

# THE BLACK STONE

## Memory of a female serial killer in Bremen

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### Abstract:

This is the story of the serial killer, Mrs. Gesina Gottfried from Bremen, Germany. She was executed in 1831, being charged and convicted for having murdered at least 16 people, partly from her own family, with arsenic trioxide.

### Keywords:

Arsenic;homicide;history;Serial-killer

*It now and then happens on a vacation trip that you come upon an interesting story of criminal history. For even the smallest idyllic villages on the continent, where timber framed houses seem to radiate tolerance and tranquility, sometimes also hide grim secrets. I was in Bremen, this seemingly peaceful northern German Hanseatic town with Roland statue and "Stadt Musikanten". In a narrow alley in the old quarter Schnoor I found a restaurant that looked tempting. There I was served good food, but also a story that made an impression on me, because the house had originally been the residence of one of the worst female serial killers in criminal history.*

Gesina Margaretha Gottfried (ca. 1785-1831) once lived in that house. Commonly she was locally known as "Gesche", which is the inhabitants' Low German form of "Gesina". If she had lived a normal, quiet and retired life, we had probably not known much about her, but the trial that revealed her heinous deeds came to shed light on herself and her family.

She grew up in humble circumstances in Bremen, where the father, Johann Timm, was a tailor with poor economy, so the mother had to contribute as a sewer (1). Through parental manipulation Gesina happened to make the acquaintance with the wealthy saddler Johann Mittenberg, whom she married in 1806. Now she had indeed made a surprising and unusual step, from her own environment and into the bourgeois class. Unfortunately, this was not a happy marriage. The husband drank and led a "lecherous" life in saloons and brothels, and in 1813 he died – perhaps not so unexpected, being in full accordance with his dissolute existence. At that time the blue-eyed, 28-year old "Gesche" was nicknamed "the angel of Bremen" because of her seemingly sacrificial care of her husband. Yet the people around her did not know her dark secrets. How should they?

Actually she had already got an intimate relation with a good friend of her husband – the wine merchant Michael Christoph Gottfried. Her parents were strongly against this, mainly because Mr. Gottfried did not seem to be interested to marry a widow with three children. But now things began to happen, which came to change the whole situation – and soon became the neighborhood's talking point. The family members died, one after the other: 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1815 her mother, and only one week later her three-year

old daughter Johanna. On May 18<sup>th</sup> the same year the six-year old daughter Adelaide died, on June 28<sup>th</sup> her father, and finally on September 22<sup>th</sup> the five year old son Heinrich. Five deaths in one year was much, but epidemics at that time often eradicated whole families who lived in cramped and unsanitary housing conditions, so probably people around did not think much over it. Not yet anyway. Only Gesina knew why the impediments to a marriage were cleared away now.

The next year her twin brother unexpectedly appeared in Bremen, sick, mentally broken and without a job. He had been soldier and fought against Napoleon, and now back home he claimed his rightful share of their parents' belongings. Gesina was not happy about this, and 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1816 she took his life with a dish of fish that was cooked with an ample addition of arsenic. Nobody suspected any irregularity, and a doctor wrote out the death certificate: "venereal deceased" (3).

At that time white arsenic trioxide was needed and sold in pharmacies as rat poison and for destruction of insects. Its poisonous effect had been used by criminals throughout the centuries, administered in almost any form. The substance can pass through the skin, be inhaled as a vapor or given as a powder mixed in food, as it is nearly tasteless. The poisoning symptoms may begin with an irritation and burning in the throat, nausea followed by vomiting and extreme abdominal pain. Diarrhoea follows after 12-18 hours (4), together with rapid pulse, cyanosis, collapse and death. Arsenic can also have a cumulative effect, as the toxin is built up in the body over a period of time, until a small final dose appears to be lethal.

When Gesina proved to be pregnant, wine merchant Gottfried would terminate the relationship to this woman, who was so much followed by death and sinister atmosphere. But through several rounds of poisoning from a jar containing so called "mouse butter" – a mixture of fat and arsenic, which her mother had used against noxious animals like rats and cockroaches – Mr. Gottfried was gradually transformed into a helpless invalid. When he finally died on 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1817, the two had already become true wedded husband and wife. But the child she was carrying was stillborn.

Now some years passed without more deaths, because the jar was empty. The money was gone too, and the future did not seem very promising

until her neighbor, merchant Paul Zimmermann, made her a proposal. She accepted in spring 1823. About the same time she saw an advertisement in the newspaper where "mouse butter" was recommended and offered for sale, and she immediately got it from the pharmacy. To see if it was "the real thing" she had received, she made a few pieces of bread with it on, prepared as sandwich for her fiancé. He died on 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1823. Again she had got an acceptable economy, as Mr. Zimmermann had remembered her in his will.

