

## The Child from Hameln

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Roger Hamelner Mering and I were classmates and friends in high school. Once we got to discussing names and discovered that both of our middle names go back to ancestors who lived at exactly the same time in the late 1200's. My middle name, Wallace, and one bit of my ancestry comes from a brother of the Scottish hero Sir William Wallace, who led the fight to free Scotland from the English rule of Edward I. Roger's middle name came from a similarly remote ancestor who adopted the name of his birthplace as his last name. Roger said that there was an interesting story connected with that ancestor, part of which I probably already knew. And, if I were interested, his grandmother could tell me the rest. So, one autumn afternoon, he and I ate pumpkin at his grandmother's while I listened to the following tale, passed down through probably around 20 or 25 generations of Roger's ancestors, sometimes through the male side of the line and sometimes through the female side. I have supplemented what Roger's grandmother told me with information I gleaned in my old age from Google.

The town of Hameln or Hamelin, as it is usually now called, is located in lower Saxony. In 1284, it was a bustling center for grinding wheat into flour. The earliest town record, from 1384, states simply, "It is 100 years since our children left." The departure is sometimes ascribed to a day in June of 1284, and involved 130 children. No documented reason for the exodus has ever been found. The best historical speculation starts with the battle of Bornhoevel in 1227, which broke the Danish hold on the part of Europe from Brandenburg eastward to Pomerania, in what are now Poland, and southward to Bessarabia, the province lying between present day Romania and Hungary. The defeat of the Denes opened the way for German colonization of the area. So-called "locators", supported by the German nobility, roamed Saxony and adjacent lands, trying to find population for the newly acquired territory. Perhaps the 130 children from Hameln were part of an eastward German migration. That, theory, however does not account for the involvement of children rather than able-bodied youths, for the large number of children who disappeared on a single day, or for the apparently unexpected nature of the event.

So much for information from Google. Now for what has to be called legend for lack of documentation. Those of my generation learned the legend, at least in outline, before we could read and instead were being read to. Perhaps Club members under 4p, who were never read to and gained all they knew from Sesame Street do not know the legend. For the record, the story goes as follows. In 1284, Hameln was suffering from a plague of rats, living off the free menu of flour from the town mill. One day, a vagabond entertainer, probably a performer on the bagpipes, appeared. In legend, he is called the Pied Piper, which indicates that his clothes were covered with patches of various colors. The

Pied Piper offered to rid the town of rats. The town officials, eager to grasp any possibility, no matter how obviously absurd, agreed to pay the piper for a successful rat extermination. With music from his bagpipes, the piper lured the rats into the nearby Weser River where they drowned. The town officials refused to pay. They may have reasoned that nobody would ever believe a piper who claimed that he had been cheated of pay after luring rats into a river with his music. It can't be done, and besides, rats are excellent swimmers. The piper left vowing revenge.

On St. John and St. Paul's Day, when all of the town's adults were in church, he returned and enticed 130 children away into the unknown, again with his playing. Kids following a bagpiper is more plausible than rats doing so. The English learned long ago from the Scots and the Irish that the martial music of the bagpipe is a huge stimulus to joining in a military parade. Only one child was left in Hameln, a youngster with a crippled or missing leg, who walked with a crutch and could not keep up with the parade. He informed the adults of what had happened when they left church. Why did the parents not immediately pursue the piper and their children? The legend offers no explanation. Perhaps the parents assumed that the parade would eventually turn around and return to the town, an assumption that led to too long a wait to begin looking for the children, and their trail was lost to too many possible directions. Or perhaps the piper had an arrangement with professional abductors who quickly removed the children from the vicinity and on into the newly opened eastern and southeastern territory as potential labor for the estates being created there.

A suggestion of the latter possibility is contained in the continuation of the Pied Piper story told me by Roger Merling's grandmother. I will now turn to what she said. It is an account of the subsequent life of the boy from Hameln who followed the piper, and became Roger's remote ancestor.

