Life at Ramsei and Burgdorf in 1343

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The three records

The earliest Ramseyers on record are a small family of townspeople in Burgdorf and one tenant farmer, found in three medieval Bernese documents from 1343 to 1369. They took their name from **Ramsei**, a cluster of farms where the Grüne stream joins the Emme.

Date	Place	Who	What happened
6 Feb 1343	Burgdorf	**Katerina**, wife of **Johans von Ramseia**, citizen of Burgdorf	She gives a farm at Lissach to the women's convent of Fraubrunnen, to pay for yearly masses for her parents, Heinrich and Bercht of Langnau, her sister, and her husband Johans.
14 Oct 1361	Burgdorf	**Chünrat von Ramsey** and his son **Chünci**, citizens of Burgdorf	They sell meadow, field, house and orchard at Rüti to **Adelheit**, widow of Chünrat's brother **Johans**, and her children **Burin, Elsin and Agton**. Chünrat keeps the house for life for himself and his wife **Tenton**.
1369	Gosslawile	**Rudi Ramseis**	Named in a rent list: he pays two measures of rye a year for a farm he works.

Read together, they show one family over a generation. Johans and Chünrat were brothers. Johans married into a Langnau family, died between 1343 and 1361, and left a widow and three children. By 1369 "von Ramseia" ("of Ramsei") was hardening into a surname: the editor of the 1369 list notes the spelling "Ramsers".

Source: *Fontes Rerum Bernensium*, vol. 6 no. 740, vol. 8 no. 1123, vol. 9 p. 191 (e-rara).

The world in 1343

In 1343 the Emmental was not yet Bernese: it belonged to noble lords, chiefly the Counts of **Kyburg**, whose seat was the castle at Burgdorf. The city of Bern, founded in 1191, was growing fast and buying or seizing this land piece by piece.

- **Politics.** Bern had beaten a coalition of nobles at the Battle of Laupen in 1339, four years earlier, and joined the Swiss Confederation in 1353. Burgdorf itself passed from the Kyburgs to Bern only in **1384**. So Johans and Katerina lived under a count, in a town that would become Bernese in their children's lifetime.
- **The land.** The Emmental was a hilly dairy and grain country of scattered farms, not villages. Families were named after their farm or hamlet, which is why the family was "of Ramsei".
- **Lords and rent.** Most farmland belonged to a lord, a monastery or a church. Farmers held it as tenants and paid yearly rent in grain, cheese, chickens or coin, and a tithe to the church.
- **Money.** Prices were in pounds and shillings of Burgdorf or Bern coin. Chünrat's 1361 sale to his brother's widow was for **12 pounds**.
- **Language and records.** People spoke Alemannic Swiss German. Most could not write; documents were drawn up by a town scribe or priest and sealed by a knight or official, as here by the town's *Schultheiss* (mayor). Records like these survive because a convent or hospital kept its title deeds.
- **The Church.** Everyone was Catholic. The Reformation in Bern was 185 years away (1528), and the Anabaptists who were the family's later faith did not yet exist.

Johans and Katerina: townspeople in Burgdorf

Johans and Katerina were not peasants: as *burgers* of Burgdorf they were citizens of a walled market town of perhaps 1,000–1,500 people. Citizenship had to be earned or inherited and gave them rights in the town's courts and market.

- **The town.** Burgdorf sat on the Emme below the Kyburg castle, a crossing point and market for the Emmental. Townspeople were craftsmen, traders, innkeepers and small landholders. Many also owned fields and orchards just outside the walls, as Chünrat did at Rüti.
- **A family that held land.** Katerina could give away a whole farm at Lissach, and in 1361 the family traded meadow, field, a house and an orchard. That means modest property, not wealth: comfortable townsfolk with land outside the walls.

