

## **The Ghost of Weinsberg Prison (excerpted from [strangeco.blogspot.com](http://strangeco.blogspot.com))**

There are many stories of haunted prisons, but arguably the weirdest *and* the best-authenticated of the lot took place in Weinsberg, Germany in 1835. The prison physician, Justinus Kerner, published a small book documenting the case, which included sworn statements from the many people who had witnessed the surprisingly lengthy haunting, with all of them concurring that they saw no way that the mysterious phenomena they had seen could be faked.

Catherine Crowe published the most relevant excerpts from Kerner's book in her 1847 paranormal classic "Night-Side of Nature." I am largely reprinting these excerpts below, as I concluded they are simply too full of curious details for any paraphrase to do them justice.

The central figure of our story (aside from the ghost, of course) was an inmate of the Weinsberg prison named Elizabeth Eslinger. On September 12, 1835, the prison's warden, a man named Mayer, informed the magistrates that every night at about 11, Eslinger was visited by a ghost. The apparition said that she was "destined to release it," and when she refused his pleas for

her to follow him, it would press painfully on her neck. Mayer included a deposition by an inmate named Rosina Schahl, confirming this claim, adding that she herself had seen the spirit standing over Eslinger's bed. The magistrates responded with an order that Eslinger be examined by Dr. Kerner, in order to assess her mental and physical health. Soon after this, Kerner sent the magistrates his report on the beleaguered woman:

“Having examined the prisoner, Elizabeth Eslinger, confined here since the beginning of September, I found her of sound mind, but possessed with one fixed idea, namely, that she is and has been for a considerable time troubled by an apparition, which leaves her no rest, coming chiefly by night, and requiring her prayers to release it. It visited her before she came to the prison, and was the cause of the offence that brought her here. Having now, in compliance with the orders of the supreme court, observed this woman for eleven weeks, I am led to the conclusion that there is no deception in this case, and also that the persecution is not a mere monomaniacal idea of her own, and the testimony not only of her fellow-prisoners, but that of the deputy-governor's family, and even of persons in distant houses, confirms me in this persuasion.

“Eslinger is a widow, aged thirty-eight years, and declares that she never had any sickness whatever, neither is she aware of any

at present; but she has always been a ghost-seer, though never till lately had any communication with them; that now, for eleven weeks that she has been in the prison, she is nightly disturbed by an apparition, that had previously visited her in her own house, and which had been once seen also by a girl of fourteen—a statement which this girl confirms. When at home, the apparition did not appear in a defined human form, but as a pillar of cloud, out of which proceeded a hollow voice, signifying to her that she was to release it, by her prayers, from the cellar of a woman in Wimmenthal, named Singhaasin, whither it was banished, or whence it could not free itself. She (Eslinger) says that she did not then venture to speak to it, not knowing whether to address it as Sie, Ihr, or Du (that is, whether she should address it in the second or third person)—which custom among the Germans has rendered a very important point of etiquette. It is to be remembered that this woman was a peasant, without education, who had been brought into trouble by treasure-seeking, a pursuit in which she hoped to be assisted by this spirit. This digging for buried treasure is a strong passion in Germany.

“The ghost now comes in a perfect human shape, and is dressed in a loose robe, with a girdle, and has on its head a four-cornered cap. It has a projecting chin and forehead, fiery, deep-set eyes, a long beard, and high cheek-bones, which look as if they were covered with parchment. A light radiates about and above his

head, and in the midst of this light she sees the outlines of the spectre.

“Both she and her fellow-prisoners declare that this apparition comes several times in a night, but always between the evening and morning bell. He often comes through the closed door or window, but they can then see neither door nor window, nor iron bars; they often hear the closing of the door, and can see into the passage when he comes in or out that way, so that if a piece of wood lies there they see it. They hear a shuffling in the passage as he comes and goes. He most frequently enters by the window, and they then hear a peculiar sound there. He comes in quite erect. Although their cell is entirely closed, they feel a cool wind when he is near them. All sorts of noises are heard, particularly a crackling. When he is angry, or in great trouble, they perceive a strange mouldering, earthy smell. He often pulls away the coverlet, and sits on the edge of the bed. At first the touch of his hand was icy cold, since he became brighter it is warmer; she first saw the brightness of his finger-ends; it afterward spread further. If she stretches out her hand she can not feel him, but when he touches her she feels it. He sometimes takes her hands and lays them together, to make her pray. His sighs and groans are like a person in despair; they are heard by others as well as Eslinger. While he is making these sounds, she is often praying aloud, or talking to her companions, so they are sure it is not she who

makes them. She does not see his mouth move when he speaks. The voice is hollow and gasping. He comes to her for prayers, and he seems to her like one in a mortal sickness, who seeks comfort in the prayers of others. He says he was a catholic priest in Wimmenthal, and lived in the year 1414.”

