



## A Brief History of Reetz and Hoher Fläming, Brandenburg, Germany

*Generations of our Gensicke ancestors lived in Reetz (bei Belzig), Brandenburg, now part of Germany, before two of them – Christian and Elisabeth Gensicke – emigrated to the United States in 1853.*

Johann Christian Gänsike (Gensicke) and his wife Anna Elisabeth Hartwig emigrated to the United States in 1853 from the small village of Reetz (bei Belzig), then in the Kingdom of Prussia and now in today's Brandenburg State of Germany. Although parish records are limited, they show that ancestors of both Christian and Elisabeth lived in Reetz and nearby villages for several generations.

After serving in the Prussian military, Christian married Elisabeth in 1851. They had their first child, a son, in 1852, but he did not survive the year. In late 1853, they emigrated to the United States, where they had six more children, and Christian eventually became a farmer. Christian would return to Reetz twice for extended visits of up to two years each, first starting in 1889 and then starting in 1901, presumably to visit family who remained in Germany.

Reetz has never been more than a small village, surrounded by small farms and woodlands. It is served by a medieval parish church that dates back to before 1250AD. It survived World Wars I and II relatively intact.

During my 2013 visit, I checked out the church and the village cemetery, and I explored the village's streets.

### **German History Following the Roman Empire Period**

Most of today's Germany was not part of the Roman Empire. Rather, it was home to pagan Germanic tribes that included the Franks, Angles and Saxons. Germanic migrations and invasions in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century effectively helped to bring an end to the Western Roman Empire in 476AD, when Romulus Augustulus was forced to abdicate to Odoacer, a Germanic warlord.

This territory was later consolidated under the Carolingian dynasty that rose to power over the Franks. The dynasty reached its zenith in 800 when Charlemagne was crowned as the first Emperor of the Romans in western Europe in over 300 years. By the time Charlemagne died in 814, the empire included much of present-day France, post-WWII West Germany and northern Italy.

The Carolingian dynasty began to fall apart after Charlemagne died, and his empire was divided among his three grandsons. West Francia, the Kingdom of the West Franks, eventually evolved into modern-day France. East Francia, the Kingdom of the East Franks, became the Kingdom of Germany. The Kingdom of Germany then united with the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Burgundy to form the heart of the Holy Roman Empire.



*Boundaries of the Charlemagne's empire*

### The Slavs

In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the Franks headed west into the lands of the Western Roman Empire, Slavic tribes moved into former German lands from what is now southeastern Poland. These tribes included the Sorbs, Veleti and Obotrites, who settled along the Elbe and between the Elbe and Oder Rivers, including the region surrounding today's Rietz (bei Belzig).

### Holy Roman Empire Origins

Although Charlemagne died in 814, it wasn't until 962 when Otto I, king of Germany, was named emperor and successor to Charlemagne. This began the continuous existence of the Holy Roman Empire for more than eight centuries, although the term *Holy Roman Empire* did not come into use until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Holy Roman Empire was regarded by the Catholic Church as the only legal successor of the old Roman empire.

The Holy Roman Empire was a rather politically complex entity. It was comprised of a number of states and other territories that were ruled by an authority that had been granted imperial immediacy, such as imperial cities, bishoprics and principalities, as well as lordships, sous-fiefs

