Researching Our German Ancestors

Joseph Lieby, Ed.D.
411 Philo St.
New Windsor, NY 12553
palatinenotes@gmail.com

When they came

The question of when our German ancestors came to this continent makes a difference. Some like those who came to Philadelphia and established Germantown under the leadership of Pastorius came to Pennsylvania in the 17th century. A search of the Family History Library catalog for "Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Germantown" will yield numerous books and films.

For those with ancestors who came to New York in the beginning of the 18th century, the resources are perhaps even richer. The first 16 families of Palatines arrived in New York in 1708 under the leadership of Pastor Joshua Kocherthal. They were settled along the Hudson River in what is today Newburgh. In 1710 Kocherthal led a large group to the Hudson Valley to settle further up the river in East Camp and West Camp on either side of the Hudson, (Saugerties and Germantown). You will find them in church records, New York Colonial records and local property records, as well as in numerous books about the Palatines.

Later arrivals generated their own records including passenger ship records, vital records, naturalization documents and others. In all cases the process is the same: start with what you know and work backward in time. Assuming that an historical figure among the Palatines with the same surname as yours, must be an ancestor is not a reliable way to research.

No matter when they came, you need to begin with what you know. Then follow the following steps backward in time.

Ask

The first step in any project is to find out what information may already be available to you within the family. Your parents, grandparent, aunts and uncles may have answers that will save you a lot of time and effort in your research. You need to ask whiles those older members of the family are still around.

Search

Begin your search by working backward through the census. You will find date of immigration and countries of origin in the more modern censuses. Even if this does not answer the question of when they came, and where they originally lived, it will provide some clues.

Census Records

Census Year	Information Contained
1940	Country of birth Whether naturalized
1930	Country of birth for individual and parents Year of immigration Whether naturalized
1920	Country of birth for individual and parents Year of immigration Whether naturalized Year of naturalization
1910	Country of birth for individual and parents Year of Immigration Whether naturalized

1900	Country of birth for individual and parents
	Year of immigration
	No. of years in US
	Whether naturalized
1880	Place of birth for individual and parents
1870	Where born and whether parents are foreign born

Trace back through the census until you find a year of immigration. If your ancestor immigrated before 1870, keep going back until you no longer find your ancestors on the census. When they are no longer found, you can assume that they arrived between that census and the first on which they are found. That may not be the case, but it is a place to start.

Passenger Lists

There are a number of online sites on which you can search for passenger ship lists. Ancestry.com is certainly one you can try. You can also find passenger lists on Ellisisland.com.

Be aware that you need to be flexible in the spelling of the name you are seeking. Frequently the name will be spelled differently: Lieby was spelled Liebig, Boesch was spelled Bösch or Bach or Bauch or Baash.

G. Zimmerman, M. Wolfert, *German immigrants : lists of passengers bound from Bremen to New York 1847-1854, with places of origin*. (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub. Co. 1985)

G. Zimmerman, & M. Wolfert, *German Immigrants Lists of Passengers Bremen to New York 1855 to 1862.* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1986).

Ira Glazier and William P. Filby, *Germans to America: Lists of Passengers Arriving at U.S. Ports.* (This series in about 60 volumes covers passengers from 1840 to the late 1870s. It can be found at some libraries and at www.findmypast.com).

Place Names in German

Without going into the details of the national history of Germany, it should be understood that Germany only became a single nation in 1871. Prior to that there were numerous states that were held together by the fact that they spoke German as a common language. A good map of the section of Germany in which you are researching will be a great help. However to understand the locality and its political ties, an indispensible guide is a book known as "Meyers Orts". It is a gazetteer that contains the information you will need to research your German ancestor. It was originally published in 1912, but has been republished by in modern times by Genealogical Publishing. It is also available as a searchable database on Ancestry.com. However you access it, you will encounter a book written in German, using Gothic print, and many abbreviations. The printed edition has a guide for the abbreviations and common words, but that may not be sufficient. There is also a publication by Wendy Uncapher that will help to read and understand Meyers.

