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My Family History: A Glimpse Into Mental Health, Stereotypes, and Americanization

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Abstract

This narrative was compiled to provide an in-depth review of my genealogical and genetic background. The narrative is designed to give a brief overview of a handful of the ancestors I have found, as well as highlighting key aspects of their experiences that have had a tremendous influence on my life even many years later. The journey began with a test kit from 23andMe, which gave insights to my genetic background. Growing up, I had known that my mother's side was primarily Italian and Northwestern European, and my father's side was German. As an individual with distinctive auburn hair, throughout my entire life everyone assumed I was Irish. Prior to engaging in genealogical research, I had not really known if this was true, or to what extent I was connected to these populations. Stereotypes based on the way we look play a large role in how we form our identities in ambiguous situations. As a result of this I was constantly plagued by the unknowns and used bits and pieces of what I did know to form my cultural identity. Putting together my family tree and discovering my genealogical history has been like putting together pieces of a patchwork quilt. Each part of my family carries a distinct history which merges with another to create an even more diverse and beautiful pattern than the last. Some parts of this patchwork quilt of mine are quite rich, filled with a wealth of information and resources dating back 500 years, while others are mere strands of a vibrant history that is beyond my grasp at the moment. In compiling this narrative and sharing the stories of my ancestors, the biggest takeaway has been the tremendous importance of preserving records, pictures, and artifacts for future generations. An overwhelming amount of this research would have been much less tangible had it not been for the work of my great-grandmother, Adelia Mae Burrell-Sottos, and many individuals in the Schaben and VonTersch families. My greatest hope for this narrative is that it can aid in sharing some of the stories that have not yet

been told, while tying in our history with mental health, stereotypes, and Americanization that have not been formally compiled. Genealogical research is a powerful tool which has a magnificent impact on future generations and included in this narrative are simply a few of many stories to be told.

23andMe Results

Prior to this journey, much of my ancestry was purely speculation. I remember talking about heritage day in elementary school, which prompted me to ask my parents what the ethnicity of my family was. Until this point, I had primarily encountered others who would believe I was Irish because of my auburn hair. Even in school my teacher had told me, “You’ve probably got a bit of Irish in you!” My mother responded to my questions with much uncertainty, as she only knew there was a dash of Italian, some German, a little Norwegian, and just a bit of Bulgarian. As an answer-hungry child these half-answers did little to satisfy me, but I lacked the resources to investigate further. For most of my life I clung to my Italian identity. Growing up we practiced many Italian traditions and often cooked many Italian recipes, and this was one of the few tangible aspects of culture I was able to practice. Another indicator of my Italian roots is my tan skin, as many with auburn hair are quite fair-skinned and burn easily in the sun. I would often get the question, “How are you so tan?” as a child, to which I would proudly respond, “I’m Italian.” However, upon receiving my 23andMe test results, I discovered that I am only 7.5% Italian after all. The heritage I had clung to for most of my life ended up being a much smaller slice of a much bigger picture (Figure 1). Turns out most of my genetic background originates in Northwestern Europe (88%), most notably Germany (58%), Norway (9.5%), the United Kingdom (6.9%), and Broadly Northwestern European (13.6%). Upon researching my family lineage, these results make far more sense, as the Italian side I had clung to was only represented

by a small slice of over 450 ancestors I was able to track down. Far more of my ancestors boasted German, Norwegian, and English descent.

In addition to my genetic composition, I was also able to discover my maternal haplogroup through 23andMe testing. I belong to the haplogroup J1b1a1, which traces back to a woman living approximately 8,000 years ago. This haplogroup's distribution was heavily influenced by the agricultural expansion into Europe from the Middle East. Farming women and their families brought this haplogroup into Turkey and the Balkans, and across central Europe, eventually leading it to where it is primarily found in Northern and Western Europe. When comparing the numbers, this is not even slightly surprising, as 88% of my ancestry composition is from Northwestern Europe. The haplogroup J1b1a1 is fairly uncommon on the 23andMe site, with only 1 in 1,600 users sharing this haplogroup.

