The Surname Eiben in Metzenseifen

The following material summarizes copyrighted research carried out by Herr Anton Eiben on the origin of the surname Eiben. It was translated from the original German by Heinz Schleusener, and edited and amplified by James O'Hara. Errors, omissions from, or misinterpretation of Herr Eiben's work are solely the responsibility of the editor.

Created: 20. June 2005

The surname **Eiben** dates from at least the 15th century in German records, but the word may have been in use as a geographical place name much earlier. As a surname, it is widely distributed over the whole of the Federal Republic of Germany, with the heaviest concentration in the region of Ostfriesland.

Eiben is/was one of the more common names in Metzenseifen. Prior to the large scale relocation in 1946, there were 19 individual septs, or family lines, in the two villages. In order to differentiate between each family, the use of an appended "house name", or "zu-namen" was necessary.

In Unter Metzenseifen, the zu-names were:

Eiben-Fikor, Grolal, Nitschal, Paka, Ploune, Prieftraga, and Schbaza.

In Ober Metzenseifen, the house names were:

Cile, Eiko, Himmelprat, Knoubloch, Lukreza, Nitschal, Preza, Roisch, Schneidaliese, Skala, and Trogsschal.

(Of these, the Eiben-Cile family may have been one with considerable property, since there is an oak forest near the village named "Ciles Achen" and a footpath named "Cilesteig".)

Recently, Herr **Anton Eiben**, a descendant of one of the Metzenseifen lines, became curious about the origin of his surname.

His subsequent research attempted to answer two questions. First, what was the geographical source of the "Grundler", the first Eibens to migrate to Metzenseifen? Second, what is the origin of the surname Eiben?

After his retirement, he contacted Professor R.A. Ebeling of the University of Gronigen in the Netherlands, (an authority on Frisian surnames) and the Society for the Theory of Names at Leipzig University with these two questions. From these discussions he developed both a possible origin of the name and a probable geographical area from which the original Metzenseifen Eibens migrated.

Before reviewing the information provided by the experts at the two universities, it would be helpful to understand how surnames are developed in German or any other language. Onomastics, the study of the origins and forms of surnames, is an inexact science relying heavily on speculation and guess work. While there are many theories followed by researchers in the field, three seem to predominate. These three attempt to develop a source based on:

(1) a trade or profession,

(2) a patronymic name form, or

(3) a geographical place name.

In the first instance, a carpenter named William might be identified initially as "William the Carpenter", which would eventually be shortened to "William Carpenter". Hans Schmit (Smith), John Cartwright and George Mason are further examples. However, since there is apparently no German craft or profession that could serve as a source of the word Eiben, this theory does not appear applicable here.

In the second instance, it should be noted that the root of the surname **Eiben** is "**Eibe**", which was used in the distant past as a given name. "**Eiben**" is the patronymic form, meaning "the son of Eibe". In the German language, the patronym of a given name ending in a consonant is formed by adding an "s" (e.g. Harm - Harms). Patronyms of given names ending in a vowel are formed by adding an "n" or "en", (e.g., **Eibe - Eiben**). The formation of patronyms is common in other languages and cultures, (e.g., Lars Larson, Ivan Ivanovitch, and William Johnson). If this second theory applies, the first and subsequent male descendants of an individual named Eibe became "(given name) Eiben".

Other names derive from a natural or geographical feature associated with an individual or group, such as Battenberg, Berliner or York. The association could be based on an individual's dwelling place or village, or possibly an area from which he emigrated. To develop an origin for **Eiben** following the third basic theory, consider that "Eibe" translates to English as "yew", (and to Latin as "taxus"), and refers to a tough, elastic wood much favored for bows. The word is common as a place name in Saxony and Ostfriesland, but even more so in Bavaria. If the surname Eiben was derived from a place name, it was probably first associated with villages or other locations in or near yew forests. For example, there were mining towns in Oberfalz named **Eibenstock** and **Eibenthal**, and, in Bavaria, towns named Eiben or Euban (a derivative spelling).

