

# OUR FAMILY ORIGINS IN GERMANY

AS PRESENTED BY WARREN W. WIREBACH AT THE WEYERBACHER REUNION  
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The old question of "where did our family come from" can now be answered. For over ten years Dr. Lily Wirebach, and then myself, had been corresponding with various places in Germany and Switzerland but to no avail. Last year I had tentatively planned a trip to research our family origins. Then I got cold feet when I faced the great task ahead of me and the meager information I had to go by.

This year I felt it could not be put off any longer. All winter I had been corresponding with various record sources but received only negative answers. However, when I was able to locate church records in Wurttemberg for my mother's both grandparents, I felt a little encouraged. Although these great grandparents had come over a hundred years after our Weyerbacher ancestors, I felt reassured by the fact that there were records in existence.

So a trip was planned. Where would I go? This question became more and more important as the time drew near. Because there existed place names the same as that of the family . . . Weierbach . . . in several locations, different theories had been advanced that we came from this one or that one.

Did we come from Zell Weierbach? Letters I wrote to the Reformed Church minister there brought word that they found no record of any Weierbachs on their records, nor of any Isaac being born in 1730 who might have taken the name of the town as a surname.

Did we come from Weierbach-Fischbach? This town was located off the rail line by several people, friends of mine who were surprised to see the name when they were on their way to Idar Oberstein, the German centre of the gem and jewelry industry. Letters to the Protestant minister there brought a negative report for any record of Weierbachs in the village of Weierbach.

Did we come from Switzerland? There is in the county history of Bucks County a biographical sketch of Zeno Weierbach. Zeno was a great grandson of Isaac, one of the three sons to come over with Johann Nicholas. This sketch states that Zeno's ancestor Nicholas was born and reared in Switzerland. In a letter written in 1966, Elvin Weierbach of Lebanon, a nephew of Zeno, wrote that the family came from a valley in Switzerland named Weyerbach. And there is a hamlet named Weierbach in the Canton of Lucerne. Did we come from the Weierbach Valley in Switzerland? Letters to the church authorities there brought only a negative reply.

So where would I go to research? I had written to the state archives at Koblenz on advice of pastor Henn from Weierbach-Fischbach. They gave me a negative answer but suggested the Idar Oberstein area, where Weierbach-Fischbach is located. I determined to visit Zell-Weierbach, Weierbach-Fischbach, even go into Switzerland to Weierbach Valley if necessary. And I had a list of other state archives where, despite negative replies, and my almost total ignorance of German, I felt someone would help me.

So on Monday, June 4, I took a train to Idar-Oberstein with the hope that I would be able to get transportation there to Weierbach-Fischbach. To my surprise the train stopped at Weierbach, one stop before IdarOberstein. I grabbed my bag and jumped off, landing in a little town where practically no English is spoken. The station master called a taxi and I went to the cemetery attached to the church with whose pastor, Pfarrer Henn, I had corresponded. Another surprise I learned early in my German tour was that there are no old cemeteries. Usually graves are maintained only for 25-30 years. And it was no exception here. In a beautifully kept cemetery no graves were older than 30 years, yet the church bore the date 1796 and houses I could see were hundreds of years old. I stayed two days in Weierbach, visited Pfarrer Henn who tried to help but was able to offer nothing except a wonderful book on the village of Weierbach. Early Weierbach had two churches named after St. Martin and St. Georg, so today there are two sections of Weierbach. Martin Weierbach and Georg Weierbach. Pfarrer Henn was from Martin Weierbach. My taxi driver took me also to the old church in Georg Weierbach, later I was able to see the records from that church, as far back as 1600. No mention of Weierbachs, nor any first names similar to those of our Isaac or Johannes. I enjoyed great hospitality from Ernst Reith who not only was my taxi driver, at my service whenever I needed him, but he also- owned the small hotel where I stayed, the gas station and some kind of trucking business where trucks came and went all night. I left Weierbach very disappointed but full of appreciation for the warmth the people there had shown me.

I headed for Kaiserslautern now. Why? Just before I left home I had been studying a publication of the National Genealogical Society in Washington, Genealogical Research in German-speaking Lands. As I had wanted to visit Kaiserslautern where I had friends, I was interested in an article by a Dr. Fritz Braun on the possibilities for genealogical research in the Palatinate. But of more interest to me was mention in an article by Ralph Dornfield Owen, titled "Genealogical Sources in German- speaking Lands," of Dr. Fritz Braun as director of the archives in Kaiserslautern. Mentioned was the co-operative union of Palatine genealogists which was interested in the migration of Palatinates to America. This, to me, was my type of research in reverse. I wanted to know where we came from. They were interested in where their people went. A card index of names and facts pertinent to emigrants was also mentioned in this article.

So I was in Kaiserslautern, and discouraged. On a hot day the U. S. Army's Special Service Office directed me to the section of the city where Dr. Braun lived. I walked, not yet having too much faith in my German and the local taxi drivers. At Dr. Braun's house, his handsome wife ushered me into the room where he was and from that minute on my education in genealogy advanced by leaps and bounds. I stated my problem and gave all the information I could, most of it what I have just told you. Did we come from Zell Weierbach, from Switzerland or from Weierbach-Fischbach?

The first words of encouragement were when Dr. Braun told me he thought I had been in the right area. But I would not find anyone named Weierbach in the village of Weierbach.

