Avoid Mistakes in German Research

by Baerbel K. Johnson, AG®

E-mail: Johnsonbx@familysearch.org

Regional record-keeping practices and local customs can make finding German ancestors especially challenging. These suggestions for successful research strategies and practices help researchers avoid common pitfalls.

SOME GROUND RULES

- Document every detail learned from relatives or found in printed or online compiled sources
- Research the entire family (not just your ancestor) as a unit. Avoid the temptation of just tracing the direct ancestral line.
- Compiled sources, such as town genealogy books, both printed and online, are great for beginning your research, but should be documented and confirmed using original sources whenever possible
- Places are THE key to finding records. There can be (and often is) more than one locality by the same name.
- Same name DOES NOT equal same person
- Spelling variations are the rule, not the exception. Also, ages given in records and listed dates can be incorrect.

FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

The FamilySearch Catalog

The FamilySearch Catalog is key in accessing a variety of digitized records. However, collection items may not be described completely or accurately in the Catalog. Records not mentioned in the description may actually be found in the record set. Conversely, the policy of "First date-last date" may suggest that the range of available records is greater than is really the case. Rule of thumb: When in doubt, check the images themselves.

If there are several sets of records for the same time period, check them all and try to figure out the difference. The digitized film may include originals plus duplicates or transcripts, or Lutheran and Reformed records may be filmed together. Sometimes church records and contemporary civil records [especially around 1800] are filmed together, but not distinguished in the catalog entry.

Whenever both church- and civil records are available, check both sets. The records served different purposes and may complement each other in the details provided.

The parish or civil registration location is the main place found in the FamilySearch Catalog. When a locality is not found under "place search", double-check using "keyword search". This feature searches the entire catalog entry for the search terms, while "place search" only searches certain fields. Entries that have been edited recently may not show up in the Catalog. If you can no longer find a record that you know was previously there, ask a collection specialist to check the master catalog.

Search- Images

A new feature on FamilySearch.org is "Search-images", where recent acquisitions are listed. The search works best by locality. There may be several entries for a place with different time-specific associated jurisdictions. Check **all** place entries for associated records.

Many German records on FamilySearch.org are subject to contract restrictions. Some records can be viewed at home, some must be searched at a family history center, and some are only available at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. Restricted records may also be accessible on other websites (Ancestry, Archion, Matricula etc.) FamilySearch partner websites can be searched without charge at a family history center.

Search- Records

Use this feature to find collections published online. On the map, choose the continent and country. Search results include fully and partly indexed collections first, then "browsable image" collections. Some collections are also accessible through the FamilySearch Catalog. Collections may consist of indexed records, images only, or indexed records with links to images. Some collections have been indexed more than once, so that an entry may show up with or without a link to the respective image.

INDEXES

Some records may be available on multiple websites, sometimes with indexes, or indexes may be found on one website and the corresponding images on another.

In the FamilySearch Catalog, a magnifying glass icon next to a DGS or film number indicates associated indexes. However, it does not necessarily mean that the entire film was indexed. Broad searches help determine which records and years are included.

It is important to remember that indexes are only "research helps". When in doubt, the actual records should always be searched before one concludes that the ancestral entry is not there. Indexes may be incomplete, or an ancestor may be indexed differently than expected.

Users of digitized records and online indexes need to realize that

- Different websites use different search algorithms. Also, some allow wildcard searches, others don't.

- Indexing is often outsourced to countries with low labor costs; thus, the indexer may not be very familiar with the writing and/or language of the records indexed.
- If an ancestor is not found using a certain online index, search other websites to see if the respective record set is indexed elsewhere. Indexes always have some variances.

- If the online indexes are not linked to record images, it may prove difficult to locate the actual record. Other indexes may need to be used.

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

Be aware of possible "technical difficulties". Pages may be missing from the original record or may have been skipped during filming. This is not obvious, unless the pages were numbered when the record was created. Numbering added after the original pages were written can be misleading. The researcher may erroneously assume that the record is complete.
Older books may have fallen apart and been re-bound prior to filming. Pages may have been bound in the wrong sequence. This is difficult to detect on a two-dimensional film image. So - always make sure that all elements of the record fit together and make sense.

Pages may have been numbered **after** a book was re-bound, resulting in consecutively numbered pages that may be out of their original sequence

"LEFT SIDE- RIGHT SIDE" FILMS

Some catalog entries note: "l.s.-r.s." in the description. This is shorthand for "left side – right side", meaning that the left-hand pages were filmed separately from the right-hand pages. This can be tricky if the entries go across both pages. Often the year will be written only on one side, while the parents' names are written on the other side of the page.
In this case, you will need to begin you research on the side that has the names. Good note keeping is imperative! Each frame has a frame number stamped above the image. Note this number, left side or right side of the page, and which entry on the page is of interest. Then find the matching frame on the opposite side and match up your information. The frame numbers may be off by one, depending on which side of the page received the first number. In the Ancestry versions of these digitized images the left and right sides were often put together again.

THE "THOMAS PRINCIPLE"

- Believe only what you have seen yourself (and be wary even then)
- Always ask: 'Where did you get this information? What else does this record say?'
- Evaluate the source.
- It's better to check a record twice too many than once too few. Go back and review previous research considering new insights and information.

