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VFFOW - Über Grenzen hinweg Wurzeln finden



How to start family research in East and West Prussia?

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Every family research begins in one's own family. Older family members still know a lot about the past. Even if not every piece of information turns out to be correct in retrospect - family members are living sources and must be interviewed. During the interview, one directly notes down the information obtained about the family and ancestors so that it is not forgotten later.

In many drawers and file folders there are still old family documents, such as genealogical books, certificates or wills. These documents need to be saved and evaluated. When searching for old documents, it is not uncommon to come across "Ariernachweise" (Aryan certificates) and "Ahnenpässe" (ancestor passports). With these, several million Germans (including all civil servants and NSDAP party members) had to prove their non-Jewish ancestry during the National Socialist era. Even if the reason for the creation of these documents is directly linked to the persecution of Jews during the "Drittes Reich" (Third Reich), these proofs can be a good starting point for further research. This is especially true for East and West Prussia, because for the creation of the genealogical passports before 1945 it was not uncommon to use documents that no longer exist today or are difficult to access.

If you are sitting on the sofa at your aunt's, grandfather's or second cousin's house anyway and are looking through old papers, then it is advisable to ask for family photos right away. Rarely are they well sorted, labeled or pasted into albums. They should be digitized and labeled so that even in a few years' time, you will still know who is pictured on them. Kinship contacts in East and West Prussia were not infrequently maintained over many generations. It is therefore worthwhile to ask about other relatives and to go in search of them.

In all research in one's own family, it is important to be persistent. Statements such as "We have nothing left. Everything was burned" or "Everything was lost during the flight" often prove to be false. Somehow and somewhere, documents and photos have been saved. You just have to find them.

Data from the period 1874-1945 - registry offices, indexes and databases

At the latest now you have a first impression where in East or West Prussia your younger ancestors lived and what their names were. Ideally, one already knows some life data. Now you can continue your research. If you are looking for data from the time between 1874 and 1945, you have to consult the civil registers of the registry offices. In Prussia the registry offices were established on 1.10.1874. As is still the case today, the registrars documented births, marriages and deaths. Only a few of these records were moved out of East and West Prussia to the West before the end of World War II.

Therefore, most of the originals that were not destroyed towards the end of World War II and in the postwar period are now located in the Polish State Archives in Allenstein/Olsztyn, Gdansk/Gdańsk, Lyck/Ełk, Marienburg/Malbork, Thorn/Toruń or Bromberg/Bydgoszcz (addresses and references at <https://vffow.org/content/forschung/archivinformationen/polnische-archive.html>).

Gradually, the civil status registers are being digitized, so that many can already be viewed via the Polish archive portal www.szukajwarchiwach.gov.pl (with German user interface). Civil status registers that have entered the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany can be found in the Landesarchiv Berlin (http://landesarchivberlin.de/wpcontent/uploads/2017/08/Standesaemt_Ostgebiete.pdf).

Civil status registers from today's Kaliningrad Oblast have been largely destroyed. Some records from the area, together with the records of the Lithuanian Memelland, are in Lithuanian archives or libraries. Anyone researching northern East Prussia cannot avoid the archives in Vilnius/Vilna.

Many documents can be viewed at <https://www.epaveldas.lt/vbspi/simpleSearch.do> (also in English). Of particular importance is the „Archivführer zur Geschichte des Memelgebiets und der deutsch-litauischen Beziehungen“ (Archive Guide to the History of the Memel Region and German-Lithuanian Relations) (https://www.bkge.de/Publikationen/Print/Schriften_des_Bundesinstituts/Band_27.php), which was published in 2006.

In it, the archival records of the Lithuanian archives, which might be of interest to the genealogist, are comprehensively listed. Addresses of archives and libraries can be found on the VFFOW site at <https://vffow.org/content/forschung/archivinformationen/archive-in-litauen.html>. A very helpful website for this is <http://www.maryke-bruiszate.de/>. Here Dr. Witold Peuster has published results of his many years of research. You can find complete transcripts from church records and registry offices of northern East Prussia.

A good starting point for research in southern East Prussia is the Allenstein Indexing Project (<https://namensindex.org/>). Here, volunteers have indexed many of the civil registers already digitized by the Polish state archives. One can search for names and places and ideally even find a scan of the document of one's own ancestor.

