

MIND ON FIRE: THE LIFE OF JACOB BOEHME

by Wayne Kraus

"His bodily Presence was mean, his Stature small, his Forehead low, his Temples prominent, his Nose aquiline, his Eyes grey and rather of an Azure-Cast, bright and clear, like the Windows of Solomon's Temple; his Beard was short and thin; And altho' the Tone of his Voice was low, yet he was mild and affable in his Discourse; modest in his Deportment, discreet and judicious in his Words, humble in his Walk and Conversation, patient in Sufferings; also meek and lowly in Heart: His Spirit, so highly illuminated of God beyond any Thing Nature could produce, and his extremely pure and very intelligible Style, according to the highest and best German Standard, are left to the Reader's Sagacity to examine and recognize in the divine Light, by these his unsophisticated Writings." (Frankenberg)

He was born in 1575, April 24th, at the village of Alt Seidenberg in Upper Lusatia, a mile from the city of Gorlitz. Though the village was poor, it had a schoolhouse where Jacob received a basic education. His father was a peasant landowner, an elder in the church, and had enough financial wherewithal to apprentice his son to a shoemaker.

Says Frankenberg: "According to the blessed Man's own Narrative made to myself, it fell out on a certain Time during his Apprenticeship, that a Stranger, plain and mean indeed in his Dress, but otherwise of a good and respectable Presence, comes to the Shop, and asks to buy a Pair of Shoes: But as neither Master nor Mistress were within, he, JACOB BEHMEN, the Prentice-Boy, would not venture to sell them, till the Stranger, with much Importunity, insisted upon his letting him have them: Now, then, he having more of a Mind to put the Buyer off than to sell the Shoes, set a somewhat enormous unequitable Price upon them. The Man however paid down the Money demanded without the least Demur or Objection; and, taking up the Shoes, went away.

"But being got at some small Distance from the Shop, and then stopping short, he called out, with an audible and serious Tone of Voice, 'Jacob, come out hither to me.' An Address like this from a Person unknown, and made by his Christian Name too, startled the Boy; but, upon recovering himself again, he got up and went out into the Street to him. The Man then, whose Mien was serious and loving, with sparkling Eyes, taking him by the right Hand, and looking him full in the Face, said, 'JACOB, thou art little, but thou shalt become great, and a Man so very different from the common Cast, that thou shalt be the Wonder of the World. Be therefore a good Lad; fear God, and reverence his Word: Let it especially be thy Delight to read the Holy Scripture, wherein thou art furnished with Comfort and Instruction; for thou shalt be obliged to suffer a great deal of Affliction, Poverty, and Persecution

