

## The language barrier can really put a crimp in your German genealogy research. Get help tracing your *Deutsch* ancestors' names and places with these online tools.

BY JAMES M. BEIDLER

🐼 **GERMAN CAN BE** tricky for non-native speakers, and it's easy for words to become lost in translation. This was the case when I was trying to visit an ancestor's hometown: the tiny village of Elsoff, now part of the German *Land* (state) Nordrhein-Westfalen. During my first two trips to Germany, I queried my hosts about going to Elsoff, only to be told it was too far. My map told me different. But not wanting to be the stereotypical "ugly American," I didn't press the issue.

Later, I mentioned Elsoff in an email. Seeing the name in print must have made up for my terrible German accent, because the hostess told me that when I asked about the town, she thought I said *Elsass*, the German name for Alsace, when I was actually trying to say *Elsoff*. Alsace, now part of France, would've indeed been quite a distance from my hosts' home. No better evidence than this has shown me how easily German names and places can become garbled and misunderstood.

That's why it's important to learn about the language your German ancestors spoke. In this excerpt from my new book, *Trace Your German Roots Online*, we'll cover easy-to-use online tools that help you "ungarble" German personal and place names. Some of these resources deal with surnames and phonetics, while others offer map and gazetteer resources. They'll help you find the names of your German-speaking ancestors and the places they lived—the keys you need to dig further back into your family history.

### Sounding it out

Only a foolish person immediately says "But my ancestor's name wasn't spelled that way" when confronted with a record that uses a different spelling from what the researcher is accustomed to. When you consider the many dialects of German used in Europe—and that many American records were created by English-speaking clerks, enumerators or tax collectors—well, that's a recipe for a smorgasbord of place and surname spellings in the records you'll find.

The short course in German phonetics (there's a longer version in *The Family Tree German Genealogy Guide* <[shopfamilytree.com/the-family-tree-german-genealogy-guide-u4833](http://shopfamilytree.com/the-family-tree-german-genealogy-guide-u4833)>) is that several consonants frequently are interchangeable: the *b* and *p*; *d* and *t* and *th*; *g* and *k* and *c*; and (because of pronunciation differences) the German *w* and the English *v*.

For vowels, the number one source of confusion is the German umlaut. An umlaut, generally written as a pair of dots over the vowels *a*, *o*, *u* and *y* (the last usually appearing only in the Swiss German dialect), affects the pronunciation of the vowel. The use of umlauts is a shortcut for putting an *e* after the vowel. You may see a surname or place name Americanized either without the umlaut, or without the umlaut and an *e* added: *Klößner* might become Klockner or Kloeckner. Another German-language peculiarity: A "double *s*" is frequently represented as an *Eszett*, which looks like *ß* and is rendered much like (and often mistaken for) a Roman script uppercase *B*. The surname *Thoss*—*Thoß* in German—might be transcribed as *Thob* or even *Thop*.

Whenever you encounter a new German surname or place-name in your genealogy research, think about it not in terms of the spelling but rather as a set of spelling variants, using phonetics to flesh out the universe of possibilities for the name.

This is especially true for new place names, particularly if you don't immediately find them on a map (or you're unsure whether you've indeed found the right town). Jot down a list of possible spelling variants so you're attuned to all possibilities when searching databases for records or browsing through documents.

For a quick-and-dirty recap of how letters are pronounced in German, use About.com's German Language Web page on the German Phonetic Spelling Code <[www.german.about.com/library/blfunkabc.htm](http://www.german.about.com/library/blfunkabc.htm)>. While this is primarily a code used for spelling out letters for use in broadcasts, it gives the basic sounds that will help you with German in general, too.

The many dialects of German used in Europe create a smorgasbord of place and surname spellings in the records you'll find.

A much more sophisticated online look at German phonetics is part of the University of Portsmouth in England's Paul Joyce German Course. Joyce's Guide to German Pronunciation <[www.joycep.myweb.port.ac.uk/pronounce](http://www.joycep.myweb.port.ac.uk/pronounce)> details how to come up with the most likely pronunciations of various German names. Joyce's guide illustrates pronunciation rules in depth, covering every German letter as well as combinations of letters.

## Getting around language barriers

Websites for German genealogy will essentially fit into one of three categories: written in English, written in German and requiring translation, or written in German with an English version of the site. Combine this with the fact that many of the records you'll be accessing are handwritten or printed in German, and you face a potential linguistic roadblock. You can circumvent this obstacle by improving your German language skills or your skill at finding translation resources.

