CITIZENSHIP IN SWITZERLAND

Citizenship is held at the community or Heimat level rather than the national level, and it is inherited through the paternal line.

Citizenship is important because the records of an ancestor (birth, marriage, death, family book entries) are recorded in the Heimat or home town, even if the event took place somewhere else.

The surnames in a town from 200+ years ago are usually the same surnames that currently have citizenship in a town.


JURISDICTIONS

Jurisdictions are important because records about your family may be located at different levels of jurisdiction. The most important jurisdictions for Switzerland are:

- Canton
- Municipality (German: Gemeinde; French: Commune; Italian: Comune). This is a civil jurisdiction, where you would look for government records.
- Parish (German: Gemeinde; French: Paroisse; Italian: Parrocchia). This is a religious jurisdiction, where you would look for church records.
- Community/village/neighborhood – few records are at this level, but this jurisdiction is important to record because it can help you with your research.
- Hamlet, farm, or even individual house – few records are at this level, but this jurisdiction is important to record because it can help you with your research.

LANGUAGES

The four official spoken languages in Switzerland are German (63.5%), French (22.5%), Italian (8%), and Romansch (0.5%).

Swiss records can be recorded in German, French, Italian, Romansch, and for Catholic areas, Latin. Remember that in Switzerland, people spoke (and speak!) Swiss dialects collectively known as Schwyzerdütsch. Sometimes the records are written in Schwyzerdütsch.
RECORD TYPES

Civil registration records

Civil registration records are recorded with a government office. These records include births, marriages, deaths, and family books. Some civil registration records, particularly in the western cantons bordering France, began civil registration as early as the 1790s. Civil registration was established nationwide beginning January 1, 1876.

Civil registration records cover two types of events: those occurring within the boundaries of the municipality, and all events dealing with citizens of the municipality. From 1876 to around 1925 they were kept in separate registers; after 1925 events of citizens were recorded in family books.

These records are restricted by privacy laws and most of them are only available in civil registration offices in Switzerland. Usually you must prove relationship to a person when ordering a certificate.

Church parish records

The two main religions in Switzerland are Catholic and Reformed Evangelical, founded by John Calvin. Many of these church records begin in the 1500s. Family books were usually begun during the 1800s. Until the 1800s, there was no separation of church and state; everyone in town was required to belong to the parish church, with heavy penalties for dissenters.

Church parish records include baptism, marriage, and burial registers, sometimes kept together but usually kept in separate sections of a book or even in separate books. As with civil registration, the priests were required to keep records of all citizens regardless of where they lived. Typically, the later the record, the more information it contains.

Baptism records should contain the date of baptism, the name of the child, the names of the father and mother, the names of the witnesses or godparents, and the place of citizenship. Baptism records could include birthdate and place, the date of the marriage of the parents, the residence of the parents, the names of the grandparents, and any additional notes added later by a priest, such as marriage or death/burial dates.

Marriage records should contain the marriage date and place, and the names of the groom and bride. They can contain place of citizenship for the bride and groom, names of the couple’s parents, names of any previous spouses, birthdates and places of the bride and groom, and dates the marriage was announced.

Burial records should contain the name of the deceased and the date of burial. They could also include age at death, the date and place of death, the cause of death, the residence of the deceased, the place of citizenship, parents’ or spouse’s names, and birthdates and places.

MORE RESOURCES AND RESEARCH HELP

- FamilySearch Wiki: information about record types, locations, online records, “How to” Guides, genealogical word lists, foreign language reading helps, and much more.
- FamilySearch Learning Center: recorded webinar classes, including this one, specific to Switzerland, as well as specific to a language.