

The Story of the Wizard of the Odenwald

Wilhelm Lautenschläger was known as being “from Günterfürst”, and since 1614 “of Güttersbach”. In the vernacular they called him the “Wise Man of Güttersbach”.

In the time before and after the Thirty-Year War the population of the “Odenwald” (low mountain range in Germany) was very superstitious. All those who had exceptional skills, who were able to cure people and animals in a not quite ordinary way, were suspected of witchcraft and chased by authorities and mostly punished, too. Compared to the neighbouring Kurzmainz and Hanau areas, not many witch-hunts and burning of witches occurred in the “Odenwald” area. Nevertheless there was no lack of witches and wizards.

At the beginning of the 17th century Wilhelm Lautenschläger, the Wise Man of Güttersbach, was a notorious magician and wizard, well-known far over the borders of the Odenwald area. However he cannot be considered as a wizard in a common sense rather than as a man who was extraordinarily familiar with the country’s medicinal herbs and knew their impact on people and animals.

His profound knowledge for that time he partly owed his mother, whose reputation as a midwife also was to be a wise woman, and who was consulted in cases of illness even from the manorial family. She provided Wilhelm with the knowledge of lots of “good herbs”. Furthermore he was in possession of a herbal book, which he turned to. Other parts of his knowledge he owed Gypsies and other wise people.

Lautenschläger’s success must have been quite significant as the popularity he enjoyed was huge. On some days more than 20 people came to ask for his advice and help. Besides his success based on the application of natural remedies Wilhelm possessed all kinds of other secret skills. He could tell someone’s fortune, heal wounds and diseases just speaking to them, exorcize demons and analyze people’s ailments by examining their clothes only.

Concerning his activities and success, a bunch of statements are available. Some of them are instanced below:

Brosius Fuchs from Sandbach village reports that in 1627 he has been with the wise man to ask for cure of his sick child. Lautenschläger demanded Fuchs that either he should bring the sick child itself or at least a piece of clothing of the child. As a shirt of the child was presented to him he put on his eyeglasses and determined that the child is infested by ‘dead blood’.

He found out that the defect must first “shrink” and then be “split open”. As remedy he prescribed “bear’s breeches herbs” boiled in 1 ½ litres of water to give the little child to drink. In addition he administered them to pray diligently on their knees.

Another man from Sandbach named Lenhard Karch, who had horrible pain in all his limbs for a long time, also asked for a cure by Lautenschläger. After all sorts of mysterious acts he gave him a “Hollerstock” (elderflower) into his hand, applied a fire stone on the painful limbs and muttered the following blessings:

“Hollerstock, agitate yourself, I have the “Landengeriß” (pain in the extremities), I suffer day and night. I tell you that for penitence. On behalf of God, Father, Son and the Holy Ghost.” After that Karch became fresh and healthy again and bequeathed the wise man a coin.