

Imagine My Surprise
American Ancestors Essay
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Grade 9

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Imagine that for all your life you have known yourself to be American, that you come from a long line of proud Americans, and that all your living relatives are also American. Then you find one day that you have such a close tie with this little country called Luxembourg, that you are considered a citizen from birth!

Well, that was me just last year, but it wasn't as easy as waking up and suddenly having my whole ancestral lineage fall into my lap, it was a very drawn-out process. When we began this journey, we didn't imagine that it would lead to dual citizenship, a newfound appreciation for my family's heritage and a deeper understanding of the complex global forces that have shaped our world.

But let's back up. It all started with a story shared by my aunt (on my dad's side). It came from her dad (my grandfather), who was in the Air Force, stationed in Germany when my father was born. He worked with a former Belgian freedom fighter who commented on my grandfather's name, saying it was "a Luxembourg name." In 2014, we were living in Brussels, Belgium, just a few hours away from the Luxembourg border. My aunt's story spurred us to visit Luxembourg one weekend. When we arrived after a short car trip, we were surprised to see our last name everywhere: "Welter Watchmakers," "Welter Opticians," and even a street with our name. It was interesting, but we didn't think much more about it at the time.

Skipping forward seven years, my parents were discussing where they might live when my father retired from the Navy. My siblings and I are all TCKs (Third Culture Kids). Because of my

father's Navy career, we have lived around the world in so many countries, and in so many cultures, that we don't quite fit in any one place. So my parents were looking for options for dual citizenship to help our global-sized cultural predicament, and in the process, rediscovered our Luxembourg connection. When we dug deeper, we found out that Luxembourg had enacted a law stating that if one has an ancestor born in Luxembourg between 1815 and 1943, and has a traceable, unbroken male lineage, one can reclaim Luxembourg citizenship! That got us thinking, with our last name basically everywhere in Luxembourg, and the family stories floating around, we might just have a shot at gaining Luxembourg citizenship. After consulting my aunties and a cousin who is very knowledgeable on family lineage, and digging up a series of birth, marriage, and death certificates, we found our connection: my father's great-great-grandfather, Nicholas Welter.

Nicholas Welter lived an interesting life. He was born in Luxembourg in November of 1850 somewhere outside Luxembourg City. According to family stories, he left his home at age 17, reportedly because he didn't get along very well with his stepmother. He spent a couple of years in France — probably earning money to go to “the new land” of America. He first settled in Waukesha County, Wisconsin early in 1869, where he worked for a farmer named James Will. In 1876, Nicholas married James Will's daughter, Emily, and together they moved to a farm in Minnesota. In 1892, after an infestation of cinch bugs destroyed their crops two years in a row, Nicholas bought a farm just north of Walnut Grove, Minnesota, which was made famous by Laura Ingalls Wilder in her “Little House on the Prairie” series. Who knows, one of her characters may be based on my ancestor! Even today, there are large Luxembourgish communities living in both Minnesota and Wisconsin.

You've probably already drawn the conclusion that Nicholas wasn't the only Luxembourger who moved to America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This leads to questions about why Luxembourgers were migrating during that time period. Luxembourg itself recognizes that much of its population departed due to circumstances out of its control. This is the reason that they give for recognizing and reclaiming Luxembourg citizens who left Luxembourg between 1815 and 1943.

You may ask yourself, as I did, what was so difficult in Luxembourg to cause the departure of so many of its citizens? Perhaps you have rightly identified that both World War I and World War II were raging across Europe during this period. Because of Luxembourg's location and resources (at the time of the world wars steel was its valuable resource), many battles were fought on Luxembourg soil — The Battle of the Bulge, for example.

Nicolas, however, was already in America by the time of the world wars, so those certainly weren't the cause of his departure. Our family mythology suggests that Nicolas left Luxembourg because of personal family difficulties, but the eligibility start date given by Luxembourg for reclaiming citizenship stretches back to 1815, which suggests that there were broader societal troubles between 1815 and the start of World War I.

Let's back up a moment and look at Luxembourg's history. It is largely a history of conflict and economic ups and downs due to its strategic location and resources. It has been trampled, pillaged, burnt, pulled down, and built up more times than you can imagine. The history proper

starts with the castle of Lucilinburhuc in 963, a castle traded for some ancestral lands by the count of Ardennes. The fort's name directly translates to “little castle” and soon became the focal point of Luxembourg's strategic value. In the following years, a small town developed around the fortress, and it became known as one of the strongest fortresses in the north, even gaining the title “Gibraltar of the North”, and of course, powerful people wanted it.

The first “foreigner” to take the strategic stronghold was Phillip III (Phillip the Good) in 1443. The Habsburg family of Prussia next controlled it from 1477 until 1795, when the French came and took the fortress for their own. When the last empress of Luxembourg died in 1811, the fortress and surrounding lands were integrated into the southern Netherlands, but soon after, Austria, while it was trying to round out its borders, took the castle for a short time, until Revolutionary France annexed Luxembourg in the war of the first coalition.

In 1815 the Vienna Congress technically transformed Luxembourg into an independent Grand Duchy, but in reality, it gave Luxembourg to William I of the Netherlands as his own private lands. During this time, William I taxed Luxembourg severely, leading to a time of great suffering for Luxembourgers. Interestingly, this is the date that modern Luxembourg takes as its inception. Cycles of being essentially steamrolled by its neighbors continued until around 1867, when it was caught in the middle of a three-way tug of war between, Belgium, France, and Prussia, that ended in England stepping in and settling the peace, and Luxembourg finally gaining independence.

Returning to Nicholas, I suspect that in addition to any personality conflicts he had with his stepmother, Nicholas was avoiding a conflict known as the “crisis of 1867”, where the people were protesting against the plans to annex Luxembourg to Belgium or France. Life was very tough in a country transitioning from years of foreign domination and exploitation to uncertain independence. Perhaps hard times in Luxembourg contributed to the personal family crisis. Whatever the reason, he made the decision to leave Luxembourg to move to the US and start a new life.

Nicholas’ story and the circumstances around his emigration to America emerged over the past year as a significant part of my own family heritage. At the same time we were learning about Nicholas, we followed the news of war, driving so many from their homes in Ukraine. When my family lived in Belgium, we met some of the many families who fled from conflict in Syria. Reflecting on all of the above, I feel a connection to those displaced Syrians and Ukrainians (and, sadly, so many others around the world). Any of them could be Nicholas (150 years later). I am grateful that Nicholas immigrated to America and that his family flourished as citizens of this great melting pot. I hope that those who are fleeing conflict today find a place where they too can flourish in peace, security, and happiness.

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