

August, 2010, The Heritage Trip to Germany

By Louise Dukas

Wednesday, August 4 & 5

Mary Jane and Helen Moon stayed overnight at my house so we could be up early for leaving at 6:45 to meet the plane in Kansas City. Helen and Mary Jane are going to shop in St. Joe after they leave me at the plane in Kansas City.

Mary Jane saw me into the airport and helped get my online ticket before she left.

The flight was fine. As we flew out of Kansas City the view of the fields and the wooded areas was beautiful. We've had lots of rain this summer so everything is green. In our part of the world every stream, ditch and fence row has trees growing. In addition, the fields are irregular shapes. It is an abstract scene from high in the sky.

I got to Minneapolis before Alice, just long enough to eat lunch before she arrived. On the trip to Frankfurt from Detroit neither of us slept very well. Maybe we are too excited! However the night passed quickly.

Thursday, August 5, 2010

ARRIVAL FRANKFURT AIRPORT

A breakfast brunch in an airport restaurant was the start of the 2010 German Reunion Tour of the Windemuth Family. Pastries, fruit, entree's that looked so good we had to taste greeted us. Going through customs had been as simple as showing our passports to the government official, who looked at the document and compared the grim, unflattering picture to the actual face standing before him.

At the baggage claim area a porter holding a Windemuth Reunion sign collected cousins who came in on various flights, one or two or three at a time from all over North America.

He piled our bags high on the cart and led the way through halls, elevators and escalators to the restaurant where more cousins were gathered. We had an excited, joyful meeting with Windemuths and tour guides. We met Susan Wintermuth, the Reunion Host and master planner, Gene Dennis, the organization president and assistant to Susan, and Rolf Bollmann, the German tour manager who has arranged the details for our ten-day adventure. On the plane we had briefly met Mike Wintermute, who has done much research about our German ancestry that was useful in planning the upcoming tour.

A comfortable tour bus that will be our transportation for the tour took us from the Frankfurt airport to our hotel in Darmstadt. Our accommodations are excellent, and we're ready for a bit of rest, though Susan says a long afternoon nap will simply delay our adjustment to a new time zone, seven hours later than the Central Daylight Time stateside.

Walking explorations of the near-by shops and observations from the bus window show Darmstadt to be a very modern city.

A catered buffet in the hotel restaurant this evening was a great time of good food and getting acquainted with cousins we'd never met. Susan, Gene and Rolf not only welcomed us warmly, but provided help in making the trip the great adventure that it is.

Many of the cousins explored the area near the hotel after supper. They sampled German beer, many of the towns being famous for their breweries and their own beer.

Friday, August 6, 2010

DARMSTADT, PFUNGSTADT

It seems impossible that this morning we actually examined the parish book in the church in Pfungstadt with the hand-written entry of the marriage (1702) of our ancestor Johan Christoph Windemuth and Maria Margaretha Keppinger who lived in Pfungstadt, Hesse-Darmstadt until 1736. The church isn't large, and has been restored since our ancestors lived in Pfungstadt. It is relatively ornate for a Protestant church, with wood carvings, stained glass windows and an organ with many pipes. The town was known for its grain mills, as many as fourteen at one time. Johann was a coach maker, but his father-in-law was a miller. Johan Christopher and his second wife, Anna, immigrated to America in 1736.

I asked the church member who showed us the signatures in the books, which are more than three hundred years old, how he knew just where to find the Windemuth entries. He said that someone in the parish in the 1920s had been interested in the records, had made a file card for each entry and the page on which it is found so that it is not difficult to find a particular name. I can't even imagine how much time that took, for the hand writing is not easy to read, some of it is faded, and the paper is fragile.

As we followed our German guide on a walking tour of the cemetery we saw where some of the Windemuth relatives were buried (two of Johannes' children and the mother, Maria Margaretha). The only evidence that it is a cemetery are a few stone monuments that are part of the fence around the park-like area that is a children's playground now. The stones are not readable because of age and weathering.

We each looked for a restaurant for lunch. Too many people unannounced at one time at a small restaurant is not practical, and besides that, we have fun exploring the town and finding an interesting place to eat. Alice and I found a charming ice cream shop where we ordered a fresh fruit pizza with an ice cream base.

