

Was The paper made in Bohemia?

by Alžběta Kolodrubcová

The very first short-story of Sherlock Holmes, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, is very dear to every Bohemian – Bohemian by origin or by soul, and especially by both. The story was originally published in *The Strand Magazine* in July 1891. Dr Watson's recounting of the events started, "One night - it was on the 20th of March 1888..."; albeit some renowned scholars date it as 1887 or 1889. And it is full of interesting topics to puzzle generations of Sherlockian scholars, such as Irene Adler, to whom Sherlock Holmes always refers under the honourable title of *the woman* and keeps her photograph on the mantelpiece, or the true identity of Wilhelm Gottsreich Sigismond von Ormstein, Grand Duke of Cassel-Felstein, the hereditary King of Bohemia.

But now let's have a look at another problem, minor when compared with the above mentioned ones, but nevertheless also important. It is the question of the origin of the paper that Sherlock Holmes's noble client used when writing his letter asking Holmes for his professional help. From the paper watermark Holmes determined the place of its origin and read from *The Continental Gazetteer*: "Eglow, Eglonitz - here we are, Egria. It is in a German-speaking country - in Bohemia, not far from Carlsbad. Remarkable as being the scene of the death of Wallenstein, and for its numerous glass factories and paper mills." And dear Doctor Watson readily concluded, "The paper was made in Bohemia."



Sherlock Holmes most probably used one of the copies of *The Gazetteer of the World* coming out in London since 1885, however the name of the town quoted above is slightly corrupted as it should say "Eger" if its German version is meant. However, the name of Eger is ambiguous. Here it refers to Cheb-Eger, but it can also denote the North Hungarian town of Eger (in German known as Erlau, or Eğri in Turkish), which is the second largest city in Northern Hungary. It is well known for its red and white wines, especially for Hungary's most famous red

wine Egri Bikavér (Bull's Blood of Eger). It is also sought as a thermal spa and for its sights such as the castle and the northernmost Turkish minaret (the city was occupied for 91 years by the Turks, who seized it in 1596).

Nevertheless, from the context of the story it is clear that the town of Eger in the Carlsbad (Karlovy Vary in Czech) Region of today's Czech Republic is meant (in 1888 this was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Its Czech name is Cheb and this will be used throughout the remainder of this article; Eger is its German version. According to a census it had 1,013 houses with 18,658 inhabitants in 1890 (compared with more than 30,000 today), only 72 of Czech nationality but 16,795 German. No wonder it was a centre of the German-speaking region known as Egerland until 1945; the name of the town in local Sudeten German being *Egha*.

A Scandal in Bohemia took place the paper mill was owned by a lady bearing the same name as the woman Irene Adler – Sherlock Holmes' *femme fatale* who outwitted him in the very case connected with Bohemia! Between 1896 and 1904 the paper mill was in the hands of Magdalena Adler's children.

The importance of hand-made paper manufacturing declined in the second half of the 19th century. With growing production of cheaper wood-based industrial paper, hand-made paper production, and the demand for it, went down. The paper mill met its end on 6th August 1904 when, at about noon, both mills burnt down, never to be reconstructed. Afterwards the ground was bought by the city of Cheb. After sixty years even the original grounds of

the paper mill disappeared, this time under the waters of the Skalka dam constructed between 1962 and 1964. The lake above the dam covers the ruins completely. It is about 5 kilometres long and its maximum depth is 12 metres.



Cheb paper mill. Picture postcard before 1904.
Private collection of Aleš Kolodrubec