My Family

Immediate Family

My parents, Brian Merle Laufenberg and Angela Marie Sottos, met in the late 1980s at the courthouse where my mother worked. My dad worked for a bank and would go to the courthouse on a regular basis for his job. They went out with groups of people they worked with and eventually went to a concert together and began dating. On June 15, 1991, they were married at Saint Maria Gorretti Catholic Church in Coal Valley, Illinois. They enjoyed married life, adopted two dogs, and spent much time with family before having their first child, Andrew Jared, on June 6, 1998 in Davenport, Iowa, at the same hospital where each of the following children would be born. This date was coincidentally my mother's 27th birthday. Two years later, they brought their only daughter, Hannah Jeanette, into the world on May 7, 2000. Finally, in 2002 on August 6, the youngest son, Jacob Avery was born. This final pregnancy was incredibly

difficult on my mother, as she had a blood clot go to her lung during the first trimester, which suddenly became a high-risk pregnancy with complications following it. Each child was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, as was tradition on both maternal and my father's paternal side of the family. Religion has been an incredibly important part of my life. Every Sunday we attended mass at the same church as my maternal great-grandparents and great-aunt and uncle, at which we would often find seats together. My maternal great-grandparents were very involved in the church and would often serve as eucharistic ministers during the service. My great-grandparents and parents led by example and encouraged us to find a genuine interest in our faith rather than an obligatory relationship, which is truly what I believe led us to have such an openminded and healthy view of our religion and how it relates to the world around us.

Presently, my immediate family is quite spread out. My brother, Andrew, and I attend college in Fort Lauderdale, Florida at Nova Southeastern University. Andrew is finishing his senior year of college and will be graduating in May 2021 with a degree in Finance and minors in Property Management and Leadership. He intends to pursue a Master of Business Administration and work part-time at a property management company. My younger brother, Jacob, is finishing his senior year of high school and intends to pursue a degree in Exercise Science on the Pre-Medical track at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona. My parents live in Coal Valley, Illinois where my father works for IH Mississippi Valley Credit Union and my mother does consultation legal work.

My Maternal Family

Jacquelin Susan was born on March 24, 1948 in Earling, Iowa to Gerald and Jeanette Evanoff. Stephen Dale was born on June 19, 1948 to Stephen and Adelia Sottos in Pontiac, Michigan. My grandparents, Stephen and Jacquelin (Evanoff) Sottos, met in college in 1967.

While finishing their degrees, they married on June 21, 1969 and settled in Andover, Illinois. Stephen served as a detective for the Illinois State Police Department, where he did much undercover work in narcotics. Jacquelin taught the fourth grade at a local elementary school. On June 6, 1971 they welcomed their first child, my mother, Angela Marie. Just over a year later Michael Stephen was born on August 4, 1972. In the following years they had two more children, Jerry Stephen (November 22, 1974), and Jennifer Anne (November 9, 1977). The Sottos family was characteristically stoic, which led to a rather difficult childhood for my mother and her siblings. My mother recalls the better aspects of her childhood coming from her mother's side of the family, the Evanoffs.

Jacquelin's parents, Jeanette and Gerald Evanoff, were truly remarkable individuals. Jeanette Ann Schaben was born on May 25, 1925 in Earling, Iowa to Jacob and Blanche (VonTersch) Schaben. Gerald Dony Evanoff was born on November 4, 1924 in Coon Rapids, Iowa to Dony and Edith (Holloway) Evanoff. My great-grandparents "Jeane" and "Jerry" met at St. Joseph Catholic School, where they were one grade apart. The pair started dating when Jeane was a freshman and Jerry was a sophomore, around 1938. They married on October 12, 1943, just months before Gerald was drafted and sent overseas in World War II. During the war, I recently found that my great-grandfather was involved in liberating concentration camps in Germany, and brought back a handful of pictures from the years he spent in the army. Upon completion of his service, Gerald worked for the Rock Island Railroad and the Iowa Interstate Railroad, following in the footsteps of his father. Jeane held many jobs, but most notably worked for 20 years as manager of the cafeteria at Seton Catholic School, where her grandchildren and great-grandchildren would later attend. The pair was incredibly happy, and had two daughters, Jacquelin Susan and Jayne Patricia. Jeanette and Gerald celebrated 70 years of marriage until

2013, when Gerald passed on May 7 due to esophageal cancer. Jeanette enjoyed six more years with her loving family before passing away on September 21, 2019 as a result of rapidly spreading cancer.