A bus stop at the Frankenstein Castle was part of the trip back to Darmstadt. We drove through a beautiful forested area that could have been the neighborhood of Hansel and Gretel or Red Riding Hood.

Free time and dinner at a location of ones choosing ended the day. Alice and I joined about half of our group who walked to the town square and ate German food at an outdoor restaurant. I had a green salad that was topped with deep-fried fish pieces.

Saturday, August 8, 2010

SPEYER, HEIDELBERG

We enjoyed the wonderful breakfast buffet at the hotel this morning. We're beginning to feel like family: the Windemuth family.

An hour ride to Heidelberg through rural country-side, punctuated by small towns was a delight. During the last part of the trip we followed the Neckar River and saw bluffs beyond the planted fields on our left.

The road to the top of the mountain is narrow and winding, surely a challenge for our bus driver. At the top we were awed by the view of the old castle, its size and its architecture. We walked

within its most defined area, where there are breath-taking views across the river and down into the city of Heidelberg. In the cellar we saw what is supposed to be the largest wine barrel in the world, with another one near-by that is huge, even though smaller than the most famous one.

Just outside the gate to the castle grounds was a man about retirement age, I'd guess, who was doing water-color paintings, accented with ink and pencil. (I asked him.) He had many of his originals for sale.

We took the bus down the mountain to the city of Heidelberg where we had time for our own sightseeing, shopping and lunch. Alice and I had a salad with bread at an outdoor cafe. On our walk we found an open market all around the huge church and in the neighboring square. The market stalls butted up against the side of the church were unusual to us. The inside of the church was beautiful. I was impressed by the very high ceiling, the Gothic style and the beautiful windows. About half of the side windows were of very modern design. I would guess they replaced those lost in WWII.

Some of the group walked across the Heidelberg Bridge. The original bridge, which has been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times, was built by the Romans in 15 A.D.

While we waited for the bus we relaxed in the shade at the edge of the street which follows the Neckar River. Several freight boats traveled past us, most with small cars on the top, probably for use by the captain at boat stops.

Another bus ride took us to Ladenburg, a very old city founded by the Romans. The street views in all of the towns we've visited have been spectacular. In this town there were over-hanging second and third stories, tiled roofs, beam and mortar exteriors (half-timbered), and an abundance of blooming flowers in window boxes.

We saw an excavated site of Roman building foundations from nearly two thousand years ago. We looked from the street through an observation window to the much lower level of the land in the first century A.D. where there were building stones forming part of a wall from a Roman structure. Above the observation area was a more recent building (second story) where people are presently living.

The weather today has been perfect: sunny but not hot, a bit of a breeze. The ride returning us to Darmstadt was beautiful, but many of us snoozed at least part of the way.

At 6:00 we met our "Russian Cousins" in the hotel lobby/meeting room. Andreas, his wife Elisabeth, Rosa (a cousin), and her grandchild Veronica, a little girl of about four years came to see us. Their ancestor had migrated from Germany to the Volga River Valley area of Russia in the early part of the 18th century where they and other Germans had their own province. At that time they were allowed by the Russians to keep their own language and culture and to govern themselves. In the late 1930's when Germany declared war on the USSR, the Germans were quickly and forcefully moved to Siberia, leaving all of their possessions behind. The "cousins" we met were all born in Siberia. They were very interested in proving whether or not they are our blood relatives and asked to participate in the DNA testing that some of the others in the family have done.

At the time of Perestroika in about 1991 when the East /West border was opened many of the relocated German people, including the Windemuth cousins, returned to their homeland in Germany. These cousins now live in this general area. Andreas is now a postal worker.

After questions and answers, looking at pictures and documents, we went to the Ratskeller, an outdoor restaurant where some of us ate last night. We enjoyed the food and German beer, as well as the kinship of family and the relaxed atmosphere of a Saturday evening in Germany.

Sunday, August 8, 2010

CHURCH IN SPEYER, KERZENHEIM, ARRIVAL AT RÜDESHEIM

This morning's breakfast was our last at the Best Western Darmstadt hotel. It has been a wonderful place to stay, with convenient location, comfortable rooms and gracious staff.

