A Swabian Cobbler-Farmer Survives the Thirty Years War – Hans Heberle (1672)

Abstract

Hans Heberle (1597-1677) had attended school before starting an apprenticeship at the age of fourteen. A cobbler by trade, he worked a small farm a few kilometers north of Ulm. His *Zeytregister*, an account of noteworthy events during the Thirty Years War, is a very rare memoir from his social class. After witnessing the comet of 1618, Heberle was inspired to chronicle his experiences and the great events of his time. From observing events and documenting their consequences, talking to travelers and others, and reading broadsheets, he managed to compile an astonishing mixture of local, regional, and Imperial news. On a personal level, he and his wife suffered hunger, dearth, and exile, and the deaths of seven children. Heberle died at the age of 80 in 1677.

Source

Chronicle of the Era

This is a memorial book containing many histories and believable matters about conditions during the recent, miserable, disturbed, wicked, bad, perverted, and despicable world, such as we see every day in full course. And whoever wants to know what caused me to write this brief history, can read about it clearly in the preface.

Everything is dutifully recorded, with the greatest brevity, by Johannes Heberle, cobbler at Neenstetten.

In the year of Our Lord 1618.

[…]

The Great Comet and the Start of the War (1618 and 1619)

In 1618 a great comet appeared in the form of great and terrible rod, which was accorded us by and through God because of our sinful lives, which we have richly earned in the past and continue to earn daily. This comet was visible from autumn until the following spring. Its meaning and consequences should have been greeted with hot tears, as we experience and as we experienced between 1620 and 1630. Such events cannot be adequately described, as this little book richly reveals. […]

In 1619 Ferdinand II became Roman emperor, under whom began a great visitation of war, revolts, and the letting of much Christian blood, as many examples show. First of all, he began war in Bohemia, which land he subjugated and forced into his religion, and the same in the following years with the lands of Brunswick, Mecklenburg, Lüneburg, Brandenburg, Pomerania, Gotland, Austria, Moravia, the Lands above the Enns [Upper Austria], Silesia, the Rhine Palatinate, yea, almost all of Germany, more than I can tell or describe.

[…]

The Inflation (1622)

[In 1622] what happened concerning the money I will briefly relate and describe a bit, though no one can comprehend how many kinds of coins there are, because all the emperors and kings, princes and lords,

counts and nobles, cities and villages, even tinkers and vagabonds, have coined and are permitted to coin money. For which reason so many and so many kinds of coins exist, that it would take a learned tongue and good vision to be able to see and to read all of the inscriptions. There are many coins which are counterfeit or of light weight, which are not to be accepted. It was fine in the beginning, when the coins were all of pure silver, but later, within three, four, five, or perhaps eight weeks they declined and went red with copper, except for the thaler and the old money. Since the money became bad and worth nothing, no one wanted to be paid off with such crappy coin, because it was worth nothing. This caused great complaint in every land. […]

If someone kept money for a quarter of a year, it lost its value and was worth half its former value, or perhaps nothing at all. […]

Concerning small copper coins, which are minted everywhere, such as kreutzers, zweyers, and pence, I can say, first of all, that everyone wants to have them, especially the copper coins from Ulm, for in some places the Ulm kreutzer is worth half a batzen. Recently, at Dinckelsbühl I bought a new collection of [Cyriakus] Spangenberg's sermons for 20 batzen in copper kreutzers, which in other money would have cost me three florins. […]

Small coins have practically disappeared, except for the Reichsthaler, which everyone wants to get. Whoever is selling or buying anything whatsoever, even if it costs only one florin, wants to get Reichsthaler from the other. Nobody will sell the poor anything unless they can pay in Reichsthaler, which the poor cannot get their hands on. Thus, they starve, along with their wives and children, all because of the money, for everything that is needed to nourish and support people has become horribly expensive. And because there is such misery and need because of the money, some estates and cities in the Roman Empire have made an agreement about how they might forestall this situation and establish some defense against it. They have struck coins they call "coin of the realm" or "parting money," a poor and despised coinage, which no one will accept outside of the land in which they are made. The [coin called the] "stag" in Württemberg has held its value the longest. Produce became very expensive, for example, an Ulm measure of fruit costs up to 50 florins; of rye, 46 florin; of barley, 26 florins; of oats, 15 florin; of flax, 24 florin; of peas, 25 florin – all figure in Reichsthaler. When, however, the Reichsthaler climbs to 6 florins each, an Ulm measure of fruit costs 5 thaler, that is, 30 florins. Fruit sometimes climbs to 8 half-dollars, which makes it 45 florins per measure; and occasionally it rises to a level at which the thaler equals 10 florins. […]

