

ADVENTURES IN FAMILY HISTORY

Our visit to Leimersheim, Germany

By Trish Hackett Nicola, Daughter of Joseph Hackett and Rita Schwab, granddaughter of Sylvester J. Schwab and Alice Murphy, great-granddaughter of Francis X. Schwab and Mary Kibler, great, great granddaughter of John Schwab and Mary E. Hesselschwerdt

In the spring of 2016 we were planning a hiking trip to the Alsace region of France. We would be staying in Strasbourg, France for a few days before our hike started. I knew my mother's Schwab and Hesselschwerdt families were originally from Leimersheim, Germany and I thought it was close by. I checked a map and Strasbourg is only about 87 kilometers (fifty-four miles) from Leimersheim.

Although I am a retired professional genealogist (research for hire for other people), I had done only a little genealogical research on my Schwab line. While I was at the Family History Library (Mormon) in Salt Lake City about ten years earlier I made many copies and scans of family information and filed the information away, vowing to get back to it when I had some extra time. It was time to pull it out and get it in order. I gathered all the information I had collected over the years and entered it into my Family Roots database.

Luckily the Germans kept meticulous records and the Family History Library had filmed many of the records for my family; some are even online now.

The Schwab and Hesselschwerdt families settled in Sheldon, New York in the late 1830s and 1840s. In previous years I had talked to relatives, recorded census data, birth, marriage, death and burial records, deeds and wills, and visited St. Cecelia's cemetery in Sheldon to photograph tombstones. From that research I learned their place of origin—Leimersheim, Germany.

I hired a professional genealogist who was fluent in German and proficient in German script to review the information I had found years ago. She translated some of the more confusing parts and verified that I was on the right track.

Next I went to Facebook. I found a page for the town of Leimersheim, Germany. The current population is about

2,600 residents. I posted a query asking if anyone was familiar with the Schwab and Hesselschwerdt surnames. I was directed to the town historian, Franz Pfadt. Franz and I went into more detail on my family through e-mail with the help of Google Translate. As it turns out, Franz is my 5th cousin, once removed. His wife, Erna, is my 4th cousin through a different Schwab line. We exchanged genealogical information about our families.

I managed to break a bone in my foot about five weeks before our trip. I was still wearing a boot during our flight to Paris and the train to Strasbourg but donated the boot to a local hospital after a few days in Strasbourg. Our special friends from southern France, Alain and Martine, drove to Strasbourg and took us to Leimersheim to visit Franz and Erna. Besides all the family tree information, I brought a current map of western New York, a mug with an 1853 map of Sheldon, pinpointing the places where the Schwabs and Hesselschwardts had lived, an aerial photo of the farm on Cattaraugus Road in Java belonging to Sylvester Schwab, my grandfather; a collage with photos of Mary Kibler and Francis X. Schwab (great grandparents), a wedding photo of my grandparents, Sylvester and Alice Murphy Schwab; photos of Sylvester and Alice Murphy Schwab, Frank & Rita Schwab as young adults, and a photo of Sylvester with Rita and Frank, ages about 7 and 9 (my grandfather with my mother and uncle), and copies of a few photos of the Schwabs and Hesselschwardts. Franz gave us a tour of Leimersheim—the church, cemetery and the Rhine River. Franz and Erna have visited cousins from other family lines in the United States but they have never been to Sheldon.

Our tour of Leimersheim

The cemetery - Although there are large, impressive stone monuments, the plots are only rented for about twenty-five years. The leases can be renewed but most people only keep them for a limited amount of time, then the stones are recycled—the remains go to the families. This is for practical reasons. European towns and cities are thousands of years old and there is not enough room to keep all the graves.

The original baroque Catholic Church of St. Gertrud Catholic was built between 1729 and 1732. It was remodeled and enlarged a few years ago but the high altar and paintings from the Last Supper and the patroness of Gertrude of Nivelles were preserved. The addition to the church includes a high-ceiling wall of stain glass. The result is a striking combination of old and new.



Leimersheim is located in the south-east of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany

Our visit - Franz speaks very good English; Erna and I are mostly only conversant in our own language. My husband, Bud, remembers some of his high school German and speaks a little French; our friends Alain and Martine speak French and know a little German. It was fun communicating. We made it through with hand gestures and smiles and laughing a lot. We enjoyed the fresh pretzels and baked goods Erna served us from the bakery nearby.

My great, great grandparents, Maria Eva Hesselschwerdt and John Schwab; and Maria Eva's parents, George Philip Hesselschwerdt and Maria Barbra Loesch are buried in St. Cecilia's Cemetery in Sheldon. There are still many Schwabs who are descendants of the Leimersheim Schwabs living in the Sheldon area—cousins, distant but still cousins. Most of the Hesselschwerdts left the area and ended up in Ohio, Michigan and beyond. There are many spelling variations of the name Hesselschwerdt and some change their name to Hazelworth. My common ancestors with Franz and Erna are Joannes G. Schwab (1708-1765) and Maria Anna Boltz (1720-1775). There are many Schwab descendants still living in Leimersheim.

This was the experience of a lifetime. There is nothing like stepping onto the soil where your ancestors lived.

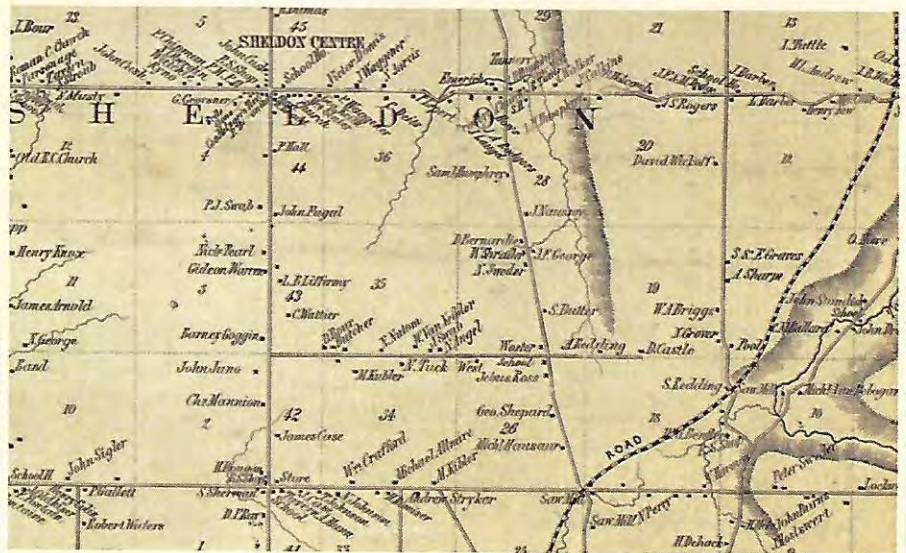


Sylvester Schwab with Frank and Rita, Sheldon, ca. 1926

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Trish at the Schwab monument in Leimersheim, Germany



The photo of the 1853 map of Sheldon that I put on a mug for a gift to Franz and Erna. It has P. J. Swab below Sheldon Centre, J. Swab on the line near the middle, and J. Hoslswert in the right corner.



Original baroque Catholic Church of St. Gertrud built between 1729 and 1732. Remodeled and enlarged, but the altar and paintings from the Last Supper and the patroness of Gertrude of Nivelles were preserved.