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Silesian Research: Barriers and Breakthroughs

Frauen und Kinder sollen die Stadt verlassen! Women and children should leave the town! With words like these, intoned over loudspeakers, approximately twelve million Germans were expelled from their homes in Silesia. This German province was part of the Bohemian Crown lands from the fourteenth century until 1526, when it came under Austrian Hapsburg rule. Then, in 1742, most of the area was taken over by Frederick the Great's Prussia. By decree of the Potsdam Conference, it was ceded to Poland in 1945. The resulting mass expulsion of Germans has presented challenges for those trying to trace their Silesian ancestry.

A good place to begin research is with the Silesian discussion lists: <<http://oberschlesien-l@genealogy.net>> and <<http://niederschlesien-l@genealogy.net>>. As the names indicate, one is for Upper Silesia and one is for Lower Silesia. Subscribing to both is worthwhile, especially if you don't know your ancestral town or in which area it is located. Both professional and amateur researchers post to these lists and many provide help to novices. However, a sizeable majority of postings are in German. This can be a barrier, but if you only read English, gather your determination and post anyway. Good results may ensue.

If you have discovered the name of your ancestral town (for a German/Polish place name list see <www.genealogienetz.de/reg/SCI/orted.html>), and if the Family History Library has microfilmed the church records of that town, having your surname information extracted by a professional is also a great point of departure. For me, this was a major breakthrough, yielding two more generations back and several other key bits of information. Because the Counter-Reformation under the Hapsburgs severely curtailed Lutheran activity in Silesia, most Lutheran (Evangelisch) church records only go back to the 1740s when Frederick the Great expanded religious freedom. If your ancestors were Catholic, you may have an advantage regarding



Silesia in the 19th century was part of Prussia. In 1945, most of it became part of Poland as shown in the inset. Thomas Rüffer Web site.

the extent of records. Civil records were not kept until the late 1800s, but many are also on microfilm at the FHL. For other types of records, archives must be mined.

Tax, land, and other records for Silesia are housed in the Polish State Archives. <www.archiwa.gov.pl/?CIDA=43>. Inquiries can be e-mailed in English, but answers will be in Polish. If you determine the records you seek are indeed held by a particular archive or its branch, then you must have your bank wire money from your account to the archive's account in order to begin research. Your bank will charge a fee to wire the money, adding to the overall cost of obtaining the desired record. My local bank employee had difficulty figuring out which was the routing number and which was the archive's account number. After all, it is not every day a customer comes in wanting to wire money to Poland with instructions for doing so written in Polish. Language, once again, can be a barrier.

Fortunately, there is a searchable database of Polish archival holdings. Its acronym is SEZAM. <<http://baza.archiwa.gov.pl/sezam/sezam.php?l=en>>. When you arrive at this page, all you need to fill in is the "Title of Fond/Name of

Creator" search box. Just enter your ancestral town in either German or Polish. Search results will appear in Polish. Having a Polish dictionary handy is helpful. After selecting a record, be sure to click on "more." This will give you a detailed document list for that record. At the top of the page, the archive where these documents reside is listed. There are two things to be aware of regarding the database: documents can be moved to another location but still appear in the database at the original location, and holdings are not necessarily consecutive. For example, the years 1585–1725 may appear, but there may be gaps in the holdings. A severe flood in Silesian Poland in 1997 caused some damage to and loss of records.

A Visit to Silesia

For great roadmaps with both German and Polish place names, see <www.hoeferverlag.de>. Also, try not to be too disappointed if there are no gravestones marking your ancestors' graves. When the Poles moved in, nearly all the cemeteries were destroyed and sometimes gravestones were used to pave the streets. It is rather rare to find German gravemarkers in Silesia today.

In October 2005, I visited Silesia's main archive in Wrocław (Breslau). I was with my father's fourth cousin, whom I had met online in 2000 as a result of a Google surname search. This was an invaluable breakthrough. Joachim Proske was also interested in family history and he wrote to an archive in Silesia and got a marriage record documenting our relationship. Also, he had visited Silesia in 2003 and was allowed inside the home he had been expelled from when he was a child. It was his mother who heard those words over the loudspeaker, quoted at the beginning of this article.

Joachim invited me to Germany and he and his wife, Karin, took me into Poland. We had made an appointment at the archive well in advance. This can be done either in writing or via e-mail. I did both just for good measure. Due to lingering ill feeling on the part of Poles toward Germans, my cousin said I, as an American, should do the talking when we got to the archive. The archivist, however, spoke only Polish or German. My German was inadequate, so again we faced a barrier. Also, the call slips for requesting material were printed in Polish. Another barrier.

It took a very long time for documents to be retrieved and, once they were, they were just placed on the archivist's desk. By telepathy researchers were supposed to know when their requested documents had arrived. Even with a German cousin who could read the old handwriting and script, I concluded it would take weeks to make headway. I needed to hire a professional.

Finding a Professional

Finding a professional researcher who is both competent and affordable has been a challenge. It is fairly easy to find a firm researching Polish or Jewish roots, but one doing German research in Polish archives is rare. The first firm I selected via the Web required a \$3,000 retainer to be paid in advance. Six collections of records were checked, yielding one breakthrough—a tax record. I was told only two of the projected three days of research were used because one set of records had been moved to a

branch archive. I could apply the remaining \$987.38 to further research.

Because I could not get an answer about the cost of this additional research, I requested a refund of the remainder. I received it several weeks later. I did receive a thirteen-page research report, the gist of which could have been one or two pages, and what appears to be digital photographs of the tax record. I concluded I had probably paid more for the researcher's airfare from Utah to Poland than for the research itself.

I went back to the Web in search of someone more affordable. I found a rather barebones website, but enquired about fees. I was equipped with a list of documents I wanted searched, thanks to the first firm telling me a set of records had been moved and thanks to the SEZAM database. To search three records, this firm would charge \$500 to be paid in two installments—half to begin, half upon completion. Also, a notarized power of attorney form was required. It was sent to me as an e-mail attachment, which I printed, and my credit union notarized for free. The contact person lived in Michigan, but there was also an office in Poland.

Of the three records checked, one

provided a breakthrough—a citizen matriculation record. I received three copies of the record: one as a scanned attachment to an e-mail which I could forward to my cousin in Germany and he could read for me, one as a photocopy in time for an upcoming family reunion, and one with the archive's official stamp. There was no written research report. When I asked about other records which might yield pertinent information, I was given a list of three more. This time the cost would be only \$325. I have sent my \$162 and I am now waiting for results.

Researching my Silesian roots has taught me that knowing German is a big asset, even when my grammar is far from flawless; that knowing Polish would also be helpful; and that having a German cousin to help is invaluable. But I have learned that the main boon for bursting through barriers is unflinching persistence. As Winston Churchill said, "Nevah, nevah, nevah give up."

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