“He says, that among other crimes, a fraud committed conjointly with his father, on his brothers, presses sorely on him; he can not get quit of it; it obstructs him. He always entreated her to go with him to Wimmenthal, whither he was banished, or consigned, and pray there for him.

“She says she can not tell whether what he says is true; and does not deny that she thought to find treasures by his aid. She has often told him that the prayers of a sinner, like herself, can not help him, and that he should seek the Redeemer; but he will not forbear his entreaties. When she says these things, he is sad, and presses nearer to her, and lays his head so close that she is obliged to pray into his mouth. He seems hungry for prayers. She has often felt his tears on her cheek and neck; they felt icy cold; but the spot soon after burns, and they have a bluish red mark. (These marks are visible on her skin.)

“One night this apparition brought with him a large dog, which leaped on the beds, and was seen by her fellow-prisoners also, who were much terrified, and screamed. The ghost, however,

spoke, and said, 'Fear not; this is my father.' He had since brought the dog with him again, which alarmed them dreadfully, and made them quite ill.

"Both Mayer and the prisoners asserted that Eslinger was scarcely seen to sleep, either by night or day, for ten weeks. She ate very little, prayed continually, and appeared very much wasted and exhausted. She said she saw the spectre alike, whether her eyes were opened or closed, which showed that it was a magnetic perception, and not seeing by her bodily organs. It is remarkable that a cat belonging to the jail, being shut up in this room, was so frightened when the apparition came, that it tried to make its escape by flying against the walls; and finding this impossible, it crept under the coverlet of the bed, in extreme terror. The experiment was made again, with the same result; and after this second time the animal refused all nourishment, wasted away, and died.

"In order to satisfy myself of the truth of these depositions, I went to the prison on the night of the 15th of October, and shut myself up without light in Eslinger's cell. About half-past eleven I heard a sound as of some hard body being flung down, but not on the side where the woman was, but the opposite; she immediately began to breathe hard, and told me the spectre was there. I laid my hand on her head, and adjured it as an evil spirit to depart. I had

scarcely spoken the words when there was a strange rattling, crackling noise, all round the walls, which finally seemed to go out through the window; and the woman said that the spectre had departed.

“On the following night it told her that it was grieved at being addressed as an evil spirit, which it was not, but one that deserved pity; and that what it wanted was prayers and redemption.

“On the 18th of October, I went to the cell again, between ten and eleven, taking with me my wife, and the wife of the keeper, Madame Mayer. When the woman’s breathing showed me the spectre was there, I laid my hand on her, and adjured it, in gentle terms, not to trouble her further. The same sort of sound as before commenced, but it was softer, and this time continued all along the passage, where there was certainly nobody. We all heard it.

“On the night of the 20th I went again, with Justice Heyd. We both heard sounds when the spectre came, and the woman could not conceive why we did not see it. We could not; but we distinctly felt a cool wind blowing upon us when, according to her account, it was near, although there was no aperture by which air could enter.”

As part of the investigation, Mayer's wife, along with her 19-year-old niece, spent a night in the cell. Her report to the magistrates went as follows:

"It was a rainy night, and, in the prison, pitch dark. My niece slept sometimes; I remained awake all night, and mostly sitting up in bed.

"About midnight I saw a light come in at the window; it was a yellowish light, and moved slowly; and though we were closely shut in, I felt a cool wind blowing on me. I said to the woman, 'The ghost is here, is he not?' She said 'Yes,' and continued to pray, as she had been doing before. The cool wind and the light now approached me; my coverlet was quite light, and I could see my hands and arms; and at the same time I perceived an indescribable odor of putrefaction; my face felt as if ants were running over it. (Most of the prisoners described themselves as feeling the same sensation when the spectre was there.) Then the light moved about, and went up and down the room; and on the door of the cell I saw a number of little glimmering stars, such as I had never before seen. Presently, I and my niece heard a voice which I can compare to nothing I ever heard before. It was not like a human voice. The words and sighs sounded as if they were drawn up out of a deep hollow, and appeared to ascend from the floor to the roof in a column; while this voice spoke, the woman



was praying aloud: so I was sure it did not proceed from her. No one could produce such a sound. They were strange, superhuman sighs and entreaties for prayers and redemption.

