German Record Sources

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The subject of this presentation is German record sources. What should we know about sources when we do German genealogy? This lesson is more about providing ideas where to search and what is available.

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About localities we spoke in the last hour, but we will talk about where to find sources that could contain your ancestors' names. We will also look into the different record types. Since you need to be able to deal with the language we will look into these sources too (beyond the stuff spoken about in the Handwriting/Language lesson). And there are listed additional sources that might become useful one day.

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Let's start with the ancestral records. I will illuminate each source a little bit on the next slides.

First at all there is the Family Search website that will be soon re-named into Family Tree. Microfilm, and sometime microfiche, can be the only source available of an original parish book for example. Printed publications are a great source since other already did the sometimes difficult extractions. Genealogical societies collect material about a specific area or subject. Many researchers publish their work online. Parishes have one of the most desirable records: the ecclesiastical records. Most archives have microfilms or microfiche of specific records.

German newspapers do not archive the older obituaries, but those are the ones we would need. Therefore not useful and we will not talk about it.

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First of all, you might check whether or not your ancestors name is already recorded on the Family Search website, soon to be called "Family Tree". Here is the data collected from several databases the LDS church extracted over the last decades. This is more like a random collection.

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This is New Family Search, open to members and non-members of the LDS church. This is a collection of individual family trees that are more or less connected to each other. You need to be registered to use this – no fees. One day both databases (family tree and family search) will be merged into one, but this is something that is still a little bit in the future.

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Microfilm numbers, or to a much less degree microfiche numbers, you will find on the Family Search website when you go to the catalog. Search for the place name and find the films you need. If a number starts with a 6 and has 6 numbers, it's a fiche and not a film. Mostly only a few thousand books are on fiche, the rest is either on microfilm or digital.

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Many publications are avail. at the Family History Library (FHL), more going online each week.

Instead of being forced to come to SLC you will be able to read these books online. Anything online will not be available on the physical shelf any longer.

One of the hundreds of local libraries or archives in Germany might have the very piece of information about your ancestor you need. Always check about this potential source when you plan a castle trip through Germany.

FirstSearch and WorldCat are databases that lists millions of books, including family histories. If you find something there try to get the book through InterLibraryLoan at your local library or university. And speaking about universities, check the content of your local university too – you never know.

On Amazon.com or even e-bay could show up family histories or town lineage books.

About genealogical societies I have a separate slide. More to it in a few minutes.

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The beauty of a village lineage book (or in modern English: one-place-studies) is that someone already did the majority of the work for you. Most of these books are arranged alphabetically or have a name index on the last pages. FHL has thousands of them, mostly on the main level.

Always double check the findings you make in books with the original records (e.g. in parish books) about any transcription mistakes. Any publication is a secondary source and should be verified before you accept the data.

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The general lineage books are usually published with one specific family tree in mind, except this series you see here. The "Deutsches Geschlechterbuch" German pedigree book or German lineage register is a series of more than 350 volumes of various genealogies. These are found on the B1 floor at the FHL (red cover and spine). The name index is available on a CD you can check out or online.

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Biographies or biographical indexes might be useful if some of your ancestors crossed the ocean to live here in the states. Most of the indexes available in the U.S. are about immigrants or their posterity, at FHL. There are some German-only biographical indexes at the FHL.

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We talked about this publication before. *Der Schlüssel* = "The Key" includes three indexes: location, surname and subject.

We already spoke about the location index. The location index offers a means to find information on ancestral villages. The subject index includes topics like occupations and information on German emigration. The surname index includes a listing of families covered in each article – but only those family names mentioned in a title or sub-title.

It shows you also where the specific item is hold. Before the Internet this was one of the best German finding tools. Der Schlüssel is found at FHL and LoC in Washington.

Familiengeschichtliche Quellen is another source that lists many Family History related sources.
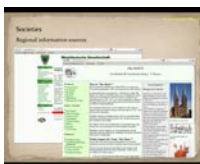
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This is the promised slice about genealogical societies. There are hundreds of them, mostly covering their local area. The most important are listed in the syllabus, but don't rely only on my list. Always check about additional possibilities on the web, new genealogical societies are founded all the time.

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Since genealogy became a big hobby many private researchers put their results online for everyone to see. Play around with the web-browser by entering various family names in combination with various towns.

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There are several different types of archives.

