

G-SIG FORUM #11

...from the German Special Interest Group. G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis.

This communication is a forum for educational, historical and genealogical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher, Group Leader for G-SIG, serves as *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

If you would like to include a notice or request, please submit your information in condensed form for the *EXCHANGE!* section (limit 50 words). *EXCHANGE!* notices run only once, but you may resubmit. We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your *EXCHANGE!* submission to persch3@hotmail.com.

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SHARING HIS DISCOVERY

As with all good things worth sharing, G-SIG's Gordon Seyffert hopes his recent discoveries will help you, too.

"I've subscribed to OW-Preussen-L, which is the mailing list for East and West Prussia. It is officially bilingual, but most posts are in German," he reports. "When I saw a discussion of surname endings that appeared to have implications for my unusual ancestral name of BALLASEUS, I jumped right in, gave a brief summary of my known family information, and stated (in summary, being careful to credit earlier posters for their ideas) what I felt I could explore or conclude from the foregoing discussions. Then I asked for help. And, thanks to one kindly person, did I EVER receive it!"

Gordon discovered that the name BALLASEUS is Baltic. *BALA* means swamp or bog. He was told that part of the name often points to the area an ancestor lived.

Gordon's ancestor, Jurge Ballaszus, was in the village Kropjen, Amt Sommerau, Kreis Althoff Ragnit. The "sz" in Ballaszus was one of the ways German linguists tried to translate a Baltic spelling. The "sz" sound was similar to *sch* or *sh*. Because of the language differences, the ancestral name Gordon is tracking was spelled Balaszus, Ballaszus, Ballaszius, Ballaszejus, and Balasejus, plus other derivations.

What about *-IUS*, *-JUS*, *-YUS* and *-EUS*? These are basically the same.

Gordon adds, "I would strongly recommend subscribing to such a list to anyone. It does result in a lively traffic, even if received in digest mode, but one can merely scan the subject lines if that is all the further one wishes to explore the messages.

He searched for the location of Sommerau, using this URL:

<http://www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp>

He knew this place was not far from the last home of his BALLASEUS family prior to removal to West Prussia, and then emigration. He then used Wikipedia to learn about the general area. He concludes, "These URLs were especially helpful, the first for the map and the second for the historical treatment of the Pregel-to-Neman-Rivers district:"

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Prussians

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadruvians>

Gordon may be reached at : gordonseyffert@mac.com .

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'I SHOULD HAVE ASKED...'

Carole DeLange (at cdelange@consolidated.net) says she should have asked.

In a recent message to G-SIG's John Wittenberg, Carole said she grew up in Florissant until about 1964 and returned for a time in the 1970s. "I wish I would have paid more attention and asked a lot more questions of my dad and my grandparents. I've learned so much about my great-grandfather in the last few months, but it's all a paper trail – no personal stories. All I know is that he came to St. Louis in about 1880 from Germany. I don't know where in Germany, but I intend to find out! Your G-SIG sounds very interesting and informative, I'd really like to be able to attend a meeting . . . I've only taken a minute to browse through some of your past articles and I'm anxious to read more."

Carole is among the growing number of out-of-state G-SIGers learning about their roots. She lives in Montgomery, Texas.

Too many family historians learn too late that they should have ASKED family members important genealogical questions when they were alive. Of course, there is a down side to this. Sometimes recollections are faulty or incomplete. So even if you have asked all the proper questions, test the answers to make sure they are viable. Even an entry in a journal or book about important family events (births, deaths, etc.) may have been done years ago from memory and may not be correct. Some researchers stick with those journal entries until there is a discrepancy, then they dig into other documents to resolve the matter.

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CHECKING INTO NOBILITY

Don't fall for all special offers to have your ancestral nobility checked and to receive a document attesting to your high status. Some scams have become a form of business that may not be based on fact.

German nobility ended as a powerful force at the conclusion of the First World War. Technically, the system was no longer recognized by governing authorities. In practice, however, there are still noble lines in Germany that trace ancestry over hundreds of years. Those that have amassed wealth still hand it off to succeeding generations.

I have heard of one German family that invested in tropical forests from which timber and other resources have been taken. The family's wealth seems relatively stable, although it is costly to maintain the family castle (literally).

Not all noble families are still wealthy. High taxes over the centuries have brought down many families from high monetary levels. Current taxes against a residential castle (*Schloss*) can result in the facility being opened for public viewing (at a price per person). Other castles are sold or turned into museums.

In contacting experts on noble lineage, there is a phrase that occurs regularly. "If you didn't know you had nobility in your ancestry, then chances are good that you are not of noble birth." Years ago I discovered that there are several official sources that verify nobility and then print the results in encyclopedic books. In Europe, it was a serious affront to say you were of noble descent, if it could not be proved legally. In some places, the claim was illegal and resulted in stiff reprimands.

