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Writing to Archives in Germany, France, and Poland

As is the case with all genealogical research in Germany, researchers need to know how to correctly and efficiently formulate letters and emails to staff members in archives on all levels of jurisdiction—public and private. In the case of census records, the archives will be entities of the governments of towns, counties, provinces, and states (depending upon the organization of archives in each of the modern states of the Federal Republic of Germany).

Conclusions may be drawn from the correspondence campaign carried out in preparation for the current book. More than one thousand letters and emails were sent and perhaps one-half of those received a response. The best responses came from city archives, while responses from archives at higher levels were progressively less satisfying. The author agrees with Gehrman's conclusion, "In general, [census records] are kept in local archives, and the central archives—and there is often more than one in each federal state—are not always informed of their existence. More research must be done in this field."¹ This book represents such research.

You should send the first communication to the lowest possible level of archive jurisdiction. The higher one goes in the system, the less likely a positive response will be received.

External and internal German borders have undergone a great number of changes since 1916—the end of this investigation. Before writing to an archive, the researcher must determine the current geopolitical situation of the town in question. For example, the states of Lippe (Detmold), Schaumburg-Lippe, Oldenburg, and Waldeck (to name only a few) have totally disappeared from the map, having been subsumed by larger modern states formed following World War II.

The entire principality of Lippe (Detmold) is now situated within the borders of the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen. Recent inquiries to Lippe towns were

forwarded to regional archives in the cities of Detmold and Minden. And the list goes on.

The first task is to determine the county and state of the target town during the years of the German Empire (1871–1918). The primary tool for that search is *Meyers Orts und Verkehrsverzeichnis des Deutschen Reichs* [Meyer's Commerce Directory for the German Empire].² Access to this key resource is possible through various leading genealogical websites. Once the location of the town has been identified, other websites will establish the current county and state of that town. Wikipedia will usually provide such details.

The next step is to locate the address of the town archive in question. The finest tool for this task is the Internet. To begin, use the German pattern to locate the official website of that town: [www.\[townname\].de](http://www.[townname].de). For example, www.fulda.de and www.darmstadt.de will quickly take you to the official city websites of Fulda and Darmstadt.

Unfortunately, there is no common organization for city websites in Germany. Some have excellent organizational trees that will guide you to the archive's address (*Archiv* is a convenient cognate) and even provide the names of staff members. Other websites seem to disregard the existence of a town archive.

In searching for the town's archive, it will help to know these terms:

Gemeinde: city, town, community

Verwaltung(en): administration

Bürgerservice: services to residents

Ämter: offices

Personal: personnel

Kommunal: public

Öffentlich: public

Mitarbeiter: colleagues, employees

Bürgermeister: mayor

Some websites have a translation option to render the text in English.

Efficient searching or good luck or both will lead you to the archive and even the archivist. Take careful note of the name and email address of the director. If your best efforts do not lead to the discovery of the archive, you may write to the office of the mayor or the director of personnel and ask to have the message forwarded to the archive. (For regular letters, see additional instructions below.) A good default email address is `info@[town name].de` as in `info@darmstadt.de`.

The next step is to compile a message that is short and precise. You don't need to indicate the reason for your search for census documents, just give the name(s) of the person(s) in question, any genealogical data you have for that person, and—above all—the best information you have about where that person lived. Indicate in what medium you prefer to receive the documents (as photocopies or as scans), and that you are willing to pay for the service. Provide both your regular mailing address and an email address to facilitate a timely response.

For many reasons, this communication should be done in German. There are now many Internet websites that offer translation services at no fee (often limiting the text to 150 words), but some of them are not very accurate. If you use a website translation, have a qualified writer of German check out the text for mistakes that only a computerized dictionary can make. (You will often find such mistakes in the English versions of German websites—some are humorous while others inhibit communication.) The table below provides several phrases that can be used to construct your message.

While it is possible that you will receive the documents as scans without an invoice, plan on paying for the research and the copies that represent a positive response. Many archivists will not charge if they spend only a small amount of time and find nothing. Others will indicate in advance that you will owe a minimum fee (specified) even if their search is fruitless. Others will do the work and indicate that they will send the documents as soon as you have paid the invoice; this practice does not involve any risk on your part.

