Researching German Ancestors

Class 3: Religious & Civil Records

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When researching your German ancestors, you will often turn to religious records. In Germany, the country of today, civil records do not begin until about 1876 in most areas. As a result, most researchers must rely on church records to go further back in time.

What to Expect

Different periods can provide different information for the basic vital records, which, prior to 1876 will be predominantly church records, and as such may be either Lutheran or Catholic. Because they are church records, the records may be written in Latin as opposed to German. And for areas in Elsaß Lothringen (aka Alsace Lorraine) the records may also alternate between German and French. The information found in the records will vary depending on the type of event being recorded.

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Symbols

In many of the registers, you are likely to come across a number of symbols that represent specific types of events.

Symbol	Meaning
*	= geboren (born)
⚭	= verheiratet (married)
†	= gestorben (died)
(*)	= außereheliche Geburt (illegitimately born)
~~	= getauft (christened)
○	= verlobt (engaged)
▭	= begraben (buried)
† *	= Totgeburt (stillborn)
○|○	= geschieden (divorced)
✕	= gefallen (killed in action)
o-o	= uneheliche Verbindung (common-law marriage, illegitimate union)

The following symbols can be found in older records:

Symbol	Meaning
⸶	= getauft (christened)
Ψ	= geboren (born)
✕	= verheiratet (married)
⋀	= gestorben (died)
⸶	= begraben (buried)

The German Research Companion, *Shirley J. Reimer, Roger P. Minert, Jennifer A. Anderson*

Abbreviations

Likewise, you may find several abbreviations used including:

- geb. – *geboren* (born, maiden name)
- gest. – *gestorben* (died)
- getr. – *getraut* (married)
- verh. – *verheirat* (married)
- u. – *und* (and)
- v. – *von* (from)

There are some abbreviations often found with some months of the year:

- September – *7ber, 7bris*

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- October – *8ber*, *8bris*
- November – *9ber*, *9bris*
- December – *10ber*, *10bris*, *Xber*

Church Records

Because you are looking for records of a specific parish church, it is essential that you know the town your ancestors emigrated from. For Catholic and Lutheran parishes, see the *Map Guide to German Parish Registers* volumes mentioned in the Bibliography.

While the records can be recorded in many different formats, they are usually found in one of the following three formats:

- Register style – handwritten or pre-printed tables
- Brief paragraph style – short entries written as a sentence which include the most important information
- Full paragraph style – full entries that may include lots of additional information about those mentioned in the records; reminiscent of the Napoleonic code-style entries

Birth/Baptism Records

These records will have at the minimum:

- Date of birth
- Date of baptism
- Name of the child
- Given names of parents (usually with maiden name of mother)
- Names of sponsors/godparents

Additional information may include the occupation of the father and perhaps the town of origin of the parents and the town from where the sponsors are from.

Tip: Number and gender of witnesses/sponsors may vary by locality and time period.

When working with baptismal records, pay close attention to the date of the event. In some parish registers the clerk or priest may save time by including a "ditto" for a date above or by using just the day of the event and the ditto for the month. When working with digitized records, look at the image before to be certain of the month and year.

Tip: Remember that many of the church records may be recorded in Latin, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries.

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When working with the register style records, you may want to create your own form in Word or Excel to abstract the information. And it may be necessary to look at the records on many different pages to be able to read the entry you are most interested in.

Confirmation Records

Many individuals are tempted to skip the confirmation records because they tend to offer the least amount of information on an individual. However, if they are available, they should be searched. Different clerks or ministers may record different information. For instance, the entries may include:

- Just the names of those being confirmed
- Names and general age of those being confirmed
- Name of the confirmed and the name of the father
- Name of the confirmed and full birth date
- Sometimes the lists are separated with all males listed followed then by all females

Changes to the confirmation records can take place quickly in a register, so do not dismiss the register if the earlier records only have the names of the individuals being confirmed.

Tip: Years and even full dates are usually spelled out.

Marriage Records

These records will have at the minimum:

- Date of the marriage
- Names of bride and groom
- Names of parents of the bride and groom

Additional information may include the occupation of the groom and perhaps the town of origin of the bride and groom and possibly witnesses to the marriage. May also include age or full birth details of the bride and groom.

Like the baptismal records, marriages are often found in one of the three major styles of register, brief paragraph, or full paragraph. In many records, the surnames are underlined making them easier to pick out of the paragraph of words.

Death Records

These records will have at the minimum:

- Date of death
- Date of burial (sometimes)
- Name of the deceased
- Age of the deceased

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- Given names of parents (and/or surviving spouse)

Additional information may include the occupation and perhaps the town of origin of the deceased.