The boy was named Johann, but generally called Jan. No last name has come down through history. It could have been that Jan had no last name. The late 12 hundreds were still the Middle Ages in Europe when people other than the nobility neither had nor needed last names. The children of Hameln often called Jan "Four Finger", for he was born with only a slight bump instead of a little finger on his left hand. Jan was 8 years old when he joined the bagpipe parade. The piper lured or led the children away from Hameln for nearly two hours. By that time, the children, especially the younger ones, could not go any farther. The group stopped at a farmhouse, where the children were given food and loaded onto several long, horse drawn wagons. Jan remembered all of his life that he was desperately homesick, confused, and afraid. The wagons traveled for countless days, stopping overnight at farms where the children slept in barns and ate at farmhouses. Often, when they came to a town, one or two of the children were left there. Jan did not know at the time that those children were in effect sold to local farmers or tradesmen who were able to use extra labor, even in the form of a young person. Jan was never chosen for such a role. His peculiar four-fingered hand had made him passed over in favor of whole-bodied alternatives. Gradually, one wagon after another, separated from the cluster and went off in a different direction. Eventually, Jan's wagon was left alone and he was the only child remaining. At that point, he was transferred to a small wagon with a sort of house built on it. The wagon was part of a Romany or gypsy caravan. Jan came cheap and the gypsies were willing to take a chance on making some meager profit on him.

As the gypsies slowly went south, Jan made friends with a gypsy youngster his own age named or called Nufo. The two played together for some three months. Nufo was learning the art of palm reading. Several times, he tried out his skill on Jan. Nufo ended up frustrated each time. Jan's right hand had a comparatively short life line; but the left hand had a much longer line. So what was Nufo supposed to predict for the length of Jan's life. Nufo gave up and turned to less troublesome palms.

As autumn was coming on, the gypsy band reached a small town in Bavaria called Makenburg. The town took its name from the Maken glacier, at the foot of which the town was located. There, somebody finally bought Jan. The purchaser was the town pottery maker, named Kleinfeld. Kleinfeld had once had a wife, who died giving birth to their first child. The child did not survive the mother's death. Kleinfeld never married again, which turned out well for Jan. Over the course of a year, the relationship between Kleinfeld and Jan gradually turned into that of foster father and adopted son. As the years passed, Jan increasingly took over the making and selling of the pottery. At eighteen, he married a local girl. They quickly had five children, three of whom survived childhood, two boys and a girl. When they were just emerging from the toddler stage, Jan's foster father died, leaving the pottery business to Jan.

Along the way, Jan acquired the last name which became my friend Roger's middle name. When people in town wanted to identify Jan among the two or three other Johann's in the area, they referred to "Jan der Hamelner", that is, Jan the Hamelner. Adding "er" to the name of Jan's birthplace is equivalent to adding "an" to Cincinnati to get Cincinnati. Thus, Jan was identified as the Johann from Hameln. And that was transformed into the proper name Johann Hamelner. Had the change from description to last name taken place later in Johann's case, he might well have gone from Johann the Potter to Johann Potter; or in German, from Johann der Topfer to Johann Topfer.

Life went on busily and uneventfully until Jan was thirty-five and his children were entering their teens. But then Jan's wife died. It was a severe blow, for the two were deeply attached to each other emotionally. Jan withdrew into himself and partially from the world, though he assumed sole care of his children. He took long, solitary walks and tried to avoid all other people except customers. That state of depression lasted for over a month, until one day, after a solitary walk on the glacier, he suddenly and inexplicably returned to his old self. He enthusiastically charged into the pottery business, became outgoing, and, for all appearances, contented.

Like his foster father, Jan did not marry again. He successfully reared his three children into their early twenties, when all three married and began their own families. One of Jan's sons chose to work in the pottery business, and gradually assumed more and more of the responsibility, much as had the young Jan. There was one significant change in Jan's interests. He became fascinated with the movement of the glacier. He began making regular measurements of how fast it was creeping down its valley and melting at its end near Machenburg. To make his measurements, he compared various aspects of the topography of the glacier in their relation to non-creeping geographic features of the surrounding hillsides. Jan became something of an expert on predicting when some bump or hole in the glacier would reach the melting terminus of the ice.

