

## Sylvia Mader, Serfaus Parish Museum

### The Coffin of Serfaus - a museum object that cannot rid itself of its history

#### Abstract:

Storytelling is a method of knowledge transfer that works holistically. This is tied to its sustainability - even to the extent that it might be undesirable.

In contrast to the knowledge representation in the form of facts, the story adheres better to memory, is vivid and therefore accessible to audiences with a broad range of educational backgrounds. Storytelling docks onto emotions, and offers the opportunity to identify with them. Because of this emotional dimension, which incorporates experiences and feelings, storytelling achieves lasting effects. In stories, reality and fiction get deliberately mixed. But what happens if the proportion of fiction goes far beyond the tolerable level?

The stories about the coffin of Serfaus cannot be eradicated. The object research has long been able to prove that it is indeed not a coffin, but a chest. The narratives about the deceased who were supposedly carried in this casket from the Paznauntal over the Furglerjoch Pass (elevation 2748 m) to Serfaus sound much more exciting than the scientific results. The challenge for the team at the Serfaus Parish Museum is to sensitively interpret the spectacular stories in light of historical facts without harming the older local inhabitants and the predecessor generation of museum guides in their narrative tradition.

In past years, as we well know, storytelling has become an approved method for knowledge transfer in museums, too. In contrast to the knowledge representation in the form of facts, the story adheres better to memory, is vivid and therefore accessible to audiences with a broad range of educational backgrounds. Storytelling docks onto emotions, and offers the opportunity to identify with them. Because of this emotional dimension, which incorporates experiences and feelings, storytelling achieves lasting effects. In stories, reality and fiction get deliberately mixed. Storytelling is a method of knowledge transfer that works holistically. This is tied to its sustainability - even to the extent that it might be undesirable, as with the history of an object from the Serfaus Parish Museum.

In order to understand the story, it is necessary to know some facts about the geographic locations in my research. Serfaus is located on a plateau about 500 m above the Tyrolean Inn Valley. Since Roman antiquity, this valley has been an important transit road linking Venice with southern Germany. Even in the Middle Ages, this connection served as a trade route and it is still frequented with cars and lorries today. From prehistoric times to the building of modern roads, footpaths additionally led across the Alps.

Beginning in prehistoric times to the 19th century, so-called "Saumwege" or mule trails led across the Alps in many places. "Saum", the old word for "load" already says that you crossed the mountains with pack animals like mules or donkeys. Humans also acted as low-cost "beasts of burden".

- Digression: The glacier mummy known as "Ötzi" or "Iceman", who lived at end of the Stone Age in the Ötztal Alps<sup>1</sup>, is world famous. He crossed over the Ötztal Alps. Annually in June and September on the very same mountain range, and by the way, one of the largest in the Eastern Alps, the "Schaftrieb" (sheep drive) from Schnalstal (South Tyrol, Italy) via the high alpine ridges in the Ötztal (Tyrol, Austria) takes place. This is a long, arduous, multi-day march (around 44 km) over harsh snow fields and steep rock and ice chutes. In science, this seasonal migration of humans with livestock is called "transhumance" (Latin: trans - over, humus - soil, area). Transhumance is an ancient form of

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<sup>1</sup> Konrad Spindler, Der Mann im Eis, Die Ötztaler Mumie verrät die Geheimnisse der Steinzeit, 1993.

pastoral agriculture management.<sup>2</sup> From prehistoric and protohistorical research, it has been verified that these sheep drives over the partially glaciated mountain passes have existed for at least 6,000 years. From mid-June to mid-September, the approx. 5,000 animals and their herders from the South will graze on the pastures and live in the old shepherd's huts around today's "mountaineering village" Vent in the Ötztal valley. The transhumance belongs to the intangible UNESCO world cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup>

The first sovereign Count Meinhard II of Tyrol divided the land into judicial districts. Each *court*<sup>4</sup> is thus a judicial and administrative unit (unlike the separation that is common today in democracies). The court limits are based on those of the old parishes. In each court, therefore, a parish formed the religious center. Only in exceptional cases were there two, as in Laudegg: Prutz and Serfaus. In addition to pastoral care, the parishes also fulfilled other tasks that are currently performed by various institutions such as banks, pharmacies, etc. The people from the side valleys needed many hours to make the long journey to their responsible castle (seat of the court) or to their parish church. So, for example, the Tyrolean farmers from Vent (elevation 1890 m) in the Ötztal Alps: in summer it took 17 hours, and in winter, 48 hours to get to their court seat in Schnals (today: South Tyrol/Italy).<sup>5</sup> To get to their responsible authority, namely the parish church in Serfaus, the farmers of Fiss and Ladis had to travel one to three hours on foot, but those from the village of See in the Paznaun Valley 6 to 7 hours, and that over the mountains.

