

What's in German Parish Records and How to Find Them

Hansen, Meyers Gaz, Kartenmeister, Family Search, Ancestry, Archion, Matricula

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I. Understand Germans Before Going There

- A. Second German Empire United in 1871.
 - 1. Prior to 1871 there were many INDEPENDENT German states. Each independent state had its own administration hierarchy.
 - 2. c1816-1870 the 13 states in dark gray on map allied with Prussia before unification.
 - 3. Prussia unified Germany into the 2nd German Empire in 1871.
 - 3. The Family History Library aka Family Search (FHL) organizes its German collection based on the 2nd Empire map, so states allied pre-1871 are listed under Prussia.
 - 4. Several of the 2nd Empire's German states—East & West Prussia, Pommern, Posen, Silesia, and part of Brandenburg—are now in Poland, Lithuania, and Russia.
- B. Groups of Germans also settled in Eastern Europe from as early as 1140. They generally retained language and culture for years until a stricter local government forced assimilation. The Austro-Hungarian Empire also contained non-Austrian Germans.
 - 1. For more see https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Austro-Hungarian_Empire_Genealogy
 - 2. Settlements in Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia are today mostly in Czechia.
 - 3. Other settlements, such as Bukovina, Carinola, Donauschwaben, Vojvodina and Banat, are today in Ukraine, Romania, Solvenia, Hungary, Serbia, or a combination.

II. Before Seeking German Parish Records, Always Check for Ortssippenbücher (OFB) (aka Dorfsippenbuch, Ortsfamilienbuch, Familienbuch, Local Heritage Book)

- A. What are Ortssippenbücher?
 - 1. Lists of families in a German parish with dates of B/Bp, C, M, D/Bu arranged in family groups.
 - 2. But an Ortssippenbuch is a second-hand source. Transcribing leads to errors!
ALWAYS GET AN ORIGINAL DOCUMENT TOO.
- B. Ortssippenbücher may or may NOT exist for a village (yet.)
 - 1. It is worth checking if there is one because it leads back generations, giving names and dates.
 - 2. Using an Ortssippenbuch simplifies reading German parish records; you go directly to the name and date, no longer needing to scroll back and forth!
- C. Finding Ortssippenbücher—always search several aka title variations (see above).
 - 1. German genealogy web site: <http://compgen.de/>
 - a. Online: <http://www.online-ofb.de/>
 - b. Also printed books can be ordered. Click: Regional, Regionale Forschung, Deutschland, Ortsfamilienbuch.

2. FHL wiki: <https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/> printed, mostly usable only in Salt Lake City. (See WorldCat.)
3. Library of Congress <http://catalog.loc.gov/> printed; use onsite in D.C.
4. St. Louis County Library <http://webpac.slcl.org/> has all currently in print; use there.
5. World Cat <http://worldcat.org> Make lists from above; seek book's closest location.
6. Online books at sites such as Google, FHL, BYU, and all xxx.de locations.

III. Why Seek Parish Records First?

- A. Before researching in Germany, need to build a family.
- B. Parish records began during Reformation or about 1540.
- C. Civil records began after German unification, c1876 in most areas.
- D. The parish goes back MORE generations. Parish records BUILD a German family, as far back as a family remained in the same parish!
- E. Most parish records are online at FHL, Ancestry, Archion, and Matricula.
- F. Do parish research in the U.S via the above online sites!
- G. First in the U.S. build the whole family. Then go to Germany to seek other German records or contact a researcher there!

IV. Find the Parish for the Ancestor's Village and its Church Hierarchy

- A. Kevan Hansen's, *Map Guide to German Parish Records, X State (Salt Lake City: Family Roots Publishing, 2004-2018)*, 61 volumes.
 1. Buy print or electronic copy at <https://www.familyrootspublishing.com/>
 2. Also published here similar gazetteers for Switzerland and other countries.
- B. Meyers Gazetteer online in English: <http://www.meyersgaz.org/> contains each village's full administration, but names parish only if village has a church. If no village church, only lists the possible parishes.
- C. Kartenmeister Poland Gazetteer
<http://www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp>
- D. Individual State gazetteers are online at FHL or Foundation for Eastern European Family History Studies (FEEFHS)
 1. https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Online_German_Gazetteers_and_Parish_Register_Inventories
 2. <https://feefhs.org/resource/>
- E. Using European online sites, requires the parish's church hierarchy between village and state: the name of the town of the Kirchenkreis, Dekanat, or Bishopric. On the main German website, Compgen, Choose GOV and type in the village name, then choose the Kirche (cross) entry <http://gov.genealogy.net/search/name>

