

Finding Our Earliest Ancestors

A 2026 Zeisset Reunion Presentation by Ray Zeisset

We've learned a lot about our ancestors over the course of these Zeisset Reunions. When we gathered here for the first Zeisset Reunion in 1969, 57 years ago, those of us present knew our six immigrant grandparents had parents, Jacob Friedrich and Margarethe Mueller Zeisset. Their names were known but no other particulars, and no one knew where Kreuzfeld was in Germany.

By the second reunion in 1972 we knew a lot more, thanks to the research of Dr. Von Ruepprecht, a genealogist in Stuttgart whose services I was able to secure. Based on this, we knew birth, marriage, and death details for Jacob Friedrich and Margarethe, as well as names of both parents for each of them, plus a few details about Margarethe's father and his parents. In addition to family information, Dr. Von Ruepprecht provided hand-drawn maps that allowed Carolyn and me to find many significant sites associated with our history on a 1970 trip we took, accompanied by my parents. Included in the places visited were Semd, Lengfeld, Ueberau, Menzingen, Adelsheim, Kreuzfeld, Neidersteinach, and Schwabisch Hall. By the 1972 reunion we had pictures to show (like this first look at Hofgut Kreuzfeld) and interest was generated that helped the family tree grow in width and depth..



Over the next 34 years, the family tree gradually expanded thanks to the research of Loretta Hoerman, Paul Zeisset's creation of a website and the connection made with fourth cousin Raphael Zeisset to bring us to the 2006 Zeisset Family History Tour. By then we knew our roots were Mennonite and extended back to 1718 and the birth of Abraham Zeisset at Rauhof, and we knew his wife was Elisabetha Landes, born in 1720. For me and others of you whose grandparent was one of the six immigrants, Abraham Zeisset and Elisabetha Landes Zeisset are our 5-times great-grandparents.

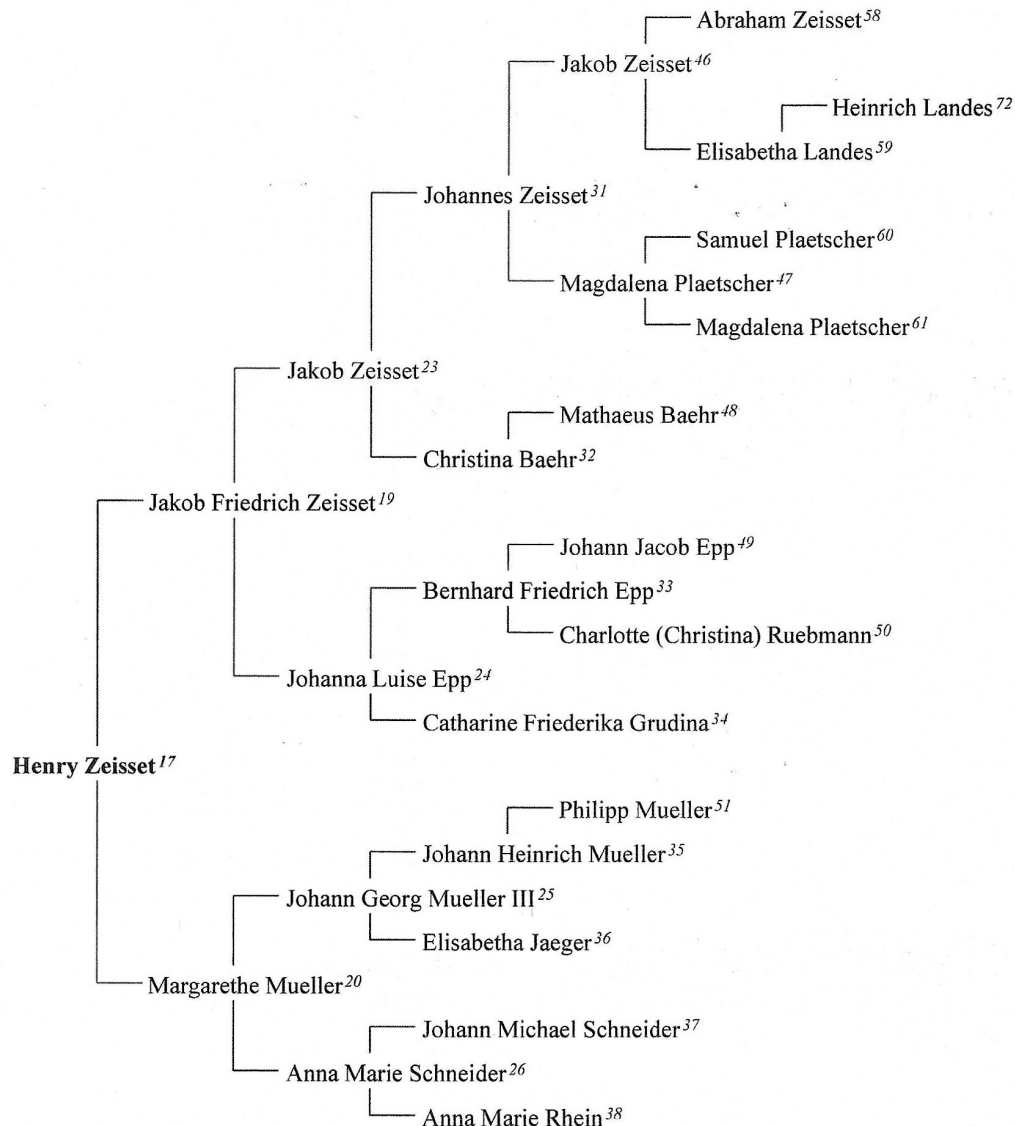
Since 2012 I have been exploring family genealogy through the Family Tree Builder software of MyHeritage.com. Originally I just used the free software to compile Loretta's information and ancestral findings from my other ancestral lines. However, in 2020 I became a paid member of MyHeritage so I could do more in-depth research and grow my family tree.