Church archives store ecclesiastical records, either as originals or as a film / fiche. The parish addresses are best found on the general Internet or the online phone book.

There are different state archives holding different types of records and most archive will have a search mask on their website.

Civil registry offices have every person born in Germany since at latest 1876, some go back to the early 1800 (for areas conquered by Napoleon).

Many archives start to put their data online, the Czech archives are here the leading force. Since Bohemia was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, you will find a lot of German records there.

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If you do not find the church records in a church archive, look up the address of the parish on the German online phone book.

If you plan to visit a parish to look into their records, make an appointment at least 4 weeks prior to your visit. For archives it depends on where you go. Magdeburg requires at least ½ year of notice if you want a microfiche reader, for other archives is ¼ year enough.

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Visit these websites if you want to know which church archive is responsible for which area and what do they have there. Left image for Lutheran archives, the right for catholic archives. The address is http://forum.genealogy.net

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This is the website that gives you all the possible state archives in Germany, sorted by federal state. Unfortunately this website is only available in German.

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A website listing all the civil registry offices in Germany is www.standesamt.com

You need to know which office you are looking for, exact town or city name (from a gazetteer). If you are not sure where it might be, then take a map and perform an area search. As soon as you have a hit for a town it will list further down the other offices of this type nearby.

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Now let's go to the German record types. The first three are those accessed most of the time to find your ancestry. I sorted this page alphabetically and you have the list also in your syllabus. The estimated years on the right depend on the area you are searching in. Some areas started as early as it is here, some areas started hundreds of years later.

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The page continues. The list is not complete, but those not listed here you will very likely never consult. You will find a complete list of all the possible German record types on the Family Search wiki. Also in the tool box you will find a document that describes what kind of information you may find in various German records.
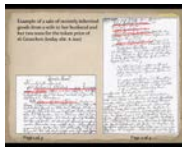
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Besides parish records, this is a record you might stumble upon one day, a court record. Contains a lot of names and is a great substitute if no other records exist.

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To the language related sources you might need sometimes one or more of the following sources.

Various German and Latin dictionaries, a German thesaurus, Wikipedia is always a good source (after a dozen of edits), and an Internet connection to some web browsers.

Let's look at each of these sources a little bit closer.

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You have the web addresses in your syllabus, but this is what I use for most of my research. The left one I use for English and German, just type in the word you need and press GO. It is maintained by the University in Munich, Bavaria. The right one, the Latin dictionary, is also maintained by a university, but this time the one at Notre Dame, in Notre Dame, Indiana.

Both tools are not perfect, but sufficient for most of the words found in records.

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Google translate made some big progress over the last years. However it is not perfect, but it contains many of the older German terms – unfortunately not all of them.

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For a word not found in a dictionary you could go to a thesaurus. This is at the moment the best one available online. It contains thousands of words today not used any more. Try to find a synonym for the word you found in a record and then go back to a dictionary.

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Wikipedia, loved by students and hated by many university professors. A test showed that every entry with about 20 editorial changes reaches the quality of an encyclopedia. If you have a word and do not understand what it means, open the German Wikipedia and then switch to English. Her as an example we used the old German word Kammerherr.

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An alternative is to type the word into a search mask of a browser. If it is a German word use a German based browser since this way you get better results. If you enter the same German word into an English based browser, the browser first tries to find a translation and not an explanation.

Speaking about browsers: There are some specific web-browsers that claim to search only for genealogy related subjects and ignoring the rest of the Internet junk, like mocavo.com. I tested Mocavo and I was not satisfied with the results, I got better hits with Google. BUT play around with this, you never know. The web address is not in the syllabus, write it down if you are interested, it is: www.mocavo.com
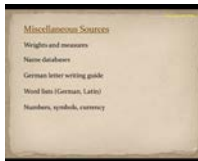
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We are already on the miscellaneous sources and will talk about weights and measures, about various name databases found on the Internet, we will cover the letter writing guides, several word lists, as well as numbers and symbols found in historical records.

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Since no one can remember how much a Prussian cubit or morgen is, I prepared a list for you with the most common weights and measures. It is found under "Non-metrical weights and measures". If you do not find it in the list, search for it on the Internet, someone might have the answer.