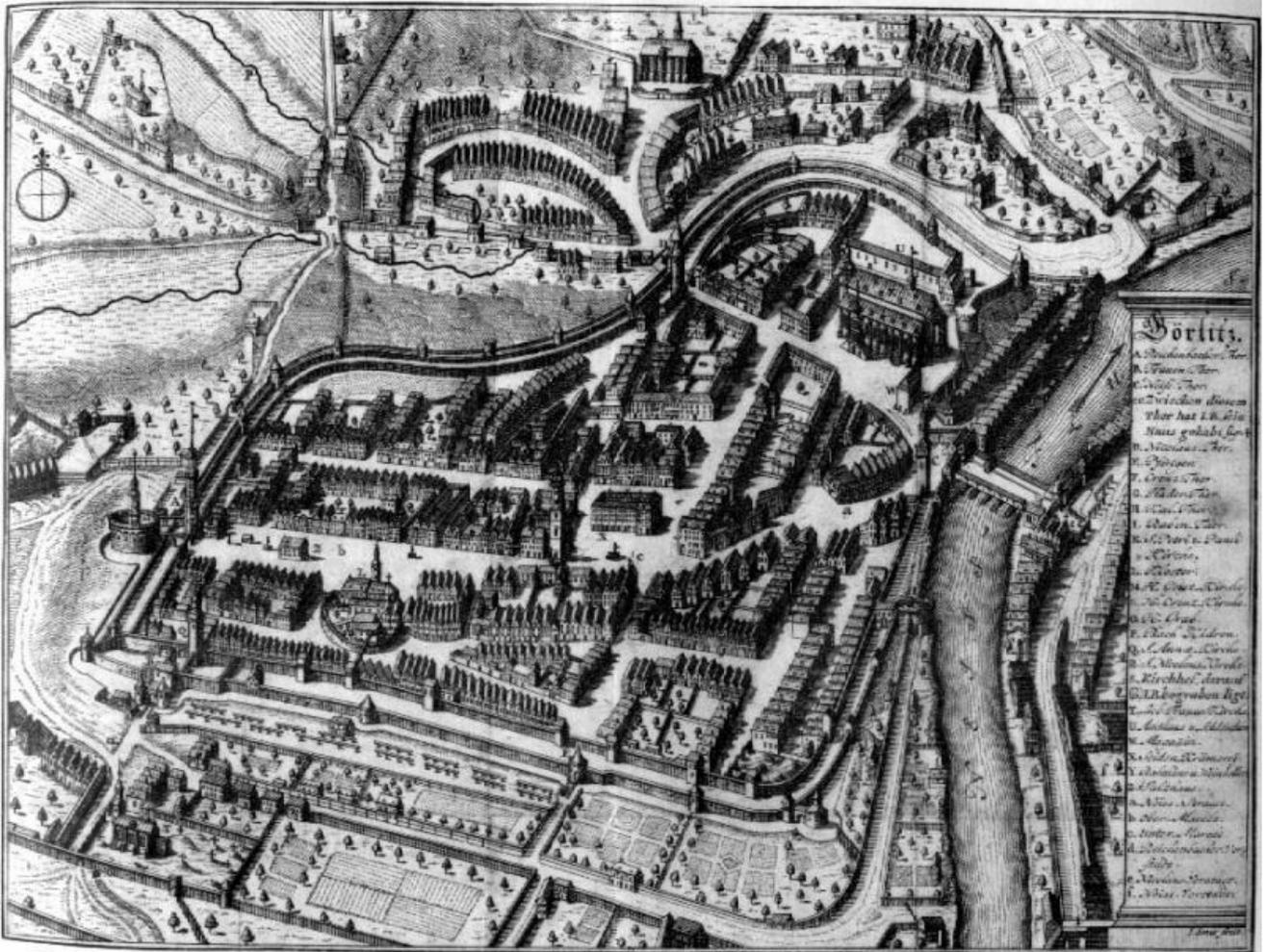
also: Nevertheless be thou of good Comfort, and firmly persevere, for God loveth thee, and he is gracious unto thee!’

“Upon which the Man, after squeezing him by the Hand, and looking him full in the Face, went of Course his own Way.”



“But JACOB, as may be easily supposed, was not a little surprized at this Incident. Both the Prediction and the Exhortation, together with the Mien of the Man, were ever in his Thoughts, nor could he forget them. The Effect of it was also visible afterwards in a renewed Seriousness and Attention amidst all his Doings; and it was also followed in a little Time after by the Spiritual Call, and Sabbatic Day... [when] he set himself upon fervently and incessantly praying, seeking, and knocking; until, being at that Time with his Master on their Travels, he, thro' the Father's Drawings in the Son, was, in Spirit, translated into the Holy Sabbath and glorious Day of Rest to the Soul; and thus of Consequence had his Request granted him. Here, (to use the Words of his own Confession) ‘Surrounded with the divine Light for the Space of seven Days successively, he stood possessed of the highest beatific Vision of God, and in the extatic Joys of his Kingdom.’”

In 1599 Jacob became a master cobbler, joined the Guild, married and bought a house in Gorlitz.