V. Finding Parish Records Online

- A. Start with **Family Search!** Many of the parishes in their catalog have online images. But some do not yet have online permission. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/>
- B. Next, try **Ancestry** (\$ but free at Libraries) <https://www.ancestry.com/>
 1. In the Card Catalog filter for Europe, Germany. Recommend not narrowing the filter further.
 2. Search by keyword, first trying the parish name.
 3. If parish not found, then try the next higher church location, then the State.

4. Also, instead of searching the chosen records immediately, first check in box on right to see if the parish sought has been included in the chosen records.
- C. **Archion** <https://www.archion.de/en/> A German site for Protestant churches only.
 1. Free to search or browse to see if your parish is therein. Check back frequently for additions or get on their newsletter list.
 2. Two ways to search for record images: Search and Browse.
 3. Search only gives results if the parish is already included.
 4. Browse needs the church hierarchy for the parish, but also has records not available.
 5. Buy a “pass” to download images (\$) only after determining if your parish is there.
- D. **Matricula** (free) <http://data.matricula-online.eu/de/>. An Austrian site for Catholic churches only but includes Catholic records in Germany and other European countries.
 1. Free. Check back frequently for additions.
 2. Downloading and copying images restricted to personal use with a citation.

VI. Can't Find Parish Records; What to Do?

- A. Find a German Protestant parish:
 1. [http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland](http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Evangelische_Kirche_in_Deutschland) listed by state, then Kirchenkreis or Dekanat, then parish.
 2. <https://www.ekd.de/en/Gemeindesuche-161.htm> enter the location of the Kirchenkreis, then by parish.
- B. Find a German Catholic parish:
 1. [http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Katholische Kirche in Deutschland](http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Katholische_Kirche_in_Deutschland) listed by state, then Dekanat or Bishopric, then by parish.
 2. <https://www.dbk.de/bistumskarte>
- C. State Archive: search online for “Staatsarchiv (or Landesarchiv) + State name.” Look at Catalog (Bestande). Email under Kontakt.
- D. Other countries: find help on FamilySearch’s research WIKI and FEEFHS:
 1. Enter country name on https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page
 2. <https://feefhs.org/resource> choose the country needed.

VII. Anticipate Standard Record Content!

- A. Baptisms
 1. Two common organizations: child’s name first or parent’s names first.
 2. Contents:
 - a. Child’s name, date of birth (DOB), and date of baptism (DOBp),
 - b. Father’s name, status, and occupation [sometimes place if it differs],
 - c. Mother’s given and maiden names,
 - d. Witnesses’ names, status, occupation, and place or if female or young male witness: name of father or husband, his status, occupation, and place.
 - e. pastor.
 3. May also include child’s date of death (DOD), child’s number in family, illegitimacy, parent’s date of marriage (DOM,) an earlier child’s DOB.
- B. Confirmations include confirmand’s name, age or DOB, and the father’s name.
- C. Marriages include:
 1. Sometimes, dates banns announced.
 2. Date of marriage.

3. Groom: name, status, occupation, whether widower or single. If single: his father's name, status, occupation, mother given and maiden names,
 4. Groom's age—note comes after parents but pertains to groom,
 5. Bride: given and maiden names,
 6. If bride a widow, name of previous husband and his status, occupation, place.
 7. If bride single, name of father, his status, occupation, place; mother given and maiden names
 8. Bride's age—also after parents or first husband, but pertains to bride,
 9. Witnesses: names, status, occupation, place, or if female or young male witness: name of father or husband, his status, occupation, and place.
 10. Pastor.
- D. Deaths or burial registers include:
1. Deceased's name, age, cause of death (e.g.: the illness), DOD, and/or DOBu.
 2. For children, parent's names. For married adults, spouse's name.
 3. Sometimes also survivor's names and/or the number of survivors.