Jeanette Schaben-Evanoff was a woman with many stories. I could fill this narrative with her stories alone and I probably still would run out of room. There is one story, however, that is of tremendous importance to the narrative of my story and my family's history. Jeanette Ann was born to Blanche (VonTersch) and Jacob Schaben. Years before her parents married, her father served as a soldier in World War I. Jacob Schaben was drafted to the US Army to serve during World War I in 1918 at 24 years old. He fought for a year and a half before becoming injured in the trenches, with a deep gash on the underside of his foot extending from his toes to his heel. Once his bleeding had slowed enough that he was not in imminent danger, he was instructed to carry the dead platoon members to a medical tent for identification. This event led to his first "breakdown," as it had been termed, and the onset of "Shell Shock" which is today referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). His symptoms consisted of fatigue, tremors, confusion, nightmares, impaired sight and hearing, and unrelenting anxiety. As a result of this, Jacob was sent back to New York where he was treated for depression as a result of "Shell Shock." Treatment for "mental patients" consisted of behavioral treatments focused on preoccupying the men with activities they once enjoyed. Jacob was deemed "better" and sent home after a few months of treatment. To give some context on the time period and the war, World War I was the first war with documented cases of "Shell Shock." By the end of the war, more than 80,000 men were deemed to have symptoms of the disorder. WWI was largely fought hand-to-hand with bayonets, and many returning soldiers developed symptoms due to this combat; those who had injured the enemy in their face often developed facial tics, others who had injured them in the

stomach developed unrelenting cramps, and many suffered from nightmares involving their weaponry. PTSD has been misunderstood since its beginnings, and few veterans with PTSD returning from WWI received any sympathy, in fact most were believed to be weak. This stereotype of mental illness as weakness has persisted for an incredibly long time and is only recently beginning to turn. After returning to Earling from New York, Jacob and his brother rented a farm where Jacob was able to follow a treatment plan of “keeping his mind occupied” due to the busy nature of farm life. On June 3, 1924 he married Blanche (VonTersch) Schaben and the two bought a farm two miles from Earling. In the following years, Jacob suffered again from the effects of PTSD and had another “breakdown.” He went to see a doctor in Des Moines, Iowa and was prescribed chiropractic procedures and given “Crazy Crystals” which were essentially horse salts. These were prescribed to be mixed with water and 1-8 glasses drank a day to “cure” PTSD. The doctor also recommended he eat dandelion greens. He continued with the treatments he had learned in New York as well, keeping his mind and body busy constantly to escape the PTSD symptoms. The family of 8 was very happy, and in many recollections from my great-grandmother Jeanette, they had a blissful and generous life. When asked to describe her parents’ relationship, Jeanette had said she had never seen two people more in love, and she believes maybe intuitively knew they would not have each other for long. Although the family was happy and prospering, Jacob continued to struggle with PTSD silently. All “treatments” he had been using were now failing and effective medications and treatments were decades away. In January of 1934 Jacob was admitted to the VA Hospital in Knoxville, Iowa. His treatments here were similar to New York, keeping him engaged in the activities he had once enjoyed, like baseball. Blanche and the children visited several times, but she was later asked not to bring the children back as it was hard on Jacob. By September of that year, Jacob had returned home.

Jeane remembered the time being difficult on her family, and recalled Jacob spent most of his time upon his return sitting and staring into the cornfield. Three weeks after returning home, he was readmitted into the hospital, believed to be following a suicide attempt. This was the last time the children would see their father. On December 13, 1934 at the VA Hospital, Jacob found a rope, entered a shed on the property, and committed suicide. At the time, and still within recent years, suicide is seen as shameful, selfish, and weak. It has been believed that individuals who die by suicide are manipulative and selfish, only thinking of themselves, though no scientific study has found these individuals to be higher in these traits. In current days, we know none of this is true, but at the time Jacob Schaben died, this stigma was thriving. The Schaben children felt the shame associated with their father's death on their shoulders.

Unfortunately, Jacob Schaben's death would not be the last time my family felt the pain and loss from mental illness and death by suicide. My uncle, Michael Stephen Sottos, worked in the Moline police force for 11 years. He was a devout community servant and had a passion for helping others. He served many roles within the force and rose quickly to the rank of Detective Sergeant. However, in the early 2000s he was primarily working with child abductions and abuse. Every day he witnessed the worst of humanity, and consoled families broken by the atrocities of others. Having five children of his own, and many nieces and nephews, he became on edge and worried that at any moment a case with one of his own would come across his desk. The trauma of what he witnessed every day on the job, coupled with the stress of his home life and recent seeking of treatment for depression, played a role in his death by suicide on July 31, 2006. Similar to the death of Jacob Schaben, many of us felt the effects of this loss and the connotations this manner of death has in society. Especially growing up going to Catholic school, it was difficult for us to compare church teachings to our direct experiences in this way. I