When confronted with language barriers, translation resources are key. First, try Google's simple Translate feature <[translate.google.com](http://translate.google.com)>, which lets you translate a word, phrase or passage from German to English (or between any of the hundreds of other languages available). Google

Translate, however, gives translations that are rough at times and fail to account for many contexts. You may want to double-check Google's translation on other translation websites such as BabelFish <[www.babelfish.com](http://www.babelfish.com)>. Online German-English dictionaries, such as BEOLINGUS <[dict.tu-chemnitz.de](http://dict.tu-chemnitz.de)>, Dict.cc <[www.dict.cc](http://www.dict.cc)> and Linguee <[www.linguee.com](http://www.linguee.com)> also can provide valuable translations for words you'll likely find during research.

If you'd rather take translation matters into your own hands, the web offers a variety of services to teach yourself German. Some of these apps, podcasts, articles, courses and sites include:

■ **DEUTSCHE WELLE** <[www.dw.de/learn-german/s-2469](http://www.dw.de/learn-german/s-2469)>, free online course as well as a free podcast called the Audio-trainer <[www.dw.de/learn-german/audiotrainer/s-9677](http://www.dw.de/learn-german/audiotrainer/s-9677)>

■ **DUOLINGO** <[www.duolingo.com](http://www.duolingo.com)>, free iOS and Android app

■ **LANGUAGE SURFER: HOW TO PASS THE GERMAN A1 TEST** <[www.languagesurfer.com/2013/08/19/how-to-pass-the-german-a1-test](http://www.languagesurfer.com/2013/08/19/how-to-pass-the-german-a1-test)>, free website

■ **LEARN GERMAN BY PODCAST** <[www.learngermanbypodcast.com](http://www.learngermanbypodcast.com)>, free podcast

■ **MANGO LANGUAGES** <[www.mangolanguages.com](http://www.mangolanguages.com)>, free iOS and Android app

■ **MINDSNACKS** <[www.mindsnacks.com](http://www.mindsnacks.com)>, \$4.99 iOS app

■ **NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR GENEALOGICAL STUDIES** <[www.genealogicalstudies.com](http://www.genealogicalstudies.com)>, \$89 online course

■ **SLOW GERMAN** <[www.slowgerman.com/category/absolute-beginner](http://www.slowgerman.com/category/absolute-beginner)>, free podcast

■ **SURVIVALPHRASES.COM: GERMAN** <[www.survivalphrases.com/german](http://www.survivalphrases.com/german)>, free website

## Surfing for surnames

In addition to trying out phonetic variants of surnames, some online tools let you get an idea of where those surnames are found in today's Germany. While there's no guarantee that the highest concentrations of a surname in modern Germany will be an exact match of those names' historical concentrations, these databases do give you a starting point for a geographic hypothesis on your family origins when other records haven't borne fruit.

One such website is Ken McCrea's GermanNames <[www.germannames.com](http://www.germannames.com)>, which charges nominal fees for maps and German postal code listings of surnames. A book of surname maps for the 500 most frequent surnames also is available from the same author.

Another tool, the Geogen Surname Mapping site <[legacy.stoepel.net](http://legacy.stoepel.net)> (shown on the opposite page), generates three types of data on surnames:

■ **RELATIVE DISTRIBUTION:** gives the number of instances of the surname per million phone book entries, which adjusts for the potential of a lot of instances of a surname purely because of an area's population

## MORE ONLINE

### @ Free Web Content

■ Glossary of German genealogical words <[familytreemagazine.com/article/german-glossary](http://familytreemagazine.com/article/german-glossary)>

■ Common German names <[familytreemagazine.com/article/common-german-names](http://familytreemagazine.com/article/common-german-names)>

■ Understanding German language and surnames <[familytreemagazine.com/article/understanding-german-language-and-surnames](http://familytreemagazine.com/article/understanding-german-language-and-surnames)>

### + For Plus Members

■ Deutsch Lands: Guide to historically German regions <[familytreemagazine.com/article/deutsch-lands](http://familytreemagazine.com/article/deutsch-lands)>

■ Quick Guide: Finding Germans in FamilySearch.org's IGI <[familytreemagazine.com/article/finding-germans-in-familysearch-igi](http://familytreemagazine.com/article/finding-germans-in-familysearch-igi)>

■ Surname spelling lesson <[familytreemagazine.com/article/spelling-lesson](http://familytreemagazine.com/article/spelling-lesson)>

### \$ ShopFamilyTree.com

■ Trace Your German Roots Online <[shopfamilytree.com/trace-your-german-roots-online](http://shopfamilytree.com/trace-your-german-roots-online)>