- **Marriage across the valley.** Katerina was the daughter of Heinrich of Langnau, 20 km up the Emme. The family was already tied to Langnau, the area where the Ramseyers lived two centuries later.
- **A woman acting in her own name.** Katerina made her gift herself, "with the consent" of her husband. Married women could hold and give property, usually with a husband's or guardian's approval. In 1361 the widow Adelheit bought land in her own right for herself and her children.
- **Home.** A town house was timber on a stone base, with a tiled or shingled roof, a smoky kitchen hearth and one heated room (*Stube*) with a tile stove. Animals were kept in the town: pigs, a cow, chickens.
- **Food.** Porridge and bread of spelt (*Dinkel*) and oats, cheese and butter, cabbage, turnips and beans, apples and pears from the orchard. Meat on feast days. Water, milk, and thin wine or cider.

Rudi Ramseis: a farmer's year in 1369

Rudi lived the life most of the family's descendants would live for the next 500 years: a tenant on someone else's land, paying rent in grain. The 1369 list says he paid **two measures of rye** a year for the farm he worked at Gosslawile; his neighbours paid in spelt, oats and shillings.

1. **Spring.** Ploughing with oxen and sowing oats and barley. The village fields were farmed in three rotating strips: winter grain, summer grain, fallow.
2. **Summer.** Hay from the meadows to feed animals through winter, the job that set the size of a farm's herd. Cows and goats went to higher pasture.
3. **Harvest (Aug–Sep).** Rye and spelt cut by sickle, by the whole family. The lord's share and the church tithe were set aside first.
4. **Autumn.** Rent day, usually Martinmas (11 Nov): Rudi's two measures of rye delivered to the landlord. Pigs slaughtered and salted.
5. **Winter.** Threshing, spinning flax and wool, repairing tools, cheese and butter from the cows.

A tenant like Rudi could be evicted, but in practice farms often passed from father to son for generations. That is how a family stayed tied to one place long enough for its name to become a surname.

Faith, death and the Black Death

Katerina's gift was about the afterlife: she paid the nuns of Fraubrunnen to say a mass every year, on the anniversary of each death, for her parents, her sister, her husband and herself. People believed these prayers shortened a soul's time in purgatory. Gifts of land for such *Jahrzeiten* (anniversary masses) are why so many medieval charters survive.

- **Fraubrunnen** was a Cistercian convent founded in 1246, about 10 km west of Burgdorf. It gathered land across the region through gifts like Katerina's, and its archive went to Bern at the Reformation.
- **Five years later, the plague.** The Black Death reached the Swiss lands in **1348–49** and killed perhaps a third to a half of the population. Johans died at some point between 1343 and 1361; he may have been one of its victims, though no record says so. The timing fits: in 1343 he was alive and named as Katerina's husband; by 1361 he was "seli" (the late Johans), with a second wife, Adelheit, and three children still young enough to be named with their mother. A first wife dying, a remarriage, and then his own death all inside 18 years is what plague years did to families. The plague came back in 1356–60, so a second wave is as likely as the first. Katerina herself may also have died in 1348–49, which would explain why Johans had remarried by 1361.
- **What plague changed.** With so many dead, land was plentiful and labour scarce. Surviving families like Chünrat's and the widow Adelheit's could buy and consolidate land, as they did at Rüti in 1361.
- **Persecution.** During the plague, Jews in Bern, Burgdorf and Zofingen were falsely accused of poisoning wells and murdered (1348–49). The family's own ancestors would be persecuted for their faith two centuries later.

Are they our ancestors?

Probably kin, not proven ancestors: about 190 years with no surviving records separate these people from Peter Ramseyer (born about 1534), the earliest proven link in Christopher's line.

- **For a link:** the name is rare and comes from one hamlet. Katerina's family was from Langnau, and later Ramseyers lived in the Langnau–Signau–Eggiwil area.
- **Against certainty:** "of Ramsei" could describe anyone who came from those farms. Several unrelated households may have carried it.
- **What could bridge the gap:** land and rent registers (*Urbare*) of the Signau and Trachselwald lordships, 1400s–1500s, in the Bern State Archives. They are not online.

Sources

- *Fontes Rerum Bernensium*, vol. 6 no. 740 (1343), vol. 8 no. 1123 (1361), vol. 9 p. 191 (1369), read on e-rara.
- Historical background (Kyburg, Laupen 1339, Burgdorf to Bern 1384, Black Death 1348–49) is general knowledge, not looked up for this doc; dates are approximate where noted.