An introduction to researching in Continental Europe

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The Continent is a very large place with many countries, so this article is necessarily fairly general. That said, many of the records of Continental countries show great similarities because of the shared histories of so many areas. At the same time there are distinct differences between Continental records and the British records, so by understanding these differences and looking at some of the important record classes, how to begin Continental research should become clearer.

The records of Continental Europe

The most important point to understand is that Continental European records are not centralised, but kept and indexed at local levels. For example, in France, Germany, The Netherlands, and Italy this means at town halls, although older records may have been moved to regional archives. For this reason, no Continental country has a national index of births, deaths and marriages.

As to the types of records available for a given locality and the location of those records, the history of the place will need to be understood; especially a knowledge of whose jurisdiction the place came under at various times. With the exception perhaps of France and Switzerland, most Continental countries were only formed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For example, Norway came under Denmark for hundreds of years until 1814, when it was ceded to Sweden. Sweden eventually recognised Norway as a separate country and even allowed it its own constitution and parliament, although it wasn't until 1905 that Norway declared its complete independence. One result is that in the Scandinavian area some classes of records, and the way that records were kept, are similar across more than one of those countries. Similarly, this occurs in the area covered by the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, an area that extended from Croatia and northern Italy northwards to parts of modern-day Poland and Ukraine.

The country we know today as Poland was only created after WWII. The ancient Kingdom of Poland straddled an area more to the east into Lithuania and Ukraine. Then, in 1795, Poland completely disappeared from the map when it was partitioned between Russia, Austria and Prussia. It did not reappear again until 1918. Following WWII, the whole country was lifted up and moved westwards into what had been parts of Prussia. Thus, records for this area may be in Polish, German or Russian. In the case of records from former German areas, the records may even now be located in Germany, as many were moved westwards in front of the advancing Soviet army during the last stages of WWII.

There are, however, major compensating factors that ameliorate the lack of centralisation. In general the records are very good and extremely full of detail, much more so than in the English speaking world. Among other things it was common for the records to make reference to the various parties' place of residence and place of origin, especially if they were not native to the locality. Also, many areas showed a propensity to record all people coming into and leaving their areas and where they came from or went to. Therefore, it should be straightforward enough to follow the trail back. This is, of course, in complete contrast to British records where before the census, finding someone's birthplace can take years of research or may never have been found.

Registration of births, deaths and marriages

Civil registration as we know it was developed by the French at the time of the Revolution at the end of the 18th century, and was a consequence of the process of nationalism and the formation of a modern state. Governments needed to be able to better account for all their citizens. A comprehensive birth registration system, for example, made the process of conscripting all males of a particular age much simpler. Importantly, the French system also required the local registrars to make copies of all registrations and send them periodically to some more central authority, creating a backup copy if ever the original was destroyed. Registrars also produced ten-year tables (indexes).

Civil registration began in France and the Rhineland in 1792. As the French advanced eastwards across the Continent and annexed various countries, the French system was introduced elsewhere. Registration began in Belgium in 1796, Hesse-Nassau in 1803, in parts of Italy in 1806, Westfalen 1808, Hanover 1809 and the Netherlands in 1811. With the departure of the French in 1814, some places promptly dropped the system, although the pattern was set so that in future the churches were often required to keep better records. Belgium and the Netherlands kept civil registration. Because France never became established in places such as Bavaria or Prussia, registration was not established there until the formation of the German Empire in the 1870s. Registration began again in Italy in 1869 following unification of that country.

In much of Eastern Europe the governments gave the responsibility of recording birth, deaths and marriages to the main faiths – Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish. The faiths were directed to keep much fuller civil type records and to furnish copies to the civil authorities. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire and much of Prussia this system started in the 1790s. In Scandinavian countries civil registration was, until very recently, the responsibility of the Lutheran Church.

Church records

These include the familiar baptism, marriage and burial registers. They do tend to be a little fuller than British records with, for example, sponsors named in baptismal entries and both parents of the parties to a marriage named. (See Fig. 1. Baptism certificate.)

Church records may also include confirmation registers and church membership lists. In Denmark there are family books and vaccination registers from 1800. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the Lutheran church was responsible for recording all comings and goings of people from the parish. In Sweden this officially began in 1686, with the introduction of household examination rolls, although there

was some resistance to the system so comprehensive coverage for the country didn't commence until the beginning of the 1700s. Records for Denmark and Norway commenced in 1814.

Census

Census records are not commonly used for research, as there are usually better alternatives. If the records survive generally they will be in local or regional archives, usually un-indexed. There are exceptions. Norway has censuses from 1801 to 1910 available on a searchable database, online. Denmark also has an impressive series of census records available online, starting with the first census in 1787, then 1801 and through to the 1860 census. Mecklenburg has four censuses with the first in 1819.

