

# Samuel Hahnemann - early years in Meissen

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Just over a 100 miles from Berlin, on the banks of the broad River Elbe in South West Germany, lies Meissen, the ancient Saxon town founded by King Henry 1 in 929AD. In mediaeval times the town was a centre for the cloth trade, but in the early eighteenth century, an apprentice Apothecary by the name of Johann Bottger found the surrounding clay soil to be especially suited for the making of white hard paste porcelain. This became known as Dresden china in Britain and *Porcelaine de Saxe* in France. In 1710 a factory was established in the town and thirty years later an art school added. All Europe had endeavoured to copy the superb translucent ware produced in China and Meissen was the most successful in achieving this aim until 1756, when leadership passed to Sevres in France. Amongst the artists who worked on painting the Meissen pottery (with its famous crossed swords trademark) were Christian Gottfried Hahnemann, engaged in 1741 at the age of 21 years, and his brother Christian August, appointed a year later when he was 20. Both are thought to have subsequently specialised in painting delicate flowers and landscape. Initially Chinese flowers were in vogue; later they were superseded by European species such as lilies, pansies and tulips. Sadly, it was a rule of the factory that artists' names could not be incorporated in their handiwork, so it is not possible to attribute specific designs to the brothers. Their father, Christoph, was also an artist by profession.

Following the death of his first wife, Johanne, after only 18 months' marriage the elder brother married Johanna Christiane, daughter of Quartermaster Captain and Mrs Johann Spiessen in 1750. From this union came a number of children, of which the third was a boy named Christian Friedrich Samuel born close to midnight on 10th April 1755, in a three-storey corner house known as the *Eckhaus*. To avoid confusion with all the other family members called Christian, the youngster was known as 'Samuel.' The house, on the corner of what is now known as Hahnemannplatz and Neumarkt, no longer stands, having been taken down in the early 1900's (according to a charming young lady in the local Tourist

Bureau), and replaced by a hotel. The property is presently occupied on the ground floor by a Dental practice and has an appropriate plaque commemorating the place of Hahnemann's birth.



A stone recess in the corner, now bricked up, is said to have contained a bust of the Founder. This has now been removed, mounted on a stone column and erected in a small town-centre park. (*see below*)

During the disastrous Seven Years' War that started in 1756, the Meissen factory was plundered by the Prussian King to help finance his armies' battles with Austria. Skilled labour was forcibly withdrawn to start up a rival porcelain industry in Berlin. The remaining artists and workers suffered acutely and opportunities to educate their children from



their scanty incomes became less and less. Gottfried and Johanna taught their children the basics of reading and writing at home during their infant years. Eventually Samuel was admitted to class two at the local school in July 1767. He took to studying enthusiastically, excelling particularly in languages. Within a few years he had mastered Arabic, English, French, Greek and Spanish in addition to his own native German; by the time he was 13, he was teaching fellow pupils Hebrew. Unfortunately, economic circumstances were such that his father attempted to divert his interests away from book learning towards a more practical type of vocational training. The object of this was to ensure a greater chance of paid employment in the future. Thus, shortly before his fifteenth birthday, Samuel was sent to work in a grocery store in Leipzig to obtain the necessary experience to become a merchant. This did not appeal, however, and it was not long before he returned home, where his mother hid him until the news could be broken gently to his father without fear of reprisals.

Samuel never rebuked his parents for the lack of formal academic instruction during his early years, understanding the difficult situation in which they found themselves. Indeed, in later life when he became a father, he took pleasure in teaching his own children too. Gottfried taught his son 'to think' and passed on several of his own maxims, one of which - '*Never be a passive listener or learner*' followed him into adult life.

The youthful Samuel continued studying, even making a secret clay candlestick in which to place a taper so that he could read his books furtively. His teacher recognised his talents for learning and offered the boy free tuition providing he helped out with teaching other pupils in his class. In about 1771, despite intense competition, Samuel won admission to the long established Prince's School in Meissen, joining his favourite school master Johann Muller, who had moved there a year earlier. He pursued studies in botany, mathematics and geometry in addition to languages for which he had such a prestigious ability. The school existed until 1941.

Four years later Samuel was preparing to leave the School and chose the subject 'The wonderful construction of the human hand' as his farewell dissertation. The speech was

delivered in Latin from the school platform to an audience of teachers, dignitaries, parents and former pupils. In it, Samuel acknowledged Divine Intervention in the creation, and considered the way in which the bodily form had been adapted to the self defence needs of different animals; circumstances in which the hands played a major role. In his choice of subject Samuel was preparing for his future at medical school.

With the equivalent of about £8 in cash from his father and a bag full of carefully folded clothes, he left Meissen in the spring of 1775 to enter the most famous educational institute in Germany, the University of Leipzig, founded in 1409.

Hahnemann's contact with Meissen continued spasmodically throughout his life. On his eighty-sixth birthday the Town Council conferred the freedom of the city on Hahnemann, a gesture that he appreciated very much. Unfortunately, enthusiasm for Hahnemann's work amongst Meisseners today is rather less apparent than it was during the last century. However, with unification and the great interest for homoeopathy in Germany generally, it is to be hoped that recognition will be forthcoming in the future. **BHA**

Books on the life of Samuel Hahnemann  
Hobhouse RW. The Life of Christian Samuel Hahnemann, CW Daniel 1933.  
Cook TM. Samuel Hahnemann, Wellingborough, Thorson's Ltd 1981.

