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## III.

MEMOIR OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL GERSTER-CASTOR REUNION  
BASEL, SWITZERLAND, 1987

Richard J. Castor

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Two hundred and fifty years have elapsed since Hans Georg Gerster, a Swiss from the village of Gelterkinden in the Canton of Basel, emigrated to the New World. Pietist leanings and his quest for citizenship in this new land were strong inducements for him to embark on the Rhine from Basel in July, 1736. With him were his mother, Elsbeth Sparr of Herzogenbuchsee, and his three-months pregnant wife, Eva Gysin of Hölstein. Arriving in Rotterdam, they boarded the Princess Augusta, and set sail for the New World via Cowes, England arriving safely after being shipwrecked off shore, at Penn's Landing, Philadelphia, September 15, 1736.

The American Castors (anglicized version of Gerster) celebrated this event August 22-24, 1986, at the Hotel Hilton, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

At this reunion, the descendants of Hans Georg determined that a return to the Swiss homeland of Hans Georg Gerster would be both an educational and historically significant opportunity.

The Wastler Escorted Travel, Inc. of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, carefully planned every detail of a 17-day tour. Many tour members had corresponded with Gersters living in both Switzerland and Germany, to invite them to a banquet at the Hotel Basel International for the evening of August 29, 1987.

On August 19, twenty-eight American Castors, descendants of Hans Georg, and another ten non-related Castors from the Castor Association of America, traveled via Icelandair from the JFK

International Airport in New York City, arriving in Luxembourg at noon the following day.

The Swiss Homeland Tour focused on the history and culture of each area visited. After touring the multi-layered, walled city of Luxembourg, we visited Würzburg with its magnificently painted and sculptured Residenz Palace. A surprise organ concert in the Stiefthogg Cathedral by Dr. Linsenmeyer was breathtaking. He then graciously permitted organists present to play the old, historic instrument. Bach and "Amazing Grace" were heard that day. In the evening while we were waiting for the lights to illuminate the Marienburg Fortress across the Main River, we happily met Friedrich Prinz zu Schoenaich-Carolath (more fondly referred to as "Fritz"), who graciously spent his evening taking us to many unique places about his city and giving detailed histories which we thoroughly enjoyed.

At the Herrgottskirche in Creglingen the altar was incredibly hand-sculpted in wood by the world-famous Tilman Riemenschneider (1460-1531). The "Blood Altar" in St. Jacob's Church in Rothenburg was also his creation.

Rothenburg on the Tauber is a walled city containing quaint buildings and ancient artifacts extending back to the Roman period. There in an upper room we met a farmer and his daughter who re-enacted the legend of a farmer rescuing the town by drinking three liters of wine. They remembered to bring a handsome enameled glass beaker of delicious wine for all of us to taste... but only after the farmer recited in German poetry the town's history.

The curious 1000-year-old Dinkelsbühl was a fascinating town and we examined with interest its many architectural gems of antiquity. Crossing the Danube, we arrived in Augsburg, which we toured after a leisurely dinner.

Near Munich, the sprawling Nymphenburg Palace and Gardens were viewed with awe, and the famous Town Hall's Glockenspiel was seen in action downtown.

Salzburg, Austria, was our home for two days, from which we visited the "Sound of Music" Palace, the cathedral where Maria and Rudolph von Trapp were married, Mozart's home, Hitler's Eagle's Nest, Berchtesgaden, and the Königsee. In the evenings we enjoyed concerts in splendid palaces. We proceeded westward through Garmish-Partenkirchen and Oberammergau (we got a glimpse of the "Jesus" of the Passion Play) to the quiet village of Schwangau. There we inspected "Mad" King Ludwig's fairy-tale Neuschwanstein Castle, and the home of his youth, the Hohenschwangau Castle. After our dinner in the Ratskeller of the Gasthof, we relished "Stube Time" with the local Bavarian citizens in their native attire.

Traveling through more remote Alpine passes, we came upon the highly-embellished, majestic Wies Pilgrim Church of the Gegeisselten Heiland which was undergoing extensive restorations. We passed Innsbruck and then the towering Zugspitze at 9,721 feet. We enjoyed lunch at a sidewalk café in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, where we obtained several of its world-famous postage stamps. Arriving in Lucerne, some took pleasure in an evening's dinner cruise on Lake Lucerne, or the colorful Swiss music with Alpen Horn in the hotel restaurant. Shopping was always fun!

