

Peter Prosch, the “Court Tyrolian” (1789)

Abstract

Abject poverty in his Tyrolian homeland forced Peter Prosch (1744-1804) to take to the road as a traveling trader in German-speaking lands. Although Prosch was a glove maker by occupation, he earned his living not only by selling his wares to German princely courts but also as a “court Tyrolian,” a position comparable to that of the “court fool” or the “court Moor.” At the prince bishop’s court in Würzburg, Prosch was especially welcome; at the personal request of Prince Bishop Adam Friedrich von Sensheim (1708-79), Prosch spent sixteen weeks per year in residence at his court. Prosch’s wife always came along with the party; even during her pregnancy she was at her husband’s side during his travels. In his journal, which is excerpted below, Prosch describes his activities as the “court Tyrolian,” his work as a trader in Würzburg and Ansbach, and his other travels.

Source

[...]

The prince grew fond of me; he said that I should stay with him for a while and assured me that it would not go badly for me. All the ladies and gentlemen in Würzburg loved me, and with time this became my favorite court in all of Germany. I was free in trade and commerce, had my food and drink at the page and cavalier table, my horse stayed in the court stables and received free fodder, and my steward had his food and drink in the knights’ room. The prince went to Bamberg and took me with him on the back of his coach, assigning me the title of night commode custodian; for I was the first groom of the stool, and when something happened on the road, I had to get down with my case and unpack. That was my whole job. And anyone who knew Adam Friedrich knew what an agreeable master he was. He loved foreigners and natives, and when everything was amusing, tidy and going well, he was totally delighted by it. Any foreigner who came to Würzburg received every imaginable honor and amusement.

After that I had to stay with the prince for sixteen weeks every year, and if he himself had not been better versed in tomfoolery than I, it sometimes would have gone badly for me. Sometimes I did not have a store of jokes with me, but the prince searched long and hard until we finally came upon a dialogue that often made him laugh so hard that it brought tears to his eyes. There remain living enough ladies and gentlemen who were eyewitnesses and who still acknowledge me, and who sometimes commiserate with me that those times are gone. As I said, he gave me so much that I needed for my household. He was a devout, exemplary, genuine bishop; he was a soldier, hunter, musician, architect, gardener, and a true father to all his subjects, so he is immortal in Würzburg and Bamberg.

I had the great fortune, over the course of eighteen years, to always spend some time with him at court, and I can pride myself on the fact that he often said to me, when I went home, that I should keep God in mind, conduct myself well, and come again soon. I am only happy that no complaint about gossip or anything else about me from anybody at court ever reached me and that all the people liked me, as otherwise, generally speaking, conflict tends to occur at courts because of resentment or envy.

My pregnant wife and I now left Würzburg, arrived in Ochsenfurt, and asked if there was a prince and any ladies and gentlemen not far from here, namely in Ansbach. We headed to Ansbach from Uffenheim; when we arrived in

Lehrberg, we were horrified to hear that in Ansbach everything was Lutheran. We went there, fearful and trembling, and asked the guard at the city gate if there was not an inn in the city where Catholics or tradesmen stopped, because we were all too afraid of the Lutherans and never had been in a Lutheran town. We got the answer: at the Black Bear.

To our great joy, we found three Tyrolian tradesmen there, namely, Knittel, Stier, and Zitronenmelcher, as well as a Catholic citizen, Lambert, from Tyrol.

They were as happy as we were that we viewed each other as countrymen, immediately bought my wife a measure of Tyrolian wine, and then we went to bed. The next day we ate our midday meal; my wife was beautiful, and was consequently spoken to a number of times, for there were all kinds of boarders in the building, among others the valet of Mr. von Lehrbach, Teutonic Knight from Mergenthal. He knew me and told his master, who informed the margrave. We still had nine dozen gloves. I was called to court, and my wife also went fearfully with me. We were led into a hall where the ladies and gentlemen were mingling together socially.

The margrave and the margravine greeted us, and we kissed their clothing; at the pharaoh table I laid out my wares. The ladies and gentlemen rolled dice for the gloves, as many as I had, and they were all paid for honestly. A man came with a violin and played it, and the margrave got me to dance with my wife; this was done in our own fashion and caused a great deal of laughter. Preparations were made for the evening meal, and the margrave and margravine called us in.

We received food and drink and our pockets full of sweets and baked goods.

How happy we were to have sold our gloves and enjoyed enough food and drink, and [to learn] that there are also such good ladies and gentlemen among the Lutherans.

We both thanked prudent God. We stayed on for several days more and then went cheerfully home.

Source: *Leben und Ereignisse des Peter Prosch, eines Tyrolers von Ried im Zillerthal, oder das wunderbare Schicksal. Geschrieben in den Zeiten der Aufklärung*. Munich, 1789, pp. 80-83. Available online at: http://digital.onb.ac.at/OnbViewer/viewer.faces?doc=ABO_%2BZ169708702

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