We left at 9:00 A.M. for Speyer, the girlhood home of our Great great great ----- Grandmother Maria Margaretha Kleppinger who married Johann Christopher Windemuth on January 4, 1702. We attended the second Sunday morning service in Speyer, which was a modern service, with special interpreting in English just for us. The church is ancient though this building is post-WWII. We were served coffee and assorted cakes after the service and visited with others of the nearly 200 attending. We were made very welcome.

We rode the bus to the Dom, in Speyer also, a huge old cathedral with enormously high ceilings. Restoration is in progress on part of the outside of the building, which seems to be common on old buildings wherever we go.

The annual fair is going on and the long street in front of the cathedral is packed with eating stands, with tables and chairs at each. We saw a stilt walker dressed in a black suit and tie walking among the crowd. We listened to an accordion player accompanied by a fellow sitting on the ground, playing a hand-made percussion instrument with his fingers. Each finger was wearing a metal thimble to make the sounds when he tapped.

We continued on the bus to Rosenthal, very near Speyer. There we had a guided tour of the ancient Abbey Rosenthal, once the home of nuns. The walls of the church are still standing, leaving the interior of the church like an open-air theater. Weddings and other special events are often held there. We saw a model of the whole complex as it once was.

At Kerzenheim, not far away, we were greeted by the Mayor and a local man and lady who served us complimentary wine (and gave us the glasses as souvenirs) and took us on a walking tour of the town. This is the town where Margaret E. Bernhardt, the wife of Johann George Windemuth lived as a child. She was the next in line of our Great Grandmothers. We ended the tour at a beautiful restaurant in a very large building in the middle of town. The meal was wonderful. Mine was pork with mushroom gravy and French fries. Alice had turkey in gravy, with noodles, almost as good as her mother used to make, she said. It took a long time to pay our bills and after that we had an hour's bus ride to Rüdesheim. Our hotel is just across the Rhine River. Alice and I have a room overlooking the river, the railroad, the street and the boat dock.

Each of these towns probably had about 100 people when our ancestors lived here. Perhaps 1500 people live in each one now. Farm land surrounds each town, and looking across the valleys we can see three or four towns from any one point.

It's been a long day, with lots of walking and everlasting memories.

Monday, August 9, 2010

RHINE RIVER BOAT RIDE, OBERWESEL, WP WINERY

We just returned from a delightful evening which began with dinner for our tour group at the Rüdeshheimer Schloss restaurant. We began the meal with a creamy soup (none of us could decide on the recipe), followed by veal in a very good gravy, noodles, applesauce with a garnish of red currants. The dessert was cooked plums topped with ice cream and a wafer.

After dinner many of us walked up the hill in a very narrow street lined with restaurants where crowds were congregated for drinks, fun, live music and dancing. At the restaurant where we stopped there were accordion, guitar and keyboard players and a vocalist.

The day began equally exciting. The breakfast buffet in the hotel is bounteous and tasty. From there we crossed the street and the railroad tracks, walked about a block to the dock for the particular boat company with which we had reservations for a two-hour ride down the Rhine River.

The weather was perfect, sunny and partly cloudy; the folks on our tour are agreeable and great fun; the scenery is spectacular.

From the boat we saw many vineyards, which are in plots from small to large on the sides of the mountains, always on the side where the sun hits just right. I don't know how many castles we saw, mostly high on the hills. All along the river are small towns which are long and narrow, hugging the river bank.

In every town we could see tall church towers. The narrator on the boat told the age of the castles and sometimes of the churches, all dating at least back to the Middle Ages.

We got off the boat at St. Goar and rode to Oberwesel where we explored the town on foot to find a restaurant for lunch. All the shops were closed over the lunch hour. We finally found a restaurant (we learned later that there were more farther up the street), had difficulty in ordering, and had a rather mediocre lunch.

We walked back to the bus and rode to the WP winery, where we tasted three different wines, saw the wine cellar, the barrels in which the wine is stored and heard a little about the business from the second generation owner.

After crossing the Rhine by ferry the bus returned us to our hotel for resting, shopping and whatever we chose.

What a day! A beautiful ride on the Rhine River, a visit to a working winery, a wonderful dinner in a German restaurant with friends.

"My cup runneth over!"

August 10, 2010

GUTENBERG MUSEUM, HESSEN PARK, ARRIVAL AT BAD-SOODEN

This was the day to move to a new hotel so our bags were packed and in the hall by 7:00 A.M. We all ate breakfast in the hotel dining room as usual. As the days go by we are all getting better acquainted with each other. The meal times and bus rides are good for that.