MyHeritage and Ancestry.com allow tracing ancestral lines through the sharing of information other amateur and professional genealogists have found. While errors may exist when you get information from sources you don't know, one can carefully choose which potential results to accept and thus try to get a generally accurate picture of one's ancestry. Findings such as this are different in nature from what Loretta presents in her chapters on ZeissetGenealogy.com. She has been able to verify her findings with birth, baptismal, census, and other records that she has been able to view personally. One can have greater confidence in the accuracy of her findings, but they are limited by availability, the ability to visit places where original records are available, as well

as the ability to decipher and translate them.

Initially, I found few clues beyond what Loretta and Raphael had gathered. However, in the last few years, with digitization of more records and use of Artificial Intelligence to make matches more quickly, our family tree has become much bigger.

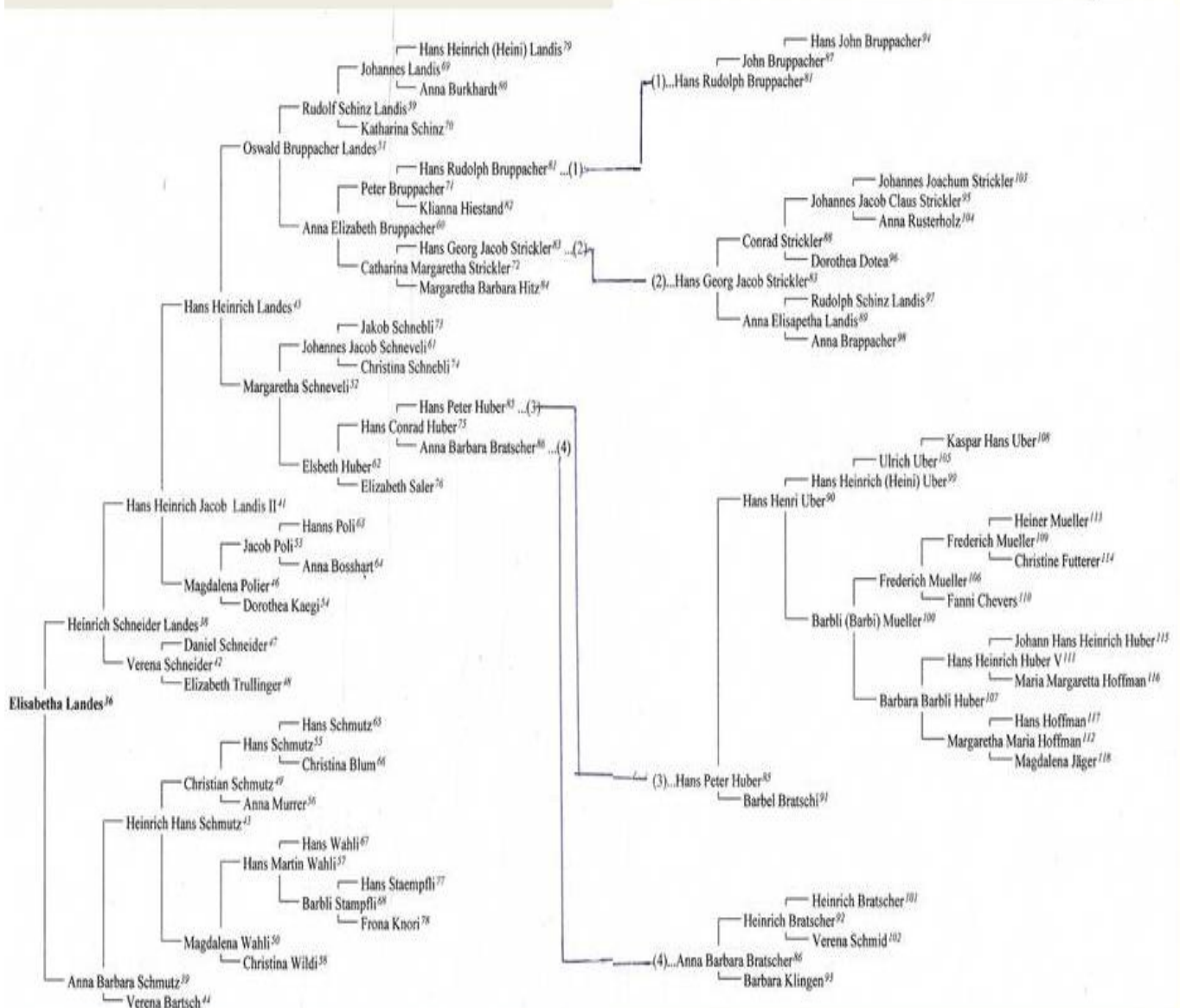
The following ancestry chart shows what we knew in January 2021. The name of any of the six immigrants can be substituted in this chart in place of Henry Zeisset, my grandfather.



