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Einsiedeln Elsewhere

A 2015 Report about Re-activating Ties with Louisville, Kentucky

by Susann Bosshard-Kälin

For years the idea has pursued me to look for the traces of Swiss from the town of Einsiedeln who had settled in the city of Louisville situated on the lower Ohio River. In the year 2006 when I was on a journalistic assignment for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* related to the Benedictine monastery St. Meinrad in southern Indiana, I was fortunate to meet people with ancestors from my hometown Einsiedeln. I met eight descendants—Kaelins, Schoenbaechlers, Birchlers, Bisigs—for coffee and I thought already then how fascinating it would be to take a closer look at the trails of those emigrants in the context of today.

It was on that trip that I got to know and appreciate Leo Schelbert. It was pure luck from which a cooperative research effort was to evolve. We became a “dream-team.” Between 2007 and 2014, we realized the two books *westward* and *Emigrant Paths*, first published in German as *westwärts* and *Nach Amerika*. Thus it was not before 2015 that time allowed me again to open the “Dossier Louisville” and to pursue the steps of immigrants from Einsiedeln in the American Midwest.

Time is Running Out

I must admit that, nine years ago, one could find quite a few more Swiss and Einsiedler in Louisville than today. Many of the older people of Swiss descent have passed on who still had personal remembrances of immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th century. Meanwhile, also the noted KAELIN’S restaurant has closed and been



sold, the place where, during the 1930s, Louis Kälin invented the legendary cheeseburger and where also many Swiss went in and out. Also the Bisigs milk business doesn't exist anymore, nor the "Swiss Hall"—the meeting place of the Swiss. Thus, it is high time to pursue the history of the immigrants from Einsiedeln and above all to recover and document it with the help of those still living and interested descendants of the third to the sixth generation. Also still existing family relationships between Louisville and Einsiedeln people are to be discovered and strengthened.

Leo Schelbert found the plan to be worthwhile and promised me his full support as well for this research project—"behind the scene," as he put it. Again my thanks go to him. Without his consistent cooperation, my "America projects" would not have been possible. Also Donald Tritt, the committed founder and promoter of the Swiss Center of North America in New Glarus, who is also an expert in Swiss American matters, has given the project "Einsiedeln elsewhere" his full support for which I am grateful. In Louisville, I reconnected with Vicky Ullrich-Birchler who had made the 2006 meeting possible.

Starting "Einsiedeln elsewhere"

In January 2015, I began to plan and organize the project "Einsiedeln Elsewhere—the Presence of a Swiss Village in Louisville, Kentucky." The Einsiedeln historian, Heinz Nauer, age 30, who is completing his doctoral dissertation very much liked the suggestion of joining me on my first investigative trip in order to explore the historical dimension and, also, to discover what aspects of the Swiss or even Einsiedeln heritage might still be extant in Louisville, an American midwestern city of over one million inhabitants. Also the Einsiedeln photographer and designer, Paolo de Caro, age 28, and



the camerawoman Martina di Lorenzo, age 35, she too a native of Einsiedeln, joined the team. Its diversity is important to me. It allows that in unique encounters one could film, take pictures, and make interviews on the spot. It is at the same time, a kind of mentoring—to awaken interest in younger people about Swiss migrations and to take them along on a project abroad—maybe they too might catch the “virus” as I have.

Tracing Einsiedeln Emigrants to Louisville, Kentucky in 2015: A Diary

Wednesday April 8—Wednesday 22 April

Before our journey to Louisville, Heinz Nauer, and I stayed for some days at Leo and Virginia Schelberts in Evanston, Illinois. It is a nice and most appreciated stay. On a quick trip to New Glarus on Saturday, 11 April, I gave a public talk on the invitation of Beth Zurbuchen, the President of the Swiss Center of North America, that featured my activities as a journalist and the several books that had emerged from them, while Heinz Nauer was checking out the Center’s archive. On Sunday evening the other members of our team, Martina and Paolo, arrived from Switzerland in Chicago. Now complete, we wondered what to expect in Louisville.

Monday, April 13

Filming at Schelberts in Evanston. I want Leo’s voice and picture on film since he knows so much about the migration of Swiss women and men—he is some kind of a “Switzerland–America.” Actually he dislikes the limelight, but then agreed to comply for the cause. On the porch of his house, we were filming for three hours, then took leave with our densely packed car and drove southward on Highway 65 towards Indianapolis and Louisville. In pouring rain we



reached Talbott Avenue in Louisville thanks to the navigator at 6 p.m. Louisville keeps the daylight savings time of winter, so we arrived there an hour later as planned, thus had but little time to move into quarters because we were expected.

