**Deciphering Names of German People and Places**

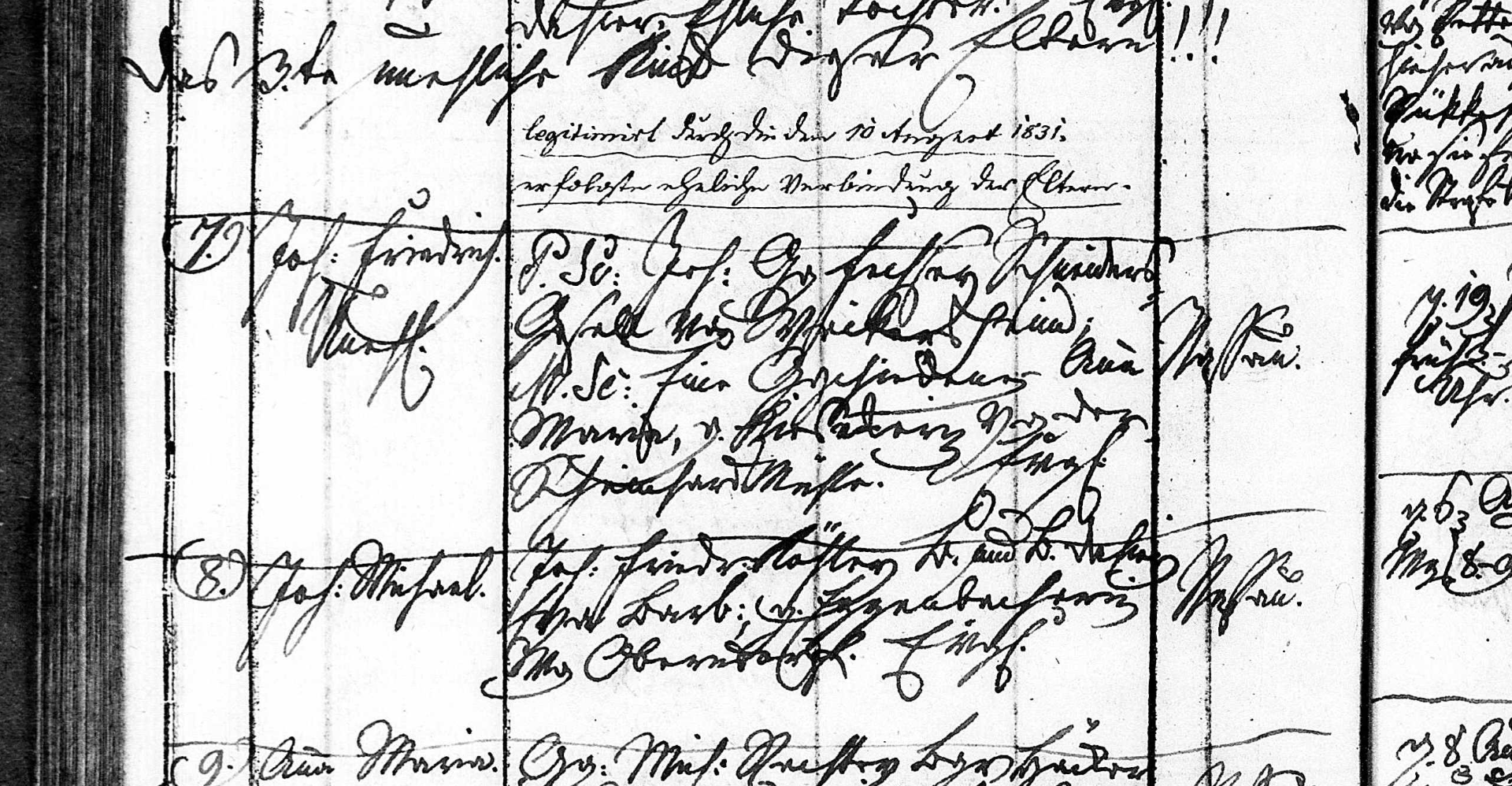
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**Overview:** *The names of our ancestors and their ancestral homes are often recorded and passed down in unrecognizable forms. Learn techniques for unscrambling personal and place names to find your family.*

German research is challenging enough when the names and places of our ancestors are spelled correctly. The historic place names, surnames, and personal name variants may be unfamiliar or foreign to us, and of course, the old handwriting and typefaces can be difficult, even for native German speakers. Would that they could write them so neatly as in this example all the time:



Often, the handwriting is far more difficult to read this. Here is a more realistic example.