A similar service is offered for civil registers, but also for church records of West Prussia by the PomGen file of the Gdansk Pomorskie Towarzystwo Genealogiczne / Association for Genealogical Research in West Prussia (<http://www.ptg.gda.pl>). Research possibilities beyond the borders of East and West Prussia are made possible by the various databases of the Verein für Computergenealogie. They can be used comfortably via a common metasearch (<http://www.genealogynet.de/>). For these as for all other databases applies: Only a fraction of the data and documents has been recorded yet.

If you find something, you are lucky. If you don't find anything, you can continue your search elsewhere.

And before 1874? The church records

Before 1874 in East and West Prussia not state institutions but the churches were responsible for the registration of births, marriages and deaths. At this point at the latest, one should be aware of which religion or denomination one's ancestors belonged to.

In East and West Prussia, most people were either Catholic (especially in West Prussia and in East Prussian Warmia) or Protestant (in all of East Prussia except Warmia and in West Prussia). Jews, Mennonites, Calvinists, Old Believers, and members of other faith communities also lived in the region. References to these religious communities can be found on our association website (<https://vffow.org/>) and in the publications of the Association for Genealogical Research in East and West Prussia.

But where are the Protestant and Catholic church records? The Protestant church records, as far as they were moved to the West of Germany shortly before the end of the war, are stored in the Protestant Central Archive in Berlin. They are now largely digitized and can be used via the Protestant Church Book Portal www.archion.de for a manageable fee. Many church records of Mennonite congregations can also be found here. Original Catholic church records from East and West Prussia can be found in the Polish diocesan archives.

Copies can be used in the Episcopal Central Archives in Regensburg (<https://www.bistum-regensburg.de/fileadmin/redakteur/PDF/Ostkirchenbuecherverzeichnis.pdf>) and for Warmia (Ermland) in the Martin Opitz Library in Herne (<https://martin-opitz-bibliothek.de/de/sammlungen/sondersammlungen/historischer-verein-fur-ermland-ev/ermlaendische-kirchenbuecher>).

For "tolerated religious communities" (e.g. Mennonites, Old Believers) it was valid according to the Prussian Land Law of 1794 that births, marriages and deaths also had to be registered in the church books of the respective parish of the majority denomination.

If one has found the right church book, then one should not assume to find one's ancestors in a few minutes via a register. Registers are the exception rather than the rule. And if they are available, they often contain errors. So it's a matter of looking through page after page in search of your ancestors. Family research is not for those in a hurry.

The "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (also known as "Mormons") provides important help in family research. For religious reasons, the church collects all kinds of personal records and makes them available to everyone, even if you do not belong to the church. From East and West Prussia, the Mormons have film versions and digital copies of numerous Protestant and Catholic church records, but also civil status records of the Jewish communities or archives of state origin. Quite a few church records were already filmed before 1945, so that data from church records that no longer exist today can also be obtained in this way. Unfortunately, the early origin of the films (now digitized) is not always conducive to the quality of the recordings. In addition, the Church of Mormon indexes

documents of all kinds and publishes research results. Therefore, a visit to the site www.familysearch.org is advisable in any case.

Kraupischkehmen? But which parish was responsible?

Before you can look through the church records in your hand or on the screen, there is one more problem to solve. To which parish belonged the village where my ancestors lived? If you search in West Prussia, then the problem is quickly solved - on the excellent page www.westpreussen.de a comprehensive village database is deposited, through which the civil and ecclesiastical affiliations, among other things, can be easily determined.

For East Prussia (but also for West Prussia) one can fall back on the page www.kartenmeister.com, in order to determine the responsibilities of the parishes and registry offices. Important additions are provided by two standard works reprinted by the VFFOW: for the years 1907/1908 the *Gemeindelexikon für Ost- und Westpreußen* (Special Publication 102: <https://vffowbuchverkauf.de/SO-102>) and for the year 1785 Goldbeck's *Topographie für Ostpreußen und Westpreußen* (Special Publication 7: <https://vffowbuchverkauf.de/SO-007/1> and <https://vffowbuchverkauf.de/SO-007/2>).

What does this mean? Learning to read

If one has finally found the right church book, one already has to master a new challenge. Unfortunately, the entries are often difficult to read. Quite obviously the parish priests who kept the church books did not intend to help today's family researchers. So there are beautiful and illegible handwritings, neat entries in tabular form and more or less chaotic notes. Sometimes there are extensive entries, sometimes only short notes with cryptic abbreviations. In East and West Prussia, apart from German, there are entries in Polish, Latin or Lithuanian, depending on the time and region. But one can also prepare for the first encounter with the writings of past centuries. Again, it is the Mormons who offer various handouts on scripture study: <https://script.byu.edu/Pages/choices>. Afterwards you can check your knowledge in an online test: [https://script.byu.edu/Pages/the-german-documents-pages/ge-words-test\(english\)](https://script.byu.edu/Pages/the-german-documents-pages/ge-words-test(english)).

