

# Searching for Philip Morkel in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Germany

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Stamouer Philip Morkel arrived at the Cape on the VOC returnship *Oosterstein* in 1708. He was a "konstabel", in charge of the gunpowder and guns on board and was listed as born in Hamburg.(1) We know quite a bit about his life at the Cape but his youth and family in Germany remains a mystery. Philip also had an unmarried brother, Willem Morkel who was a surgeon ("chirurgijn", also listed as "opperbarbier") on the VOC ships *Mijnden* and *Groenswaart* and who stayed at *Onverwacht*, Philip's farm in the Hottentots Holland. Willem was also listed as born in Hamburg. Other than that, we know almost nothing about Philip's years in Germany and why he and his brother joined the VOC for the perilous voyages to the East and eventually the Cape of Good Hope.

With almost no experience and skills in genealogical research, my wife Barbara and I set out to find more about Philip's origins. We learned as we went along, and while we never found a definitive connection in Germany, the search yielded interesting information about the context in which the brothers grew up. We also located and met a few German Morkel families who had researched their family lines, and we were able to trace the family name back to 1383.

Much of the earlier work was done before data searches on the internet became available. I was on sabbatical in Copenhagen and while busy with normal duties, found time to visit some of the sources in Europe. At first the task seemed daunting – my first visit to the Hamburg archive was a good example of how not to do it. The staff were friendly but I came unprepared and the standard index cards and directories yielded nothing of value. Trial and error showed that the key was to locate experienced intermediaries at each of the archives and primary European sources. They included archivists, academics and private genealogists who knew their way around their particular archive and could read the old handwritten documents in the original language. Once located, they did their work efficiently and we were amazed how generous they were with their time and how modest their fees were.

The vicars (Pfarrers) of small town churches referred my queries to local intermediaries who were trusted with access to the old church books. Amongst others, we dealt with a retired school teacher and a former bank manager. Their enthusiasm was infectious and in one case I was able to inspect registers going back to the mid-fifteen hundreds when the church was founded not long after the reformation. These people were also wonderful sources of the history of their town and region.

## Philip's Birth Date Mystery

The Morkel family Tree (2) was compiled from South African sources and not surprisingly, did not list a birth date for Philip, who was born in Germany. South African Genealogies of GISA (3) list his birth date as 27 February 1677. With no source provided, the origin of this date remains a tantalising puzzle – if there is a document that lists Philip's birth date, what else does it say about him - perhaps something about his origins in Germany?

The International Genealogical Index and Rootsweb show several birthdates for Philip Morkel – 1683, "about 1684" and "about 1685". The Mormon LDS database is an inclusive one where sources are not checked and verified. The 1683 birth date was submitted in 1964 and my attempt to contact the submitter was not successful. (4)

## VOC Records

Apart from employment information (dates of voyages, pay rates etc), the VOC records in the Rijksarchief in The Hague listed both Philip Morkel and Willem Morkel as born in Hamburg and little else (5). These archives also contained a copy of Philip's will made in 1734 while he was in ill health (enigszins ziekelijk), shortly before his death in 1735. In the will it is stated that he was born in Hamburg. But again there is no birth date or any other useful information about his origins in Germany.

## Hamburg Archives

The Hamburg Genealogical Society (6) is open every second Wednesday afternoon and as luck would have it, we passed through Hamburg on that day. Their directories and files contained no Morkel names and they commented that the name did not sound northern German, but rather was from further south. From a list provided by the society I contracted Herr Johannes Vogel to search the Hamburg archives for Philip, Willem and their parents during the period around 1670 to 1690. Mr Vogel was a retired archivist who knew his way around the State Archives of Hamburg where the state and church records (up to 1865) are centralised.

Mr Vogel searched the following records:

1. The archives of the five evangelical/lutheran churches in Hamburg at the time – St. Petri, St. Nikolai, St. Katharinen, St. Jacobi and St. Michaelis.
2. Citizen records (freeman's oath books) from 1529 to 1732.
3. Marriage records for the city.
4. Death records for the city.
5. Hamburg government (Senat) records. While some of this was destroyed in the great fire of 1842, fairly extensive 17<sup>th</sup> century records concerning foreign affairs, military and special records (Senatsprotokolle) are available.