- Do not "Read too much in-between the lines". [For instance, a cross in the margin means that knowledge of the individual's death had come to someone who had access to the parish register. It does not necessarily mean that the person died as a small child.]

PUBLISHED TOWN GENEALOGIES/HISTORIES

Published town genealogies, although convenient to use, are a derivative source and prone to mistakes because

- Incorrect data may have been incorporated from another published or unpublished source
- The author worked with a limited number of original sources and thus arrived at some incorrect conclusions
- Original documents may have been difficult to read
- Mistakes were made in translation or transcription.

Research in compiled sources should therefore be combined with extensive research in the original church- and civil registration records. Published material should be viewed with a critical eye.

Generally, town genealogies include everyone who appeared in the records, but there are always exceptions. Thus, if a person is not found in a published volume, check the original records anyway. Also study the preface and explanatory notes of the book.

MAPS, GEOGRAPHY, AND HISTORY

The more you know about your research area, the better your chances for success in finding ancestors! Take the time to learn the layout of the land, map nearby rivers, mountains, industrial areas, railways, major roads, and other important features. Much information can be found in German-language Wikipedia articles, which can be translated using tools such as https://www.deepl.com/en/translator . Printed town or regional histories are often available. It is important to understand changes in jurisdiction that may have taken place over time.

REGIONAL PECULIARITIES

Be aware of regional peculiarities that may affect your research. Some examples are:

- In Mecklenburg, micro-mobility [moving around from town to town within a relatively small radius to get work] and the use of multiple given names are common challenges. Mecklenburg-Schwerin is also one of the few areas where a statewide census was taken at irregular intervals [1819, 1867, 1890, 1900, 1919].
- In Ostfriesland patronymics were used regularly until at least 1811. After that the practice was gradually replaced by a modified system that included the father's given name as the child's middle name, used with the now mandatory fixed surname.
- Schleswig- Holstein went back and forth between Denmark and Germany for several centuries. Regular censuses were taken by the Danish government in the 19th Century. Records may be written in German or Danish. Patronymics are frequently used.

- In Westfalen the preference of farm names over personal family names was strong into the mid-19th Century. Husbands frequently took on the wife's surname, if that was associated with the property on which they lived. Sometimes the surname changed as tenant farmer families moved from farm to farm.

BEWARE OF COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Here are some examples of common beliefs that are generally **not true**.
- Most couples were married when their first child was born [In fact, illegitimacy rates varied by time period and locality, but tended to be around 10 %]
- People usually married young [Many states passed laws requiring minimum ages at marriage in order to curtail population growth among the lower classes.]
- People didn't move around much. [That depends on the local economy.]
- A person will always be recorded with the same first and last names. [This also depends on local customs.]
- A cross in the baptismal record means that the child died young. [It only means that someone with knowledge of the death noted it in the book and does not infer a certain time or age at death.]
- Ages given in death records are usually correct. [Ages are flexible. Variations of up to five years either way, more for very old individuals, are normal.]
- Notations in original records are always correct.
- Family books are usually complete and correct. [For instance, they may be missing several children that died young.]

NAMES AND IDENTITY

Naming practices often result in more than one family having several children with similar names. Common given names and surnames may also present challenges. Individuals must be documented sufficiently to positively establish their unique identity. In order to do this, it is often necessary to extract **all** information on every possible person and his family and associates and organize it until the correct person is documented. Godparents are especially important in this situation. Details, such as occupation, house number, nicknames, addresses, and family relationships are important identifiers.

STRATEGIES FOR EVALUATION

Most importantly, find out what each record says in its entirety. Online courses to help you read the German script are available on FamilySearch.org. The easiest way to find them is through the FamilySearch Wiki; see https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Handwriting . Individual help is available in the Online Germany genealogy community. Type "community.familysearch.org" in the address bar. There is no charge to join or participate in the group, although a free FamilySearch account is required.

Evaluate all information found and decide whether the conclusions are reasonable and make sense. Some things to consider:

- Look at families as a unit. Do all the information puzzle pieces fall into place? For example, large gaps between children suggest missing siblings who may have been recorded in a different parish or under a different surname, or possibly different mothers.
- Know what was likely or possible at the time [For example, some states set minimum ages for marriage and required proof of sufficient property before issuing a marriage license in the 18th and 19th centuries.]
- Understand the family's socio-economic background and its implications in their daily lives. Social standing determined many aspects of an ancestor life: schooling, work, marriage, and more. Also keep in mind popular late 19th and early 20th Century myths such as "He was an illegitimate son of a nobleman, whose mother worked at the castle." Or "The surname was changed at Ellis Island." "They met on the boat coming over" etc.]. There may be some truth in them, but often these were just romantic notions.
- Distances should be measured in terms of how long it took to walk, not drive. A hundred miles is relatively close today, but not, if walking and horse-drawn carts are the primary modes of transportation.
- Search and *Re*search! Re-checking records searched years ago may result in finding details that had previously been overlooked. Also, information that has surfaced in the meantime may suggest different interpretations or family connections than previously thought.

Edited March 2023