Population registration

Population registration, which is often tied in with civil registration, is the registering of the population by household. Basically, whenever someone moved house or changed occupation, they were required to register the fact with the authorities. The records were compiled by address and include names, ages, religion, relationship, occupation, former residences and date of arrival,
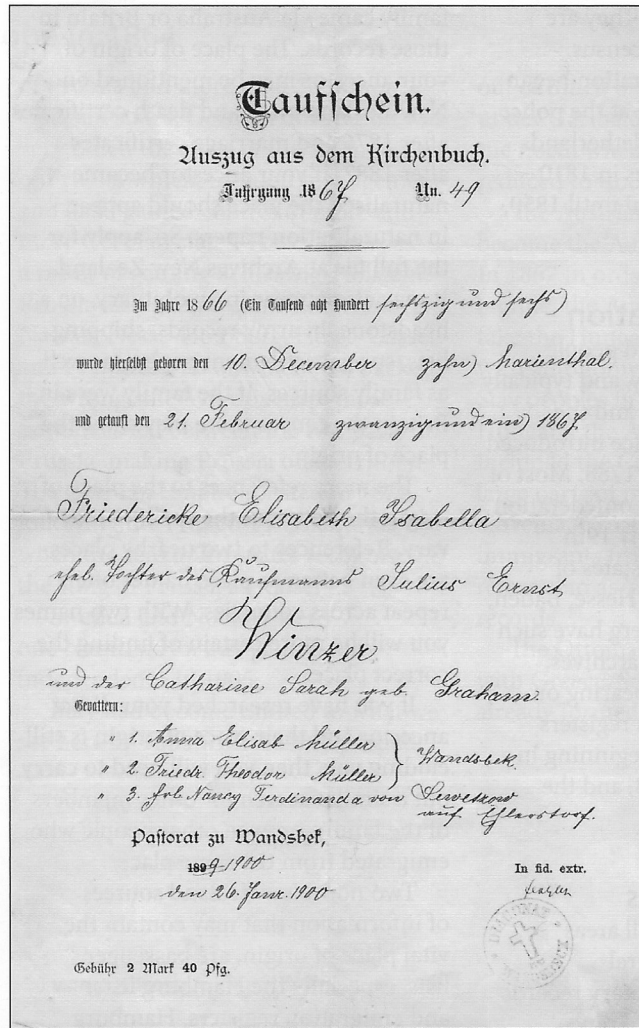

Fig. 1. Baptism certificate for Friedericke Elisabeth Isabella Winzer. A certified copy of the entry in church book for Wandsbek, near Hamburg. Private collection.

Details include baptism date, birth date and place, father's occupation, mother's maiden name and three witnesses, with addresses.

Fig. 2. Meldekarte. Household registration card for Julius Ernst Winzer, his wife Catherine Sarah née Graham and children, 26 Apr 1892. Staatsarchiv Hamburg. The documents shown, under number 11, were a Hamburg citizenship certificate and marriage certificate. The final line records the death of Julius on 27 Nov 1899.

The card was pre-printed and recorded information in 18 fields. The fields are:
1) *Surname and Christian names of householder (Calling name underlined)*
2) *Place of birth*
3) *Date of birth*
4) *Marital status*
5) *Religion*
6) *Status or profession*
7) *Military status*
8) *Nationality*
9) *Since when in Hamburg*
10a) *Last place of residence*
10b) *If formerly in Hamburg, then where*
11) *The documents that were shown*
12) *Names of spouse(s) and children*
13) *Birthplaces of spouse and children*
14) *Birth dates of spouse and children*
15) *Comments for spouse and children*
16) *Date of registration*
17) *Residential address (of person under No.1)*
18) *Receipt No.*

and where people moved. They are really a bit like a running census.

In German areas registration began in the 1840s and was done at the police station. It still is. For the Netherlands the system started in places in 1810 although it wasn't universal until 1850. (See Fig. 2. Meldekarte.)

Emigration registration

Emigration registers record people applying to leave a country, and typically include birth dates, places and the intended destination. France introduced emigration registration in 1788. Most of the states of the German Confederation kept registers from the early 19th century. For example, the states of Brandenburg, Brunswick, Hesse, Baden, Rhineland and Württemberg have such registers, kept in the local archives, and now progressively appearing on Ancestry.com. Emigration registers also survive for Sweden, beginning in 1851, Denmark from 1868, and the Netherlands.

Some other records

Probates are common to all areas although there are no central repositories or indexes. Notary records are preserved especially in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Many are now online, as are land and manorial records and directories.

Locating the place of origin

The first step in Continental research is to determine the place of origin of your ancestor.

As already outlined, Continental European records are not centralised. Therefore, before any research can be undertaken on the Continent, you need to first establish the exact town or village where your ancestor was born or where a particular event occurred. A reference to say Hanover or Bavaria or Croatia is not enough. In the case of Hanover, at different times this could mean the city of Hanover, or the area held by the Electors of Hanover, or the Kingdom of Hanover.