VIII. Viewing Parish Images

- A. Seek the LAST record ancestor made before leaving Germany.
1. Usually his/her baptism or marriage.
 2. If ancestor had German born children before emigrating, start instead with a child's baptism because that is the last record the whole family made there.
- B. Baptism of German immigrant or his/her last German born child.
1. Read each entry entirely; be sure you understand it, or at least understand that an unknown word is an occupation or illness.
 2. Save an image of the WHOLE PAGE, not just your ancestor's entry! Later you will want/need as large as possible a sample of the minister's handwriting to compare! You can always make a second copy enlarging just your ancestor and the headers.
 3. Copy onto each image page the full citation from your research notes.
 4. Now seek ancestor's other records: C, M, D. AVOID THE WRONG PERSON. The immigrant's death would NOT be in Germany if he/she died in the U.S.! If you find a death, question if identified another person of the same name; look further.
 5. If a family register exists (mostly in Württemberg) obtain it next because it has names and dates that will save time, like an Ortssippenbuch.
- C. Next seek ancestor's siblings' baptisms. They have at least one of the same parents.
1. If no Ortssippenbuch or Family Register and image unindexed scroll forward and back by line looking at all. Usually (NOT always), children were born every 2 years.
 2. Do not be surprised if you find illegitimate births. German marriage laws differed by state and time, but delayed marriage approval until specific taxes paid and employment conditions met. Men averaged 25 years, women a bit younger, say 21.
 3. Follow with siblings' confirmations, marriages and infant deaths or adult deaths for each. [Deaths occur later, beyond the initial record set used.]
- D. In all ancestor's and sibling's records, seek clues:
1. Mother's maiden name adds family members.
 2. Date the earliest child born suggests parent's marriage date.
 3. One parent from another village, suggests you may need another parish.

4. Earliest date a parent described as “late,” or deceased suggests the date of that parent’s death and the possible remarriage date of the other parent.
 6. Witnesses’ names and relationship suggests more family members.
 7. Witnesses’ places suggest other places to look for more family.
- E. Use the clues to define the parent’s, date of M and D.
1. AVOID CONFUSION, FOLLOW ONLY ONE PARENT AT A TIME! If both came from this parish, choose one to follow first.
 2. First find parent’s marriage(s).
 3. Then obtain death records.
 4. M and D records yield DOBs and places of birth (POB) for parent.
 5. Find the parent’s baptism.
- F. REPEAT for each generation starting with baptism and following steps above.
- G. Continue repeating by generation to earliest family record in the parish.
1. Further back, records contain less and less information; handwriting becomes increasingly more unclear, deteriorated, or squeezed together.
 2. The earliest parish record may or may NOT go all the way back to the beginning of the Reformation (c1517.)
 3. A family member may name another place from which the family came. Find the parish of the new place to go further back.
 4. Or this parish’s records may end in say 1750 and no records go further back. The records may say “geschlossen” (closed), which means you need an earlier parish name. To go back further, learn that prior parish’s name.

IX. Conclusions

- A. **Parish name** for a particular village is identified in Hansen’s books, Meyers Gazetteer, State Gazetteers online, or Kartenmeister for Poland.
- B. **Parish’s hierarchy** obtained on Compgen’s GOV.
- C. **Parish records online:**
 1. **FamilySearch:** Free. Largest collection; always search first!
 2. **Ancestry (\$):** Family Search is the source of many parishes; check sources carefully.
 3. **Archion:** Protestant parish records for Germany. Free to check if a parish is included, but Images cost (\$).
 4. **Matricula:** Catholic parish records for Germany, Austria, and other countries. Free, but downloads restricted to personal use only with a proper citation!
- D. First find ancestor’s last German record in the parish—usually baptism or marriage. Check all his/her records to be certain not in Germany when should be in U.S.!
- E. Next seek all sibling’s records.
- F. Then find parents’ marriage and baptism of one parent.
- G. Repeat for all generations to the end of that parish’s records.
- H. **No parish records.** Do not give up, seek alternate non-parish German records in Germany by hiring a genealogist or historian there.