

The Ghost of Darmstadt

by John C. Kissinger, 100-DA

My family has a few rather gory tales of various wings of the clan. The German end of the family supposedly lost their holdings at Bad Kissingen in one of the French incursions that ended with the killing of the head of the family and three sons fleeing for their lives. The Huguenot French end of the family got wiped out in the St. Bartholomew's Night Massacre, with the exception of a 14-year-old boy. He escaped from Strasbourg with the clothes on his back and the family bible (which is now at the Lancaster, PA County Historical Society.) The boy found his way into the Moselle Valley and was saved by other Huguenot refugees. But my experience doesn't tie in with any of this.

When WWII came to an end, a point system was instituted for troop redeployment. To go home with the 100th Division, I needed 45 points, but my total was 44! This necessitated a transfer to occupation duty with the 3rd Infantry Division stationed at Darmstadt, and the fun began.

There was a good barber in the suburb of Nieder Ramstadt who spoke an awful Schwabisch dialect and was proud of his brother who lived in America at a place named, Snotty, Oiyoo. It took two haircuts for me to locate the brother in Cincinnati, Ohio. The barber always greeted me with, "Kissinger, *der grosser held!*" Then he would ask me where my warhorse was parked and thank me for not bringing my lance and sword into the shop. This act went beyond my sense of humor, but I dismissed it as heavy-handed Schwabian joking. But there must have been a more historic reason.

One day, my assignment came for guard duty at the mansion of Ethelbert Merck, the chemical industrialist. Apparently he, along with most German magnates, was being held in custody, pending Denazification. My assignment was to make a security check of the grounds at dusk; turn the outside guard to our mobile patrols; and spend the night indoors. I was told that there were civilians in a basement apartment. They were not to be disturbed, and they would not bother me. However, the order was to be on the look out for any untoward action, shoot first, and ask questions afterwards. In retrospect, I think they were worried about robbers in the area.

After doing my rounds at dusk, I took over the drawing room. The day bed was better than my bunk at the kaserne, and they had a fine Bechstein piano with a bunch of sonatas on the music rack. In a few minutes, I settled in with my carbine (loaded and locked) on the bench beside me and was demonstrating to myself how badly my piano artistry had deteriorated during my tenure in the army. While desecrating Beethoven, I got an odd feeling that someone was behind me in the room. While practicing some fingering with my left hand, I grabbed the carbine with my right hand, swung around, and almost took a shot at an elderly woman. She was shaken, but she identified herself as Mrs. Merck. She spoke English, but when she asked my name, I replied in my best Pennsylvania Deutsch, Johannes Kissinger. Her reaction amazed me. She turned pale, started to shake, and blurted out something about a ghost of the past. When I asked her why she reacted this way, she told me, "Your name is a name to reckon with in these parts," and she fled the room.

I have chased my ghost for almost 60 years and have never found him. One friend who was stationed in Darmstadt a decade after I served there suggested that many years ago, my people were knights and tax collectors. (More likely tax delinquents.) One oddity came up, in this. The only Kissinger in the city in my time there died before I could find him. He was head of the Electrical Engineering Department at the local technical institute. In the U.S., the men of the family go for jobs as electricians, electrical engineers, or computer engineers. As a microbiologist, I am the black sheep.

July 2004 Association Newsletter

The Ghost of Darmstadt Revisited

by John C. Kissinger, DA-100

John Kissinger, DA-100, told his original “ghost tale” in the June 2004 Newsletter. His occupation duty was in Darmstadt at the mansion of Ethelbert Merck, the chemical industrialist.

When she saw Kissinger, Mrs. Merck, who still lived there, blurted out something about a ghost of the past. When asked why she reacted this way, she said, “Your name is a name to reckon with in these parts,” and fled the room. John had asked for help unlocking the 60-year mystery connecting the Kissinger name to Darmstadt.

I had hoped that my ghost tale would get a rise out of one of the minions of the 100th. Instead, the ball took a crazy bounce.

I have a long-time friend from grade-and high-school days in California, Charley Renn, who was a computer whiz. I sent the story to him as a joke (sort of an in-house joke between PA Dutchmen). Charley went to his computer and dug out a mess of information from Don Watson, an expert on German-Hessian history. Don surprised me on this, because I was looking backward about 200 to 300 years, knowing the bloody family legends. I should have looked to World War I.

Don’s research revealed: “Professor Rudolf Kissinger was administrator of German education in the Darmstadt area, from 1911 until 1931. He was responsible for mobilizing the youth of Germany to serve as support for the regular German army. He worked in close association with military authorities and the Merck family. One of his instructions was for the young ladies in the Darmstadt area to “report for duty” at a certain address in Darmstadt. They weren’t given the option of saying NO! and many families were frightened by this. Kissinger had the authority to round up German young ladies, and to expel the youth of other nationalities who might be living in Germany. This included French and Russian nationals. His authority could not be questioned. A directive from him had to be followed.”

Perhaps Mrs. Merck was herself or was the mother of a young lady who was rounded up.

Rudolph Kissinger, a bit of a martinet, must have scared the daylights out of the straitlaced families of Darmstadt by dragooning their daughters to report for unspecified duty. If someone suggested to Rudy that some folks decided he was going into the military brothel business, he would have been mortified. I have a tiny picture of him in full uniform with his wisen kreuz at his throat. He was more like a tough Wehrmacht bureaucrat overdoing the job. He must have been a monarchist, because his reign ended in 1931. Hitler took over in 1932, and got rid of most of the old men. When I was at Bucknell, we had two of these men on the faculty—after World War II both went back and one became Adenauer’s Ambassador to India and the other became second-in-command in the Education Ministry.

My relationship to the ghost must be mighty thin. My Kissinger ancestor came [to the US] in 1727. In those days, the early German migrants were taking a savage beating from the Quakers. The Quakers would not give arms to the people on the frontier. In desperation, they sent to Germany for gunsmiths. One of my mother’s Huguenot ancestors brought his family, and one of his sons began gunsmithing in Bedford [PA]. He made a variation on the long rifle (shorter and lighter) which became known as the Pittsburg rifle.

My grandfather of that time came over to handle a different problem. The Quakers were stealing the settlers blind on land deals. So Jacob Kissinger, surveyor, came over from Sandhofen (Ludwigshaven). His way was paid by some people in the area northwest of Philadelphia, and he was embroiled in law suits for most of his life. In Carpenters’ Hall in Philadelphia, one wall has a draw-up of Scull’s map (the earliest map of PA), and Jake must have worked for Scull. Anyway, there’s a little dot on the map midway between Adamstown and Reading marked J. Kissinger. Jake put his home on the map (he had a sense of humor or gave an early sign that Kilroy was there!).

Anyway, after almost 60 years, the ghost is known. It really bothered me. The Mercks had a son who was a major in the Waffen-SS, but he was killed in Prague. I felt like a fool when I scared the wits out of Mom Merck.

I hope Ray Denman conveyed my thanks to you. He's become one of my few contacts with the 100th. I'm between a wheelchair and a walker. Born with an extra vertebra in my back, I am the 100th's only real 4-F.

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