

German Research vs. U.S. Research

She explains German research with particular clarity and thoroughness: "I think there are two main differences between research in the United States and research in Germany: (a)

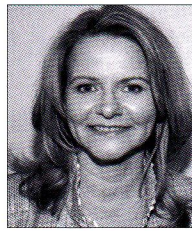
very strict Personal Data Protection Laws and (b) a general lack in interest when it comes to genealogical research in Germany.

"As of 1874 (in some regions 1876), civil records were recorded in Germany by the civil registry offices. Before that time it was mandatory that all births, weddings, and deaths be recorded in church books in the church of the town or village where the people lived.

"Until last year, generally all civil records after 1874 were subject to the German personal data protection law, that is, that unless one could prove a specific interest or direct relationship (children, parents, grandparents), one could not gain access to these records. And genealogy is not considered a specific interest, and siblings or uncles and aunts were not considered direct relatives.

"As of January 1, 2009, the dates of restriction were softened and all birth records until 1898, all wedding records until 1928 and all death records until 1978 became archival goods and are no longer subject to aforementioned law.

"In the majority of towns, the civil records were turned over to the local archives, and they received thousands of new records that needed to be indexed, etc. This has caused an immense increase in requests for assistance with genealogical research. However, these archives have not had an increase in staff or funding to deal with the increase in inquiries. Currently it can easily take one to two months for inquiries at an archives to be answered. And then there are always the exceptions to the rules where the records have not yet been turned over to an archive and to a certain extent still the same old restrictions are enforced.



"And there is one thing that researchers have to understand: We do not have one centralized German archive nor do we open a drawer and pull out a record on anyone who has ever lived in Germany or its former provinces. We do not have a general

German church or state archive where we could look up names and will find the place of origin. Generally speaking every German state has its own main archive and every bigger city has its city archive.

"I often get inquiries about finding a 'Johann Schmidt from Prussia.' Without any further details I might as well be looking for a John Smith born somewhere in the Midwest. Unless I am given more specific information there is not much I can do to find this person within any reasonable amount of time.

"The best place to start here is the search in the Hamburg passenger departure lists as they list the home towns of the emigrants as well as personal data on his/her age, profession, and other persons/family members travelling with him/her. But here, too, it is helpful to have as many details as possible such as when the emigration may have taken place, the name and age or some other secondary detail that would help confirm a person to be the right one.

"It also needs to be taken into consideration that parts of the former Germany, respectively the former Eastern Provinces such as West Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, etc., belong to other countries nowadays (such as Poland and Russia)."

Research in Germany

Andrea Bentschneider

Andrea Bentschneider lives in Hamburg, Germany, where she has established her genealogical research firm, Beyond History. She is a member of the Association of German Speaking Professional Genealogists as well as of the Association of Professional Genealogists, and serves as the exclusive researcher in Germany for Ancestry.com.

Hamburg Passenger Lists

As the Hamburg passenger lists have become more widely available to U.S. researchers, their unique usefulness and breadth of documentation have changed immigration research from difficult to exciting. Andrea enjoys the enviable position of being able to read the original rolls.

"After working with the Hamburg passenger departure lists on microfilms for

many years and almost on a daily basis, the first time I saw and actually touched the original lists at the Hamburg State Archive, I was moved to tears. Particularly as the list I held in my hands was the page with the departure record of one of my own ancestors who had emigrated to the United States in 1866 at the age of seventy-one years, to follow his eldest son to Michigan. While it is great to be able to work with documents on microfilm, or on Ancestry.com and similar services, nothing beats holding the original document in your hands. Feeling the thick paper, hearing that special sound when you turn the pages, smelling the dust of times gone by. And every name in the document has a story to tell and stands for another life full of dreams, fears, and hopes.

"I particularly treasure the Hamburg passenger lists as the only almost completely preserved collection of emigration records, covering more than 5 million records during the years 1850-1934. Since this is such a valuable and unique resource, I understand the need to protect the original documents. The majority of inquiries from abroad begin with the search in the passenger lists. They usually hold the key to finding emigrant ancestors' hometowns."

War and Documents

Wars have not been kind to historical records. "Due to World War II, records and some important sources were lost—both due to bombs and willful destruction due to the wrong ideology," Andrea says. "But it does not mean that there is nothing left (from that period), research is just a bit more challenging."

