

SOME HISTORY OF THE DESCENDANTS
OF
HANS ULRICH GRAF

Today in northeast Switzerland in the Rhine Valley in the canton of St. Gallen sits the town of Rebstein, first settled long after Rome's legions were forced out by southerly expanding German tribes. Rebstein is some distance above the banks of the Rhine about eight miles south of Lake Constance and is the first known residence of our Graf family. The view below is a scene on the outskirts of Rebstein with the foothills of the Alps in the background.



The name Graf was originally the title of persons who controlled a portion of land similar to an earldom or county or canton. Rebstein belonged to an area administered by the Holy Roman Emperor dating back to the 700s when Charlemagne ruled. The early Grafs were rulers bound by treaty and custom to support the empire in exchange for local authority.

The ruling family at the time of Rebstein's birth was the Grafs von Montfort. Their castle at Sargans was a strategic crossing point of trade routes from the south as well as west toward Zurich. That family was "Graf" in the true sense of the word. However, the Grafs of our family were probably once owned by a Graf, no different than other property. Being Graf's serfs, we would have been referred to as "the Graf's", and in more modern times simply took the name of our former owner.

It is, of course, possible that we descended from the Graf nobility, but considering sheer numbers of nobles versus serfs, it is unlikely.

By 1375 the Grafts of Montfort, having been the main feudal force in the Rhine Valley since 1230, were at the twilight of their power. Their land lay directly in the path of the swiftly emerging House of Hapsburg; Europe was leaving the Middle Ages with increased economic and political possibilities, so the Hapsburgs gradually gained control. This did not overly concern the serfs in Rebstein since they were to serve many masters in years to come.

The surname Graf appears in records many times from the 14th Century on, sometimes referring to a serf, sometimes to a noted citizen. In 1723 Hans Caspar Graf was named mayor of Rebstein. Whether he is a relative of ours is debatable; however, it can be said that all we Grafts are spiritual brothers and sisters since our ancestors walked the same hills and breathed the same socio-political and religious atmosphere. The newer generations continued to influence history both in the mountains of Switzerland and the plains of America.

Forty-one years after Hans Caspar Graf held the mayor's office in Rebstein, a Hans Jakob Graf was born to Hans Ulrich and Regina Graf. Hans Jakob and his wife, Anna Barbara, had seven children. The youngest was Samuel, born January 14, 1801, and we descend from him.

Europe was going through political upheaval at this time. In 1798 Napoleon's troops had swiftly occupied Switzerland. The Swiss aristocracy saw this as a rescuing force to uphold the failing feudal traditions. Liberal Swiss hoped that Napoleon's control would bring them new political expression. All of Switzerland was shocked to find the invaders levying heavy taxes to finance further military actions. A new constitution, however, with a more centralized system, eventually brought a representative government. The Rheintal became part of the Canton of St. Gallen and Rebstein became a town in its own right in 1803. In July of that year the village council was elected. There were four Grafts on this council.

The Vienna Congress was convened in 1815 by the victorious allies whose aim was to restore the old order. One of the decisions was for the Canton of St. Gallen to pay reparations to the displaced feudal nobility and weighty taxes were levied on the already suffering people. This was also a time of bad harvests, and in 1816 there was much¹ driving rain and 35 days of heavy snow. Potatoes rotted in the ground; the distilling of schnapps was outlawed so that the poor would at least have some starch to eat. The following year brought no relief with heavy snow until late May which then melted into the flooding Rhine destroying dams and flooding the valley. Typhoid fever and famine followed with nearly 30,000 starving people left to wander in search of food.

I HANS ULRICH GRAF wed REGINA _____²

II HANS JACOB GRAF b. 1764, d. 3 Apr 1829 wed ANNA BARBARA GRAF³,
d. 31 Dec 1833

III JOHANNES GRAF b. about 1797 wed ANNA MAGDALENA MAFLI

IV 1. JOHANNES GRAF

¹ Manuscript by James Jeffrey Graf (grandson of Fordyce Graf) 1978, p. 17

² Genealogy compiled by Cheryl Graf (Mrs. David) is used throughout.

³ Letter from Ursula Kobelt to Marilyn Rasmusen 26 Feb 1987

2. SAMUEL GRAF
3. ANNA BARBARA GRAF, died in her teens in 1823
4. JOHANN JACOB GRAF
5. JOHANN HEINRICH GRAF , b. 1835, a baker⁴ , embroidery manufacturer⁵

Children of this fifth child were:

V. 1. HERMANN GRAF d. 1904

2. HEINRICH ROBERT GRAF , baker ⁶ and lace manufacturer,⁷ d. 1919. In 1916 when American cousin Franklin Hess visited, he reported that Heinrich Robert and family had a “delightful and beautiful garden, partway up a mountain slope, near Rebstein with an exquisite view of the valley”. Incidentally, Franklin Hess also met the remaining first cousin of Johann Heinrich Graf, an elderly Rebstein man who, he said, “resembled his Uncle Samuel Graf with white, curly hair.”⁸ As to the beautiful garden, when Ruth and Mary Hess visited the Swiss Grafs in 1922, they told the relatives back home that when they were invited for tea in the garden, a servant was summoned by pushing a bell-button imbedded in a tree. ⁹ Heinrich Robert was active in the village council, school board, church, parliament and served as a district judge. He moved from the old Graf home to the mountain villa and became the largest vintner in the area. It was not uncommon to see him and his family helping to bring in the grape harvest.

VI 1. THILDI GRAF , b. 13 Aug 1894 d. May 1989. She first married in 1914 but was soon widowed when her husband, on a business trip to England, perished in a German U Boat attack in the English Channel, leaving her with a small child. She eventually married Col. Werner Kobelt who became top commander of northeast Switzerland preparing the area for an expected German attack during WW II. They had two children. In late years she lived in a mansion converted to apartments outside Rebstein where Marilyn and Ben Rasmusen visited her in about 1986; she immediately greeted them in perfect English and they found her charming as seems to come through in the photo.

⁴ Letter from Ursula Kobelt to Marilyn Rasmusen 1984

⁵ Op. Cit. J. J. Graf Manuscript p. 22

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Op. Cit. J. J. Graf Manuscript, p. 16

⁸ Letter from Franklin Hess to Alpha Graf 11 Oct 1916

⁹ As told to Marilyn Rasmusen by Dora Graf Suppes



photo.

They each separately noted her strong resemblance in look, manner and taste in dress and decor to Dora Graf Suppes. Her daughter Ursula said that when Thildi first took the apartment in this villa she was uneasy because it had previously been the home of her father's main business competitor.¹⁰ Later, about 1988 Rasmusens again visited Thildi when she was in a nursing home, very frail and not able to respond to Ursula's suggestion that she speak English. The Swiss Grafts were visited by various American cousins over the years and were always most hospitable.

VII 1. TILDI _____, WED _____ GIGER.¹¹ In 1982 she resided in St. Gallen and was the wife of a doctor.

- VIII 1. HANELORE GIGER
2. JEANETTE GIGER
3. LINA GIGER
4. YVES GIGER

VII 2. URSULA KOBELT , Social Worker. Marilyn and Ben visited her attractive Herrliberg apartment in about 1988. She hosted at a lakeside restaurant, reached by ferry, and then accompanied them to visit her mother to whom she was very devoted.

3. WERNER KOBELT wed Ruth Outwater. He was 57 in 1982 and president

¹⁰ Letter from Franklin Graf to Ruth Hess Barker 3 Dec 1964

¹¹ Op. Cit Letter , Burket Graf