remember in a religion class in middle school the topic of suicide had come up in relation to Catholic teachings. My religion teacher had said that suicide was a grave sin, as God had given us life and it was not ours to take. Following this she had said individuals who had died by suicide did not go to heaven. This had weighed incredibly heavy on my heart, and many of my classmates knew about my uncle and walked on eggshells around me for a while after. Later I had discussed the topic with my mom and not only was she appalled that my teacher had said this but helped explain to me how wrong this was. The Catechism in 1992 by Saint John Paul II had discussed how those who die by suicide are often going through much more than meets the eye, and other factors remove the burden of the act from the individual which, as a result, does not mean the afterlife is being decided because of one act. While present views of the Catholic Church on suicide are much more accepting than they were for Jacob, there are obviously many people who have not chosen to accept this and still look down upon these individuals. Even outside of the Catholic Church, many see mental illness as a weakness and suicide as being selfish. It is incredibly difficult to overcome these stereotypes and biases without advocacy and education. Knowing my family's history with mental illness was a big factor in prompting my decision to study psychology in college, as well as why I founded an organization to advocate for mental health awareness on college campuses through therapeutic animal interactions.

On my mother's paternal side comes our Italian background. Though this background was a central part of my identity for so long, I discovered it only accounts for 7.5% of my genetic composition. However, as I have gotten older and learned more about this side of my family, I found out about many deeply hidden family secrets. The journey of my Italian side started in Santo Stefano di Camstra, Sicily, Italy. Stefano and Rosalea Sottosanti had two sons and a daughter, Salvatore, Andrea (Andrew), and Ananciata. Ananciata first came to the United

States with her husband, Anthony, where they settled in an Italian neighborhood in Galesburg, Illinois and owned a corner shop. In 1911 at the age of 18, my great-great grandfather Andrea Sottosanti came to live in the United States, hoping for a better life. With him he brought a traditional Italian baptismal gown, which is believed to have been in the family for many generations. It has been used in every baptism on this side of my family since Andrew brought it to the United States. Andrew traveled at sea for two weeks on the SS America from Palermo, Italy, arriving on April 2, 1911 to Ellis Island. He moved to Galesburg with his sister and her family, living there for 12 years before meeting his wife, Elsie Mae McGuire. Interestingly enough, my family has discovered many inconsistencies with Elsie's family which we are still looking into. Elsie and Andrew married on July 24, 1923 when she was just 16 years old. A little over one year later they had their first child, Steven, on September 9, 1924 who passed away at four months of age on January 28, 1925. Soon after they welcomed their second son, Stephen Sottosanti, my great grandfather, on November 18, 1925. The pair would have two more children, Salvatore and Rosalea. Here's where it gets interesting. Elsie and Andrew had far from a perfect marriage. Many problems arose between Elsie and Ananciata, Andrew's sister, who was mad that Andrew had muddied their proud Italian genetics with a woman who was not Italian. Little is known about the other problems in their marriage, as this side of my family tends to sweep many undesirable actions under the rug. Based on the stories I have heard regarding life in this side of the family, it would not be surprising if there was abuse going on behind the scenes. We are uncertain of the timing, but at one point in their marriage Elsie had wanted a divorce. When she brought this up to Andrew, he was incredibly angry and cut her face from ear to mouth so no man would ever want her. For this reason, one side of her face drooped for the

rest of her life. She was banished from her children's lives and did not see them again until nearly the end of her life.

Another interesting aspect of the Sottos side of my family is the fact that our name was never officially changed. There is no record of the last name going from Sottosanti to Sottos. Andrew documented on his Certificate of Arrival and Preliminary form for a Declaration of Intention in 1941 that he occasionally used Sottos, as it was a shorter name. All of his children were named as Sottosanti and used the name for most of their lives. My grandfather, Stephen Dale, born to Adelia Mae (Burrell) and Stephen Sottosanti, was the first of this family to carry the surname Sottos. Why did they use the shortened form? One of the biggest motivators was assimilating into American culture. At the time, Italians were seeking a better life in America in large numbers, many of which coming from south Italy and Sicily, which were more impoverished areas (Woolf, 2015). Many immigrants were portrayed poorly in the media, leading to stereotypes of "outsiders" as lazy, crime-prone, violent, and ignorant people. A publishing from 1907 stated that, "immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe are storming the United States and mongrelizing the good old American stock," (Woolf, 2015). Many stereotyped individuals of Italian descent as "mobsters" who engage in organized crime and violence, which still persists today. Burying our "outsider" culture and becoming more American was the best way to protect our family from the hate and violence many Italian-Americans faced in the 1900s.

