

The Genealogical “Hail Mary!” Search

Leland Meitzler looks at German surname distribution maps for locating where your family may have lived

The greatest issue for those with Germanic origins is often locating the name of the place where their ancestors lived. Once found, genealogists can often surge ahead in their project, locating the parish, civil, newspaper, and other records of their ancestors and even finding cousins living in Europe today.

However, far too often the place of origin remains elusive. Even if every available source has been searched, in some cases, a piece of paper with the exact name of the family’s hometown might never be found. Documents that list the German state, like Bayern (Bavaria), are just not specific enough. This leads us to what I call the “Hail Mary” (to use a prayer and football analogy) of genealogical searches — using online German surname maps to find the locations in the homeland where cousins still reside today.

If you can’t find any place of origin for your German ancestor, you might try using current surname distribution maps to see where your surname is found in Germany. These maps have traditionally been based upon phonebook listings, so in most cases, the numbers are for adults, as children historically don’t have phones. Based on surname distribution maps, I’ve found that the majority of Meitzlers in Germany still live within 50 or 60 miles of where my great grandfather was born in 1820. If your name is uncommon, this approach might narrow your search for where your people came from. There are a number of surname distribution map sites online that include Germany. Following are three common ones: two are free, and the other, subscription-based, is located at Ancestry.de.

GEOPEN SURNAME MAPPING

Free

<http://geopen.stoepel.net>

This free website has changed a lot over the last decade. Lucky for us, the owner of the site has kept his older maps and the statistics generator online as “legacy” products. Produced by Christoph Stoepel, the site is now very interactive, and visual. When you first open the home page, you see two maps. The map in the center shows in visual form where the Stoepel families live in present-day Germany. The user can zoom in and out on the outline map by moving their mouse roller. Little columns are scattered about the map — with the taller ones representing where larger numbers of folks by the Stoepel surname live. According to the stats found on the right-hand side of the page,

214 hits were found for Stoepels living in 114 places. The word “clusters” (in place of places) is used here. The most Stoepels in any one place (or peak value) is 13. When I last looked, the name had been accessed 1,895 times, with the last being in the 14 days previous to writing this article. And statistically, the name ranked 18,925 — definitely not a popular surname. By looking at the map, you can quickly see where the Stoepels live today. By holding down your left mouse button, you can manipulate the 3-D map, and view it from any direction. At the bottom of the stats on the right of the page is the word name>, written in blue. Enter any surname to the right of name> and get the

Geogen 4.0

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name> Stoepel
ok: rendered 214 hits into 114 clusters
    peak value is 13
hint: use left mouse button to rotate view
stat: name accessed 1895 times
    prev 19 days ago
ok: phonetic code XTPL
ok: rank 18928
name> |

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Geogen © 2005-2015 Christoph Stoepel

The home page of the geogen.stoepel.net website (Courtesy Christoph Stoepel)

map and stats for that name.

On the left hand side of the screen is another smaller outline map. Click on it, and that map takes center screen. The various districts in Germany are outlined, and shaded. The shading is reflective of how many listings of people by a surname are in each area. By hovering over a district, you can find the place name, as well as the number of listings for that surname in the place. Two stats are available – an absolute number and relative number. The absolute number is the one most of us are looking for. This tells us how many listings were found, and not a statistic. To see an

older map and stats, check out <http://legacy.stoepel.net/en/Default.aspx> that is in English, and compiles complete sentences about a surname, based on earlier data. Again, absolute and relative maps may be viewed by clicking on the links.

On the right of the home screen is found a web or starburst showing surname variations for that particular name. Click on the illustration, and it enlarges and expands. This is useful, in that the researcher will know what other surname spellings to watch out for. If you wish to see earlier versions of the program, navigate to <http://christoph.stoepel.net/ViewSoftware.aspx?id=0200>.

ANCESTRY.DE NAMENSFORSCHUNG

\$ - Subscription Service

www.ancestry.de/learn/learningcenters/facts.aspx

First, you'll need a World Explorer subscription to Ancestry.com, or a subscription to the German Ancestry.de. Go to <http://home.ancestry.de> and log in using your Ancestry username and password. Once you've logged in to the German website, navigate to www.ancestry.de/learn/learningcenters/facts.aspx by pasting or typing this address into your browser. This will take you directly to the Namensforschung search site in Ancestry.de's

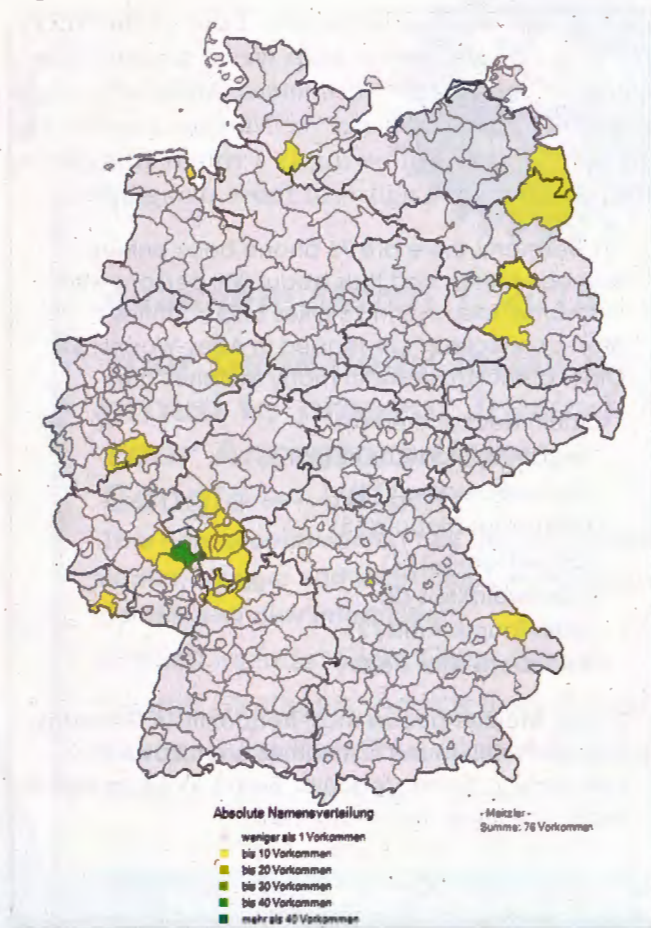
Infocenter. Enter your Familienname (Surname). Click Start. A few paragraphs of information about how your surname is distributed throughout Germany will come up (written in German of course!), followed by a surname distribution map. If your German language reading skills aren't great, copy and paste the paragraphs into the left-hand box at <http://translate.google.com> and read all about it. As an example for this article, I searched on the name