Waiting for a response can at times be difficult. Archivists are often overworked and understaffed. You should wait at least two weeks before sending another

email. Ask for confirmation of receipt of your inquiry and keep a careful record of correspondence, including the date you sent the inquiry, the addressee, and the information requested.

Few American researchers have bank accounts in Germany, so most will need to find a way to obtain a bank check in Euro. Again, the Internet features several websites where such checks can be purchased. Remember that your personal check cannot be used in Germany. If you choose to send a bank check in dollars, add at least ten percent to the required amount to cover the conversion fee the archivist will have to pay when cashing the check at the city's German bank. If you pay by bank transfer, you will need two codes from the archive: the IBAN and the BIC. Both will be shown on their stationery. If not, you need to request those in another email.

Pay any required fee without delay; you or others will be writing to that archive again and a good relationship is most important.

Acknowledge any response from an archive with a short email. The archivists will want to know that you received the message and any documents they sent, and that attached images can be read.

If writing a letter for air mail delivery to Germany, be sure that you use the correct mailing address for the archive, including the five-digit postal code that precedes the name of the city. Check the U.S. Postal website for current air mail rates. Your letter should consist of only one page and will thus cost the minimum for international air mail.

If you receive copies of important documents and choose to publish them in articles or books, you should be aware that essentially even the smallest archive requires that you request permission before doing so. Some will want a copy of your publication while others only copies of the pages where their documents appear. Some archivists will give permission up front to use the documents without restriction, but the best approach is to have written permission in every case (which was a true challenge in the writing of this book). Of course, there is little chance that your publications will land on the desk of an archivist in a small German town and any fraudulent use thereof be discovered, so this is a matter of an author's integrity. Finally, be sure to request the official citation for any document used as an image or to which you refer in your text.

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|---|--|
| Dear Sir [archivist, mayor, etc.] | <i>Sehr geehrter Herr [Archivar, Bürgermeister, etc.]</i> |
| Dear Madam | <i>Sehr geehrte Frau [Archivarin, etc.]</i> |
| Dear Director . | <i>Sehr geehrte Frau Direktorin, Sehr geehrter Herr Direktor</i> |
| I am looking for census documents | <i>Ich bin auf der Suche nach Volkszählungsurkunden ...</i> |
| ... for the year [1843 etc.] | <i>... aus dem Jahre [1843 etc.]</i> |
| ... for the years [1834 to 1846.] | <i>... aus den Jahren [1834 bis 1846]</i> |
| The person I am looking for was... | <i>Die gesuchte Person hieß ...*</i> |
| The people I am looking for were ... | <i>Die gesuchten Personen hießen...</i> |
| They lived in the town of [name] | <i>Sie wohnten in der Ortschaft [name]**</i> |
| They lived in the county of [name] | <i>Sie wohnten im Kreis [name]</i> |
| I would like photocopies of any documents you find regarding this person. | <i>Ich hätte gern Fotokopien von allen Urkunden, die Sie bezüglich dieser Person finden.</i> |
| I would like scans if possible of any documents you find regarding this person. | <i>Ich hätte gern Scans (wenn möglich) von allen Urkunden, die Sie bezüglich dieser Person finden.</i> |
| I will be pleased to pay the usual fee for photocopies and/or scans and/or postage. | <i>Ich bin gern bereit, die anfallenden Gebühren für Fotokopien und/oder Scans und/oder Porto zu begleichen.</i> |
| I can send you a bank check in Euro as payment. | <i>Ich kann Ihnen einen Bankscheck in Euro schicken.</i> |
| My bank can transfer the money to your account. | <i>Meine Bank kann den Betrag direkt auf Ihr Konto überweisen.</i> |
| Please provide your IBAN and BIC. | <i>Teilen Sie mir bitte Ihren IBAN und BIC mit.</i> |
| Thank you for your kind assistance. | <i>Vielen Dank für die freundliche Hilfe.</i> |
| With best regards, | <i>Mit freundlichen Grüßen,</i> |
| Did you receive my inquiry of May 15? | <i>Haben Sie meine Anfrage vom 15. Mai bekommen?</i> |
| I am still very interested in this information. | <i>Ich bin immer noch sehr an diesen Informationen interessiert.</i> |
| I hope you will find time soon to help me. | <i>Ich würde mich freuen, wenn Sie mir schon bald weiterhelfen könnten.</i> |

*Word processing programs have fonts that include ß (double s) and Umlaut characters (ä ö ü Ä Ö Ü), as well as the Euro symbol €.