Evangelische Kirche Nassau (OA. Mergentheim) (Nassau, Württemberg, Germany), Kirchenbuch, 1579-1876, Bd. 6, Johann Friedrich Fechser birth (19 July 1825); FHL microfilm 1,732,380, item 3.

There are often abbreviations, some in Latin. Handwriting styles vary widely, and penmanship can be very poor. There may also be problems with overlapping letters, information bleeding through the page from the other side, faded images or stray marks, and other things that make reading the language difficult. This is one of the many reasons why the place names and personal names become corrupted. Past researchers and indexers can easily make mistakes when transcribing records such as these.

Handwriting challenges can be overcome with access to the original records and the application of paleography skills and reference tools. The bigger problem can be the corruption of names over time.

**Corruption of Names**

While it is *not* true that officials systematically changed immigrant names on arrival, the butchering of personal and place names still occurred there. An immigrant who did not speak the language, and possibly illiterate in their native language, might not have known how to spell their own name or home village. The record keeper might hear it wrong or try to spell it the way they heard it. Officials weren’t changing names, but immigrants often did, for various reasons—inconsistently. They may have used a nickname, or translated their name to the new language, or altered the spelling so people would pronounce it correctly, or to simplify the pronunciation. When giving places, they may not have been precise.

As immigrants settled into their new country, they often modified their name over time, based on their increasing familiarity with their new language and culture. Different record keepers might hear and spell names differently. As generations passed, and names of people and places were orally passed down, they could become further corrupted.

**Butchered Name Examples**

During the webinar we will examine several examples illustrating the problems with names. These are just a few examples to illustrate the concepts for overcoming name problems.

Just from the family of the record above, there are the following variants.

* *Johann Georg Fechser* became *Joh G Eusser* in one index.
* The surname *Fechser* has been spelled *Fecher*, *Fechsen*, *Fichzer*, *Fetcher*, *Fisher*, etc.
* Family records had his birthplace as *Weiggesheim* (pronounced Wee-ge-shime) instead of *Weikersheim* (Vai-kers-hime).
* The mother’s maiden name of *Kiessecker* has been spelled at least a dozen ways. Her first married name of *Spörer* became *Simpever* in some family records.
* The mother’s birthplace, *Scheinhardtsmühle* has been rendered as *Aufdersch, Hardismulle* in some trees.
* There are any number of spellings of *Württemberg.*

Other examples

* *Waldkirch, Baden* became *Boden, Walkearth* in a U.S. marriage record.
* *Rheinhard Deschler* first name was found as *Rhinehart*, *Rhine, R C*, *Rinehart* and last name as *Deshler*, *Daschler*, or *Desher*.
* A person born in *Hülsagen, Schaumburg-Lippe* was said to be from *Konigsburg, Schaumburglippy, Hannover*.
* *Engel Maria Dorothea Hansing* was transcribed as having the surname *Hausing*. In other records she is known as *Angel Maria, Dorothy*, or *Dora*.
* The surname *Dollweber* became *Dolweaver*, *Dolavever*, *Dollverver*, or *Dolveboar*.
* The town *Röbel* became *Rewel*.

**Place Imprecision**

Ancestors were not always exact about the place they were from. Here are some scenarios:

* Specific places were not always required on forms.
* Even when required, they sometimes named a larger town or region.
* The last residence may be given rather than a birthplace.
* They may not have correctly remembered the exact place.
* The place may be a small village or farm, while the records are in a nearby place.
* There may be many places by the same or similar names.
* The name of the place and the historical jurisdictions may have changed over time.

**Place and Personal Name Variation**

There may be dozens of possible spelling variants for each personal and place name. Here are some main reasons for such variation.