Portents (1623)

When the grain is cut, drops of blood have been found on the stalks; yes, even the heads themselves are full of blood, which, alas, refers to bloody war. […]

This summer around Tübingen and Schorndorf in Württemberg, fiery balls fell from heaven around St. James' Day [July 25]. They fell 3 times on a Sunday, in the morning, at midday, and in the evening. The event was described in a public announcement, which I read myself. […]

Family Events and Refugees (1628 and 1635)

On August 25 [1628], between one and two o'clock in the afternoon, my dear wife brought into this world for me my daughter Catherine, her first child, who was baptized that very evening during the preaching service. On that day, the sun rose at about 5:22 in the morning, and the moon stood in the sign of Scorpio. […]

On April 2 [1635], my dearest father blessedly left this vale of tears and fell asleep in the Lord. His age was 67 years, 8 weeks, and 3 days, and he died between seven and eight o'clock in the morning. Thanks, honor, and praise be to God for this act of grace, that in this age of great danger, He protected [my father]

against so many robbers and murderers and allowed him to die a natural death in these terrible times, when many thousands have been shot down and killed. […]

Note: In the countryside during these times, because of the great war no funeral sermon was preached. For there were no pastors in the countryside for nearly a whole year. If a peasant died in the city of Ulm, for him, too, no funeral sermon was preached because of the great expense, which an ordinary man could not cover. Once again, the honorable council of the city of Ulm declared that no funeral should be preached for those who died of plague, whether in the city or on the land, whether rich or poor. During this year the plague raged unchecked. […]

[When the Imperial army occupies the district, the people of Neenstetten flee into the forests.] But no one could stay in the forests and woods because of the great hunger, for we had no bread, salt, fat, or anything else with which to nourish ourselves, and I could get none of these things, of which we formerly had plenty, to guard my wife and children from dying of hunger. We sought only peace and quiet.

Then, my wife and I, with the little children and a whole crowd of others, were driven from the forest. We thought to take refuge in [the Duchy of] Württemberg and fled to Heuchlingen, but, dear God, there we got no peace. Two days later we had to leave the place, because the cavalry came in great numbers, plundered everything, and took whatever they could find. They stayed fourteen days in [the district of] Launssen and Urspring. […]

The Edict of Restitution & the Swedish Invasion (1630 and 1631)

In the mandate which the emperor issued in 1629, [it was decreed that] the ecclesiastical properties were restored to the Catholics against the wishes of the Protestants, who protested strongly but in vain. More was demanded of the Duke of Württemberg than of others. Next came [the powers of] the Lower Saxon Circle, [who complained] of having to put up with this after having withstood so many wars. The Imperial free cities, too, raised complaints, appealed to the emperor and to the Diet, and took their cases to law. But no help came from any quarter.

The Saxon elector, who though a Protestant had been strongly on the emperor's side, also raised objections. The emperor, however, called the princes to a meeting at Regensburg and told the Protestants to attend.[1] While the ecclesiastical properties were being discussed at Regensburg, the Swede invaded Pomerania and took from the emperor almost everything, pushing his troops back in retreat. Then the Protestants raised an army, though it did little, because they wanted to wait and see what the Swede would do and how he would fare.[2]

At the Regensburg assembly little was accomplished, for things looked bad […]. No one knew what to expect or hope for, seeing that so few wanted peace and quiet. The victors wanted war, while the losers hoped that their luck would return and that their hopes would be fulfilled and things would turn for the better. […]

This year [1630] was a bad one for the Protestant religion everywhere, and if the Swedish king had not opposed the emperor in the field, the German princes would have been finished. Alone, they were too weak and couldn't have overcome the sly crowd. But God, Who can end and change everything, ordained that those who had dug the pit fell into it.

At year's end, it is well to notice amidst these terribly troubled and sad times, that we should not forget what God has done to us through his Holy Word, which shines so brightly and clearly on us. Therefore, we Protestants held a feast of thanksgiving in all churches on the 24th of June, St. John the Baptist's Day, for it is precisely one hundred years since the Protestant confession was submitted at Augsburg by some princes and Estates of the Holy Empire to the great Emperor Charles V. We marked this feast with divine services, prayers, song, and Communion. During the morning and noon sermons, the Confession of

Augsburg was read publicly by the pastor from the pulpit, so that everyone would know what the confession is and what it contains.

