

The Rise of a Burgher—Burkard Zink (c. 1466)

Abstract

Born in Memmingen, Burkard Zink (1397–1474/75) spent most of his adult life in Augsburg as a man of business. There, he composed a lengthy four-book chronicle of the history of his adopted city. At the beginning of Book III, Zink provided an account of his own life, most of which is reproduced below. Zink's text is perhaps the first true autobiography by a German burgher, for it expresses a self-conscious sense of continuity of experience lacking in earlier works. The account reveals the great variety of Zink's travels and experiences, the economic mobility of burgher life, and the familiar and emotional sides of family life.

Source

In God's name, I began to write this special book about how I, Burkhart Zink, lived since my childhood days, in what ways I have striven, and what my fortunes were.

In the year 1401 my dear mother died in childbirth. May God have mercy upon her. Amen. I was then four years old and had three siblings: two brothers, Johannes and Conrad, and our sister, Maragrete. Our father was named Burkhart Zink, who was at that time an artisan working in Styria. He also had property in Memmingen next to Mangolt's ditch, near the baker, the widow Kipfenberg, who later remarried. Our father's house has since been bought by a farrier, and today many smiths who smelt iron are settled in the surrounding streets. [...]

Thereafter, that is in 1404, my father remarried. His new wife's father was Hans Schmid von Krumbach, a smith and a pious man. A young, proud woman, she was unfriendly to us children and beat us badly. My father loved her, however, and she loved him in turn, as so often old men and young women suit one another, which is as it is.

In 1407, when I was a lad of eleven, I left Memmingen, my father, and all my friends to travel with a student. I was also a student at the time and had been in school for nearly four years. And we went together to Carinthia into the Wendish Lands to a market town, Reinsnitz by name, a town that lies in Carinthia^[1] six [German] miles beyond Laibach [= Ljubljana] in the direction of Croatia. I remained for seven years in this land, where I attended school, for my father's brother was a village priest at Riegg, a large, pretty village, to which belonged at least five other villages—Göttenitz, Pausenprunnen, etc. He had been pastor there for nearly thirty years, having arrived in the land with the wife of Count Friedrich von Ortenburg. He had been her secretary and became a priest at her wish. The countess was born a von Teck. Her brothers, Duke Ulrich, Duke Friedrich, and Duke Lutz, had their seat at Mindelheim. My master, that is, my father's brother, sent me to school in Reinsnitz and placed me in the care of an honest fellow, Hans Schwab. He was Count Friedrich's builder at Ortenburg, where he was building the lower house down here on the mountain.

I lived for seven years with my host in Reinsnitz, who treated me well and desired that I should do well. He wanted to send me to Vienna to the university, but I didn't want to go, and, wishing to stay with him no longer, I left him against his will. Returning to Memmingen—I was by this time an eighteen-year-old student—I intended to stay with my father and be a young gentleman. But the entire plan went bad, for my father and stepmother had separated, my brothers had died, and my sister had been married off. Whatever I had as inheritance from my mother, my father and other friends had given to my sister, for we children each had our own maternal legacy, which we had received when our father remarried. While I

was living in the Wendish Lands with my master, my friends had decided that I would stay with him and that he would support me. In order to give her [Burkhard's sister] better chances, they gave her more of the inheritance. Now that I had returned home, I wanted to have as much as other young fellows possessed, but I received nothing, and everyone was against me. Then I regretted not having stayed with my uncle. I went into action and traveled back to my uncle. When I arrived, I received a terrible shock, for my uncle was dead. He had left his property to his children, of whom he had four, and to other persons. Alas, I had gone there and worn myself out in vain, for I got nary a penny out of it. Had I stayed with him, it would have been all right, for everything would have gone to me.

