Accessing European Church Records

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Church records often contain facts about our ancestors that cannot easily be found elsewhere. They tend to start much earlier in time than other records [Figure 1]. In many parts of Europe these records have been digitized, transcribed, microfilmed, or otherwise made available to researchers. They are a fabulous resource that you should mine for information about your family.

Finding your ancestral village

For most people, determining the church your ancestors attended is the first hurdle. This requires uncovering the name of the town(s) they came from and determining if they are Protestant or Catholic. Of these, learning the name of the town presents the greatest challenge. A thorough investigation of the process is beyond the scope of this discussion. Nevertheless, History & Genealogy staff members have created a list of 20 possible sources for finding this crucial information. [see Figure 2]. We also have an online tutorial covering this information[2]. Finding the village or town name is the key to doing research in Europe.

Figure 1 - The Start of Church Records				
1800s	1700s	1600s	1500s or Earlier	
Armenia	Albania	Estonia	Austria	Luxembourg
Bosnia	Belarus	Finland	Belgium	Netherlands
Bulgaria	Iceland	Latvia	Croatia	Norway
Georgia	Russia	Lithuania	Czech Republic	Poland
Ireland	Ukraine	Romania	England	Portugal
Kosovo		Scotland	France	Slovakia
Moldova		Sweden	Greece	Slovenia
Montenegro		Turkey	Hungary	Spain
Serbia			Italy	Switzerland

Finding the records

Three factors will determine what records are available, specifically:

1. What information was originally recorded

At a bare minimum, a clergyman would record baptisms, marriages, and deaths. The amount of detail and the style of the record keeping will on the place and time. The closer to the present, the more detail you can expect to find.

Tips for Seeking Place of Origin:

   Ask family members
   Old family papers or artifacts
   Passenger lists
   Naturalization records
   Church records (marriage, death, or baptisms of the immigrant's children)
   Birth records
   Civil marriage records
   Death certificates
   Obituaries and death notices
   European Tax, Land, Poll, and Census Records
   Wills and probate records
   Headstone inscriptions
   World War I draft registrations
   U.S. Census records
   U.S. Army Register of Enlistments 1798-1914
   Pension Records
   Geographical Surname Sites
   Contemporary telephone books (online)
   Location specific resources. (Such as Men of Bern[2], The Alsace Emigration Book[3], The Wuerttemberg Emigration Index[4], or others.)
   Published family histories and internet family trees

This is not an exhaustive list. You might find the town name in any of these, or none. You must, however, have a specific location to begin researching in Europe.

Figure 2

2. **Which Record Books Survived**
Over the centuries, Europe has experienced quite a lot of warfare. Churches and their records were often casualities of these conflicts. Most German church records, for example, suffered destruction during the Thirty-Years War (1681-1648). Additionally, fire, water, or even ill-conceived efforts at preservation may have destroyed the records.

3. **Reluctance to Release Information**
Some churches, meetings, or denominational archives have for various reasons been reluctant to allow microfilming or digitization.

Finding European Church Records
European church records are currently available online though a number of sources. You will need to check all of them to see if your ancestor's church is included in their record set:

1.   *FamilySearch* has digitized a number of these already. More will definitely become available over the next few years. Some of them, however, might only be available in a Family History Center or Affiliated Library. Others may require membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or a visit to Salt Lake City. German church records can be found in two places on FamilySearch:—Catalog and Records. Search both because the records you need might be in one but not the other.
2.   *Ancestry.com* has digital copies of many European parish records. Countries represented include England, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Russia, and Spain.
3.   *FindMyPast.com* makes available records from Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, and the United States. They have church records from all of these locations. A special emphasis of theirs in the United Stats has been Roman Catholic Records.
4.   *MyHeritage,com,* a subscription site, is a newer entry in the field. At the present time they offer access to records from Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Isle of Man, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Ukraine.
5.   *Archion.de*, a German subscription database has digital copies of the records from Protestant Church archives in Germany. Many of the records they provide come from areas of Germany such as Bavaria and Neidersachsen whose archives have previously resisted

efforts to make their collections more widely available.