[1631] When the bishoprics, abbeys, and other ecclesiastical properties had been returned to the Catholics, the clergy began to quarrel among themselves. Although the Catholics had not yet achieved a full victory, and the Protestants were not wholly defeated, they nevertheless began to quarrel, even those [whose lands] were never at issue. At this time, the king [of Sweden] was already in Pomerania, which he had brought into his power, and the Imperialists were being crushed and thrown back. And because the Imperialists behaved so badly, robbing and plundering everything, and the Swede was a little less demanding, he made a good name for himself and was liked better than the emperor was.

As the emperor was so demanding in point of religion, many, who had formerly been on his side, went over to the Swede and supported him. The Imperialists, however, attacked several cities and took them, thinking the better to keep the Swede from setting foot in them. One of them was the powerful, famous, and strong city of Magdeburg. The emperor had it besieged, taken, ruined, and wiped out. Within a few hours it was laid in ashes, and many thousands of persons died of fire and sword.

General Tilly thought to have made a great name for himself from this victory, but it was his greatest misfortune, for afterward he had little luck and quickly went to his ruin. The Swede defeated him near Donauwörth, and he, Tilly, was killed by a shot.[3] […]

The Storming of Castle Albeck (1635)

It was a good fortress, the garrison of which consisted of a number of soldiers and their captain. They allowed everyone into the castle, so that the poor country folk would not be killed. The Imperial troops, however, quickly invested and blockaded the castle, so that no one else could either come out or go in.

The enemy dug out the wells, so that inside they had no more water. Indeed, the poor farmers in the castle had very little, no bread, flour, salt, or fat. The soldiers also had little, though they would have shared with the others, if they could have done so. […]

And so, things moved toward a battle. Everyone had brought in their cattle and horses, and although in the beginning there were very many animals, later they had very few. This could have been tolerated, if they had had water. Water was so scarce, that they drank the water in which tripes had been washed, also the water used for cleaning, and almost everyone drank his own or his children's urine and thought it good enough. They were only beaten in the end because their thirst grew so great, for of hunger they no longer took any notice, even though they had only horseflesh to eat.

As misery spread in the castle, growing ever worse, the farmers began to look for a remedy, and they came out of the castle in order to take refuge in the city of Ulm, if they could.

[…] Some got away, but some were shot down and killed, and many of the women were captured and abused in all sorts of ways, and they later arrived in the city. The besieging force departed on July 10, leaving one company of cavalry and one of infantry.

[…]

The Terrible Year (1635) and the Peace of Prague

During this year, 1635, we experienced and endured a great deal of scarcity because of the war and plague, of which many thousands died and starved to death.

I have recounted above the main events of the war [in this year]. The dearth was so great that at Ulm grain rose to 13 florins, then up to 16, 17, even 20 florins. Then no grain came into the municipal granary

at all, for the bakers secretly bought it all up. Rye cost 12 florins, peas 15 florins, oats 8 florins, fat and salt cost the same – between 9 and 12 batzen per pound and metzen – and a metzen of salt came very dear. At Weidenstetten […] an Ulm metzen of salt cost 1 florin, a price I myself paid, as I can attest with tongue and pen, and with this chronicle. There was such terrible suffering, so bad I cannot describe it.

From this death and starvation arose an evil worse than all other evils, namely, a pestilence, and many thousands of persons died of hunger, war, and plague. The hunger, you see, drove many poor folk to eat nasty and disgusting things, indeed, all sorts of improper things, such as dogs and cats, mice and dead cattle, and horseflesh. And the flesh from dead carcasses thrown away by the renderer – horse, dog, and other animals – was taken away. Indeed, people quarreled over it and thought it fine stuff.

People were also glad to eat all sorts of plants from the fields, such as thistles, nettles, and [other plants]. Every kind of plant was favored, for hunger is a fine cook, as the proverb says. From this hunger a great pestilence and mortality arose, killing many thousand persons. Doctor Conrad Dietrich of Ulm wrote in his New Year's sermon for 1635[4] that at Ulm more than 15,000 persons died and were carried out of the city, among them 5,672 poor folk and beggars, 4,033 peasants and strangers, and 168 foundlings. On many days 150, 160, even 170 at most were carried out. Wasn't that terrible? Yes, I believe it was the evil of all evils, for I have not only heard about it but saw it and heard it with my own eyes and ears.

