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The Protestant genealogy in Alsace … remarks and advices

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Abstract

Dealing with the genealogy of his Alsatian ancestors requires good historical, geographical, linguistic, religious, cultural knowledge as well as those of the local laws and customs of a region whose German origin is millenary. Although a today French identity, French-German bilingualism is official. Religious affiliation remains a paramount information in searching for ascendants. The Protestant church registers began about 1625: written in Gothic German, as well as the first ten years for civil records from 1793 and revert to German from 1871 to 1919. Lutherans, Anabaptists and Reformed (mainly zwinglianists), used German until the 1950s in their religious rites. Always applying the Napoleonic concordat of 1801, the French law of 1905 on secularism does not apply in Alsace and religious affiliation is officially declared. According to the Protestant parishes, the Julian calendar was replaced late by the Gregorian one, sometimes only in 1700, as in Switzerland. The present paper is focusing on some specific points of the Alsatian genealogy providing a few remarks on and basic tips to avoid mistakes (that even experienced genealogists sometimes continue to commit) when facing Protestant trends.

In Alsace, Protestants have German culture more pronounced than in other religions, because the vast majority are Lutherans from the Augsburg Confession. For all ecclesial acts the language was in German since the Reformation induced by Martin Luther and his translation of the Bible, printed by Gutenberg. The introduction of bilingual offices occurred in the 1950s! I remember the first one in Colmar; only the sermon was in French.

For almost a millennium, Alsace, German soil, was part of *Heiliges Römisches Reich deutscher Nation* (translated to English as *The Holy Roman Empire* - but should be complete by adding *of the German Nation)* since February 2, 962 by Otto I, and partially of the Second and Third *Reich*. Alsatian genealogies follow the German practice until the early nineteenth century and from 1871 to 1919 and 1939 to 1944. Yet today local laws apply which were inherited from German times and from French occupation, i.e., the Napoleonic Concordat of 1801 and the non-application of the French law of 1905 on secularism. The religious affiliation of the ascendants is crucial knowledge in genealogical research. Outstanding are the "mixed" marriages. Unlike France, Protestants were not a minority in the German Empire; the elected emperor when Catholic had to deal with the Protestant princes. For example, Charles V in

1555 had to enact the famous the principle *Cujus regio, ejus religio* (whose realm, his religion) on Lutheran request.

Good knowledge of the history of Alsace and of German, its written language always official language, is a basic prelude before beginning the search of Alsatian ascendants. The present paper brings together my knowledge gained during research on my German, including Alsatian, and Swiss families, some are known from the 3rd Century. For all, the border has never been the Rhine River but the "blue line" of the Vosges Mountains.

Calendar year

Before the middle of the 15th century, the year generally began at Christmas, on December 25, sometimes already on January 1, but on March 25 in the Protestant County of Montbéliard until 1564. During the reign of Ferdinand I (1558 - 1564), January 1 has been adopted to avoid adverse disparities among the territories of the Holy Roman Empire (Tab. 1).

Gregorian Calendar

In Alsace, the adoption of the Catholic Gregorian calendar occurred between 1583 to 1603 in Catholic possessions and later in Protestant parishes, because it was imposed by the Vatican then

keeping the Julian calendar until about 1681 to 1700 according to the villages. Thus it was possible to distinguish the religious holidays between Lutherans and Catholics. A difference of about 12 days may occur between dates, according to the Julian or Gregorian calendar. Unfortunately softwares generally impose the French Catholic date of 1583.

Français	Deutsch		English
janvier	Jenner, Jänner, Hartung	Januar	January
février	Hornung	Februar	February
mars	Lenzmonat, Frühlingsmonat	März	March
avril	Ostermonat, Osteren	April	April
mai	Wonnemonat, Blütemonat	Mai	May
juin	Brachmonat	Juni	June
juillet	Heumonat, Heuert	Juli	July
août	Emtemonat, Hitzmonat	August	August
septembre ou 7bre	Herbstmonat, Fruchtmonat, Herpsten, 7bris	September	September
octobre ou 8bre	Weinmonat, 8bris	Oktober	October
novembre ou 9bre	Wintermonat, 9bris	November	November
décembre ou 10bre	Christmonat, Xbris, 10 bris	Dezember	December

Table 1 - Comparison of the names of months in different languages and at different periods. .

