Western Europe

Tracing Your Western European Ancestors

Leslie Albrecht Huber offers basic, sound advice on tracing your ancestors in Western Europe.
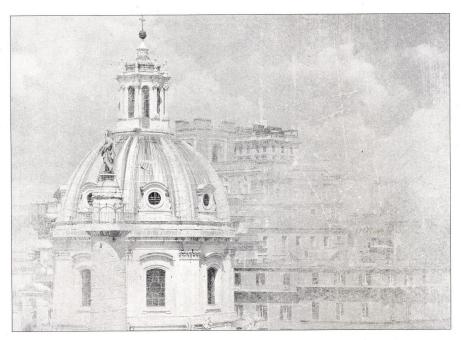
TRACING WESTERN EUROPEAN ancestors can be a task that strikes fear into even experienced family researchers. There's just so much about it that can seem – well, foreign. New record types, new languages, and new handwriting styles can feel overwhelming.

Yet, a little knowledge can go a long way. As with any research problem, Western European research problems can be tackled one step at a time. All you have to do is learn what those steps are!

This Side of the Ocean

Sometimes news that an ancestor came from Germany or Italy can be enough to make a researcher ready to dive right into to those Western European records. This is not the best approach to your search though. Before you switch your focus to European records, make sure you have thoroughly scoured the US and Canadian records for information about your ancestor. Gathering as much information as possible about your ancestor on this side of the ocean will increase the likelihood of finding him or her on the other side of the ocean – and lend confidence that you have actually found the correct person.

What type of information are you looking for? The short answer is almost anything. Census records can provide ages and help you determine an approximate birth year, let you know if your ancestor naturalized, give you a date of immigration, and include a birthplace (although, often only a country). Death records might also help you figure out an approximate birthdate or provide names of parents. Naturalization records often provide details about immigration, such as date, port of

departure or arrival, or even the name of the ship in addition to the ancestor's home (sometimes only a country, but sometimes more specific). Obituaries, county histories, or probate records can contain additional information about the family. Marriage records and births of children even sometimes give glimpses into the person's life in the Old World.

Although you want to absorb anything you possibly can, one piece of information is perhaps more important than any other in tracing your Western European ancestor. That is the name of your ancestor's European hometown. You will need to know this in order to use the most important Western European records: parish records – since parish records were kept at a local level. This town name may be found in any of a variety of US or immigration records, but is not guaranteed to be in any one particular record.

Crossing the Ocean

When you have finished your search of North American records, there is one more group of records you should check before devoting your time exclusively to Western European research. These are the records created when your ancestor crossed the ocean – immigration records.

The star of the show here is passenger lists. Passenger lists were created both when people left their countries of origin and when they arrived in their new destinations. Many US arrival records dated after 1820 have survived and are available online. These records may show names, traveling companions, ages, places of origin, occupations, and possibly destinations. A great place to start (no matter where your ancestors came from) is at German Roots (*www.germanroots.com*). Choose "Emigration and Immigration Records and Resources."

Next, from the menu across the top, select "Passenger Arrival Records." Here you'll find wonderfully thorough links and explanations of the major US ports and how to access their records.

New York was the most important US port of arrival. Its records are available for free at *www.castlegarden.org* (for the period 1820-1892, contains 11 million names, but not complete) and *www.ellisisland.org* (1892-1924, complete with over 22 million names). Other important ports were Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New Orleans – all with surviving records. Ancestry (*www.ancestry.com*) has many of the US arrival lists, searchable at one time. Through their database, you are able to pull up actual images of the records.

Canadians can access many immigration and citizenship records through the Canadian Genealogy and FamilyHistory Centre, *www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/genealogy/index-e.html.*

Some European departure lists have also survived. Perhaps most important are the Hamburg passenger lists which include about one-third of people leaving from Central and Eastern Europe. Ancestry (*www.ancestry.com*) has the lists and a partial index. You can also read more about locating these records at FamilySearch's guide available as one of their Wikis: *www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Hamburg_Passenger_Lists.* There are other examples. Copenhagen's very thorough police records contain information on nearly 400,000 emigrants available online through the Danish Emigration Archives: *www.emiarch.dk.* Several useful databases exist for locating Swedish emigrant ancestors. You can read more here: *www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Swedish_Emigration_Databases_and_Indexes.* To see what's available for Germany, go back to the German Roots site (*www.germanroots.com*) and choose "Passenger Departure Records" this time. Keep in mind that many emigration records did not survive or have not been filmed. For example, most of the records from

Bremen, one of the most important ports of departure, were destroyed.

Most people consider immigration records an important piece of their ancestors' stories. These records can also provide focused direction for future research. Passenger lists can contain valuable pieces of information, such as ages, relationships, occupations, and hometowns, that can help you locate your ancestor in other records more efficiently.

Researching in European Records
Now that you've utilized US records and passenger records, you're ready to turn your attention to Western European records. For most people tracing Western European ancestors, parish records will form the backbone of their research. There is no US record as important to US research as parish records are to most Western European research.

There are several reasons parish records are so important. For one thing, they generally include everyone. A person didn't have to be wealthy or own land to be in parish records. In fact, he or she didn't even have to be particularly religious since being part of the parish was often just part of life. The records list men, women, and children. (Of course, parish records don't contain the names of absolutely everyone. Some

churches burned – along with their records. And, some people attended nonconformist churches.) Also, parish records contain the details genealogists are looking for: dates and places for births, marriages, and deaths. Finally, parish records often date back hundreds of years, and many of them have not been microfilmed.

