

Who do I now know I am

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As a boy growing up my father was the only person I knew with my surname. The background was very simple, my father's father – my grandfather – had died in an accident weeks before my father was born. My grandmother remarried when my father was 4 years old and had three children from this second marriage. However, the contrast between my mother's side of our family – grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, great-aunts and even a great-grandmother, the undisputed matriarch of the family – and my father being the only person with my name was striking. At times I wondered if it would not make more sense to have my mother's family name.

Around the year 2000 while visiting my parents in my hometown of Dortmund I was bored and decided to go to the local registrar office with nothing more than my grand-father's name and birthdate. Starting with my grandfather's birth entry, very quickly they found his death-certificate, and finally the names of my great-grandparents. From there it was another easy step to find my great-grandparents' marriage document, from which I learned that my great grandfather had been catholic, my great-grandmother had been protestant. But the real surprise came when the office clerk turned over the entry to a second page, my great-grandparents had been divorced in 1923, something quite unusual at the time in the context of a working-class family.

I did not know this then, but what was intended to be a single visit to an office became the starting point of a lifelong hobby. And looking back, there are elements of ancestry research in this event that I believe to be typical:

- Sometimes the easiest way to find information really works. I knew the location where my grandfather was born and that turned out to be the place where I could start to untangle the jigsaw of my family. These days many documents are available online and even wonderfully cross-referenced.
- Every family has its stories, anecdotes, legends. I can only speak for myself, but so far, all the snippets that I remembered from listening to my family have been true, in this case the fact that my father did not come from a protestant family. These snippets can be irrelevant, but sometimes they provide the context to take your personal research further. Every book about ancestry research that I know recommends starting with talking to the oldest living relatives. Even if it does not lead to dates and facts, it may give these little insights.

- Coming home from the registrar office I had copies of documents in my possession. Very quickly, I added more documents, things obtained from my parents and other family members. Add to that a selection of notes and scribbles. Eventually I had a whole box of 'things', and I lost the overview. The obvious next step was to get myself a computer programme to store and organise and structure this tangled web. Even twenty years ago there was a multitude of offerings, some free, some incurring a one-off cost, some a subscription. And this is where working with others became handy, because I learned from their knowledge and experience.

By now I have pursued this hobby for over twenty years. My family tree includes at least 6 generations for each branch of my family. My fascination no longer comes from wanting to learn more about the 'unknown' part of my family, I just love that it gives me a background to and a connection with the history of the place I come from. It also allows me to engage with my inner 'Sherlock Holmes', there is an element of detective work in all of this.

While most of the work has been done by myself on long evenings in front of my computer, joining forces with others is always a pleasure. My sister is much better than me in deciphering documents in the old German handwriting. She also often provides me with an alternative angle on a problem when I get stuck. Beyond the family, the knowledge and experience of other hobby genealogists is invaluable.

I have managed to visit a few of the places my family comes from, fortunately most of my ancestors are from north-west Germany. Later this I will visit a WWI military cemetery in northern France where a great-uncle is likely to be buried, and from there I will visit a village in the Alsace where one of my great-great-great grandmothers was born. I have not quite finished off my itinerary, but there seem to be many of 'my people' coming from the area between Osnabrück and Paderborn, so these may be places worth visiting.

I have not uncovered any illustrious celebrities among my forbears, but my genealogical journey continues to be fascinating, at least for me. And I look forward to uncovering even more with every foray into the archives...