



● The 'ratcatcher' . . .

EVERY Sunday morning during the summer tourist season, the Pied Piper legend is re-enacted in the town square of Hameln, or Hamelin, a small town near Hannover in Lower Saxony, West Germany. Pastries in the shape of rats are sold as part of the celebration.

But this is no mere show for visitors. Behind the festivities lies a historic tale that so shook the village that it has been retold for 700 years.

Even the exact date is recalled: June 26, 1284, when 130 children are said to have vanished from Hamelin.

*Why did they leave? Was there really a Pied Piper?*

Like many legends, there is a true story, whose origins become obscure and lost behind later embellishments. The evidence of the tale is revealed in more than the annual drama.

● There is a "Ratcatcher's House" in Hamelin, on which is written a graphic account of the children's disappearance, and other houses with such inscriptions.

● Even more intriguing is the "Street of No Noise" in the medieval quarter, an ancient alley where, for several hundred years, no parade, wedding procession, street dancing, or parties have been allowed — and where children are not allowed to play.

It was down just this alley that the sons and daughters of Hamelin left home, never to return.

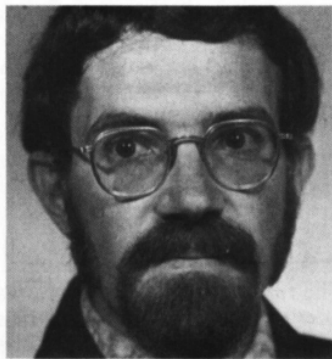
ONE FAMOUS account of the fable is Robert Browning's poem, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's Story." The dramatic poem recalls the terror of the . . .

"Rats!  
They fought the dogs and killed  
the cats,  
And bit the babies in the cradles,  
And ate the cheeses out of the  
vats,  
And licked the soup from the  
cooks' own ladles,  
Split open the kegs of salted  
sprats,  
Made nests inside men's Sunday  
hats,  
And even spoiled the women's  
chats  
By drowning their speaking  
With shrieking and squeaking  
In fifty different sharps and flats."

## The truth about . . .

# Pied Piper's

By FRED FOLDVARY



The villagers complained bitterly about inaction by the city governors:

"To think we buy gowns lined with  
ermine  
For dolts that can't or won't  
determine  
What's best to rid us of our  
vermin!"

To the rescue came a stranger, tall and thin, wearing a long pied (mottled) coat, and a playing pipe. For 1,000 guilders, he promised to rid Hamelin of all its rats. The astonished mayor and city council were more than glad to agree.

The Piper fluted his way down the streets as "out of the houses the rats came tumbling," until he led them to the Weser River, where all perished but one who swam across and warned all other rats to stay away from Hamelin.

Returning to city hall, the Piper asked for his 1,000 guilders. But the mayor, thinking "what's dead can't come back to life," refused to "pay the Piper," thus not only coining a now familiar phrase but setting the stage for the coming tragedy.

The flutist threatened to "pipe to another fashion," and the mayor mocked him. "Blow your pipe till you burst!"

The Piper played again, this time the "sweet soft notes" that roused the children, who left home to follow him to the nearby Koppelberg Hill, where the mountain opened and the Piper disappeared with the children. Only

one child remained, lame and unable to dance the whole way. "Alas, alas for Hamelin!"

THE STORY of the search for the true history behind the tale is as fascinating as the fable itself.

It began in 1934, when Hamelin celebrated a Jubilee Year, the 650th anniversary of the event. The sponsors engaged Heinrich Spanuth, a school principal, to assemble historical material related to the legend. Spanuth discovered so much that it became a permanent museum and Spanuth its curator.

Spanuth, in fact, was a victim of contemporary vermin — the Nazis — and the Piper discovery is closely tied up with the march of events of the 1930s and 40s. He had been fired for being a liberal of the old school, unfit to teach the children of Nazi Germany. The city quietly then gave him this harmless post.

During the Hamelin Jubilee of 1934, there came one Wolfgang Wann, archivist of the city of Troppau (now Opava) in Moravia, central Czechoslovakia. Wann was among the descendents of German colonists who had settled in Czechoslovakia during the Middle Ages, and his mission was to trace the founding of Troppau by settlers from the Weser area. The two scholars agreed to collaborate in the project.

Two years later, they came upon a note written by the philosopher Leibnitz about a 14th century manuscript in Lueneburg, a city 90 miles north of Hamelin. There, in a chronicle called "The Golden Chain," written in Latin in 1370 by the monk Heinrich of Hereford, was a passage on the back of the last page written in English, with the title, Hamelin.

It described a "young man of about 30 years," who led 130 children "out of the East Gate." Also, "the mother of the deacon John of Luede saw the children leave town." John of Luede indeed lived during the mid 1300s and

**'Out of the houses the rats came tumbling'**

... June 26, 1284

# promised land

his mother may have been a child in Hamelin in the fateful year of 1284 – perhaps too young or lame to join the others?

