the volume.

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Heading to Germany

By Dr. Gerald Perschbacher

OK, you are determined to do it. You've got to make a trip to Germany to see what you can find by way of genealogical significance.

The potential is extremely good these days, since reunification had taken firm hold and the social and cultural barriers between "East and West" sides of the country have diminished greatly. Still, there are some caveats to consider.

MAKE A LIST-- Sounds simple. But the list should be sufficiently detailed. I have heard tales about Americans on bus tours through Germany and want to find all they can about their heritage. One story goes like this: Martha has a two-hour stop in her ancestral town. When her tour bus stops, she and her daughter head to the Rathaus (town hall) to obtain all they can about the family. Once inside, Martha says, in perfect English, "I want to see all I can about my ancestors." She is greeted with a bland stare. She catches German officials off guard. They had no idea she was coming, and there is no archivist on duty (since many are volunteers and spend partial days in the collection). Worse yet, a large portion of the city records were destroyed in a wartime fire. Besides, seldom are tourists allowed the opportunity to page through precious original documents!

Martha did not realize that a percentage of Germans understand English enough to converse in it. Perhaps only 25% of the people in her ancestral town could understand what she wanted and converse in English. Another 25%

understood the basics of what she said, but they preferred to respond in German. That was OK with Martha, since she spoke German when she was a child. Well, she SORT OF spoke German. She knew key phrases, but her sentence structure and word choices were dissimilar to those in current Germany. Her German was Americanized and reflected very old phrasing. It was a case of time and distance resulting in language shifts.

Martha expected a "fast-food" response but only got the name, phone number, and e-mail address of a person who *might* be able to help. Martha had no more time to do more tracking since that person was out of town at the moment. Martha felt defeated. Truth is, she defeated herself! She failed to plan carefully.

ESTABLISH CONTACTS -- Had Martha made contact in advance, her trip may have reaped good results, even in a two-hour span. But no one knew who she was, they had their work to do when she barged in, and they did not appreciate her brash attitude of obtaining as much as she could in so short a time. Martha didn't mean to come across that way. She was just too excited about being there!

If you plan to head to Germany, allow a half day or more for research at any specific location. Contact officials at least a month in advance (three months is even better). You may be successful in making contact via a town's website or by letter to the *Rathaus*. It is best to understand that you may THINK your ancestors originated in a certain town, but that may have been the MOST RECENT locale in which they lived before heading to America. That does not mean they ORIGINATED there. But that is something you may be able to confirm far in advance of travel. That may mean you could plan to contact one or two other towns as you backtrack through history.

Some people will find "von" in their old records. "Heinrich Dahms von Ingelstadt" sounds like an impressive name. You may think it means that Heinrich was a nobleman. Not necessarily so. The "von" means "from." So Ingelstadt was the town. And the entry was made in 1825, a year after Heinrich left that town. It was not his ancestral town, since he had moved around to three other towns prior to that. When he first arrived in Ingelstadt, he may have been called "Heinrich Dahms von Frankfurt" since that's where he was before moving to Ingelstadt. Watch for this, since you may find one of your ancestors listed with several "von" locations and think it may not be the same person. Chances are, it is.

Once you establish contact with an official, keep your questions simple and specific. "I am looking for information about Martha Schmidlauf who was born

here in 1850 and came to America by 1875." "I want to know if others came with her and who they were." Everybody likes simple questions. Answers may cost Euros, or maybe not. If you trade information, both individuals come out winners.

You could begin ongoing correspondence (by letter or e-mail) with your German contact, and as facts float back and forth, you discover more and more. You establish a friendly relationship in the process. Given cheap rates for phone calls, you may be able to converse long-distance. If so, record the comments or at least jot detailed notes.

This involves RESEARCHING BEFORE YOU GO. Find out your ancestral trail from the time your family arrived in America. Make a couple extra paper copies of it and take those on the trip. You might please some German researchers by trading that information for details they can provide. Seems like Germans are interested in what their families did when they arrived in America.

Put basic facts in order to reap grand results.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT TIME -- Don't simply set YOUR schedule. Ask the GERMAN contact about the best days and time to meet. You will be fortunate to make good contact with a historian who knows several people you should visit. This could involve a full-day's itinerary and perhaps your contact will provide transportation and accompany you.

Germans are fairly flexible, especially if they like what you are researching and if you come "highly recommended." In other words, one good German vouches for you to another good German. See what a good contact can do?

PREPARE YOUR ITINERARY IN ADVANCE -- If you plan to head to southern Germany on a winter trip, watch out. Snow and inclement weather may slow you down or result in canceled appointments. During Christmas time, people are prone to concentrate on family, church, and civic events rather than research.

If you plan a summer trip (June through August) you will hit a peak season. This may not be to your advantage in costs for transportation and lodging. If you plan a spring or fall trip, you may be more successful since life moves at a slower pace. I have found late spring to work very well (May especially). Schedules seem more flexible and you beat the summer rush of tourists.

ALERT KEY PEOPLE -- Don't just tell researchers you are coming. Alert town officials. If possible, work with key people in your home community to take some gift or artifact to Germany and make it a semi-official presentation. Your hometown mayor may be willing to draft a kind letter thanking your ancestral

village for contributing its former citizens to our fair land. A certificate of appreciation might even be presented to the Germans. Perhaps a commemorative item from your community can find its way into your suitcase.

Let your contact(s) know you wish to make a little presentation to your ancestral town's Burgermeister (mayor) or some other official. This will give you more notoriety and may open more doors on your venture.

DON'T EXPECT TOO MUCH -- set your sights modestly, but be realistic about meeting your goals. Prioritize WHAT you want to accomplish. Focus on the top points. Also be sensitive to matters and be willing to ADD to the list as the occasion warrants. If you prepare well, your results could be phenomenal!

When heading to Germany, I take partially filled suitcases. This allows room for return items. On one return I packed 95 pounds of books, files, and historical items into portions of four suitcases which I and a relative took on the trip. Each bag was "carry-on" size. It took two hours to pack everything, the more important items being carried on board, the lesser items being checked below. Two suitcases weighed more than 40 pounds. I reinforced them with twine/rope on the exterior to avoid damage and loss. My plan succeeded--all items were safe!

KEEP ORIGINALS AND MAKE DUPLICATES -- Soon as you arrive home, begin the process of sorting and organizing your research results. DO NOT mark on original sheets! Take time (and money) to duplicate (or scan) your important items. Make a binder for the copies and use that set for special ongoing notations. In that way, you will preserve your originals for future reference.

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SHARE the G-SIG FORUM! That's right -- if you know of someone who would be interested in reading this edition, why not FORWARD it to them? It only takes a moment to do and you may be praised by your friend or relative! This could open a new door of opportunity for others.

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