

A genealogical how-to for Americans of Swiss descent

Should you wish to conduct genealogical research of your ancestors in Switzerland, this information sheet will provide you with the first steps on how to proceed.

Swiss Characteristics

A few Swiss characteristics should be mentioned, which are not known to many genealogists:

First of all, in Switzerland, vital documents (birth, marriage, divorce death) have only been recorded by official Swiss authorities since 1876. Before that time, churches, foremost the catholic and protestant (Calvinistic and Zwinglianic) ones were responsible for registering changes in civil status. Therefore, in order to contact the correct authority in Switzerland, it is imperative to know for which time period the research is being conducted. It is also crucial to know which religion an emigrant belonged to in Switzerland. It is rare that emigrants change religion upon emigration, so it can be assumed that, if in doubt, the religion practised overseas is the same as in Switzerland.

Secondly, not only is the town¹ where an event took place of importance as far as registering vital documents in Switzerland, but also the "Bürgerort/Commune d'origine/Comune di attinenza" (place of origin). Every person who possesses Swiss nationality is, at the same time, also a citizen of a specific town. It is the town, where his/her ancestors used to live. This place of origin is handed down from father to child, and upon marriage, in the earlier days, a woman would also acquire the place of origin of her husband and at the same time lose her own. The place of origin is of importance, since all vital documents, regardless of the place where the event happened, are recorded there. This has been the case since 1876, as a rule since 1800, however in some cases as early as the end of the 17th century. Therefore, the civil registry office of the place of origin contains all vital records of a family (at least the male line). There is however one important exception: only the vital documents provided to the places of origin are registered. Particularly, as far as emigrations overseas during previous centuries are concerned, it was very seldom that vital documents were reported back to Switzerland and therefore the family registers were not kept up to date. As a result, the descendants irrevocably lost Swiss citizenship. In order to conduct the genealogical research of a family, it is just as important to know the place of origin as it is the family name since there are often families with the same name that have different places of origin. In overseas sources, it is unfortunately seldom apparent whether the indicated town is the birthplace, last town of residence or, in fact, the place of origin. The Swiss Surname Book (published in English as "Swiss Surnames: A complete Register", by Picton Press, P.O.Box 250, Rockport, ME 04856-0250, \$ 149.50) contains a complete index of all surnames of families, including their places of origin, which, in 1962, possessed Swiss nationality. In cases of rare family names, this book can be an aid as to the region or even the town of origin.

Thirdly, changes in civil status were and still are only recorded in the individual towns, respectively in the parishes. Cantonal or federal records do not exist. Also, please note, that before 1900, no cantonal or federal lists of emigrants were made. This means that the respective town must be known, otherwise the research can become quite time consuming, very expensive and in some cases impossible. There are however ways, despite missing information, to determine the place of origin, if it does not involve very common Swiss last names and first names and if basic personal datas are known. Unfortunately, overseas,

¹ „Town“ in this text refers to city, small town or community

a lot of information regarding ones origin, even if the name of a Swiss town is mentioned, refers not necessarily to the town itself, but also to a wide region around the town. So e.g. the name "Berne" is often referred to the whole canton of Bern, including the Canton of Jura (previously part of the canton of Bern). Prior to 1798 it even covered the Cantons of Vaud and parts of the canton of Aargau, therefore approx. 1/3 of today's Switzerland.

It is also important to mention that nowadays, because of data protection it is more complicated, and can almost be impossible to track down vital dates of the youngest generation. The search for living relatives can therefore present itself as much more difficult than the search for ancestors back into the 17th century. In addition, the cantons request a cantonal research authorization which is subject to a fee.

Necessary preliminary work in the USA

Because of the aforementioned difficulties, namely the lack of knowledge of town names in Switzerland, it is recommended, sometimes even necessary, to first exhaust all research possibilities in the USA. Once exact names of places are known, the research can be extended to Switzerland. Hereafter is a list of some key American sources which might contain the names of places of a Swiss born emigrant:

- passenger lists of the ports of departure (after 1850 mostly Le Havre or Hamburg, before also Bremen (Loss of lists), in the 18th century Rotterdam)
- passenger lists of the ports of arrival
- Department of Health Services for death records
- Church offices for death records
- Burial records
- Cemetery records
- Grave stones
- Obituaries in local newspapers
- Department of Health Services, marriage records (if emigrant married in USA)
- Church offices for marriage records
- Census records
- Naturalization records
- Confirmation records of children born in Switzerland

The research should not only be focused on the emigrant solely, but also on his whole family. If an emigrant e.g. was accompanied by his wife and children, their data should also be examined according to the beforementioned possibilities, if the town of origin of the emigrant cannot be determined.

The National Archives and Records Administration, 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20408, Tel. 202/501-5500 has microfilms of passenger lists arriving at more than 60 Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico ports (genealogical webpage address: www.nara.gov/genealogy/genindex.html). Please find hereafter two additional webpages which might be of interest in your research: „Where to Write for Vital Records: www.inlink.com/~nomi/vitalrec/staterec.html“ and „Cyndi's List of Genealogical Sites: www.CydisList.com“.

In case you are already in possession of names of places (place of origin, birthplace etc.) of your ancestors, or even if, despite all your research you could not come up with this information, your next step would be to contact the Central Office for Genealogy.

The Central Office for Genealogy

It is the job of the Central Office to get interested parties acquainted with the genealogical research done in Switzerland or to suggest possible ways for a solution to a specific problem. Primarily, it provides information on how to do-it-yourself. Should, however, an interested party not be in a position, based on the aid received, to undertake the research him/herself, perhaps due to the lack of language (German, French or Italian), the old writing, lack of time or money for a trip to Switzerland, the Central Office of Genealogy would be willing to undertake some research on a small scale, including correspondence with Swiss authorities, or, as an exception, research on a more extensive level. In case the Central Office is not able to provide extensive research, a qualified professional genealogist for the specific field or specific region in Switzerland would be recommended. The selection will be made based on professional competence in order to avoid disappointments.

