

GENEALOGY AND ONOMASTIC (the study of name origins)

Stories and Legends

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Man is without doubt the only animal that asks himself where he came from, where he is going and why. Although there is little hope of answering the latter two questions without consulting a medium or a clairvoyant, genealogy and onomastic, to some degree, allow us to answer the first. I say "to some degree" because here again, without resorting to stories and legends, the possibilities are quite limited, due to the absence or non-existence of documents that would lead clearly to the origin of the patronymic (a father's name passed to his children.)

The origin and meaning of the patronymic "Ortlieb" or "Orthlieb" already has will surely continue to consume lots of ink and generate lots of hot air. Nonetheless, from time to time it's worth it to make a point and to try, at the risk of disappointing dreamers, to sort out facts from legends.

The most spectacular legend, and the most enduring one, is about the son of King Etzel (Atilla). My father told it to me when I was about twelve years old. That son's name was "Ortlieb" and he was, therefore, our ancestor: the "Lucy" of all Ortliebs.

One study, disseminated on the Internet a while ago, showed how unlikely it is that this legend is true. Ortlieb is without a doubt of German origin. However, Attila's language was Hungarian, so it is unlikely that he would have given his son a German name. Ortlieb would therefore have been a poor translation of a Hungarian name. (His actual name was Aldrian.)

Whatever it may have been, it was in any case a first name; the idea of a patronymic didn't exist at this time. The children of little Ortlieb would have had totally different names, as was the custom of their day. Moreover, we know that this unfortunate little Ortlieb was assassinated when he was seven years old. Even if the Huns had been quite precocious, it is highly unlikely that young Ortlieb would have fathered any children before his death. In my opinion, then, several solid arguments definitively put this legend to rest.

A similar story concerns the much talked about 13th century sect from Strasbourg known as the "Ortliebians" whose members were burned at the stake in 1211 - about whom we wrote in Bulletin #3. Their leader was named Ortlieb, and since he preached chastity, he doubtless died without descendants. We know little about his parents, but from what evidence we do have, we know they weren't named Ortlieb. The author of the article about this sect, Professor Amalie Foessel, to whom I wrote, confirmed that in this case, his first name was unique and not handed down as were other first names of that time. Here again, it would be useless to link this questionable ancestor to an Ort(h)lieb family tree.

There's also the Bishop, Ortlieb von Brantiss (1430-1491) of whom we wrote in Bulletin #2, whose marble sarcophagus may be found on a postage stamp from the Principality of Lichtenstein. In the unlikely case that he had descendants, they would not have been named Ortlieb because, here again, Ortlieb is a first name, not a surname.

Eugene brought to our attention another bishop named Ortlieb from the Swiss city of Basel in the twelfth century. [[Isn't this the fellow mentioned at Musee d'Unterlinden?]]

Let us recall that at the beginning of history, men were so few and so dispersed that it would have been pointless within small family groups to give “labels” to individuals. Furthermore, acknowledging that they must have had language, they probably referred to one another by their physical characteristics (big, little, blond, red...etc.).

With the advent of Christianity, as soon as babies were baptized, they were given “baptismal names,” generally of Biblical origin. Here again we are talking about unique first names, names not passed to people’s descendents. Things got complicated when in a village there were half a dozen girls named Eve and as many boys named John. To tell them apart, they were most often given a second name, generally a nickname. Therefore an Eve who lived by a river became Eve River and John with the brown hair became John Brown. Neither the baptismal name nor the nickname was transmitted to children. In effect, nothing said that the children of Eve would live by the river or that John’s children would be brunettes.

Things got even more complicated when people acquired possessions and wanted to pass them down to others. They had to have documents drawn up with the help of notaries, and these rare men who could write still didn’t know any better than the next man how to identify particular people. How would they know who was the son of John Brown when the man possessed neither his mother’s nor his father’s name? Undoubtedly it was notaries who required people to pass on a name from father to child for identification and thus, surnames began to exist.

This process wouldn’t have come about all at once; and not everywhere at the same time. It was toward the end of the 15th century that surnames came into general use.