Tip: Germans can have many given names and may die under what is their rufname – *their call name, as in the name they were called.*

Familienbüch Records

The *familienbüch* or family register most often resembles a family group sheet and details a father, mother, and their children. It usually includes the names of the parents for both the father and mother of the sheet.

These records offer a synopsis of the events for a family. In some instances, next to the names of the parents of the father or mother or one of the children of the couple, there may be a number that is a cross-reference to that person's own page in the family register.

The family registers may show second marriages for either the father or the mother and they usually include columns for the birth, confirmation, death, and notes for each child. The notes column may indicate if a child immigrated to America.

With the information in the family register it may be easier to find the baptisms, marriages, and deaths for the people of the family, especially when you are new to working in the records of a parish or in German records in general.

When saving such documents, you may want to save the image as a full page and then also save the top half (the information about the father and mother) in an image and then save the bottom half (the information about the children). Sometimes the writing can be particularly small.

Given Names

You are likely to come across children with three or four given names. It is possible in such cases that one of the names will be underlined. If this is found, the underlined name is the name they are called or known as. This name is their *rufname* (call name). It can also change as they grow older.

Another thing to be careful of is assuming that if two children share the exact same name that the first born of that name died. You will want to verify that with a death record. Especially if the two children have multiple given names, they likely each are using a different *rufname* (call name).

Among the given names, you will likely find Biblical and Saint names.

Tip: Until 2008, the child's given name(s) had to identify their gender.

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What to Expect from Civil Records

Different periods can provide different information for the basic civil records. Like so many other places, the closer you come to the 1900s, the more information you may find in these records. The volumes go from completely handwritten documents to forms for which the information is added.

Similar to the church records, they are usually arranged in one of the following three formats:

- Register style – handwritten or pre-printed tables
- Brief paragraph style – short entries written as a sentence which include the most important information
- Full paragraph style – full entries that may include lots of additional information about those mentioned in the records; reminiscent of the Napoleonic code-style entries

Birth Records

Unlike the church equivalent which will supply the date of birth and baptism, what you are more apt to find in the civil registers is the date and time of birth. However, an identifier indicating whether the child was legitimate or illegitimate is usually included in the civil records. The information about where the child was born and the names of the parents (with the mother's maiden name) and the occupation or standing of the family is also usually included.

The earlier records may include church information, though these records are identified as *zivilstandregisters* (civil registers) they look more like church records.

As with many European countries, you may find "marginal notes" on a birth record that supply additional information about the individual who was born as they grew to adulthood. You may find marriage or death notes, so pay close attention to the margin of the record.

Marriage Records

As the records begin to use standardized forms, you will often find very valuable information. Standardized marriages usually include the following for both the groom and the bride:

- Occupation
- Name of the groom or bride
- Religion
- Date and place of birth
- Place of residence
- Occupation of father of groom or bride
- Name of the father of the groom or bride
- Name of the mother of the groom or bride
- Residence of the parents of the groom or bride
- Occupation of the witness
- Name of the witness
- Age of the witness
- Residence of the witness

If it is a second marriage for either the groom or the bride, then after their occupation and before their name, you will usually find the German word for widow/widower – *witwe/verwitwete*. You may also see notes about the births of children as well.

Death Records

With civil death records, you will find that there is a registration date – this can also be true of the birth records – and it is not the same as the date of the event. A death record often includes the following:

- Place of registration
- Date of registration
- Occupation of witness
- Name of witness
- Residence of witness
- Name of deceased
- Age of deceased
- Religion of deceased

- Residence of deceased
- Birthplace of deceased
- Relation of deceased to spouse or parents
- Residence of spouse or parents
- Place of death
- Date of death
- Time of death

If the spouse or parent of the deceased has predeceased them, then you may see the mention of *verstoben sei* before the name of the relation.

Typed Registers

A typed register is unusual but could be the result of recreating a damaged volume. These records resemble a family register in that they include information about the father and mother and then children.

These entries often rely on characters to symbolize events:

- * - birth
- ∞ - marriage
- + - death

Tip: Remember that if dates are typed as numerals that the Germans always put the day, then the month, then the year.

Keep in Mind

The records can be in German, Latin, or, if in areas of Elsaß Lothringen (Alsace Lorraine), even in French. Whether church or civil records, they can offer a variety of information and can vary from year to year, clerk to clerk, and minister to minister. Some records may have an index, but it is a good idea to go through page by page, especially if you are not sure of all the given names of your ancestor. Family registers offer an opportunity to get a lot of information at once but you should then look for the life events in the baptisms, marriages, and deaths. They require a lot of patience to read, especially if you are not fluent in German.

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