The name Weierbacher meant, by adding the "er," that the name had been assumed by someone coming from that place. Our name probably took its initial formation between the 14th and 15th centuries and was first recorded as descriptive identification. By the 16th century surnames were recognized and were passed on to others in the family. As the population grew it became more difficult to distinguish one person from another as in a village 25% of the males could be named John, 25% Henry, and identified in many cases by their occupation or location of home.

And persons leaving an area would not take the name of the little village they left if they migrated too far for that place to be known. So the possibility that someone who left the village of Weierbach became known as Weierbacher, i.e., someone from the nearby village of Weierbach. So Dr. Braun told me I would not find any records in Weierbach, but in the area around it.

As this time I added another bit of information I had not thought to mention before . . . the only other Weyerbacher family I knew of, still using the original spelling, - came to America in 1852, a hundred years

after our ancestors came. They came from Oldenburg. This was given in the census records for 1860. I had written to two towns by this name in northern Germany just before I left home. At this point Dr. Braun stopped me and said this was a significant fact. These Weyerbachers, he thought, were of our line. In 1850 the area of Weierbach-Fischbach was reporting to the district of Oldenburg.

Dr. Braun then suggested we go to his office and consult the reference material there. In an index file under the spelling of Weierbacher, we found a reference to a Johannes who left the town of Oberstein to go to America in 1753. This was the lead I had been looking for for years.

In the valued book by Strassburger and Hinke, Pennsylvania German Pioneers, we find a Johannes coming over in 1751 with Johan Nicholas and Isaac. This is the family of our ancestor. Again in 1753 is shown a Johannes Weyerbacher, age 20. I was fortunate to have copies of the passenger lists for both the ship Edinburg and ship Brothers showing the actual signatures of the passengers in their own handwriting. Dr. Braun compared both signatures and stated that they were evidently written by the same person. In the index cards were also cards for a Maria Juliane Weierbach born in the village of Baumholder, who went to Brazil in the 1800's.

On Dr. Braun's suggestion I went to Idar Oberstein, but there I was told the church records for that period were in the state archives in Koblenz. So off to Koblenz I went. These are not next-door towns, but required quite an extensive trip by train each time. In Koblenz I encountered a non-English speaking staff at the archives. But I managed to get the Reformed church records for the town of Oberstein. There I found Weierbachs, many of them, but none with familiar first names. So I asked for the records from the village of Baumholder. They were being used by another man who relinquished them when he was told I was from America.

In the Baumholder church records I found the record of Isaac Weyerbacher, baptized April 17, 1730. Isaac was the ancestor of most of us here. Then I found the marriage records for Isaac's parents, the Johann Nicholas and Catherina Magdalena we honor as our first ancestors in this country. I found their baptismal records, and the baptismal records for Johannes and Henry, and six daughters. We had thought the original family consisted of three sons, Isaac, Johannes ( ancestor of the Ohio branch) and Henry, and two daughters, Anna Margaret ( Mrs. Becker ), and Anna Elizabeth ( Mrs. Frey ). I also learned that Catherine Magdalena was the daughter of John Jacob and Maria Magdalena Hermani, Johann Nicholas was the son of Hans Nickol and Eva Elizabeth Weyerbacher.

I also noted other names on the grave stones in the Baumholder cemetery which were familiar in the early Pleasant Valley history, Zehres Schug, Jost and Hess. It is possible that others from Baumholder either followed or preceded the Weyerbacher family here.

Another interesting fact: On the original deeds of land to Johann Nicholas he was listed as a Weaver. In the church records in Baumholder he was also listed as a Woolen Weaver!

And then I went to Baumholder! By bus from Idar Oberstein. There is a large United States Army installation there but it still retains a part of its quaintness in narrow twisting streets and old houses. High above the town one can see two steeples, those of the Catholic and Evangelical churches. The one on the left was the Reformed and there were recorded the baptisms, marriages and deaths of our family. I asked at the Pfarrer's house for the key to the church. The pastor's wife opened the door and I entered where our ancestors had worshipped, just as their descendants worshipped in Springfield church. That was quite a thrill for me. Here 222 years later, I, a great, great, great great grandson of Johann Nicholas and Catherina Magdalena, was walking where they had walked, and I knelt and prayed where they had prayed.

Then I visited the little church cemetery. As I said before, there were no old graves there. But I found the graves of Wilhelm Weierbacher, who died in 1943 and his wife, August, who died in 1952.

So I prepared to leave Baumholder, little knowing that yet another surprise was ahead of me. I stopped in a little store to buy all the cards they had of Baumholder. I told the little lady who sold them to me that my name was Weierbach and my ancestors had gone to America from Baumholder. She became very excited and we locked up the store and almost ran up the hilly street to meet Fraulein Hedwig Weierbacher! My guide stood in the street calling "Fraulein Weierbacher." Another lady coming down the street said we were on the wrong side of the house so we went around and Frdulein put her head out of the upstairs window. When she heard that a cousin from America was down below she came running down. By this time all the neighbors had their heads out the windows and several people on the street joined in helping me explain my story in poor German and much hand waving. I took her picture and left with the promise to write from America. I learned that the graves were her parents'. She was the last of the name in Baumholder but knew nothing of the Weyerbachers in America.

Dr. Fritz Braun of Kaiserslautern asked me to give his personal greetings to you, my family, the Weyerbacher reunion. To his help alone I owe the success I had. I myself was deeply impressed by his kindness and his patience with my language barrier. Thanks to the helping hand of this great gentleman, I was able to bring you my story—"Our family origins in Germany."