

Understanding the Swiss “Community of Origin“ (Swiss-German: “Heimatort“)

Swiss citizenship is based on a system of “triple citizenship“:

- 1) Municipality (community)
- 2) Canton
- 3) Swiss Confederation

To understand the municipality level, it is important to understand that every Swiss person has a “community of origin,“ as translated from the German “*Heimatort*“ and the French “*lieu d’origine*.“

Because the concept of Swiss citizenship on the municipality level is unusual for people from other countries where citizenship is based on a national level, I choose to use the term “*community of heritage*“ which is – hopefully – more easily understood.

The “community of heritage“ or “community of origin“ is the place where the family (usually the father) comes from, and citizenship – inherited through birth – often extends back for several centuries. It should not be confused with the place of birth. The place of origin – “community of heritage“ – may be the same as the place of birth, but is not necessarily the case.

According to Article 37 of the Swiss Federal Constitution, a Swiss citizen is someone who holds citizenship in a Swiss municipality. Through that municipal citizenship, an individual is automatically a citizen of the canton in which the “*community of origin*“ is located. One is automatically entitled to Swiss citizenship only by being a citizen of a municipality and a canton.

An example of inherited rights of citizenship in a specific community is recorded in the biblical account of Joseph and Mary in St. Luke, chapter 2:

*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed... And all went to be taxed, **every one into his own city**. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (**because he was of the house and lineage of David**:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child [emphasis added by author].*

Joseph returned to his “*community of heritage*“ – his “*community of origin*“ – where it was necessary for him to pay his taxes. He was a citizen of Bethlehem even though he lived in Nazareth.

The mandatory registration of vital statistics throughout Switzerland in one’s “*community of heritage*“ is comparable to the Roman tax laws in biblical times, since both are dependent upon an individual’s citizenship status in his “*community of origin*.“

The attempt to regulate certain kinds of welfare benefits led to new laws in Canton Bern in 1676 and again in 1679. To assure a general overview of the people who held inherited citizenship rights in their “community of heritage,” “*Citizens’ Registers*” (German: *Bürgerregister, Burgerrodel*) were established by decree of the cantonal government on 9 September 1822.

Nowadays, the vital records or “*Family Register*” of a “community of heritage” are maintained by regional civil registry offices. Access to the old “*Citizens’ Registers*” is very restricted due to Swiss data protection and information privacy laws; therefore, the “*Family Register*” is closed to the public.

Unfortunately, the distinction between an individual’s Swiss “*community of heritage*” and the specific place of that person’s birth/marriage/death was not made in many early Swiss genealogies. Many of them were compiled over a century ago for families in the United States who simply did not know or correctly understand what a Swiss “*community of heritage*” was. That lack of understanding creates an immense source of confusion and astonishment today.

A clan is defined as people who are united by kinship; therefore the biblical wording “*House of David*” refers to a royal, anointed clan. The common Swiss surnames found in numerous varying “communities of heritage” actually call attention to various clans who, for whatever reason, bear the same surname. Such Swiss surnames as Boss, Bühler and Kunz are good examples.

Just in Canton Bern there are eight different clans bearing the surname Boss. United by kinship in their varying communities of origin, each individual kinsman – regardless of where he was born or where he lives – holds rights of citizenship inherited through birth in his old Swiss “*Heimatort*.” (Erlenbach im Simmental, Guendlischwand and Sigriswil are merely three of the eight communities of heritage of the Boss clans.)

Boltigen, Daerstetten, Diemtigen, Erlenbach im Simmental, Lauterbrunnen, Lenk im Simmental, Matten near Interlaken, Oberwil im Simmental, Sigriswil and Zweisimmen are only 10 of the 17 municipalities in which Bühler clans have Bernese roots. (The surname *Bühler* is correctly written in English as *Buehler*, but often spelled *Buhler* since *ü* – pronounced and spelled u umlaut – is not part of the English alphabet.)

The surname Kunz is derived from the given name of *Konrad* (also written as *Conrad*), a name favored especially in Roman Catholic regions because of Saint Conrad of Constance (900-975), who was made Bishop of Constance in 934. Old clans bearing the surname Kunz hold inherited rights of citizenship in 14 different communities of heritage in Canton Bern, Boltigen, Diemtigen, Ersigen, Grafenried, Lyssach, Reichenbach im Kandertal, Trub and Wimmis being among them.