

GGSIG FORUM #113

Written for participants in the Germanic Genealogical Special Interest Group (GGSIG; www.ggsig.org), augmenting German-American research and heritage. *FORUM* contains genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights plus ideas on German culture & ancestry. Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.) is *FORUM* compiler-coordinator.



Cut a BIG Slice of German Life

By Dr. Gerald Perschbacher

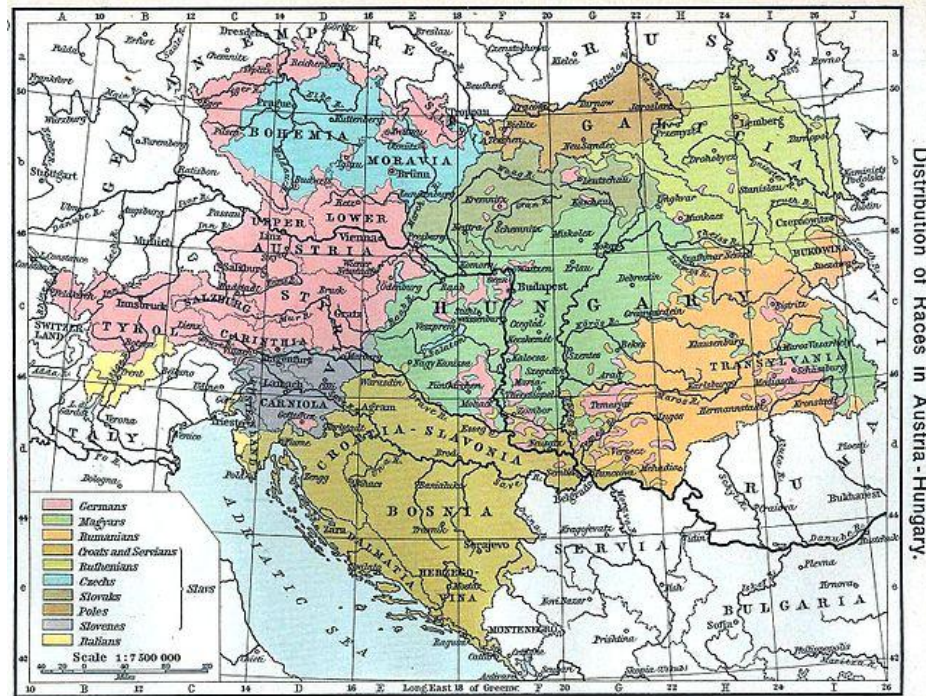
Walk a mile in someone's shoes and you'll gain a broader understanding of what life was like for them.

When that comes to Germany, wearing the "shoes" is gained through reading, viewing videos, seeing pictures, and actually going there. Since the last of those suggestions isn't the easiest to do quickly, let's settle for the first three options.

READING...

Ask yourself, "How much reading have I done on the subject of Germany?" Be honest, since you'd only be trying to fool yourself.

There are many ways to "read up" on Germany and where Germans lived (even as clusters in the Balkans, *see next picture*). The first of which is pretty simple. Gain a spatial understanding of your ancestral area by checking maps. Not just one, but several, showing topography, agriculture, and the locations of rivers and towns. If you don't know your ancestral hometown, then (for the sake of this exercise) pick one you think is a good choice. What you learn from THAT one can help you later when you find your ACTUAL ancestral spot.



Study the terrain on the map. Watch for elevation lines to grasp the countryside. Was the lay of the land flat? Rolling? Rugged? Mountainous? Coastal? Since armies and trade routes usually followed paths of least resistance, the lay of the land could be a key to understanding the importance of your ancestral site and perhaps even the jobs your ancestors may have held. Farming wasn't the only job. Some people were watchers (*der Wachter*) who guarded the city's entry points. In some cases this may have been a temporary stint, much like offering time in a volunteer army or emergency unit.

Now, mingle this with MORE reading in order to learn how words were used and how sentences were phrased. "Their way" seems very ancient. Example:

GOLDEN BULL OF THE EMPEROR CHARLES IV 1356 A.D.