Otherwise, it's: Practice, practice, practice... Hard to decipher are mostly only the first 5 - 10 pages of a handwriting. After that it gets easier. Since there was no obligatory spelling for the family names until the 20th century and these were mostly noted only after the heard, are to be considered with the search in church books and files also always most different spellings. In the Polish or Lithuanian-speaking parts of East and West Prussia, Polish or Lithuanian variants may also appear in baptismal and family names. These should always be taken into account in the search, so as not to overlook any persons searched for.

Laptop and bookshelf: Helpful literature

A lot of important information today can be found in databases. But some books are so helpful that you should have them on your bookshelf. Conveniently, all these books can be ordered from VFFOW for comparatively little money (<https://vffowbuchverkauf.de/>).

Already mentioned were the Gemeindelexikon and Goldbeck's Topographie for researching places in East and West Prussia. In 1938 thousands of places in East Prussia were renamed by the National Socialists because their names did not sound German enough. District towns were also affected. Thus Pillkallen became Schlossberg or Darkehmen Ebenrode. An overview of these "renamings" can be found in Helmut Zipplies: Ortsnamenänderungen in Ostpreußen (QMS 2: <https://vffowbuchverkauf.de/QMS-002-BU>).

The VFFOW has published sources and published so many writings in decades of work that it is hard to keep track of them. Therefore, Erwin Spehr has compiled a bibliography of the association publications for the years 1953 to 2000, in which one can search, for example, by region, occupational group, or individual name (Special Publication 100: <https://vffowbuchverkauf.de/SO-100>). The association publications are also indexed by online registers for family and place names (register.vffow.org).

If you encounter puzzling occupational names in church records, such as fellow "Mitnachbar", "Instmann", or "Wildnisbereiter", you should take a look at the standard work "Was waren unsere Vorfahren? Amts-, Berufs- und Standesbezeichnungen aus Altpreußen" (special issue 18: <https://vffowbuchverkauf.de/SO-018-BU>).

In a way, the "Kartei Quassowski" is a database on paper. The family researcher Hans Wolfgang Quassowski (1890-1968) evaluated numerous printed and unprinted sources, especially on East Prussian families, before and after World War II. His card index was published by the VFFOW in 24 volumes and made accessible by indexes (<https://vffowbuchverkauf.de/navi.php?qs=Kartei+Quassowski&search=>).

For geographic orientation and location of historical place names or also for determining the extent of the parish in which one is doing research, it is helpful to use historical maps. These are now available online for all areas (<https://www.vffow.de/content/forschung/ortssuche-in-ost--und-westpreussen/>). For West Prussia there is even a very recommendable genealogical map (<http://westpreussen.de/pages/uebersicht/ortsverzeichnisse/landkarte-pommern-westpreussen-danzig.php?searchresult=1&sstring=pommern>).

A great help are the online local family books, which have been created in the meantime for several parishes, especially from the northern part of East Prussia. Experienced family researchers compile the data of all families of a place from the church books and often also from other relevant sources. An overview can be found at <https://www.online-ofb.de/>.

Let's go: Tips

Genealogical research only becomes really exciting when you exchange information with others. Experienced researchers who have been researching a county or parish for decades know all the

relevant church records and archives. And they are usually happy to share their extensive knowledge and help beginners. You just have to find these experts. The easiest way is to join an association like the VFFOW (<https://vffow.org/content/ueber-uns/was-wir-bieten/>), contact the regional contacts (<https://vffow.org/content/ueber-uns/regionale-ansprechpartner/allgemeine-hinweise/>), read along in the mailing list and on the Facebook page.

One can also publish a search query in these media oneself. In doing so, it is important to provide as much information as possible about the people being searched for. Requests of the type "I am looking for the Kowalski family in Gdansk" have little chance of success. In an inquiry all already determined names and life data, the denomination of the ancestors as well as references belong, where one already (unsuccessfully or successfully) looked for.

More and more sources are digitized, especially older books can be found more and more often in digital libraries. It is therefore worthwhile to regularly check the relevant pages on the Internet. Caution, on the other hand, is advisable to take over research results of others from the Internet without checking them. Family research always means using first-hand sources as far as possible. For this I wish much success!

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