

## An outing with the Luther family

Martin Luther's descendants cultivate the family ties – and the heritage of the Reformation



Photo: Anika Kempf  
Detail from Martin Luther's ancestry table on a tablet computer. They are connected through the Christian faith – and through their famous ancestor: the descendants of Martin Luther (1483-1546) are called “Lutherides”. In a worldwide family network, they cultivate the heritage of the Reformer from Wittenberg. Every three years they hold a big meeting at a different Luther site. The last destination, at the beginning of September, was Augsburg, where the monk from Central Germany defended his new ideas against the papal legate Cajetan in 1518.

“Your father and my granny are grandchildren of siblings.” This is how it sounds like when the descendants of Martin Luther talk about their rather complicated kinships. Hannelore Masuhr, a feisty lady in her mid-sixties who lives in Leipzig, said these words to Henriette Rossner-Sauerbier from Zeitz. For the last six years, the actress and theatre director was the head of the family clan, which has a name that is also slightly complicated: “Lutherides Association – descendants of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora, as well as of the collateral relatives”.

### **Most of them are descendants of Luther's son Paul**

The association has around 200 members all over the world. It was founded in 1926 in Eisenach by the theologian Otto Sartorius, whose grandson Werner is still active in the Lutherides Association and was their president for many years. All in all, there are probably several thousand descendants of Luther – there exist branches in the USA and in the Netherlands, where a descendant of the Reformer from Schulpforta emigrated to in 1735. Most of them, including the line in the Netherlands, descend from Martin Luther's youngest son Paul (1533-1593), who was a doctor and the personal physician of Duke John Frederick II from Saxony.



Photo: Anika KempfHenriette

Rossner-Sauerbier, theatre director in Zeitz, and president of the Lutherides Association from 2007 until 2013. Henriette Rossner-Sauerbier also belongs to the Pauline line. "The Lutherides want to promote the contact within the family - in accordance with the attitude of Martin Luther, who really was a family man", she explains. She perceives the Reformer and his "Here I stand, I can do no other" as a great role model. "I admire what he did." Each of the Luther descendants, who have now met in Augsburg for their family gathering, can tell his or her very own story - however, they are not only connected through their kinship, but also through the Christian faith.

This becomes already clear during the church service with which the Luther family begins its meeting in Augsburg. It is held in the church of St Anna, which once belonged to the Carmelite monastery where Martin Luther resided during his stay in the city in 1518. The worship is dominated by an atmosphere of both serenity and reflection. The organ plays a waltz as well as the mightily roaring "A mighty fortress is our God". The homily about a section from Jesus Sirach is given by Christian Priesmeier, a Lutheride himself, a clerk by profession, and at the same time a novice in the Protestant monastery Amelungsborn near Holzminden. "I wish us a blessed time", he says at the end.

### **The mockery of the classmates**

Christian Priesmeier's mother Ingrid, a sprightly elderly woman with white hair, who, during the guided tour, intrepidly tackles the ups and downs of the streets of Augsburg's city centre, talks about the mockery of her classmates when her kinship with Martin Luther was mentioned: "When I told it at school, they laughed at me." Only when she brought a book that listed all of her ancestors back to the Reformer and founding father of the Evangelical church, her fellow students believed her.



Photo: Anika KempfGenealogists in a

scholarly debate: Alfred Jacobsen from Mainz (left) and Wolfgang Liebehenschel from Berlin. Many Lutherides had similar experiences - and they also learned how much attention their families paid to passing on the tradition and the heritage of the Reformation. No wonder, since Martin Luther and his wife Katharina von Bora are considered as the primordial image of the bourgeois family and of life in a Protestant vicarage. Hans Peter Werner, who was born in Gera and for many years has now been living in Lörrach, is in charge of the finances of the Lutherides. He was introduced to the association by his uncle. "He motivated me very much", Werner says. Alfred Jacobsen from Mainz joined the

Lutherides two years ago. He is a passionate genealogist and discovered the connection by following the traces of his own family history.

Wolfgang Liebehenschel also has a clear idea about what connects the descendants of the famous man from Wittenberg. "To be a Lutheride means to engage in spreading the notion of Martin Luther's Reformation as far as possible - which means that Christian ideas are secured", says the former construction director from Berlin-Kreuzberg. Liebehenschel, who is 77 years old and a non-conformist in the spirit of Luther, has made his mark as a genealogist, too: he has caused a heated scholarly debate about the place of birth of Luther's mother Margarethe Lindemann (1459-1531). Katharina von Bora's birthplace was also corrected due to evidence provided by him.

### **Collateral relatives and relatives by marriage**

Liebehenschel's mother was called Lindemann herself - his family belongs to the so-called collateral relatives. Since the reunification, the descendants of Luther's siblings, especially of his brother Jacob (1490-1571) also belong to the Lutherides. While, in the lines of Luther's children, the name of the Reformer died out in the 18th century, it continues to exist in the collateral lines. One example is Monika Luther. "My step grandma had the Martin Luther ring", the agile lady with the peaked cap says. "I was twelve years old and sad that I was not yet allowed to wear it." Only one year ago she joined the Lutherides - after having overcome a severe sickness: "I thought it would mean my end." A turning point and the conscious reflection of one's own roots.



