

ASPECTS OF FRANCONIA - ZEIDLER MUSEUM

January 2018 – Wild Honey from the Forest

Two rather unusual German words are “Imker” and “Zeidler”, the former usually translated as “bee-keeper”, while the latter makes reference to the former occupation of “honey hunting” or “honey harvesting”, that is taking the honey from wild bee colonies found in the forest. Those who did this, the “Zeidler”, played an important role in centuries past, supplying the towns and cities with a very sweet and useful substance called honey! I’m sure you will all have eaten a good many Lebkuchen over Christmas and will realize that honey is an essential ingredient in their production. You might even have downed a glass or two of mead, sometimes referred to as honey wine. Or you might be aware of all the wonderful medicinal properties of raw (= unprocessed) honey.

Whereas the “Imker” continues to gather honey from his own bee colonies, “Imme” being a Low German word for bee and “kar” meaning basket, the “Zeidler”, now figures from the past, gathered honey from wild bee colonies. To do this, of course, they needed the permission of the Emperor, the owner of the Imperial Forest. A document of 1266 refers to these extensive forests as the “bee garden of the Holy Roman Empire” and their exploitation for honey was soon granted to the “Zeidler” by imperial decree. It was a profitable activity and over time the market town of Feucht, about 15 km from Nuremberg, became one of the centres of “wild honey gathering”. Today this nearby town has a highly informative museum dedicated to the traditions and customs of the “Zeidler”, in every way worthy of a visit.

The Feucht museum explains how the “Zeidler” went about their trade and makes very clear why honey was of such importance in former times. Sugar made from sugar cane was a very expensive commodity before the process for extracting sugar from sugar beet became commercially viable in the early 19th century. Honey, however, was a natural product and remained for centuries the major “sweetener” for preserving fruits, for making Nuremberg Gingerbread, and for producing the honey-wine known as mead. And for relieving sore throats.

The “Zeidler” were highly respected people, who for centuries enjoyed a good living thanks to imperial privileges. In return, they had a “policing” function where they were typically armed with crossbows, one of their duties being to accompany and protect the Emperor as he travelled through the sometimes dangerous Imperial Forest. That, of course, helps explain the coat of arms of the town of Feucht, a “Zeidelmännchen” with a crossbow over his shoulder next to a beehive.