* Ancestors changing their names for whatever reasons—and not consistently.
* Attempts to translate the name into the new language.
* Attempts to write the name the way it sounds.
* Changes to political boundaries, official languages, and local dialect variations.
* Mishearing the name. (Maybe 2nd or 3rd hand.)
* Nicknames and abbreviations.
* Transcription errors.

**Tips for Resolving Name Problems**

* Gather all possible clues and context. (Conduct an exhaustive search.)
* Identify as many variant spellings names as possible.
* Don’t rely on derivatives—analyze the originals!
* Use advanced search techniques.
* Think phonetically and visually.
* Use reference tools—to their full capacity.
* Deepen knowledge of German and of Germany.

**Common Mistakes to Avoid**

* Searching only for “correct” or “standard” spellings.
* Searching for the one record that gives the answer.
* Tunnel vision on the ancestor.
* Ignoring other available records and overlooking details.
* Making assumptions and hasty conclusions (based on bias)

**Gathering Clues & Context (Exhaustively)**

Gather all the data you can, not only about names, dates, and places, but also occupations, ages, religion, relationships, etc. The more context, the more likely you will recognize potential matches despite conflicting forms of names. Don’t just look for the one record that gives the answer, as that usually does not exist and could cause you to miss other vital contextual clues. Analyzing records in the places they moved to are key to discovering where they came from.

**Note All Variants**

Don’t just search for the “correct” or “standard” spellings. Note all variants for future searches and record analysis.

**View the Originals**

Don’t rely only on derivative sources, such as indexes, abstracts, transcriptions, or prior compiled research (published or unpublished.) They may all contain errors. View the images of the original records to verify the spellings, as well as to look for other clues and context that derivative sources may have missed.

**Pay Attention to Detail**

Every detail may be a potential clue to differentiating between two people of the same name, or matching two records of the same person with name discrepancies. Look at all of the information on the records, not just the vital information. Look for added context in page headers, preceding or subsequent pages, and on title or cover pages or endpapers.

**Use Advanced Search Methods**

Use wild cards (e.g. \* or %) and phonetic matching algorithms. Experiment with exact search versus broader searches or alternate terms. Try omitting terms from the search.

**Think Phonetically**

How might a German pronounce and spell the name originally? How might German sounds be rendered in the immigrants’ new language? Try to anticipate possible variants in either the German records or the records of the new country.

**Think Visually**

How might handwritten letters be confused with other letters. An “s” might look like an “f” for example. The double “ss” or ß (Eszet) might look like “B”. Be aware that handwritten letters in English or other languages besides German may also have visually similar letters.

**Use Reference Tools (To Their Full Capacity)**

Reference lists are key to verifying names. These include personal and given name dictionaries, geographic dictionaries, gazetteers, word lists, or other lists of terms. Maps are also key, including historic topographical and surname distribution maps. Learn about all the searching and browsing capability of these resources to maximize the benefits.

**Don’t Get Tunnel Vision**

Don’t just focus on the primary ancestor, but also other family members, neighbors, and associates. If a name is corrupted in your ancestor’s records, a record of someone in their network may have a recognizable spelling. To move forward, you sometimes need to step back. Don’t only trace backward, but also forward to the end of a person’s life, and to the 2nd and 3rd generation, as their records may give clues to names of people and places.

**Beware of Biases and Assumptions**

Your prior knowledge of German or of German places, or of the family can be of great help, but it can sometimes bias you to make assumptions and hasty conclusions. Beware of this. Just because it looks right and “fits the narrative” doesn’t mean it is correct. Read everything carefully and consider the full context. Question all assumptions and look for evidence rather than gut feeling or snap judgements.

