



## The Probable Slavic Ancestry of the Gensickes

*Given the history of Brandenburg, Germany and linguistic analyses of the historical Gensicke name and area places names, and we likely have some Slavic ancestry through the Gensicke line. This seemed to have been confirmed in an Ancestry DNA analysis, although over time Ancestry has radically changed the results of that DNA analysis several times.*

### **Reetz and other Hoher Fläming History and Place Names**

Pagan Slavic tribes had settled in a number of areas across eastern Europe, including the area east of the Elba River and west of the Oder River in present-day Germany, the area that includes Reetz and other Hoher Fläming villages.

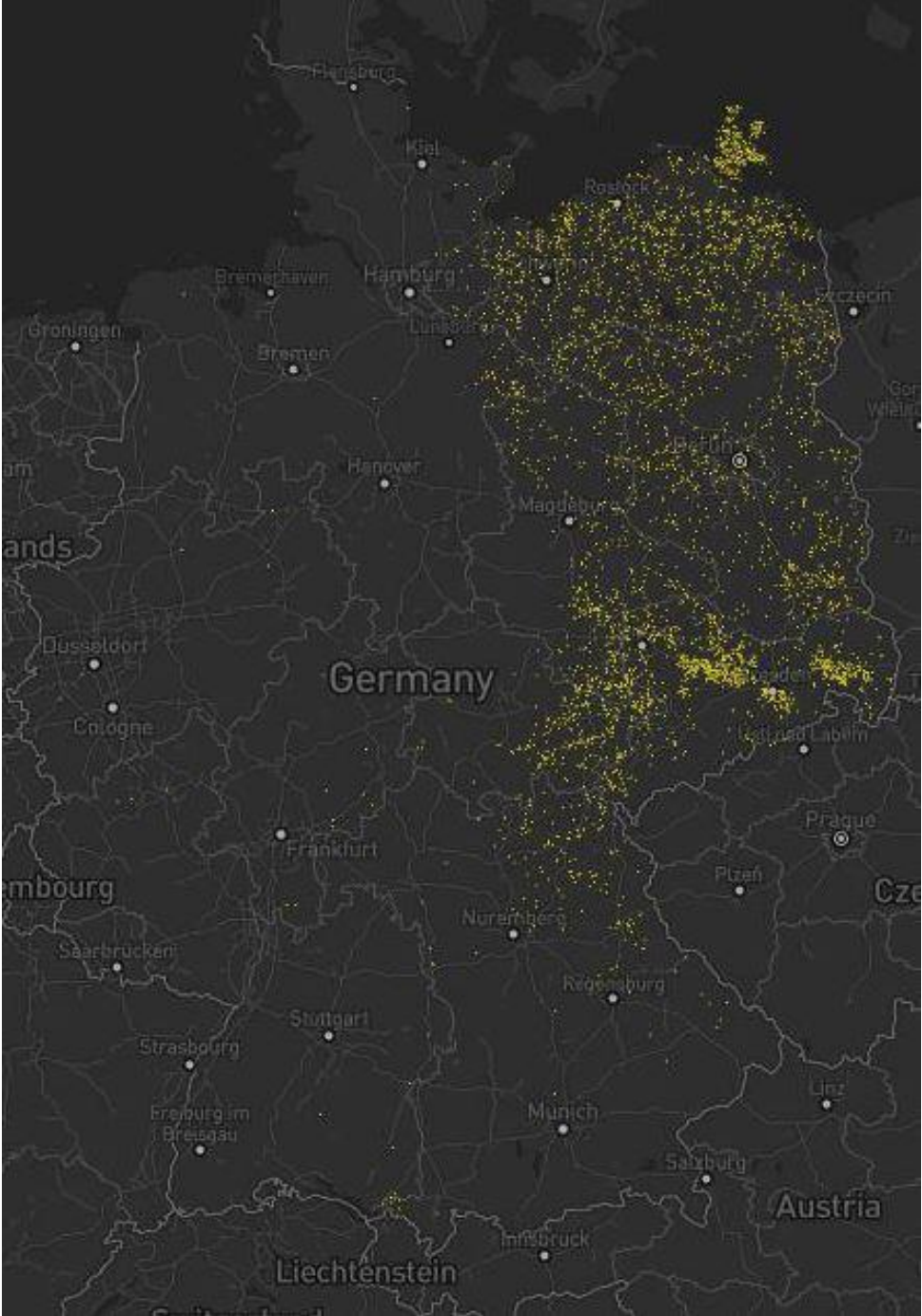
The Christian leadership of the Holy Roman Empire had an eye on Christianizing the Wendish people – the Sorb, Veleti and Obotrite Slavs in this area – as well as designs on their lands as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Initial German conquests seemed successful, but the Wendish tribes reverted to paganism in 983AD after a Slavic rebellion reversed German gains.