Gorlitz c. 1600

"[In] 1600, being in the 25th Year of his Age, enraptured a second Time with the Light of God, and with the astral Spirit of his Soul, by Means of an instantaneous Glance of the Eye cast upon a bright Pewter Dish, (being the lovely Jovialish Shine or Aspect) introduced into the innermost Ground or Center of the recondite or hidden Nature.

...the gate was opened unto me, so that in one quarter of an hour I saw and knew more than if I had been many years together at an University. For I saw and knew the Being of all Beings, the Byss and Abyss; also the eternal generation of the Holy Trinity; the descent, and origin of this world, and of all creatures, through the divine Wisdom; I knew and saw in myself all the three Worlds; namely, the Divine, Angelical, and Paradisical World and then the Dark World, the original of the Nature to the Fire; and then thirdly, the external, visible World, being a Procreation, or External Birth, from the two internal and spiritual Worlds; and I saw, and knew the whole working Essence in the evil, and in the good; and the mutual origin, and existence of

each of them; and likewise how the fruitful bearing Womb of Eternity brought forth...

Being however somewhat dubious, in Order to rid his Mind of such a supposed imaginary Conceit, he went to the Green before Neys-gate at Goerlitz, where his House was near the Bridge; and where, in Spite of all his Efforts to the contrary, this Sensation of the Glimpse he had received grew stronger and stronger in him continually; to such a Degree, that by Means of the Signatures formed upon them, or by their Figures, Lineaments, and Colours, he was enabled to look as it were into the Heart and into the most intimate Nature of all the Creatures. Which Ground, thus impressed within him he has also amply expressed and illustrated in his Treatise *de Signatura Rerum*. This Discovery overspread him with Joy; but he said nothing, thanked God, minded the Affairs of his Family and the Education of his Children, and lived in Peace and Friendship with all Men; mentioning little or nothing of this Light he had received, and of his interior Conversation with God and Nature, to any Person whatsoever."

"When in my resolved zeal I gave so hard an assault, storm, and onset upon God and upon all the gates of hell, as if I had more reserves of virtue and power ready, with a resolution to hazard my life upon it (which assuredly were not in my ability without the assistance of the Spirit of God), suddenly my spirit did break through the gates of hell, even into the innermost moving of the Deity, and there I was embraced in love as a bridegroom embraces his dearly beloved bride.

"The greatness of the triumphing that was in my spirit I cannot express either in speaking or writing; neither can it be compared to any thing but that wherein life is generated in the midst of death. It is like the resurrection from the dead.

"In this light my spirit suddenly saw through all, and in and by all, the creatures; even in herbs and grass it knew God, who he is and how he is and what his will is. And suddenly in that light my will was set on by a mighty impulse to describe the Being of God.

"But because I could not presently apprehend the deepest movings of God and comprehend them in my reason, there passed almost twelve years before the exact understanding thereof was given me."

Then Boehme began his first book, *Aurora*.

Morgen Rote im auffgang.

Das ist

Die würtzel. oder mutter Der PHIL.
SOPHIA. ASTROLOGIA. UND THE.
OLOGIA. Auf höchsten Gründe.

1084.

Beschreibung Der natur, wie alles gewest
und im anfang worden ist, wie die Planeten
und Elemente. Erachtet worden. Das
von andern qualitäten, Bösen und gutten, wo,
habe alle Ding seinen Ursprung hat, und
wie es sich stetig und wüchset, und wie
es am Ende seiner Zeit werden wird:
Dinge von Gottes, und der Hellen Kunst
beschrieben ist, und wie die Menschen in
ihres Erachtens wüchsen. alles auf
vorsehen gründlich behandelt. In Englisch
im ersten Theil, mit fleiß

Erhalten

Jacobus Bohner in Vortil, Im Jahr 1612

ETATISVE. 37. Annor. In Die. etc.

1612. Anno 1612

In the summer of 1612 he lent the still-unfinished *Aurora* to a nobleman named Karl von Endern who had the book unbound and copied. Thus, unbeknownst to Boehme, his book began to circulate and his name came to be known among the intellectuals of Silesia, Bavaria and Bohemia.

