

Tracing the Reuschleins in Germany

By Carole Reuschlein Ecker



Sebastian Reuschlein with either his 1st wife Cecelia Schauf (my ancestor) or 2nd wife Theresa Ott (Holler)

The history of my Reuschlein family has never been a mystery to me. Not the American part, anyway. My siblings and I played on the lawn of the Sauk County Courthouse in Baraboo as our parents dug through its records. We knew the names: Heinrich and Elizabetha Vath Reuschlein, Sebastian and Cecelia Schauf Reuschlein, then our grandpa Henry who, with our grandma Christina Paulus Reuschlein, raised a small brood of fine future adults: Dorothy, Florence, Clifford (our dad) and Earl.



Christina Paulus and Henry J. Reuschlein

We knew that the Reuschleins came from the region of Baden-Württemberg in Germany, that they arrived in Wisconsin before our Civil War, that their roots ran deep in Plain, where we spent many warm Sundays visiting ancient family members. We saw family pictures going way back in Wisconsin, but none before that. No faces, no places in Germany. In time, I heard the

name Tauberbischofsheim, the town where my family originated, and someday I wanted to see it.

My husband Mike and I aren't new to genealogy or to travelling to our ancient homelands of England, Ireland and Poland. But we regretted that we were always too rushed, leaving an area too soon. So we planned our trip to Tauberbischofsheim last fall around an efficiency that would yield leisure time, and do it affordably. We rented an apartment for 18 days (often found on VRBO.com or, in our case, through Tauberbischofsheim's online chamber site), saving hundreds on hotel rooms and restaurants.



Timbered house built in 1582 known as the "Reuschlein House" named for a Reuschlein family that once lived there, located in Distelhausen south of Tauberbischofsheim.

We rented a small GPS-equipped car, cheaper and less stressful to rent before leaving home, to get us everywhere on our own timetable. The upshot: middle-class but spanking-clean accommodations, wonderful landlords who made us part of the family, and, by staying put, freed-up transit time. An off-path stop on Germany's famous Romantic Road, little Tauberbischofsheim is called "Tauberö locally" is an acceptable mix of quaint and practical: charming to tourists but useful for residents. Fortress in the old town, shoe stores and hardware stores off the marketplace and industry on the outskirts. The area restaurants are affordable, the vineyards prolific, the breweries

pristine. People are small-town friendly. We were quickly and massively exposed to the culture.



Market square in Tauberbischofsheim

Our landlords had us to cookouts and a church fish fry. They gave us apples and potatoes and wine; we made them apple crisp. Next door, Grandma gave us a tour in rousing German of her tiny farm, and we nodded and smiled and gave her cherries from the market. In the grocery store, we did as the locals, grabbing the cheap but good local wine and snapping up the best bread early in the day. Mike took to evening walks, often landing in a pub down the street, where he made a buddy. On the annual Culture Night, we wandered the entire town proper ó the exact streets my ancient Reuschlein family used ó taking in snippets of concerts in churches, dances in the town hall, drum circles and wine tastings on street corners, and the highlight for us: tea in the warmly lit fortress at long tables of folk-singing neighbors.

Our only prepping for German culture was a short book on customs and some YouTube language tutorials. I memorized maybe 100 words, focusing hard on pronunciation. Mixing and matching words and phrases got us through some rough patches but mostly, a little learning was a dangerous thing and I found myself paddling upstream with jovial fast-talkers, drowning in rolling Rø and a-a-achs. (If you're hoping for a real cultural experience in any country ó full of laughter and unity and camaraderie ó you can't beat trying sincerely to speak the language.)

Other prepping for our trip rested on refreshing my genealogy notes. Dorie Hetzel Danelski and Pat Alt Pulvermacher's book, The Genealogy and History of the Reuschlein Family from Tauberbischofsheim, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, has been essential to my record keeping. Their work is outstanding: comprehensive and sourced. (A side note: this huge, two-volume book is loaded with family names of Plain residents connected with Reuschleins.) I made sure my software entries were updated and downloaded to my tablet photos of pertinent documents I might need. I searched online directories for the Reuschlein surname and, finding two in Tauber, sent letters in English with a ham-handed Google translation in German. I researched German archival resources, contacting by email genealogists for hire (expensive!), churches and archival libraries. I should have guessed that the libraries, where most protestant records reside, are useless without a translator of Old German. Catholic churches keep their own records, and Tauber's St. Martin's church offered me the help of a volunteer researcher. Irmgard Wehrner-Lippert turned out to be a gifted translator, passionate historian, and just a downright nice person. She brought us ó to my amazement ó photocopies of the baptism, marriage and funeral records of my ancestors and branch relatives, back as far as 1797. She brought us the finest liverwurst from the butcher in the next town over. She brought us what I really came for, though I didn't know it ó my family: three Reuschleins waiting for us in the coffee house in the old town.

