

## HE HAD A SOARING HEART

Gustav Mesmer – “The Icarus of Lautertal”

Gustav Mesmer was born on January 16, 1903, in Altshausen, a village north of the small town of Ravensburg in Upper Swabia. He was the fifth of ten children. Owing to an unfortunate coincidence Mesmer was committed to a psychiatric institution in 1929, where he would endure 35 years of isolation. Only his dream of flying from village to village using muscle power alone helped him survive those years. Today, tens of thousands admire Mesmer's inventions and ideas. He would have been 100 this January. An obituary of the ingenious Swabian artist and inventor.

Gustav was eleven years old when the First World War put an abrupt end to his schooling. “Without school,” Gustav would later write, “one lives one's whole life on the back roads.” Early in life he is sent to provide cheap labour on a number of different farming estates. While working for the housekeepers at the convent of Untermarchtal he is talked into entering monastic life. Looking back in his biography, he notes, “The nuns there persuaded me to become a monk. They said I would make such a lovely priest. Without giving it much thought I chose the world-renowned Benedictine monastery of Beuron. Even as a candidate you are required to sign a document to the effect that everything you own and all your work shall be the monastery's, with no claim to pay, health insurance or life insurance. Only one as naive as myself could fall for something like that.” As Brother Alexander, he spends almost six years at Beuron. Shortly before he is to take his final vows, Mesmer leaves the monastery. He later says that he had found day-to-day life there difficult to cope with. Mesmer returns to Altshausen to live with his parents, and in 1928 becomes a carpenter's apprentice. The master-carpenter gives Mesmer a good reference, but he does comment on his apprentice's “quiet, peculiar nature”.

The 17th of March 1929 was to change Mesmer's life completely. Probably still affected by his years at the monastery, he disrupts Communion at the village church in Altshausen. He is reported to have called out a number of times that it wasn't the blood of Christ that churchgoers were being given and that the whole thing was a fraud. Mesmer is forcibly removed from the church and taken to his parents. But what are they to do with Gustav? He has, has he not, always been a peculiar character, an odd fellow?

14 days after the incident, the Mesmers' family doctor writes a report in which he notes, “It is not unlikely that Gustav might hurt himself or others, and I consider this behaviour to be a sign of delusional anxiety or paranoia.” Mesmer allegedly locks himself into his room several times and on one occasion throws a club against the closed door. Eleven days after the incident at the church he is committed to the Bad Schussenried mental home with an initial diagnosis of “schizophrenia, slowly progressive, in an individual who has perhaps always been feeble-minded”.

Mesmer hopes that he will soon be released and writes to his parents, asking them for their support. Not receiving a reply – he does not know that the home's administrators are not passing his letters on – he breaks out and returns home to Altshausen. His parents, however, do not want Mesmer to stay and send him back. “This is not a life worth living,” he writes in a letter to his parents in 1931. “I have

long done penance for my preaching, or do I deserve death?" Mesmer soon realises that he will not be able to return home and, for the time being, he accepts his fate. At Bad Schussenried, Mesmer is employed in the book bindery, where he is considered a hard worker.

On October 10, 1932, the following is noted in his patient file: "Has invented a flying machine and submitted drawings thereof." Mesmer would later say that he had read, in a magazine in the mental home's book bindery, an article about an Austrian and a Frenchman who had wanted to fly using a bicycle. The idea had inspired and fascinated him. From then on, Mesmer is obsessed with the idea of flying. He draws all kinds of flying machines and builds models of them. A short note in his file reads: "He is in good spirits," followed by, "constantly draws new flying machines that even a layman would shake his head at."

During the years of incarceration, Mesmer's imagination is all he has, and it bears him up beyond the walls of the mental institution and into freedom. And he yearns to return home. He expresses this wish in several letters to his family. He dreams of leading a normal life, of having a family of his own. He asks his mother whether she would allow him to "look for a wife". He does not receive a reply and therefore writes to the daughter of one of his carers: "Perhaps you, dear Miss, would delight in being my bride?" The staff at the mental home describe Mesmer's hopes and dreams as "ideas of reference". Mesmer is not taken seriously, but laughed at. According to his patient file he has an "infantile personality", and there are several references to "delusional ideas".