But Boehme lived in Upper Lusatia, where the church was little more than a department of government and the clergy's main task was to monitor the population for heresy. Doctrines that departed from Lutheran orthodoxy were perceived as incursions by hostile foreign powers and probably the work of Jesuit agents.

So trouble befell when a copy of *Aurora* fell into the hands of Gregorius Richter, Prelate of Gorlitz, who denounced "the shoemaker" from the pulpit and demanded that the City Council expel him, lest God cause the ground to open up and swallow the whole town. Next day JB was summoned before the Council, who urged him "out of love for the city's quiet" to hand his book over to Richter for immolation and desist from writing any more books. To this he agreed.

He applied himself to his trade and did not write again for seven years. But, as heresy hunters always do, Richter only publicized what he was trying to suppress, and made Boehme famous. Scholars and noblemen made pilgrimages to meet the "philosophical shoemaker," sometimes staying for weeks. Friends urged him to ignore the Council's decree and take up his pen again. He was understandably reluctant to comply.

"I saw this first book no more in three years; I supposed that it was dead and gone, till certain learned men sent me some copies of it, who exhorted me to proceed, and manifest my talent, to which the outward reason would by no means agree, because it had suffered so much already for it; moreover, the spirit of reason was very weak and timorous, for my high light was for a good while also withdrawn from me, and it did glow in me as a hidden fire; so that I felt nothing but anguish and perplexity within me; outwardly I found contempt, and inwardly a fiery instigation; yet I was not able to comprehend [that light] till the breath of the Most High did help me to it again, and awakened new life in me, and then I obtained a better style in writing, also deeper and more grounded knowledge: I could bring everything better into the outward expression."

From 1619 till his death in 1624 he produced a huge corpus of literature. He wrote *The Three Principles of the Divine Essence*, *The Threefold Life of Man* and *Forty Questions of the Soul* in just nine months. There were no first drafts, review copies or editorial changes. He wrote by direct inspiration, as fast as his hand could move.

"Thus now I have written, not from the instruction or knowledge received from men, nor from the learning or reading of books; but I have written out

of my own book which was opened in me, being the noble similitude of God, the book of the noble and precious image (understand God's own similitude or likeness) was bestowed upon me to read; and therein I have studied, as a child in the house of its mother, which beholdeth what the father doth, and in his child-like play doth imitate his father; I have no need of any other book.

"My book hath only three leaves, the same are the three principles of eternity, wherein I can find all whatsoever Moses and the prophets, Christ and his apostles have taught and spoken; I can find therein the foundation of the world and all mysteries; yet not I, but the spirit of God, doth it according to the measure, as He pleaseth."

Jacob Boehme was a healthy and active man, fully engaged with the workaday world. He was a prominent member of the Shoemakers Guild, and was jailed in 1604 and again in 1606 over his role in conflicts with the Tanner's Guild. In 1612, in response to price-gouging, he hatched a plot to acquire "beef-skins" from abroad, which brought another lawsuit from the Tanners Guild. There is an entry in the cobblers guild book, in Jacob Boehme's handwriting, recording the shoemakers' legal victory. It begins, "PRAISE GOD! PRAISE GOD! PRAISE GOD!"

Ten years later he paid a 10 taler fine for the "black market trading" of textiles. He was caught selling gloves made by his wife and other ladies of Gortitz, which brought a complaint from the Threads Guild.

Boehme seems to have had an antinomian attitude toward earthly authority, as did many in that age of war, corruption and inflation, including Karl von Endern, a master of the underground economy.

