

Solothurn's cult of saints

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St Verena Gorge – A Personal Memory

The Verena Gorge is a mystical gorge near Solothurn, the traditional home of the charitable St. Verena and today place of pilgrimage for people far and wide. Read these charming personal memories about the Verena Gorge by Irene Knowles.

When I was in 3rd class Primary School many moons ago, our annual outing was to the St. Verena Gorge. We travelled by train to Solothurn and within under half an hour on foot, we reached our destination, the entrance to the Verena Gorge. A further short walk then led through the forest, alongside the river, to the hermitage and the chapels.

The home of the hermit looked like a gingerbread house. To us children, a hermit was something quite mystical. We even got a glimpse of the man as he hurried through the garden to disappear behind the building. He was called the "Waldbruder" and acted as caretaker of the chapels. I always thought that these men were monks. However, I was told that they were ordinary Solothurners, employed by the City of Solothurn. To find a successor was never a problem. It was in fact a very sought after position and was only advertised for the first time in 2014. Someone able and willing to greet the visitors, answer questions for curious tourists, hosting events like weddings and baptisms that take place in the chapel, etc., was wanted and ... you guessed it, they employed a woman. She is called sister as she wants to do this job in order to serve God.

The St. Martins chapel was first mentioned in 1426. It is built below an overhanging cliff. The St. Verena chapel is set into the limestone rock. It is said that St. Verena lived in a cave in these parts looking after the poor. Once, on her way

through the gorge, she got caught in a flood and only survived by holding on to a hole in the rock. This single spot helped her to survive. Even today, pilgrims hope for healing by touching it.

I never revisited this beautiful part of Switzerland again until I was an apprentice. Apprentices in those days earned very little money. My girlfriend, whose aunt owned a restaurant, was looking for helpers on busy Saturdays and Sundays during the summer. Well, this could be the answer to our problem – we could make extra money. So we offered our services and were accepted. The restaurant in question was the very restaurant at the beginning of the gorge, Restaurant Kreuzen. On a fine day it was always very busy. The choice of refreshments then was rather limited. Men usually ordered a beer. Some regulars always wanted theirs lukewarm. It was served with the bottle stuck into a pretty copper container holding warm water. Lots of coffee was also in demand. The treat for children was raspberry syrup or apple juice. As far as something to eat goes, hazelnut croissants were the hit, "the best ever".

What is the morale of this story, you wonder. Well, no visit to the St Verena Gorge would be complete without a treat at the Restaurant Kreuzen, of course! For me something else comes to mind. I know a Verena married to a Martin. She ain't no Saint, but she is a most generous friend to many.

Solothurn's Cult of Saints

At about the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire in 450 AD, St. Eucherius of Lyon mentions the martyrdom of St. Ursus and St. Victor in Solothurn which took place around 290 AD. Ursus and Victor were part of a Roman legion from Thebes in Egypt (a Roman legion comprised 6,666 soldiers). This Theban legion was ordered to move to Gaul to fight the Burgundian rebels. It was common to move foreign legions around the Roman Empire to prevent them uprising in their own countries.

The area around Thebes had a very early, almost fanatical Christian community. The first monks in the Christian tradition known as the "Desert Fathers" comprised many Thebans. The Theban legion therefore included many of these early Christians.

After the rebellion was quelled in Gaul, the Roman Emperor Maximian issued an order that the whole army should join in offering sacrifices to Roman gods for the success of their mission, including possibly the sacrifice of Christians. The Theban legion, down to the last man, refused the order. The Emperor, who considered himself as one of the Roman Gods, was outraged. He ordered that the Legion was "decimated" that is, a tenth of the legion's soldiers was put to death by the sword, over and over, unless orders were obeyed. None of the legionnaires complied and they all went to their death.

Legends abound as to where these soldiers died exactly, with St. Maurice in Switzerland being the foremost place mentioned in records. However, Ursus and Victor, and possibly 64 other legionnaires, were beheaded on the bridge in Solothurn. As martyrs, they were later declared saints by the Christian church. Over the ensuing years, Solothurn developed a "cult" of their saints. About 500 AD, the Burgundian Princess Sedeleuba took the bones of St. Victor to Geneva. The bones of St. Ursus remained in Solothurn and were later buried in the first church dedicated to the veneration of St Ursus and Victor around 870 AD. They were later shifted to the neo-classical Cathedral of St Ursus and Victor which stands in Solothurn to this day.

By Susie Wood



"Waldbruder" in front of his Hermitage