As we left Rudesheim we continued to see many vineyards in the flat lands, not just on the hillsides along the river. Over the day as we traveled farther we saw many fields of grain (wheat or rye) being harvested and the straw being baled. Occasionally we saw a small field of corn, but it certainly is not a predominant crop. There are heavily forested areas that end abruptly at the boundary of a grain field.

At Mainz we visited the Gutenberg Printing Museum, where we saw two and a half (one ancient Bible is half missing) Bibles printed by Gutenberg using his newly invented movable type. A costumed docent demonstrated the printing process of Gutenberg's time in the 1500's.

The illuminated pages we saw of early Bibles, copied by monks, were filled with color, and many had gold embellishment.

We went from Mainz, on the bus, to Neu-Anspach where we toured Hessenpark, a representation of life in the 1500's, 1600's and 1700's, somewhat like our Living History Farms. Old unused buildings have been brought to the site, restored, and in the case of a few homes, furnished as they might have been when in daily use.

We saw two men repairing a thatched roof. Many of the buildings have that kind of roofing, though the more recent ones are of tile. We saw the men cutting ripe grain with a scythe, bundling it and shocking it for threshing later on.

Most of us bought a sandwich and/or ice cream and a drink at the stand on the museum grounds for our lunch.

Another bus ride took us to Bad-Sooden on the Werra River where we are staying for the next four days. Richard and Hannele Windemuth, our Danish/German cousins greeted us before we got off the bus. Upon seeing Alice's name tag, Hannele immediately asked if she were a cousin to Kathleen. We were

amazed, for Kathleen Wintermute Rumiano is indeed our cousin. Richard and Hannele became acquainted with her at the Branson Reunion and visited her in California after meeting her there. They have corresponded since that time.

Richard and Hannele have made the plans for our stay here which promises to be wonderful. We ate supper at a local restaurant. I had pork, part with cream gravy and part with mushroom gravy, potato croquettes, vegetable salad and apple juice. It was excellent!

Hannele sat with Alice, Sandra and I at supper so we got better acquainted. All four of us were at the Branson Reunion and, of course, remembered my brother, Jesse, who was the host that year, and others.

Hannele took those of us whose bills for supper had been paid (a slow process) on a little walk to see where people go for the healing and refreshing here. This town has long been known for its healing mineral springs. The healing comes when the air evaporates the salt water that comes from deep in the ground. The water drips on long walls made of large twigs, evaporating as it drips. The walls are covered with the salt which has accumulated over many years. It makes the air healing for persons with breathing problems or simply to make anyone "feel better".

Alice and I indulged in ice cream cones after the walking tour and before we returned to our very beautiful hotel room. Another wonderful day!

Wednesday, August 11, 2010

BAD-SOODEN, THE TOWN OF JOHANNE AND BEATA WINDEMUTH

Our hotel in this town known for its mineral baths is beautiful. The buffet breakfast is excellent as well. We have had only the best in accommodations on this trip.

The first "cultural event" of the day was a power point presentation by Heinz Reinhard Conti-Windemuth, a German genealogist and part of the family, who explained a little about the line of our ancestry and showed sides of many buildings in the States for which his father (or uncle) was the stone mason. The limestone masonry was the architectural decoration for the building.

We met Herbert and Winifred Neie who are a Lutheran minister couple, their son, his wife and their three-month-old son who looks for all the world like my great grandson, Levi Lucas. Common genes???? Maybe not, for Levi has his father's complexion and hair color, probably

not from the Wintermute side. A few of the persons in the family have had DNA testing which proves our common ancestry.

We left at 9:00 this morning to see the old church in Weidenhausen, dating to 1660, where our "Grandparents" Johanne and Beata Windemuth probably attended church. We know that they lived in this village. The minister of the church described the building, its history and brought out the church record books starting with 1660. We were told that there are still Windemuths living in the community. "They are all over the place", many of them being small inn-keepers. The books are very fragile and the names in them have not been catalogued, so we really don't know if our ancestors are recorded here.

