

Lost flight

By JACK BRUBAKER
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In August 1958, Ken Kreider didn't care whether he ever returned to Lancaster County.

The 24-year-old Elizabethtown College student knew he had so much less to return to at the college and, especially, at his home in the Buck.

The trauma of that dreadful summer — when his mother and 12 other Lancaster County residents died in what was characterized at the time as the largest mass tragedy in county history — dominated his thoughts.

He wasn't sure what to do.

Kreider had led a group of fellow members of the Church of the Brethren to Germany to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Brethren movement.

They toured Europe for 35 days, concluding with the 250th anniversary celebration in Schwarzenau, Germany. Then they returned

Fifty years ago, the Brethren church and this county were rocked by a historic tragedy. It has not been forgotten.



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J. Kenneth Kreider and his wife, Carroll, are leading a tour to Germany to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Brethren church.

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to the United States, by way of the Netherlands, on three flights.

The second of those flights, carrying Brethren pilgrims and other passengers, exploded and fell into the Atlantic Ocean. All 91 passengers and eight crew members perished.

Among them was Kreider's mother, 49-year-old Catherine Kreider.

With that crash, life for the young tour guide changed forever.

Flash forward to this summer — 50 years later. Life, in some ways, repeats itself.

Today J. Kenneth Kreider, 74, a retired professor of history at Elizabethtown College, is leaving for Germany again, leading a group that will help commemorate the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Brethren church.

Kreider, of course, hopes this trip will be happier than the first.

But he cannot forget the past.

"I put them on the plane in Amsterdam and the plane went down just off the coast of Ireland," Kreider recalls of the early morning of Aug. 14, 1958.

"I stayed on an additional week or I would have been on that plane."

Kreider spent much of that week mourning his mother and wondering how he could board another plane to fly home.

"The thought went through my mind, it would be easier not to go home than to go home," he says. "In other words, I didn't care whether my plane went down or not."

But Kreider boarded his plane a week later. Informed of the young man's personal distress, the pilot called him to the cockpit. He told him there would be no repeat of the tragedy.

His mother's plane — KLM Flight 607E — had exploded "instantaneously," the pilot said. The people on board had died before they hit the water.

The strong implication was that the "accident" was no accident.

"The people involved in the airline (Dutch KLM) said it was an explosion," Kreider says. "I believe it was the first of the bombings of airplanes. It was terrorism, though I can't prove it."

In addition to his mother, Kreider lost his great-aunt, Florence Herr, 71, a retired teacher making her first trip abroad.

Many of the other Lancaster County passengers were related or had planned to become related.

John Hollinger and Audrey Kilhefner, recent graduates of Brethren-affiliated Elizabethtown College and prospective teachers, were engaged to be

married.

The flight was Hollinger's engagement gift to Kilhefner.

Surviving members of the tour group later said the engaged couple was "always hand-in-hand."

Eby Espenshade, 44, director of admissions at Elizabethtown College, also died in the crash.

Another tour member recalled that Espenshade had been homesick and said he would never tour Europe again without his family.

Elsie Armstrong, of Holtwood, and her cousin, Ruth Ann Armstrong, of Drumore, went down with the plane.

So did sisters Joy and Rose Groff, also of Drumore.

All four were in their mid-20s.

Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Hummer died along with Hummer's sister, Maria. All lived in Ephrata.

Mary Stoner, 40, of Lititz R1, also lost her life in the crash.

The mourning for these people went on for a long time. Postcards arriving from the dead to the living provoked added grief.

Tinges of sadness remain 50 years later as Kreider, his wife, Carroll, and others prepare to leave Philadelphia for Germany tonight.

It is impossible to forget what happened in 1958, but the primary focus of their trip is on something that occurred in 1708.

In that year, Alexander Mack

began rebaptizing adult believers in the Eder River. Such activity, called Anabaptism, was illegal. That was the beginning of the Brethren church.

The primary focus of Kreider's tour is the two-day commemoration of Mack's rebaptism of his followers at Schwarzenau this Saturday and Sunday.

An anticipated 1,000 visitors will participate in worship services, lectures, singing and tricentennial commemorative events.

Kreider is leading a group of 49 travelers, including 13 from Lancaster County, on a two-week tour that will visit Schwarzenau and the Alps. He is the only traveler who also made the 1958 trip.

"We will be seeking a recognition of our rich heritage with inspiration for the future," says Kreider.

While history has been Kreider's vocation, tour-guiding has become his summer avocation.

Since deciding, after all, to make that plane trip home 50 Augusts ago, he has led dozens of tours to all seven continents.

None of those tours, to his everlasting relief, has been as eventful as the first.

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