Our home for the next ten days is a stroke of luck! By airbnb.com, I found a house for us, and lo and behold, the house is owned by a KAELIN, and Brigid and her family are originally from Einsiedeln. I will ask her about it on Saturday. During our stay, the young musician and singer as well as her husband and little son are living with her parents in the city. Therefore, we have a whole house for ourselves.

It is shortly before 7 p.m. We go to the Legion Club just a few blocks from our stay where our friends, Vicky Ullrich-Birchler and Brigid Kaelin have arranged that those of us from Einsiedeln could inform every one first hand, that is, all those who had answered an article in last week's local newspaper *The Courier-Journal*, all those descendants of women and men from Einsiedeln. Shortly after 7 p.m., the first began arriving at the Club's bar. I distributed leaflets about Einsiedeln and placed Swiss chocolates on the tables as well as "Häliböcke," that is, Einsiedeln pastries for pilgrims, plastic tourist bags, and small Switzerland-US pins. We shake hands, greet each other here and there—"hello, I am a Kaelin, a Bisig, a Schoenbaechler, a Curiger"—delightful to hear it spoken with an American twang. The bar is getting fuller by the minute. It is only twenty after seven and Brigid is concerned; finally she takes the microphone and asks people to move into the Club's large convention room, the Bar has become far too small to accommodate new arrivals. We couldn't believe it; 35 had announced their coming, finally there were about a hundred. A fabulous scene—Zehnders in one corner and Schoenbaechlers in another.

Vicky Ullrich does the welcoming—we are overcome—then she asks Jeff Haeberlin, Vice President of the Gruetli Helvetia



Team filming Leo Schelbert in Evanston, Illinois.

Society, the association that together with the Swiss Ladies Society keep Swiss matters in Louisville still alive. Then I tell of the project: that we are retracing the steps of immigrants from Einsiedeln based on the questionnaires that we had previously sent out, that we would like to ask who might be interested to work with us—with photos, for a film, in interviews, providing historical documents—who would want to share stories. Some 50 persons filled-out questionnaires and handed them to me, and some 25 more I am to contact in the next weeks. We are obviously astounded, and also delighted, and certainly inspired.

I hand Vicky a letter of recommendation from Hermann Betschart, the mayor of the district of Einsiedeln, for the mayor of the city of Louisville. Heinz, Martina, and Paolo introduce themselves. We are showered with questions, concerns, wishes, and expectations, but are unable to make promises right then and there. We would be around for ten days and might be back in August. The evening is joyful and loud. At the end, I insist on a group picture (see on next page) of us all because it seems unbelievable. Boy, what have we done!

Tuesday, April 14

In our kitchen, the coffee machine displays its pitfalls, and American manuals seem to have their own rules. But luckily Vicky



Those who attended the first group meeting in Louisville, Kentucky.

had already put eggs, bread, milk, orange juice, and butter in the refrigerator. We review the numerous filled-out questionnaires, also discuss who would be suitable for a film—we had met the people last evening for the first time. It would be a challenge to meet all expectations.

I invited Vicky and Bob Ullrich-Birchler for coffee at 10 o'clock. I had met Vicky in 2006, and she was also this time an incredible help in organizing the Louisville stay. Without a middle woman on-site an undertaking such as this would be impossible. We discussed the day's program and finally decided to make the first interviews, photos, and film clips at their home, not far from our lodging. Incredible, what they had readied. Bob, an amateur historian and retired building engineer, laid out numerous historical pictures and Vicky, engaged in family history, told the fascinating story of the Trachslauer Öchslins and Bennauers Birchlers. I found myself set back 150 years when the young couple, married in March 1852 in Einsiedeln, set out in May on the boat *Great Western* from Rotterdam and Liverpool without knowing a word of English into a world that was entirely unknown to them.

In the afternoon, Vicky and Bob took us to the few "Swiss and Einsiedeln places" up in the highlands of Louisville, to the former



Zehnder’s Garden, to the Oechslin and Kaelin Avenues, to the former Swiss Hall, to Kaelin’s Restaurant, now unfortunately closed. In 2006, I still could enjoy the legendary cheese burgher together with my companion, the late photographer Liliane Géraud. There wasn’t much of *Einsiedeln* around anymore. Yet there were reminders, and those we wanted to discover and document.

Wednesday, April 15

The days are racing by—three fascinating and eventful ones have passed. The *Einsiedler* people of Louisville are most hospitable, and it seems to be indeed the right moment to discover last vestiges, and perhaps to revive the connections, and build a new bridge between *Einsiedeln* and Louisville. Might it succeed?