In the Serfaus Parish Museum there is a wooden chest, which had been linked to a curious story long before the opening of the museum. Only in recent times, after some progress in the research of the object, did the museum, which opened on August 15, 2014, try to establish another version of the story. We did not fully succeed.

The story: The people who died in See were carried in this "mortuary chest", or more like a coffin or casket as the object, Inv. No. 100, is named, over the Furgler Joch pass to the parish church in Serfaus to be buried there (6 to 7 hours walking time). As the crossing of the mountains with the unwieldy wooden object seemed too difficult for many a listener of the story, a variant arose: According to this, the deceased was put into a leather sack, which was fastened to poles and carried over the mountain by men. Upon arrival at the Komperdell Alm (elevation 1970 m) – today a ski area above Serfaus - the corpse was transferred from the sack to the chest and carried by a funeral procession to a particular farm called "Arche Noah". So it was probably hoped that it would offer the deceased a dignified funeral procession. [Author's note: In addition, it could explain the discovery of the chest in the farmhouse.] Then the corpse was laid out in the Arche Noah farmhouse. The carpenter came to take measurements for the proper individual coffin in which the corpse was finally buried. The historian Othmar Kolb has collected the rumored details.<sup>6</sup>

The short story, "An Alpine Idyll" by Ernest Hemmingway (1927) only fueled the imaginations of the storytellers. Horror stories circulated in the villages, whose inhabitants in the Middle Ages had to travel a long way across the mountains to bury their dead. Two examples follow:

<sup>2</sup> Thomas SchmarDA (2007), Der Schaftrieb im Ötztal – <https://www.naturpark-oetztal.at/> - (aufgerufen am 10.6.2019).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unesco.at/kultur/immaterielles-kulturerbe/oesterreichisches-verzeichnis/detail/article/transhumanz-schafwandertriebe-in-den-oetztaler-alpen/> (aufgerufen am 10.6.2019).

<sup>4</sup> Wilfrid Beimrohr, Mit Brief und Siegel Die Gerichte Tirols und ihr älteres Schriftgut im Tiroler Landesarchiv (Tiroler Geschichtsquellen, herausgegeben vom Tiroler Landesarchiv Nr. 34), Innsbruck 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Tiroler Landesarchiv, Gubernium Publicum, Zl. 10.341/921, ex.1826. Vorher gehört Vent zu Gericht Kastelbell.

<sup>6</sup> Othmar Kolp, Gemeindebuch See, See 2008.S. 51 f. und Dorfbuch der Gemeinde See im Paznaun. Diplomarbeit, Universität Innsbruck 2004.

Example A: The farmer leaned his dead wife up against the wall in the barn. Her frozen corpse is waiting for its transport to the parish church. Whenever the farmer had something to do there in the dark, he hung his lantern on the splayed hand of the dead wife.<sup>7</sup>

Example B: The corpse of the farmer, again frozen in the attic in the old farmhouse until the pass is crossable when the snow melts - The farmer's wife already has taken a new lover who is just with her. As it is in the wooden houses, when it gets warmer, the old beams begin to creak and crack, and today it is particularly bad and loud. Then she calls up to the attic: "You do not have to call on me anymore, I already have another!"<sup>8</sup>

The American writer Ernest Miller Hemingway (\* July 21, 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois, † July 2, 1961 in Ketchum, Idaho), was one of the first ski tourists to visit the sleepy villages of the Tyrolean high valleys, making them then socially acceptable. A "corpse transport story" between the Tyrolean town of Galtür and Ardez in Switzerland made its way into literature. In the Middle Ages, Galtür belonged to the parish of Ardez, which held the same relationship over its rights as Serfaus held over See.