**Deepen Knowledge of German and Germany**

While you can succeed in German research without fluency or expert command of paleography, geography, and history—the more you know the better. German context will help you to recognize and overcome name variants. You can gain such context using resources like the FamilySearch Research Wiki, CompGen.de (Genealogie.net), Wikipedia, genealogical society websites, and how-to books. (See the list of resources below.) Besides old handwriting, it is good to learn vocabulary, basic grammar, and especially pronunciation, as this can be key to anticipating spelling variants. Here is some basic information on German consonants and vowels, relative to English.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| German | English Sounds |
| v | f |
| b, p | b or p |
| d, t, th | t or d |
| c, g, k, ck | g as in **g**ood, k, or ck |
| w | v |
| S | z |
| z | ts |
| sch | sh |
| r | gutteral r (like French); swallowed/silent r (as in British –er) |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| German | English Sounds | In Writing (English) |
| a | ah; a as in f**a**ther | a |
| ä | ay; a as in m**a**ke or s**a**y | ae, a, ay, eigh, ai as in fair, etc. |
| e | e as in L**e**derhos**e**n | e, eh, ey, ee |
| i | ih; i as in **i**t | i |
| o | oh; o as in **o**ver | o |
| ö | oe; mix of oh and ey | oe, o, or, oo, u, etc. |
| u | oo; u as in t**u**be | u, oo |
| ü | ue; mix of oo and ee | ue, u, ue, iu, yu, i, ie, ee, or, oer, etc. |
| ie | ee | e, ee, ei |
| ei | aye, ai; i as in m**i**le | ie, i, ay, ai, y, etc. |
| eu | oy | eu, ew, oy, ee, etc. |

**Resources**

*Behind the Name*, [https://www.behindthename.com](https://www.behindthename.com/) – Database of given name. Tells origin of names and equivalent forms in other languages. Starting to add surnames as well.

Beidler, James M., *The Family Tree Historical Atlas of Germany*, Family Tree Books, 2019.

Center for Family History & Genealogy, *BYU Script Tutorial*, <https://script.byu.edu> Includes instructions and examples for reading old German in handwriting and print.

*Dict.cc Deutsch-Englisch-Wörterbuch*, <https://www.dict.cc> – Comprehensive German-English, English-German online dictionary, including archaic terms, abbreviations, and phrases. Includes links to numerous other language sources.

FamilySearch, *Research Wiki*, <https://www.familysearch.org/wiki> –Includes much info on German research, including records, geography, names, reference resources, especially: “German Gazetteers,” “Germany Personal Names”, and “German Genealogical Word List”

*Geogen Surname Mapping*, <https://legacy.stoepel.net> – Look up surnames in Germany to see the relative and absolute distribution on a map, based on telephone data from ca. 2002.

*Kartenmeister*, <http://www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp> - Online gazetteer of the areas of Germany now in Poland, Russia, or Lithuania. Includes the German and modern names and location of parishes and civil registration.

Kevan Hansen’s Map Guides to German Parish Registers, Family Roots Pub. (FamlyRoots)

Minert, Roger P. *Spelling Variations in German Names: Solving Family History Problems Through Applications of German and English Phonetics*. (Family Roots, 2000).

Minert, Roger P. *Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents:* *Analyzing German, Latin, and French in Historical Manuscripts* . (Family Roots, 2013).

*Mapire*, <https://mapire.eu> – Detailed historic maps of 19th century Europe overlayed over a modern map. Includes nearly the full German Empire as well as most of the rest of Europe.

“Meyers Gazetteer of the German Empire,” *Ancestry.com*, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1074/> - Full digital copy of Meyers Orts gazetteer, including city maps. Use keyword search or brose. (Location search is broken.)

*MeyersGaz.org*, <https://www.meyersgaz.org> – Database version of Meyers Orts gazetteer of the German Empire. Includes wildcard search, maps, and info on parishes for most regions.

Roger Minert’s Series of Germany Place Name Indexes (with Reverse Sort). (Family Roots)

Thode, Ernest. *German-English Genealogical Dictionary*, Genealogical Pub., 2008.

Verein für Computergenealogie, *Compgen*, <https://www.compgen.de> –Includes many resources, including place database, genealogy wiki, surname map, and much more.

*Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org> – Helpful articles such as “German Grammar,” “German Toponymy” (Info on formation of German place names, with meaning of suffixes, prefixes, and attachments), “German Empire” (also try various historic provinces, kingdoms, duchies, etc.), “German orthography,” (Explanation of the German alphabet, writing, pronunciation, etc.)