About the Peace of Prague

In 1635 the emperor had beaten the Swede fairly well and driven him back, so that he decided to leave the Empire altogether, though in fact he did not leave the Empire but took up position at one end of the marshes in Farther Pomerania. At this time, the emperor made friends again with the Elector of Saxony, who had previously allied himself to the King of Sweden and been the emperor's foe.

The emperor and the Saxon made peace at Prague[5], for the Saxon was the head of the Protestant camp. The emperor thought that when he had [peace with] the head, he would have the whole Protestant Union, and so it happened. For when the Saxon came to the emperor and allied with him, Nuremberg was first in line to follow, and Ulm followed Nuremberg. They met the Hungarian king, the emperor's son who was at that time King of Hungary, at Heilbronn. There the Ulmers got their liberties confirmed, as follows: that they will be left secure and un-coerced concerning the free exercise of their religion, their form of government, and their rights, liberties, and laws as of old. […] Then the *Te Deum laudamus*[6] was sung in all the churches, and the bells were rung for an hour, and at the end all the city's artillery was fired from all bastions at once. After Ulm, Memmingen was next [to make peace], then Frankfurt. I read about this in a newsletter. […]

Cannibalism at Breisach (1638)[7]

Almost all the dogs and cats in the city were eaten, and some thousands of horses, cattle, oxen, calves, and sheep were also eaten.

On November 24, a captured soldier died in the jail, and when the provost went to bury him, [he found that] the other prisoners had taken his body, cut it up, and eaten it. The prisoners in the jail made holes in the walls with their fingers so that they could partake of it. Two dead men in the burying ground were carved up, and the entrails were extracted and eaten. Three children were eaten in one day.

The soldiers promised a pie-maker's son a piece of bread, if he would come into the barracks. When he entered, they butchered and ate him. On December 10 in the Fischerhalden alone, eight prominent citizens lost children, probably eaten, because nobody knew where they'd gone to. This doesn't count the strangers and beggars' children, of whom nobody knew anything. In the square alone ten deaths occurred, not counting those found in the manure piles or in the alleys.

On December 12, another soldier died in the jail, and when the provost went to bury him, the others lying about fell upon the body, ripped it with their teeth, and ate the corpse raw. […]

Aftermath of War (1640)

At the beginning of this year [1640], when we had a bit of peace and rest from the war, hunting wolves was just about our biggest task. Many wolves came into our area during the war, for God sends evil beasts into the land to punish us by eating our sheep and cattle.

Before the war, by contrast, it was remarkable to see one wolf, but in recent years we commonly see many of them together, for there are plenty of them, both young and old. They run among the livestock, even when two or three men are present, and take goats and sheep from the herds. If the men try to prevent it, the wolves react with great violence. Why, they even come into the villages and walk in front of the houses and take cats and dogs away, which is why for a long time no one has been able to keep dogs in the villages.

[…]

NOTES

[1] In fact, the electors themselves assembled at Regensburg from July to November 1630. They discussed the Estates' grievances and deposed Albrecht von Wallenstein from his Imperial command – trans.
[2] "The Swede" is, of course, King Gustavus Adolpus of Sweden, who landed his army at Usedom in Pomerania on July 4, 1630 – trans.
[3] Refers to the Battle of Rain in 1632 and Count Tilly's death on April 30, 1532 – trans.
[4] That is, the sermon delivered on New Year's Day. The New Year's sermon looked back on the previous year – trans.
[5] Refers to the peace signed on May 30, 1635. This might well have ended the Thirty Years War, except that the specter of peace prompted France to enter the war, which then continued for another thirteen years – trans.
[6] "O Lord, we praise thee," the traditional hymn of thanksgiving – trans.
[7] Breisach was a strong fortress city on the right bank of the Rhine below Freiburg im Breisgau and well above Strasbourg. It guarded the crossing of the Rhine in the direction of Colmar – trans.

Source of original German text: Gerd Zillhardt, *Der Dreissigjährige Krieg in zeitgenössischer Darstellung: Hans Heberles „Zeytregister" (1618-1672), Aufzeichnungen aus dem Ulmer Territorium. Ein Beitrag zu Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsverständnis der Unterschichten.* Forschungen zur Geschichte der Stadt Ulm, herausgegeben vom Stadtarchiv, Ulm, vol. 13. Ulm, 1975, pp. 85, 93-94, 98-100, 110, 122-23, 129-31, 154-56, 158-59, 161-63, 176, 182.

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