Now Gesina Gottfried began to search out her murder victims by chance, without any reason or system: it might be a friend, a neighbor or a troublesome creditor. But always with some economic benefits as a result. When she no longer was able to keep the house in Pelzerstrasse 37, which she had got through Mr. Gottfried, she sold it to wheel maker Johann Rumpff, but with the condition that she was allowed to stay there forever after. Here she acted almost as a part of the family, as a kind of household keeper and the children's "aunt". Shortly afterwards Mrs. Rumpff was the next in the row, given the "mouse butter" twice, from which she died on 22<sup>th</sup> December 1826 as Gesina's twelfth known murder victim.

But widower Johann Rumpff now began to be suspicious, and when he one day discovered some white grains in a salad he was served, he refused to eat it. And when the same white grains reappeared a few days later in a dish of ham, he secretly left the findings to a doctor who soon confirmed the content of "a considerable amount of arsenic". On 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1828 Gesina Gottfried was arrested.

For three years she sat imprisoned in a cellar underneath the town hall in Bremen, but under relatively comfortable conditions, according to that time. She was regularly questioned by investigation judge Franz Friedrich Droste, who actually felt a certain pity for her and thus treated her very humanely. The two had conversations where he explained to her why he had to act with a harsh look when he performed his office, as this was not his real nature.

In court it was proved that Gesina had murdered 16 people – although she asserted it to be "at least 30". The death sentence was as expected: she was to be beheaded. A scaffold covered with black clothing was erected on the open Domhof Square. At eight o'clock in the morning on 21<sup>st</sup> of April 1831 her time had come. The Domhof was crowded with people and it was complete silence when Gesina entered the podium and was seated on a stool. Here she heard the sentence pronounced by judge Droste, and she had to see how he took a wooden stick and broke it as a symbol, saying: "The rod is broken, the judgement is given. You must die!" The executioner then performed his macabre duty, and left the head and body in a coffin.

This was the last public execution in Bremen, and it made a tremendous impression on all bystanders. Many of them felt sick for days afterwards. However Gesina's head was not buried, but was displayed in the museum at Domhof afterwards – to raise money for an orphanage. Yet in 1912 her skeleton remained in the Department of Pathology of the city hospital, but both head and body were probably destroyed and disappeared during the bombing of Bremen in the last war.

The reason why a young woman could feel pleasure in killing people is hard to understand and explain, even if much has been written about this case and discussed afterwards. The diagnosis "Münchhausen Syndrome by Proxy" (MSbP) has been mentioned (2), as she had explained to the court that the murders had given her an ecstasy-like satisfaction. If this riddle will ever be solved is doubtful. However the inhabitants of Bremen still remember this event. At the Domplatz you will find "The black stone" in the



Fig 1: Gesche Gottfried, drawing by Rudolf Friedrich Suhrlandt.



Fig 2: Mrs. Gottfried's house in Pelzerstrasse.

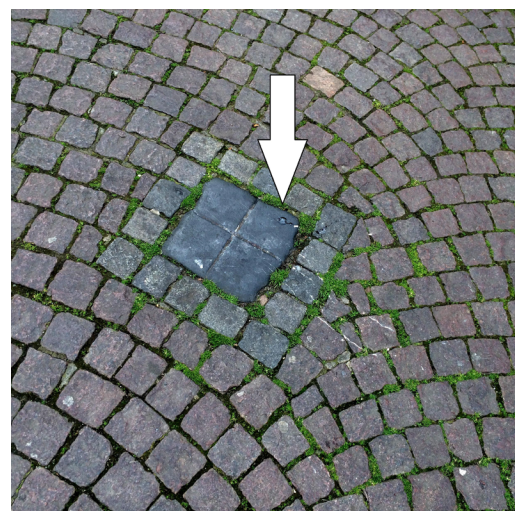


Fig. 3: "The black stone" at the Domplatz. See the spit mark (arrow)!

roadway – a memorial of the place on which the scaffold once stood. People are allowed to spit on the stone, and they still do! If this is to demonstrate their disgust towards Gesina Gottfrieds cruel deeds, or merely as a general protest against executions, is a question.

Indeed, identification of arsenic by means of chemical analyses was known and used since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But shortly afterwards, in

1836, the British chemist James Marsh developed a test so sensitive, that it was accepted as evidence in a court of law, as even 1/50 mg of arsenic could be identified (4). As a consequence Europe saw a reduction in the number of arsenic poisonings in the following years.

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