The next day brought us to the historical area of our roots, that of our immigrant ancestor, Hans Georg Gerster. We visited Charles Scholer's grandparents' village of Zunzgen and the nearby church in Zeglingen where they were married. We met a wedding party there by the name of Gysin who invited all of us to their ceremony. Small world!

As we arrived in Herzogenbuchsee, the hometown of Hans' mother, Elsbeth Sparr, we discovered a little festival in progress. In the band was a Walter Gysin, and the baker of the town was Alfred Sparr. Both had been to the United States once, and we promised to write after they listened with considerable interest to the story of our historic quest. We visited Hans' mother's church, Die Kirche der Bergpredigt, which was being prepared for a wedding later that day.

On to our Hotel International Basel where the First International Gerster-Castor Reunion Banquet was held that evening of August 29. The first Gerster greeted us at 3:30 P.M. for a 7:00 P.M. banquet. We were overwhelmed by the warm and enthusiastic welcome of 160 (189 total were present) Gersters from Switzerland, Germany, Liechtenstein, Austria and France. The Banquet Hall was decorated by four quotations from Hans Georg Gerster's letters, and the Gerster-Castor Coat of Arms Banner made by Connie Castor for the National Castor reunion of one year earlier hung proudly center stage. N. Stephen Castor's 30 foot genealogical chart spread across the back wall. This First International Reunion had the accompanying menu, program and history. Leo R. Wastler was Master of Ceremonies. "Marlitante" Trudi Gerster, a Swiss story-teller and politician of national renown, welcomed the American Castors. Richard J. Castor welcomed the Swiss Gersters. N. Stephen Castor discussed the history of the Castor genealogy in America. As interpreter, Dr. Kathi Studer-Stalder of Liestal captured the spirit and camaraderie of the occasion wearing her great-grandmother's Baselbieter Sunday Tracht (old national dress of that Canton's area). Unexpected pleasures awaited us with the playing of Alphorns, a Gerster jazz trio, a musical saw by Jack Henry, the singing with great pride of the Baselbieterlied by the Swiss with a fifth stanza composed by Kathi Studer just for this occasion and dedicated to us, and a precision Swiss fife and drum quartet in authentic Fastnacht costumes (all Gersters). Esther Gerster made candied favors for each American. The featured banquet speakers were Dr. Ernest Menolfi of the University of Basel and Dr. Mattias Manz, Archivist of Baselland in Liestal, who presented the results of their fascinating and successful research on Hans Georg Gerster. (We are deeply indebted to both of them for their tireless efforts and great time spent in our behalf by digging more deeply into our historical roots, and to the Swiss, Dr. Leo Schelbert of the University of Illinois at Chicago, for his many helpful suggestions and intercedings for us these past two years.) The banquet ended well after midnight with regrets that more time could not be spent visiting with our Swiss Gerster cousins

and new friends. Many of the Gersters present brought their genealogical records to find common links in our ancestries. The American Castors under Joyce Henry's leadership closed with singing, "God Be With You Till We Meet Again." For all of us present that night, in the words of Ernst Gerster of Tecknau, "This was a dream come true!"

Sunday morning, August 30, we visited the Evangelical Reformed Church of Gelterkinden where our ancestor and his mother attended church. There Mrs. Brigitte Heckendorn of Gelterkinden presented a thorough history of this beautiful edifice, that from its knoll overlooks the quaint town beneath it. The Gemeindepräsident, Urs Winistorfer, warmly welcomed us, presented the history of the area, and introduced the councilmen of Gelterkinden. Councilmen Konrad Handschin and Werner Thommen accepted for the town of Gelterkinden the following plaque presented to them by Richard J. Castor in loving memory of Hans Georg Gerster and his wife, Eva Gysin, with the following bi-lingual inscription:

In Loving Memory of our  
Distinguished and courageous Swiss ancestor of Gelterkinden  
HANS GEORG GERSTER  
March 5, 1710 - December 24, 1797  
And his wife, EVA GYSIN, of Hölstein

We American Castors  
Dedicate this 250th Anniversary Commemorative Plaque  
To our living Swiss relatives  
August 30, 1987

Urs Winistorfer, Gemeindepräsident &  
Hans Freivogel, Bürgermeister

Thelma Castor Campbell	William H. Castor, Jr.
Charles G. Castor	Shirley A. Jamison Delp
Harold Edward Castor	Patricia Castor Devine
Jonathan Wike Castor	John D. Henry III
N. Stephen Castor	Mary Castor Henry
Norman Robert Castor	Grace Elizabeth Castor Meissner

R. Jeffrey Castor

Emily Castor Winkler

Richard J. Castor

Evelyn Castor Winslow

Vernon G. Castor, Sr.