Meanwhile, through the years, Jan and Nufo renewed their childhood friendship. Every couple of years, the gypsy band passed by Makenburg and camped there for a few days. Nufo always came looking for Jan, and they spent a few hours together. Eventually, Nufo entered the role of patriarch and leader of the band. He made sure that no trouble or con artist activities disturbed the town when the gypsies were present..

In the summer of 1329, Jan was 53 years old, an advanced age in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Early in the summer, he called his children together to talk about the future. He said that the last time the gypsy band had visited Makenburg, he had asked his friend Nufo if it would be possible to travel with the band in mid-summer of the current year back to Hameln. Nufo had somewhat reluctantly agreed. He assured Jan that the latter would be welcome company on such a trip. But what Nufo did not like was the notion of setting a definite time for the journey. Gypsies, he reminded Jan, were wanderers who kept no schedules. But, for an old friend, he would see to it that the band moved from Makenburg to Hameln during the specific summer of 1329. Jan apologized for insisting on just that summer, and he promised to return the favor with what he had to give, namely financial compensation.

Jan told all of this to his gathered children. He followed it up with a shocking addition. He said that he knew that he would pass out of this world shortly after arriving in Hameln, and hence nothing of him would ever return to Makenburg. The children were, of course, both taken aback, incredulous, and confused as to why their father should make such an assertion. They quickly and silently decided that Jan must be suffering from the onset of old age mental impairment. They were sure that that must be the case when, before they could think of what to say in response, Jan apparently forgot what he had just said and switched to more conventional talk about death. He requested that they bury his dead body next to the grave of his wife, their mother. With some relief, the children agreed that they would certainly see that their father's wish was carried out. Thus, the disturbing family conference ended. Jan resumed his usual outgoing daily life. His children, however, kept a wary eye out for any other hint of mental aberration.

The journey to Hameln never took place because of a heat wave. The summer of 1329 started early in central Europe and was, for Europeans, miserably hot for two and a half months. The volume of icy water flowing from the Maken Glacier was the highest in anyone's memory. It was a bright spot in the heat, for the water was the only source of cooling. Jan grew noticeably agitated as the heat continued. He seemingly became obsessed with how fast the glacier was melting backward up its valley. He checked the recession at least once a day, and sometimes more often. The gypsy band arrived, camping near the end of the glacier. In almost hysterical haste, Jan made final reparations to join them and be on his way to Hameln.

Then, suddenly, one day while Jan was sitting and talking to Nufo in the latter's covered wagon about the trip, the reason for his frantic behavior became clear. Or as clear as it would ever be. The tongue of the glacier cracked off. In the resulting fissure, Jan's frozen body appeared. It was not the body of 1329, but the body of the Jan who had just lost his wife and had gone despondently on a walk up the glacier. There was no doubt about the identity of the body. People remembered what Jan's younger self looked like; and the missing little finger of the left hand provided positive identification.

One of the gypsies was the first to see the body and rushed to tell Nufo. Nufo went to the door of his wagon to receive the news. When he turned back toward Jan, Jan, or the Jan with whom he had been talking, was gone. No one ever saw him again.

That evening, as Nufo pondered the events of the day, his mind wandered back to the long ago contradiction between the life lines on Jan's palms, the comparatively short line on one hand and the long line on the other. Could it be, Nufo wondered, that Jan had died twice. On his solitary walk up the glacier after his wife died, had he either fallen or jumped into a crevasse. Had Jan's responsibility for his young children led God to force Jan to enter a second body to last until the children were grown. At Hameln, the children had abandoned their parents. Perhaps God would not allow one of those children, as a parent to reverse the event and abandon his children. Had Jan known that his second life would end when his first body came to light?

Nufo described his speculations to Jan's children, and the speculations became part of the lore the children told their children; the latter told their children; and thus the speculations went down the generations, until Roger Merling's grandmother conveyed them to me.

How much can one believe of a report of miracle from the early part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century? I think that Roger's grandmother believed all that she told to me.