

CHAPTER VI

FINDING THE BURKARDS

by

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It was August 8, 1964, Matt's ninety-second birthday had he still been living. Hot and dry in Dettelbach, Germany, just like in New Franken where we'd customarily celebrated the occasion in earlier times. I thought (at the remembering) how Matt would have enjoyed the happenings of that day and the following ones. What fantastic stories he would have told about finding the descendants of his great-uncles who remained in Dettelbach when his grandfather Josef, and brothers Johann and Anton, had, emigrated to the new land in 1847. (Michael, teacher and leader of the original group had come two years earlier).

How excited Matt would have been at learning his life-long parish (Saint Kilian's) had been named after the patron saint of his forebears in old Franconia. How he would have speculated what those forebears were really like. And he would most certainly have been related to Saint Burkard, second ruling Bishop of Würzburg in 742 A.D. Surely they would have been cousins.

My interest in those forebears, though Matt had mentioned them casually during my growing-up years, hadn't really peaked until my aunt Anna pointed out in the New Franken Cemetery, the inscription on the immigrant Burkard brothers' tombstone, that they had come from Dettelbach. I'd decided, then, I would one day go there and try to find our cousins - if there were any.

Some years later, in an Emily Kimbrough "Our Hearts Were Young and Gay" venture, daughter Sharon and I set out for two months in Europe. We'd taken a plane, then train to Würzburg, the nearest large city to Dettelbach. Here we'd checked into the Excelsior Hotel, directly across from the railroad station, and immediately asked the clerk if he knew of any Burkards living in the area. "Yes sure," he said, "*there are Burkards living in Dettelbach.*" Elated at the information and anxious to find those Burkards, we asked, "*How would we get there?*"

"*You may take the railway tomorrow morning*" he said accommodately. If we were to take the train the following morning we'd better get a schedule, so we said politely, "*Thank you very much,*" and left. We crossed the network of streetcar tracks, back to the ultra-modern railroad station that had replaced the original, destroyed by British fire bombs in World War II.

Eight o'clock next morning, we excitedly boarded the train for Dettelbach. After ten miles of travel, we arrived at a small station--just outside the city limits. Here we were told we'd have to take a bus into town. There would be one along shortly. The fifteen-minute wait was endless. Anticipative, yet somewhat apprehensive, I seated myself next to a man with a brief case, assuming he would know something about the town folk. After several questions, in my limited German, without learning anything, a kindly-looking woman in a dark navy-blue suit who'd apparently been listening to our conversation, leaned across the aisle and said, "*I'll take you there, A Burkard woman has a little store on the corner.*"



Figure 1: Former entrance of Maria Röthlein's store

Pleasantly surprised, I expressed appreciation with "Danke schön, vielen Dank," and followed her as she got off in front of a small Corner store on Weinbergstrasse and went in. She greeted two women there with, *'Hello'* adding, *"I think I have relatives for you from America,"* and left promptly.

The women looked at Sharon and me quizzically, puzzled, seemingly unemotional, while I introduced myself as the great-grand-daughter of Josef Burkard who had come to America in 1847. Who, along with his brothers Johann and Michael, and Antonia, (Michael's wife) died in the Cholera epidemic within six days of each other, eight years later. "Yes", her mouth agap, *"we are indeed relatives, we have all of that in our history back to 1654. We'll show you,"* the dark-haired, grey-eyed woman said.

My euphoria was indescribable. Like striking gold! I could scarcely contain my emotions as the women introduced themselves. The dark-haired one, owner of the store, was Maria Röthlein, nee Maria Burkard. The other, a statuesque blond, Friedl Burkard, was the wife of Maria's brother, Armin.

We must meet the rest of the family, Maria said, leading us through a doorway to their living quarters. Here we met Maria's husband Georg and daughter Sylvia.

Shortly, we followed Friedl to her home a few doors down the cobblestone street. No sidewalks. Solid stone right up to the house where we met teenage daughters, Christiana and Eva-Maria. My sixteen-year-old Sharon was completely enchanted with them for they spoke her language, having learned English in school. And they took her over for the day. A son, six-year old, dark-haired, olive-complexioned, leather-hosen-attired Franz-Peter was too busy playing with his friends to be much concerned with visitors.