We used the morning for “office services,” for identifying film clips, assessing photos, making first selections, answering e-mails, contacting people at home, skypeing, facebooking, writing first texts, scanning documents, and slowly building the projected website. We assess our work, consider this and reject that. All is new—the people we meet for the first time and our first working together as a team. I don’t know this region of the United States and places are far apart.

The project for us four is indeed an experiment: film, photography, history, journalism, networks, organization, logistics,

meals—all are truly challenging. But midway on this first trip, I can say that things have gone well. The plan of involving all of us four in the varied tasks at the same time seems to be working. Yet it requires flexibility, tolerance, calmness, understanding and generosity from all of us.

The afternoon of April 15 is devoted to the family of Mary Ann Kaelin. She is a lively lady of 83 years whom we met in her apartment with her brothers George and William. Her husband, J. J. Kaelin, comes from Euthal. She herself has German and Swiss roots and married J. J. Kaelin in 1953. She and her brothers tell a fascinating story, but none of them speak German. We take many photos and film, and we learn step-by-step to combine interviewing, picture taking, and filming.

By the way, we also put a note on the door of our house—Dr. Donald Tritt of Columbus, Ohio, was to call me once he saw the message. Donald, who is portrayed in my book *Emigrant Paths*, has offered to join us and especially to assist Heinz Nauer in historical research. He has been most involved in the pursuit of Swiss American history and recently donated 4,000 books to the Swiss Center of North America related to Swiss and Swiss American history, and is a most active member of the Swiss American Historical Society. He was coming by car, and to have a second one available proved to be most helpful. He called around 8 o'clock. He could get the key from the mailbox and get settled. On our return, there is a "hello" from the psychologist Dr. Donald Tritt. He is a great friend of Switzerland whose parents came from the Bernese Oberland, and has done important historical work such as a biography of Leo Lesquereux, the noted deaf Swiss American botanist who immigrated to Columbus, Ohio. I am glad that this friend of Leo Schelbert is a member of the party. So we are now five in this shared Kaelin house.

Thursday, April 16

At 7 o'clock in the morning, we drive toward St. Meinrad, Indiana, the daughter foundation of the monastery Einsiedeln. Many memories remind me about the report of 2006 relating to the then oldest Benedictine in the world, the 105-old Fr. Theodore Heck. And I sadly remember Liliane Géraud who had been along but has since passed on.

We were greeted by Mary Jane Schumacher, Public Relations and Communications Director of St. Meinrad, who led us on a tour of the large complex on the hill. Much still looks familiar. Martina and Paolo went to the lake and to the church to take pictures; and Heinz and Donald visited the archive to look for materials on *Einsiedeln* immigrants, the main purpose of our visit. I walked to the cemetery where I found three *Einsiedeln* names on withered tombstones, of two monks with the name of Fuchs and a Fr. Salesius Kaelin who died in 1854. I visit the church where there is replica of the Black Madonna that is housed in *Einsiedeln*'s special sanctuary within the large monastery church. We are guests and are served lunch, and after four in the afternoon we drive to Tell City, a town I had also visited in 2006. Founded in August 1858 on the Ohio, it is some 14 miles distant from St. Meinrad, a somewhat sleepy and run-down, but still charming place. After a walk and some picture taking we have beer and burgers in a joint in the middle of the village.

Friday, April 17

In two cars, we drive to the large farm of Gilbert Kaelin, a unique personality, who is a descendant of emigrants from Willerzell. He has a large family, and it seems that all of the Louisville Kaelins had ten to fifteen children, and that is why there are today some one hundred Kaelins listed in the Louisville telephone book. They come from four branches that I will need to sort out requiring more time than I have now.

The Willerzell Kaelin have lost contact with Switzerland and Willerzell, but the accordion player Gil looks at age 80 just like a farmer from there. We had wonderful chats, got great pictures, and had a jolly time on his farm and on that of his brother Lawrence's farm, who is age 90. Some members of the family joined us and were delighted that we are interested in their ancestry. The first emigrant was Jacob Anton Kälin who emigrated in 1880. When I return back home, I will try to find out more about him. Jacob was on the boat for many weeks that apparently lost course and went westward, then again northward on the Atlantic, a very trying experience for the many people onboard. Today it is hard to imagine, given that we have to spend just a few hours on an airbus, enjoying some fine red wine when flying above the clouds.