As I had worn myself out for nothing, I set out afoot once more and came back to Memmingen. The master was already home, no one was glad to see me, and none of my friends regarded me at all. I moved to an honest fellow, who had come to town from a village, and took his two lads to school. I stayed with him for a year, taught the boys, and charmed his daughter. Yet the longer I stayed in school, the less I liked it, and eventually I wanted to go no more but to learn a trade. My sister had married a weaver, a pious, wealthy man. I visited them often, and I considered how well his apprentice had it. His trade pleased me so well that I wished to learn it, so I left school. My brother-in-law would gladly have taught me, but my other friends didn't want me to learn his trade, so I decided to learn another. My friends advised me as though I had never wanted anything else than to learn the furrier's trade, which, so they advised me, would be a good, honorable one. Thus I let them persuade me and apprenticed myself to a furrier at Memmingen called Master Jos, who was also a watchman at the Kempten Gate. After I had been with this master for two weeks, I had had enough of him, for my back ached, and he liked nothing about me. So I went to my sister and said that I didn't want to stay with the furrier but to return to school. My sister favored this move, and so did her husband, for he would have been glad to see me become a priest.

So I packed up once more, got my schoolbook, and asked my sister and her husband for some help. They gave me a bare six shillings, and the same day I went to Waldsee. I spent the night in a hostel, for I had little money. And it happened that when I left the furrier, my friend had to pay him seven shillings, which he had been promised for teaching me. After I had spent one night in the hostel at Waldsee, I arose early and went over to Biberach [an der Riß], where I soon found an honest man (he was very rich, a cobbler who no longer practiced the trade). For the love of God, he wanted me to live with him for a year or longer and go to school, but I would have to find my own provisions. So I went to school for two weeks, and it shamed me to beg. When I left the school, I bought a loaf of bread and sliced some of it, and as I came home, the master asked whether I had been in town to buy bread. To my positive reply, he said that in this town people were glad to give to poor scholars. But I did not want to beg. A student told me that there was a good school in Ehingen. I wanted to go there with him, so I did. There were lots of older pupils [*bachanten*] who begged in the town. When I saw that the older and bigger pupils went around and sang for bread, I fell in and became friendly with them. I, too, wanted to get enough by begging and, no longer ashamed to beg, got plenty to eat.

When I was in Ehingen, where I went to school for half a year, an older student came to me and asked whether I would go with him to Ballingen, which had a good school. He offered to help me find a good position with pay, also to help me in other ways and advise me. I was so taken by his good words that I went with him to Ballingen. It is a small town, one mile from Hochenzoll. After arriving in Ballingen, we stayed for more than a year. I went to school, and my companion abandoned me, giving me neither help nor advice. So I found a poor man, a smith named Spilbentz. I lived with him for a while and taught his son. Next I found a host who gave me full board, so that I did not have to beg. Then I left him and went to Ulm, where I remained a full year with a fifer. He was the city fifer, Hänslin of Biberach, and he was good to me. I taught his boy, who has since become a fifer, too. I begged for bread.

In 1415 I went from Ulm back to Memmingen.^[2] My brother-in-law, seeing me changed, convinced me to go to Augsburg and be ordained an acolyte.^[3] So I travelled to this city of Augsburg and soon came to a merchant named Ulrich Schön, once a rich man but now impoverished. I stayed with him for a year and

didn't go to school at all. Once at Fasnacht, I rode over a boy near St. George's, and his friends' reaction forced me to flee and go to Nuremberg. I traveled with the merchant on business all over, to Bavaria and elsewhere.

So I came to Nuremberg, where I lived for three years with a rich man, Cuntz Beham, an older, honorable, pious man. He had his business at the market on a corner next to the chapel of Our Lady on the Saltzberg,^[4] where he had his shop. His wife was the daughter of a respectable man named Schultheiß von Pernhaim, who lived behind the Dominican convent toward the Haymarket. He was rich, and he sold wine.

