



Alsace-Lorraine: Translating German and French Names and Place Names

Germany “How to” Guide, Beginner Level: Instruction

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August 2019

OBJECTIVE

This guide will teach you to translate given names, surnames, and place names from German to French and vice versa. The guide will also explain how to look up French surname frequency.

ALSACE-LORRAINE HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Alsace-Lorraine has a lengthy history of being alternately under German and French rule.

From around year AD 870 to 1648, the area was under German rule. With the Thirty Years' War of 1618–1648, the area changed hands and came under French rule until the France-Prussian War of 1870–1871 (known in France as the War of 1870), when Germany once again took over the region. The German Empire regained the area of Alsace-Lorraine, added to it the department of Moselle and a few arrondissements (subdivisions) of the department of Meurthe, and gave the region the German name Elsaß-Lothringen.

Within the following 75 years, Alsace-Lorraine changed hands four times. The area remained under German rule until the end of WWI, in 1918. At that point, the Treaty of Versailles returned Alsace-Lorraine to French rule, and it remained part of France until the beginning of WWII. France invaded Germany in 1939, and Germany retaliated by invading France in 1940 in the Battle of France. Germany took control of Alsace-Lorraine but had to surrender the region to France in 1944.

Alsace-Lorraine remains under French rule today, though the people living there are a mixture of German and French ethnicity because of the region's history of repeatedly changing hands.

This short historical overview is to explain why ancestors from the region of Alsace-Lorraine may be listed as being from France in some records and from Germany in other records. If U.S. censuses show this back-and-forth information, the likelihood of your ancestor being from Alsace-Lorraine is high.

Because Alsace-Lorraine has been back and forth between German and French rule, the language of the records switches between German, French, and Latin.

You may want to examine the following before continuing:

- Read the [German Script Tutorial](#) “How to” Guide to learn about and practice reading the old German script.

Surname Frequency Look-up

The [Géopatronyme](#) website has used findings from various sources, including birth records statistics from INSEE, France’s National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, to make available a surname look-up.

- Go to [geopatronyme.com](#) and type a surname into the search box labeled **VOTRE NOM**. Then click on the **Valider** button.
 - For example, type in **Gilles** and click on **Valider**. The Gilles page shows a map of France and a table, both indicating the geographical prevalence of the name.
 - The departments on the map are colored according to how many times the surname is found between the years 1891 and 1915. (The darker the department, the more times the name is found there.)
 - The table to the right of the map lists the departments, with their department number in the left-hand column and the number of times the searched surname is found in that department in the right-hand column, under the heading **Nb**. For Gilles, the highest occurrence of the surname is shown as being in the department of Moselle, in which there are 766 instances of the surname found between 1891 and 1915.
 - Right above the map is a list of year ranges, under the heading **Choisissez la période**. After each year range is a number, indicating the number of occurrences of the searched surname in France during that period. Select one of the year ranges to view the corresponding surname map and table.
 - For example, click on **1966-1990 : 4259 naiss.** on the Gilles page. You’ll notice that the department in which the surname Gilles is found most often is still listed as **Seine Maritime**; however, the surname is found in Seine Maritime 346 times, quite a few more times than the 232 times in the 1891–1915 time period. In this way, you can see the prevalence of a surname in France changing over time.
 - Note that surnames from Alsace and Lorraine during the times these areas were German are not counted. Even so, this look-up gives a good indication of whether you have read a surname in a record correctly, and it also helps you know in which department(s) to start looking for your ancestors in records.

Name Changes

Since Alsace-Lorraine was alternately under German and French rule, the names of your ancestors in this region may have been translated in the records into the language of the administration at that time.

Sometimes only the given names are translated, and other times the surname is translated as well. When determining which version (French or German) of a name to record in your genealogical database, consider the following:

- **Signature:** If a person signs a record, use the version of the name from the signature.
- **Ethnicity:** If the person's ethnicity is known to be either French or German, he or she likely went by the ethnic version of the name.

No matter which version you record as the official name, be sure to list the translated name as an alternative name. This will help you remember to look for both versions in the records.

See the **Given Names** and the **Surnames** headings below for more details.

Given Names

If your ancestor (let's say his name is Jakob) was of German ethnicity but was living in Alsace-Lorraine while that region was under French rule, he may have been called **Jakob** at home and in his community but have been recorded as **Jacques** in official documents.

To determine which French equivalent given name you are searching for (along with the original German given name) in Alsace-Lorraine records, do the following:

- NamepediA
 - Go to namepedia.org/en/firstname/translate and type a first name into the search box labeled **Translate first name**. Then select a language from the drop-down box—if you have a German name you want to view the French version of, select **French**; if you have a French name you want to view the German version of, select **German**. Then click the **Translate** button.
 - For example, type in **Hermann** and select **French**. Then click **Translate**.
 - The results show that **Hermann** is **Armand** in French. This means that if you have a German ancestor in Alsace-Lorraine who had the name Hermann, he may be listed as **Hermann** or **Armand** in the civil records.
 - Some names will show up as having no translation but may have a translated version available elsewhere on the website.
 - For example, type in **Jörg**, select **French**, and click **Translate**. You will now see a list of three versions, each with the note “No translation found.”
 - However, if you click on **Jörg** from the results section, you will be taken to a page detailing related names. Under the **Relations** heading are several boxes, each with a related name. The French name **Georges** is found in the 7th row of the 3rd column—this indicates that the German name **Jörg** can be translated into the French name **Georges**.