And then we met Armin. He was at his *Lagerhaus*, where farmers brought their grain to be turned into malt for Franken beer. He, too, dropped everything to become better acquainted with the Americans about whom, until that Saturday morning, he'd known nothing. Armin, stockily built and of medium height, greatly resembled his sister Maria. Even to the lack of sharply defined ear lobes. This feature immediately caught my attention for my eldest children, Eldon and Rhea, don't have defined ear lobes, either. During the course of the day's visit, as I expressed my observations, the conversation turned to family resemblances, characteristics, and traits. The genetic traits of impacted wisdom teeth in the Dettelbach Burkards' families particularly impressed me, for this too, is a strong one in American Burkards, including myself, daughters Joyce and Sharon. Obviously, genetics knows no geographic area or country. How well Matt could attest to this, I thought, remembering poignantly ...

"Tell us the story about how you got that hole, Uncle Matt," my small cousins would say as they sat on his lap in the old wooden rocker that barely accommodated his broad frame, after making a game of poking a finger into the dimple-like depression in his cheek. Then quickly pulling the finger away, while he tried to snatch it with his mouth.

"Oh, you know the story already, you don't wanna hear it again," he would reply.

"We do too, Uncle Matt, tell us the story again, Uncle Matt," the cousins would coax, and Matt, after making a great display of reluctance, would go on happily to tell the story about how he was shot in the cheek.

"Well, it was this. There was this great big man who was huntin' for bear in the woods up north when I was a young fella--lumber jacks, they called us. Well, he was a lookin' for bear around our loggin' camp up there near Iron Mountain. Now that big fella was kinda dumb 'cause he should knowed there ain't no bear walking around in the dead 'o winter."

"Why not, Uncle Matt?"

"Cause them bears sleep all winter. Anyways, here it was about thirty below zero and we was goin' back to camp for supper, and a little schnapps to warm up, and it was gettin' kinda dark already when this bear-huntin' man saw me and thought I was a bear. BANG! He shot that rifle off, and that bullet hit me right here in the cheek."

"I staggered a little bit--kinda lost my balance, and then got straight again."

"And then what, Uncle Matt?"

"Well, then, I golly, I jist went 'phisst', and spit that there bullet right out! And that's how I got that hole in my cheek!"

It wasn't until some years later we learned how Matt really came by the indentation. He'd had an impacted wisdom tooth which ordinarily would require the services of an oral surgeon. But Matt wouldn't do anything about it, at least not until the abscess that had formed under the tooth burst. While he'd suffered excruciatingly, he made little reference to the incident. The bear story was more fun. Yes, I thought, coming back to the world of the present, geographical location knows no genetics

As the new-found relatives and I walked down the slightly hilly streets of Dettelbach, observing garreted towers, the partially broken down medieval wall, shrubbery-overgrown moat, *Fachwerk* (wood-panelled) houses with geraniums trailing from the windows, we shared backgrounds, experiences, and ideas.

Paradoxically, (in this old-world atmosphere) small cars raced through the narrow streets making us jump quickly out of their way. Strangely out of place here. Where everyone knew everyone else. Where leder-hosen-clad children played in the street, or were on their way to school with bags on their backs. Where men and women greeted each other with "*Griß Gott*" in typical Bavarian fashion, visited a bit, and went about their business. Where the old and the new met, and intermingled.

*"We'll take you to uncle Johann's place, he has **The Book**"* Armin said after we'd visited his Lagerhaus, becoming acquainted with its operation and employees. *"Oh, that would be great! First, please, tell me how is Johann related to us?"*

"Well, it's like this: his grandfather Melchior was my great grandfather, and Melchior was your great-grandfather's brother. Do you understand?"

I assured him I understood, as we continued walking and talking in German with me using the formal *she* when Armin said suddenly, *"You must say 'Du' (the familiar form in German) because we are cousins and you are now a part of our family."*

This, on a Saturday afternoon, when at nine in the morning neither had known the other existed. In the one hundred and twenty years since the four Burkard brothers (Johann, Josef, Michael, and Anton) and their families had left Dettelbach to cut out a new life in the Wisconsin wilderness, none ever returned. Nor their descendants.

To know this is to understand the new cousins' excitement, as well' as mine. It wasn't until a few years later, on a subsequent visit, that Eva-Maria told me her mother and aunt Maria were virtually in shock at our first encounter. And to think, all the while I had attributed their relative unresponsiveness to that Germanic external control!

