Notes on German Research from Tom O'Brien

Tom O'Brien really had some great research tips and help for German Research. Not only did he provide some great handouts and explanations of those handouts and websites, but he individually worked on and provided information to our members who answered his questionnaire! Including a picture of Anna's Aunt as a little girl in Germany! What a surprise and great personal help for those members. Really got everyone excited about doing further research too.

Tom advised us that with any research there are some common tips:

1. Know the time and place. Knowing the year your ancestor was in a certain place is a must to help you in researching for records. Time and place will tell you what government was in power and where records might be kept. In Germany the borders were constantly changing as towns were ruled by different Kings and Lords, as well as religions.

2. Know the Travel Routes. Most people migrating in and out of the country had common "highways" that they traveled on - could be rivers, could be trains, could be a good dirt road. Look for information on Migration Trail Ways in Europe, Germany or whatever country you are researching. This will help you in finding the home port that they left from, and the records and ship name that might be available in that town.

3. Sign up and use Roots Web. There are groups of people who are researching the same area you are and they share their "where to look" "what new records are now available" help with language and many other thoughts and information. Go to the main page of Roots Web: http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ where you can see all kinds of help links, but go to Message Boards then click on the area of the world you want information on, and from there a list of all the countries in that area pop up. If you click on Central Europe, then Germany, you will be brought to a list of towns/areas in Germany. Click on what you want and you will get to a list of topics and then all the postings people have put on the message board about that topic and area. Read through them to learn, and then post your question or information. Make sure to check back and read other postings as they may lead to answers to your research, indirectly. Or you may find someone in your ancestors town that can help you.

4. Use Google Chrome. Google Chrome is a internet launching pad or web browser just like Internet Explorer, FoxFire, or Mac's Safari. Tom likes it for foreign researching as he gets better results.

5. Use Resources readily available to you and check back often. FamilySearch.org adds 1.1 million new records every day. The LDS Family History Library has more records available than any other source, and they are adding these records to their web site: FamilySearch.org at a high rate and it's free. Use the resource. Not only for records but also How To under the Learn section of the web site. Great videos and articles on how to research for different kinds of records and different countries. If you find a search result at FamilySearch.org and it has a IGI Batch number, use that number to get the record and more information. Batch numbers can include other records and information that is about 99% correct. Also as a side note: FamilySearch just made an agreement with Italy to digitize ALL of their civil records and make them available on their web site. So watch for an influx of Italian records soon.

6. Use Maps. Get maps of the area you are researching and use them to help you see other cities and towns where records may be kept for your ancestors. By looking at current maps using Mapquest or Google Maps you can find and get the name of surrounding towns.

Tom showed a timeline map software program "CENTENNIA". It "is a map-based guide to the history of Europe and the Middle East from the beginning of the 11th century to the present. It is a dynamic, animated historical atlas including over 9,000 border changes. The map controls evolve the map forward or backward in time bringing the static map to life. Our maps display every major war and territorial conflict displaying the status of each region at intervals of a tenth of a year." The downloadable edition of the Centennia Historical Atlas is available at no charge. It covers the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Era from 1789 to 1819. The map data and text for the full period from 1000 AD to the present are already present in the download file and may be opened at any time with an access code. A single-user license access code is priced at $79.00.

7. Use Phone Book Directories. Find the Postal Code for your ancestors town using maps, then go to phone books and look to see who might currently live there. For every ancestor that came to America, there were probably 4 or 5 who stayed back. You probably have distant cousins living back in the same town, or near it, who have more information, access to records or photos of your ancestors. You need to find them and contact them! It's easier than you think and most rewarding.

8. Find the website for your ancestors town. When you Google your ancestors town, follow it with ".de" and you will get the town's website. Each country or language has a ".??" for that specific language. Example Paris.fr will bring up a web site for Paris in French. Paris.jp brings up Paris in Japanese. Most places will only bring up the town site in the native language but you can use Google translate to get the website in English.

9. Use books about the Country. You can find all kinds of books to help you with your research, especially with Time and Place history. The Silverton Library has some and The Abbey Library in Mt. Angel has a great source of both German and Irish books. Tom had many books on German Research. One in particular was The German Research Companion. Which may also be printed for other countries.

10. Check out Geneanet.org http://en.geneanet.org/forum/ Geneanet is a website where family trees are created and posted but more importantly is it's international forums. Go to the main web site and click on the Community Tab and then the Forum link. It will then give you a list of all the different forums currently going. This site is international and in many different languages. You can find out who else is researching the same name as you, or area, and maybe even find someone in the foreign town you want information from, be able to contact that person and ask them to do some leg work for you in your ancestors town.

11. Websites. Tom's handout had a list of useful websites for German research. One of the must use was the Jewish Gen ShtetlSeeker, for town search of ANY German ancestors, not just Jewish.