In the late thirties, Mesmer breaks out of the institution and returns home 16 times. Each time, though, he is sent back again. On one occasion he manages to stay out of the home for fourteen days, working on farms as a day labourer and dreaming of leading a normal, respectable life. Mesmer's escapes, however, remain but brief episodes which always end with him back imprisoned within the walls of the mental home.

In January of 1934, the "Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases" came into force. It was the National Socialists' first step toward the extermination of mental patients. Bad Schussenried was one of the institutions in which many patients due to be discharged were forced to undergo sterilisation. Mesmer was spared this fate because there was no hope of him being discharged any time soon. Most patients were, however, well aware of what was going on at the time. When the Second World War broke out, the National Socialists turned the former mental institution Grafeneck into an extermination camp. From February to December 1940, more than 10,000 people deemed "unworthy of life" by the Nazis were killed in the gas chambers at Grafeneck. Bad Schussenried was one of the transit stations on the road to death. Gustav Mesmer was lucky: his name was not on any of the transport lists. He was a hard worker, so the home's administrators made sure that he was able to stay.

In the chaos following the end of the war – chaos that had spread even to the mental home at Bad Schussenried – Mesmer manages to escape again and returns home. He stays there for two months, but in June 1945 Mesmer's mother sends him back to Bad Schussenried on the pretext of his having to return clothes. Mesmer surrenders himself once more to his fate, for what else is he to do? He

learns to weave baskets, and he makes drawings, writes poetry and prose, and continues to devise flying machines.

In 1949 Mesmer, at his own request, is transferred to a psychiatric hospital in Weissenau, near his home village of Altshausen. The diagnosis made for the transfer is, as years before, “paranoid-type schizophrenia”. In Weissenau, Mesmer is granted greater freedom and, slowly, even gains some recognition. In his patient file he is attributed “a notable talent for drawing”. But more than ever before he presses for a release: he wants to open his own basket weaver’s shop and have a family. No one helps him, however, despite the fact that it has become clear that Mesmer does not belong in a mental institution. In 1962 he writes an autobiography with the title “Of one who spent part of his life in a monastery and part in a psychiatric institution”.

1964, 35 years after he was committed, Gustav Mesmer is released from the institution in Weissenau. The last note in his patient file reads: “At the behest of relatives in Rottenburg, Mesmer was today transferred to the old-people’s home in Buttenhausen, which happened to have a place free. His delusions surface only in his letters or other writings, they no longer seem to be of great importance to him.”

Mesmer spends the last, and probably the happiest, years of his life in the old-people’s home in Buttenhausen, a village in the Swabian Alb region. The home’s administration has given him access to a small workshop where he can finally work on his ideas for flying machines. Here, no one bothers, patronises or ridicules him. And Mesmer’s creativity seems to have no bounds. It is almost impossible to keep track of everything he drew, devised and built, particularly in the latter years of his life, so much did he produce. With one of his flying machines, a modified lady’s bicycle, he causes a sensation in the hills of the Swabian Alb. On Sundays he often starts his attempts at flying, by hurtling down steep hills with his flying bicycle. Soon, people start calling him “The Icarus of Lautertal”, a mark of their affection. He is part of the community, and for the first time in his life he is fully accepted as a human being and indeed admired.

In the early eighties, friends of Mesmer’s begin discussing the idea of presenting his inventions and his works of art to a wider public. Exhibitions in Vienna, Mannheim, Lausanne, Ulm and other places are well received. In 1992, Mesmer experiences the pinnacle of his late-flowering career: one of his flying bicycles is shown as part of a display, the subject of which is “The Dream of Flying”, in the German pavilion at the World Exhibition in Seville

One year later, Gustav Mesmer finally returns to his home village of Altshausen. 64 years after the incident at the church and his entering into psychiatric treatment. A major exhibition showcases the works of “The Icarus of Lautertal” in the decades past – a late vindication of the now-appreciated inventor and artist. He is particularly happy that the invitation to the exhibition reads: “Gustav Mesmer – The Flying-Bicycle Engineer of Altshausen”.

He was often asked whether he had ever succeeded in taking off with one of his flying machines. Yes, he would reply mischievously, his machine had once carried him almost 50 metres down the valley, but unfortunately no one had been there to witness the event.

Gustav Mesmer died on Christmas day 1994, a few weeks before his 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

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