Johann greeted us with, *"Hello, how are you? I am happy to meet you,"* the extent of his English vocabulary, learned as a conductor on the railroad. This, I was soon to learn when I tried to communicate further in English. Maria had telephoned him about our unexpected visit and he was anticipating our coming. Was prepared with coffee and cake, which we politely declined for the time being. (Armin had taken us to the Gasthof Grüner Baum for supper a short time before).

Prepared with **The Book**, straight as a ramrod, and with black hair belieing his seventy-five years, Johann pridefully placed a three-inch thick manuscript on the cloth-covered dining room table.

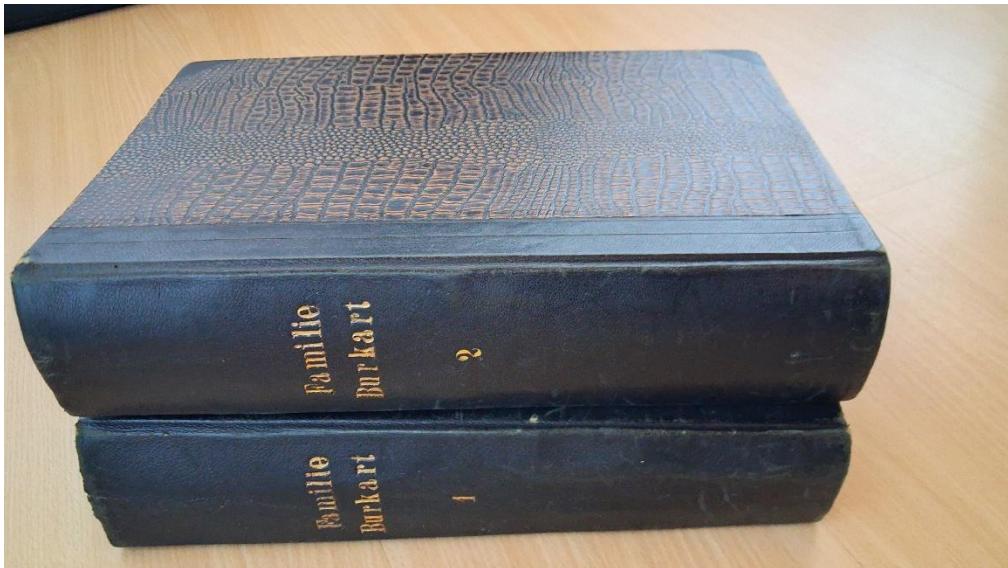


Figure 2: Family records of Johann Burkart

"*What is in this book?*" I asked. "Really everything about our family" and he went on to tell why he'd put together the family genealogy. During the Hitler era, each family had to select some member to research church and state records in order to prove "pure" Aryan lineage, if called on to do so. Those unable to prove it were brought before the court for "evaluation". If a spouse was non-Aryan, the couple had to be divorced, to say the least. Johann paused, wet his lips and swallowed hard, as though the remembering was too much, even after all these years. "Were there any who--weren't Aryan?" I asked, hesitatingly. "*In our family – no-, but there were thirty Jews in Dettelbach at that time, mostly merchants, who were jailed, held for persecution, and then released to their homes. But, finally, the SS came in the middle of the night and took 'em to a concentration camp, and we never saw or heard anymore of 'em. Then there were no more Jews here, not even to this day.*"

I was beset with conflicting emotions. Horror and sadness at Johann's first-hand revelation, delight at locating the genealogical data all researched and compiled, and frustrated at finding the entries in that long-hand script I couldn't read. When I confessed I couldn't read German script, Armin, who'd been absorbed in Johann's and my interaction said, "*No problem, Eva-Maria will type up all the parts that have to do with your family and send it to you.*" And she did, with German and Latin entries dating from 1654. Wanting to share as much as he could of the family history that had been of life-long interest to him, Johann brought out pictures and letters. Pictures of his forebears, and letters the emigrant brothers had written to the relatives in Dettelbach. Letters preserved by the descendants of their only sister Anna, from whom Johann had gotten copies. Also, in German script

