

The family von Kleist

The family of the Kleist's belongs to the Pomeranian ancient nobility. Ancient nobility stems from estate. Each estate develops originally by grant of a sovereign and survives during the sequence of generations by a modification of the same law of succession in favour of the heir of the land and soil, the eldest living son.

The history of the family reaches back into the 13th century. For the early times exist only few documents.

The Germanic knights Conrad and Berthold Clest immigrated into Pomerania around 1240 – within the scope of the so called East-Colonisation during which the Holy Roman Empire little by little subordinated the small West-Slavic territorial tribes, politically and clerical at first, then also linguistic and cultural – by influx of settlers. Conrad certified 1248 as marshal at the court of Duke Barnim I. the establishment of the city Gartz on the Oder.



In the year 1834 a metal seal was found in a forest between Ristow (today Rzyszczewo) and Wutzow (Osòwko) in the district of Belgard, East Pomerania – the eldest known Kleist shield. As still today two running foxes and a joist were the symbols, and it contained the Gothic script “S(igillum) Klest de Densin”. Historians date the seal to the end of the 13th century; it belonged more than 700 years ago to the chieftain of the family who testified 1289 as Vassal at Belgard together with his brother Prissebur an assignment of rights.

S(igillum) Klest de Densin

The metal seal proves that Klest de Densin was the first feudal vassal of the family in the region of Belgard. Exemplary for the East-Colonisation was the interbreeding by marriage of immigrating German service nobility with Slavic nobility, most probably also in this case: Pribislaus, father of Klest de Densin married a daughter of Conrad Clest and named one son after the motherly grandfather – as it was usual with the family name as given name. Therefore, the ethnology of the family von Kleist starts with Klest den Densin.

For 75 years thereafter documents remained silent. Only 1364 Prissebur Klest at Muttrin shows up and 1368 the servant Dubislaus Clest, later at Bonin. Most probably they are the grandsons of Klest den Densin; but without mentioned names inbetween we refer to Prissebur and Dubislaus as second generation. Starting here documents become more numerous.

The feudal letter dated April 13, 1477

100 years later in a feudal letter of April 13, 1477 all Kleist vassals testify that they stem from a common ancestor who had three sons, each creating one line: Tychow – Dubberow, Muttrin – Damen, Villnow – Raddatz. The first two lines are still alive whereas Villnow – Raddatz died out at the end of the 18th century.

With this letter the family was privileged with the “complete hand” for all present and future estates in the dukedom Pomerania. This meant that real estate would not fall back to the duke when an owner died without male heirs, but it would go to the next of kin. This privilege was valid for 400 years, strengthened the economic base of the family and contributed to the growing of the family over many generations. It resulted also in the fact that family registers were drawn up in order to furnish proof who was the next kin. Consequently over the centuries many estates remained in the family but changed – sometimes repeatedly – between the lines. But the privilege also shows how influential the family was in those days.

At the time of the feudal letter one Kleist was a councillor of the duke, and he became later chancellor for several years. We find many Kleists as civil servants in important functions, two more chancellors and several bailiffs – until 1637 when the Pomeranian Dukes died out,

During these years the Kleists are residents only in Pomerania. We see students at several universities, even in Siena. First papers date 1568. While around 1477 less than 20 male members are documented, four generations later (9. generation) already 100 are known. The distribution into three lines becomes insufficient; they are divided into branches which in turn are split up into houses, mostly named after the estates.

During the 30-years war (1618 – 1648) the transfer to the electorate of Brandenburg took place. The Kleists hold still civil servants positions but not so close to the sovereign as in the small Pomerania before. We find district administrators and officials at the court of justice. One of them liked to experiment with a strange phenomenon, the electricity. His invention to [store electricity in a bottle](#) is well known today. The most significant Kleist of this time was privy councillor for the elector and took part in the negotiations for the “Westfälischen Frieden” (peace treaty 1648). In October 1662 he sneaked away, converted to Catholicism and became councillor at the electorate in Bavaria.

Since then Kleists can also be found outside of Pomerania. The just mentioned Kleist took a nephew into his family who became catholic as well and signed up in the Bavarian Army; later he changed to the army of the Elector and Archbishop of Cologne and established the Rhineland Branch of the family whose members had the title baron – today in Germany part of the name.

Another Kleist followed as page a Brandenburg princess who married the Duke of Kurland and advanced there up to court marshal. He was the founder of the Kurland Branch which also bore the title baron. Some members served in the Russian Army.

Quite a few Kleists became Danish soldiers; most of them returned home, but one officer founded a Danish Branch around 1700 which was “alive” until 1901.

In the middle of 18th century one Kleist signed up into the Russian Army. This Russian branch founded by him was unknown to the family for almost 200 years.

However, Brandenburg and Prussia remained the serving center for the sons who had to step aside. Early in the 18th century the family reached the highest number of male members in one generation, almost 200. The family contributed 12 Prussian

generals and one fieldmarshal; few noble families show similar numbers. In the three wars led by Frederic the Great (1740 – 1763) 116 Kleists fought next to each other or one after the other. More than 40 were killed, including the poet [Ewald Christian](#).