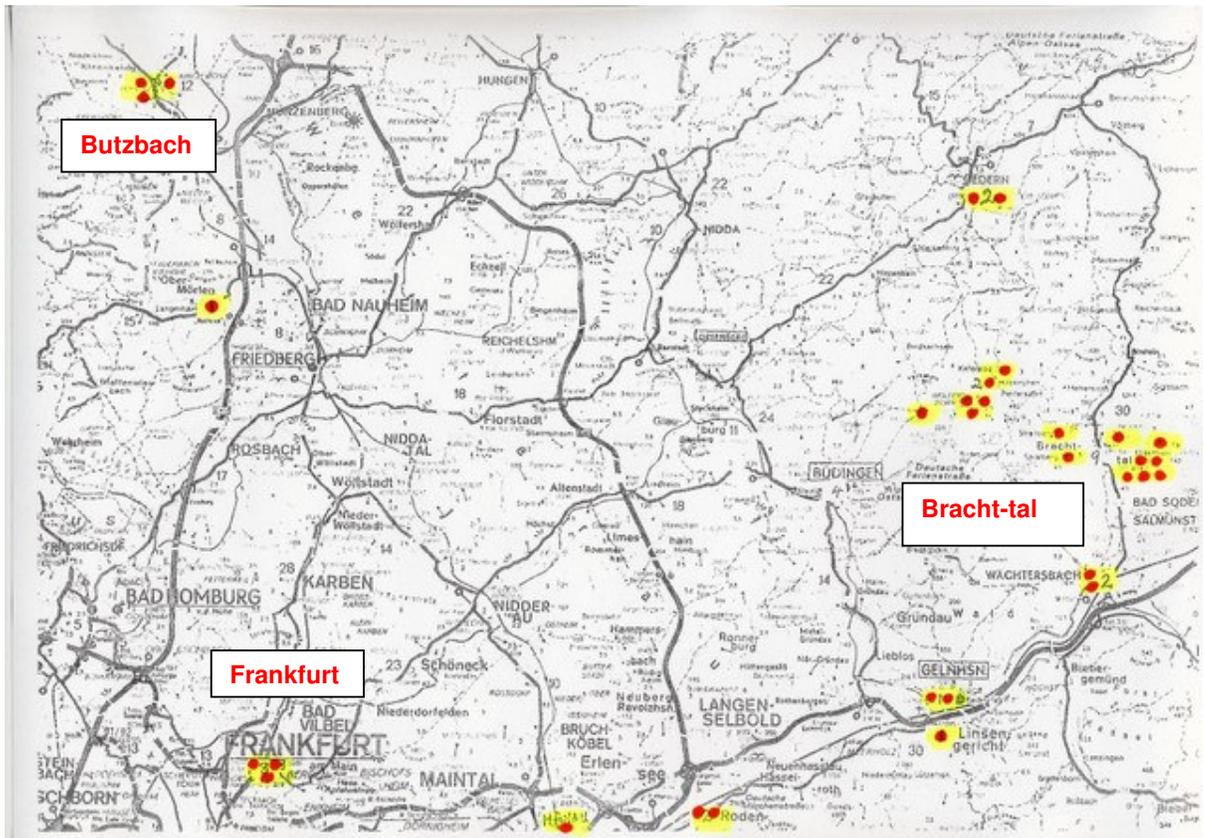
His search was unfortunately negative. He could not find a single Morkel name in the archives – the first Morkel name in Hamburg appeared in the 1800s.

## Morkel Families in Germany

While browsing in a Copenhagen library we came across a reference to a Professor Arnd Morkel, Rector of the University of Trier. We eventually visited Arnd and his wife and he showed us his family tree going back to Anthonius Morkel from Kirchgöns. The marriage register ("Copulationsregister") of the nearby town Butzbach list his marriage to Margaretha Velten Leschen on 19 August 1633.

