

O Tempora, O Mores

From the Church Court Proceedings of the 18th Century

Perhaps no other state's village social life is as well documented as Württemberg's. For this we are indebted to the Church Court proceedings of the 17th and 18th Centuries, which are still currently at hand in most towns. Church Courts [*Kirchenkonvente*] were in these times the custom and morals tribunals in the old Duchy. The subjects handled here included almost all aspects of life, care of the poor, school matters, offenses against public order, as well as customs and morals. Perhaps nothing opens our eyes more clearly to the differences between now and then as these reports of the customs and practices of the times. We townspeople of the early 21st Century can only wonder at how the authorities, state and church, guarded and watched over their subjects in these times, down to the most personal areas. Along the way, often-harmless matters were dealt with, matters no town council of today would consider. A few examples should make this clear.

Poverty and Begging

The topics of poverty and begging are dealt with throughout church court proceedings. Early-on, the words of Pastor Johann Georg Keppelmann describe for us the great poverty of the inhabitants of the Remstal after the 30 Years= War: *...because of the great overflow of beggars, and the increasing poverty, which was so great that almost half the population were themselves forced to beg.*

Most of the inhabitants again soon achieved a certain level of comfort. The population also increased rapidly during the first decade of the 18th century. As a result [of the inheritance patterns, no primogeniture] there was a sharp splintering of the properties in the Duchy of Württemberg. Thus families had to derive their livelihood from ever-smaller parcels of farmland and vineyards. Many younger sons had to pursue occupations other than farming to survive. Or they decided to emigrate. The poorest got jobs as day laborers. To these less well-off inhabitants, including the soldiers just released or escaping from the war, came as well those *“who just did not want to harm themselves with work.”*

So it is not surprising that the town was constantly expected to give a helping hand to its poor fellow citizens. In the proceedings each individual case is put on record, and the accompanying details are often depressing. They show the constant effort of those in charge to limit begging, even if they could not eliminate it. When, how, and how often the poor individual of the town could beg was carefully determined. Supervision was delegated to the Beggar Supervisor, and the beggars were issued identification buttons (*blechle*). Child beggars were strictly forbidden. Out-of-town beggars were rigorously expelled, the sick people were put in carts and, as soon as possible, delivered to the next town, since one lived in constant fear of imported epidemics.

Already in earlier times the town supported a poorhouse. We do not know where it was first built, but probably it stood in the *Mühlgasse*, certainly outside of the *Etters*. In 1723,

Hauptstrasse 37 was designated the poorhouse, and it was still in the possession of the town at the beginning of this century [1900]. The proceedings tell us that the old, sick, handicapped, unwed mothers and children, lived there together as a community, isolated from the other inhabitants of the town and avoided by them. Often the bailiff had to see to the order there and also keep peace in the house.

Actum d. 27 Sept 1771

Poor list, Beggar Overseer

The poor were summoned to be question concerning the begging, and reproached for going about it:

Michael Mezger, a baker,..., who does not like to work.

Young Michael Sigle sends his wife Catharina out to beg, has a daughter Anna Maria, who has a bad leg, is unmarried, and is taken care of by him.

Hanns Georg Eisenbraun has his bread and just does not want to harm himself with work.

Johannes Bäder, who keeps a disorderly house, and even now as little as he has, cannot keep it in order.

Margaetha Hümlin, in the poor house, who was just seized in Grunbach for begging, and brought back here, apologizes that she can't otherwise help herself.

Barbara Bühlerin, cannot otherwise help herself with her children.

Barbara Mackin, she is old, has nothing but her little house, cannot earn anything.

Heinrich Seybold sends his children out begging.

(in total 18 people)

It is hereby ordered that:

1. Michael Mezger is to be assigned as begging overseer, for which he is to receive 5x day wages, but for this he must be diligent in his office and must watch out for local and out-of-town beggars.

2. The poor who can take care of themselves are to be completely curtailed from begging:

(eight names follow)

To the contrary, the truly needy are allowed to beg here on two days, Thursdays and Saturdays.

Magdalena Retterin
Jung Michael Sigle with his daughter
Daniel Eisenbraun
Hanss Georg Eisenbraun
Johannes Bäder
Jacob Gruber's Daughters
Hanss Georg Schwegler
Heinrich Seybold's Children
Helene Linderin

It is strictly forbidden to go begging out-of-town: the more so that in the current times there is here and there something to eat. If however according to circumstances the poverty is found to be so extreme that they can no longer help themselves in this way, then they are given hope that there will be further assistance.

