

General Thoughts on the Origin of the Gerholz - Gehrholz - Gierholz Family

Joel Streich, October 2018

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Years ago, 1996, I came into contact with Heinrich Gerholz in L,beck. In 1968 had he placed a notice in the "Familienkundliche Nachrichten", a German genealogical magazine. He wanted to find others with the Gerholz name and he wanted to find out where the family may have originated. He had been able to trace his family back to the mid-18th Century in Greifenberg. He was the last known member of that Greifenberg family who still bore the Gerholz name. He was aware that the name Gerholz did not seem to appear in Pommern before the 18th Century, but did appear in the Neumark before that. He suspected that his family may have come to Pommern from the area around Soldin where Gerholz Families had been well documented.

With all the data currently online, we know a lot more today about the Gerholz Family. One new discovery that would especially please Heinrich Gerholz is that there still are some people named Gerholz in Germany today who are distantly related to him. Heinrich Gottfried Gerholz, born 1818 in Greifenberg, was a brother to one of our Heinrich's direct ancestors. This Heinrich Gottfried was a master blacksmith. He moved from Greifenberg to Kreis Cammin where he had several children. His son Friedrich Heinrich Gerholz was born about 1843. He was a master knife maker and he later moved to Kolberg. Some of Friedrich Heinrich's descendants went to Berlin, others lived in Kolberg until 1945. So, if you live in Germany, your name is Gerholz, and your family once lived in Kolberg, you are related to Heinrich Gerholz and the other Gerholzes from Greifenberg. Back in 1996 I wrote to some of the Gerholzes I found in the German telephone book. I did hear back from several including two who did indeed state that their families originally came from Kolberg.

The other discovery that would greatly interest Heinrich Gerholz concerns where his ancestors may have lived before Greifenberg. Heinrich suspected that they may have been from the Soldin Area. With the data available today, I too believe that they came to Greifenberg from the Neumark, but not directly. I believe they lived for some generatons in Poland. More on that below.

Besides Pommern and the Neumark, four other areas in Germany stand out as being home to Gerholz Families going back to at least the 17th Century. Two are in West Germany: the Hanover-Springe Area in Niedersachsen and Northwestern Germany from Dortmund to Oldenburg even up to Frisia. In the Hanover Area the name in past centuries was spelled Gerholz, even more often Gehrholz and occasionally Gierholz. Several of these Hanover Gerholzes and Gehrholzes turn up in the 19th Century in Berlin. There are still Gerholz and Gehrholz Families living in the Hanover Springe Area today. If your name is Gehrholz and you live in Germany, you are probably related to these

Gehrholzes. In the Northwest Germany Area were Gerholzes lived in the 17th century the name seemed to have many variations in spelling. Garnholz, Gernholt, Gierholz are some examples. If you live in Germany today, and your name is Gernholz or Gierholz, your ancestors may have originated in this area. It is worth pointing out that the the Hanover Area of Niedersachsen and Northwestern Germany were both areas that supplied many of the emigrants who took part in the Ostsiedlung. These areas may be the Ur-Heimat of the Gerholzes who ended up in the Neumark, Pommern and East Prussia Centuries ago.

Gerholz Families appear as early as the 16th Century in North Brandenburg and Berlin. The name is often written as Garnholz, Gernholz and Gierholz. Brandenburg could be the origin of the Gernholz Families who later lived in Kreis Randow and Kreis Greifenhagen in Pommern. But a more likely source might be the Neumark.

The Gerholz Family has been documented in Ostpreussen going back to at least the 16th Century. Several family members held prominent postions. Georg Gerholtz was an Amtsschreiber and appears around 1590 in Angersburg. Friedrich Gerholtz was a Pfarrer in Allenburg in 1662. There is a Peter Gerholtz in Nidden in 1610. He had a Verleihngsurkunde for a Krug there and this document is of great interest to linguists since in that document the dividing line between the Lithuanian and Kurish languages on the East Bank of the Kurischen Haff is dicussed. Gerholzes lived in Ostpreussen right up until the end of WWII.

The name Gerholz turns up quite early in the Neumark. The first appearance sems to Albrecht Gerholz, a Fuhrmann, who is listed in the Frankfurt/Oder B,rgerbuch in 1590. The names Gerholtz and Gernholz appears in several different locations in the Neumark in 17th and 18th Century muster and census lists. The name is most often selled Gernholz. There are some records of Gernholzes from Kreis Soldin turning up in Kreis Saatzig in the early 19th Century. Later in the 19th Century one finds Gernholzes in Kreis Randow, Kreis Greifenhagen and Kreis Cammin in Pommern. It is a good bet that some of the Gernholz Families in West Germany may have once lived in the Neumark and Pommern.

But why do I suspect that Heinrich Gerholz's ancestors (and my own as well) came to Pommern from Polish territories? It is based on the timing and suddenness of their first appearances there. Prior to 1728 there don't seem to be any records of Gerholzes living in Pommern. The name hadn't been recorded there in the 17th Century Bauernlists or other early records. The first appearnce of the name Gehrholz/Gerholz found in Pommern so far is from the Kolberg Garrison Church record of the 1728 marriage of Johann Michael Gehrholtz and Anna Maria Peterson. Several more Gerholz individuals appear in the Kolberg Garrison records in the 18th Century, but no longer appear there by the early 19th Century. The next place Gerholz appears in Pommern is in Labes in 1745 where Christian Gerholz married Christina Raddue. The ancestors of Heinrich must have arrived in Griefenberg about this same time. Sigmund Gerholz

performed the Bürger Oath in 1772. Sigmund and family had obviously lived there prior to 1772, but were not originally from there. (Mstr. Christian Gerholzin Labes had a son named Sigmund.)