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I want to introduce you to two tools you might find helpful. Sometimes you might stumble over a first name that sounds very unfamiliar. You might even ask yourself whether this is a first name or a normal word. In this example I entered the first name Harm. Does not sound like a typical first name, but it is as you can see on the left side. It was confirmed that this is a valid first name, in this case one that is used in the Baltic and North See areas.

Another example: your ancestors' family name looks like it is spelled Harm. You can check Geogen (geographical genealogy) whether or not such a name exists. Start typing and the name shows up indeed.

One more word to Geogen: If you have an unusual German family name and you have no idea at all where this ancestor is from, use this tool. It will show you a map of Germany and the counties where

families with this name live today. Darker a county is colored more people with that family name live in that area. This might be the county where your research starts.


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You did the search and realized the records are only available at the local parish in Germany. You need to write a letter to request records. Write German – because there is no obligation for parish priests to answer. Archives have to answer always.

A letter in German has a four times higher chance to be answered. Offer to pay for their service but do not include money (you only include money to countries outside of the European Union).

You will find the letter writing guide on the familysearch wiki, just follow the instructions and the example printed there. If you need to send money to Germany to pay an archive, a parish or a private person, use xoom.com. They charge $5 per transaction compared to most banks with $32. And xoom is faster than the banks.
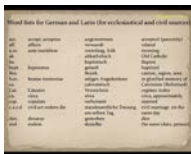
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I prepared a tool box for you with a combined German and Latin word list, including abbreviations; this is just the beginning of that list. You find it under "German words and abbreviations". It contains the most commonly used words used in ecclesiastical and civil records.


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Also on familysearch wiki is one, but without the Latin words and without abbreviations, but the wiki version includes more words than my version. The web address is in your syllabus.

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This is also one of the files I prepared for you in the tool box, a list of old German professions. On this slide there is the example for someone who worked in the leather business. The whole list is quite huge. Best way to find a word is by using the Ctrl+F keys.
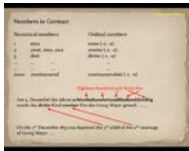
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Let's talk a little about German numbers. Also here I prepared a list for you which includes the basic numbers up to 2000 (in the tool box). In most records you will see the ordinal numbers, be aware of the endings that depend on the sex of the word that follows next (masculine, feminine, neuter). Also the years are written a little bit different in German than you know from English. This is an example how ordinal numbers are usually found in parish records.

Numbers written out do not look so much different than English, with the exception of the last two digits where the smaller digit comes before larger one.


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Latin numbers are often found in parish records stating the year when something happened, as you can see on the image. I prepared a list with the most common Latin numbers up to 2000 (in the tool box).

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Have you seen these signs before in parish records? If you have not known them before, now you do.

Every weekday was dedicated to a specific planet and the planets' symbols were used to record the dates of the week for specific events (like a christening).
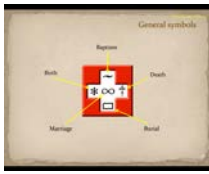
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You very likely know these general symbols, but just to make this complete, here they are. Two of them, birth and death, each of us have or will experience. The rest is optional. So far I have not seen the symbol for cremation in any genealogy related records, but since we deal with ancestors past long time ago we very likely don't need it .

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Through German history several names of the months were used. You have these in your syllabus.

To have this list handy can save you a lot of background research time. The Jänner for January is still used today in Austria and part of Switzerland.

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The last topic for today is the conversion table between the former Julian to the modern Gregorian calendar. Introduced in 1583 to correct the difference in the seasons caused by a wrong calculation of days during the Julian calendar.

There were quite a few uproars when this was introduced because the people had 11 days less for working but still had to pay the same amount of taxes. Some parts of Germany introduced this earlier, some later. Some switched back and forth every time when the King or Duke switched religion.

Usually you record a date as it is found in the records and do not worry about the rest. But if you are interested in having a more correct present-day recorded, you can use the website address to calculate this. What the website is not telling you when the conversion in a specific area happened. This info you can look it up in the tool box I prepared for you guys.

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My last official slide for today.

For those that want to know the very exact date since the website does not do anything before 1700.

The title is not in the syllabus; write it down if you are interested. If you do not get it I can send you the pages with the specific problem you have by e-mail. I can't send you the whole book since it is under copyright – but a few pages is covered under the fair-use doctrine of the copyright law.

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 Questions? Last chance! And also for the last time the address for the tool box.