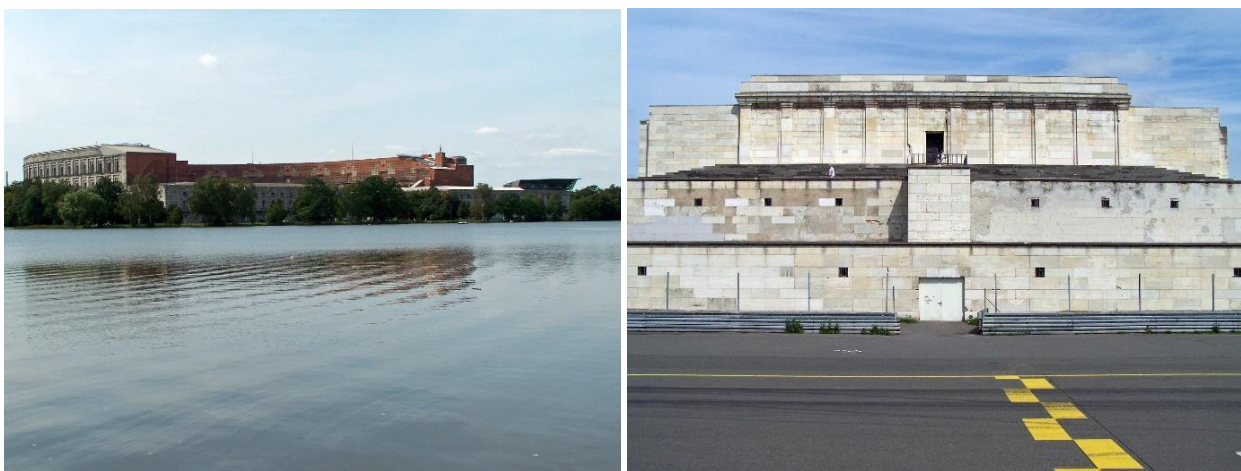
and allodial fiefs. These had some degree of sovereignty, although none of these were truly sovereign. The number and boundaries of these varied regularly over time through new grants, marriages and inheritance. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were about 1,800 of these in the Holy Roman Empire, although many were little more than family estates.

The Holy Roman Empire built a number of imperial castles. German kings often stayed in them temporarily while traveling throughout the empire. The Holy Roman Empire did not have a capital city in any traditional sense, but Nuremberg – home to Nuremberg Castle – was probably as close to that as any city was, at least up until after the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).



*The Bailiff's House (left) and Courtyard (right) at Nuremberg Castle*

Because of Nuremberg's importance to the Holy Roman Empire, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party chose it for the site of their Nuremberg rallies. Construction was started on facilities at the large Nazi Party Rally Grounds on the edge of town, but most of these facilities were never completed.



*Kongresshalle (left) and Zeppelintribüne (right), built as part of the Nazi Party Rally Grounds on the outskirts of Nuremberg.*

The Christian leadership of the Holy Roman Empire had an eye on Christianizing the Wendish people – the Sorbs and the other Slavic tribes in this area – and they had designs on Slavic lands as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century. They began an effort to conquer and colonize the area. Initial German conquests seemed successful, but the Slavic tribes reverted to paganism in 983 AD after a rebellion reversed the early German gains.

The Germans then attempted conversions through peaceful means by the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, and enjoyed some success with that approach. This effort, however, was stymied when, in 1147, German Christians launched the Wendish Crusade, one of the Northern Crusades against pagan Slavic cultures in northern Europe in the Baltic region. The Slavs focused their response on the Germans, generally sparing Dutch and Flemish colonizers. Christian Germans secured lands east of the Elba River, pulling these lands into the Holy Roman Empire.

### **The Ostsiedlung and Hoher Fläming**

The Ostsiedlung (East Settlement) was a migration period of ethnic Germans into and beyond the eastern areas of the Holy Roman Empire, effectively reclaiming the former German lands occupied by Slavic tribes.

With the Holy Roman Empire's victory, large tracts of border lands opened up for further colonization, which was heavily promoted by many of the landowning elites. Over the next 100 years or so, much of this area was colonized by Dutch and Flemish settlers, especially after 1106 when Archbishop Frederick of Hamburg-Bremen actively promoted Dutch and Flemish colonization. The Slavs, however, were not expelled. They would co-exist with these settlers.

Germany in this region had much bog land, swamps and marshes. The first Germanic incomers to this region took over the tilled farmland of the conquered Slavs. The Dutch and Flemish colonizers had experience with swamp reclamation, as dike building and artificial drainage had been practiced in Holland and Flanders since Roman times. These colonists reclaimed thousands of acres of swampland in the region.