The political subdivisions of Germany also need to be understood. In many ways they are like our divisions into states, counties and towns. The following for Biengen might be helpful.

Dorf	Town or village	Biengen
Amp	District	Staufen
Kreis	County	Freiburg
Staat	State	Baden (in Meyers)

R. Wright, *Meyers Orts- und Verkehrs-Lexikon des Deutschen Reichs With Researcher's*. Baltimore, (MD: Genealogical Publishing Company), 2000

Wendy K. Uncapher*, How to Read & Understand Meyers Orts- und Verkehrs-Lexikon des Deutschen Reichs,* (Columbus OH: Origins). Available for $11.95 online at www.OriginsBooks.com.

Language Aids

The challenge when doing German research is not just that the records are usually written in German, but that they use either a printed Gothic font, or a cursive style that is difficult for non-German readers to understand. Actually, it is even difficult for modern German readers to understand.

German Script and Print

Deutſch

Roman	Fraktur	Cursive
A, a	𝔄,a	
B, b	𝔅,b	
C, c	ℭ,c	
D, d	𝔇,ð	
E, e	𝔈,e	
F, f	𝔉,f	
G, g	𝔊,g	
H, h	ℌ,h	
I, I	ℑ,i	
J, j	ℑ,j	
K, k	𝔎,ť	
L, l	𝔏,l	
M, m	𝔐,m	
N, n	𝔑,n	
O, o	𝔒,o	
P, p	𝔓,p	
Q, q	𝔔,q	
R, r	𝔑,r	
S, s	𝔖,ſ,s	
T, t	𝔗,t	
U, u	𝔘,u	
V, v	𝔙,ð	
W, w	𝔚,w	
X, x	𝔛,x	
Y, y	𝔜,ÿ	
Z, z	𝔷,ȝ	

Roman	Fraktur	Cursive
Ä, ä	𝔄,ä	
Ö, ö	𝔒,ö	
Ü, ü	𝔘,ü	
ß	ß	
ch	ch	
sch	ſch	
ck	ck	
tz	tz	

German Language aids are available. Buy a good German dictionary. There are also specialized German dictionaries that can help you translate the German documents you find.

Ernest Thode, *German English Genealogical Dictionary,* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1992).
Edna M. Bentz, *If I Can You Can Decipher Germanic Records*, (San Diego, CA: Edna M. Bentz, 1982)
Roger P. Minert, *Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents, (*Woods Cross, UT: GRT Publications, 2001)

There are several workshops available on www.familysearch.org/learningcenter to help you learn to read German documents. They are free.

Some Common Terms

birth	Geburten	parents	Eltern
marriage	Heiraten	legitimate	ehelich
death	Tote	maiden name	Geboren (or) geb.
baptism	Taufe	civil registry	Standesamt
husband	Ehemann	office, district	Amt
wife	Frau, Weib, Ehefrau	county	Kreis
daughter	Tochter	place of residence	Wohnort
son	Sohn	today	Heute

General Resources on German Research

Shirley J. Riemer, *The German Research Companion,* (Sacramento, CA: Lorelei Press, 2000)

Clifford Neal Smith and Anna Smith, *Encyclopedia of German-American Genealogical Research,* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1976 reprinted 2003.)

Palatine Resources

Nancy Wagoner Dixon, *Palatine Roots, the 1710 German Settlement in New York*, (Camden, ME: Picton Press, 1994).

Henry Z Jones, *The Palatine Families of New York, A Study of the German Immigrants Who Arrived in Colonial New York in 1710,* 2 vols., (Rockport, ME: Picton Press, 1985).

Henry Z Jones, *More Palatine Families, Some Immigrants to the Middle Colonies 1717-1776 and their European Origins etc,* (Rockport, ME: Picton Press, 1991).

Philip Otterness, *Becoming German, the 1709 Palatine Migration to New York,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).