Sylvia Reuschlein Schlegelmilch and her husband Willi live on the third floor of an extensive house just outside the remains of the old town wall. Their three-season porch overlooks tiled rooftops and the fortress. Sylvia's mother, Käthe Reuschlein, and her aunt, Rita Reuschlein, live in separate apartments in the house. (They are the two Reuschleins I wrote, but their age and the language barrier precluded a response.) Willi is a retired engineer who speaks English well, and Sylvia is a former cook. Their sons are Markus and Thomas, and they have Schlegelmilch family in Minnesota. The Schlegelmilchs were unstoppably gracious. They beamed at meeting

us, eagerly shared family history and old home movies and planted handmade gifts in our hands. They ladled on the courses at table-sagging meals. Sylvia did German food at its best. Sausages, deep-fried apple rings, tangy sauces. Once, dessert was three homemade cakes. We enjoyed it all squeezed around a table on the porch, as doves barnstormed the fortress tower, diving and rolling like Blue Angels.



Front: Kätke Reuschlein. Middle: Silvia Reuschlein Schlegelmilch, Thomas Schlegelmilch, Carole Reuschlein Ecker. Back: Willi Schlegelmilch, Dorothy (fiancée) and Markus Schlegelmilch, Michael Ecker (my husband).

Sylvia and Willi showed us half-timbered towns and abbeys and castles, as well as family-related churches and cemeteries (where they explained that ancestors' graves can't be found, due to the custom of strange to American ways of relinquishing plots after a time). They took us to a little Oktoberfest in a nearby village, where we bought crafts at the outdoor market while they stopped all along the way to greet neighbors. There were spinning and sparkling carnival rides set almost right up against the town church. We ompah-ed our way through half-liters of beer at blue-checked picnic tables. "Why would you go to Munich?" Willi said. "Germans don't go there. We have real Oktoberfests here."

There isn't much I'd change about our trip, itself. But I do have a mental list of what I'd do upfront next time, and it all centers on getting at things sooner. About nine months out, I'd start digging online for an affordable genealogist. Mike did that for our Poland trip, and the genealogist took us to an abandoned estate, a church crumbling into the

sea, and some hunting land all connected with his family. I'd also use the added time to work harder at finding relatives, asking family in the states for help, looking on Facebook, contacting people mentioned in Dorie and Pat's book. I'd take time to load pictures of my family, current and past generations. Sylvia showed me a charcoal portrait of her dad, who looked much like my own dad, Cliff.

What I wouldn't change about our trip, what I am most grateful for, is the hands-on, person-to-person gift that it was. Almost everywhere, we were touched by others' hospitality, but most notably by our landlords, our researcher and my new family.

Our landlords let us in on the best places to eat, and many nights we'd walk the bike trail to the next town, shortcutting on a cow path to some fine restaurants. We'd return home in blackness, edging across a narrow bridge with the help of only the galaxy above.

Our church researcher, Irmgard, also a tour guide of historic Tauber, led us in a group tour one night. From her, I first felt a kind of misty presence of my family on those streets in the 18th and 19th centuries. I was strolling past their lives like a map in raised relief: their church, their shops, their neighbors' homes, likely their own homes.

Finally, my own dear German family, Sylvia and Willi and their sons, Markus and Thomas, took us to themselves. We are part of each other's lives now, and it moves me to know how they care. Sylvia, in her halting but beautiful English, made sure I knew. They had taken us to an ancient abbey, and as we wandered the toppling cloisters, she took me aside. In the church, she said, she lit two candles, one for her family and one for mine. She prayed, she said, stumbling through the English, that my family would always be well and that our trip would go well. The longer she spoke, the damper her eyes became, and I was humbled by her goodness and sincerity. We hugged each other, and I felt unworthy of her friendship.

We had found these lovely people, and they were my family. My dad and my grandparents would have been so pleased. I was proud to be the Reuschlein who took the family full circle

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