My Paternal Family

Donald Anthony Laufenberg was born on April 17, 1928 to Bernard and Theresa (Weiner) Laufenberg in Norwalk, Wisconsin. Through my research I have discovered that many Germans chose to settle in Wisconsin, most notably many Laufenbergs. According to Ancestry

data, there were 62 Laufenberg families living in Wisconsin in 1880, which made up 75% of the recorded Laufenbergs in the United States. Often after people hear my last name, they ask if I have any relatives in Wisconsin, as apparently this was a popular area for those who share my last name. Wisconsin was also home to the Parr family, from whom my grandmother, Shirley Mae, was descended. Shirley and Donald married on October 20, 1948 in Pine Hollow, Wisconsin. From Wisconsin they moved to Coal Valley, Illinois where they had three children, Michael Anthony, Kristine Marie, and Brian Merle, my father. When Brian was six years old, he was involved in a car accident with his mother and sister on April 21, 1969. The accident occurred before seatbelt use was as commonplace as it is today. As a result of being unrestrained, my father was launched into the windshield from the backseat, cracking his skull and breaking his femur close to the hip. He was rushed to the hospital where he had a metal plate put into his forehead to repair the extensive damage and his fracture was set and cast. Unfortunately, his sister Kristine was also thrown forward from the passenger seat of the car and was pronounced dead on the scene. Thankfully his mother was largely unharmed, physically, with only scratches and bruises. Following the accident, however, the family was forever altered, and Shirley lived with the guilt and trauma of that day which impacted her relationships with her family.

The Laufenberg family is predominantly German, with roots in Prussia during the late 1700s. All of the descendants I was able to trace leading to my grandfather, Donald Anthony, were entirely of German descent. On the Parr side of my father's family, I was able to find ancestors from the mid 1700s and all were born in the United States aside from William Alfred Pettit who was born in Newmarket, Suffolk, England on March 17, 1756 before settling down in New Jersey. Olga Parr, mother to Shirley Parr, came from the Martenson-Lovstad family, which was entirely Norwegian. My father recalls his great grandmother, Marie (Lovstad) Martinson,

but did not have much of a relationship with her as she knew little English and predominantly spoke Norwegian.

Conclusion

My last name, Laufenberg, directly translated means “mountain runner,” or “mountain climber.” When I learned this fact as a child I was incredibly empowered, thinking of my descendants as people who conquered the mountains. Obviously today it is not that simple, but as a child I was in awe that I had such powerful ancestors. Now I admire my ancestors for many different reasons, but many of these reasons focus on their strength and courage, relating to both sides of the family tree. To come to a new country, often alone, and completely start over in search of a better life for you and your family is no simple feat. The strength, determination, and willpower of these individuals will forever inspire me. Compiling this narrative and engaging in extensive genealogical research has given me a tremendous appreciation for those who came before me. When researching the social and political climates of the lives of many of my ancestors, it is incredible to think of the hardships they overcame, the relationships they may have made, and the events they were alive to see. In history classes I had always wondered if my relatives were involved in these big historical events and ponder which stance they would have taken on the issue. The questions that have plagued and fascinated me since I was a child can finally be answered through this genealogical research, and I am incredibly excited to pursue this topic further. Moreover, I am grateful my children will have the resources at their disposal to answer their burning genealogical questions, at least in part, by looking at the family tree, scrapbooks, and narratives I have compiled (see Figures 2 and 3 in the Appendix). Genealogy is an incredibly valuable tool for understanding our past, shaping our future, and working toward an end to biases and stereotypes.