6. *Matricula Online* [http://data.matricula-online.eu/en/], a European website has digital copies of records from Roman Catholic archives across Europe. Records are currently available from Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, and Slovenia.

7. *French Departmental Archives* have been in a process for the last decade to digitize their records and put them online. Typically these will be civil registrations back to 1792 and church records, to the extent they exist, for earlier times.

8. *National Library of Ireland* made their Roman Catholic Parish Registers available digitally a few years ago. Although they are only available for browsing, they still offer researchers an opportunity to find their Irish Ancestors from anywhere in the world at no charge.

For more details about using these (and other) websites, see History & Genealogy's virtual class 301 | Researching Church Records Online[3].

If the records have not been made available digitally, it will be necessary to contact the archive in Europe to determine the process for viewing and copying the records. It may also be advisable to hire a local genealogist to research for you. Sometimes having a local person on the ground can facilitate access to local archival collections.

Beginning Your Search

Start with an individual. Determine their place of origin. Determine their denomination. It's important to factor in denominational differences. While all Catholics practice infant baptism, some Protestants such as Anabaptists and English Baptists practice believer's baptism. Other, Protestants such as the Quakers do not practice baptism. These differences will directly affect what records you might find for your ancestors.

If you determine that the individual is of a denomination which practices infant baptism, look for a baptismal record. The baptism record will list the name the individual's parents. Then look for the marriage of the parents. After that, look for the individual's death record. If you are lucky, the information will be written clearly on an easy-to-understand form or will be written in a clear and easy-to-read paragraph. Most entries are formulaic, containing the same verbiage for each entry .

Your hope is that the parents' marriage record will indicate the names of their parents. If so, you can begin searching for their baptism records. If not, there may only be one person with the name in the town. That will make it easy to identify them and continue your backward research. On the other hand, there might be two, three, four, or even more possible candidates. In that case, your search just turned into research and analysis. You will have to research the community in order to rule everyone out.

In some cases, there might be two copies of the register. Each parish kept a copy of baptisms, marriages, and deaths. A second copy or transcript was sometimes created for submission to the bishop, the church archives, or even government offices. Often time information is different from one to the other. You must look at both!

If the individual is of a denomination that practices believer's baptism, there might be baptisms recorded. Prior to 1662, all Presbyterian and many independent clergy recorded baptisms in the Anglican church registers. Similarly, Anabaptist Baptisms were often recorded in Lutheran Church

registers. There might even be a register of unbaptized children in the town.

Complications to Research

The two major barriers to church record research are language and handwriting.

Early Catholic church records are usually written in Latin. Protestant records might be in Latin or the local language. The *Family Search Wiki* has word lists for a number of languages. They can be accessed at https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/[Language]_Word_Lis. *Note: Replace [Language] with the Language – German, French, Latin, Etc.*

Handwriting presents its own problems. Records from the Germanic areas of Europe will often be written in a Gothic script. In parts of Eastern Europe, the records may be written using the Cyrillic alphabet. Even if the more contemporary script is used, the writing will be small (to preserve expensive paper) and the ink will be faint (because it was diluted with water to make it last longer). As you move backward in time, the records will likely become more difficult to read. Take your time and work with the records. You should be able to get back to the parish's earliest records.

Finding and using European Church records can be challenging, but the rewards are worth the effort. With a little time, anyone can develop the skills necessary to do the research.

Notes:
1. Benutzer: El tommo, *Wölferlingen, Westerwald, Germany. Protestant Church Erected 1751*. [Photograph], 10 May 2013. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/ File:Woelferlingen_Germany_Church.jpg accessed 14 August 2017.
2. *Finding a European Place of Origin*, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJEEDZOmhbQ, accessed 8 March 2021.
3. 301 | Researching Church Records Online, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyq4K4gAvpQ&t=2s (accessed 21 January 2022) Handout https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/Researching%20Church%20Records%20Online.pdf (accessed 21 January 2022).

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