"One generation shall praise thy works to another." Ps. 145:4

Councilman Konrad Handschin searched diligently for the bell tower key, and upon finding it, opened its ancient door for Richard Castor to climb its circular steps, view the town from aloft and ring two of its mammoth bells. After visiting the cemetery, we drove to the nearby town of Tecknau where we joined an open air church service. The beautiful hymns were familiar to the American Castors, the scriptures were translated, and the sermon was delivered carefully in German.

As the Richard Castor family enjoyed a heart-warming visit with his Gerster correspondent, Ernst Gerster of Tecknau, his wife, Meta, and family, the tour bus proceeded to the Farnsburg Restaurant where the Gemeindepräsident welcomed the visiting Castor families with a "toast." There we all enjoyed a sumptuous luncheon together. Many then climbed the adjacent hill with Dr. Ernest Menolfi and Kathi Studer to view the remains of the Farnsburg Castle (A.D. 1319-1342) where Hans Georg and his mother must have traveled on many occasions in an effort to gain Hans' citizenship. The view of the countryside from those heights was captivating!

Upon returning to Gelterkinden, we visited the old Town Hall, there to witness the Gerster-Castor Plaque already hung prominently on the wall. Dr. Ernest and Mrs. Dunja Menolfi then led the tour through Hölstein, Niederdorf, and Oberdorf to Waldenburg. A walking tour demonstrated both the former church (St. Peter's) and residence (The Old House) of Hans' pastor and friend, Hieronymous d'Annoni, to whom his letters were addressed from the New World. We must credit him with the careful preservation of so many documents concerning the people of the village of his day, including Hans' letters. The old city gates and part of the city walls were still intact. High on

the eastern hill was the old Waldenburg Castle. The day ended with a visit to the town of MuttENZ, and the church where Pastor Annoni completed his popular and effective ministry of 24 years. Our family was invited by the Menolfi's to enjoy a fascinating walking tour of the early palatial homes of downtown Basel, and then to savor a delightful Swiss country meal, spiced by stimulating conversations and happy pleasantries.

Monday morning Dr. and Mrs. Menolfi both canceled classes to give us a guided tour through the City of Basel. The open air market in the middle of the city displayed many fresh fruits and vegetables. The old Town Hall, its original section dating to 1630, with gleaming golden cupola and colorfully patterned tile roof, was an architectural gem with an equally unique interior of frescoed walls. It was here that Dr. Menolfi introduced us to seven ancient documents from the Staatsarchiv's archival library, each record referring to Hans Georg Gerster, Eva Gysin, or Elsbeth Sparr. These ancient volumes displayed the baptismal record of Hans Georg Gerster, letters between the Cantons of Basel and Bern concerning the citizenship of Hans Georg Gerster, and the manumission papers of Eva Gysin, the latter being dated just two weeks before they began their long journey northward on the Rhine. Carefully we passed the old documents around the table, to be viewed, photographed and reverently handled by Hans' fortunate descendants. In our hands was the history of our origins.

From the Town Hall the group proceeded to the embarking area on the Rhine River where Hans as well as thousands of other Swiss and German emigrants over the centuries had begun their long, arduous and harrowing journey to the New World.

The University of Basel Library held the next unusual surprise for us: the main display cabinet revealed the two original letters that Hans Georg had written to his friends in Switzerland from Germantown in the New World via his Pastor d'Annoni in Waldenburg. The handsome, red volume, A Castor Family In America, compiled and written by Charles G. Castor for the 1986, 250th Anniversary Reunion,



was also proudly standing at attention. An advertisement entitled "Opportunities for Travelers," was shown from the local newspaper of April 3, 1736, announcing "the arrival on April 20 or 21 his covered boat and will accept travelling persons as well as merchandise and other goods or as far as wanted." This was undoubtedly the Rhine boat Hans embarked on. A journal dated 1805, showing emigrants saying their "good-byes" at the ship landing embarking area of Basel, was also displayed. It was a unique and thrilling experience to see these particular documents all on display together ...reflecting the origins of a true-to-life drama played out through the centuries to this very moment of time in each of our own lives.