Meitzler. A rough translation of the paragraphs from German to English is as follows:

"The name Meitzler occurs a total of 76 times in 24 rural districts. There are an estimated 202 people with this last name. This is below the average for all German family names. There is insufficient statistical data for this name. The results may not be useful. The name is 47,057 of the most common names. Most people with the surname Meitzler were found in Alzey-Worms district; the name occurred 38 times in the phone book. Very few people live in Hochtaunuskreis with one phone book entry. To download the map, with the right mouse button, click an empty area on the map and select "Save image as..." Source: The distribution of the name is based on approximately 35 million phone participants in Germany from 2002."

It's interesting to note that the distance from Alzey-Worms to Hochtaunuskreis is only about 56 miles, and it's far-flung as compared to most of the adjacent Meitzler living places. Eleven of the kreis immediately scattered around the Alzey-Worms area today had at least a few Meitzlers living in them in 2002. Where did my Charles Meitzler emigrate from? The Alzey-Worms area (specifically Kriegsfeld), where the original records can still be located today.

The outline map is colorized with shades running from a light grey to pink to yellow to several darkening shades of green, dependent on the number of entries for a surname found in that kreis, or "district or county" as we would call it in



The Meitzler surname mapped at the ancestry.de Namensforschung. (Ancestry.de)

North America. Hover your cursor over any district, and get its name.

VERWANDT.DE GERMAN SURNAME MAPS

Free

www.verwandf.de/karten

The Verwandt site was purchased by MyHeritage.com in 2010, and a portion of the surname mapping section continues to be supported. This website gives more detailed information about the families and where they live than those found at the other two previously mentioned sites. Here you will find surname distribution maps for three countries: Germany, Switzerland, and Poland. The drop-down menu also lists Argentina, France, Great Britain, Canada, Netherlands, Austria, Spain and the United States. However, when you choose any of these countries on the menu, and enter a name and search, you will shortly get a 502 Bad Gateway message. The German map is the default, but the user can successfully select either of the

other two countries by using the drop-down menu.

The first thing you see at the top of the screen is the search box saying Karten zum Namen (Maps to Name). You may enter a surname here and choose a different country if you like. Click on Suchen (Search). This will take you to a new screen where a colorful outline map is found, again with colors ranging from white to green to yellow to orange to brown to red. The white districts have no families listed with the surname (weniger als 1) darkening to red shaded areas having more than 60 (mehr als 60).

I entered the surname of Meitzler again, and mapped the name. This resulted in a map that

looked very much like the one I did at the Ancestry site. Following the map was a section titled: *Statistik: Zahlen zum Nachnamen 'Meitzler'* — or in English *Statistics: Figures [or Numbers] on the last name 'Meitzler'*. Following is a rough translation from German to English of those paragraphs:

"In Germany, there are 75 phone book entries named Meitzler and thus about 200 persons with this name. They live in 26 cities and counties. Most connections are logged in Alzey-Worms, 31. Other districts/cities with many Meitzlers are:

- Rhein-Neckar Krels (6)
- Regan (4), Paderborn (4)
- Donnersbergkreis (4)
- Darmstadt-Dieburg (3)
- Teltow-Fläming (2)
- Odenwaldkreis (2)
- Main-Taunus-Kreis (2)
- Pinneberg with 1 entry

Steffen Meitzler occurs most frequently in Germany. The next often found first names are followed by Falk, Regina, Frank, Joachim, Bernd, Viola, as well as René, Dorothee and Marianne."

On the right-hand side is a column titled Top Vornamen (or Top Given Name), where ten first names, also listed above, were found again. Below the Top Vornamen column is another titled Top Landkreise (Top Counties or Districts). Here were found the 10 districts listed above repeated in a different format.

Finally, instructions are given allowing you to embed your personalized map in your blog or on your website! You can download their WordPress plugin or copy HTML code directly into your Web page. Once posted at your site, readers can click on the map and go to the original at the Verwandt.de site — or do a search on their German surname just below the map showing your surname distribution. This is easy to use and I think it's pretty cool.

With a little patience and a lot of luck, by using the above resources you may be able to narrow your search to a county or maybe even town, allowing you to search local parish and civil records for your family. ☺☺

Absolute Verteilung des Namens 'Meitzler'

Karten zum Namen

Zur relativen Verteilung →

Fahren Sie mit dem Mauszeiger über die Karte, um die Landkreisenamen zu sehen

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© Bundesamt für Kartographie und Geodäsie
www.bkg.bund.de

The Meitzler surname mapped at the verwandt.de/karten/ website. (MyHeritage.com)

verwandt.de

Verteilung des Namens **Meitzler**

Woher stammt dein Name?

The verwandt.de German surname mapping widget. (Myheritage.com)



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