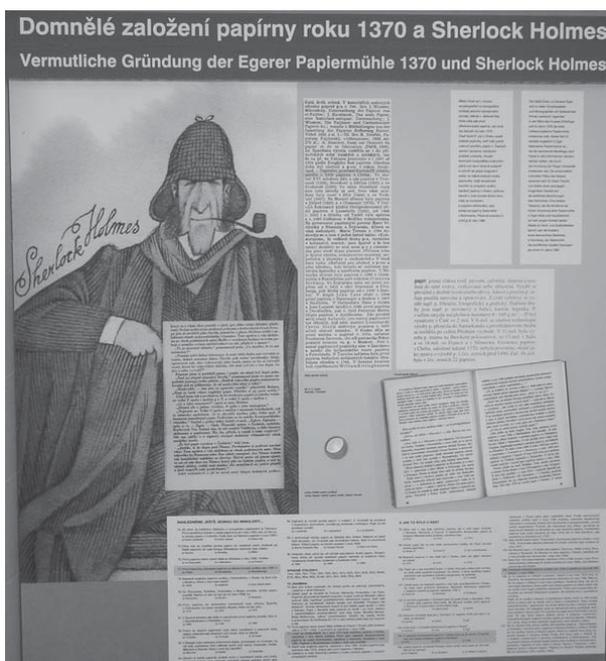


Photo of an exhibition panel. Exhibiton *Zkuste si to bez papíru* / *Probieren sie es ohne Papier* [Try it without paper]. Cheb, May 2004. Photo © Aleš Kolodrubec

The heading says: *Alleged founding of the paper mill in 1370 and Sherlock Holmes* (Picture © Adolf Born, Czech artist and Knight of the Legion of Honour, honorary member of the Czech Society of Sherlock Holmes)

And so, two opposite elements – fire and water – finished the fame of this once famous place that even got into the Holmesian canon. “The paper made in Bohemia” and its place of origin, however, lives its own life in memories that survive until our days.

In 2004 an exhibition, “Zkuste si to bez papíru” (“Try it without Paper”), was held in Cheb and the publication of a book bearing the same name was printed. The exhibition was focused on the history of paper production in the Eger region as there were several other paper mills beside the Eger one – however smaller and of lesser importance. A small group of the Czech Society of Sherlock Holmes (CSSH), together with the author, participated in the grand opening of this exhibition, where a panel devoted to Sherlock Holmes and *A Scandal in Bohemia* mentioning “The paper made in Bohemia” coming from the Cheb paper mill was shown.

In June 2007 Guy Marriot of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London (SHSL), accompanied by

several members of CSSH, including the author, explored the place of the former paper mill hidden under the dam lake from the opposite river bank. In September 2007 members of SHSL - participants of its expedition “Meet Me in Bohemia” – visited the Skalka dam to see the waters covering the ruins of the paper mill famous to all Sherlockians.

The so called “Egertal” (the Ohře-Eger river valley in German) was once a very famous and popular recreation area with roads along both river banks, a couple of weirs holding water and producing small lakes, several restaurants, and an outlook tower called “Egerwarte” (Chebská hlídka or stráž, meaning



Photo of the site of the Cheb paper mill in June 2007.
Photo © Aleš Kolodrubec

Cheb guard). Near the paper mill both banks were connected by a wooden bridge that survived until 1964. A small motor ship for 20 passengers operated and in winter skating was quite popular there and skaters could get from the city further than the former site of the paper mill.

Once the lake opened and showed us a little bit of its secrets. In May 2011 the author was lucky to visit the banks of the river, which had moved back and uncovered parts

of the ruins of the paper mill, only to hide it again later in that year, presumably for further decades and several generations.

The paper production is very closely related to an issue that was an indicator for Sherlock Holmes’s deduction about the origin of paper. Yes, it was pronounced by Doctor Watson, but Holmes led him there. And that issue was a water mark (also known as filigree):

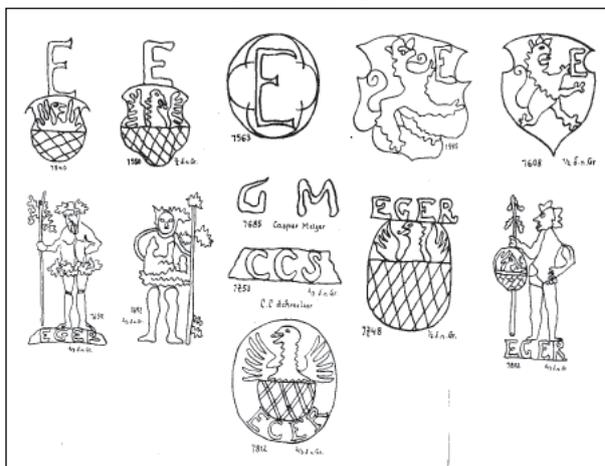
‘Peculiar -that is the very word,’ said Holmes. ‘It is not an English paper at all. Hold it up to the light.’ I did so, and saw a large E with a small g, a P, and a large G with a small t woven into the texture of the paper.¹