A quick stop at the Archives of Baseland at Liestal found Dr. Mattias Manz displaying for us the actual birth record of Eva Gysin. He then came onto the bus, personally gave each member a copy of the document, and bid us farewell.

Crossing the Rhine we headed northward through the beautiful Schwarzwald (Black Forest) to Titisee-Neustadt where we spent our time and our money...a lot of shopping here. Vernon G. Castor, Sr., our hero, was frequently seen with nose in air, and the quip, "Just sniffing for the bäckerei!" That evening we savored a delicious fish dinner, delicately prepared and served. An invigorating jog or walk around the jewel-like lake was but 5 miles! Triberg, the world's capital for hand-carved wooden clocks and other sculptured works, was a most intriguing visit.

The next day found us in the age-old and romantic city of Heidelberg on the Neckar River with its Philosopher's Walk and magnificent Castle of the Palatinate Electors overlooking the city from the southeast.

An entire day was devoted to the historic city of Worms, where we enjoyed Pfarrer Alfred Hans Kuby as both our city guide and after-dinner historian-lecturer. He spoke eloquently and precisely of European history, the Reformation and the Renaissance, fielding our many questions with finesse. He was special! We saw where Martin

Luther took his stand before the Imperial Diet at Trinity Church, and uttered those famous words, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. May God be my helper." That same day Worms held the largest of the Rhine River festivals, the "Fish Net Festival," which revealed both day and evening festivities typical of European celebrations. We were so glad to witness the dancing, singing, and band-playing...a carnival in native attire!

A luncheon on the Drosselgasse, one of the most desirable of all eating areas in Europe, revealed a cosmopolitan group of diners: they came from Italy, Russia and Norway that particular day. In the town of Rudesheim we admired the highly ornamented signs in gold and bright colors, truly handsome art forms.

An overnight stay in the city of Mainz, the capital of Rheinland Pfalz, was enjoyed in Guttenberg's hometown. The next morning we boarded the ship that would take us northward on the Rhine to Koblenz, passing many quaint towns and twenty-four magnificent castles that our ancestors viewed as they had journeyed to their new homeland in America two hundred and fifty years earlier. Debarking at Koblenz, we visited St. Kastor's DOM and then drove on to Köln (Cologne). Arriving only a few minutes before 5:00 P.M., and knowing that the tremendous, world-famous cathedral would be closing its doors in a few minutes, some daring Castors raced to its portals to climb the 524 circular stone steps into its towering steeples, where they could view more closely its magnificent architecture, and more distantly, the entire city far below with its surrounding peaceful terrain.

The next morning we traveled the Moselle Valley, considered to be the most beautiful in Germany, with its innumerable vineyards reaching heavenward, high into the mountains, every foot of ground meticulously groomed for a thorough yield. A short visit to the pleasant town of Karden found an early Protestant Reformed Church by the name of St. Castor's. We were on our very best behavior! That evening we gathered for our playful and yet somber farewell dinner in our Trier Hotel directly across the street from the Porta Nigra, a

Roman ruins dating to the 5th century.

Returning to Luxembourg, we visited both the American and the German Military Cemeteries. Few eyes were dry. General George Patton was also buried there with his men at his request.

The return flight found some of us spending any remaining moneys jingling in our pockets on the beautiful woolens in Reykjavik, Iceland. After our 8-hour flight, we "touched-down" in our homeland of the United States of America, and reflected on Hans' arrival after a courageous and perhaps desperate 12-week journey. He, his now six-months pregnant wife, Eve, and his aging mother, Elsbeth Sparr, were searching for political freedom, religious expression, and most importantly, the privilege of citizenship in a new country where all were to be considered equal. By comparison, these ideals make us ever mindful of our heritage, a land where opportunity and freedom are the birthright of every citizen and their heirs...and a renewed appreciation that we must jealously guard today if we are to preserve this rich heritage for our descendants of tomorrow.

Gelterkinder, 1754