The address of the Central Office for Genealogy is as follows:

Zentralstelle für genealogische Auskünfte SGFF
Alfred Dobler
Alte Blindenholzstrasse 14
8616 Riedikon
Switzerland
www.eye.ch/swissgen/ver/chausk-e.htm
alfred.dobler@gmx.net

Services provided by the Central for Genealogy

1. The Central Office for Genealogy is equipped with computer data consisting of more than 100'000 references to publications, works deposited in archives, or also partly privately kept, of ongoing genealogical research on Swiss families. This data is constantly brought up-to-date. This should help avoid someone starting research which has already been more or less completed. From this information, you might learn in which towns a specific family name surfaces provided that this information can not be obtained differently. The quality as well as the quantity of the work indexed can vary considerably. Sometimes you only find short notes regarding a family or a summary of a few generations. Therefore, it is best to limit ones expectations. However, sometimes even a small indication can help someone get over a hurdle and can be very valuable. It is also possible to obtain references of extensive works of a family history which are published in books.

The referenced material can only, on rare occasions, be found at the Central Office for Genealogy. Generally, it is up to each individual to consult the respective library or archive where the material can be found. This research can, by explicit wish, as an exception, be conducted by the Central Office. It is also worth mentioning the fact that most of the publications are out of print and therefore cannot be purchased any longer. Please note that the data does not contain references to individual persons, and therefore the problem of an unknown place of origin of a person can only indirectly be solved.

A large part of the published material, all independently published family histories or collections, resp. magazine articles, including texts published in the U.S., you will find in the bibliography:

Bibliography of Swiss Genealogies by Mario von Moos, 1993, 839 pp., published by Picton Press, P.O.Box 250, Rockport, ME 04856-0250.

2. Besides the data mentioned in paragraph 1, the Central Office also provides a continuously growing computer data base in which over 60'000 individuals including their genealogical connections are listed.
3. The Central Office for Genealogy is in possession of a continuously growing genealogical archive, containing, among other things, more than 200'000 reference cards, each listing one family, plus a collection of genealogical sources such as microfilms of church books or published sources. It also hosts an extensive library with standard literature and reference books.
4. The Central Office for Genealogy specialises in research of unknown places of origin and in emigration. A multitude of published lists of emigrants are available as well as remarks which could lead to the identification of emigrants. The Central Office's work comprises mostly migration movements, also general genealogical research and works closely with professional genealogists, archives, genealogical associations and other specialists. With the help of these connections, quite a few previously unknown places of origin could be found.
5. The Central Office of Genealogy can also provide important informational tools, for entry level into genealogical research, which go beyond the borders of Switzerland, e.g. a databank listing all town names of the former Prussian kingdom.
6. For people who would like to visit Switzerland personally, the Central Office is offering to accompany them on their research trip for one or several days; be it to visit archives and assist in the research, conduct the research of the ancestors together, travel to the region or origin of the ancestors, or simply assist with translations.
7. In case the Central Office of Genealogy is not able to (further) assist, addresses of renowned professional genealogists will be provided who can directly be contacted by the individual.

Since the Central Office of Genealogy specialises solely on genealogy, heraldic information regarding coat of arms cannot be provided.

Information Networking

The Central Office for Genealogy requests that all individuals to whom it had sent information, forward to it a photocopy of any texts or work, in which the material referred to by the database, is used. This applies regardless if this material is published or not. These copies are, in turn, stored in the library and thus increase the resource material available for families, especially if this documentation is extensive. This will serve the purpose of passing on this information to others researching the same family.

Genealogical Societies

The Genealogical Library

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day-Saints, Inc.
35 NW Temple Street
Correspondence Unit B-216
Salt Lake City, UT 84150

They have extensive microfilms of the records of many Swiss Cantons and the Principality of Liechtenstein. They do not provide research services. However, their records are available for viewing at their branch genealogical libraries throughout the world. For an address list, write to the above mentioned main library.

Besides some regional and ethnic genealogical societies, there are two national associations:

Freunde der Zentralstelle für Genealogie
c/o Zentralstelle für genealogische Auskünfte
Alte Blindenholzstrasse 14
8616 Riedikon
Switzerland
www.eye.ch/swissgen/ver/chausk-e.htm
alfred.dobler@gmx.net

Membership includes one free inquiry per year at the Central Office for Genealogy, a quarterly professional magazine containing general matter of genealogy as well as genealogy in Germany and in Switzerland with English summaries of the main articles, occasional information about the Central Office for Genealogy and an annual conference.

Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Familienforschung SGFF
President Dr. Heinz Ochsner
Grabenweg 1
4414 Füllinsdorf
Switzerland

Email: h.ochsner@dplanet.ch

Membership includes an information newsletter as well as a year book.

Newsletter

The Swiss Connection
Ms. Marilyn A. Wellauer
2845 North 72nd Street
Milwaukee, WI 53210

A quarterly newspaper for Americans of Swiss descent.

Coat of arms

Information and research on Swiss coats of arms

**Wappenauskunftsstelle der Zürcher Goldschmiede
c/o Roland Spitzbarth
Feldeggstrasse 58
8008 Zürich
Switzerland**

Useful hints:

- **Ancestry.com (Geneology company - fees for some content)**
www.ancestry.com
- **Church Family History Library (Good starting place for genealogical research)**
www.lds.org/en/2-Family_History/Family_History_Main.html
- **Cyndi's List of Genealogical Sites on the Internet (One of the best sites online for genealogy information)**
www.CyndisList.com

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