From the church we went only a short distance (three or four miles) to the Abbey Germerode where monks and nuns once lived. There is a record there of a parcel of land owned by the Abbey being leased to a Windemuth in 1433. We have no proof that he was one of our ancestors, but it appears likely. This is the earliest known recording of the Windemuth name in any of its spellings.

One of the theories about the meaning of the name is from the meaning of "muth" (part) and "winter" (pasture) which may have meant "one who owned a part of a pasture or a parcel of land". It could also mean "one who often changes his mind" from another meaning of the root words. Take your choice!

The Abbey was rebuilt following a fire in 1938. It is Lutheran, as is almost all of the north part of Germany. It is now used as a church (The pastor was our guide) and for retreats, etc.

The afternoon schedule was altered to give us free time before we gathered in the hotel lobby/meeting room at 5:00 P.M. for a concert by a local community lady's chorus. They sang several traditional German songs acappella and very beautifully.

We ate our evening meal at the same outdoor restaurant as last night, followed by an interesting informal discussion at our table about health care and other problems.

Thursday, August 12, 2010

WARTBURG CASTLE, BAD-SOODEN OVERNIGHT

As various ones of our group met this evening, going to and from eating supper, looking for an ATM machine, or simply visiting, we've all commented "It was a wonderful day, but we are tired and ready for bed". We have had drizzling rain much of the day which didn't spoil our activities, but gave the far-away vistas a hazy look, changing the forested mountains from black/green to blues and grays, accented with mist here and there. Everyone got a little bit damp a few times, but no one complained.

We drove to Eisenach where Wartburg Castle is located. Martin Luther translated the New Testament from Latin to German while he lived there in exile, disguised as a monk. The castle dates from the 1100's. The bus took us up the mountain as far as the roads allowed, and then we transferred to mini-busses to go the rest of the way. However, we still had steps and steep broad paths to the castle itself. We ate lunch at a restaurant in one of the ground floor rooms, followed by a guided tour of the castle. The floors are of cobblestones, the walls of stone, the ceilings mostly high. This castle was finer than most for it had fire-places in several rooms. One room was decorated with mosaics covering every wall and the ceiling. The mosaics were in honor of St. Elizabeth and installed in the early 20th century. When I saw the steps ahead and the drizzling rain I decided to wait for the rest of the group while they finished the tour and climbed to the top of the Tower. A few of us enjoyed coffee in a little restaurant in the castle while we waited. The rain began in earnest while we were at the castle.

Also in the town of Eisenach we went to the Bachhaus, a very modern museum with exhibits and stories of Bach and the music of his time. We attended a short concert, at which the docent played the ancient instruments: organ with pipes, clavichord, etc.

As we drove to the castle we went from West Germany to East Germany that had been under Russian Communist rule after WWII. We saw some remaining guard houses from where armed guards kept watch before reunification. Many big old houses were abandoned because owners either escaped to the free world or were arrested. The houses had no buyers because they were so close to the border between East and West. The Communists took ownership and now the houses have broken windows and are in disrepair.

On the way from Eisenach we stopped at Breитай, a very small town. We walked up a short but steep hill to see a house, inscribed on the side with the Windemuth name, where Windemuths lived for six generations. It is a charming little town, with narrow streets and tiny, colorful gardens.

Back at the hotel we were tired, a little bit soggy, but filled with wonderful memories of the day. Alice and I had an excellent meal in the hotel as did several others.

Friday, August 13, 2010

BAD-SOODEN, ALLENDORF, IRON CURTAIN MUSEUM, DINNER WITH COUSINS

The first event of the day (after breakfast) was the bus ride to a location not far from Bad Sooden -Allendorf where East and West Germany met. We saw a section of the Iron Curtain and the “no man’s land” between East and West Germany from the days when Russia forbade any contact between the two areas. A wide strip of land is cleared of trees and brush; a barbed-wire topped fence is on each side, and mines are buried throughout the “no man’s land”. A museum has been established by volunteers, both as a display of what occurred, and for research for information about who and how many persons were killed, who were the persons who gave the orders and what those orders were. It is a haunting site; one that illustrates the fear and poverty under which the East Germans lived from the late ‘40s to 1991.

The bus took us to Allendorf where great preparations have been made for their week-end Thanksgiving festival starting this evening. The streets are decorated with garlands of wheat; crowns made of wheat are displayed in doors; stands for food have been set up all over the town.

