

THE WORLDWIDE HUNT FOR HEIRS

GENEALOGISTS SHARE THEIR
MOST THRILLING STORIES

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Introduction.

Estate Genealogy and its Stories

Dear Reader!

When an outsider hears the term 'probate search', he might imagine something along the lines of a private investigator. Even seasoned professional genealogists would not be presumptuous when claiming that the search for heirs is full of surprises and unexpected twists. But what is really behind this profession, which combines the work of a lawyer, a historian, and a private investigator?

Part of the daily work in genealogical research is to experience joyful moments when an empty spot of a family tree is filled or to experience a feeling of satisfaction when an heir has finally been found after months or even years of research work in archives, emigration or immigration registers, registrar's offices, and barely legible records which are sometimes located in the most remote parts of the world.

From time to time, a genealogist is greeted with some scepticism by the heirs after they learn that they are eligible to receive an estate from somebody they have never even heard of! After all, it does not happen every day that somebody learns that he or she is about to be 'showered with money' from out of the blue!

Furthermore, the life stories, biographies, and stories which we reconstruct in our professional genealogical work and which are somewhat reflected in the stories of the heirs are often interesting, sobering, and moving. Being

confronted with family tragedies can affect even the toughest and most experienced genealogist.

Even this small insight into the daily work of our profession demonstrates that genealogy not only traces family relations, but is also able to fill dusty documents with life.

In this book, our genealogists tell stories about what they experienced during their worldwide hunt for heirs and much more. This anthology comprises 30 genealogical stories about some of their most thrilling cases from the last 17 years. The names mentioned in this volume are fictional, and some locations have been changed in order to maintain the anonymity and integrity of the protagonists.

30 genealogists from the *Historikerkanzlei* and their subsidiaries have each chosen one story from their rich wealth of experience that was particularly moving on a personal level; a story they continue to think about because it stayed with them in their professional as well as private lives.

These are stories which...

- highlight the international nature of searching for probates, which can lead investigators to other European countries or even countries outside Europe;
- demonstrate people's mobility as a fundamental constant of family and relations in the past as well as the present, while showing connecting elements throughout time and space;
- show the commitment of the *Historikerkanzlei* to meet the quality requirements of its international challenges in its branches in Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, and Italy.

These stories have all been selected for different reasons, but they all have one thing in common: they are worth telling because they demonstrate that estate genealogy and family research are a fascinating professional field.

The stories that we have compiled here make it obvious that our profession is more than just searching through birth certificates, passenger manifests, marriage certificates, death records, or estate records - to name just a few of our profession's fundamental sources; it is more than just reconstructing blood relationships. Through our work, we make stories real and more tangible for outsiders, with all their biographical highs and lows - equivalent to a journey into the past which continues to have an effect on the present.

These are stories which move, surprise and make people chuckle, and which affect people and make them wonder. Apart from paying tribute to the daily challenges of genealogical work, the contributions compiled here show the individual and cross-generational twists and peculiarities of life.

We wish you great joy in reading our stories!

Nicolas Forster
Lukasz Nieradzic
Norbert Nowak

Vienna, September 2021

Hannes Bacher

The Woman with Two Identities

For the longest time, the inheritance case of the deceased Leopoldine Diana Paget, who died in Great Britain several years ago, was a complete mystery to me; especially as it seemed that the real identity of the deceased had been concealed on purpose.

A genealogical partner office made our office aware of an inheritance case, which had already been closed a few years ago, as no heir could be found. With the limited data available to us, I considered how we could best conduct a successful investigation. Looking for documents and other sources with information about the testatrix and her relatives, I came across her marriage record in a British registry. Apparently, she married a British man in 1947. The marriage certificate stated that, at the time, she was 30 years old and the daughter of the already deceased Josef Reinhart, who was a major in the Austrian army. Furthermore, the certificate contained the information that testatrix had been married to a Mr Fuchs prior to that; this marriage, however, had ended in divorce. According to the certificate, the lady in question had been born in Germany; but this information contradicted the existing data about her father.

This is where my search began. From her documents for entering Great Britain, I found out that the deceased had been born in Austria, had been divorced and never had any children. For the time period in question, there was neither any officer named Reinhart in Austria nor any evidence of the testatrix or her place of birth. Assuming that she had

probably met her husband when he was stationed as an occupying soldier in Austria, I narrowed down the search to the British occupation zone. In order to narrow down my investigations even further, I looked for individuals named Reinhart in old phone directories and World War II military casualty lists. My goal was to find a grouping of the same surname and consequently the testatrix' place of birth. The city of Graz soon proved to be the right place, as this is where this surname was by far most common.