You will also need to establish the actual name you are looking for. Spellings may vary and many families anglicised their names, especially at the time of the world wars.

A golden rule of genealogy is to always work back from the known to the unknown. Therefore, the place of origin of your ancestor should be looked for in New Zealand records, or if your family came via Australia or Britain in those records. The place of origin of your ancestor may be mentioned on New Zealand birth and death certificates after 1876 and marriage certificates after 1882. If your ancestor became naturalised the place should appear in naturalisation papers. So, apply for the full file at Archives New Zealand. It may also appear in an obituary, on a headstone, in army records, shipping lists, special settlement papers, as well as family sources. If the family were in Britain the census there may show the place of origin.

The more references to the place of origin the better, as the spelling may vary. References to two nearby places are even better, as place names often repeat across countries. With two names you will be more certain of finding the correct place.

If you have researched your direct ancestor and their place of origin is still eluding you, then you will need to carry out a similar search for other members of the family, or even other people who emigrated from the same place.

Two non-New Zealand sources of information that may contain the vital place of origin, are passenger lists, especially the Hamburg lists, and emigration registers. Hamburg was a major port of embarkation for people leaving from the German states, Prussia, Scandinavia and even Italy. The Hamburg lists begin in 1850, are chronological by ship and show each passenger's last place of residence, which may be their place of origin. Ancestry.com has indexed lists with images up to 1934.

If only the former state is known then emigration registers and passport applications should be checked.

Researching in Continental Europe

Once armed with a place of origin, research on the Continent can start. Begin by locating the place on maps, both current and old, and try to gain some understanding of the geography and history of where it lies and whose jurisdiction it came under at various times. It will also be necessary to determine the registration district and/or parish that the place fell within.

The NZSG Library has good how-to-guides for several countries that are well worth borrowing. These will give a good feel for the country and its records. Also, do look at the excellent FamilySearch Wiki for each country. The wiki has detailed information on researching for every country, articles on the important record classes and also maps and gazetteers.

Always check FamilySearch, Ancestry and the national archives for your country's records as so many, especially digital images, are coming online. For most countries the FamilySearch Wiki also has direct links to the national and regional archives and to any digitised records. Additionally:

- Belgium: Images for all civil registers are on FamilySearch.
- Denmark: All church book images plus the census and more are available at the Danish State Archives at *www.sa.dk/content/dk/ao-forside*. Impressively, the site also has an 'English' option and information on using the records.
- France: Department (county) archives should be checked. Archive addresses can be found at *www.guide-genealogie.com/guide/archives_adresses*.
- Germany: Extremely detailed topographic maps for the German Empire 1860-1965 are on Ancestry.com. Use the *Map Guide to German Parish Registers* series to determine the parish. Civil registry and parishes can be determined using *Meyers Gazetteer of the German Empire,* which is on Ancestry.com. Church records will be located in regional archives or special church archives. For Germans who emigrated to the United Kingdom check the Anglo-German Family History Society at *www.agfhs.org*.
- Italy: Civil records are on FamilySearch and Ancestry.
- The Netherlands: Images for all civil registers are on FamilySearch. A name index to cover the whole country is being developed and can be found at *www.wiewaswie.nl*. The index will eventually include all births, deaths and marriages, including parents and witnesses to marriages, church records and wills. Always check the websites for the regional and municipal archives at *www.archiefnet.nl*.
- Norway: All church book images plus the census and more are available at the Norwegian National Archives at *www.arkivverket.no/eng*. The site also has an 'English' option and information on using the records.
- Poland: The location of all surviving vital records is listed at Polish State Archives at *baza.archiwa.gov.pl/sezam/pradziad.php*. Use the

The shape of Continental Europe in 1864

For many hundreds of years the borders of Europe were in a continual state of change with the configuration of many territories reflecting the fortunes of the ruling dynasty.

By the 19th century, large areas of the Continent were coalescing into empires. Following the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1814 the frontiers of Europe were redrawn in what is known as the Congress of Vienna. The result can be seen on the accompanying map and broadly survived until WWI.

This map is a snapshot of Europe in 1864. It would have been familiar to many Continental people who emigrated to New Zealand at that time. The following should be noted:

The country of Poland did not exist as it had disappeared from the map in 1795. It did not return until after WWI. On this map, the Polish speaking area was centred on Warsaw, which was within the Russian Empire, and extended northwards into Prussia and southwards into the Austrian Empire.

The control of Schleswig-Holstein was about to pass from Denmark to Prussia. The loss of territory was keenly felt by Denmark as at the time Denmark's population was 1.75 million and Schleswig-Holstein's one million. It should be added that the majority, especially in Holstein, were German speaking.