With the influx of Christian Flemish lowland colonists, the name *Hoher Fläming*, or *High Fleming*, was given to part of the region. The earliest known mention of Reetz (Redizke) dates to 1161, during the peak of this colonization period.

The colonizers didn't just bring their families and worldly goods. They also brought their faith. A number of churches were constructed in this region during this period, many of which survive to this day.

- For more about these churches, see [The Medieval Village Churches of Hoher Fläming](#).

The Slavs took a backseat to the Germans as a consequence of the conquests and colonization, but the Sorbs held onto a number of their traditions and language. Starting in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Germanification efforts got underway, and in 1667, the Prince of Brandenburg ordered the immediate destruction of all Sorbian printed materials, and saying mass in the Sorbian language was forbidden. Further bans on Sorbian language and culture continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, resulting on an increase in Sorb emigration to both the United States and Australia.

The Nazis dealt with the Sorbs by simply declaring that there were no Sorbs, referring to them as Wendish-speaking Germans. Although clearly not an endorsement of Sorb culture, it spared the Sorbs from the Third Reich's policies of ethnic cleansing.

During the East Germany era, the government created a broad range of Sorbian institutions, and the Sorbs were officially recognized as an ethnic minority. In today's unified Germany, the Sorbs are still a recognized minority, but budget constraints have been cited to justify reductions in support for Sorbian institutions.