While extremely important, parish records are certainly not the only Western European record. Other types of records exist, their content and usefulness varying from country to country. In some countries, other records besides parish records are actually the most significant record. One of these important record types is civil registration records. These are vital records kept by the government. In the Netherlands, for example, civil registration records are the most useful genealogical record. Census records provide a valuable framework for research in England. Some other countries have census records as well, although generally not as thorough and consistent as England's census records. Probate, military, and land records are sometimes accessible and useful. You should get acquainted with research strategies for your particular country in order to have an understanding of what resources can be of most use to you.

Finding and Reading the Records
Now you know that you need to look at parish records and possibly other records too. But how do you get ahold of them? The easiest way to access records is in your own home, online. And more records are becoming available this way all the time.

Those with English ancestors will find several great websites to help them. FindMyPast (*www.findmypast.com*) has passenger ship lists, census records, civil registration records and others. The people at Free BMD (*www.freebmd.org.uk*) are seeking to transcribe the civil registration index. And Genuki (*www.genuki.org.uk*) has a wide variety of information useful to people tracing English or Irish

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ancestors. If you have Swedish ancestors, don't miss Genline (*www.genline.com*) which contains searchable images of thousands of parish records. Denmark has census, immigration, and other records available at *http://ddd.dda.dk/ddd_en.htm*. Digitial Archives of Norway (*www.arkivverket.no/eng*) is an important source of Norwegian records, Genlias (*www.genlias.nl/en*) is great for research in the Netherlands, and those with Irish ancestors will want to visit the Irish Family History Foundation's website (*www.irish-roots.ie*). And, there are many more.

You should also be aware of FamilySearch's Record Access Program. Announced in 2007, this program seeks to eventually digitize and make available online all the records of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City which contains the world's largest collect of genealogical records. They are also partnering with other repositories and commercial sites. You can see what is already available at their website by scrolling down the front page and choosing to "Browse by Location."

While more records are available online than ever before, the great majority of Western European records are still not online. Many have been filmed by FamilySearch (and will eventually be digitized and posted online). You can find these by searching FamilySearch's catalog (go to *www.familysearch.org* and select "catalog"). Most of the films can be ordered to your local FamilySearch center for a small fee and used there.

If the information you seek is not available online or by microfilm, your best course of action may be to write for it. For parish records, the easiest approach is to write the local parish itself. If the records are not there, hopefully the person receiving the letter will forward it on to the correct place for you. It is best to limit your inquiry to one or two specific pieces of information and to include a donation. FamilySearch has letter-writing guides to help you translate your request into the

appropriate language. Access these by choosing the "Learn" tab from the front page of Family-Search. Scroll down to "Research Wikis," then type in the specific item you are searching for (such as Italian Letter Writing Guide).

For many people, more vexing than the question of how to find the records, is how to read the records once you find them. Most people find themselves facing a dual problem at this point: 1) reading a foreign language and 2) reading an unfamiliar script. Very few of us are fluent in the language in which our ancestors' records were kept. Fortunately, fluency isn't required (although, of course, any knowledge of the language helps).

So how can you wade through these records? First, take time to become familiar with the record type you are working with. How-to books that discuss major record types and how to use them are available for many of the Western European countries. For example, these books might describe the basic format of parish records in that area, what information is usually included, and what commonly used abbreviations mean. Many of these books are published by the Genealogical Publishing Company and can be found at their website here: *http://genealogical.com*.

Next, use a word list. These documents, only a few pages long, include the most frequently used words in genealogy records and their translations. You can also access these in the "Research Wikis" section of the "Learn" area on FamilySearch. For more extensive projects, consider purchasing a translation dictionary.

Sometimes, at least equally challenging to reading the language is making sense of the script. It's more than just bad handwriting that makes it hard to decipher letters in some of these old documents. It's a completely different script or style of writing. The Gothic script was used in many European countries including Germany, the Scandinavian countries, and the Baltic countries. Some letters are easily recognizable, while others letters

were formed very differently than we are accustomed to. For help figuring out the alphabet, check out FamilySearch's "Handwriting Guide: German Gothic," available at *http://feefhs.org/guides/German_Gothic.pdf*.

Research strategies and resources vary somewhat from country to country. For a more thorough background of what is available in your country of interest, be sure to check out the FamilySearch Wiki for your country. To find these, you'll once again want to make your way to the "Research Wikis" at FamilySearch. Type in the name of the country of interest to you to pull up a guide filled with a wealth of tips and instructions, constantly updated by the genealogy community. Also under the "Learn" tab, you will find a link to "Research Courses." Here you might be able to locate a full-length (one hour or longer) lecture by a professional genealogical speaker or a five-minute mini-lesson on a topic relevant to your research. Another great website to visit is WorldGenWeb (*www.worldgenweb.org*). This site contains a variety of information about an assortment of countries (and usually even about states or counties within countries).

Use the information above to get acquainted with some basic sources and methodology for Western European research, and you will soon be able to approach your Western European family history problem with excitement and confidence instead of trepidation.

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Leslie Huber is a regular contributor to Family Chronicle and Internet Genealogy Magazine. She is also the author of **The Journey Takers,** *the story of her Swedish, German and English immigrant ancestors' journey to America. The book is available at* **http://familychronicle.com/books.htm.**