While waiting for a flight in the airport lounge of Frankfurt I came across several Morkel names in one of the telephone books for the country region surrounding the city. Back in Denmark, Barbara undertook the tedious task of paging through the telephone directories of West Germany in the main Copenhagen Post Office. This was doing it the hard way before the internet, which would enable this task to be done in minutes. She uncovered just more than 40 Morkel names. We found two "hot spots" of names – around Butzbach, about 60 kms north of Frankfurt and a number of small towns (Spielberg, Streitberg, Gedern, Wolfenbörn, Wächtersbach, Schlierbach and others) collectively named the Bracht-tal, about the same distance north east from Frankfurt in Hessen. There were also one or two Morkels in cities such as Frankfurt, Munich and Dusseldorf. The small towns interested us more because it was more likely that the families would have lived there for generations. I wrote letters to all and received about 8 replies. The most interesting was from Carsten Morkel, then a University student, of Pohlgöns a small town, (like neighbouring Kirchgöns) close to Butzbach. Carsten could trace his family back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, about 1610 in Pohlgöns.

We visited Carsten's family in Pohlgöns and we were received like family. Carsten took me to meet Herr Meyerhahn the local genealogy enthusiast (retired school teacher) who was entrusted with the books or registers (christenings, marriages and deaths) of the Butzbach Church (Evangelische Markus-Kirchengemeinde). The books went back to 1561 and showed water stains from being buried during the 30 years war from 1618 to 1648. The Reformation commenced in 1517 when Martin Luther pinned his famous 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. While there were several Morkel names in the books, none even remotely connected with Philip or someone who could have been his father.



**Location of Morkel names (red dots on yellow highlighting) from the German Whitepages. Except for a few names in the larger cities, all Morkels are from the Hessen - Frankfurt region.**

We also met a few Morkel families in the Bracht-tal who kindly referred us to intermediaries who searched the church books of Spielberg, Udenhain, Hitzkirchen, Burgbracht, Kefenrod, Wolfenborn and Bindsachsen. These searches found one name, a shepherd, Johannes Morkel in Spielberg who married in 1670, but who stayed in the area. Johannes had 10 children and, while the dates were promising, none could be connected to our Philip and Willem Morkel. These searches were unsuccessful.

Mr Meyerhahn alerted a colleague, Bodo Heil about my quest and he sent me a copy of an article from from the Hessen genealogy journal. (7) In the article, the Morkel family is traced back to 1383, using tax records. The first mention of the family was Markel from "Howysel" (Hoch-Weisel is today part of Butzbach town), always without a first name, and mentioned first in 1383, and thereafter at regular intervals until 1436 at which time he was worth 170m (mark?) taxable capital which for that time represented reasonable wealth. Markel married Grede and had three children, a son Hientze and two daughters.

The first time the name is spelled "Morkel" appears in the sixth generation after Markel of Howysel.. Emmerich Morkel is listed in 1535 as the younger mayor ("jüngerer Bürgermeister"), and also in 1548 and 1554. A house-mark (8) is available for 1535 and 1548. He owned farmland and vineyards in Butzbach. His taxable capital increased over the years to 360m by 1553. Emmerich died in 1554. He was married to Else who died 1581.



#### **House-mark (Hausmark) 1535 of Emmerich Morkel**

(Source: Melchior 1982. Butzbacher Familien: Marckel, Markel & Morckel)

Descendants of Emmerich Morkel also used the spelling Morckel on occasion. However, in the Church books the name is consistently spelled Morkel. (This is at variance with Arnd's family from the same area who used the Morckel spelling). Melchior's records continue until 1594. Sadly it also lists several deaths from the plague (Pest) in 1574, particularly of children.

### **Germany in the 1600's and the Thirty Years War**

Despite some uncertainty, a birth date between 1677 to 1683 for Philip Morkel sounds reasonable. In what kind of society did he and Willem and before them, their parents, grew up?

In the 1500's Germany was a fragmented collection of larger and smaller principalities, cities and lands with considerable independence, within the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. According to one source, it consisted of 7 electoral princes, 4 archbishops, 46 bishops, 83 other spiritual leaders, 145 counts and lords and approximately 83 imperial towns.(9) After a period of population expansion, Germany entered a recession in the 1590s, followed by a general downturn in the European economy in the 1610s and 1620s. Social and political tensions erupted in peasant revolts as well as social unrest in towns. There was a general expectation of war, with preparatory raising of armies and building of protective walls and cities. A fall in solar energy was associated with a drop in average temperatures, reduced crop seasons and reduced agricultural production in what has been termed a 'little ice age' – captured in the icy winter scenery in paintings of the time. Starvation, destitution, burning of witches and infanticide were not uncommon. (9)