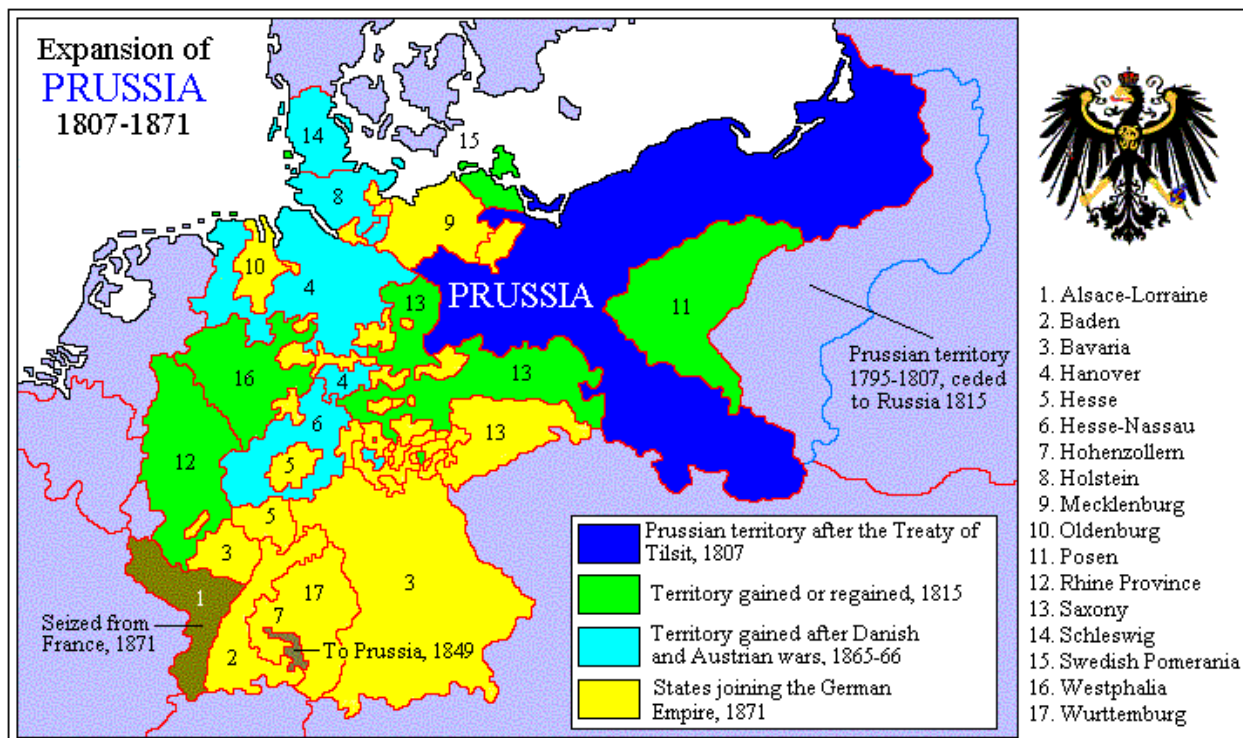
### **Prussia**

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a Catholic medieval military order of Germanic Crusaders called the Teutonic Knights conquered the lands of the Prussians, one of the non-Germanic Baltic tribes along the southeast coast of the Baltic Sea. The region was then Germanized through immigration from central and western Germany, with Polish influences coming from the south. The Prussians were fully assimilated into this and disappeared as a distinct ethnic group within a couple centuries.

In 1466, Prussia was split into the western Royal Prussia, which became a province of Poland, and the Duchy of Prussia. It was the union of Brandenburg and the Duchy of Prussia in 1618 eventually led to the creation of the Kingdom of Prussia in 1701, taking its name from Prussia, although its capital was in Berlin, in the heart of Brandenburg.

One peculiarity was that Brandenburg was still a state within the Holy Roman Empire, whereas the Duchy of Prussia was truly independent and ruled by the Hohenzollern family. The king of the Kingdom of Prussia thus was referred to as the King *in* Prussia rather than the King *of* Prussia.

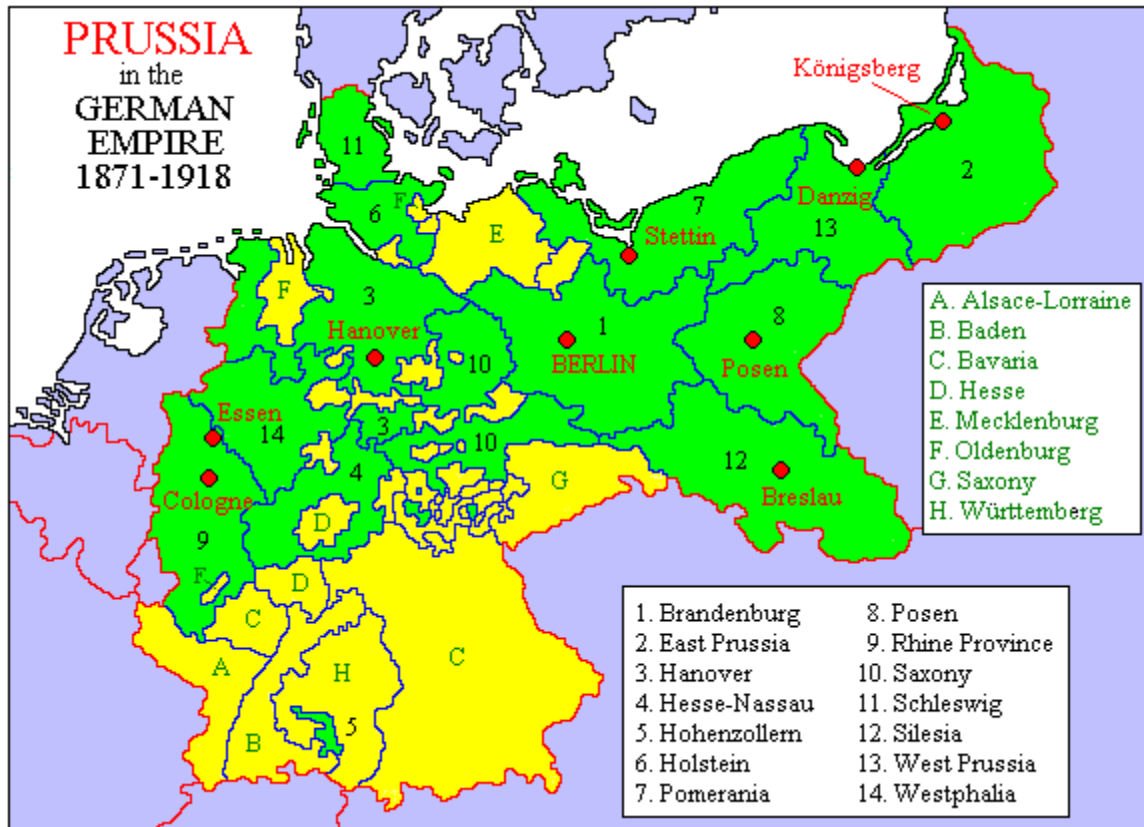
The Holy Roman Empire was dissolved in 1806. After territory gains and losses during the Napoleonic Wars, Prussia ended up with a net gain of territory through 1815's Congress of Vienna. The Holy Roman Empire was essentially replaced by the German Confederation, a loose confederation of states. Some of these states became part of Prussia after the Danish and Austrian wars in the 1860s.