Through MyHeritage I have identified a total of 133 ancestors of the six Zeisset siblings that came to Riley County between 1884 and 1893, 125 on their father Jakob Friedrich Zeisset's side and 8 on their mother Margarethe Mueller's side.

For many years our earliest known Zeisset ancestors were Abraham Zeisset (born 1718 at Rauhof) and his wife Elisabetha Landes (born 1720). From MyHeritage we have identified Abraham's grandfather as Jacob Zysett, born about 1660 in Switzerland, and Abraham's father, also named Abraham, born at Rauhof in 1692. The biggest changes in our family tree are ancestors of 5-times great-grandmother Elisabetha Landes Zeisset, for whom 80 ancestors have been found. Elisabetha's father was born in Germany (near Rauhof) but her mother and all her other ancestors were born in Switzerland.

Elisabetha Landes Zeisset Ancestry

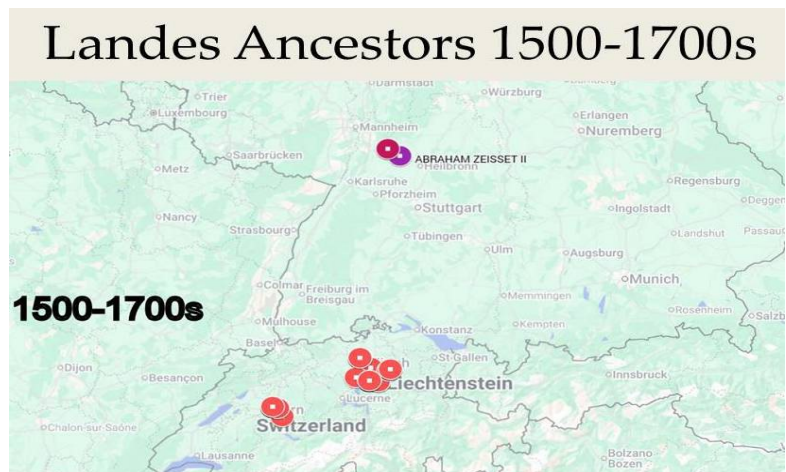


Her chart takes us back to six 17-times great grandparents. The earliest ancestor uncovered for

whom we have complete birth and death information as well as location of his birth and death is Heiner Mueller, born in 1360 in Herisau, Appenzell, Switzerland. Two other 17-times great-grandparents were born about 1340, but we have no other details.