A combination of tensions both within the Holy Roman Empire and among the states of Europe produced a series of conflicts from 1618 to 1648 which have come to be termed the 'Thirty Years War'. They included splits between catholics and protestants, revolts of provincial estates against their territorial rulers, resistance of the territorial rulers against imperial power, and a wider set of conflicts between non-German states which were fought over German soil. These included conflicts between Spain and the Dutch, between Sweden and Poland, and between France and the Hapsburgs. (9)

In thirty years of fighting, the German economy and society were devastated. Various armies marched through the country side, looting and killing whoever were in their way.(11) The area around Frankfurt and Butzbach was in the centre of these conflicts. Peasants and farmers lived precarious lives – uncertain if they could harvest crops. When they fled to walled cities and towns such as Butzbach for protection they lacked the ability to raise crops and the congestion caused diseases and the plague. Eventually a peace was negotiated in 1648 as the 'Treaty of Westphalia' setting institutions in place which endured until the abolition of the empire in Napoleon's time in 1806. (9)

The effect of the war hit some areas in Germany particularly bad with up to one third to two thirds of the population lost. The greatest killer was undoubtedly epidemics of typhoid, the plague and venereal diseases. The destruction of buildings and livestock by unpaid troops through foraging and the use of scorched earth policies caused immense damage to an already fragile subsistence economy. (9)

After the peace of Westphalia, the agony continued. Louis XIV of France sought to extend his territory north-east and repeatedly attacked the Rhineland after 1674. In the Palatinate, in Baden and Württemberg towns were burned, crops destroyed or requisitioned and peasants driven from their

homes. Destruction was particularly savage in the year 1689 when the beautiful castle of Heidelberg and the cities of Mannheim, Worms, and Speyer were laid waste. The Rhineland was to be turned into a desert so that it could not be used as a granary by the enemies of France. Ruins from the French predatory wars still were smouldering when the Hessian states were overrun and devastated anew in the War of Spanish Succession. Again they paid dearly for their strategic position. During the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), French armies were again quartered upon the Germans, and in 1707 the Palatinate suffered great destruction from French raids. (10)

Hamburg escaped much of the devastation of the period. It flourished as part of the Hanseatic League in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was an active trading post even after the League declined toward the end of the middle ages and developed its own economic infrastructure. The Hamburg Stock Exchange was founded in 1558, the Bank of Hamburg in 1619 and a protective convoy started in 1662 to protect merchant ships on the open seas. Hamburg protected itself by taking a political neutral position while also fortifying itself.(12) Despite the devastating 30 years war, Hamburg was able to continue to grow in economic importance. Thus, if the Morkel family lived in Hamburg, they would have escaped much of the hardships of the 30 year war and subsequent troubles.

During this time of hardship in Germany, neighbouring Holland experienced a boom economy based largely on the VOC trade in spices with Batavia. The VOC needed staff, particularly at officer level and one can imagine that the locals who qualified would have preferred to stay at home (or become top rank officials in Batavia), leaving the perilous voyages to Germans and Danes keen for work. The Dutch had a strong relationship with Hamburg which harboured Dutch merchants escaping wars in Holland during the late 1500s and had a recruiting office there.

### **Perhaps Philip did not want to be found**

Thus far we have found the following:

1. Philip and Willem Morkel are both listed in the VOC records as born in Hamburg. Our search has so far has failed to find any trace of Philip, his brother Willem, their parents or any Morkel family in that city at that time.
2. We found about 40 Morkel families living at present in the Hessen countryside near Frankfurt. At least two families could be traced back in Butzbach and neighbouring Pohlögons and Kirchgöns to the early 1600s and late 1500s and we found Morkels in Butzbach as far back as 1383.

Perhaps our search in Hamburg was inadequate, and that some time in the future the connection in the Hamburg Archives will be found. Perhaps Philip and his brother Willem came from elsewhere, possibly Hessen and came to Hamburg to join the VOC. At this stage we simply do not know. The work in Hamburg was quite extensive and done by an experienced archivist. Philip and Willem were both educated and trained in their profession, so they would likely have appeared in documents of the time. Thus there is a probability that the brothers came from elsewhere, such as the Frankfurt region. If so, why did they list Hamburg as their birthplace?