The traditional notion that See's dead were buried in the meadow near today's rectory was refuted by an archaeological dig. Nor does the burial place correspond in any way to the Christian custom. Only criminals and the unbaptized were buried outside of the consecrated earth of the cemetery. The gothic portals of the cemetery wall show that the size of the cemetery has changed little in 700 years.

According to the tradition, the dead were carried first in a leather sack over the mountains, then in the chest or "coffin" (Inv. No. 100) from the high alpine pasture area of Komperdell (elevation 1970 m) down to Serfaus (elevation 1429 m). This is what happened with all of See's dead, again and again with the same leather bag and the same chest. Yet, the Serfaus chest is not suitable for reuse. For this, the hinged base plate is missing. Nevertheless, the notion of the coffin which could apparently be used over and over, held on stubbornly. It was presumably fed by the distorted memory of the unpopular "Joseph-type Sparsarg" ("miserly coffin")<sup>9</sup>: this wooden coffin was equipped with a hatch at the bottom, through which the corpse was let into to the grave. Emperor Joseph II of Austria introduced it in 1785.<sup>10</sup> Apparently he sustainably aroused the minds of the people with it. Yet it is documented that this novelty met with great resistance among the population.

It is difficult to convince some of the Serfaus population that you could to tell the story differently, or actually must, after considering the research results.

## Settlement and parish affiliation

<sup>7</sup> Mündlicher Erzählung von einem Mann aus der Region, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Köck, 80 Jahre im Paznaun, Landeck 2003, S. 116f.

<sup>9</sup> Referenzobjekt im Bestattungsmuseum am Wiener Zentralfriedhof ausgestellt und online: „Josephinischer Gemeindegarg - Um die Verwesung zu beschleunigen, wurde von Joseph II. 1784 angeordnet, die Toten künftig nur in einer „Todtentruhe“ auf den Gottesacker zu bringen. Die in einen Sack eingenähte Leiche fiel durch den Klappmechanismus ins Grab, der Sarg wurde wieder verwendet. Der ausgestellte originale Klappsarg für Kinder kam wegen der hohen Kindersterblichkeit besonders oft zum Einsatz. – Online-version vom 19.08.2014. - <http://www.bestattungsmuseum.at/eportal2/ep/channelView.do/pageTypeld/69635/channelId/-49304> (aufgerufen am 22.6.2019).

<sup>10</sup> Hofdekret vom 27. April, Verordnungen zu Leichenbegängnissen in: *Handbuch aller ... Verordnungen und Gesetze vom Jahre 1784*. Band 6. Joh. Georg Moesle, Wien 1786, S. 565 (Digitalisat (<http://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/>) – (aufgerufen am 5.6.2019)

In the 14th century, shepherds from Serfaus and Fiss, who had come over the mountains, settled permanently.<sup>11</sup> From the transhumance (see above) some widely-scattered hamlets later developed into the local village named See in Paznaun Valley. At that time, however, the German word "See" (lake) did not designate a place, but rather a lake (no longer exists today), hence the former name "Zum See" (at the lake). Initially there were only two farms (1344), but gradually it grew to be more. Around 1600, 11 of a total of 20 farms belonged to the Serfaus parish in the sprawling area of See.<sup>12</sup>

Since 1445<sup>13</sup>, See had a small chapel for daily worship, but for weddings, christenings and funerals, solely the priest in Serfaus was in charge. Even on high holidays, such as Easter, Christmas, etc., it took 6 to 7 hours to walk to Serfaus for church service. Today, this could be interpreted as a combination of religious practice and hiking. In the Middle Ages it was nothing out of the ordinary in the Alpine valleys. The situation was more difficult when someone died. The dead had to be taken to Serfaus for burial, of course onto consecrated ground in the cemetery. Presumably, the corpse was sewn into a linen sheet or laid to rest in a burial shroud, as was customary in those days.<sup>14</sup> So the deceased was put directly into the grave - without a coffin.<sup>15</sup> After 400 years, there is no telling whether they used a leather bag for extra protection during transport.

The bigger the village became, the more often weddings, baptisms and deaths occurred. The desire for independence became more urgent. Between 1594 and 1600, the pastor of See received permission to marry his faithful, to baptize their babies and to bury the deceased.<sup>16</sup> A cemetery was created and from 1650<sup>17</sup> on, according to regulations, also a deceased registration book, in which one registered names and date of death, was established. The transport of the dead over the mountains, of which one still speaks today, thus did not take place until the 1950s as many people believe. The close affiliation to the Serfaus parish church eased after 250 years.