The Germans attempted conversions through peaceful means by the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, but a Wendish Crusade, one of the Northern Crusades, was launched in 1147. Christian Germans secured lands east of the Elba River. Although the Wends were not expelled or otherwise eliminated, Christian Flemish lowland colonists were brought in to help secure and populate the area, thus the name Hoher Fläming, or High Fleming, given to part of the region.

- For more on the history of this region, see [A Brief History of Reetz and Hoher Fläming, Brandenburg, Germany.](#)

The Slavic history of this region, however, survives in a number of place names in the region, as is apparent by place name suffixes, some of which have undergone some degree of Germanization over time. For example, place names that end with “-in” where the accent is on the final syllable (e.g., Berlin) have generally Slavic origins. Place names ending with “-itz”, “-tz” and “-ow” (sometimes Germanized to “-au”) also generally have Slavic origins.

Reetz, Nedlitz, Medewitz, Deetz, Schmerwitz, Schlamau, Wollin and Golzow are just a few of the place names in the area whose suffixes suggest that they are of Slavic origin.



*This map of modern Germany shows the locations of towns whose names end with suffixes that resemble Slavic-origin place name suffixes such as “-itz”, “-tz”, “-ow” and their variants. They are heavily concentrated in the area east of the Elba River once dominated by the Wendish tribes.*

## The Gänsike Name

In Germany, “Gensicke” was originally “Gänsike”. My grandmother, Esther Gensicke Wasson, once told me that “Gensicke” meant “goose herder”, which was indeed an occupation at one time. The German word for “goose” is “gäns”, and “geese” is “gänse”. But “gänsehirte” is the German word for “goose herder”.



*Gänsehirte, by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, a Flemish painter known for his depictions of peasant life in rural settings*

“-ike” does not have any meaning in German as a stand-alone word, and certainly not “herder”. However, it is used as a diminutive suffix, generally meaning “son of”, much like the suffix “-son” in English and the prefix “Mc-” in Gaelic (both “Watson” and “McWatt” mean “son of Watt”). But “-ike” is not a German diminutive.

“-ike” and numerous variations (e.g., “-ic”, “-ik”, “-ovic”, “-vic” and “-vich”, among others) are diminutives found in names in a number of Slavic languages, e.g., Archie Bunker’s son-in-law Michael Stivic, where “Stivic” means “son of Stiv (Steve)”. “Petrovic” means “Petr’s son”. Thus, a surname suffix like “-ike” in Germany suggests that the name is of Slavic origin.

That said, “gäns” is certainly a German word. When the Holy Roman Empire brought Flemish colonists into the Hoher Fläming area that had once been Slavic territory, there was an intermingling of Germanic and Slavic peoples, languages and cultures.

## **The Moravian Church**

Most Germans living in Brandenburg State in the 1700s and 1800s were Lutherans. Reetz (bei Belzig), where Christian and Elisabeth Gensicke were from, in fact is only about 25 miles from Lutherstadt Wittenberg, where in 1517 Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to a church door, a seminal event in the Protestant Reformation. Lutheranism has its roots in the work of Martin Luther. The parish church in Reetz is a Lutheran church and the only church in Reetz, and it may have been the official church in that area. Reetz parish church records include the births, baptisms and marriage of Christian and Elisabeth Gensicke and some of their ancestors.