“It is very extraordinary that, whenever the ghost spoke, I always felt it beforehand. We heard a crackling in the room also. I was perfectly awake, and in possession of my senses; and we are ready to make oath to having seen and heard these things.”

On December 9, Mrs. Mayer, her niece, and a maid-servant spent another night in the cell, with similarly weird results:

“It was moonlight, and I sat up in bed all night, watching Eslinger. Suddenly I saw a white shadowy form, like a small animal, cross the room. I asked her what it was; and she answered, ‘Don’t you see it’s a lamb? It often comes with the apparition.’ We then saw a stool that was near us, lifted and set down again on its legs. She was in bed, and praying the whole time. Presently, there was such a noise at the window that I thought all the panes were broken. She told us it was the ghost, and that he was sitting on the stool. We then heard a walking and shuffling up and down, although I could not see him; but presently I felt a cool wind blowing on me, and out of this wind the same hollow voice I had heard before, said, ‘In the name of Jesus, look on me!’

“Before this, the moon was gone, and it was quite dark; but when the voice spoke to me, I saw a light around us, though still no form. Then there was a sound of walking toward the opposite window, and I heard the voice say, ‘Do you see me now?’ And then, for the first time, I saw a shadowy form, stretching up as if to make itself visible to us, but could distinguish no features.

“During the rest of the night, I saw it repeatedly, sometimes sitting on the stool, and at others moving about; and I am perfectly certain that there was no moonlight now, nor any other light from without. How I saw it, I can not tell; it is a thing not to be described.

“Eslinger prayed the whole time, and the more earnestly she did so, the closer the spectre went to her. It sometimes sat upon her bed.

“About five o’clock, when he came near to me, and I felt the cool air, I said, ‘Go to my husband, in his chamber, and leave a sign that you have been there!’ He answered distinctly, ‘Yes.’ Then we heard the door, which was fast locked, open and shut; and we saw the shadow float out (for he floated rather than walked), and we heard the shuffling along the passage.

“In a quarter of an hour we saw him return, entering by the window; and I asked him if he had been with my husband, and

what he had done. He answered by a sound like a short, low, hollow laugh. Then he hovered about without any noise, and we heard him speaking to Eslinger, while she still prayed aloud. Still, as before, I always knew when he was going to speak. After six o'clock, we saw him no more. In the morning, my husband mentioned, with great surprise, that his chamber door, which he was sure he had fast bolted and locked, even taking out the key when he went to bed, he had found wide open.”

Mrs. Mayer spent another night in the cell on December 24, but only saw a white shadow hovering around Eslinger.

Frederica Follen, who shared the cell with Eslinger for eight weeks, attested to the haunting, although she only saw the ghost once. However, it often spoke to her, warning that she should mend her erring ways.

Catherine Sinn, who was confined in an adjoining cell for two weeks, testified, “every night, being quite alone, I heard a rustling and a noise at the window, which looked only into the passage. I felt and heard, though I could not see anybody, that some one was moving about the room; these sounds were accompanied by a cool wind, though the place was closely shut up. I heard also a crackling, and a shuffling, and a sound as if gravel were thrown; but could find none in the morning. Once it seemed to me that a hand was laid softly on my forehead. I did not like staying alone,

on account of these things, and begged to be put into a room with others; so I was placed with Eslingen and Follen. The same things continued here, and they told me about the ghost; but not being alone, I was not so frightened. I often heard him speak; it was hollow and slow, not like a human voice; but I could seldom catch the words. When he left the prison, which was generally about five in the morning, he used to say, 'Pray!' and when he did so, he would add, 'God reward you!' I never saw him distinctly till the last morning I was there; then I saw a white shadow standing by Eslinger's bed."