Republican or Revolutionary calendar

This calendar is a French exception, imposed even in official Alsatian documents in German. The Republican calendar was used in Alsace from September 22, 1793 to December 31, 1805. It begins with the year II. The former date generally corresponds to the beginning of the civil records that are commonly in German until about 1806; only large towns have used French. In some municipalities, especially in Lower Alsace, revolutionaries months have been translated to German - see Table 2.

Mois révolutionnaires	Elsäßer Monat	Dates d-m
vendémiaire	Weinmonat	22-9~21.10
brumaire	Nebelmonat	22-10~20.11
frimaire	Frostmonat, Reifmonat	21-11~20.12
nivôse	Schneemonat	21-12~19.1
pluviôse	Regenmonat	20.1~18.2
ventôse	Windmonat	19-2~20.3
germinal	Knospenmonat, Keimmonat	21-3~19.4
floréal	Blütenmonat, Blumenmonat	20-4~19.5
prairial	Wiesenmonat	20-5~18.6
messidor	Erntemonat	19-6~18.7
thermidor	Hitzmonat	19-7~17.8
fructidor	Fruchtemonat	18-8~16.9

Table 2 - Comparison of denominations revolutionary months in French and German. The 5 extra days and the 6th in leap years are not indicated here - see also Table 1.

The Registers

Protestant church records are in German Gothic script (Tab. 3). Examples of different Gothic scripts are represented in the two tables below (Tab. 4 and 5). The palaeographic and linguistic specificities of Alsatian records represent great difficulties for many non-German speaking genealogists, and even for native ones! Misinterpretations often lead to wrong ascendants – plenty of examples occur among the Mormon data as well as in Ancestry.com.

The use of German is easily explained by the fact that less that 5% of the Alsatians had knowledge of French and 95% were only speaking Alsatian and writing German until the middle of the 20th Century. Only in 1859 did the teaching of French became compulsory in Alsace, but a decade later, Alsace returned to Germany (1871 to 1919) and later from 1940 to 1945. For almost all Alsatians the native language is Alsatian (speaking) and German (writing).

The Surnames

In terms of onomastics, there is little difference between Alsatian and German surnames. This is even more evident that many ancestors immigrated to Alsace from other German and Swiss regions, especially after the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). Changes in surnames remained exceptional, at least in our families. This patro-

nymic maintenance also applies to members who emigrated to USA and Canada.

Periods	Letter types (fonts)	
15th century	**textura**	(a)
end of 15th c.	**Schwabacher**	
beginnnng 16th c.	**Fraktur**	(b)
19th century	**Kurrent**	
about 1918	**Sütterlin**	
from 1941	**Antiqua** (typographic) **Normalschrift** (handwriting)	(c)

Table 3. - Main steps of the German Gothic writing. (a) printing characters used (Bible edition); (b) use until the middle of the 20th century; (c) End of the Gothic German by Adolf Hitler.

Table 4. – Three of the German Gothic writing: Kraktur, Sütterlin, Kurrent (see also Tabl. 5).

Unlike the basic explanations, such as oral transcription by the US administration, Wohlhüter, Nadelhoffer, Wölfersheim, Sturm immigrants, among many others, have not seen their name changed, sometimes maintaining the umlaut. It seems to me that these changes are in fact related to illiteracy as the surname holders more than to the oral transcription of an immigration officer. When using genealogical software, any change in the surname introduces a gap in a family tree, except if variants can be manage by. Genealogists generally use the recent surname for all the as-

cendants. In France no surname change is allow after the law of the *6 Fructidor an II* (August 23, 1794).
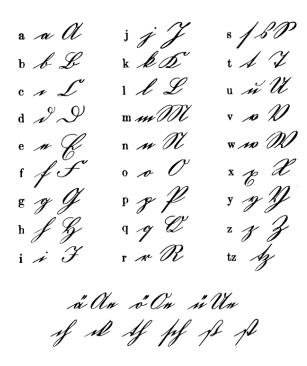

Table 5. – Gothic German in Kurrent fonts.

