

# Unlocking German Ancestry: Expert Strategies for Finding and Interpreting German Records

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## **A. Methodologies involved in finding villages of origin**

- a. First job: Find every document of the immigrant ancestor or mentioning immigrant
- b. Prepare for surname variants
- c. “Redundancy” is a virtue (e.g., obit may well have something tombstone does not)
- d. Even items such as letters and diaries might give clues!
- e. Be prepared for village names to be corrupted
- f. Familiarize yourself with German maps / gazetteers
- g. Look for “patterns of association” with other individuals
- h. Process any piece of information that might distinguish the immigrant (e.g., occupation, names of other family members, etc.)

## **B. Utilize “whole family” genealogy**

- a. If specific records don’t exist for your ancestor, try others in family

## **C. Look for published sources**

- b. 1700s families: Burgert / Jones / Yoder / Hacker
- c. 1800s families: Burkett / *Germans to America* / Emigration indexes

#### **D. Search International Genealogical Index**

- d. References to individual
- e. References to clusters of the surname if it is not common
- f. References to shipmates
- g. References to “associated persons”

#### **E. Look for other sources of immigrant information**

- h. Heimatstelle Pfalz immigrant card file
- i. Hamburg embarkation lists
- j. German phonebooks
- k. Google searches

#### **F. Use the “concentric circles” strategy**

- a. If a village is found for the above categories of people (surname, shipmates, associated persons) but your immigrant is not found ...
- b. ... work out from that village in “concentric circles” to other surrounding villages

#### **G. Types of records that might yield a place of origin (in the US):**

- |   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| • Naturalizations                               | • U.S. Census                  |
| ○ Declarations of intent (“first papers”)       | • Family Bibles                |
| ○ Petitions for naturalization (“final papers”) | • Family registers             |
| • Baptisms of children                          | • Fraternal societies’ records |
| • Marriage records                              | • Enlistment papers            |
| • Church burial records                         | • Discharge papers             |
| • Tombstones                                    | • Pension documents            |
| • Obituaries                                    | • Letters from relatives       |
|   | • Postmarks on letters         |

## **H. Types of records that do not exist in Germany:**

- Old Tombstones (graves are rented for 25 years)
- Obituaries
- Census (only very few regional exceptions)

## **I. How to identify a hometown in Germany:**

- a. If you do not know a place or region of origin
  - i. Begin with departure records such as the Hamburg passenger lists;’  
IMPORTANT: they list the last place of residence prior to the departure – may or may not be identical to birthplace
  - ii. Use a last name distribution map <https://nvk.genealogy.net/map>
  - iii. Use genealogical databases such as FamilySearch, Ancestry and MyHeritage to identify areas where that last name was frequent (this method is not applicable to very common names)
  - iv. Use the free metasearch databases of the *Verein für Computergenealogie* (Association for Computer Genealogy) <https://meta.genealogy.net/>
- b. If you know a region, but not a hometown of origin:

Repeat the previous steps PLUS

  - i. Search in regional German emigration databases for more information  
Use google search: Auswanderung + (town, region, state)
  - ii. Look for emigration files (applications, permits, etc) at regional State Archives
  - iii. Contact the local genealogical society  
[https://wiki.genealogy.net/Portal:Vereine\\_und\\_Interessensgruppen](https://wiki.genealogy.net/Portal:Vereine_und_Interessensgruppen)  
[https://www.dagv.org/?Die\\_DAGV\\_Mitgliedsvereine](https://www.dagv.org/?Die_DAGV_Mitgliedsvereine)

## **J. If you know the German hometown and want to find out more about your ancestors:**

Repeat most of the previous steps PLUS

- a. After 1874: Research in civil certificates (vital records)
- b. Before 1900: Research in church books

## K. Types of German records that are useful to learn about your ancestors:

- Church books  
(baptisms, marriages, burials)
- Civil certificates (vital records as of October 1874/ January 1876)
- Cemetery records
- Passport applications
- Address books (in cities)
- Resident registration records
- Citizenship applications & records
- Military documents
- Emigration application files
- Court documents (inheritance, adoption, name changes, lawsuits, etc.)
- Business and land records
- Records about education and profession
- Family heritage books (secondary source)

## L. Old German Handwriting = Kurrentschrift

a. Key:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurrent#/media/File:Deutsche\\_Kurrentschrift.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurrent#/media/File:Deutsche_Kurrentschrift.svg)

b. Transkribus: <https://www.transkribus.org/>

c. Helpful Books

- i. [Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents](#), Roger Minert
- ii. If I Can You Can Decipher Germanic Records, Edna Bentz (Look on book resale sites)
- iii. [Tips and Tricks of Deciphering German Handwriting](#), Katherine Schober
- iv. [The Magic of German Church Records](#), Katherine Schober
- v. [German-English Genealogical Dictionary](#), Ernest Thode

d. Script Generator Website: <https://www.deutsche-handschrift.de/adsschreiben.php#schriftfeld>

e. WordMine (Hangman Help!): <https://www.wordmine.info/>

## **M. German Language Help**

- a. German Genealogical Word List (FamilySearch):  
[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/German\\_Genealogical\\_Word\\_List](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/German_Genealogical_Word_List)
- b. Latin Genealogical Word List (FamilySearch):  
[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Latin\\_Genealogical\\_Word\\_List](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Latin_Genealogical_Word_List)
- c. Online Dictionaries
  - i. Leo: <https://dict.leo.org/englisch-deutsch/>
  - ii. Dict.cc: <https://www.dict.cc/>
  - iii. Wordreference: <https://www.wordreference.com/>
- d. Google Translate and DeepL
  - i. Google Translate: <https://translate.google.com/>
  - ii. Deepl: <https://www.deepl.com/translator>
- e. ChatGPT: <https://chatgpt.com/>
  - i. “What does “xxx” mean in German genealogy?”
- f. Translating Websites to English
  - i. Google Chrome: Right click > Translate to English
  - ii. Copy and paste link into Google Translate

You can do it!