#### The Chest with the coat of arms

The chest or the coffin carries the coat of arms of the Wehingen on the front sides. In 1525, Veit von Wehingen received Court Laudegg as a fief (possession, but not ownership) for his services in the war. He was an important military adviser to the Tyrolean prince. The income from the Laudegg Court meant an increase in wealth for the family. Later, his sons Christoph and Hans Franz inherited

<sup>11</sup> Erste gesicherte Nachricht für die Pfarrgemeinde Serfaus-See stammt aus einer Urkunde von 2. Februar 1344, Hermann von Schrofenstein nennt 2 Höfe: „rautte“ (Rauth) und „galmitte“ (vermutlich: Glitt) - vgl. Othmar Kolb, Anm. 6, S. 65.

<sup>12</sup> Zwei Bauernhöfe (1344), fünf (1427), sechs (1491), sieben (1503), zwanzig (1600). Othmar Kolb, Anm. 6, S. 65 und 72.

<sup>13</sup> Pfarrarchiv See, Ablassbrief vom 16. Jänner 1445, zit. in: Othmar Kolb, Anm. 6, S. 146 mit Abbildung.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Zanesco, George McGlynn, Alexander Zanesco und Stefanie Anders, Archäologische und anthropologische Untersuchungen zum Friedhof St. Nikolaus, Hall in Tirol, (Forum Hall, herausgegeben von Alexander Zanesco, Bd. 3), Hall in Tirol 2012, S. 133, hier: 114.

<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Mader, Notizen zu ausgewählten Exponaten aus den Sonderausstellungen des Museums Stadtarchäologie Hall i.T. von 2008 bis 2011 (Forum Hall, Bd. 3), S. 382-394, hier: 389 (Ausstellung „De profundis“).

<sup>16</sup> Kein archivalischer Beleg erhalten. See wurde zwischen 1594 und 1600 zur Kuratie erhoben. – vgl. Kolb, Anm. 6, S. 148. Der Kurat durfte nun taufen, verheiraten und bestatten. Nur die finanzielle Abgabepflicht an Serfaus blieb bis 1891 (Erhebung zur Pfarrkirche See).

<sup>17</sup> Taufbuch ab 1636, Sterbebuch ab 1650, Traubuch ab 1651.- siehe: Wilfried Beimrohr, Die Matriken (Personenstandsbücher) der Diözese Innsbruck und des Tiroler Anteils der Erzdiözese Salzburg (TGQ Nr. 17), Innsbruck 1987, S. 132 und Othmar Kolb, Anm. 6, S. 151.

the fief. A "Kirchmaier"<sup>18</sup> was placed at the side of the respective priest, who was jointly responsible for all financial matters. In 1556, Christoph von Wehingen was named the Kirchmaier.<sup>19</sup>

Presumably he used the old gothic chest – his own family property that had long since gone out of fashion – to keep the inventories of parish property, contracts, and other important documents. It was customary to store such documents in a theft-proof chest and protected from moisture. The chest (Inv. No. 100) fulfilled these conditions through its leather casing and the two pad-locks (double-secured), which unfortunately are missing. Its gothic appearance suggests the fact that it was used as an archive chest in secondary usage.

Chests were used for the storage of all sorts of items, from clothes, to crockery, to rifles, and even grains were stored in chests before cabinets and cupboards prevailed. The house-shaped body is typical of gothic chests. In the Renaissance and Baroque eras, flat lids were preferred. Also, the chests had curved pedestals and an ornamented front. Nevertheless, chests of this type were utilized until the 19th century.<sup>20</sup> Simple in style, of course, are often the so-called community chests made for archival material. Since the "Gemeinde" ("community" or "municipality") only became a political entity in 1819<sup>21</sup>, the archives of the village community were kept in these chests even before this.

The Wehinger coat of arms with the zig-zag bar on an undivided background is the coat of arms of the family lineage. Veit von Wehingen used it, but also already used the Wehingen-Neuhaus four-part alliance coat of arms with the sloping brick wall with squared merlons. Franz von Wehingen had been married to Magdalena Schurf<sup>22</sup> in 1550 for four years already. He was living in Sigmundsried Castle. His father bought the castle because Laudegg Castle in Ladis was in poor structural condition and hardly habitable anymore. Christoph von Wehingen was earmarked for a church career. He sold his brother Hans Franz his half of the inheritance of Sigmundsried Castle in 1550.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, he appears more often in documents than his brother Hans Franz as the judge of Laudegg.