The surname in emigrated Anabaptist families is a special case with variations as to between children within the same family (see Appendix). This obviously makes research in basic genealogical data particularly difficult or sterile [1]. In addition, ancestry becomes doubtful, the father-child link is no longer ensured especially in emigration earlier than 19th century. Original records are needed in roder to avoid mistakes in identity".

In the parish registers, the feminization of the surname is made by adding "-in" or "-n" when the name already ends with "i" or "ÿ" [2] (e.g., Wohlhüter and Wohlhüterin). This form is often the cause of transcription error by considering this female form as patronymic. This practice ended with the establishment of the State-Civil, simultaneously made their surnames final and invariable in form. Since the law of *6 fructidor an II* (August

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[1] An anecdote - one day, I got a message from a US cousin born Miller in Erie Co, NY, asking me for help in search for her ancestor, because she could not find him kowing birth date and location in Bas-Rhin. A bit surprised, I went directly to the register and found him under the surname Müller. Miller - Müller indeed, it's a sucker's history!

[2] In German, y is a vowel with the sound "ü" or "i"; in the latter case, it is often written with an umlaut: ÿ and can also be replaced by "i".

23, 1794) for all citizens first and last names have to be those listed on their birth certificate and consequently cannot be translated but have to be used in the original form.

The **umlaut** *(Umlaut* in German) is a diacritic mark composed of two small vertical lines placed above a vowel to indicate a sound change. Be careful that you do not confuse the umlaut with the French *tréma* (two dots): a diaeresis indicates that a vowel should be pronounced apart from the letter that precedes it. The umlaut modifies the sound of several vowels: a o u y; in typography, in the absence of umlaut these letters are replaced by digraphs: ae oe ue which merely reflect a sound. In Germany, these forms have been deleted in the early 20th century by the umlaut. It is an archaic use that can still be found in some countries, i.e., USA, Canada! In France with the use of computers the umlaut, as well as the accent in capitals, have to be applied. Thus, one should write Schürch or SCHÜRCH not Schuerch, Wohlhüter or WOHLHÜTER not Wohlhueter - never Schurch or Wohlhuter. Consideration to our ancestors needs for us to correctly use given names and surnames... at least in genealogy!

The **ligature** or tied letter Œ/œ, called *"e in the o"*, or Æ/ae, is Latin and does not exist in German. Thus, its use in German word is wrong: for ex. the village Röschwoog being written today officially Roeschwoog but Michelin and Wikipedia among others write Rœschwoog.

	from birth record	usual given name	US ranking
grandfather	Johann Martin	**Martin**	John I
father	Johann David	**David**	John II
son	Johann Michael	**Michael**	John III

grandmother	Maria Catharina	**Catharina**
mother	Maria Margaretha	**Margaretha**
spouse	Anna Margaretha	**Margaretha**

Table 6. – Example of the Alsatian specificity in the ranking of the given names over three generations. Always spouses keep their surname (see text).

The **origin of the name:** the surname of a family has generally a single origin, often unrelated to the same surname of a neighbouring family, sometimes distant by only a few miles. Etymology and origin of the surnames were established in the 11-12th centuries: most of the surnames have mainly as origin: given names, geographical and topographical terms, nicknames, jobs. These observations confirm how much each family name is a special case that cannot be likened to a general case.

Finally, in a very general genealogical framework, we must never neglect the contribution - 50%! - brought by the spouse's surname, sometimes insolvable without this support more than complementary. In German and Swiss traditions, the name is attributed to a family to distinguish it from other families composing a social group: each spouse retains his surname. Some genealogists make this misunderstanding between the official and societal use that is obviously a mistake in genealogy.

The Given Names

Most of the Alsatian children have two given names: the first is often one commonly used for other family members (so-called *name given by the family*), and the second is specific to the child (*Christian name*), so considered as the usual one (Tabl. 6). Remember that the names should be written as it appears in the birth record, using the language (German or French) of that act, i.e., without translation. In other records, such as marriage or death, only the usual names are often indicated for all the persons. Consequently, the data must be checked on the birth certificate to ensure the correct identity of the person. A partial identity (only the usual name) is often a source of error and confusion, especially in France where the first given name is the usual one.

