

(1606) Hans Eisenbeiß Tragedy (z138)

translated by: Gertrud Wilhelm, Irmgard von Schmeling, Agnes T Sauer, Robert Saavedra, Fall 1997

The following story is quite graphic and unpleasant to read. However, since it is a story that is well known throughout much of Germany, it is important that Eisenbeiß families are aware of it.

There are four versions of this tragedy. Version #1: von 900 Jahre Eliasbrunn, 1071-1971, pages 15-17, section V (from 900 years Eliasbrunn, 1071-1971, pages 15-17, section V.), Version #2: von "Eine Tragödie im Hause Eisenbeiss, anno 1606" (from "A Tragedy in the House Eisenbeiss in the Year 1606"), Version #3, von "Die Stadt Gera und das Fürstliche Haus Reußi", pages 280-281 (from "The city of Gera and The princely house Reussi", pages 280-281), Version #4: von Sagenbuch des "Voigtlandes", von Robert Eisel, Gera, 1871, page 55 (from the Tale book "Voigtlandes", from Robert Eisel, Gera, 1871, page 55).

Two of the four versions are printed in this book.

It is possible Hans contracted rabies. This would explain his behavior.

Version #1, English: from 900 years Eliasbrunn, 1071-1971, pages 15-17, section V.

The history of Eliasbrunn's multiple murder, as seen in the light of the law.

Without a doubt the most dreadful deed of a farmer belongs to Hans Eisenbeiss from the town of Eliasbrunn who, on the 28th of April 1606, killed his whole family and his maid, in the most shocking event experienced in the history of the Highlands.

Through a contemporary report, the public learns the awful deed and the detailed circumstances surrounding the perpetrator's lawful punishment and subsequent execution. Unfortunately, this description was aimed more at satisfying the people's desire for sensationalism than dealing carefully with the deed, the guilty party and his condemnation.

First, the history itself:

On Monday, 28 April 1606, around 10:00 o'clock in the morning, the 42 year old farmer Hans Eisenbeiss' took an ax and killed his six children, his still pregnant wife and his maid, all shortly one after another.

His servant who was in the field at the time, escaped the killing and could later pinpoint Eisenbeiss hiding place in a nearby forest called Geschwandholtz. Eisenbeiss was later arrested in that forest. He could not deny the deed he had done, when the arrest was made, because he was still holding the murder weapon and his clothes were soaked in blood.

During the interrogation, Eisenbeiss remained silent. When he was taken to be tortured, he could give no other motive for his dreadful deed, other than the understanding that his wife, children, and farm-hands wanted to rule over him.

On 30 April 1606 Eisenbeiss was taken to Eliasbrunn. There, he had to touch the corpses prior to their burial, as this was the local custom. On 5 May 1606, early at 8:00 o'clock, the judgment was read to him in Lobenstein. Later, Eisenbeiss was taken to Eliasbrunn where the judgment was executed.

After his hands were chopped off, his thighs were crushed with heavy wheels and his heart was ripped out of his body. Then, he was decapitated and the remainder of his body quartered. His heart and guts were burned. The house in which Eisenbeiss had lived was torn down, and the Court ordered nothing to be ever build in that place again.

Now, a short statement from the ghastly story.

If we want to legally explore the cruel happening, we must separate the person from the perpetrator and his presumed motive for his awful deed. The farmer Hans Eisenbeiss is marked in the contemporary description by respected citizens, as a pious and God-fearing individual. It was understood, that Eisenbeiss had altogether no real motive for his deed, and the allegations that his wife wanted to control him was only the product of a cruel torture he suffered.

When there are, however, no logical motives, the deed could have only been committed in mental derangement; that means, the perpetrator at that time was not in full possession of his mental sanity. This concept becomes even stronger through his own statement when he said "it came over me". He had personally no logical explanation for his deed.

While today a perpetrator who has acted in mental derangement is deprived from a normal lifestyle by spending time in a sanitarium, this crime was committed during the Middle Ages, when mental derangement cases were punished especially hard.

The gruesome deed was committed twelve years before the beginning of the Thirty-Year War, at a time when witch burning was an everyday occurrence and justice was ignorant of the existence of clinical insanity. They saw those deeds as the work of the devil, which had to be expelled with "fire and sword".

In reports, it is often spoken of the devil being incarnated in a perpetrator's body. Other times the killer had a devilish-face. In the Russian Countries, there was talk about a throat-cutting Justice Committee, which originated from the time of Karl the 5th.

Excerpts from declarations revealed that the high court dealt only with the deed itself. The motives to the deed were within their jurisdiction only insofar as interpretation of the law, which should confirm the judgment. By no means, however, could mitigating circumstances be brought forward, especially if by interpretation of the law, so that the perpetrator would be absolved.