A few years later, during another visit to Germany, I met several "new" cousins, among them Hans Rüthlein, school administrator and artist, from Schwarzach. He, very graciously, typed up the letters and sent them to me. In the following two days we were feted with food, beer, and Franken wine. I was amazed at how much could be learned about the culture and ideas over a bottle of wine, as these folk opened up to me -- a cousin who happened to be American. For instance, when I asked, wonderingly, *"How come Johann lived alone?"* Friedl told me his wife Rosa had gone to live in the woods. *"In the woods? I don't understand "*

Friedl had then explained Rosa had gone to live with the nuns in the convent. *"Why?"* I wanted to know, as Friedl shrugged her shoulders, replying, *"I heard say he was too gentle, too woman-like, too easy-going. She wanted a man like her father. Strong, domineering, one who would rule her."*

"Well, that's hard for me to understand." Friedl had nodded in assent, *"Yes, for me too. And every spring he decorates the house--paints and puts on new paper, and plants those beautiful flowers in the garden. Always hopes she'll come home, but she never does."* I could only respond, *"Poor Johann "*

Rosa did eventually come home to Johann, to visit him in the old people's home, just a few days before he died in 1973. Ultimately, she took up residence in the same old folks home, in the same room Johann had occupied....

To the question I'd hesitated to ask, but needed to know the answer, *"Why did you follow Hitler?"* Armin, his dark eyes saddened, answered candidly, *"Please, try to understand. He held you right in the palm of his hands when he talked. And oh, he promised so much. The worst thing, he said, that could happen to us was communism. Yes we believed him. What he didn't tell us was that what he offered was just as bad, even worse. Yes ... he had a big mouth. You got one too at home. Goldwater. So be careful."* I assured him, knowingly, with our constitution and division of power, we had ample protection. A sad smile spread over his high-cheek-boned face, *"We thought we had it too when Hitler just took over."* Armin rested periodically during our visit. He was plagued with headaches from shrapnel that bulged his head slightly at the crown where his dark hair was thinning. But he insisted on taking us to special interest places. The 'Steigmühle', a short distance outside the town, where three Burkard brothers, including great-grandfather Josef, had operated flour mills. Tauberrettersheim, where some of the first settlers in New Franken came from.

The Marienberg Fortress, in Würzburg, on a hill overlooking the city. *"Here,"* Armin said, pointing to the city below, flanked by the Main River, *"the British leveled the whole city with fire bombs. Killed a hundred twenty-five thousand--ninety percent of the people there! The bombs got to them even in their cellars and shelters."*

"Oh my God, how awful! But you said, while we were driving here, this is an historical City, why then...? There's nothing here, no industry, nothing that would make a difference."

Armin smiled at my naivete, "My dear Cousin, they wanted to cut off the German supply route by knocking out the Main River bridge."

"Oh .. I understand. And Dettelbach, what happened there- only sixteen miles from here?"

"Dettelbach was lucky. Never bombed, but, it was occupied Our family had to live in the cellar and in the Lagerhaus Well, we can talk about that later ... still, we did lose a lot of men. Ninety-eight soldiers killed in the first world war, and in this last one, a hundred twenty-three. Dettelbach isn't very big, only about three thousand people."

I needed to know--"Did you lose anyone close?" "Yes, my brother Edmund." One more stop we needed to make, Armin insisted, before he would take us back to our hotel. We would have coffee and cake at his home and then we'd visit the cemetery in Dettelbach. In the beautiful flower-covered church cemetery, we saw many Burkard names etched on marble slabs. One in particular moved me deeply. The inscription was to Armin's and Maria's brother Edmund, who was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. His name, age twenty-four, helmet, lamp, and flowers are there, with the rest of the Burkards. His body is in a cemetery on the Holland border Standing at the grave site, I couldn't help but think not only does geographical location know no genetics, neither do warring nations. One's identity to blood relatives speaks mutely to this. What would Matt have thought, and felt, if he were living and standing here? Would he have recalled the first world war was to make the world safe for democracy? And now again, this? Would he have thought it was only chance Edmund's great-grandfather, Melchior, stayed in Germany in 1847? Chance, that Edmund died for 'that side'? One wonders

And so we said "Good Bye" to the Rüthleins and Burkards and "See you soon" and warm handshakes, loaded down with books, pictures, and other tangible tokens of friendship, including roses from Johann. And copious notes. As we promised to return, little did we know we were never to see Armin again. For two years later a letter edged in black was delivered to our home in America. Armin was dead.

