

Totenbretter (Death Boards) – An Old Tradition in the Bavarian-Bohemian Borderlands

© Susan McNelley



Totenbretter in the Bavarian-Bohemian Borderlands. Photo courtesy of V. Ashbeck-Gross, taken in June of 2013 on the road between Warzenried and Neukirchen beim Heiligen Blut in Germany, about 20 miles from Železná Ruda, Czech Republic (formerly Markt Eisenstein, Bohemia).

What are these boards that are sometimes found along the roads and pathways of the Bavarian-Bohemian border (now the border between southern Germany and the Czech Republic)? Are they gravesites? Are they simply memorials to the departed? A little history is in order here. In the nineteenth century, totenbretter, the German word for death boards, were a common and unique feature of the landscape in the Bavarian-Bohemian borderlands.

In 1880, Karl Baedeker mentioned the death boards in his book for travelers to southern Germany. In his description of the Bavarian Forest on the route from Deggendorf to Eisenstein he observed, “The custom of erecting boards on the roadside to the memory of the dead is prevalent.” Twenty-five years later, in his travel book written in 1907, he again noted that in the Bavarian-Bohemian Forest, on the Eisenstein to Deggendorf route, “The paths are frequently flanked with ‘Totenbretter,’ i.e. memorial tablets with inscriptions and paintings.”

A short article concerning this curious custom of eastern Bavaria appeared in a couple of American newspapers early in the twentieth century. Again it was noted that “They are erected, often in a row of thirty or more- on the roadside, in fields and meadows, near chapels and crucifixes, in the village streets – in short everywhere; they are even nailed to houses and barns.”

Before the advent of caskets, when a person died, the corpse was laid out on a board, generally in the deceased's home. There were no morgues. The body would thus lie in state for two or three days before burial. It was a time for family and friends to visit and to pay their last respects. In this devoutly Catholic region, a rosary might be said and guests offered home-baked bread and beer. When it was time to put the body in the ground, the body would be wrapped in linen and buried with the board. Or it would be slipped off the board and the board would be burned or saved for another corpse.

In eastern Bavaria these 'death' boards were put to another use: they were placed outdoors along a path that the person took in life, on his farm, or in a favorite place. The boards did not mark the place of burial, as might be assumed. Originally the boards were placed horizontally. The boards were simple and usually unadorned. The exception would be one to three crosses which would be painted on or carved into the wood. The board was left to weather in place and crumble. The idea was that the board should rot as soon as possible. Sometimes the boards were placed over ditches, streams, and swampy areas, symbolizing the bridge for the souls of the dead as they made their way to the afterlife. The moisture in the environment would also hasten the deterioration of the wooden planks. The faithful believed that the disintegration of the board symbolized the ending of suffering for the poor soul in purgatory. Only then could the soul escape to find peace with God in heaven.

The origins of this unusual custom are unknown. It is speculated that the tradition originated in the Bavarian Forest and in the Upper Palatinate of Germany, sometime in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. However, no one knows for sure. It might have been earlier. The people in the Bavarian-Bohemian borderlands were generally isolated from the larger world and followed many of the practices of their forebears in previous centuries. The earliest surviving totenbretter dates back to 1815 and is from Aigenhof, in eastern Bavaria. It is currently housed in the Gäubodenmuseum in Straubing, Germany. (Clearly, the practice of allowing, even encouraging, the decay of the death board is no longer being followed.)

Also by the mid-nineteenth century, many of the boards were placed vertically, particularly in the southern regions of eastern Bavaria. They were nailed to the wall of a barn, placed on a fence, free standing, or sometimes attached to chapel walls. Some boards were left unpainted, others were roughly painted, usually in white and blue. The board might be left a simple rectangle, but often it was carved into a simple shape.

After coffins were introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, the death board no longer served as a place on which to lay the body. People still saw the death boards along the pathways as a part of the traditional rites surrounding death. The boards became shorter and more elaborate in their design. In some areas, a stock of them was produced and individual boards were personalized at the time of death. In addition to the name and dates of birth and death, a simple message including words such as "virtuous," or "honorable" might be inscribed. Many boards offered a rhyme of a few lines to reflect on the transience of life or a short prayer for the deceased. The

board might feature a color image of a patron saint. Symbols that are found on the death boards include the hourglass or the skull, both symbolizing fleeting human existence. Other images include the anchor (a symbol of hope), the cross (a symbol of the Christian faith), or a heart (symbolizing the affection of the living for the deceased). It is to be noted that these symbols are also commonly found on headstones. The board was often topped with a little wooden canopy. They were frequently placed in the vicinity of a small shrine, a crucifix, or a small chapel.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the many decaying death boards that lined the roads and paths came to be considered an eyesore. There were literally hundreds of them in some parishes. In 1895, new death boards were prohibited along all of the district roads and trails in Vohenstrauß, a town in the northeastern part of the Upper Palatinate in eastern Bavaria. Police were instructed to remove those already in place. Presumably, the authorities in other districts felt similarly. The twentieth century saw a sharp decline in the number of *totenbretter*. They disappeared with modern development and the construction of modern thoroughfares. The original religious significance of the boards was also lost on the population.

However, the custom did not disappear entirely. In 1975, Franz Bergler recorded thirty-two death boards in the old district of Vohenstrauß. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, they are scattered throughout the Bavarian-Bohemian borderland region. In fact, it appears that there is a resurgence of the tradition. Instead of being allowed to rot, these boards are generally well maintained. They are seen as a way to keep the memory of the dearly-departed alive, a reminder for passersby to think about and pray for the deceased. In this way, they have much in common with the headstones in cemeteries, although no body lies beneath them.

Sources:

“A curious custom that is observed in Eastern Bavaria” *The Genesee News*, January 5, 1917. (Genesee, Latah County, Idaho) Google News Web 27 June 2014.

Baedeker, Karl. *Southern Germany (Württemberg and Bavaria): Handbook for Travelers*. Leipzig: Karl Baedeker Pub., 1907. P 309. Google Books. Web 27 June 2014.

Baedeker, Karl. *Southern Germany and Austria (including Hungary and Transylvania): Handbook for Travelers*. Leipzig: Karl Baedeker Pub., 1880. P. 155. Google Books. Web 27 June 2014

“Totenbrauchtum im Bayerischen Wald” (Death Rites in the Bavarian Forest) – Well attended evening with Hans Wrbe, the curator of LK Cham, 2006 Web 27 June 2014.

Staniczek, Peter. “Totenbretterbrauchtum im Raum Vohenstrauß.” *Arnika, Journal of the Upper Palatinate Forest Association*. April 1986. P. 176-185. Web 15 June 2014.

©Susan McNelley/www.tracingsbysam.com / June 2014