■ The Family Tree German Genealogy Guide <[shopfamilytree.com/the-family-tree-german-genealogy-guide-u4833](http://shopfamilytree.com/the-family-tree-german-genealogy-guide-u4833)>

■ German Genealogy Cheat Sheet <[shopfamilytree.com/digd-german-genealogy-cheat-sheet](http://shopfamilytree.com/digd-german-genealogy-cheat-sheet)>



Surname Map (1205)

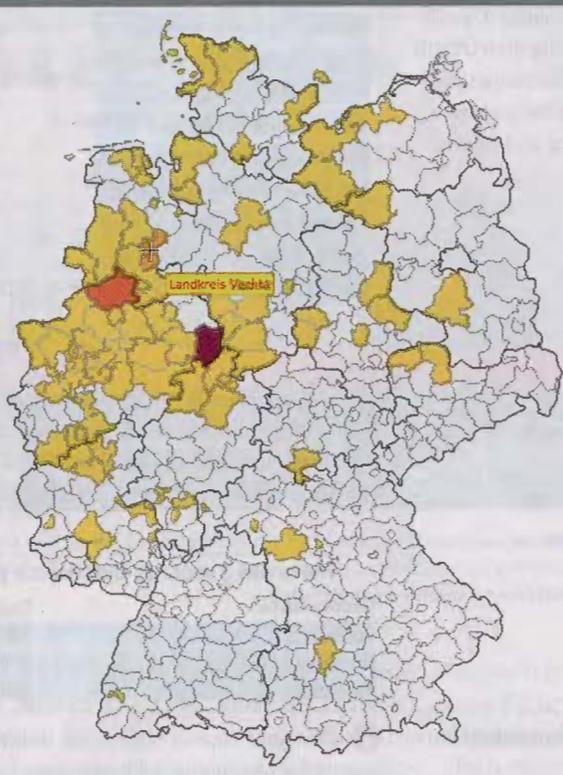


Summary  
I found 1  
occurrence

Relative Distribution for Dierkes  
Considering the population  
Kreisfreie Stadt München.

Absolute Map for Dierkes  
Most Dierkes can be found  
agglomerations can influence

Sorted by federal states  
This is a diagram for all pho  
in this calculation).



Relative Distribution

- less than 10 entries per million
- up to 200 entries per million
- up to 400 entries per million
- up to 600 entries per million
- up to 800 entries per million
- more than 800 entries per million

- Dierkes -  
Created by Geogen 3.0 (November  
Sum of all entries: 1205

[erweiterte Einstellungen im lokalen Geogen-Client]

The Geogen website <[legacy.stoepel.net](http://legacy.stoepel.net)> produces maps showing the distribution of surnames in Germany. Roll over a county (*Landkreis*) to see its name. According to this map, the surname Dierkes is most highly concentrated in Vechta, Steinfurt and Höxter.

■ **ABSOLUTE DISTRIBUTION:** puts the actual numbers of entries into groups

■ **PIE CHART:** shows the percentages in which the surname is found in current German states

To begin searching Geogen, call up the site and type the surname you're interested in into the box (for example, *Rathmacher*). After the site processes, click on the links under the Surname Map tab to generate the maps and a pie chart. The Community tab shows notes left by other searchers, if any. Select the Links tab to see a number of potential spelling variants and the number of entries for each. In addition, this tab offers maps of the surname in other European countries and the United States, as well as other web links. Note that the site may not work in all web browsers. If you have difficulty using it, try another browser.

**Mapping it out**

Because of the many changes to political divisions in German lands, you must always think about your ancestors' hometown not only in terms of where places and boundaries are now, but also in terms of "then"—with "then" possibly referring to multiple time periods. A number of websites will help

you bridge this gap between today and yesterday, hopefully leaving you with no town unfound. Some have actual maps; others are gazetteers (essentially, encyclopedias of places).

A good tool is *Meyers Gazetteer of the German Empire*, which is also called *Meyers Orts- und Verkehrs-Lexikon des Deutschen Reichs* and is searchable on Ancestry.com <[search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1074](http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1074)>. Compiled in 1912, this resource lists the type of place (town, community, etc.), state, population and more for parts of Germany lost to neighboring countries after World War I. It's in German gothic script and contains abbreviations; Ancestry.com's database information and the



**TIP:** The many dialects of German could lead to transcription errors or spelling variations in records both foreign and domestic. See <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_dialects](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_dialects)> for more on the local varieties of German.