Based on the stated age of 30 years, which had been documented in Great Britain in 1948, I searched the church registers in Graz for Mrs Paget's birth date under her maiden name Reinhart. However, I did not manage to find any entries for a 'Leopoldine Diana' in combination with this surname for the period around 1918. By this time, I had already begun to suspect that Graz was not the right place after all. However, I made a last-ditch attempt to search the parish registers for infant baptisms, which might be associated with the father's name 'Josef Reinhart'. And in fact, I found several children who fulfilled these requirements and came across a Ms Christiane Stefanie Reinhart who had been born to a postal worker in 1912. The entry in the baptism register would not have been particularly remarkable, if not for the marriage of Christiane Stefanie Reinhart with a man called Andreas Fuchs in 1930, which was added to the entry after the fact. I remembered that the testatrix used to have the surname 'Fuchs' before her divorce and examined the marriage in 1930. There I found the information that the marriage had later ended in divorce, which matched with the data about the testatrix. This raised my suspicion that the information given by Ms Paget about herself in Great Britain must be treated with a grain of salt. Maybe the 'Christiane Stefanie' I had found was in fact the testatrix we were looking for?

In order to answer this question, I consulted old records of residence in the city archive. As a result, I find out that

Christiane Reinhart had a daughter two years after her wedding. But because the testatrix should have been childless according to the data at hand, I had my doubts about the theory that these two individuals were actually the same person. However, one year later, in 1933, she left her family and went to London to work there as an interpreter, which proved her connection to Britain. She only returned to Graz shortly before the war, but lived separately from her husband and daughter and soon divorced Andreas Fuchs. Ms Reinhart worked as an interpreter for the Wehrmacht during the war. At this time, she had a relationship with an officer. From this relationship, she had two daughters out of wedlock. As she already had done before, Ms Reinhart soon left her old life and returned to England in 1947; her children out of wedlock stayed with their grandparents.

Shortly afterwards, the testatrix appeared for the first time on the entry documents mentioned at the beginning, which led me to believe even more strongly that 'Christiane Stefanie' and 'Leopoldine Diana' were the same person.

At this point, I began to look for her three children, which had been born in Austria. During my search, I also located the testatrix in question's already very old brother. He told me that his sister had met a British soldier and, on the spur of the moment, followed him to London in 1947. She left her children in Austria and did not contact her brother for several years. He received first letters from her only at the end of the 1950s; I could see that the name of the sender on one of the envelopes was 'Leopoldine Page'. This confirmed that my search was correct. I therefore contacted the three children who had been born in Austria. They also confirmed that they had been receiving letters from their mother under this name; however, they lost touch with the testatrix approximately ten years before her death. Evidently, Ms Page was admitted to a nursing home at that

time. This meant that the three daughters I had found were the heiresses we had been looking for.

In the end, using all researched information, every question regarding the identity of the testatrix could be answered. The real reason, however, why the testatrix gave false information remains unknown. Perhaps she made all those false statements in order to keep her work for the Wehrmacht during World War II secret in order to avoid potential problems in Great Britain? Not only did she change her first name, she also made herself younger by several years. Furthermore, she misstated her father's profession and pretended to be childless. In spite of all the false information deliberately stated by the testatrix, her children received their inheritance in the end. However, this must be cold comfort for the three daughters who had to live without their mother.

Gregor Brezina

The Contact

Some time ago, I was contacted by a Swedish institution which was looking for an heir in an inheritance case in Sweden. This Swedish institution was a funeral home, which was also active in several other areas such as the administration of estates or giving legal advice in inheritance matters. In Sweden, estates are usually administered not by notaries public or other public institutions, but by private individuals or companies.

What's interesting about this case is that the genealogical office in Sweden tried to get in touch with one of the heirs (the testatrix' nephew) while the heir tried to contact the appropriate authorities in Sweden. Both, however, seemed to have missed each other. In this case, there was a will that named an Austrian man, a Hungarian woman, and the Swedish Red Cross as heirs. In Sweden, registering a will is not regulated. The repository of the will must be known to a trusted person so that the will could be found and administered after the death of the testator or testatrix. I managed to get in touch with the Austrian heir and it soon became evident that this would be the easiest part of this case.

From this moment on, the *Historikerkanzlei* acted as the hub for all correspondence between the different parties. After that, we tried to contact the heiress, who was living in Hungary. A Hungarian-speaking colleague finally managed to track down her son. He turned out to be a lawyer, did not want to accept our offer, and instead contacted Sweden directly.