Not all titles of nobility were transferable. There was the *Uradel* and the *Briefadel*. The former related to ancient nobility, while the latter was by letter or document (*Brief*) that conveyed noble status to the person paying for the document. Most often it was not to be transferred to future generations.

G-SIG's Pat von zur Muehlen (patvonzurm@msn.com) has been researching the subject of noble ancestry and found that the St. Louis Public Library has many genealogical books on the subject. I believe Washington University's library also has similar books. Looking up the names you are tracing, in a matter of minutes you should be able to tell if there is acknowledged nobility.

If interested, I suggest you check "Genealogischen Handbuch des Adels" (GHdA) as the first resource. You may find information about it online. It will be in German, and there have been updates over the years. GP

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MORE ABOUT NOBILITY 'DOCUMENTS'

By Gerald Perschbacher

Much has been done on my surname, and one thing German experts hold is certain: The name was not of noble status. If anything, it was of "*ministeriale*" status, which means it was a family with an appointment. But this does not grant nobility.

Still, one genealogical source (I'll call it "Q") has said this: "The distinguished surname Perschbacher can be traced back to the province of Brandenburg," Q goes on to fill a paragraph on the history of Brandenburg. Interesting, since the surname name is derived from Hessen-Darmstadt, far from Brandenburg. It is Hessen by nature and form.

Still more confusing is Q's statement, "Bearers of the family name Perschbacher were found in Prussia, where the name emerged in medieval times as one of the notable families of the region. From the 13th century the surname was identified with the great social and economic evolution which made this territory a landmark contributor to the development of the nation." German historians who have researched the family name since the 1950s have not found that connection and do not accept it. No documents have been discovered by serious researchers that show "Perschbacher" as a notable family of Prussia. In Hessen-Darmstadt, yes, but not in Prussia.

A further statement was made by Q: "A major aspect of research into family names is the fact that the spelling or pronunciation of a name undergoes tremendous changes throughout its history." Perhaps, but not in the case of Perschbacher. The changes were minor since the 1400s. The source then noted there were "numerous variations of the name Perschbacher, and they are...Perschbauer, Perschkau, Perschadam, to name a few." Unfortunately, none of those variations have a direct connection to my surname, according to German sources. They were not derived from the same root words. And I might take further issue with Q's statement, "During this period of change, the family name Perschbacher moved to Prussia, which was established as the primary origin of the family name. The name flourished in this region for several centuries throughout the early Middle Ages. Later, from the mid 16th century, the family name migrated to other parts of the continent..." yet there are no traceable facts that have surfaced for these assertions. Equally questionable is the statement, "Later, they achieved the distinction of being elevated to the ranks of the nobility as knights and chevaliers."

As well intentioned as Q's assertions may be, they do not present documentation

nor are they corroborated by existing ancient documents of scholarly acceptance. However, Q compiled this information and offered it at a price. A fancy document was drafted and “sold” by Q to please a customer.

While I would like to believe some if not all the information offered by Q was correct, the evidence and documentation goes against it. When confronted by the facts, I can only go in that direction. Hence, Q’s efforts are the stuff of dreams and hopes, and little else.

Be cautious. When examining assertions by any source, test the documentation. Your family isn’t of noble lineage just because some “Q” says it is.

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THE HUNGARIAN CONNECTION

John Maurath, a G-SIG participants who is an authority on the Civil War from a German perspective, says, “There is a big connection between Hungarians and Germans, not only here, but also in Hungary, where many Germans stopped in (and stayed) on their way to Russia in the late 1700s, early 1800s. Most Hungarians spoke or speak German. This is a result also, as you know, of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.” He says Canadian Steve Beszedits is an expert on this subject. Read more about it at the following Web site: www.missouricivilwarmuseum.org .

John adds, “One of my German ancestors, Denis Maurath, served in Fremont’s Body Guard, which was commanded by an Hungarian, Karoly "Charles" Zagonyi. This was in General John C. Fremont’s Western Department, headquartered right here in St. Louis.”

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GOVERNOR SALUTES GERMAN HERITAGE

Missouri Governor Matt Blunt proclaimed October 6, 2006, as German-American Day and personally presented his proclamation in his office on September 14 to German Consul General Wolfgang Drautz of the Chicago Consulate General. The annual proclamation recognizes the contributions of generations of German immigrants who helped build the United States and chart its course through the past 300 years. Like several other Midwestern states, Missouri has a high concentration (29%) of its citizens who claim German ancestry. Many celebrate their heritage at Octoberfest events throughout the state. *(Reported by G-SIG’s Lansing Hecker)*

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ILLINOIS CHURCH CONNECTIONS?

