



New Association for Genealogy founded in the Municipality of Hesperange

The Roots of the Luxembourgers

LuxRoots.com is more than just family research and intended as the basis for science.

BY SAMMY STAUCH

“Big Data” — you might say. But the Luxroots project, which records information from the Luxembourg civil and parish registers between 1600 and 1923 and makes most of them available on the Internet, is not to be found in the attic of the NSA, but in the basement of a retired savings bank worker.

Georges Eicher (65) of Howald [a suburb southeast of Luxembourg City] is, as a pensioner, a prime example of the changing times. He is not a passionate collector of model railroads. Rather, he could be described as a do-it-yourselfer of software.

A photo in a cabinet crowded with books: In the 1980s, Eicher in front of a real chunk of a computer — clearly, he has always had fun with data processing.

“There must be a better way.”

“My younger brother started family research. When I saw how he worked with index cards, I thought, ‘There must be a better

way.’” When was that? “1982. I wanted back then to bring genealogy from the index cards to the computer.”

In 1985 Eicher bought a computer and software — for three years he attended evening classes to learn how to program databases — and to develop a genealogical software that did not exist previously. Although a ten-year abstinence from this subject followed, but the years have been anything but a waste to invest. For technological advances in the meantime — Internet and digital photography — which, Eicher believes, should have happened in the first place. So he wrote a modification for his old software for the Web — the way in which he recorded the first records for the canton of Clervaux [in the middle of northern Luxembourg]. He was still fascinated by the idea of putting genealogy in the computer age and of providing information to people who are interested in their ancestors.

Little by little, he was joined by the first supporters — in September 2004, then came the official launch: From a private website that was luxroots.com. The goal: the digitization and process of approximately three million records. Meanwhile, 50 people, all volunteers,



For privacy reasons, only data before 1914 can be viewed at Luxroots.

(PHOTO: SHUTTERSHOCK)

have joined, entering dates and names every day in their spare time: births, marriages, deaths, occupations — and much more. Especially for new team members, deciphering the ancient cursive is a challenge. While one reads by himself, Eicher assures, quite quickly, to make the work even easier by having data entry operators to focus on only one community at

the beginning. That way they could get to know the manuscripts of each of the writers and their flourishes and peculiarities better. The data comes from the documents freely accessible on the Internet — as well as from around 500,000 images of files that Eicher himself has made in the last eleven years. This mass of photos gives the idea of this roadblock, to which such a project would have inevitably led without digital photography.

Almost a million records recorded

Meanwhile, nearly one million records were collected. In 2025, the project should be finished - because the data of all the people who were born after 1923, are not publicly available to the public and the records in the parishes began at the beginning of the 17th century. For privacy reasons, only data before 1914 can also be viewed at Luxroots.

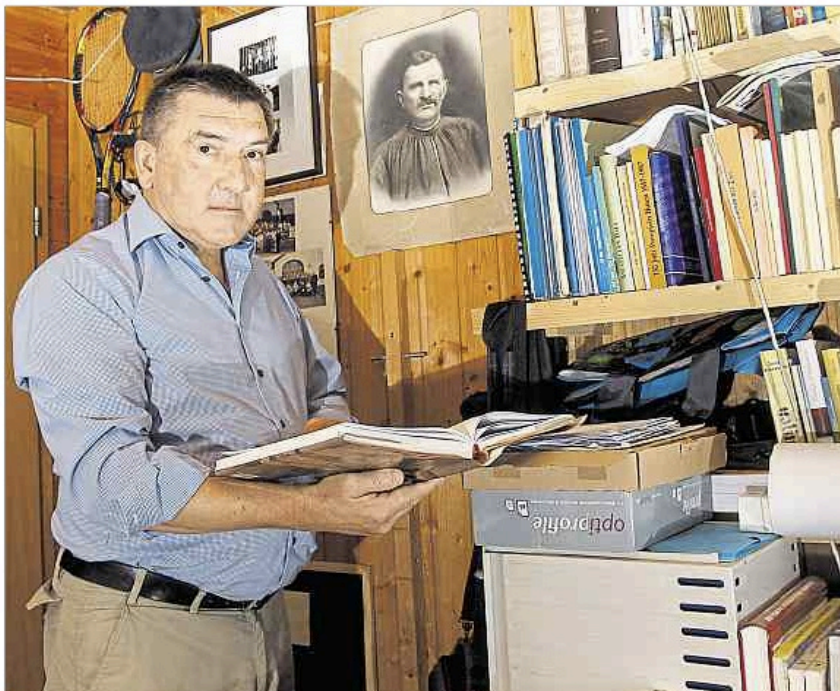
But what is the knowledge gained after years of deciphering some battered microfilm? What is the added value of tenacious research, which is complicated by wayward years and months of the French Revolutionary Calendar, by spelling mistakes of the writers in Latin, French, and German? Certainly — in seconds accurate pedigrees and comprehensive lists can be generated. But, for Eicher, it is equally important that Luxroots lays the foundation for science. “The work that we do, brings

more than just results of genealogy,” he says and pulls out, as an example, a chart showing 30,000 people who died between 1870 and 1923 — arranged by age.

About 8,500 young children did not live to be three years of age. The bar chart is anything but abstract: Behind each number are real documents — real weddings, baptisms, funerals. All of this is a data resource for scientific questions: Are conclusions about medical care in the country or in the cities possible? How many families are socially ascended or descended over the centuries? Questions that can be answered for Luxembourg with seamless facts by 2025.

Genealogy done at Luxroots.

But interested individuals can also now do genealogy using luxroots.com. The fee, which is imposed after a three-day free access, supports the technology and a fund, which assures the continuation of the project. Commercial heritage investigators, however, are less welcome with Georges Eicher: “You should not be allowed to draw any profit from the project meant for the public.” If you want to learn more about Luxroots, you should visit the event, “Genealogy in the Greater Region [Ahnenforschung in der Großregion]” on November 9 at the Civic Center in Hesperange [a suburb southeast of Luxembourg City] (Rue Gaessel, 10 am to 5 pm).



Georges Eicher of Howald has been for decades an avid genealogist.

(PHOTO: GUY JALLAY)