Everyone in the prison, it seems, experienced at least some of the ghostly phenomena. Aside from the cracklings and shufflings, they would sometimes hear the spirit let out a heartrending cry. Often, as the inmates lay in bed, the ghost would pull the blankets off them. Several of the inmates heard it speak. When the ghost would lean over the women, or whisper in their ear, some of the inmates became so nauseated by his odor that they would vomit. If he touched them anywhere, those areas would immediately become swollen and painful. The ghost would also shake the heavy, iron-barred window in Eslinger's cell so violently that it rattled. As an experiment, six men tried shaking the window, without being able to move it in the slightest.

Perhaps oddest of all is the fact that on two different occasions, Eslinger saw Dr. Kerner and Justice Heyd enter her cell along with the ghost...when the two men were not physically there. Both times, Heyd was surrounded by a black cloud. When Eslinger asked the ghost about the cloud, it replied that it was a sign of impending tragedy. After the first time Eslinger saw the cloud, Heyd's father died. A few days after the cloud's second appearance, Heyd's child also died unexpectedly. Eslinger would occasionally see strangers come in with the ghost. These people would soon afterward come to the prison in the flesh.

A 16-year-old named Margaret Laibesberg, who was serving a ten-day sentence for stealing grapes from a vineyard, was increasingly terrified by the ghost's nightly appearances. On the fourth night, Eslinger came to her bed and said reassuringly, "Do, in the name of God, look at him! He will do you no harm, I assure you."

Laibesberg recounted, "I looked out from under the clothes, and I saw two white forms, like two lambs—so beautiful that I could have looked at them for ever. Between them stood a white, shadowy form, as tall as a man, but I was not able to look longer, for my eyes failed me."

The figure would always ask the girl to pray for him. It would occasionally touch her on the forehead and eyes. She would feel

pain when it did so, but apparently did not suffer any swelling. Both she and another prisoner named Neidhardt testified that one night, they heard Eslinger ask the ghost why he looked so angry. He replied that it was “because she had on the preceding night neglected to pray for him as much as usual.” Laibesberg was so rattled by her ordeal that upon her release, she vowed to live a virtuous life from then on.

After reading all this, the magistrates decided that a committee consisting of physicians, clergymen, and other local worthies should visit the prison and see the spectral goings-on for themselves. They all heard the strange noises, saw the lights, smelled the disagreeable odors, and some of them saw the spirit. After their visit, the men presented the magistrates with a report on their findings which said, in essence, “We dunno.”

After Eslinger was released from custody, the ghost continued to make regular visits to the prison, as well as surprise cameo appearances in various Weinsberg homes. Some of these residents only heard it, others smelled it, or felt it, and a few had the honor of seeing it.

One Mr. Dorr was an outspoken skeptic about the whole affair. When Dr. Kerner heard of his mockery at the very idea of “ghosts,” he asked Eslinger to suggest to her spirit friend that Dorr was in need of a personal visit. She did, with predictable results:

On the morning of December 30, Dorr awakened as usual, and immediately began thinking about some pressing business affairs. Suddenly, he sensed something nearby, which was blowing a cold draft on him. Assuming some animal had gotten into his bedroom, he looked around him, but saw nothing. He next heard a noise which reminded him of electrical sparks, and then a loud bang by his right ear.

Dorr was sold. He scoffed no more.

There is an oddly touching conclusion to our little tale: the ghost had repeatedly asked Eslinger to go to Wimmenthal, where he had lived, to pray for him. On February 11, 1836, she did so, accompanied by some friends. As she knelt in the open air to pray, her companions saw the apparition hovering around her. A woman named Wörner--a complete stranger, who had never heard of the Weinsberg ghost--stated that as she stood some distance away, watching Eslinger pray, she saw the apparition of a man, accompanied by two smaller ghosts, floating nearby. She added, "When the prayer was ended, he went close to her, and there was a light like a falling star; then I saw something like a white cloud, that seemed to float away: and after that, we saw no more."

When Eslinger finished praying, she fainted. After being revived, she told her friends that before the ghost and its two companions

left her, the spirit asked her to give it her hand. After wrapping it in her handkerchief, she complied. "A small flame had arisen from the handkerchief when he touched it; and we found the marks of his fingers like burns, but without any smell." Unnerving as this was, it was not the flame which caused Eslinger to faint. She explained that she had been badly frightened by a pack of terrifying-looking animals which rushed past her when the ghost floated away.

That was the last time Eslinger, or anyone else, was visited by the Ghost of Weinsberg.