Then I went to Bamberg, where I rented from Johannes Frank, who was a procurator in the episcopal tribunal, and I also boarded with him. I stayed with him for half a year and then went to Würzburg. At the time I was there, a measure of good wine cost 1 penny. [...] Know that on the day I arrived at Würzburg, the bishop of Würzburg left the city [with his troops] and returned the same day. They went to a large village to punish a nobleman named Seckendorf. He had plundered the village and burned the church and the towers, in which about 400 peasants had taken refuge. This was told to me by two soldiers who were eyewitnesses, one named Zwiffel, the other Liecht. They were lodging with me when this happened. The bishop was a prince of Bavaria.^[5]

In 1419 I returned to Augsburg and lodged with a rich man, Jos Kramer, a big fellow in the city. He was a builder, though he belonged to the Weavers' Guild. Yet he didn't practice this trade, for which he had no use, but was a merchant with business in Styria and also in Venice. He owned at least 100 bales of barchent,^[6] and I did all his business at Venice, Frankfurt, and Nuremberg. He was truly an honorable man who treated me well. May God in heaven repay him and care for his soul.

I marry my first wife.

When I lived with this master, I married a poor woman, the daughter of a widow named Störkler from Möringen. She was a poor but honorable woman, who brought me [as dowry] nothing more than a small bed, a calf, and a few pans and other poor things, worth no more than ten lbs. altogether. I, too, had little, just a good suit of clothes and not much cash. Yet I was well trained and could earn money, which I would willingly do. Though my master was generous, this is all we possessed, what we'd earned. My wife was named Elizabeth, and she was at that time maid to Jos Kramer, my master, whom I also served (as I've already said). We took one another in good friendship. This happened in 1420, eight days after Pentecost Sunday. And after our wedding, I was unsure as to what I should do, for I possessed nothing. I no longer had my master's favor, for I'd lost it, for he took it badly that I had married my wife without his counsel. So now he would neither advise nor assist me. So I didn't know what to do. My wife, however, was dear to me, and I liked her company. When I spoke with her of our situation, she was generous and consoling. She said: "My Burkhart, buck up and don't despair. We will help one another, and we will get out of this situation. I will spin on my wheel and will produce each week a good 4 lbs., that is, 32 pence." And since my wife was so trusting, I perked up and thought I could do some writing and see if I could find a priest for whom I could write. However much or little you earn, I thought, your wife is earning 32 pence, and all will be well. And perhaps God will grant that we survive. There was a priest at Our Lady's Church, Sir Conrad Seybolt from Memmingen, who was a curate at Our Lady's. He liked me, because he was also from Memmingen, where he had taught school, and I had been his pupil. I went to him and said that I had married and didn't know what I should do. I would gladly write for pay, but I had nothing with which to write. The good man was glad that I wanted to write, for he wanted someone to write for him. He said, "If you write for me, I will employ you for pay for a whole year." He therefore brought me a large book of parchment, which belonged to Master Rudolph, a cathedral canon and pastor at Our Lady's Church, and also a graduated doctor. The book was called Compendium of St. Thomas [Aquinas]. He allowed me to take the book home and gave me a gulden, so that I could buy paper and begin to write. So I went home to my wife and told her what I'd done, which made her happy. And so I began to write, and in one week I

wrote four twelve-page gatherings of large-sized paper *karta regal*, and I took the four to my employer. He was pleased with my speedy start, also with my hand, and he promised me four groschen per gathering. Thereafter I wrote fifty gatherings for him and earned a lot of money. My wife and I sat together, and I wrote while she span, and often we earned 3 lbs. in a week. We often sat there together for the whole evening. And all went well for us, for we earned what we needed. As we started our life together, there was a great plague, which began in the fall of the year 1420 and drove down the price of everything. [...] In the countryside and in town, things were fine and good. Everyone who survived got rich, but there were deaths without measure here in the city and everywhere on the land. [...]