There is no mention of rats in the Lueneburg account. They were injected much later by religious writers who felt that some divine purpose must have caused the loss of innocent children, and conjured the rats to explain it as punishment for the broken pledge to the “ratcatcher”.

*But if rats did not cause the exodus, what did?*

**W**OLFGANG Wann’s town of Troppau lies in a strategic valley known as the Moravian Gate, near the current Polish border. The town was established in the 13th century by Bishop Bruno, Count of Schaumburg. The main city in Moravia today is his namesake, Brno (sic). The Count wanted to secure this strategic gap by importing immigrants – from Germany. For Bruno himself was a German.

Schaumburg, Bishop Bruno’s birthplace, lies on the Weser River just 10 miles from Hamelin. It was quite natural for him to send his recruiters to the Weser region, promising the colonists new opportunities and land.

*The Pied Piper was none other than one of these agents, who came to charm away colonists with his promises as well as by his colourful pied costume and his silver flute!*

As Wann dug deeper into the records, he found evidence of former village names, such as Hamelinkow, near Troppau. He discovered still-living families with names such as Hamlinus, Hamler, and Hamel. What clinched the evidence was the uncovering of duplicate 13th century names in the archives of both Hamelin and Troppau, rare names not found elsewhere. Of course it was long known that the original settlers of Troppau were from the Weser land, but now it seemed clear that the exact origin was Hamelin.

Interestingly enough, Browning pointed to that very origin in his poem:

“And I must not omit to say  
That in Transylvania there’s a tribe  
Of alien people who ascribe  
The outlandish ways and dress  
On which their neighbours lay such  
stress  
To their fathers and mothers  
having risen  
Out of some subterranean prison  
Into which they were trepanned  
Long ago in a mighty band  
Out of Hamelin town in Brunswick  
land,  
But how or why they don’t  
understand.”

Transylvania is in Romania, not Czechoslovakia; otherwise, this section of Browning’s account is remarkable.

Wann himself was a descendant of this German migration and, ironically, having spent a lifetime studying the trek of his ancestors to Czechoslovakia, he became part of the reverse migration from the Sudetenland back to Germany after World War II, when the Germans were expelled.

Among the 60 pounds of hand baggage permitted him were the historic documents of the Hamelin exodus.

But the great question remains: How or why did the Piper have such great success in Hamelin? If not the rats, what force led to the loss of such a great portion of the town’s youth? Here is Dr. Wann’s explanation:

“Hamelin in 1284 was a social pressure cooker, a walled town of 2,000 residents and growing fast. But to be a citizen, one had to be a burger, a property owner, and a few grasping patrician families held everything. They owned the crowded housing, and refused to expand the town walls. They owned all the woods around Hamelin, and reserved for themselves cutting privileges, fuel for the cold winters. Moreover, in land speculation, they had bought up all the open fields around Hamelin, thus driving into town many dispossessed peasants, an angry proletariat. These uprooted farmers, or, more likely,



... of Hamelin

their land-hungry sons and daughters, were natural volunteers in the Piper’s offer of a new deal.\*

The “children”, then, were young adults, who left the wretched conditions of Hamelin to settle on land of their own – this promise of land was the “music” that lured them away.

**A**N IRONY of the story is that in the legend, the city fathers caused the exodus by their greed.

In historical fact, after the departure of the “children”, they smothered all record of it, fearing that it could happen again. Though the city archives were well kept, there is no mention of the exodus of June 26, 1284.

But the common folk of Hamelin, in anguish over their loss, kept the memory alive and passed it down to the present day.

*One question remains – why June 26?*

It was the date of the summer solstice celebration, still observed in Saxony. This long day was perfect for the departure, and the long summer daylight hours would allow more time for the journey. Wann’s theory is that there was a mass nuptial then, with some 60 marriages and much feasting and dancing, just before the trek to the east, when the youths were led through the East gate by the triumphant Piper, to their promised land.

Today, when a bride is married in Hamelin, the wedding procession is silent when it passes through “The Street of No Drums and Trumpets.”

*What a testimony to the age-old curse of concentration of land and power in a few hands.*

\*The remarkable research by Dr’s. Spanuth and Wann was reported in “What Happened to These Children?” by James P. O’Donnell, *Saturday Evening Post*, Dec. 24, 1955. It also appeared in “The Pied Piper of Hamelin: The True Story” by John Henry Richter, in *Topical Time*, March/April 1982, published by the American Topical Association (based on the earlier article). The stamp illustrated in the article was issued by West Germany in 1978. Robert Browning’s poem appears in *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning*, The Modern Library, New York, 1934.

**There were no rats – just greedy landowners**