If we dive a little bit into the history of papermaking it will help us to clarify what that watermark was like and how it appeared on the sheet of paper. The name “paper” is derived from the Latin word *papyrus*, which comes from the Greek *papuros*. “Papyrus” is a paper-like material made from the papyrus plant (*Cyperus papyrus* in Latin). It was widely used in ancient Egypt for writing several thousand years before the introduction of the paper that we use nowadays. The invention of paper as we know and use it now originates from China and the year 105 AD is generally stated as its beginning. The Chinese kept its production secret. In spite of their effort it made its way to Japan in 610 AD. In the 8th century the secret got to the Islamic world and paper manufacturing spread from Samarkand via Damascus, Cairo and Morocco further to Europe.

A water suspension of natural fibres is used as a raw material for paper production. The pulp is scooped out of a vat by a mould formed of a wooden frame with wire screen. When the mass settles and dries enough, the sheet is removed and further adjusted and dried, making a sheet of hand-made paper.

1 A Scandal in Bohemia

The Chinese used mulberry, however later rags were used and in Europe they were the basic material. Rag-and-bone men bought old rags from a wide area surrounding a paper mill, collected them and sold to the mill. Rags were prepared in a crusher or stamping mill, further producing the pulp. This



Watermarks of the Cheb paper mill; courtesy SOA Cheb (State District Archive – Cheb branch)

The first filigree for the Cheb paper mill was made by a goldsmith Jorg in 1540. In the illustration you can see different samples of watermarks of our paper mill, showing either connection with Cheb (bearing “E” or “Eger” when owned by the city) or with its private owner (“CM” for Caspar Melzer from 1685 or “CCS” for C.C. Schmelzer from 1850). “Eg P Gt” standing for **Eger** (or Egria) **Papier Gesellschaft** is not recorded in the archives, however a custom made filigree for the noble family might be possible. And its probable design suggested by the author of this article is shown in the illustration.

And thus, for his letter to Sherlock Holmes, the hereditary King of Bohemia really used a sheet of paper, with the proposed watermark, manufactured at a Cheb paper mill, whose existence has been proven.

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Sources:

Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan: *A Scandal in Bohemia*. [In: *The Strand Magazine*. London, July 1891]

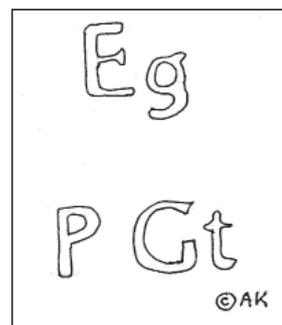
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Ottův slovník naučný: Ilustrovaná encyklopaedie obecných vědomostí, Devatenáctý díl. P–Pohoř. Praha, J. Otto; 1902 [Otto’s encyclopedia: *Illustrated encyclopedia of general knowledge*. Vol. 19, from P to Pohoř]

Karel Halla: *Zkuste si to bez papíru / Probieren sie es ohne Papier* [Try it without paper]. Cheb 2004 (Czech-German mirror publication on the history of paper manufacturing in the Cheb–Eger District)

process demanded great supplies of water and that’s why paper mills were founded on rivers. Water energy was also used for the crushing of rags and making a water suspension of cotton particles.

Watermark or filigree is a sign that appears on paper when viewing it against a source of light (from a window, a lamp, or probably in Holmes’s case, against a burning fire in a fireplace). This sign is prepared by using a thin wire soldered to the screen and creating thus the desired image – a logo, producer’s name etc. (Other ways of making a watermark are also possible and its visibility can vary too. But in our case, this one was used.)



Possible design of the watermark mentioned in *A Scandal in Bohemia*.

