Writing for Genealogy Information in a Foreign Language

Let's say you've traced your ancestors to Germany, or Poland, or Italy, or somewhere else that does not have English as a primary language. What do you do now?

Most people only speak one or two languages, and it happens very often in genealogy that you end up doing research in a country whose language you do not speak. While much of the world does speak English, not all do, and it's bad form to send a letter to a town hall or archives department and not have it in the language they speak there. At best it will be delayed and at worst it will be ignored.

Your first option is to find someone who actually does speak that language and have them translate it properly for you. Write out the full English query, being sure to be as specific as possible with dates, relations, names, and places. The more information you can supply, the better.

If you don't have anyone around that can translate for you, consider paying for a professional translator. They can be quite cheap for this sort of a quick task, and you're guaranteed that the question you THINK you are asking is the one the recipients actually work on. It can be really awful to think you have a 'dead end', when actually the records are right in the town hall you wrote to - but they didn't understand your letter.

The next step would be to find a sample letter on the web. Start out at WorldGenWeb and follow down to the country you're doing research in. Most of the country pages have sample letters for you to use - simply plug in the names and dates into the spots. This might not work for more complex queries, but should suffice for most of what people would ask about.

Finally, you can always try your hand with Babelfish at Altavista.com. I've done this route many times and have been quite successful with it. In essence, you plug in your English version and choose what language you want to turn it into. It will give you back the translated text. It might not be grammatically correct, but it will definitely get the gist of your request across. When I send letters with Babelfish-translations in them, I always include the matching English text below just in case. That way if someone in the office *does* speak English, I'll have a better chance of at least one of the versions getting the results I want.

Be sure to send along an INTERNATIONAL (not US) check for payment. Foreign banks won't often cash US checks! If you do a money order or postal order, again make sure it is INTERNATIONAL and not just US or local to your country.

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