City records show that JB borrowed much, bought and sold much and moved substantial amounts of money. His investments in real estate, leather and textiles made him prosperous enough that in 1612 (the year he wrote *Aurora*), at the age of 36, he was able to sell his cobbler's bench and leave shoe-making behind him. He placed all four of his sons in a trade, cared for an orphaned niece and kept up a voluminous correspondence with his many adherents and inquirers. When the Thirty Years War brought economic crisis to the region, he made ends meet by trafficking in the underground economy, buying gloves in the country and selling them in Prague and Dresden, travelling dangerous roads through war-torn lands. He remained a busy man of affairs even while in the throes of divine ecstasy and when his fierce inspirations kept him writing deep into the night. His books were hand-copied and circulated discreetly so as not to draw further attention from the religious authorities. But in 1623 he published in print *The Way to Christ*. Gregorius Richter, now in the last stage of chronic alcoholism, published a violent pasquillo against Boehme, the contents of

which demonstrate the ruination of the Primate's mind. It begins with an awful Latin poem and proceeds with a stream of invective that sounds like a parody of Luther:

"As many lines as there are, as many Blasphemies against God, are to be found in the Shoe-maker's Book: which stinks abominably of Shoemakers Pitch and Blacking; fy, fy, let this stink be far from us...O Christ! the Holy Spirit hath anointed thee with Oil, more than thy fellows, and hath made thee a Priest. But the Shoemaker, the Devil hath defiled thee with Dirt, and Dung, and made thee a Heretic...The Shoemaker is the Antichrist...Thy filth O Shoemaker, hath exceedingly defiled OUR City. O that all those who read thy writings, might away along with thee into Perdition. O, now then begone, and come no more, that thou mayest miserably perish, and rather take a Shoe into thy hand, than a PEN."

To my knowledge, no critic has ever improved on Richter's performance. Denunciations are always along these lines:

"Boehme's sect is truly devilish, and the vilest excrement of the devil; it has the father of lies for its origin; the devil had possession of Boehme, and grunted out of his mouth." (Johann Trick)

"It puts me in mind of what Travellers tell us of a horrid Fanaticism in the East, where the Devotee makes a solemn Vow never to taste of other Food than what has passed through the Entrails of some impure or savage Animal." (Bishop William Warburton)

"May we not pronounce, with utmost certainty, of one who thus distorts, mangles and murders the word of God, That the light in him is darkness; that he is illuminated from beneath, rather than from above; and that he ought to be styled Demonosopher, rather than Theosopher?" (John Wesley)

Oddly enough, Richter's pasquillo accused Boehme of being a drunkard: "CHRIST scarce drank any wine, but the Shoemaker guzzleth freely, Outlandish wine, and Brandy-wine...the Shoemaker runneth every Morning, to the Brandy-wine or Strong-water."

The Shoemaker replied, "Spanish wine causeth that Men sometimes lose the Primate for a while, also men may see by the red Wine-pimples on his Face that he drinketh strong Wine much more than I, for I have no such sign of it as he; he drinks more foreign Wine in a week than I in a year....Men use sometime to take him from lying drunk under Tables, abroad, and bring him Home: Men may indeed find him oft drunk in one week, but the Shoemaker not in Three years."

To Richter's accusation that Boehme was jovial, he replied, "If Nature giveth to one to Laugh and to be friendly and affable, more than to another, and

maketh of another a Saturnine Sour Grim-looking Man, that the Primate cannot Mend."

The Shoemaker was again summoned before the city council and examined by the Electoral Court in Dresden, where he was questioned by a panel of theologians and scientists, who pronounced him "a man of marvelously high mental gifts, who at present can be neither condemned nor approved."

While staying at the house of a nobleman in Silesia, Jacob contracted a high fever and then developed a gastric ailment from drinking too much water. He was brought back to Gorlitz where he languished for two weeks. Hans Martensen tells the end of the story:

He awaited death with composure. On Sunday, November 21st, shortly after midnight, or early in the morning, he called his son Tobias, and asked him if he did not hear that sweet and harmonious music. As Tobias heard nothing, he begged him to open the door that he might better hear it; then he asked what was the hour, and when he was told that it had just struck two, he said: "My time is not yet; three hours hence is my time." After some silence he exclaimed: "Oh, thou strong God of Sabaoth, deliver me according to thy will!" and, immediately afterwards: "Thou crucified Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, and take me to thyself and thy kingdom!" A little later, he gave instructions where some of his manuscripts would be found, and expressed hope that the noble friend whom he had visited in Silesia would provide for his widow, but also assured her that she must speedily follow him (as indeed took place, for she died of the plague in the very next year). At six in the morning, he suddenly bade them farewell with a smile, and said, "Now I go hence into Paradise."