If your ancestry is traced to nearby counties in Illinois, perhaps your family belonged to one of the numerous churches that dotted the area. If you know a town where your family had lived, consider contacting local churches for information in official church registries (births, deaths, baptisms, confirmations). Before 1920, most Americans did not travel any notable distance to church. They frequented worship sites near their homes.

If you are not certain of your ancestral town but know of the general area, contact a church and ask if there is a historian who can check on your lineage. Church historians often have a good idea of surnames connected with their church's history. Co

If your family has Lutheran connections in Illinois, you might contact: Holy Cross, Renault, founded in 1853; St. Salvator, Venedy, founded in 1842; Trinity, Red Bud, 1842; St. John, Red Bud, 1855; St. Paul Columbia, 1841; Holy Cross, Wartburg, 1841; Trinity, Millstadt, 1849; Holy Cross, Sugar Loaf, 1841; Zion, Mascoutah, 1868; St. Peter, New Memphis, 1863; St. John, New Minden, 1846; 0 St. Paul, Wine Hill, 1859; or Olive Branch, Okawville, 1865. GP

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LEAVING GERMANY FOR AMERICA

It was a bold effort when 75 emigrants from Dietzenbach set plans to move to America in 1846. But there was land to cross before a riverboat ride could take them to a seaport. To assist in the effort, the mayor of Dietzenbach made a public statement asking farmers to carry emigrants plus their possessions to Mainz at the lowest cost. From there they would take a steam boat to the coast. It took seven farmers with horse-drawn wagons to move the 75 Dietzenbachers.

The process usually worked this way. An announcement was made that help was needed. Since farmers owned large wagons, they stood in the forefront to help. This was a good way for them to earn a little extra cash, too.

A bidding process took place. The farmer who bid the least, often got the job. This was an old tradition upheld in towns and villages in Germany through the 1800s. This was seen as a community service. In small towns where many families were related, it was a good way to help relatives.

In late years, emigrants traveled to seaport by train.

Families from the same village traveled to America in groups. There was safety in numbers, relatives could watch the children, and once settled in the New World, there were more hands to help build a new life. Most of the German settlers did not speak English. The few that did, often gained importance among their fellow settlers. So there was an incentive to learn English.

Strange as it may seem, many German settlers had no real idea about America. Despite books on the subject, many did not understand how far it took to travel to America, they did not know its population centers, and they had little idea of the way of life which was a strange adaptation of European traditions blended into a special American culture that was still emerging in the late 1800s.

Highly educated Germans such as teachers and pastors set lofty goals and ideals by forming emigration societies to travel to America. However, they had no practice and often faced insurmountable problems that resulted in the disintegration of their societies. The fortunate emigrants were those whose emigration society survived long enough to see them safely to America.

Too often, well intentioned payments for transportation to America met with dismal failure as money was stolen under false pretense. GP

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EXCHANGE! *Comments, ideas, and requests from those in G-SIG:*

+ “I would like to be able to read original German documents,” said Kathy Wurth, G-SIG member, when she called Carmen to inquire about private German lessons. “Sure, “ Carmen told her, “and I can also prepare you for any future trips to Germany.” Learn German at your pace. Take private language classes. Bring a study partner along. For details, call Carmen Freeman, native speaker and experienced German tutor: (314) 963-9534 or CarmenKFreeman@aol.com .

+ Herb Soendker (jr09210@verizon.net) of Tampa, Florida, says, “I am interested in the family lineage of the Soendker and Sondker families. I believe both of these families came from the same source of Sondker and either lived or still live in the St Louis area.” He may be reached at (813) 910-3564

+ Still interested in the German School Association, a not-for-profit organization, that began its new semester of affordable German language classes for adults and children? Classes are held at Abiding Savior Lutheran School, I-55 & Butler Hill Road, 9 a.m. to Noon, Saturdays, for 30 weeks. Tuition: Children: \$150; Adults \$250. Books extra. Call (314) 544-3990 or 963-9534 or (www.germanstl.org/germanschool). Helga Thalheimer is president of the German School Association of Greater St. Louis.

+ There are various ways to learn German. Pat von zur Muehlen suggests German lessons on HEC-TV. “In my area that is cable channel 26.” Individuals can check www.hectv.org for the schedule.

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Want a printed copy of G-SIG FORUM by mail? Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: St. Louis Genealogical Society, Attn. Ed Schmidt, #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140, St. Louis, MO 63143.

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Have some great ideas for the G-SIG FORUM? Any topics to suggest? Want to share your findings in order to help others in their search? Then submit your material to

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or mail it to: Attn: G-SIG, #4 Sunnen Dr.,
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