Prussia territory gains in the 1800s

Prussia led the movement to create a unified German Empire, succeeding in 1871. The Kingdom of Prussia became the most important state – in terms of power and territory – in the German Empire.

Our Gensicke and Krueger ancestors who emigrated to the United States did so when where they lived was part of the Kingdom of Prussia. Our Hoffman ancestors emigrated to the United States from the Kingdom of Bavaria, which joined the new German Empire in 1871, a few decades after our Hoffmans left Bavaria.



*Prussia in the German Empire*

After World War I, Prussia became a state in Germany's Weimar Republic. When the Nazis gained power in 1933, they dissolved the representative assembly of Prussia, and in 1934, they divided Germany into new states, which effectively brought an end to Prussia. After winning World War II, the victors considered reconstituting Prussia, but decided against it. The Allied Control Council Law No. 46 officially abolished Prussia on February 25, 1947.

### **The History of Reetz**

There are two villages named Reetz in Germany's Brandenburg state, one near Pritzwalk in the northwest part of the state, and Reetz (bei Belzig) in the southwest part of the state, west of the city of Belzig and on the border with the state of Saxony-Anhalt. Our Reetz ancestors emigrated from Reetz (bei Belzig).

The oldest known written mention of Reetz dates back to 1161. That year is used as the founding date of the village. There may originally have been a Slavic settlement of that name, as this had been a Slavic-populated area before the Holy Roman Empire conquered it, and the -tz suffix in German place names usually indicates a Slavic-origin place name. A number of villages in this once-Slavic region have names that end with this suffix.



*Reetz celebrated its 850<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2011.*

Reetz began as a small farming settlement that was owned by a succession of families: the Querfurt and Luckenberg families, followed by the von Kracht and then the von Brandt von Lindau zu Weisenburg families up until 1755.

The medieval stone church that dominates the center of the village was built between 1190 and 1250, one of a number of medieval stone churches built in the area by the Dutch and Flemish colonists who settled here during the Ostsiedlung. The church was severely damaged during the Thirty Years War and was reconstructed in 1654. It is the only surviving building from the Middle Ages in Reetz.



*The Reetz Parish Church (left); Christmas services inside the Reetz Parish Church (right)*

An agricultural crisis and the Plague in the 1300s led to many of the newer villages in the region to be abandoned. Only Wiesenburg, Jeserig, Schlamau and Reetz survived through this period.

In 1530, there were 15 farmsteads and another four cottages in Reetz. Over the next two hundred years, the village grew slowly, with 14 farmsteads and another 12 cottages in Reetz. But by 1804, the village had grown to include 67 farmsteads.

Reetz had been part of the Holy Roman Empire, but when it fell, the Congress of Vienna added the territory that include Reetz to Prussia.

By 1861, (700 years old) there were about 100 half-timbered houses, five public buildings, a brickworks, a windmill, 156 farm buildings and 700 people in Reetz.

There were 228 local men drafted into the German military during World War I. Of these, 32 died, their names recorded on the village's war memorial.