His body remained unburied for several days while the family battled local religious authorities, who were reluctant to give a Christian burial to a heretic. They were forced to comply under orders of the powerful Catholic Count Hannibal von Drohna.

Friends provided an elaborately carved wooden cross for his grave (see image below) but it stood only a few days before it was destroyed by vandals.



VHILICIV

Aus GOTT geboren.
In IHSVH Gestorben.
Mit dem Heiligen GEIST ver-
siegelt. Ruhet alhier IACOB BÖHM
von Alt Seidenburg. A+O 1624
den 17 IX-bris um 6. v. Mor-
gens Im 50 Jahr seines
Alters. Seeliglich ver-
schieden.



seine letzte
Worte.



IN fahr ich hin ins PARADEIS.



Gregorius Richter Jr. became a famous hymn writer and one of Jacob Boehme's most enthusiastic advocates, publishing several volumes of his writings. In the preface to the first volume he wrote, "O my father, what have you done?"

On April 24, 1924, a statue of Jacob Boehme was unveiled in Gorlitz and a new stone placed on his grave.

While staying at the house of a nobleman in Silesia, Jacob contracted a high fever and gastric ailment. He was brought home to Gorlitz where he languished for two weeks and died at the age of 49. His transition from this world to the next was a triumphant one.

*In Mundum VENI!
Sathanam descendere VIDI!
Infernum VICI!
VIVITE magnanimi!*

Into the World I CAME,
and Satan SAW Descending quick;
I now HAVE Hell SUBDU'D!
Ye Heroes, bold in Faith, LIVE and rejoice!

For three centuries Jacob Boehme's thought would run through the western world like a hidden stream, never widely known but influencing the influential - Newton, Milton, George Fox, the Philadelphian Society, the Cambridge Platonists, the Bavarian Illuminati (!), Goethe, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Blake, Coleridge, Emerson, William Law, Madam Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, Carl Jung; many occultists and many clergymen. His modern day proponents have been similarly diverse, from evangelical missionary Norman Grubb to theoretical physicist Basarab Nicolescu to nutty sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick.



In 1621 Boehme began to prophesy "the Time of the Lily and the Judgment of Babel." (e.g., Epistles 3, 15, 26, 34) The Thirty Years War between

Catholics and Protestants had just begun, and when it was over, there was great indignation against religious leaders. Never again would the nations go to war at the behest of the clergy. And while religion had armies decimating Europe (again) a generation of great scientists heralded what we now call the Enlightenment. And as the power of Babel (organized religion) crumbled, the writings of Jacob Boehme spread through Germany, the Netherlands, England and Pennsylvania, and a thousand "Dissenter" sects sprang up like lilies in the wasteland.

Boehme foretold that a "new, worldly antichrist" would triumph over the "old, religious antichrist," and that his reign would begin with a seeming golden age but end in misery and oppression.

Now the ideals of the Enlightenment are forgotten, secularism is a lazy bourgeoisie cult, and even as science bounds from triumph to triumph, the social order has gone so haywire that it is becoming increasingly impossible to believe in the supremacy of human reason.

The Age of Reason is receding and the next wave is rolling in - the Age of Vision - a new Time of the Lily.

It is now a Time of seeking; for a Lily blossoms upon the Mountains and Valleys in all the Ends of the Earth: He that seeketh findeth; the Spirit of the Lord of Hosts has out of his Love planted a new Branch in the human Property, which shall Root out the Thorns of the Devil, and make known his Child Jesus to all Nations, Tongues and Speeches, and that in the Morning of the eternal Day.