One can only speculate, but it is possible that we could not find Philip and Willem because they did not want to be found. In those days it was not always easy to move, particularly if you served in the army of a feudal lord. If for some reason (and it may have been quite a legitimate, but not approved by the count) you “disappeared” it may have been best to leave the country and join a ship for far away lands. The VOC was the foremost employer of the time and recruited in Hamburg. To cover your tracks you give your place of birth as Hamburg, one of the old Hanseatic league “free cities” not ruled by a feudal lord. This is guessing but it can explain the absence of any reference to Morkel in the Hamburg archives.

The thirty years war ended with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648, but it was only partly effective and unrest continued for many years thereafter. If they were from Hessen, it would have been in this collapsed society that Philip and Willem's parents were born - probably around the 1650's. In spite of the economic hardship of the time, there is evidence that Philip and Willem's parents were reasonably well off. Philip's brother, Willem was a surgeon, a “chirugijn”. This was a person who obtained his medical knowledge through an apprenticeship, rather than a university course. They belonged to a strong Guild with strict rules and demands. Candidates were between 16 and 18 years and apart from

being healthy, needed parents with sufficient means to pay for the four year apprenticeship. (13) Likewise, Philip as an artillerist would also have been supported by his parents during his training.

The idea that the brothers came from a reasonably well-off family is reinforced by being readily accepted in the Cape society, which as all societies of the time were very conscious of status and rank. In spite of severe shortage of females, Philip quickly found a wife (Maria Biebow) and when she died in 1713, married again in the same year. His second wife, Catharina Pasman was from an established family. His mother-in-law was at the time married to the Landdrost of Stellenbosch and Catharina inherited a large farm on the death of her sister in the same year. It is interesting that both fathers-in-law were also from Germany – Detlef Biebow (from Mecklenburg) and Rudolf Pasman (from Mörs, Rhenish Prussia). It is unlikely that they would have accepted Philip if he were not from a similar class.

It is not unlikely that the brothers' parents would have encouraged their sons to move to a better life. This notion is reinforced by oral tradition within our family, that the two brothers came to the Cape "because their father did not want them to serve in the army" (14). If this is so, then it is somewhat ironic that Philip was employed by the VOC as a soldier, probably because he was trained in that craft. He was a "konstabel" on board a ship to the east, i.e. a gunner and in charge of the gunpowder and guns aboard the ship. At the Cape he served as an artillerist before settling down as a farmer.

While the above speculation appears plausible, there is a further complication which adds to the uncertainty. Parts of Hessen, and particularly the Butzbach area were under the rule of Dutch aristocracy – the counts (Grafen) of Nassau and Katzenelnbogen, including Willem of Orange. (15) (Two of the bulwarks at the Castle in Cape Town are named after these counts). If the brothers wanted to escape the influence of their Dutch overlord, why join the VOC? If they went with the blessing of the count, why list their birthplace as Hamburg? The Dutch counts would have been absentee landlords and it is possible that they would not have been aware of such detail.

It is also possible that the brother grew up in another town, where their parents had moved to from say Butzbach. If that were the case, the search for them in Germany becomes very difficult – the possibilities are numerous, starting with Frankfurt, Giessen, Kassel and many others.

If the brothers came from the Bracht-tal area they would have been under another count, Graf Büdingen-Isenberg (15), with no connection to the Dutch. In the Bracht-tal town of Gedern, Herr Erwin Diehl, genealogist (ahnungsforscher) provided interesting background about the history of the area. According to him the feudal lords did not like losing able workers and did not easily give permission for people to move away. Such movements were usually noted in their records. For example Diehl found that three Morkel families from that area migrated in 1760/1767 to Russia under Catherine the Great. Around 1860/1870 these Germans found themselves vulnerable and moved on to the USA. I located one of their Morkel descendents living in San Francisco.

Mohr (10) also commented on the problems would-be immigrants from the area faced. During the years 1671 to 1677 William Penn recruited Germans to move to what became Pennsylvania in the USA. The numbers swelled to about 225,000 German-speaking people in the American colonies at the start of the Revolutionary war. While they were not successful, the rulers of the South German states tried to stop the exodus. The Morkel brothers would have faced similar restrictions when they migrated.