In 1878, the Moravian Church of the United Brethren a.k.a. the Blirstown Moravian Church was established in Blirstown, Iowa, located about five miles to the northwest of the Christian Gensicke Farm. In their local newspapers, Christian and Elisabeth were identified as members of the Moravian Church at that time, and indeed Christian was one of the church's initial elders. Church records show that four of their children were brought into that church on March 21, 1880, including confirmation records for son F.H. (Henry) and daughter Anna Johanna.

Although the church had closed by 1890, in the 1895 Iowa Census, Christian and Elisabeth listed their religion as Moravian, as did their son F.H. (Henry) Gensicke, who lived with them. Henry's wife Hannah and their three children, however, were identified as Lutherans, and the births and baptisms of their three children at that time had been recorded at St. Martin's Evangelical Lutheran Church, located a couple miles from the Gensicke home.

The Moravian Church is one of the oldest Protestant denominations in Christianity. It emerged from the Bohemian Reformation in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the Kingdom of Bohemia about 60 years before Martin Luther's Reformation. The church's heritage can specifically be traced to Moravia (today's southeastern Czech Republic) and Silesia (today's southwestern Poland).

The Hussite Movement – followers of theologian Jan Hus – led to the creation of the Moravian Church. A contingent of these independently organized the Bohemian Brethren a.k.a. Unity of the Brethren about 50 years after Hus' death.

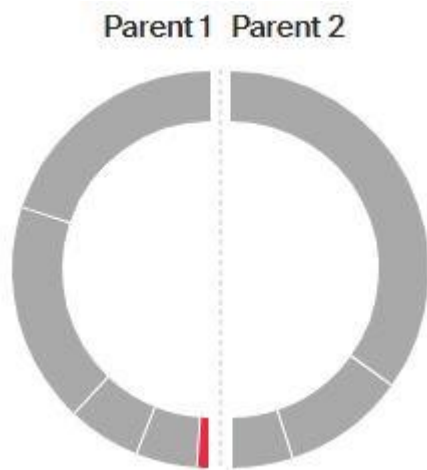
A Counter-Reformation Movement took hold, forcing the Brethren underground, and they were eventually dispersed across northern Europe. A contingent made their way to Upper Lusatia, in present-day Saxony in eastern Germany, in 1722.

Given their ties to the Lutheran church in Reetz and the fact that there was a Lutheran church closer to their farm, and it does make me wonder why Christian and Elisabeth would join the Slavic-originated Moravian Church as soon as that option became available. Of course, it may just have been because they preferred its approach to Christianity.

## The Everchanging Ancestry DNA Analysis

I was aware of the Slavic history in the region around Reetz (bei Belzig), and the use of Slavic suffixes in the Gänsike name and in regional place names when I submitted a DNA sample to AncestryDNA. As my grandmother Esther Gensicke Wasson's ancestry goes back to Prussia and Bavaria, I expected to see about 25% of my DNA ancestry as Germanic or as a combination of Germanic and Slavic. It found that I was 0%-27% Germanic and Slavic.

However, AncestryDNA regularly updates its technical approach, training data and results. One consequence is that over time my percentages have changed radically. In fact, in their 2021 update, the Germanic and Slavic ancestry disappeared completely only to return in 2022.



*A small percentage of my ancestry through my father's side, which includes the Gensicke line, is of Slavic origin (2022).*

## Conclusion

Our Gensicke ancestors likely contributed some Slavic ancestry to our family tree.

- The surname as it appeared in Germany – Gänsike – includes a Slavic diminutive suffix.
- The family was from a region once dominated by Slavic tribes, where the Slavs were integrated into the German population rather than expelled after the German conquest.
- The family was from a village with a Slavic origin name.
- As soon as the opportunity arose while living in Iowa, the Gensickes transferred their church membership to a more distant Slavic-origin Protestant church from the closer Lutheran church.
- Although it has been inconsistent over time, AncestryDNA analysis usually shows that I have a small percentage of Slavic ancestry.

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Last updated November 1, 2023