Eternal, omnipotent God, in whom the sole hope of the world is,
 Of Heaven the Maker Thou, of earth, too, the lofty Creator:
 Consider, we pray Thee, Thy people, and gently, from out Thy high dwelling
 Look down lest they turn their steps to the place where Erin is ruler;
 There where Allecto commands, Megaera dietetic the measures
 But rather by virtue of him, this emperor Charles whom Thou lovest
 O most beneficent God, may'st Thou graciously please to ordain it
 That, through the pleasant glades of forests ever in flower,
 And through the realms of the bless'd, their pious leader may bring them
 Into the holy shades, where the heavenly waters will quicken
 The seeds that were sown in the life, and where the ripe crops are made glorious
 Cleansed in supernal founts from all of the thorns they have gathered.
 Thus may the harvest be God's, and great may its worth be in future
 Heaping a hundred fold the corn in the barns overflowing....

You can consider part of your “reading” to be derived from online sources. Enter the names of several towns or villages. As you search the Web, jot down, download, or copy informative details that you may find helpful in the near future. For example: Was that town a pioneer site (*see next picture*) or a military stronghold during the 1800s? Was it graced with the *Schloss* (palace) of the area nobleman? That could enhance its importance. Find out what type of church(es) it had over the years. That could be an indication of your ancestors’ “faith-outlook.” Single out details touching on the era when your last German ancestor lived there. These factors may reveal reasons he or she left. Overcrowding? Danger? Plague? Famine? Severe weather? I think you get the picture.

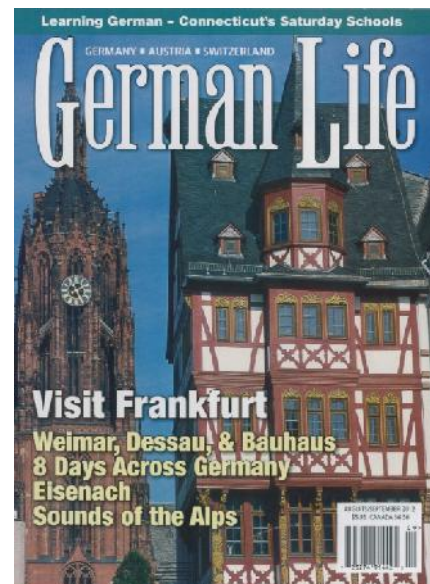


If your family line came from a large city such as Leipzig, Munich, Coln, etc., read about those cities, paying close attention to the era when your family lived there.

Generally, read articles and book chapters on German history to gain a broad picture. You could even extend this to adjacent countries like France or the lowlands, Poland, Austria, and others. The French boarder land during the late 1600s and up to the early 1800s was in a nearly regular state of flux as armies moved back and forth and as communities were raided, burned, or otherwise oppressed.

Post notes or write with pencil in the margins if you own the book or magazine. You probably will be glad you did since they can serve as future locators when other questions arise. In effect, you are making an index.

It came as a pleasant surprise when two very good friends named Joan and Louis gave me some past copies of *German Life*, a magazine I highly recommend for its scope of information and entertaining delivery of content. There on one cover was “*Der Grosse Engle*” of Frankfurt-am-Main, the building which was owned/operated/lived in by two of my ancestors (two brothers, one of which was a medical doctor, the other being the apothecary).





Doing research on that building, I found visuals of the site from the 1700s. It was quite a mental experience to think about what could have transpired when they were there!

Although I had been to Frankfurt several times and stood in front of that building, I did not realize THAT was THE ONE until I casually read the magazine and summed up the facts. Thankfully, while there on a recent trip, I took photos showing the building. Next time I am there, I intend to visit inside!

The point I am leading toward right now is that **READING** and deductive **THINKING** go hand in hand like little playmates. One tugs and pulls the other, and progress is made. When one idea starts to fall flat, the other can pick it up and move forward with it. **NEVER** just read. **ALWAYS** read to **THINK**. As you do, you could very well have many “A-HA!” moments of discover and realization.



A view of Heidelberg

Viewing Videos...