## Plotting Your Ancestor's Village With Kartenmeister

Once you find the name of your German ancestor's hometown, you'll want to pinpoint the location so you can start researching church and other historical records in the right city or village. The Kartenmeister website helps you locate more than 71,000 places in what was once eastern Prussia (this includes areas that are now Poland and Russia). Follow our example to get started with Kartenmeister:

**Kartenmeister**  
[\[Home\]](#) [\[English\]](#) [\[Deutsch\]](#) [\[Polska\]](#) [\[Dictionary\]](#) [\[Latin-German-English\]](#) [\[Lithuanian-German-English\]](#)  
[\[Settlements\]](#) [\[Historic Background\]](#) [\[Kolonist\]](#) [\[Measurements\]](#) [\[Border Changes\]](#) [\[Laws\]](#)  
[\[The Social Fabric\]](#) [\[Miscellanea\]](#) [\[Database\]](#) [\[Entfernungsberechner - Distance Calculator\]](#)  
[\[Umgebungssuche - Proximity Search\]](#) [\[Maps\]](#) [\[J.G.Knie\]](#)  
 Medicine Hat Wetter/Weather  
 Since March 31, 2001  
**2302407**  
 Visitors/Besucher  
[Check Out Our New Map Images Page!](#)

1 Go to the Kartenmeister home page at [www.kartenmeister.com](http://www.kartenmeister.com).

German City Name/Ortsname:	Niederung
Polish City Name/Ortsname:	
County/Kreis:	
German Province/Provinz:	
Polish Province/Provinz:	
Closest German City/Ort:	
Closest Polish City/Ort:	
Family Name:	
How Many Results Per Page?:	<input checked="" type="radio"/> 10 <input type="radio"/> 20 <input type="radio"/> 50 <input type="radio"/> 100
<input type="button" value="Submit"/> <input type="button" value="Reset"/>	

2 Scroll to the bottom of the page to find the search boxes and enter a family name or a German or Polish city, county or province in the appropriate field. We'll type *Niederung* in the box for German City Name/Ortsname. Hit Submit.

**There are 3 records that match your search criteria.**

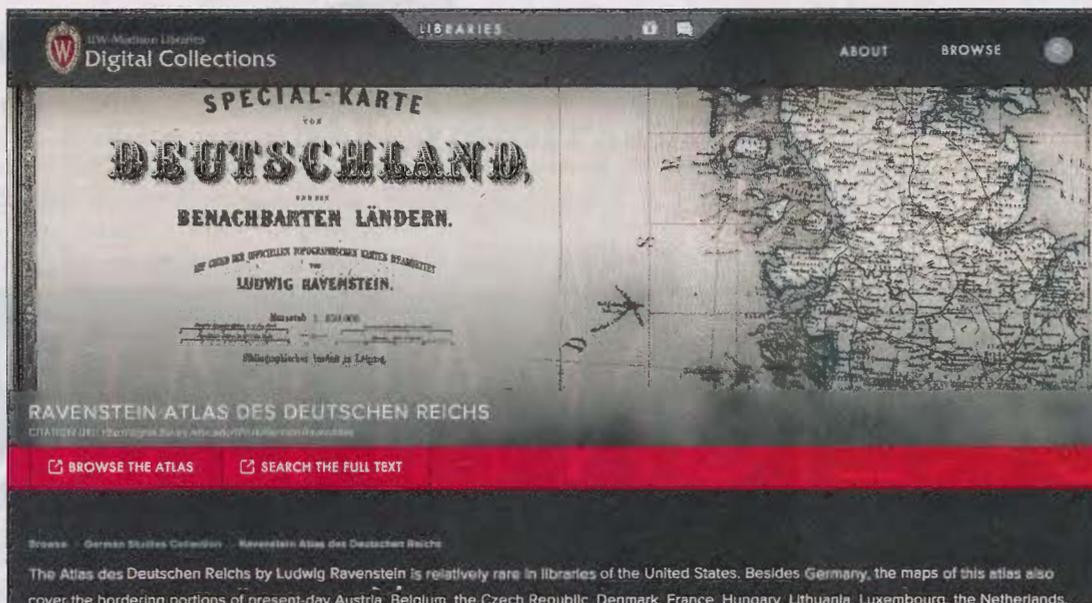
German Name	County/Kreis
<a href="#">Niederung</a>	Schlochau
<a href="#">Niederung</a>	Schlochau
<a href="#">Niederung</a>	Schlochau