Back in our hotel room, while exploring literature pertaining to Würzburg's history, we encountered the Burkard name several times. At one point, Sharon said excitedly, "Maybe he was a relative!" (*)1

"Who?" I asked, surprised.

"This St. Burkard."

"Oooh? What makes you think so? It would be nice if he was, but, just because it's the same name --well--doesn't make it so."

Undeterred, Sharon answered, "Maybe not, but he lived right here in Würzburg, and that's only sixteen miles from Dettelbach."

"Hey, you're right dear, so let's read some more and we can have fun thinking about it anyway."

"Okay, it says here:"

St. Burkard came from an old Saxon family in England and was made a Fürst (Prince) Bishop of Würzburg in 742 by Pope Bonifacius. In the thirty-nine years of St. Burkard's service as the second ruling bishop of Würzburg and its environs, including Dettelbach, his accomplishments included building the church and monastery named after him. He, like the missionary martyrs Kilian, Kolman, and Dietman, was charged with converting the heathenish Germans to Christianity. It was he who had the remains of the nearfor gotten martyred missionaries, that had been buried in the horse stable in 688, disinterred and placed (amid great pomp and ceremony) in a tomb at the present Neumünster Church.

It was he who promoted the canonization of Kilian, leader of the three martyrs. Ultimately, in 983, he himself was promoted for canonization by Bishop Hugo, former Prince of France, who had gotten his ecclesiastical training in the Burkard monastery.

"Wow!" I said, as Sharon finished reading. *"It's a good thing there's an English translation in that little booklet, or we'd never learned all that. So ... let's go out and see what we can before we have to leave".*

"Okay," Sharon said, as we picked up our cameras and purses.

Our first stop was the Neumünster Church. Here, we went down in the basement to view the tomb of the three missionaries, with their images cast in busts on top of it. St. Kilian in the center. How excited Matt would have been at seeing this, the patron saint of his home church, I thought, as we paid our respects. While walking across the Main Bridge, we discovered the huge Baroque statue of St. Burkard, along with ten other Franconian dignitaries. *"He really was a big wheel here in Würzburg,"* Sharon observed, a quizzical smile lighting up her deep-brown eyes.

"He sure was, he sure was," I answered rather absentmindedly, while noting the general view and indulging my impressions. For there on the hill (where Armin had taken us the previous day), stood the imposing Gothic Fortress Marienburg. At the foot of the hill, on the left bank of the Main, the twin-towered Romanesque St. Burkard Church nestled like a buffer between the fortress and the river. The statue, on its solid cement pedestal, with bishropic hat and sword-in-hand-raised-arm, was both appealing and forbidding. As I stood dwarfed before it, waiting for Sharon to take my picture, I recalled Armin telling us that all the statuary

remained standing through the World War II bombings that knocked out the Main River bridge. Strange....

Later, in a more jovial mood, I mailed a letter to my husband Jerry, with the following cryptic message, "You'd better treat us with due respect, hereafter, because we have saintly blood in our veins." His plan, on receipt of the letter (he later said), was to have us welcomed back home with a band playing "When the Saints Come Marching In"--but he just hadn't been able to swing it.

A tremendous sense of identification with a name symbolizing another time and place swept over me as we walked down Burkarder Street, past the Cathedral, St. Burkardushaus, and through the medieval Burkard gate. And I thought of Matt. Deeply religious, he would indeed have been proud to bear the name of a saint--related or not. He more than likely wouldn't have known, or realized, that most ruling bishops in early times were sainted, not necessarily for their saintliness. Yet, to the degree one's name is a symbol for the person (blood related or not), our roots were further entwined as we left the Würzburg-Dettelbach area.

Remarks by Alfred Rüthlein

*1) The idea, that the Burkart family might be related to a bishop is not correct and just fantasy. 'Burkard' is a last name in our family, but as well it was used as a first name, especially in former times in Germany. Bishops and popes of the catholic church always receive a new name during their consecration, and are called i.e. Benedict XI or Pius II further on. Her wealthy original name might be completely different. Especially St. Burkart, born in south England was the first bishop in Würzburg who was canonized after his death due to his merits during life. His original name is unknown.