In other words, if you have traced your ancestors back to the 15th century, don't be disappointed if you can't go further back. You will be engaging in a "Mission Impossible," because of the absence of surnames. With the exception of kings and nobles of the highest rank, genealogical trees simply stop there. Other barriers might also prevent you from going farther back. Wars and revolutions often resulted in complete destruction of archives. The French Revolution and, especially in Alsace, the Thirty Year's War (1618-1648) put an end to many family trees when archives were burned. It's not surprising that many family trees end in the 17th or 18th centuries for want of documents.

There are some 3,700 Ort(h)liebs in the world, of which 2,300 are in Germany.

This large number suggests two things:

- the large proportion of Ortliebs in Germany confirms the German origin of our surname.

- After only 500 years, 3,700 people would be unlikely to have a single common ancestor.

Mathematicians among you could tell me that starting from the year 1500, there are 500 years until now. If couples procreate each 30 to 40 years, that represents 15 generations. Now if couples each have an average of three children of whom half are boys, we have 1.5 males to the 15th power or 438 male descendents. If all these male children married, there would be 1314 children by now, giving a global population of 1,314 kids + 876 parents = 2,190 Ortliebs descended from the same couple (including their spouses). Even ignoring bachelors, spinsters and celibate clergy, we are still far from 3,700.

At the time when patronymic names supplanted nicknames it is a good bet that at least in Germany, there were dozens to hundreds of men scattered over many villages whose last name was "Ortlieb." Each of them, simply by adopting a patronymic name from his nickname gave birth to an "Ortlieb Family", generally without the least biological link to any of the others. It would be as if you asked everyone named John to change his patronymic name to John as well. There would be as many families with the surname John as there were Johns (first name) in the world: a multitude of Johns.

So in regard to Maxence's suggestion in Obernai that we organize a seminar to construct a giant genealogical tree, common to all 3,700 Ortliebs where each Ort(h)lieb might find his little branch, it is not realizable because one such tree doesn't exist. No "buts" about it, there will be hundreds of trees to establish!

To cite a recent example, at our meeting in Obernai, I took a census of the Ortliebs from Beblenheim, who nearly all share a common ancestor, Conrad of Ribeauvillé. They are more or less distant cousins in that they all came from Obernai where Philippe found their common ancestor Johannes-Hans. Yet nothing proves they have the least familial connection to Johannes-Hans and Conrad, except that Obernai and Ribeauvillé are only a few hundred yards apart.*

Which brings us back to, except for the 38 Ort(h)liebs who came to our reunion, there are not just two trees to assemble... What would the 3,700 other Ort(h)liebs say?

What does Ort(h)lieb mean? We've seen that its origin is surely German.. The name has two syllables Ort or Orth and Lieb. In Old German, Ort or Orth signified a place or location. What's more, the patronymic Orth is quite widespread. A dozen

families in Strasbourg alone have the name Orth. Those who watch German television undoubtedly know the series "Orth Castle-hotel." Philippe from Roynac, in one of his documents, tells us that in a little Tyrolean village he found this word Orth on the door of a place that people referred to as "The Little Place." Das Ort (Neuter) is, by contrast, less well known. Eugene brought this to our attention in Bulletin #1. It means, it seems, "Tip of a Sword." I recall that my father told me that Ortlieb meant "The Sword." Lastly, Erich of Freiburg told me a new and original interpretation of the name. One of his friends, a priest, said that Ort was used in some Hebrew texts to mean God (Gott).** Ortlieb then would be a synonym for Gottlieb, a name also widespread in Germany.

Then, what should we think about the "h" in Orth? At first glance one would think that Orth was an old spelling for the word for place or location. Originally, Orthlieb had to have been written with an "h." You would think the greatest concentration of Orthliebs would be in Germany where the name originated. Yet of the 919 Orthliebs to be found in the census of Germany, none of them spells his or her name Orthlieb. Only one ancestor who came from Berlin, that of Robert Hans Orthlieb of Calgary, Canada, had an "h" in his name. I have seen a notarized document in which his name was spelled with an "h." I've got to admit that this is not any sort of explanation.