Thus membership was diminished, also by the poor pay for low ranking officers. Officers were stationed all over Prussia, including Hamm/Westphalia where 200 years later the family archive was installed. But the “Region Belgard” remained the centre of the family. More than 60 estates were owned there during the years of which in 1945 14 were still run – mentioned in the Feudal Letter of 1477, so in family ownership since the 14th and 15th century.

Family Association

The family owned land. That was the prerequisite for another privilege granted by the Prussian King Frederic William IV. Subsequent to the disturbances in March 1848 in all European countries also Prussia felt compelled to introduce first parliamentary structures. The “Herrenhaus” was formed as 1. chamber and together with the House of Parliament a legislative was created. Some families owning land in Prussia were granted the right to present a member for the Herrenhaus. The Kleists were among them. In order to hold proper elections for this family member a Family Association was formed on June 2, 1857 at Stettin. As first delegate Hans-Hugo von Kleist-Retzow was appointed February 1, 1858 and he took up office for lifetime on March 2, 1858.

The newly formed association called for a tender to write the Family History. It was published in several volumes between 1862 and 1886. Today one can find them in the internet in the original fracture script and updated as file.

In 2025, we completed a [rough translation](#) of the family history into English for family members in the United States.

The eldest minutes of a Family Day, in print, is from 1876, the eldest directory from 1892. Starting 1914 all minutes are documented, replaced after 1934 by newsletters – until 1944. Various articles, among others in the Kreuzzeitung and the Adelsblatt about Family Days plus two photos for 1908 and 1909 are in the archive.

The last member in the Herrenhaus was General Georg, house Wusseken. He has published several articles, inter alia a list of the participants in World War I. Since 1933 Ewald, house Wendisch Tychow, was chairman of the association. He was active in assembling family documents and deposited them in Pomeranian Provincial Archiv at Stettin. The whereabouts are unknown.

During World War II 33 members of the family were killed in action or air attacks. As a result of this war all estates in Pomerania and Middle Germany were lost. Most family members had lost their homes and managed to scrape through as refugees in Western Germany.

The first newsletter after the war – with only few copies – is dated November 1, 1945; the first Family Day was held in October 1955 at Bonn. Appointed as chairman was Berndt who had been on the board since 1933.

Family Days are held every second year, in locations rotating geographically in Germany. Thus 29 gatherings were organized after WW II. Berndt and Dieter started the continuation of the Family History which then was published in 1980 by Hans Wätjen. A new statute was passed in 1957, with small alterations still valid today. Since 1963 the "Familienverband derer von Kleist" is registered as a formal association.

1989 the Association celebrated the 700th anniversary of the family. When the Iron Curtain fell contacts to the city of Frankfurt (Oder) and the Kleist-Museum were built up and two Family Days were held there. Frankfurt (Oder) calls itself "Kleist-Stadt" in memory of the great poet [Heinrich](#) who was born there.

The family has approximately 300 members at present who live mostly in Europe but also in North America, Russia and Australia.

Under Heinrich's chairmanship (1995 – 2011) – and with support of Sigurd who is an expert in the internet – the Association reached out both East- and Westwards. On the Eastern side contacts were built up with Estonia and Lithuania (the former Kurland) where many dates and informations were dug out from the archives for completion of the family history. And in Novosibirsk/Russia a professor was found who during the war for good reasons had changed his surname von Kleist into that of his mother.

In Pomerania, now Poland, Heinrich was active in preserving records of the Kleist centuries by restoring cemeteries and churches, a yearlong effort which culminated in a well accepted exhibition at Bialogard (former Belgard) "The Family von Kleist and the District Belgard".

Towards the West Heinrich made several visits to the USA, Canada and Chile to find and look up family members whose ancestors had lost connection with the German Family Association. Some of them came to the Family Days in Germany, some were gathered in a regional Family Day at Vancouver. The relations with the English speaking cousins were also strengthened by a book written about Heinrich's grandmother Ruth and her close interrelationship with the priest [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#) who was hanged 1945 by the Nazis – Jane Pejsa: [Matriarch of Conspiracy](#).

The von Kleist's in the United States and Canada

The first Kleist came as Hessian officer to America as support for the British troops during the Independence War, but he returned home afterwards.

The first emigrants entered the USA between 1880 and 1900. From the house Warnin came two brothers, one went to New York. He has descendants today. The other is supposed to have gone to California. We don't have information about his destiny.

Around 1900 a nephew of them went to California. His descendants are living there. They have changed the surname to "Vonkleist".

One Kleist from the Rhenish Branch immigrated to the US and built a factory for music instruments in Tonawanda. After having sold it later he returned to Germany, his son remained in USA. He has many descendants.

As result of the Russian revolution one Kleist from the house of Kerklingen came 1923 to the US via Shanghai. His daughter lives in Alaska.

After World War II one Kleist from the house Galten emigrated and settled in Pennsylvania. Another cousin from the house Susten-Gawesen went to Chile and from there to Canada. Many descendants from both cousins live today.