** Use only the German spellings of place names (not Munich for *München* or Cologne for *Köln*).

A simple request might look like this:

Dear Director,

I am looking for census records of the years 1852 to 1864. The person I am looking for is Adam Henrich Meinert. He lived in Jeggen in Osnabrück County. I would like photocopies of any documents you find regarding this person. I will be pleased to pay the usual fee for photocopies and postage. I can send you a bank check in Euro as payment. Thank you for your kind assistance.

With best regards,
Melanie Minert Bell
[Complete mailing address]

The German version reads (in just 68 words):

Sehr geehrte Frau Archivarin,

Ich suche Volkszählungsurkunden aus den Jahren 1852 bis 1864. Der gesuchte Mann hieß Adam Henrich Meinert. Er wohnte in Jeggen, Kreis Osnabrück. Ich möchte Fotokopien von allen Urkunden, die Sie bezüglich dieser Person finden. Ich bin gern bereit, die anfallenden Gebühren für Fotokopien und Porto zu begleichen. Meine Bank kann den Betrag unmittelbar an Ihr Konto überweisen. Vielen Dank für die freundliche Hilfe.

*Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Melanie Bell geb. Minert
[Complete mailing address]*

Writing to Archives in France

In writing to archives in France (for a location in Germany before 1918), you may use the following version of the above letter and replace the underlined names of persons and places as appropriate:

A l'attention de l'archiviste:

Monsieur,

J'effectue des recherches concernant les recensements allemands, de 1852 à 1864.

La personne que je recherche s'appelait Franz Josef Kurscheid.

Il vivait à Bitschweiler dans le district d'Weissenburg.

Vous serait-il possible de me fournir des photocopies de tous les documents que vous puissiez trouver concernant cette personne.

Je suis prêt à payer les frais de photocopies et d'affranchissement. Ma banque peut également transférer le montant directement sur votre compte.

Je vous remercie pour votre aide.

Cordialement

Avec mes sincères salutations

Payments to French archives will be requested in Euro.

Writing to Archives in Poland

If you need to write to an archive in Poland (for a location in Germany before 1945), you may use the following message with your specific persons and places:²

Szanowni Państwo,

Poszukuję dokumentów ewidencji ludności stałej, dotyczących pana Friedricha Karla Kujauda z lat 1852–1864. Pan Kujaud zamieszkiwał w Wylatkowie, gmina Witkowo. Jeżeli znajdują się u państwa owe dokumenty, prosilibym o kopię wszystkich Akt dotyczących tej osoby.

Jestem gotowy uiścić opłatę za pańską pracę, fotokopie i przesyłkę według cennika Archiwum w formie bezpośredniego Przelewu na podane przez pana konto.

Z poważaniem

Payments to Polish archives might be requested in dollars or *Zloty*. Pay precisely as requested. Use the conversion and payment methods described above for German remittances. Response times from archives in Poland tend to be a bit longer than from Germany.

Addressing Envelopes (examples)

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Stadtarchiv Darmstadt | [all terms and titles in native language] |
| Karolinenplatz 3 | [house number follows street name] |
| 64289 Darmstadt | [postal code precedes city name] |
| Germany | [country of destination in English] |

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Archiv de Wissembourg | |
| 11 place de la République | [not all proper nouns like <i>place</i> |
| 67160 Wissembourg | are capitalized in French] |
| France | |

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Archiwum Państwowe we Wrocławiu | [city name is declined for grammatical case] |
|---------------------------------|--|

| | |
|----------------|--|
| ul. Pomorska 2 | [<i>ul.</i> = <i>ulica</i> = street and is not capitalized] |
|----------------|--|

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|-----------------|--|
| 50- 215 Wrocław | [do not use the German name = Breslau] |
| Poland | |

Notes

- ¹ Gehrman, Rolf. "German Census-Taking Before 1871," Restock, Germany: Max-Planck-Institut für demografische Forschung, 2009, 17.
- ² Gazetteers are also available for each German state of the Empire period, but they are often difficult to locate. Internet searches will likely bring good results in some cases.
- ³ The author expresses appreciation to Magdalena K. Zajak for her kind assistance in the translation of communications from and to archives in Poland.