In the afternoon, we visit Milton Kaelin, the nephew of Gilbert and Lawrence. He is a retired chemist, a loner, a pigeon breeder, and the keeper of the historical papers of Louisville's Gruetli Helvetia Society. He is a board member, and in his stable keeps a fireproof steel cabinet where the historic documents since the association's founding are being preserved. For 70 years, the Society had its own house and park in the center of Louisville, a very nice place that we had seen from the outside some two days ago. The place was sold to the Fraternal Order of Police Deputy Sheriffs' Lodge 25 in 1993 because there were fewer and fewer Swiss and members of the Swiss association, and also the money needed for upkeep had dwindled. With the sale of the property, the Swiss presence diminished, a meeting center was gone, older Swiss Americans passed away, and fewer and fewer of the younger generation were interested in their Swiss ancestry and in things Swiss. And now our small team is here from Einsiedeln to reawaken interest in the immigrant past and to renew the ties. What might come of it?

One step has been taken already: On August 1, 2015, the Gruetli Helvetia Society and the Swiss Ladies Society will again hold the Swiss Picnic at a rented facility, and I hope to be there.

Saturday, April 18

Paolo and Martina rise early to accompany milkman Bob Ehrler with Einsiedeln ancestry on his milk tour. The pictures taken are fine, but for filming, the delivery of bottles moves too fast. It is an example of the trial and error approach we need to take.

At noon today, Brigid Kaelin, the owner of the house, will visit us to be interviewed and photographed. The singing, accordion, guitar and banjo playing of the 35 year old musician and her band are well known. She is uncomplicated and funny, and for a film clip she even plays the saw she takes from the wall. The two hours pass swiftly. Then Donald and I get ready for Jeff Häberlin who will take us to the "Thunder over Louisville," the fireworks that open the Kentucky Derby, the most noted horse race in the United States. About a million people are supposed to witness the spectacle scheduled for 9:30 p.m. I had also taken along a note from the district mayor of Einsiedeln Hermann Betschart for Greg Fischer, the mayor of Louisville. And lo and behold, among hundreds of thousands Jeff Häberlin suddenly shouted "Greg" with whom he had gone to High School. Thus I could

meet the mayor and tell about the note and about our project—nothing seems to be impossible in America! The fireworks all the way to the large bridge over the Ohio were spectacular. People were cordial, welcomed us, and seemed delighted with our work.

Sunday, April 19

The morning vanished quickly with breakfast, talk about the coming days, and the gathering of the files of our contacts from last Monday. In order not to disappoint people, I will send out 75 emails tomorrow to those who we were unable to see during the first phase of the project but hope to meet after August 1st. I also noted that by then a website might have become reality.

In the afternoon, we divide into two groups: Heinz and Paolo join the “Kaelin-Schoenbaechler Reunion” of seven, Martina and I the “Zehnder Reunion” of nine people. People tell us about the immigrants, their becoming potato growers, and especially the Zehnders milk farmers in St. Matthews. We hear about the Zehnders’ good and bad days, their large Catholic families, their reunions with up to 50 people, and their present contact with relatives in Einsiedeln.

Monday, April 20

The day was devoted to exploring the city of Louisville. Heinz and Donald visited various archives, and despite inclement weather Martina and Paolo crossed the city in search of special sights, and I visited the city’s historical museum. A review of photos and film clips suggested that tomorrow at sunrise the city and river should be revisited, but the weather did not quite cooperate. In the evening, I met briefly again with Vicky and Bob Ullrich-Birchler to discuss preparations for August 1st, review the filled-out questionnaires, and consider activities to be tackled on the second visit.

Tuesday, April 21

It was the last day for interviews. We met with the seasoned dairymen Mike and Domenic Ehrler. They told us how the Ehrlers had divided the city’s sections for milk distribution in the 19th and 20th century. Then we see Bob Ehrler shortly before noon. He is the last of the milkmen from central Switzerland. He is an interesting man, a lawyer who passionately preserves the heritage of his ancestors.

Wednesday, April 22

In the afternoon when we returned our car to the rental place in Evanston, we had travelled 1,376 miles. Then we went our own ways, but planned to meet in about a week in Switzerland in order to assess what has been achieved.

Wednesday, April 29

Our team is agreed that we will take a second trip to Louisville. We will pay the costs of travel, lodging, and meals, ourselves, and do the work pro bono. The first trip had totally swallowed the seed money given by Victorinox, the Swiss American Historical Society, and the Gruetli Helvetia Society. We realized that we could not wait until new financial support was raised; the project needed to be pursued immediately after it had been successfully launched. Interviews with descendants of people from Einsiedeln needed to be undertaken, more historical and pictorial material needed to be unearthed, and the revived August First Picnic needed to be attended by the team. Unfortunately, the team's camerawoman Martina di Lorenzo was not able to join this second journey.