3 View your search results. Kartenmeister returns three results for *Niederung*, all in the Kreis (county) of Schlochau.

<b>German Name</b>	Niederung
<b>Polish/Russian Name</b>	Zdrojki
<b>Kreis/County</b>	Schlochau
<b>German Province</b>	Westpreussen
<b>Today's Province</b>	Pomorskie
<b>Location</b>	East 17°14' North 53°47'
<b>Google Map</b>	<a href="#">Google Maps (Niederung)</a>
<b>Map Number</b>	25
<b>Location Description</b>	This village/town is located 1.2 km and 225 degrees from Prechlau, which is known today as Przechlewo
<b>Lutheran Parish</b>	Prechlau 1905
<b>Catholic Parish</b>	Prechlau 1905
<b>Standesamt/Civil Registry</b>	Prechlau 1905
<b>Gemeindelexikon/Town Index</b>	II-23-66
<b>Population By Year/Einwohner</b>	1905: 148

4 Click on a result to bring up a grid with information about the town. The first *Niederung's* Polish/Russian name is *Zdrojki* and it was in the German province Westpreussen. Today, it's in the province of Pomorskie (the Polish *voivodeship* of Pomerania). The Catholic and Lutheran parishes were in Prechlau. Clicking the map link shows you where the town is (or was) located.

For more details on Kartenmeister and the information it provides, go to the home page and click the link for English. Under *Border Changes*, you'll find an overview of how German borders changed after the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I.



Find even tiny towns and villages in the 1883 *Atlas des Deutschen Reichs* (*Atlas of the German Kingdom*), known as Ravenstein's Atlas. It's digitized and searchable on the University of Wisconsin website <[uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/German/Ravenstein](http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/German/Ravenstein)>.

abbreviation table at <[www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Abbreviation\\_Table\\_for\\_Meyers\\_Orts\\_und\\_Verkehrs\\_Lexikon\\_Des\\_Deutschen\\_Reichs](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Abbreviation_Table_for_Meyers_Orts_und_Verkehrs_Lexikon_Des_Deutschen_Reichs)> can help you use it. It provides the map coordinates, jurisdictional information, foreign or former names and other details about the towns, parishes and other places you search for.

But as far as historical maps go, among the most-detailed and accessible is *Atlas des Deutschen Reichs* (*Atlas of the German Kingdom*) by Ludwig Ravenstein, published in 1883. The University of Wisconsin digitized this atlas, made it searchable and posted it online at <[uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/German/Ravenstein](http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/German/Ravenstein)>. Once you find a village in Ravenstein's atlas, you can compare the area to a modern-day map.

To use the Ravenstein atlas, go to the home page for the atlas on the University of Wisconsin's website. You'll likely want to begin using the atlas by keyword searching, so click on Search the Full Text. In the search box, enter the name of your ancestors' village. By default, the site will search for that term in all titles in the university's German Studies Collection. Instead, narrow your search to the Ravenstein Atlas by using the pull-down menu to select *Atlas des Deutschen Reichs*. Then view your results, which are organized by the section of the atlas where they appear (for example, I entered *Sprendlingen* and received two entries). Then access the pages from the PDF link at the top of the results page.

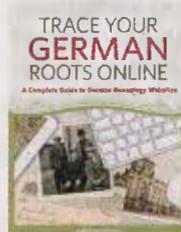
If you can't find information on your town (or you want to manually browse the atlas' pages), return to the atlas' home page and click Browse the Atlas. On the resulting browse page, choose one of the sections of the map, labeled *Ia* (northwest Germany) through *Ix* (southeast). Then click the thumbnail

image to load a PDF of the map in your browser (or right-click on a PC or control-click on a Mac to download the file). You can zoom in and out and pan around to find the town. Note the names of nearby towns and the state or province.

Another site worth mentioning is Kartenmeister, a comprehensive database for villages in the former eastern Prussian areas, which now lie mostly in Poland. See the sidebar on the opposite page for more on using this site.

For maps of modern Germany, you can try using Google Maps <[maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com)>, although there's a caveat: Even if the name you type applies to multiple towns, the engine will find one village with that name while ignoring the others. A workaround is to search for neighboring villages instead, if you know any. The German National Tourist Board <[www.germany.travel/en/index.html](http://www.germany.travel/en/index.html)> has a variety of maps among its arsenal of resources. But the best online modern-day maps are served up at ViaMichelin <[www.viamichelin.com](http://www.viamichelin.com)>.

With all these language and geography resources, you probably feel like a race car driver waiting for the green flag to take off. Understanding some basics about your ancestors' language and hometown is the first step in journeying to the old country. So, *Damen und Herren*: Start your engines. ■



**JAMES M. BEIDLER** is the author of the "Roots and Branches" syndicated genealogy column, as well as *The Family Tree German Genealogy Guide* and *Trace Your German Roots Online* (from which this article is excerpted). Order your copy of either book at <[shopfamilytree.com](http://shopfamilytree.com)>.