Another more plausible hypothesis would be that the "h" was added along the way by a conscientious scribe who remembered that Orth was written with an "h." Indeed at the time when patronymics were first adopted, few men knew how to read and write. People used scribes when it was necessary to have a document drawn up. Scribes themselves weren't too strong as spellers. They spelled phonetically -- and loosely. The

patronymic Schmied (Blacksmith) is a good example because in Eugene Ortlieb's "Where does my Name come from?" we find it spelled four different ways. Even Ortlieb is sometimes spelled variously as Ortlip, Ortlipp, Ortlep or Ortlepp. There is also a feminine version Ortliebin that in German is grammatically feminine. Erich told me that in 14th century in Freiburg there was an Ortliebinnen Association with its own coat of arms.

I know that our Orthlieb cousins are very attached to their "h" and no one would dream of taking it away from them. Simply, as Eugene said at Haut-Koenigsbourg, the "h" is of no significance. Not only does it have no significance, it is also very ephemeral, that is, in the same family you may find Ortliebs and Orthliebs. I have seen this very phenomenon in Robert Hans Orthlieb's documents that he showed me when he visited Strasbourg this past May. On a baptismal document dated 1889, his great grandfather's name Heinrich Gottlieb Friedrich Orthlieb is spelled with an "h." Then on his grandfather's death certificate the "h" has disappeared; the name appears as Karl Jakob Ortlieb. The "h" then reappears in his father Hans Orthlieb's name.

I was able to count in the region around Obernai from the beginning to the end of the 18th century 30 births of Orthliebs; during the same time 45 Ortliebs saw the light of day. The "h" would have been added sometime in the 18th century. [WHY??] In Philippe Orthlieb's document "Research and Genealogical Hypotheses of the Orthlieb Family" the "h" appeared in 1626, having been absent before, which shows it was the addition of a scribe in the 17th century.

When talking about a person, Lieb means likeable or nice. Derived from the substantive Liebe (love) or the verb Lieben (to love) one could interpret it in the patronymic Ort(h)lieb in different ways: He who loves a place or location, for example, where he lives. Admittedly this interpretation is simple, but it is good. It is, in every case, the meaning given in dictionaries of patronymics. We have seen the other possible interpretation like Gottlieb, he who loves God or is loved by God and also the “Defender of the Sward.”

The fact that the 3,700 Ortliebs of the world most likely don't have a common ancestor leads to conclusions that we aren't closely linked biologically and our DNA analysis wouldn't show many commonalities. So why create an association called “The Ort(h)lieb Family?” The answer is to be found in Section 2.1 of the Bylaws of the Family Association. **“The Association has as its goal to create a ties among people sharing the patronymic Ort(h)lieb, to bring together historic or genealogical information in regard to this surname...”** The tie that unites us therefore is not a genealogical one, but an interest we all have in our patronymic. Of course, that doesn't mean we wouldn't eventually look for common ancestors, but their absence isn't an obstacle because it is rather our name that unites us.

Just as a group of people who like cats might form a cat fanciers' association, we have our association. In their bulletin they might publish stories of cats as we publish stories of Ort(h)liebs. In our Bulletin, respecting the objectives of our association we will try to relate the exploits and the merits of certain Ort(h)liebs, without much concern about which branch of the family they came from. Moreover, each time that we have the

necessary information to add to a genealogical branch, we will do it. All the better if this tree is yours!

* In his brochure "Research and Genealogical Hypotheses on the Orthlieb Family" dated 15 August 1997, Philippe Orthlieb established a tie between Conrad and a Friedrich Ortlieb (1595? – 1670?) that I have not been able to trace, either in J. L. Kleindienst's work nor in the archives of the Genealogical Circle of Alsace.

** One of my Jewish friends, an expert in Hebrew texts, unfortunately could not confirm this opinion. According to him the only Hebrew word that comes close to Orth is "Or" meaning "Light."