

12/16/2011 05:34 PM

Burned for Spoiling Beer

Germany Rehabilitates Its Persecuted 'Witches'

By Kristen Allen

Tortured and burned at the stake by the tens of thousands, Germany's alleged witches have been largely forgotten. But thanks to efforts by a small group of activists, a number of German cities have begun absolving women, men and children who were wrongly accused of causing plagues, storms and bad harvests.

It began with the trial and execution of an eight-year-old girl for witchcraft in the spring of 1630. Compelled to name others involved in an alleged nighttime dance with the devil in the German town of Oberkirchen, young Christine Teipel's confession sparked a wave of fingerpointing and subsequent trials. Within just three months, 58 people, including 22 men and two children, were burned at the stake there.

The Oberkirchen trials represent just a small fraction of those that led to the execution of some 25,000 alleged witches between 1500 and 1782 in Germany. The country was a hotbed of persecution, says witch-trial expert Hartmut Hegeler, explaining that some 40 percent of the 60,000 witches who were tortured and killed in Europe during the infamous era were executed in what is now modern Germany. Hegeler, 65, a retired Protestant minister and college religion instructor in the western German town of Unna, is now working to rehabilitate these supposed witches city by city.

"We owe it to the victims to finally acknowledge that they died innocent back then," Hegeler told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "But this is not just about the past -- it's a signal against the violence and marginalization of people that goes on today."

It was mainly women who were targeted, although there were also a surprisingly high number of men as well as a few children like Oberkirchen's Christine Teipel. They were accused of not only cavorting with the devil, but also of causing insect plagues, bad weather, ruined harvests and even spoiling the production of beer.

Flood of Inquiries

"Of course there were no witches, these were all invented crimes," says Hegeler, who has written 17 books on Germany's witch trials. "But in hard times it was a good tool for local authorities to place the blame on others for famines and other problems. The witches were a wonderful scapegoat for whenever things went wrong."

In a time when many regions were fighting for political domination, historians believe that leaders also used the trials as an expression of power, he explains. And, contrary to common belief, it wasn't just the Catholic Church that encouraged witch hunts. The Protestant Church was behind a significant number of trials. "I was stunned to find this out when I first started my research," he says.

Hegeler's efforts, along with those of an informal "working group" of some 40 like-minded activists across the country, have led to what he calls a "snowball effect" in witch exonerations. Eight cities have officially absolved convicted witches of wrongdoing in the last several years, five in 2011 alone. Some seven other cities are also currently processing requests to do so. As word of witch exonerations spreads, Hegeler reports receiving a number of inquiries from concerned citizens hoping to clear the records of falsely accused witches from their own communities' books.

Recently he has been in contact with Green Party officials in the Rhineland town of Rheinbach, where they have reportedly proposed the rehabilitation of 130 witches who were burned at the stake in the area around 1631. The city plans to address the motion next week, according to regional daily *Express*. But no particular party claims ownership to the cause, and inquiries and support have come from officials across the German political spectrum, Hegeler says.

Early this month, Hegeler also filed a request with the city of Cologne to rehabilitate Katharina Henoth, who was strangled and burned at the stake there in 1627 for allegedly causing a plague of caterpillars at a monastery. He has also contacted the office of Cardinal Joachim Meisner, the archbishop of Cologne, in hopes that the Catholic Church too might make a public statement to acknowledge the unjust execution. While city and municipal courts were generally responsible for witch trials, church forces often spurred their progress, Hegeler says.

'Long Overdue'

But not every community welcomes such requests. In November, the western German city of Aachen rejected a request to vindicate a 13-year-old Sinti girl who was tried and killed in 1649.

"I was very disappointed with the politicians there. It wouldn't have cost them anything and would have given them even more credibility," Hegeler says, referring to the fact that the city awards the prestigious Charlemagne Prize each year for distinguished efforts toward European unification.

The city of Büdingen in the state of Hesse also told Hegeler they had more important issues at hand. According to him, the city may have feared upsetting an aristocratic family that allowed the witch trials to occur and still wields significant political clout there. "But most cities say this is long overdue," he adds.

Of all the witch trial cases he has researched, the case of Christine Teipel remains among the most personally moving for Hegeler. Still, he has filed no official request for her pardon. Discussions with Oberkirchen officials proved fruitless, he said, though the city does have a memorial to the victims.

"People don't want to talk about rehabilitation there," he says. "For some reason there are great reservations. They don't want to take the step of saying that those executed were innocent. At least not yet."

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Some 25,000 alleged "witches" were executed between 1500 and 1782 in Germany. Germany was responsible for the deaths of some 40 percent of the 60,000 witches who were tortured and killed in Europe during the infamous era, says witch-trial expert Hartmut Hegeler. This woodcut shows a witch being burned at the stake in Dernburg in 1555.



This image shows the trial of George Jacobs in 1692. He was accused of witchcraft during the infamous witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts. He was found guilty and later hanged. In 2001, more than three centuries later, the state cleared the names of the witches put to death during the hysteria. Now, Germany is beginning to do the same.



This image from a German magazine dated around 1650 shows a woman being "ducked," a method of punishing alleged witches.