The town is very old; the home of some of our ancestors. It is located on steep hills. We walked up a steep street to see a house with the Windemuth name on the front. Family members lived there for six generations, but not now.

There was free time before we met in the hotel patio and restaurant for a reception and dinner with German relatives. The party had been publicized in the local paper, inviting others with the Windemuth name in their ancestry to attend. Twenty Germans had made reservations; 46 showed up. A total of nearly 90 people were at the reception. With a number of family members being bi-lingual and willing to interpret for the rest of us, there was lots of conversation among the cousins who had never met before.

The dinner was in the beautiful hotel dining room. Speakers greeted us in both German and English. The tables were arranged so that Canadians, U.S. citizens, Germans and Hannele and Richard Windemuth from Denmark were all sitting with new friends. It was a wonderful ending to a week of getting to know each other and about our common heritage.

Saturday, August 14, 2010

BAD-SOODEN TO FRANKFURT VIA BÜDINGEN

Everyone was relaxed and ready for the last day of our tour as we gathered for the wonderful hotel breakfast buffet. We'll soon be without the great variety of German breads each morning and all that is served with it.

Bags were loaded into the bus and we left at 10:00 for Frankfurt. The scenery continues to be green and glorious, with many fields of grain waiting to be harvested, backed by the forested hills. Our route took us through small towns and country roads, giving us the feeling that we have seen Germany beyond the cities.

We stopped in the town of Büdingen for lunch and a time to stroll through narrow streets, lined with small shops and restaurants. Some of us had lunch and one last indulgence of kuchen. Mine was of apple and walnuts. The shops closed at 2:00 P.M., a normal time for Saturday.

We arrived at the hotel in Frankfurt, which is a contrast to the small town setting heretofore. This is in the business part of town, with no shops nor amenities close-by, except for an ATM machine.

We all ate supper together in the dining room, ending with Black Forest cake. We're all saying "Good-bye", and wishing each other well on going home or continuing our travels.

Sunday, August 15, 2010

FRANKFURT

We had another wonderful breakfast in the hotel dining room this morning. I have no idea how this adds to the cost of our trip (which has been outstanding in giving us a big "bang for our buck"), but we have had fruit, fruit juice, at least four kinds of dry cereal, sliced bread of two or three kinds, hard rolls, croissants, thin sliced cheese (several kinds), sliced meats, fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, salad greens, coffee and tea on the buffet every morning of the whole trip. We are spoiled!

Some of our group left for the airport on a 7:00 A.M. bus, but many others were eating breakfast when we did.

Jane Wintemute, Sarah Gordon, Carol Paulson and Barbara Mulcahy from Vancouver, B.C. are staying in Frankfurt two more days and invited us to spend the day with them. Alice and I are delighted. We enjoy them as friends and we appreciate help in finding our way in the city.

We finally decided to take taxis to the center of the old part of the city where there is a huge cathedral. We saw pictures of the area after WWII when everything surrounding it was demolished; only the church was standing and it was badly damaged. It has been restored and is beautiful. We are told that the tower rises about 300 meters.

Since it is Sunday many shops are closed. The museum we intended to visit is closed for repairs until October. We strolled around the area, stopped in a few shops that are open, had coffee and lunch.

There was intermittent rain all day. I didn't go prepared. Optimistically, I thought the clouds would rise and disappear. Not so! Jane loaned me her umbrella, since she had her rain jacket with a hood. The generosity of friends!

About 3:30 in the afternoon we were tired and damp, we couldn't go to our choice of museums; we had explored several shops, we had been awed when we went inside the cathedral, so we decided to say good-bye to our Canadian relatives, and take taxis to our respective hotels.

Alice and I had naps that just seemed right for a dreary Sunday afternoon in Frankfurt, Germany. We had supper in the hotel dining room. Alice had a club sandwich and fries; mine was potato soup. Good choices!

I called Frank from the hotel this evening. Their house is full of family reunion relatives; most of them will leave tomorrow. Frank will meet our train in Brussels about 4:30, and they will have more "relatives" in the house tomorrow night!

The first of our three-part adventure is finished. Alice and I agree that we can think of nothing that could have been done differently to make it better. Sue, Gene, the bus driver, the tour guides, Rolf, the cousins with whom we have traveled have made this tour a wonderful experience. We thank them all.