Also in mid-18th Century there are some appearances of Gerholdt, Gernholz and Gerntholz Families in Polish Territories. Johann Christian Gerntholz, a smith, moved from Schwerin a/d Warthe in Poland to a newly created settlement Blockwinckel in the Warthebruch in 1752. In 1764 in Birnbaum, Poland, the Waffenschmied Johann Friedrich Gerholz turns up as father of the bride. And finally, in 1769, Johann Gernold and Matthes Gernold, both from Poland are recorded as settlers in the Netzebruch at Gutschterbruch in Kreis Friedeberg/Nm.

Prior to the Partitions of Poland there were many Germans living in Polish territory. It is well documented that the high feudal farm rents, obligatory field work that had to be performed on the noble estates, and the compulsory military service that were demanded of the serfs and tradesmen of Pommern were among the harshest in Germany, and that the Neumark was even worse. Many families literally left their homes in the middle of the night and fled the Neumark and Pommern for a better life in "Free" Poland. This is probably the historical explanation of how the Gerholz Families got to Poland. But what brought them back to Germany?

Besides the land improvement projects initiated by Frederick the Great in the Warthebruch and the Oderbruch mentioned above, another very important population project is described in a Wikipedia article summarizing the history of Pommern in the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries: "Pomerania during the early Modern Age". One main point is that after three centuries of war the population of Pommern was decimated. In 1718 the Prussian Government began a massive program of rebuilding and resettling the province. From the wiki article: "Programs were made allowing financial aid to rebuild houses, e.g. people were paid 23% of a house's cost if they build it with fire-proof material, and vacant residential areas were let for free to those willing to erect buildings, also there were cases where those building a house were granted free citizenship, were freed of garrison duties, or were given the necessary timber for free. Also, public buildings were renewed or built anew by the Prussian administration." And continues: "Protestant craftsmen from Roman Catholic Poland settled in the towns. The colonists were freed of certain taxes and services such as military service. Between 1740 and 1784, 26,000 colonists arrived in Prussian Pomerania, and 159 new villages were founded. Most colonists originated in the Palatinate, Mecklenburg, and Poland." The information in the wiki article comes from a book by Werner Buchholz "Pommern. Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas." Siedler, Berlin 1999, ISBN 3-88680-272-8. Such a migration from Poland could explain how Gerholzes popped up suddenly in Kolberg, Labes, and Greifenberg in the mid-18th Century.

In addition to the historical events and timing that suggest similarities between the Gerholz Families in Greifenberg und Labes,

there is also an occupational similarity. Sigmund Gerholz in Greifenberg was a master blacksmith. Christian Gerholz in Labes was a master as well. Since his name was always recorded as Mstr. Christian Gerholz we do not know for sure whether this referred to his being a blacksmith or a metalworker (Schloflermeister). One of his sons, Abraham Christian, was indeed a metal worker, while another, Johann Christian, was a blacksmith. I would also like to point out that besides the Christian Gerntholz mentioned above, a blacksmith who settled in the Warthebruch, there were also Gerntholz blacksmiths in 19th Century Kreis Randow and Greifenhagen. Also- there was a Gernholz blacksmith there.

The Gerholz Family from Labes is the origin of the Gerholz and Gehrholz Families in the USA today. Johann Michael Friedrich Gehrholz from Friedrichsgnade in Kreis Regenwalde and his children emigrated to the US in the 1870s. They settled in Michigan. Other Gerholzes from Justemin emigrated in the 1880s. One set of cousins ended up in Minnesota and the other set in Wisconsin. All the Gerholzes and Gehrholzes in the USA today are descendants of Christian Gerholz in Labes.

Other descendants of Christian Gerholz remained in Pommern. About 1860 these Gerholzes began using the Gierholz spelling. Many lived in Labes and surrounding villages such as Schl[^]nwitz, Woppersnow, Schievelbein and perhaps Grabow right up until 1945. There was also a Gierholz Family in Stettin that was related. If your name is Gierholz and your family comes from Pommern, welcome to the club. Also, if you live in Brazil, have an old great grandmother whose maiden name was Gierholz, you are welcome to the club as well. (One of the Kolberg Gerholzes also ended up in South America.)

There are no Gierholz or Gernholz Families in the USA today. There is, however, a Gerntholz Family. This family may be related to the Gerntholz Family from Pommern that lives in West Germany today. (One relatd Gerntholz Familiy from Pommern also emigrated to South Africa.) But more lkely the Gerntholz Family in the US is related to the Gerntholzes who lived in the part of Poland that, after the partition, became Kries Filehne.

Heinrich Gerholz, his daughter Ursula Hagemann and I always wondered what the relationship between their ancestors, the Greifenberg Gerholzes, and my ancestors, the Labes Gerholzes might be. I think there is one. It might turn up some day, perhaps in the church records from Birnbaum or elsewhere in Poland.

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