In 1421 on St. Ulrich's Day, my wife bore a child named Andlin. When she was a year old, the city of Rottweil started a war against Count Friedrich of Zollern, who was called "Öttinger." He had done much damage to the Rottweilers and had made war on them contrary to God, honor, and justice. The Rottweilers asked all the free cities for aid, which was granted to them. The Augsburgers hired troops, and mustered and formed up twenty-four journeymen, of whom I was one. They gave each of us 4 groschen per day. Thus, I went on campaign with the others against the count of Zollern and remained away from home for ten months. Everything went well for me, and I saved about 30 gulden. I was appointed quartermaster and secretary of all the infantry. [...] I was present when Hohenzollern Castle was taken, and I returned home with the very last group. Yet I was sent home with a dispatch, and I remained there for nearly six weeks, until I went back to Hohenzollern. For a year and a day we besieged the castle, which was taken on Corpus Christi [3 June]. It was surrendered for mercy; the 32 soldiers in the castle were taken to Ulm, and the castle was razed to the ground in 1423.

When Hohenzollern was taken, and we came home, the city council sent their advisor Jörg Plossen, and me with him, to Hungary to King Sigismund, our most gracious lord, and to Duke Ludwig of Bavaria, who was at that time with the King of the Romans. The subject [of the mission] was a nobleman, Oswalt Öttinger, who was our enemy and made war on our city against God, honor, and justice. We were away half a year and accomplished very little. The case also had to do with the Jews. [...]

My master, Jos Kramer, sent me to Venice in 1424 [...] [where] I conducted his business, when he had business there, until 1427. Then my masters sent me to Rome.

I left Augsburg for Rome with many ducats, which I was to hand over to a doctor in Rome, Master Peter Frid, who was my lord [= bishop] of Augsburg's procurator. [...]

When I returned, I served my master as before, doing business for him and for myself, and by God's grace all went well. Amen.

In 1431 I was rich and also tired of traveling, and I thought how I might gain a position at home in the city, so that I would not have to work so hard. Now, fortune would have it that a man, Hanns Drittmer, who worked at the city scales, resigned, and Peter Egen, who is since known as Peter of Argun, and who was also employed at the scales, had no weigh master. He sent to me to say that if I wanted to become weigh master, he would do well by me. So, very quickly I pledged myself to him and was his servant, and he paid me 53 gulden per year. And know that he allowed me to ride to Venice whenever I wished and that I could do my business as before while employed at the scales. My master, Peter Egen, surely treated me well. Whenever I asked, he lent me money, much or little, for which may God in heaven thank him. I remained at the scales for seven years until 1438, then I left the scales, for I did not want to be idle but to work and travel as I used to do.

In 1440 around St. Michael's Day [29 September] I bought my house in the broad KirchgaÙe for 200 gulden. Behind it I built an addition with a sitting room, bedroom, and kitchen. [...] I bought it from Master Hainrich Liephart, who was a carpenter and the city's works master.

In 1441 on the feast of the Raising of the Holy Cross [3 May], I contracted with Hans Meuting to work for his firm for three years. He gave me 60 gulden per year in wages and invested 200 gulden in the firm on my account. I invested 500 gulden cash in the firm and remained with him for three years. Note that in those three years we gained a profit of 23 percent, which satisfied me, for, thanks be to God, in one year I saved 200 gulden, plus all of my provisions. When the three years were up, I left the firm.

When I left the firm I bought my house, situated in the Judengaße. [...]

In 1401 my dear mother died in childbirth, as I noted above.

In 1407 my brothers, Hans and Conrad, died in the village of Haimertingen and are buried there. In 1415 my master, the pastor on the Riegg in Carinthia, died. [...]

In 1419 my sister at Memmingen died of the plague.

In 1420 I married my first wife, Elisabeth, daughter of the [widow] Störkler of Meringen. We had little in goods, as I've already said, but we had honor and piety, well-being and luck.

In 1421 on St. Ulrich's Day [4 July] my wife bore a daughter named Ändlin. She was surely a lovely child, whom everyone had to love. She lived for nine years and then died.

In 1423 in Easter Week [4–10 April] my wife bore a son named Johannes. He was still living in 1466.

In 1425 on St. Thomas's Day before Christmas [21 December], my wife bore a daughter named Dorothea.