Translation of a German given name to English or French often hampers the use within the family. Indeed, Johann, Johannes, Hans, Hanss ... can only be translated respectively to John and Jean. But in German, each of those cited given names is specific, distinct from the others, and can distinguish two members among siblings or cousins. This applies with other given names like Catharina, Kathrina, Catherina... Michel or Michael (no umlaut here!). Not knowing the local customs, or knowing them poorly, led to mistakes which were passed on. Another often overlooked point is the nickname for men: der Alte, der Mittere, der Junge. But that nickname changes over time because after the death of the "senior" (Alte), the "medium" (Mittlere) or "junior" (Junge) will be called Alte in an act. Then this nickname is not always passed from father to son or grandson, but sometimes to cousins. In all cases the surname of the spouse allows one to ascertain the

identity. In some Alsatian genealogies established by American descendants, one labelled under John I, John II, John III and the consequences on the validity of such an use can be seen on Table 6; in the same way to quote by an initial the second given name or by a nickname or alternative name in place of the complete or original given name does not fit with the basic rules in genealogy.

In the Alsatian culture (German), tradition dictates that the given name(s) is indicated before the family name (surname). Here we apprehend the differences between Alsatian (German culture) and French (from Latin culture), and the historical gaps that often suggest that Alsace is French! Certainly it is today by nationality but not culture. In both customs, given name(s) and surname of the father and mother are needed in all records : in other words, a person keeps officially his surname all his life.

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Appendix

Anabaptists' surnames and their variants

The Schürch as example

En Alsace...

Since the 17th Century several families of Swiss Anabaptists *(Täufer),* namely Mennonites and Amish, have changed their surnames after emigration to Alsace and Montbéliard County and to Pennsylvania (USA). The variants may affect up to each child within the same family, so that each child can have a different <u>surname</u> derived from the father's surname. On the contrary, mennonite families never changed their original surname after emigration, i.e., Graber, Roth, Amstutz... (Emig, 2014b).

Among the surname Schürch, none of the Anabaptist emigrants has retained the original name: Schürch. This surname was (and still is) borne by about 20 different families mainly from the Canton of Bern, Switzerland, unrelated with each other. From 1794, these variants were subject to French law – see above.

Variants used:

o *Schirch, Schürch, Schirck*: the 18th century in the County of Montbéliard.

o *Churc, Chure, Churq, Churque, Schirch, Schurck, Schurque, Surcke, Surque, Schink, Schürk*: in Belfort and the Sundgau (South of Alsace).

o *Schurch, Schircker, Schirger*: the 17th in the Sundgau near Muhlhouse.

o *Cheric, Cherich, Cherique, Chirk, Gerig, Goerig, Kerique, Koerique, Scherich, Scherig, Scherik, Scherique, Schir, Schirch, Shirck, Schirk, Schirsch, Schoerich, SchoerSchurch, Schircher, Schirher*: the

Such large variations are only found in Anabaptist families, while in Catholic or Protestant families, the changes, when any, are minor over one or two centuries for a given surname. This is also true in Catholic families named Schürch in Alsace, usually originating from the Catholic canton of Lucerne (Switzerland).

Research has been done to try to find an explanation but without success. Even descendants are unable to answer this point. In the records of the Doubs, Mennonite surnames are registered with the variant (that never happens in other surnames). Marthelot (1950) offers as explanation: "on a pu noter les déformations subies par les noms de famille mennonites, de consonance germanique, dans ces pays de langue romane." (= it was noted the distortions suffered by the Mennonite surnames, of Germanic sounding in these countries of romance language). Actually, Mennonite families settled preferably in or near German-speaking localities, with the exception of Belfort and romance-speaking part of the Sundgau. Nevertheless, it is certain that the Anabaptists maintained the use of German and *Schwyzerdutch*, even in the USA, with a German dialect known as "Pennsylvania Dutch" (Pennsylvania German).

In America...