With its many small towns, we could not fully explore the Bracht-tal area, but the probability that Philip and Willem would have come from such small 17<sup>th</sup> century towns would be fairly low. It is unlikely that a family with the means and education the brothers had, would have come from the small hamlets of that area.

Thus the puzzle remains unsolved. Perhaps someone will dig further and come up with answers.

**André T. Morkel**  
**May 2007**

## Sources and Notes:

1. P.W. Morkel 1961. *The Morkels. Family Tree and History*. Private publication. Philip William Morkel (the founder of the chain of furniture stores) commissioned genealogist Franklin Jacobus Boonzaaier to compile the family tree during the 1950s. More about Philip at the Cape at [www.stamouers.com](http://www.stamouers.com)
2. Boonzaaier and also Pama do not show a birth date for Philip Morkel.
3. J.A. Heese & R.T.J. Lombard and GISA, *South African Genealogies Vol.5 L-M*. Genealogical Institute of South Africa.
4. The Rootsweb birth date of 1683 was submitted in 1964 by Johann Grobler, P.O.Box 321, Rothdene, South Africa. After all these years, the address is probably not valid anymore, and I was not surprised that a letter to that address was not answered.
5. Rijksarchief voor de Centrale Regeringsarchieven tot 1795. Eerste Afdeling van het Algemeen Rijksarchief. Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 20, 's-Gravenhage. Postbus 90520, 2509 LM 's-Gravenhage. Nederland.
6. Genealogisches Gesellschaft Sitz Hamburg e.V, Postfach 30 20 42, 2000 Hamburg 36. Germany.
7. Melchior, Erich 1982/1983. "Butzbacher Familien: Marckel, Markel und Morckel". *Hessische Familienkunde. Band 16 J20952 F ISSN 0018-1064*.
8. Housemarks to identify property were common in the middle ages when literacy was not common. See for example Rudolf Koch, 1955. *The Book of Signs*, Dover Publications N.Y. Marks persist to this day for branding cattle and other farm animals.
9. Fulbrook, Mary 1990. *A Concise History of Germany*. Cambridge University Press. p39 ff.
10. From the Mohr family of Kansas website, <http://mysite.verizon.net/res1y70k/mohrhistory.htm>
11. The German classic novel of 1668, *Simplicissimus* by H.J.C. von Grimmelshausen deals with these terrible times. An English translation is available at <http://www.wm.edu/history/rbsche/grimmelshausen/>
12. Hamburg history. [http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/mikebailey1/hamburgarea/hh\\_history.htm](http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/mikebailey1/hamburgarea/hh_history.htm)
13. F.W Marx, *Slawespore* p30, 2007 published by the author. [fwmarx@telkomsa.net](mailto:fwmarx@telkomsa.net). The relevant section translates as: "A surgeon obtained his medical knowledge through an apprenticeship rather than at university. They belonged to a strong guild with strict rules and regulations. Candidates usually came from well-off families who could afford the four year course. They had to be healthy and well formed (welgeskape) between 16 and 18 years old. During the course they lived with the master surgeon and were subject to strict discipline. They accompanied their master on his rounds and had to attend lectures in anatomy, Latin and Greek. They learnt to operate, close wounds, do bloodletting and mix medicines. Each year they had to pass an examination and at the end of the course a oral examination during which other Guild members could ask questions. While they did not enjoy the status of university qualified doctors, they handled medical work and could also do dentistry and work as a barber. They were probably better suited to the hazards of ships than doctors."
14. "Many, many years ago two young men by the name of Morkel were sent to South Africa from Germany because their father didn't want them to serve in the German army." From "The Story of the Morkels" by Weldon Broughton, *The Cape Argus* 14.10.1933 reprinted in *P.W. Morkel, 1961. p55*. This newspaper article about the rugby Morkels was based on interviews with members of the family at that time.
15. History of the Butzbach and Büdingen (Bracht-tal) area in: *Handbuch Der Historischen Stätten Deutschlands. Hessen. IV Band*. Herausgegeben von Dr Georg Wilhelm Sante. Alfred Kroner Verlag Stuttgart. (undated)