- A few examples of common German given names are listed in the following two tables, the green table showing male given names from German to French and the purple table showing female given names from German to French.
 - These name translations are taken from the book *Słownik Imion* (see the **Further Information** heading at the end of this handout for publishing information and an explanation of how to look up the translated names). *Słownik Imion* is very thorough in listing translations of given names.

Male Names		Female Names	
German	French	German	French
August	Auguste	Adelheid	Adélaïde
Bernhard	Bernard	Anna	Anne
Ferdinand	Fernand, Ferdinand	Barbara	Barbara, Barbe
Franz	François	Bertha	Berte, Berthe
Friedrich	Frédéric	Dorothea	Dorothée
Georg, Jörgen, Jörg	Georges	Elisabeth	Elisabeth
Heinrich	Henri	Franziska	Françoise
Hermann	Armand	Gertrud	Gertrude
Jakob	Jacques	Johanna	Jeanne
Johann, Johannes, Hans	Jean	Katharina	Catherine
Josef	Joseph	Magdalene	Madeleine
Karl	Charles	Margaretha	Marguerite
Ludwig	Louis	Maria, Marie	Marie
Ulrich	Ulric, Ulrich	Regina	Reine
Wilhelm	Guillaume	Wilhelmine	Guillaumette, Guilette

Surnames

Not only German given names, but also German surnames may be translated in records during the times when Alsace-Lorraine was under French rule. Specifically, surnames that have a dictionary meaning (such as occupational or descriptive surnames) may be translated.

- To determine what French surname equivalent you may be looking for, look up an online translator, such as [Google Translate](#).
 - For example, type the German surname **Ritter** into Google Translate. Select the language to be translated into as **French** and hit **Enter**. The French translation will show up as **Chevalier**.
 - Note that surnames are also sometimes translated when a person immigrates to the United States. **Ritter** translated into *English* is **Knight**; if your immigrant surname in the United States is **Knight**, the emigrant surname in Germany may be **Ritter**, or in France it may be **Chevalier**.
 - So if your ancestor's surname was **Ritter**, you will want to look for *both* **Ritter** and **Chevalier** in Alsace-Lorraine records.

Place Names

The [Communes d'Alsace-Lorraine](#) FranceGenWeb Wiki page contains a list of German/former (**Ancienne**) place names and their French/current (**Actuelle**) counterparts. Warning: Do not translate this page, as that will change some of the town names and cause confusion.

Use **CTRL+F** (hit and hold the **CTRL** button on your keyboard and hit the **F** button; if you have a Mac, use **Command+F**) and start typing in the town name in the search bar that pops up.

- Every exactly matching string of letters on the page will be highlighted, and fewer letter strings will be highlighted the more you type into the search bar.
- For example, hit **CTRL+F** and start typing in **bes**; note that the number 9 shows up in the search bar, indicating that there are 9 matches. Add another letter, so that it's now searching for **besd**; now there are only 2 matches. Hit **Enter** to view the next match or use the **up-and down arrow buttons** next to the search bar to see that the two matches are Albesdorf and Gebesdorf. Let's say your German town is Albesdorf; in the **Actuelle** column next to **Albesdorf** it gives the French town name counterpart, **Albestroff**.

Meyer's Gazetteer

The online gazetteer (place-name dictionary) *Meyer's* includes locations that are now in France. Follow the steps below to access information about a town in Alsace-Lorraine.

- At www.Meyersgaz.org, type in the German version of a **place name** (insert an asterisk anywhere in the place name where the letters are unknown or where the spelling may have changed over time) and hit **Enter**. This will bring up a list of all German Empire localities that fit the search. Places are listed under their 1871 (German) jurisdictions.
- At the top of the page where it says **Filter results by region**, click on the drop-down box and select **Elsass-Lothringen**. This will then filter out the results so that only those who fit your search and are listed as being located in Alsace-Lorraine are shown.
- Click on a blue hyperlinked **town name**. This will take you to the *Meyer's* webpage for that town and give you information about the various jurisdictions, including civil and ecclesiastical. You can also view the location on a historical or current map.

- If you click on the **Map** heading on the town page, you will see an old map of the region. In the top right-hand corner of the map, click on **Toggle Historical Map** to view the same area in Google Maps.
 - For practice, search for the town name **Hirsingen**. Click on the **town name**. This will take you to the Hirsingen page. Click on the **Map** heading to view the area on an old map. Now click on **Toggle Historical Map** in the right-hand corner; notice that where it previously said **Hirsingen**, it now says **Hirsingue**.
 - **Hirsingue** is thus the current/French name for the former/German town of **Hirsingen**.
 - Consult the [Meyer's Online: www.Meyersgaz.org](http://www.Meyersgaz.org) "How to" Guide for more detailed information about how to use this online gazetteer.

Further Information

- Janowowa, Wanda, et al. *Słownik Imion* (Dictionary of Names). Wrocław, Poland: Ossoliski, 1975. (FHL book 940 D4si)
 - This book is available in the Family History Library.
 - *Słownik Imion* is a dictionary of names, with their German, French, and other counterparts. In each name entry, **#7** is the French name and **#12** is the German name.
 - *Słownik Imion* contains an all-names index in the back of the book.
 - For example, if looking for the French equivalent of the German name Georg, look for **Georg** in the index. The index entry states "**Georg, p. Jerzy**"—this means "**Georg, see Polish name Jerzy.**"
 - The entries in the book are alphabetized according to the Polish/bolded names. For example, find **Jerzy** in the book. Underneath the name, look at **#12** to make sure it is the German name (Georg) you are looking for. Then look at **#7**, which provides the French equivalent, Georges.