Photo: Anika KempfChristine and Georgius

Zygalakis with her granddaughter Anne Lauer (centre). Apart from the collateral relatives there are those who have united themselves with the Reformer's family through marriage. "I came to the group because I married my wife", reports Georgius Zygalakis, a citizen of Görlitz with Greek roots. "Her maiden name is Lindemann." They had not only a Protestant but also an Orthodox marriage ceremony, so that the marriage could also be acknowledged in Greece. For the first time, the couple, who live in Nuremberg today, brought their granddaughter to the meeting in Augsburg. "Granddad and Grandma asked me whether I would like to come with them", says Anne Lauer while being busy taking photographs in the church of St. Anna. "And I said yes."

Every three years the Lutherides hold their family gathering, in cities that are closely connected with Martin Luther's life and work. What does the Reformer have to do with Augsburg? For the first time he came here when, in 1511, on his way back from Rome, he visited the Augustinians in Heiligkreuz. Seven years later, the famous dispute with the papal legate Thomas Cajetan (1469-1534) took place in the city. The monk from Wittenberg resided in the Carmelite monastery in Augsburg from October 7th until 20th - today, the famous "Lutherstiege" and a small museum are memorials to his stay.

### **When the Reformer shouted at the papal legate**

The questioning by Cardinal Cajetan was held in the city palace of the Fugger family. The fearsome general superior of the Dominicans demanded that Luther should revoke his 95 theses on the issue of indulgences. Luther himself cornered the papal legate theologically - the situation escalated. "Around ten times I began to talk, and it was as often that he thundered me down", the monk from Wittenberg later remembered. "Finally, I began to shout as well." At the end, Cajetan rumbled: "Leave, and do not return to me, unless you are willing to revoke." Luther did not revoke. "Thank

God”, says Henriette Rossner-Sauerbier. Many church historians consider the dispute of Augsburg as the actual beginning of the Evangelical church and theology.



Photo: Anika KempfA memorial plaque at the church of St. Anna in Augsburg reminds of the famous debate between Martin Luther and Thomas Cajetan in October 1518. However, no Luther memorial exists in the Fugger town. However, until today only a small memorial plaque near St. Anna reminds of this birth hour of Protestantism in the Bavarian-Swabian metropolis. Perhaps this can be changed until the 500th anniversary of the event in 2018. A Luther memorial would suit Augsburg well. The city looks back onto hundreds of years of togetherness of the denominations. For a long time, all public positions were required to be staffed twice – with a Catholic and a Protestant. Today, every fifth citizen of Augsburg is a Protestant; half of the population belongs to the Catholic church.

Apart from this, a large number of traces of the Reformation can be found in Augsburg. The Lutherides were able to assess them during a long walk through the city. They include the Barfüßerkloster, where Johann Schilling preached in 1522 against misconduct in the church, celibacy, and the rule of the Fugger dynasty. In the church, which soon afterwards became Protestant, both Mozart and Albert Schweitzer did once play the organ. Bertold Brecht, who was baptised there, was inspired by a painting in the church to write his “Caucasian Chalk Circle”.

### **Rigorous action against the Anabaptists**

Schilling was one of the predecessors of the Anabaptist movement, which had one of its most important centres in the city. The authorities took rigorous action against this radical faction of the Reformation – on April 12th, 1528, several of its followers were arrested in a house in Lower Augsburg, at the Hinterer Lech. The tongue of a woman named Elisabeth Heggenmiller was cut out. The principal, Hans Leupold, was executed. A memorial plaque reminds of the atrocities.

Two years later, Augsburg became the venue of the “Confessio Augustana” - in the bishop's palace, in the presence of Emperor Karl V., the law scholar Christian Beyer from Saxony presented what is the most eminent Protestant confession statement until today. At that time, Luther, who was still outlawed and whose life was threatened, lived in the fortress of Coburg and stayed in close contact with his comrades in Augsburg, most of all with Philipp Melancthon. The Augsburg religious peace of 1555 finally created a temporary balance between the denominations. But at that time, Luther was already dead for ten years.





Photo: Anika Kempf Group photo of the

Lutherides during the family meeting in Augsburg at the beginning of September. His descendants not only followed historical traces during their stay in Augsburg, they also had to busy themselves with worldly matters, for example the affairs of their association. During a general meeting, a new executive committee of the Lutherides Association was elected. The new president is Martin Eichler from Dresden, who had been Henriette Rossner-Sauerbier's deputy. She became the chairwoman of the Association of Friends of the Lutheride Library, which was established in the gate house of the Moritzburg in Zeitz. The collection of genealogical books on Luther and his descendants offers invaluable material for interested family members and for scientific research.

### **Zeitz is the “city of the descendants”**

Members of the Luther family can be found all over the world – but a particular large amount of them lives in the heartland of the Reformation, in Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia. Wolfgang Liebehenschel knows that Zeitz is considered to be the “city of the descendants”. Since the time of Paul Luther's son, who was a canon, Lutherides have always resided in the city in the Burgenland district. For example Henriette Rossner-Sauerbier, who lived in West Germany for a long time and returned to her native city after the wall had come down. Hannelore Masuhr has also returned back to the roots, “where the souls of my ancestors are”. A couple of months ago she moved from Bonn to Leipzig. Since then, she is even more deeply connected to her relatives and can say sentences like “Your father and my granny are grandchildren of siblings.”

*Audioslide: Anika Kempf, Sound: Claudius Grigat*

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The Audioslide shows faces and stories from the Lutherides' meeting 2013 in Augsburg.

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