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Appendix

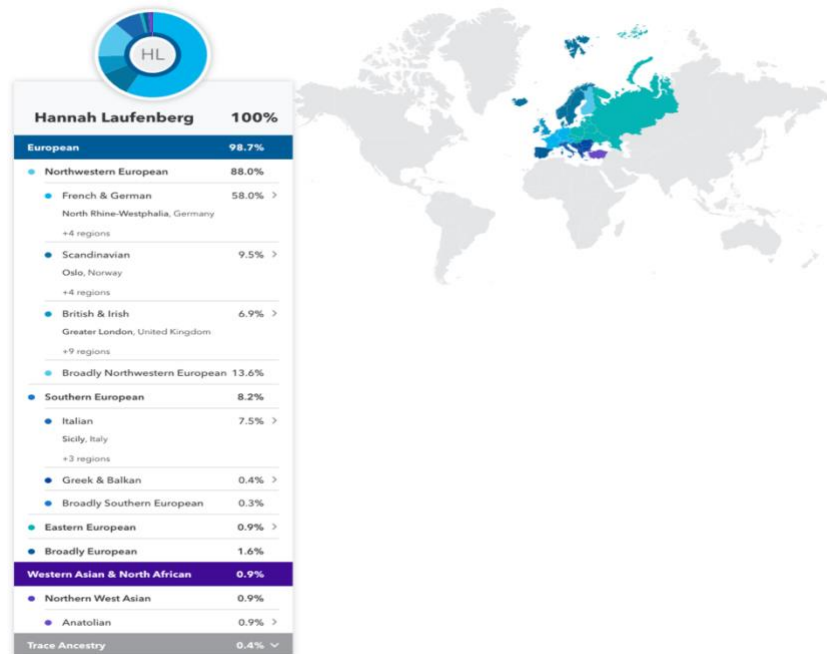


Figure 1: 23andMe Results

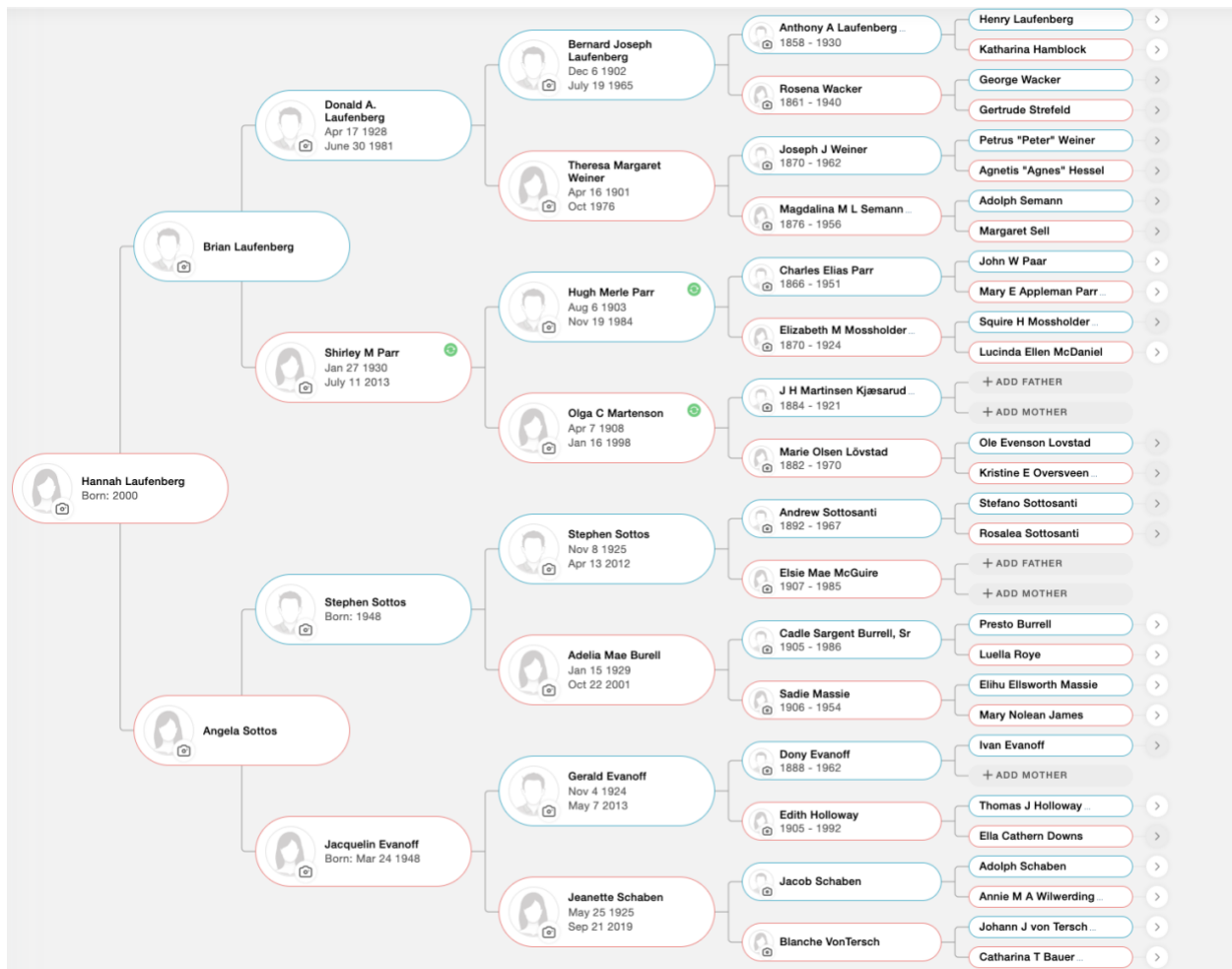


