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Memories of Lembach and Alsace
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My memories of Alsace actually began in 1961 and 1962, although my first introduction to Lembach occurred in June 1969, just after my Apollo 9 flight.

In 1961-2 I was a fighter pilot flying F-86s out of Phalsborough Air Base as part of a deployment that was initiated by President John Kennedy immediately after Chairman Khrushchev erected the Berlin Wall. I was enrolled in graduate school at MIT at the time, but flying with the Massachusetts Air National Guard to make some additional money and keep up my flying skills. I had already served 4 years on active duty flying F-100S in the Philippine Islands. I had left active duty to return to MIT to earn my Master's degree in Aeronautics and Astronautics. Mr. Khrushchev interrupted my studies with his wall. Not knowing if he was going to go farther, President Kennedy activated our ANG squadron (along with many others) and sent us over to Europe.

This was my first experience of living in Europe, and by chance, there I was in the vicinity of my grandparent's home. It was a busy time during the 9 months that I was stationed there. I am embarrassed now to look back and think that I never went to Lembach or visited with my Alsatian relatives, but I was very shy and did not really feel comfortable in doing it. That seems strange now, and it probably was... but I was only 27 years old and a bit awkward.

However, I certainly remember the beautiful countryside and the friendly people. I did not have a car or any readily available transportation, but a friend did buy a small car and on weekends we would get around visiting Strasbourg, Nancy, Saverne, and several nearby villages. I remember how beautiful the Vosges Mountains were and all the vineyards and fields. It was my first taste of old castles and historic fortifications. We have nothing like that in the United States and it became a memorable part of my first "taste" of Europe.

After my Apollo 9 flight in March 1969 our crew was assigned to attend the Paris Air Show in late May to be part of the U.S. space exhibit. It was a bit of a tradition that the crew who flew immediately prior to the annual Paris Air Show would participate in the event to

represent the U.S. It was a great experience. One of the high points for me was our insistence that we meet with the two cosmonauts who were also there representing the USSR... Shatalov and Yeliseyev. They had also flown very recently and were participating in the USSR space exhibit just down the line of pavilions from us. It was amazing how difficult it seemed to be to get the bureaucrats and officials to arrange a meeting with them. One day the three of us (McDivitt, Scott and I) decided it was time to "just do it" and we walked out of our exhibit without any coordination and walked down the line and into the Soviet pavilion... completely unannounced! It created quite a scene... people scurrying around realizing that the Soviet pavilion had been "invaded" by the American astronauts! But it got the job done! After that we got much better cooperation from the bureaucrats and we ended up with several memorable meetings with our cosmonaut friends.

After the close of the Paris Air Show NASA assignee each of us to head in a different direction to tour other sites in France and nearby Europe. In my case the tour was to Lembach, my ancestral home, then on to Strasbourg and to CERN in Geneva. This was a very special visit, as you can easily imagine. I had never met any of my European relatives at that time and here I was headed to Lembach to be welcomed as a hero. This was quite an uncomfortable role for me. It was clear that there would be cameras and TV people everywhere and that there would be very little opportunity to spend any personal time with anyone. Furthermore I could speak no French and I would clearly have to say something!

So, on the flight over to Strasbourg (which arrived late since we were awakened late at the hotel) I rehearsed over and over again the simple sentence that my friend from the NASA European office had written for me to say: "Je suis content de rentrer chez moi". By the time I left the plane I had it down pretty well.

We drove through the beautiful countryside that rainy morning trying desperately to make up for some of the lost time, but the road conditions and traffic just didn't cooperate. We therefore arrived at the town center in Lembach quite late...something like 40 minutes after our scheduled arrival time.

This was very uncomfortable for everyone. We were not only embarrassed by being late but especially upset because it had started raining lightly and everyone was standing there in the square waiting for us getting cold and wet. Especially the children! I seem to remember (my memory is far from perfect!) that there was a children's chorus waiting there to sing for us and the poor kids were all freezing.

What I remember most poignantly about the event was me "procession" from where the limousine left us off to the steps of the city hall where the official welcoming ceremony took place. My wife and I were surrounded by a phalanx of officials and protectors who pushed through the crowd (it seemed like several thousand people... perhaps it was?) toward the steps. On the way we would hear someone shouting over the music and the general cacophony "hello Russell, I'm your great-aunt Gertrude" or "hello, I'm your cousin Walter" or some other name and relation. We could do nothing to acknowledge these heartfelt greetings; they were 6 or 8 rows back into the crowd... all we could do was wave as we were almost dragged onward to the City Hall steps. Most of those relatives we sadly never met again. It was very touching, it was very happy, and it was also very sad.

There then was the ceremony, the chorus singing, the official welcome, my single sentence in French and the ceremony was over. I recall that we made a very fast tour of the town and

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some of the old buildings that my grandfather Jacob and/or grandmother Louise had lived in or gone to school in. It was all too much to remember the details; too much, too fast, too confusing. And very emotional. We had drinks and toasts on the second floor of the City Hall. I have no idea who was there except that more relatives whom I was unable to meet shouted "hello" from the crowd.

And then it was over and we were now late for the special luncheon that had been prepared down in Strasbourg. I think that the then Mayor of Lembach went with us, but I'm really not certain. Time and too much input have blurred it all in my mind by now. About the only thing I recall from that luncheon was that the wonderful white asparagus were in season and I learned how to eat them in the Alsatian way! And then off to Geneva and CERN.

Other memories

You asked about my memories of the countryside, history and especially the Fleckenstein castle. These are all part of my very pleasant and personal memories from several visits to the area since that wonderful crazy day in June 1969. I've made several visits to the area and it is always wonderful.

The family moments are most special. Charlotte organizing 30 or more members of the extended family to meet with my wife, our three daughters and I at a restaurant in the Vosges. They were all lined up in order by their relationship to my grandmother and grandfather! They were even color-coded... their nametags were different colors, each color signifying their lineage in our family! Oh yes... Charlotte is organized!

At the lunch we spoke English, Spanish, French, German and many combinations and variations of each. We all had a great time. Fleckenstein is something special. I have been to Europe many times and love to visit both old castles and cathedrals. There is a connection with the past which Europeans take completely for granted, not even thinking about it for the most part. It's part of the natural cycle there. But this is very special to those of us from America. Everything is new here; something really old is perhaps 200 years old! On the one hand it is part of the reason why change and new things are so readily accepted in America. Since there is no history, let's get on with the new. But it is also the source of something missing in Americans. They do not understand or appreciate their connections to the past and the richness of tradition and history that is second nature to Europeans is almost totally missing in Americans. At least until they travel and get old enough to appreciate their origins.

So for me, and now some (most?) of my children, visiting Alsace is something special. And when we visited Fleckenstein for the first time and could barely make out the name Schweickart carved into one of the stones honoring one of the builders of the castle... well that was really special. Now I'm looking forward to (somehow) getting some of our grandchildren over to appreciate and enjoy Alsace and our history there. Maybe it will happen... maybe not.

But in any event Alsace, Lembach, the countryside, the mountains and hills, the castles, cathedrals, the wine, the food, the people, the music, the history... all of it is very special and I look forward to someday seeing it again. And hopefully, introducing yet another member or two of the American side of the family to the wonders and connections of Alsace. And, of course to the flammkuchen as well!