Later, perhaps in the late 19th century or early 20th century, when the parish of Serfaus acquired a vault, the chest became useless. It fell into oblivion and was first found again in 1958. However, the knowledge about its functional context had meanwhile been lost or was concealed for some reason. Called a "mortuary chest," it found its way into the media. On the occasion of the highly dubious 1575-year anniversary of the Serfaus pilgrimage in 2002, Robert Klien described the mortuary chest in the "Town Book"<sup>24</sup> and thus helped establish the history of funerals with questionable seriousness.

## Summary

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<sup>18</sup> Kirchmeier, Verwalter des Kirchenguts – vgl. Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm. 16 Bde. in 32 Teilbänden. Leipzig 1854-1961. Quellenverzeichnis Leipzig 1971. (aufgerufen am 10.06.2019).

<sup>19</sup> Pfarrarchiv Serfaus, Pergamenturkunde, 1556 XI 26 [Urbar] Verzeichnis der Grundzinse und Verpflichtungen der Besitzer der Höfe in St. Georgen und St. Zeno gegenüber den Kirchen St. Georgen und St. Zeno verfasst von Christoph von Wehingen, Kirchmaier – Ebenda Auszug aus Kirchmaier Rechnungen 1556, verfasst und unterzeichnet von Christoph von Wehingen.

<sup>20</sup> Information von Frau Mag. Martina Pall, Direktorin der Schell-Collection. - Email von Mag. Martina Pall am 13.06.2019 08:28 Uhr.

<sup>21</sup> Wilfried Beimrohr, Übungen zu Schriften der Neuzeit – Workshop „Paläographie intensiv“, Tiroler Bildungsforum, Neustift, 8. Juni 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Leopold Stierle, Die Herren von Wehingen, Sigmaringen 1989, S. 90.

<sup>23</sup> Waltraud Comploy, Die Burgen Tirols am obersten Inn, (=Veröffentlichungen der Universität Innsbruck Bd. 74, Kunstgeschichtliche Studien, Bd. I), Innsbruck 1972, Seite 64.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Klien, Die Pfarre Serfaus, in: Gemeinde Serfaus (Hg.), Serfaus [bearbeitet von Robert Klien], Serfaus o.J. [2002], S. 152-165, hier: 153 f.

Every village has its stories. They arise especially where there were living conditions in the past that seem unimaginable to us today. One tends to judge the past from the point of view of the present. The oral tradition is so sustainable, because the oddity of the stories always outweighs the scientific facts.

What is especially unpleasant or disagreeable in the hearts of our ancestors is passed down from generation to generation. More and more the details blur. What remains is the objectionable feeling left by an unpopular imperial reform. The facts fade, but the coffin remains in their heads.

The remembrance of the transport of corpses over the mountains in Tyrol may never have petered out, at any rate it was revived by Ernest Hemingway.

In 1970 someone found bones in the rectory garden. He "classified" them as human bones. And already there's a cemetery for the people of See. The archaeological excavation three years ago proved that it is not so. On the basis of the stylistic classification of the cemetery portals in the Gothic period, it is possible to gauge the size of the cemetery back then. Burying the dead outside the cemetery wall would have been sacrilege.

Last but not least, it should be recalled that the affiliation of the farms in See, from the first settlement with 2 farms lasted 1344<sup>25</sup> to 1594. The corpse transport over the mountains of the Samnaun range took place for a maximum of 250 years. Its legendary story, meanwhile, already outlasts the second millennium.

After 2017, the chest fell victim to exhibit research. Certainly it has lost its magic because of this. Younger people and the middle generation and especially the more educated are less attached to the old stories. Positive reactions were observed among museum visitors under the age of 60. Perhaps a symbiosis of a fantasy story and real facts will be established in the future.

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<sup>25</sup> Starkenberger Urbar: die Weiler Glitt und Rauth, Pfarre Serfaus-See (heute politisch Gemeinde Kappl) – zit. bei Kolp, Anm. 6, S. 65.