On Jan 30, 1933, the day Hitler became Reich Chancellor, a swastika flag was hung from the gable of the schoolhouse. Both NSDAP and Hitler Youth were organized in Reetz. As a minor village, Reetz generally survived World War II with relatively little physical damage. However, by the end of WWII, 44 Reetzers had been killed, 33 were missing, and 77 returned from the war.

The Soviet Army arrived in Reetz in April 1945 as the war was coming to an end. This part of Germany ended up in communist East Germany, in which it remained until 1990 when East Germany was dissolved and reunified with West Germany into today's Germany.

Today, Reetz is a small village of about 600 people with few businesses. It is surrounded by farms and forested land, and generally serves as a bedroom community for some of its larger neighbors.

### **Cemeteries and War Memorials**

In Germany, both remains and cremains must be buried in cemeteries, but those buried only get to rest in peace long enough to decay, about 20 to 30 years or so. After that, their plot will be reused. For that reason, except for in some historically significant cemeteries, most headstones that one encounters in German cemeteries are generally newer. Thus, we shouldn't expect to find headstones for any of our ancestors in German cemeteries, although related family names that are found in our family tree do appear on current headstones, and thus some of these people may have been distant relatives of ours.



*I found Hartwig, Senst, Friedrich, Webert, Kube, and Kühne family names among those that appeared on headstones in the Reetz Cemetery, names found in our family tree, but no variations of Gensicke.*



*However, Gensicke and its variants do appear on headstones in nearby villages, including Schlamau (left) and Bornum (right).*

Because of German burial customs, war memorials may have more permanence than headstones do. Related family names appear on World War I war memorials in Reetz and in nearby villages.



*The Reetz War Memorial stands on the grounds of the Reetz Parish Church (left); K. Gensicke is remembered on the Görzke World War I War Memorial (right).*

### The Wrong Reetz

About 75 miles north-northwest of Reetz (bei Belzig) near the town of Putlitz, is another village in Brandenburg state named Reetz, with nearby villages named Telschow and Marienfliess. This was the first Reetz I found on maps in my research, and I originally thought this was the Reetz from which our Gensicke ancestors had emigrated. After all, immigration records showed that a number of Gensicke families emigrated from Reetz and other villages near Putlitz to the United States during roughly the same period that Christian and Elisabeth Gensicke left Reetz for the United States in 1853. I even visited this Reetz and nearby villages in 2010.



*Entering the wrong Reetz (left); the wrong Reetz Parish Church (right)*

However, once I had access to relevant parish church baptism records, I learned of a second Reetz in Brandenburg State – Reetz (bei Belzig). It was this second Reetz where Christian and Elisabeth were born, and from which they emigrated to the United States.

At this point, I have not found any connections between the Putlitz-area Gensickes and our Reetz (bei Belzig) Gensickes in either German or U.S. records. The shared family and village names thus are likely a coincidence.

Photos of Reetz (bei Belzig)



*Entering Reetz from the east on Belziger Strasse*



*The Reetz Parish Church, on Belziger Strasse*



*Looking east on Belziger Strasse from in front of the church*



*Ruins of the old brickworks, on Belziger Strasse at the east end of town*



*Senst Hof, on Lindenplatz, was established in 1773, although the oldest surviving structure on the site may date back only to 1870. Anna Elisabeth Hartwig's grandmother, Anna Magdalena Senst, may have been born here on November 11, 1774 after her Senst father relocated to Reetz. It would eventually become one of the two largest farms in Reetz.*



Construction work was underway at Senst Hof while I was in Reetz in 2013. Senst Hof soon opened as Ökozentrum Sensthof, a collection of vacation apartments, a hay hotel, and an event center. It is home to the annual Reetzival, an ecological music and cultural festival.



*Also on Lindenplatz is the old fire tower.*



*Looking up Zerbster Strasse towards the church*



*Cattle at a small farm on Siedlerweg*



*The old Reetz railroad stop, to the southwest of Reetz; Reetz is no longer served by rail*