In 1429 on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul [25 January], my wife bore a son named Conrad.

In 1430 on St. Stephen's Day [26 December 1429] my eldest daughter, Anna, died of the plague. She is buried at Our Lady's Church.

In 1431 my daughter Dorothea died, also of the plague. She is also buried at Our Lady's.

In the same year on St. Elizabeth's Day [18 November] my wife bore a daughter, Dorothea.

In 1432 on Christmas Day, my two sons, Hans and Burkhart, were confirmed.

Also in 1432 on 4 September, my wife bore a daughter named Anna ["the second"].

Also in 1432 on 9 November this same Anna died. She is buried at St. Moritz under my own headstone.

In 1434 on 23 May, my wife bore a son named Wilhelm.

In 1436 on 22 July, my wife bore a son named Jacob. [...]

In 1438 there was a great pestilence here in the city of Augsburg, and nearly 6,000 persons died of it. I, too, Burkhard Zink, fell very ill, [...] and my wife, Elisabeth, though great with child, was as sick as I. We both received communion and Extreme Unction, but God granted that we recover our health. May He be praised.

Later, when we were well, on All Saints' Day [3 November] my wife bore a daughter named Barbara.

In the same year on St. Nicholas's Day [12 December] my son Conrad died of the plague. He lies under my stone at St. Moritz's with my son Jacob.

Note that at this time, when my wife gave birth (as related), I was working again. I rode to Venice to trade,

brought bales back from that city, and conducted my master's business and served as his partner. This time I gained more than 1000 gulden, thanks to God in heaven.

In 1440 on Thursday after St. Gallus' Day [20 October] my dear wife Elisabeth died. May God in His boundless mercy be gracious to her. She lies at St. Ulrich [and Afra] under my stone. At that time I lived in my house in the broad KirchgaÙe, which I had bought from Master Hainrich. Our married life lasted for twenty years in true friendship, virtue, and amity, and we did very well. May Almighty God keep her soul forever and in all eternity. Amen.

In 1441 on Sunday after Pentecost [11 June], I married Dorothea Kuenlinbeck, the legitimate daughter of Heinrich Adeltzhauser von Wickerhofen. May Almighty God give us good fortune and prosperity. Note that Dorothea, my wife, was at that time living with her brother, who was bailiff at Möringen. Her husband, who had died at Landshut, was a nobleman, servitor to Duke Heinrich. He was a good man, Bernhart Keulnbeck by name. After he died, the creditors swarmed in and took from the good widow everything she had, so that she and her children had nothing, though many owed her money. The dear woman then had to go to her brother at Möringen, for she had nothing [...] to live with him. His wife, [Barbara] von Westernach, a sharp, angry woman, didn't want the widow in her house. She always spoke uncivily to her and insulted her and her children – a son and a daughter. Many persons told me that she was a lovely woman, good and virtuous without compare, so I, moved by sympathy on account of her beauty, goodness, and virtue, sent to her in Möringen. She then came afoot, just like a poor woman, and she pleased me so much when I first saw her that I asked her if she would have me. This gladdened her heart, and she said that she would willingly have me and do everything I wished. She would be solicitous and obedient, asking for nothing except that which accorded to my free and good will. Further, she would treat all my children honorably and accept them as her own. When I heard that the woman was so favorable she pleased me even better than before. I took her as my wife, and many honorable folk attended. [...]

NOTES

[1] In the March of Carniola, today Slovenia—trans.

[2] The year cannot be right, for Zink says that he spent seven years in Carinthia, and his second journey there was in 1415. He had been wandering for at least three and a half more years, so the correct year must be around 1419—trans.

[3] One of the minor orders, a step toward ordination as a priest—trans.

[4] An error for the Salt Market, which lay on the way from the market square up to St. Sebald's Church—trans.

[5] An error for Bishop Johann von Brunn (1411–40), who was an Alsatian—trans.

[6] Barchent, a cloth woven of wool and cotton, was a specialty of Augsburg and Upper Swabia—trans.

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