Hans Bahlow, in "The Lexicon of German Names", gives further examples noted later. For a short discussion of German name origins, together with many examples, see http://www.serve.com/shea/germusa/surnames.htm.

With this background, we can review the information Herr Eiben received from the two universities. Professor Ebeling at the University of Gronigen confirmed that **Eiben** was a possible patronymic of **Eibe**, as mentioned above. After reviewing a history of Metzenseifen provided by Herr Eiben, he concluded that the original **Eibens** who emigrated to Metzenseifen probably came from southern Germany, and that they worked as miners and blacksmiths. If that assumption is correct, it is possible that these immigrants to the area were identified by their place of origin since there were several place names in southern Germany which had **Eiben** or **Euban** as a root. Two examples are **Eibenthal** and **Eibenstock**.

He also suggested Eiben as a possible variant of Iban or Iwan (Ivan), Slavic given names common in southern Germany at the end of the Middle Ages.

However, later research by Herr Eiben rejected Iwan as a possible source.

In their response to Herr Eiben's questions, the Society for the Theory of Names at Leipzig University confirmed Professor Ebeling's statement that **Eibe** was a Frisian given name, supporting derivation of **Eiben** as a patronymic. However, they again raised the possibility of Iwan or Iban as a source, and suggested a linguistic transformation to Eiben. German linguistic history shows the letter "i" changing to "ei", and the letters "b" and "w" becoming interchangeable due to a similarity in the way they were pronounced. This suggests a possible series of changes: **Iwan** to **Iban** to **Eiban** and, finally, a softening in pronunciation to **Eiben**.

They also raised the possibility of a place name as a source, pointing out that there were several Eiben or Euban place names in Bavaria. They consider Eiben a variant of Euban, since "eu" can change to "ei" in the dialect. As an example, the proper word for "today" in German is "heute", which is pronounced "heite" in dialect.

Finally, they noted the mention of the name in two old documents: **Hans Eiben zu Freiberg** (Saxony), dated 1477, and **Erhard Eyben**, Olsnitz (Saxony) dated 1489.

Although not cited by the society, another early mention of the name Eiben can be found in the town book of Gollnitz dated 1528. The text relates that **Valenten Eyben von Metzensayyen** bought a hammer mill from Hans Neydirffer, for a price of 280 Fl, to be paid within five years to Caspar Mulner. It provides an annual payment schedule of 48 Fl on specific dates until 1534. Those interested in further research on the name may wish to check the following German references. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any equivalent English translations:

• Josef Brehenmacher: Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Deutschen
• C.A. Stark: Familienamen - Verlag, Gluckburg, 1957
• Horst Naumann: Familienlexikon, Leipzig 1989
• Ernst Schwarz: Sudentendeutsche FN (Family Names) des 15.u, 15 JH. 9 (nachhussitisch)
• Handbuch der Sudetendeutschen Kulturgeschichte BD. 6

The following examples of place names are taken from the "Lexicon of German Names" by Hans Bahlow.
• Eiben – Frisian patronym
• Eibl, Eibler, Eiblmayer, Eiblhuber, Eibner – Interpeted as habitations near yews.
• Eib, Eiber, Eyber – Bavarian town names
• Eyb – Town, Ansbach. In 1165 the name is written as "Iwe", in 1303-1313 as "Ibe", and as "Eybe" in 1317
• Eiben – Town name in Austria, also Eibenstein (Vienna)
• Eibenschutz – town name in Moravia and Saxony

In summary, it seems that there are two possible sources for the name; development as a patronymic of the given name "Eibe" (the most probable), or from reference to a geographical location associated directly or indirectly with a yew forest. In the latter case, that town, village or place was probably located in Bavaria and was populated by miners and metal smiths. This possibility is supported by the traces of Bavarian dialect still existing in the Metzenseifen dialect, a further indication that the original migrants into the Metzenseifen area came from that part of Germany.