...is the second option. Do it as often as you can. In fact, buy, check out, or borrow what intrigues you regarding German studies and information. Libraries may have travel videos you can enjoy. There are television programs and all sorts of video options via Smartphones, computer streaming, and so forth.

I have watched some travel programs three or four times and still glean more appreciation with each viewing. Some of those are pretty simple. They say, "Here is the place where (this or that) happened," or "This is where Napoleon stood," which are OK to hear if you are only watching for fun or happened to have been standing there on a trip. What I enjoy and use to advance my understanding are the videos and programs that have short conversations with German citizens or tour guides. It's nice to see the meals that are served and listen to WHY certain types of food are popular in the German diet. Occasionally some key phrases are dropped in: "The main meat in this area of Germany over the past centuries has been pork," a narrator may state. Or "Nobody would have EVER wanted to cook a goose in this village from more than a hundred years since an old tradition credited a goose with saving the village from being burned by the enemy." Little turns of history can be revealed through such commentary. Perhaps your ancestor was directly touched by such traditions.



Watching videos of recreated German eras will delight viewers as they enjoy the costumes and garb of previous centuries. Who knows? Perhaps some of the people you see walking those old ancestral streets are your distant cousins, dressed much like your direct ancestors!

Dancing often appears on videos and TV shows, and so it is with German “jigs.” Many of those are regional in nature, so pick your familial region and watch the dancers go at it! I find that American Square Dancing is the closest thing to some old German dance steps.

SONGS are a wonderful way to hear the flow of life. I’m not kidding. Don’t equate all of Germany with tubas and beerstein-waving oompah sounds. While there is a lot of that over there, you can also find soothing, lilting tunes, delightful melodies that linger on the mind, and more. Pick music from the era of your ancestors and you can hear what they might have heard -- and sang.

The rhyme of the poetry in songs can also give you a feel for the flow of thoughts that flowed freely through the minds of ancestors.



Heidelberg

Pictures...

...are moments frozen in time. If you are privileged to have ancestral pictures handed down through previous generations, be grateful. If you know of friends who do but you don’t, ask to borrow and scan those pictures if they are somewhat close to the area and era of your family. Just as today, the style of clothing changes over the years. You may WONDER what type of dress your great-great-grandmother may have worn in Germany, but if you SEE a picture of someone from her generation who is decked out in traditional ways, then you have a glimpse of what YOUR relative may have worn.

Examine how people are positioned. Photos taken more than a century ago often were posed for reasons. The little kiddies seated on an elderly lad’s lap are likely to be her very grandchildren.

Watch for similarities in body construction. This could connect to ancient tribal genes which your family may still be sharing.

Look for little things: toys, items in the background, a fence or brick wall that can be used for identification, an old wagon or horse, even small carts used to carry milk containers or farm equipment. All of these may have been common items in the lives of your ancestors.

If the pictures were taken outdoors, watch for buildings that no longer are standing. These can hint the construction on style of your ancestral place.

Realizing that photography was not seriously tried until the 1840s, any visual representation you wish to see before that time will be restricted to sketches and paintings. These can be very admirable to use for learning but we've got to be cognizant of artists taking creative liberties.

The majority of Germans before 1900 were very common folks. So if you are examining an old photo or painted portrait, be aware that accuracy was outweighed by the "artist." This could show up in simple ways: a person becomes right-handed with a quill pen held to paper when in actuality the person was LEFT handed, but you may not know that. All you can see is that your ancestor appears right handed, because that's what the artist wanted. Unless you find a written statement to the contrary or have had information handed down through the generations, you cannot say for sure. But if old Aunt Em said ALL men with your surname were LEFT handed, then that may be your best evidence, which a masterful but inaccurate portrait would be hard-pressed to overcome.

Kaiser Wilhelm II had a withered arm since his youth. He often positioned himself in photos so that this was seldom obvious. The same was true for painted portraits. Except for some notations on the subject, it was not widely known at the time. This was similar to President FDR's compensation for his polio weakness. The press of his day avoided that weakness. So did nearly everyone else, out of respect of the office, and in wartime, out of concern for the nation.

In summary, find all you can. But balance it with logic and verified information.

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