Figure 2: Partial Family Tree, MyHeritage

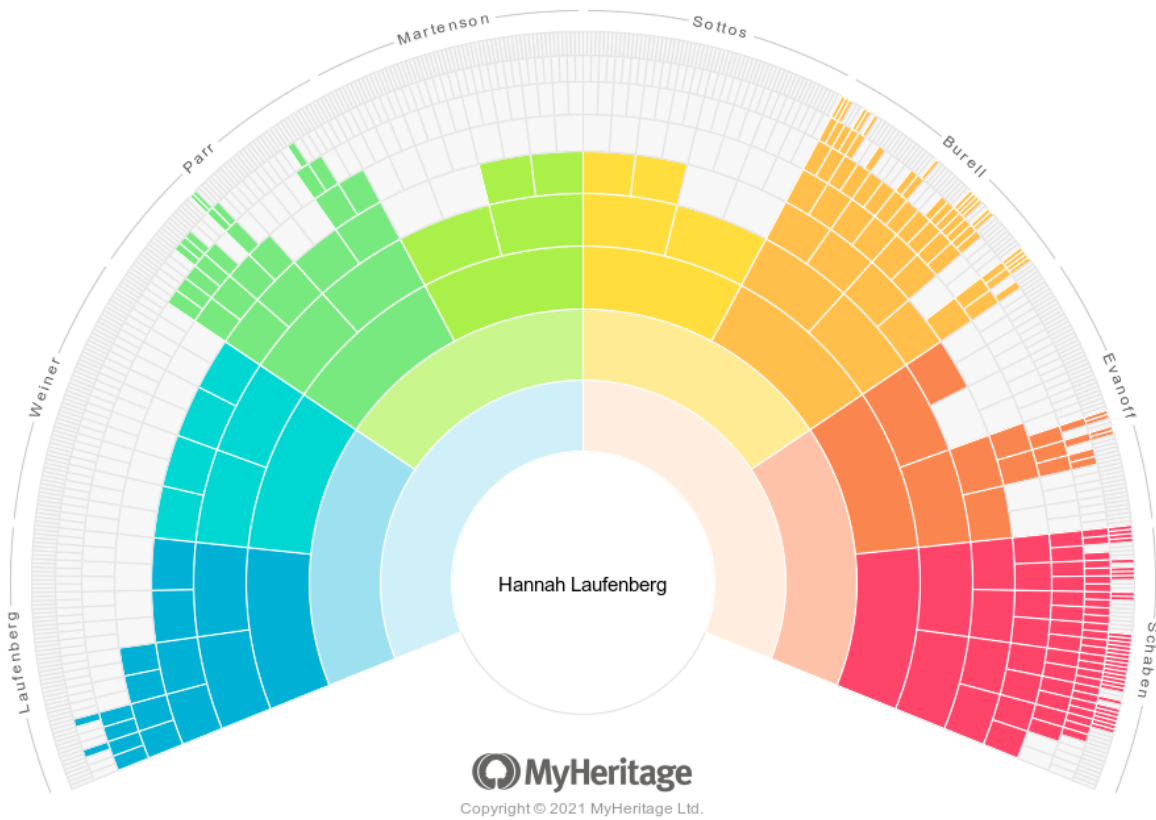


Figure 3: Colorized Family Tree Chart, MyHeritage