A Task Achieved In-Between

After weeks of intensive work and shortly before our new departure at the end of July 2015, the new home page www.einsiedeln-anderswo.ch has been launched. The texts are given in German and in English and are accompanied by portraits and informational data. The home page will continually be enriched and updated and serve as a center for the project. We are now also active on Facebook. Both of these forms of electronic communication are to serve as a virtual bridge between the Einsiedeln descendants in Louisville and their relatives in Einsiedeln as well as to make them aware of their common history. Documents are also presented as well as contemporary pictures and personal portraits in order to discover and strengthen the bonds that unite people living thousands of miles apart.

Thursday and Friday, July 30 and 31

On these two days, we visit Marcy Walker Murdoch and Joyce Zehnder French, both unique Louisville personalities with Einsiedeln roots.



Saturday, August First

The Gruetli Helvetia Society picnic has been revived and some 120 guests are gathered to enjoy the musical pieces of the Gilbert Kaelin band that encourage joyful dancing; then a lavish buffet offers a substantial lunch. Contacts are renewed since the sale of the Swiss Hall has become fewer and fewer. Jeff Haeberlin, the active treasurer of the Gruetli Helvetia Society, explains that besides his group there are only two other organizations left, the Swiss Ladies Society and the Swiss Charity Society. While many Louisville Swiss have hardly any contact with their country of origin, others like Peter Guetig Schoenbaechler are conscious of their manifold ancestral ties.

Tuesday, August 4 to August 8

Irma Raque Kaelin grants us an interview. She is the daughter of Carl Kaelin, owner of the legendary Kaelin restaurant until 2006. Together with his wife, Margaret, he invented the cheeseburger and was the first franchise taker of the world-renowned KFC—Kentucky Fried Chicken of Colonel Sanders—by the way a close friend of the Kaelin family. The Bisigs in turn were for decades successful in the dairy business.

Until Sunday, August 9, the days were filled with intensive meetings and talks as well as with picture-taking among the families of the Kaelin, Oechslin, Fuchs, Schoenbaechler, Zehnder, and Marty.



Presentation of the Einsiedeln Elsewhere project to the German American Club in Louisville on August 9, 2015.

In time, the new materials will all be added to www.einsiedeln-anderswo.ch, enriched further by historical documentation.

Sunday, August 9

As a crowning end of our intensive days in Louisville, we meet in the morning at the German American Club of which Bob Ullrich, a German American, and Vicky Ullrich-Birchler are active members. Once again I interview 12 people and families with an Einsiedeln background, and historical pictures as well as genealogical trees are submitted. It is a joyful group of people who know each other, but have not met for years. The afternoon is reserved for a happy get together with other people of Einsiedeln descent with whom we have become friends.

At noon Heinz Nauer is taking a plane from Louisville to Atlanta and from there to Zurich while Paolo de Caro will be taking a night bus to Chicago. We will return to Switzerland with numerous hours on tape and with hundreds of photographs and will enrich the website with new Louisville items.

In Conclusion

The project “Einsiedeln elsewhere” is rich in detail as well as potential. It has also become clear that the people I have met and interviewed are fundamentally American. For most, Switzerland is but a marginal relationship and remembrance. “We are Americans with Swiss ancestral roots, and we are proud of it.”

What is to come next? The website is to be enriched, photographic work presenting individual families is to be pursued, meetings in Einsiedeln or in Louisville to be organized, perhaps a film documentary attempted. Also other efforts will be made such as the creation of a Committee of Patrons, of contacts between the Rotary Clubs of Einsiedeln and Louisville, student exchanges, and the organizing of mutual visits between people of Louisville and Einsiedeln. Also a book and an exhibit about the emigration from Einsiedeln to Louisville based on materials collected might be feasible.

A Word of Thanks

The members of the team “Einsiedeln elsewhere” are grateful that the project could be launched. We thank Leo and Virginia Schelbert and Vicky and Bob Ullrich for their generous support, also Fred Gillespie, President of the Swiss American Historical Society, Carl Elsener of Victorinox, Jeff Haeberlin and Milton Kaelin of the Gruetli Helvetia Society, and Donald Tritt, the generous supporter of all matters Swiss in America.

Their support as well as that forthcoming in the future will sustain the team’s enthusiasm for an undertaking that seems not only worthwhile but of lasting significance.

~ Translation by Leo Schelbert