"There are about 62 different ways to write the name Schürch in North America," according to a statement made in the USA and Canada (Table 6.) but there are also two other variants in Alsace, not shown, i.e., Schicker and Schirger.

Many of these surname bearers have no family relationships and never have had. There is here an amalgam leading to genealogical errors. For example, surnames, such as Schorch, Schörg, Schür, Schurig which occur in France and Germany, are without any link with Switzerland. The correct surname of an emigrant from the Old World to the Americas should be certified by an official birth certificate, it is illusory to assign ancestry except to have fun with false ancestors.

➜ US branches...

This multitude of variants in the US make it difficult to know the original surname. It is obviously surprising to emigrants so proud of their origin and in general of their surname. The reason of the patronymic changes was basically explained that: "When the Schürch from Switzerland settled in Pennsylvania, which was ruled by the British, German names were often changed by English-speaking officers who were not familiar with German names. Thus, some changes were observed because of letters absent from the English alphabet, like "ü"." Nevertheless, the descendants of the Schürch from Sumiswald, arriving in Pennsylvania have chosen for variants Sherk, Shirk Sherick, Sherrick, or both within the same family! In Alsace the descendants of Valentin Schürch, emigrating from Sumiswald to Alsace, changed their surname to Schicker or Schirger over 3 generations. A cousin Schürch, reformed, who immigrated in the 19th century to the USA, kept his surname as Schuerch.
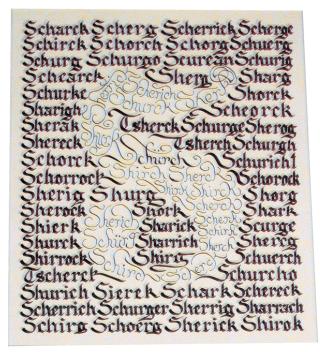

Table 7. – Pictorial representation of all the American variants of the Swiss surname Schürch [presented at the *Schürchtreffen 2010* SGNS - Schweizerische Gesellschaft der Namensträger Schürch).

➜ Canadian branches...

The first generation of the family of the so-called "Joseph Sherk" (1769-1853) (originally Joseph Schürch from Sumiswald), who emigrated to Canada (Waterloo Co, west of Toronto) was named Schoerg or Schörg. Then Joseph appears in the records of 1842 and 1851 under Sharick, while he, himself, signed "Joseph Shorg". Actually, he was known as that, in censuses, the employee quoted the surname according to the pronunciation, not how it was spelled. One of the brothers of Joseph and his descendants was called Sherrich or Shirk. Joseph's son, Samuel, and his descendants (in Canada and in Michigan, USA) have been called Sherk. Another son Jacob kept the surname Sharick, but those of his descendants in Michigan have been called Shirk.

The similarity of the American variants with those observed in Alsace may suggest these latter, the oldest, were used as a model for US immigrants. The emigration route passed through Alsace until the North Sea.

Why the need for patronymic change...

I have in mind that the change had a deeper reason than only the "Americanization" of the name Schürch: a voluntary change linked to the consequences of a leak or forced exile of the native-country for political and religious beliefs. The debate is open, especially as the Swiss Schürch did not change their surname since the 14th century. In the same way, the other US branches of my Alsatian families of my grandparents: Wohlhüter, Sturm, Nadelhoffer all kept their surname without alteration.

Are Alsatian surnames Schirch, Schirck, Schirk, Schurck variants of Schürch?

Nothing is less certain, at least in Alsace. Because...

• Schirch and Schurck may be derived from the root *"schirge"* meaning in Alsatian *push* or *drag*. The nominee could have a strong opposition character. .

• Schirch is a Germanic form of the Christian name *Georg*, influenced by the slave language, and in the same meaning the surnames Schirach, Schira (k), Schiro (k), Schirck, Schirk.

However, there is no problem for variants the origin of which is established on records. But, on the contrary, without official evidence, a surname may not be considered as a variant of a surname. We may understand that genealogical searches have tendency to be emotional, in particular when no ascendant can be found. Genealogy has limits that are often difficult to get over. This might open the door to belief. On the other hand the solution may be found in the archives of the Alsatian locality or in the "Archives départementales" but is time-depending!

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