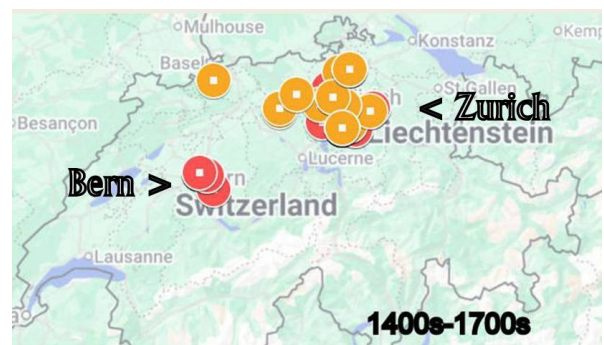
The big upshot of all of this is that we Zeissets have usually thought of ourselves as German in national origin, but in a sense we are really Swiss. While our ancestors went to Germany in the late 1600s or early 1700s, they were in Germany only about 200 years. The ancestors of these German Zeissets were in Switzerland for at least 400 years.

When we look at where these Landes Zeisset ancestors came from, we see they lived in two areas of Switzerland, near Bern in the west and another area south of Zurich in the north-central part of the country. This map shows locations of ancestor births and deaths from the 1500s to the 1700s, with the Rauhof area at top, Bern and Zurich below.



While we do not know where in Switzerland Jacob Zyset emigrated from, sixth-cousin Claudia Zeisset has speculated that it was from the area south of Bern, so in the general area from which some Landes came. (Incidentally, the tradition in Claudia's family has been that the Zysetts were Huguenots who immigrated to Switzerland from France, presumably in the 1500s. Claudia continues to research this. Some branches of our own family have had traditions of a French connection prior to living in Germany.) Some of our ancestors were in Switzerland as early as the 1300s.

Many of these Swiss ancestors are listed as being Mennonite or Anabaptist; we can speculate that most were. It is interesting that when we add locations from the 1400s to the map above, we see that those ancestors were somewhat more scattered. We can speculate that the tendency was to move to areas that seemed less prone to



persecution.

Three years ago last night, Carolyn and I celebrated our 62nd anniversary in Basel, Switzerland with sixth-cousin Claudia, fourth-cousin Raphael and his wife Joyce, and our daughter Michelle and Lee. The next day Claudia took us to Bern, and to the

area south of Bern where she suspects Jacob might have come from. My most poignant memory from our visit to Bern was standing in front of the cathedral while Claudia showed us where cages had hung over the main entrance with captured Mennonites, who were taunted and abused for long periods before being taken down and drowned in the river.

The area south of Bern in the mountains where Claudia took us was gorgeous country, but that our ancestors had to flee for their lives was sobering. We got to see in Schwarzenburg a reconstructed house/barn typical of the time our ancestors would have been there (animals on the first floor, humans above).



We were not aware of the Landes connection to the Zurich area three years ago, so we did not visit the areas the Landes had lived, but we did visit the area just north of Zurich where some of our Schreiber ancestors were from. Its lovely country.

From Swiss Mennonite history sources we know that Anabaptists first appeared in Bern about 1511 and that the earliest Anabaptists were educated and urban—but the persecution drove them from the cities and towns to the remote and relatively inaccessible highlands and mountain fringes of the fertile areas of the Canton Bern. Here they hid and persisted in spite of persecution, through the centuries.

Persecution varied in intensity until the mid-1700s. Systematic persecution began in Bern in 1528 and was episodic, with 1585 and 1644 being times of particularly heavy persecution from followers of Zwingli and other “reformers”. Supposedly execution of Anabaptists ended officially in 1571 after 40 had been executed, but this is undoubtedly an underestimate. Others died in prison or had been enslaved in galleys and died due to illness and exhaustion. It is estimated that thousands were killed during these centuries.

1648 marked the end of the Thirty Years War, and the beginning of migration of many Anabaptists to Alsace and the Palatinate with support from Dutch Mennonites. Our Zeisset and Landes ancestors went to the Palatinate, generally in the area of Sinsheim, Germany where Rauhof is located.

This presentation has summarized what we know about the ancestors of the six Zeisset immigrants, but there is lots of interesting detail about these ancestors in my “MyHeritage Report” on ZeissetGenealogy.com. Included are charts and narrative with birth, marriage, death details on these 133 ancestors, and ancestral relationship to the immigrants.