

Ulrich Büttner . Egon Schwär

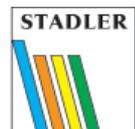
**(HI)STORIES OF
THE COUNCIL
OF CONSTANCE**

explained by entertaining narratives

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600 years ago the biggest congress in the European Middle Ages took place in Constance. People from all over the world poured to Lake Constance to participate in this unique event that went down in history as the Council of Constance. Many urgent issues were a concern to the church and to the entire Christendom so that this general church meeting became necessary.

Numerous books have been written about this event and yet the volume before you is a novelty. For the first time ever, all known myths and legends about the Council of Constance have been gathered and retold. However, we have not only focused on the myths or legends in the narrower sense but also included little analogies and anecdotes occurred during the Council which are rather entertaining.

Even though the stories are entertaining they will also give you a deeper insight into the backgrounds of the Council and its time. Particularly the myths build a bridge to the historical events about which historiography and ancient documents hardly inform. They will give you a glimpse into ideas of that time and the peoples' feelings. Some are based on verifiable facts others might be fictitious. The truthfulness is uncertain, nevertheless they are testimonies that are firmly bonded to this region and that provide us with insights into the life of earlier centuries. Being the "Night Watchman of Constance" and the "Knight strolling through the Council and the Middle Ages" we are well familiar with the history of this town. Therefore, we would like to invite you to stroll with us through the times when the world was a guest in Constance.

Enjoy reading!
Ulrich Büttner and Egon Schwär, 2014



John Wyclif

THE BLUSHING KING

Why a pugnacious professor made a king blush and why 100 years later another emperor did not

600 years ago the biggest and most spectacular meeting of the Middle Ages took place here at Lake Constance. On 5th November 1414 the 16th Ecumenical Council opened its gates in Constance. It should take almost 4 years for them to close again. Representatives of the entire Christendom streamed into this time-honoured episcopal town to debate and resolve topics that were the concern of the Occident for centuries. Three issues were the focus of the counsels:

First of all, there was the question of the true Vicar of Christ on earth. Since 1409 three popes were concurrently appointed (one in Rome, one in Avignon and one being the so-called Pisanian Pope) so that there was an urgent need for action. According to the idea that there can only be one spiritual leader in the catholic church of Rome, either one of the three had to prevail the others or a new pope was to be elected. This was subject to discussion and arguments for years. The target was the unity of the Western Church. The original sources refer hereto with the Latin words “causa unionis”. Furthermore, the general conditions of the church needed urgent reforms. On one hand the external constitution of the church was in focus, i.e. the concept and organisation, and on the other hand the inner nature, i.e. the material circumstances and theological theories but also the level of training and the moral lifestyle of the ministers. A root-and-branch reform of the church was aimed for (in Latin called “causa reformationis”)

And that’s not all: Closely linked to the reform of the church is the last of the three main targets of the Council, the “causa fi dei” – the question on the correct Church proclamation and sacramental theology. Linked to this was also the combat of the so-called heretic teachings that were widespread at that time. From the Catholic Church’s point of view, heretics were men and women who spread heresy and false doctrines and who adhered to ideas contradicting the church. But how to deal with those “misguided”, how to react to their criticism?

The interested reader quickly realizes that during this time many problems were waiting for their solution in Constance. It was certainly a mammoth task that should finally overtake the participants of the Council. But without rushing we return to the beginnings – back to

the latter part of 1414 when the days were cooler and the nights longer, when the perennial autumn fog covered the town like cotton wool. Here they were meeting now – all those learned theologians, cardinals, bishops, abbots but also ordinary priests were amply represented in town to look and experience the Council from close up. Where to start, which problems were the most urgent, which could be postponed?

Stormy times preceded those occasions in Constance. Many church critics wished to speak. Some of them indicated reasonably the nuisances of the church, others did so occasionally with furious overeagerness. One of the most influential church critics was the English scholar John Wyclif, a philosopher and theologian. He was dissatisfied with quite many things of the Roman Church. He contested, for instance, the political claim to power of the popes as well as the theological meaningfulness of the celibacy. That he became one of the most hated men of the curia in Rome is more than obvious. However, he succumbed to stroke at the age of 30 before the Council started. But his theories did not die with him. A reformer with the name Jan Hus should pick up and effectively represent many of his ideas a few decades later.

Jan Hus was a Bohemian theologian, preacher and for some a significant reformer, for others an unconvincible heretic. He doubtlessly was successful. Being the son of a wagoner he attracted attention due to his excellent intelligence and was even allowed to study. He became a priest and finally the principal of the University of Prague. Hus is said to inject whole crowds of people with enthusiasm with the power of his words and convince his contemporaries of himself and his ideas. Being teacher of philosophy and theology he got acquainted with Wyclif's ideas and made them his own.

The church also dealt with these ideas, which they considered dangerous, and consequently with Jan Hus. They decided to invite him to Constance to find a solution for this “Bohemian nuisance”. The patron of the Council, the German King Sigismund assured safe conduct for both the access and return travel and the duration of his stay in Constance. No harm should be done to Jan Hus. This was guaranteed in writing by a so-called letter of consignment of the emperor. Thus, the Bohemian set out to explain and defend his ideas at the Council. The guarantees of freedom aided Hus in his decision to beard the lion in his den. On November 3, 1414 he finally arrived in Constance even before the official opening of the Council.