"In some villages, particularly in the former Eastern Provinces (today Poland or Russia), church records or other vital records were lost, but this always has to be checked on a case-to-case basis, and cannot be generalized. Eastern Province church records may be located at several different locations, either within Germany or in local archives and churches."



Andrea onsite at the Hamburg State Archive being filmed for a German TV program.

"When it comes to records particularly from World War II, they are spread out over different Federal archives throughout Germany. So there is usually, depending on the inquiry, an average of five to ten different archives that can be contacted. There is still information available on military records, such as entry date, ranks, and when and where a soldier fought. If a soldier had the rank of an officer, there is a good chance there might be a personnel file. Other archives hold records about Nazi Party memberships and compensation for personal belongings lost due to the flight or displacement (if applicable)."

"We often get the request to find out more about the history of fathers and grandfathers during WWII, and their possible political involvement."

"For a German TV show, I had researched the ancestors of a German actor. His grandfathers covered both sides of the spectrum: His paternal grandfather was a soldier who had been missing since March of 1945—with 90 percent certainty we found the place where he was killed. His maternal grandfather, on the other hand, was a guard at the Warsaw ghetto and was responsible for killing several people there. Here we discovered the court files of his trial after the war."

"What is even worse, is when sources and historical records are destroyed wilfully, as has happened during the past two years with the majority of the records from the so-called 'Krankenbuchlager' (military hospital records), mainly from World War I."

"In May 1945, the major archive holding WWI records in Berlin was destroyed by bombs. These individual medical records of the soldiers were the only source left for tracing the military history of ancestors fighting during the years 1914–18, on a nationwide level. These records were not considered archival goods, but rather, belonged to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Berlin. Due to lack of funding, all records pertaining to soldiers born prior to 1900, which was the majority of this collection, was destroyed and hence is lost forever."

New York Luxury

Andrea was born in Hamburg, Germany. Her initial career was in hotel management, and after three years of management training in a leading Hamburg hotel, she moved to New York in September 1991, where she was part of the opening team of the St. Regis Hotel. The originally planned one-and-a-half-year stay in New York turned into ten years with various luxury hotels and a travel company.

In 2001, Andrea returned to her hometown of Hamburg. There she reconnected with a former boyfriend, whom she had first met in 1989. Today they have been happily married for two years.

Andrea misses those weekends in the Hamptons. "But I enjoy taking a walk on a beach of the Baltic or North Sea, or on the Alster Lake or Elbe river here in Hamburg."

Beyond History

Her New York experiences gave her many insights into the American way of life, the language, and the mentality, which help her understand American clients' needs and expectations. "In New York I became very involved with German-Jewish causes and created a project called 'Beyond History' to cause healing and understanding between Jews and Germans of the second and third generations," she explains. "Since it was a project that was a big part of my life, I knew my own business had to be called 'Beyond History,' despite the fact that it is difficult

for my German clients to pronounce, and to understand what it means.

"Beyond History" establishes personal relationships with clients. "We've met our clients when they come to Germany to visit the hometowns of their ancestors," she says. "We worry about their well-being when we hear on the news about wild fires in their area, and we find about their pets or similar personal interests that we all have. Unfortunately, we are not able to conduct research based on a personal photo from 1901, where an unknown group of people is sitting on a bench in a garden and no names, dates, or places are known. About once a month, we receive a photo like that and are being asked if we know the persons on that photo and what happened to them. We are sorry that we are not able to research these cases."

Continuing Learning

Andrea attends regional genealogy conferences, and particularly seems to like one:

"There is one big annual event in mid-September called 'Genealogentag' (translates into 'Genealogy Day'). This event is organized by a different genealogical society each year, and usually spans from Friday afternoon until Sunday. There are many lectures, a market place, and exhibition hall with stands of genealogical supplies and literature. There are also places to simply mingle and meet fellow researchers. A 'jour fix' at these annual conferences is the meeting of the members of the Association of German Speaking Professional Genealogists on Friday afternoons."

Roberta "Bobbi" King is a Colorado genealogist who writes, speaks, and offers genealogy classes in the Denver area. She is a Nebraska native, specializing in the research of homestead records and homestead laws. She edits two genealogy newsletters, is working on her certification, and serves as an FGS board director.