The German Empire did not yet exist; the area it would eventually cover comprised the Kingdom of Prussia and more than 30 minor German states. German unification was very much the story of the ascendancy of Prussia which, by good management and luck, gained control of more and more German states. For example, as a result of gaining Schleswig-Holstein, Prussia also gained control of Hanover, Nassau, Hesse-Homberg, Hesse-Cassel and Frankfurt, all of which had backed the wrong side. On this map, those new areas fell between the two parts of Prussia, making Prussia one territory. The German Empire formed in 1871, following the Franco-Prussian war, when the remaining states recognised the King of Prussia as Kaiser.

Sweden and Norway were one country. Norway gained full independence in 1905.

Italy had become unified to what we see here by 1860 with Austria pushed out of much of the north and the south under Garibaldi becoming united with the north when the Papal State was reduced to Rome.

The Austrian Empire would soon become the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1867 in order to strengthen the regime, the Austrians decided to take the Hungarians into partnership with autonomy and control of the Slav peoples in their area. As well as Hungary, the Austrian Empire also included the Czech and Slovak lands, large parts of modern-day Romania, Slovenia, Croatia and Dalmatia. Thus immigrants from this area may be referred to as 'Austrian' in New Zealand records.

The Ottoman Empire was in retreat with Greece, Serbia and Romania already formed.
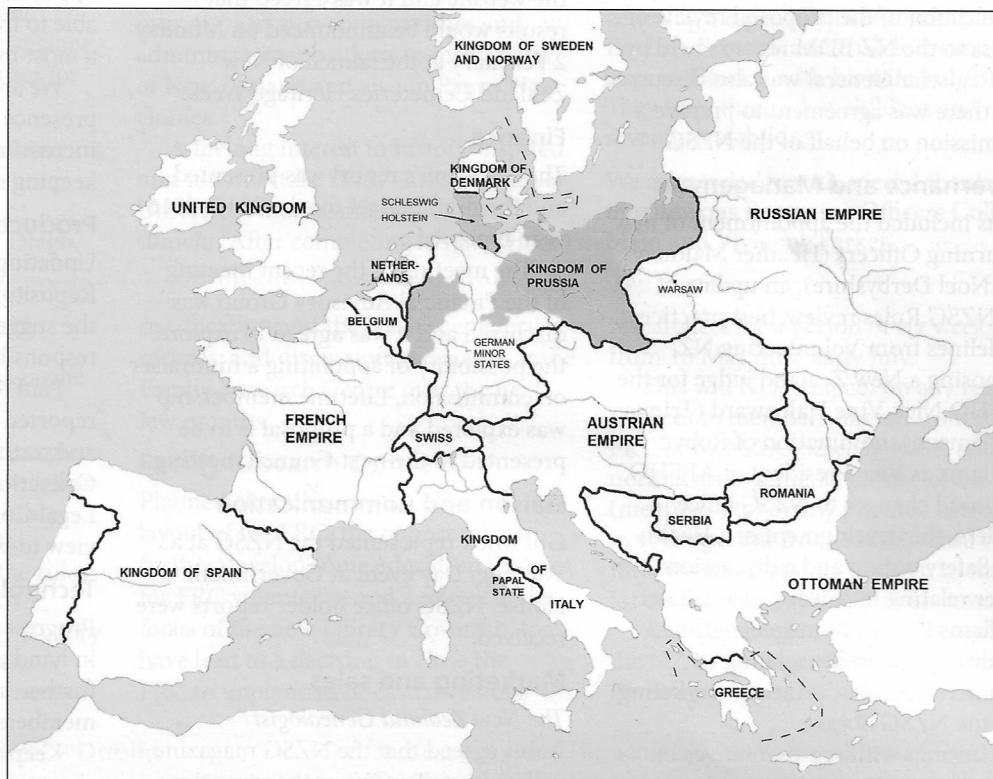
The countries of Europe, 1864. Drawn by Graham Clark.

gazetteer at *www.kartenmeister. com* for areas in the former German Empire. For maps of old Poland see *english.mapywig.org/news.php*.

- Sweden: All church book images are available, by subscription, at the Swedish National Archives at *sok. riksarkivet.se/* and on ArkivDigital at *www.arkivdigital.net/*. Ancestry also covers large parts of Sweden.

- Switzerland: A unique system of record keeping in which each family name has a place of naturalisation which is where the family originated from. No matter where an event is registered a copy is also sent to the place of naturalisation. To find the place see the *Register of Swiss Surnames, 1962* at *hls-dhs-dss.ch/famn/index.*

php. Canton archive addresses are at *feefhs.org/links/switzerland.html*.

This introduction is very brief and does not cover all countries, so do contact the European Interest Group at *ResearchEuropeanIG@genealogy.org.nz* with any queries. The group is there to give advice.

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