Customs and Morals

Actum d. 17 Nov. 1774

AEntering into the room of a maid@

It has been brought to the attention of the church court, that Gottlieb Sigle, a vineyard worker with Daniel Sigle, entered the bedchamber of Maria Catharina Layserin, Michael Siglens=maid, on the night of 21 October. Wolgert also saw Sigle entering, and took his shoes. Sigle admits to entering, but claims he only stood at the chamber door, and warned her that the boys in the streets say that Seybold, a soldier, wants to come to her. The maid says that she opened the chamber door, and remained standing in the doorway. She was not yet undressed. Neither could deny that he took his shoes off and climbed through the window and that he had prior acquaintance with the maid.

Sigle was fined 1 fl and 2 Pf Heller in Heilig a 1 fl 26 x and the maid was fined 1 Pf Heller. With the warning to avoid such suspicious meetings.

Magic and Witchcraft

Even Geradstetten had magic and witchcraft. Where there is faith, there is also superstition. The boundaries between custom, faith, and superstition vary according to time, place, and confession. Particularly in our region, church and state fought with laws and sermons against superstition, witchcraft, and *Segensprechen* [unauthorized blessing]. Responsibility for dealing with this fell mostly to the pastor and the church court.

They did not have an easy job. Many accusations turned out, on closer examination, to be malicious gossip, about what one had heard, one had seen, a mass of unsubstantiated or half-truths fill these books. Much that was considered witchcraft was really only the rural art of charms attributed to old ladies who were feared to have malicious intent. Strong punishment would not be effective here, so the church court sought to restore and maintain the peace in the

community through admonishments and persuasion whenever possible.

In the first case, a farmer from *Kernershof* attempted to investigate a thief with the help of a special procedure. As the court had already investigated the case [with no conclusion], he turned to the black arts for clues to the perpetrator. We should however be on guard against looking down on these times. Perhaps our descendents will look back at our irrational belief in progress [*Fortschrittsaberglauben*] with similar shock and disbelief.

Actim d. 21 Nov. 1794

Simon Bäder's wife from Kernershof complains at the pastorate that Johann Georg Schäfer from the Kernerhof, because of pilfered cabbage, chives, and apples, cast suspicion on her house, and because of this, to investigate the theft, ordered a magic remedy through her mother's brother Rombold in Eberhard, and that was done on Sunday Dom XX during morning prayer.

The remedy consisted of fresh oats on which a black stone lay in water. The water was seething and smoking, the oats stood in a little pail, under a tree belonging to Simon Bäder.

His older son Johann Friedrich came out of church in Grunbach, saw this under the tree, told his mother, and went up to it and threw it apart. Rombold ran down, searched for the stone and pail, and a maid of J. G. Schäfer had to gather the chards together.

Thereby the Schäfers divulged that Friedrich Bäder would have seen what had happened, if he had not thrown away the oats.

As the matter in question of the suspicion of thievery had already come before the court, and nothing could be decided, because no clues were there, so on account of profaning Sunday by the use of magic, the matter now being investigated, and because the facts cannot be denied, Schäfer is admonished and punished by a fine of 2 Pf. Heller for the church box, and 1 fl. for the Duchy.

The next case, which Pastor Karl. H. Ruoff had to handle, is concerned with especially good sautéed liver paddies [*geschamltzte Leberknöpfen*]. The tailor Fett, working in a house where they were cooking, became sick from them and suspected that his employer had poisoned him.

Actum d. 5 Maij 1815 *Witchcraft Accusation*

Mason Fischer and his wife complain that the tailor Michael Fett claimed that the Fischer woman had poisoned him with liver paddies while he was working at their house, that he got sick, and called her a witch.

When she heard of this accusation, she went to his house, and talked to him of this, whereupon he answered, had he not eaten her liver paddies, he would not have gotten sick, and he asked three times, for God's sake, please help him.

Asked of this, Fett said: during the night after he ate the Fischer woman's liver paddies, he took sick and got gouty, and thought, if he only had not eaten those nicely sautéed liver paddies set before him, he would not have gotten sick, and that he became stronger in this belief when the Fischer woman walked into his house to look in on him, which was not necessary, since he did ask her to. Besides he did not call her a witch, nor did he beseech her for God's sake for three times that she should pray for him, rather he told her, she had no business in his house, and should therefore leave.

Pastor Ruoff and his court needed to tread with care through a Solomonic trial. They left matters with an apology, considering the tailor had atoned enough with his continuing sickness:

Conclusium.

As Fett throughout denied that he called the Fischer woman a witch, and that he asked her three times to pray for him, and the Fischer woman comported herself carelessly when she went to Fett during his sickness, that Fett is to be earnestly reprimanded for his superstition, against common sense and Christianity, and therefore required that he should not only explain to the Fischer woman that he was sorry that she came under suspicion regarding his sickness, but also that he never held her for a witch. This he did in the presence of the assembled court.