According to the law, the deed could be repaid only through the perpetrator's death. That is to say, the judgment had to be executed in full force, so that whoever committed the deeds had to repay his crime only through his own suffering.

So the maximum penalty was applied to the perpetrator at each place by where he had killed a person, by ripping flesh from his body with glowing hot tongs. The hand-cutting represented a punishment of the limbs, with which these deeds were committed. The burning of the inner intestines and heart [symbolized with fire and sword] represented the expulsion of the devil from the body, which had taken possession of the person.

By the dull reaction of the delinquent, at the time when the judgment was executed, there was nothing further known about Eisenbeiss's level of intelligence that could have explained the situation. It is sure to assume that through the due process of the justice system, the perpetrator received a judgment which was felt to be just.

The order to tear down his house and leave the grounds without a structure was quickly interpreted by the superstitious, as a mark of the place where the devil lives.

In summary, the Law of 1606 was formed, aside from the pure pardon principle, from the laws of the Inquisition.

Version #2, English: from "A Tragedy in the House Eisenbeiss in the Year 1606":

From further testimonies, it is written that in the year 1606, he extinguished his whole family during a blood-rush. This deed found a cruel atone in the book "Ausgeburten des Menschenwahnes im Spiegel der Hexenprozesse und Autodafees"; (1893) from B. E. König it is cited:

In Eliasbrunn, a village not far from Lobenstein in the Voigtlande, at the beginning of the 17th Century lived Hans Eisenbeiss, a wealthy landowner, happy spouse, father and a Christian man. His household was formed by his wife, six children, a servant and a maid.

One day, on 28 April, 1606 early in the morning, Eisenbeiss was already showing signs of anxiety which became increasingly severe as the day unfolded to finally ending in complete insanity near the end of the day. The ill-starred Eisenbeiss, with ax in hand, stormed into the living room where his ten-year-old son, who just arrived back from school, was sitting at the table. The deranged father inflicted such a severe blow on his Son's head, that his brain was splattered on to the wall. Then, the crazy man went to the chamber where he killed three of his children, one of them still a baby. Then he grabbed his six-year-old daughter under the staircase, where he choked her. Then he stormed out to the courtyard and with his bloody ax and killed his twelve-year son who was tending after the cows. By this time the lunatic was running towards the garden, where he struck down his pregnant thirty-year-old wife and shortly after, his eighteen year old maid.

The lunatic had murdered his entire Household in less than ten minutes, with the exception of the servant. Immediately after this eight-fold murder, Eisenbeiss fled towards the nearest forest to look for the Servant. Before he could locate him, concerned people were already running after Eisenbeiss, who was then apprehended and turned over to the authorities.

The lunatic answered with a dull smile all questions directed at him, and only once, when he probably had a clear moment, he said that the murder happened because his family and his sense wanted him to lower himself from landlord to servant.

He was severely tortured and given a chance to indicate still another motive for his insane deed. Whatever he stated under this senseless torture had no importance. However, the judges took great interest, and the record shows that

the protocol did not remain without influence. This judgment gives a sad testimony of the inhumanity; for it is from judicial blindness, unyielding minds and fanaticism that this act of vengeance was put together.

On May 23rd, the lunatic was picked up from a tower or dungeon in the Lobensteiner Castle, was put in irons, forced into a wagon and brought to Eliasbrunn. Here, he was dropped off, tied with a with a cowhide-covered noose and then forcibly led back to his farm. While in the garden where Eisenbeiss committed the killings, he was burned eight times on the chest with glowing hot tongs.

The unbearable pain made him scream, but other times he would turn to the jurors with a foolish smirk on his face, while the people of the town were watching. Then, in that place, his hands were cut off, his thighs were beaten with heavy wheels, and while his body was still alive, his heart and guts were ripped from his chest and burned. The remainder of his body was cut in four chunks, and each part was stabbed through four different spears before raising them up along local streets.

In the garden, where Eisenbeiss killed his wife, a column was erected with the wheel used during the execution. The delinquent's head was used as the hub, and his hands were nailed on the column. Up to the moment when the hangman tore his heart from the chest, the lunatic would shout the name "Jesus", and then he would laugh again or he would begin to scream. He would also gaze several times studying the bleeding arm stumps and the horrible wounds left by the hot tongs and would raise the thighs crushed by the wheels.

The day after the execution, his house was torn down and a stone column was erected in its place. The gruesome deed was engraved on this column in horrid rhymes, which told the way the court sought equity in this case.