He found accommodation at the widow Fida Pfister in the St. Paulsgasse, that was renamed into Hussenstrasse in the 20th century. Meanwhile,

one of the three popes, Pope John XXIII was in town as well. He affirmed the protection of Jan Hus that no harm would be done to him. Unmolested by the church leaders, Jan Hus could live and preach in town for three weeks. But then they attacked: The reformer was arrested and imprisoned in the dungeon of the Dominican monastery on Constance Island where today the Inselhotel is located. Sigismund was not present and could consequently not interfere. However, when he – being in Speyer at that time – learnt about Jan Hus' arrestment, he was supposed to have raged and vowed to release the Bohemian if necessary personally forcing the prison door open. Even though Hus might not have learnt about this, he could hope for being rescued by the king when he was back in town. The rage of the emperor, however, was staged. When Sigismund returned to Constance he confirmed Jan Hus' detention and approved the legal action. There is no doubt that the king had broken his promises. Even though the emperor might not felt comfortable he nevertheless did it. But how to proceed?

Until Sigismund's arrival Jan Hus experienced terrible weeks. His cell was located directly under the latrines of the monks. Quite soon he was in poor health. Some people feared he might not even survive his imprisonment. Therefore, by the king's command, he was transferred into another prison with more tolerable prison conditions to ensure him being alive for his lawsuit. But perhaps it was his guilty conscience that drove Sigismund to this "act of humanity".

When defendant and king met face to face at court for the first time, something happened that should enrich the legends of the German history: Hus rose to speak, turning directly to Sigismund and made a gesture with his hand to the emperor. "I came voluntarily and under safe conduct by the king to this Council", he blared out against the indignant king. Rigid and confident looking his opponent in the eye, Hus reminded him on the royal letter of consignment issued in his favour and the derived civil rights and liberties. Sigismund could not meet the Bohemian's eyes. He silently peered to the side, avoiding under all circumstances the eye contact with the defendant. A murmur went through the crowd when the king blushed clearly visible for all to see. When has a king – who is supposed to be radiating dignity and power – ever blushed silently? Hus could consider himself being the moral victor.

His fate, however, was not influenced at all – he was sentenced and burned as a heretic outside the city gates.

Sigismund, however, was reassured: many consultants and cardinals

told him that his promises towards a heretic, a criminal, do not need to be kept. Such a person is not eligible to a safe conduct. Consequently, the king did not go back on his word and did not have to worry. At that time already, the legal professionals were quite practiced to interpret law to fit to their own purposes. What the council leaders did not expect, however, eventuated: With his death Hus became a martyr, an immortal myth. For years, his supporters in Bohemia were waging a successful war against the emperor's army. The so-called Hussite Wars were to shake the whole empire. The goal of eliminating the theories of Hus and Wyclif was utterly missed. Sigismund had blushed for nothing. One thing should never be forgotten: Not a few persons in the history of the world became immortal by their death.

But that is still not the end of our legend: Approximately 100 years after these incidents in Constance history seemed to be repeating itself. In 1521, a small monk and professor from Wittenberg, a certain Martin Luther, who supported similar ideas as Jan Hus, was invited to the diet meeting in Worms. He also was affirmed a safe conduct by the king – the mighty Hapsburgs Charles V. Luther set out to explain and defend his thesis against the representatives of the empire and the church. Before his departure, many of his friends warned him and reminded him of Jan Hus' fate. The promise of a king may not be worth much, he would be condemned even before the diet meeting or deported to Rome to be burnt there. But Luther did not believe that the mistakes of the Constance's Council would be repeated. Nobody wanted to have another religious war, a martyr Luther would be even more dangerous to the Church.

The professor from Wittenberg was not mistaken. When declining the revocation of his thesis in Worms and remaining steadfast, not a few urged Charles V to arrest Luther and not to feel bound to his promises of safe conduct. But now the Hapsburger displayed his knowledge of history and his eagerness to learn from history. Resisting the urge of his consultants he countered by reference to the Council at Lake Constance. "I do not want to blush as my predecessor Sigismund did!" Thus, the issue was off the table. Luther was not arrested, the earth revolved on and the history took its course.

Without a doubt, in the early 15th century Europe was in a situation of upheaval.

Modern historians tend to talk about a crisis of the late Middle Ages – and in fact, when looking back these quarrels and conflicts of those remote times seem to be like labour pains of a new age – the Renaissance,

the beginning of the Modern Times. A blushing king, an executed Bohemian reformer, quarrelling popes and all the other actors of that remote past – in historical retrospect they easily seem like supernumeraries on the stage for world history on which the curtain for the millennial spectacle of the Middle Ages slowly falls. Would Europe's history be different, would it have taken another course when Sigismund would not have blushed, when Jan Hus were not executed, when the Church was successful with its root-to-branch reform in Constance? Had Martin Luther remained an unknown monk, his life a footnote in history? Had our continent skipped the age of religious wars? We as modern human beings are not in a position to confirm this, even though these "What if"-questions always inspire our imagination.

But the Middle Ages was also a time of superstition. Thus it is not surprising that old Harry left his marks at the Council. More on that later on ...