

# Snow White – a native girl from Lohr am Main

In 1986 the pharmacist and historian Dr. [Karlheinz Bartels](#) of [Lohr am Main](#), Germany, succeeded in credibly connecting many of the actual points of reference of the fairytale to Lohr and the surrounding region<sup>1</sup>. According to this theory, the historical prototype of Snow White was born Maria Sophia Margaretha Catharina von Erthal in Lohr am Main in the year 1729. Her father, [Philipp Christoph von Erthal](#), was the superior magistrate representing the Electorate of Mainz in Lohr between 1719 and 1748. Due to his diplomatic skills, the father was frequently away from home as an ambassador and “foreign minister” for the archbishopric. In that capacity he had dealings with emperors and kings throughout Europe. For this reason, the von Erthals may have appeared to the inhabitants of Lohr as a sort of “royal family.”

The castle in Lohr was the family’s official residence. After the death of Maria Sophia’s birth mother in the year 1741, her father married Claudia Elisabeth Maria von Venningen, born the imperial countess of Reichenstein, on May 15, 1743. The stepmother was demonstrably domineering, and employed her position –Philipp Christoph was very rarely at home in Lohr – to the advantage of her children from her first marriage. The frequent absence of the father might well explain (in the words of Theodor Ruf) the “oddly inactive” role of the king within the fairytale<sup>2</sup>.

The most important clue to support the idea that Snow White was a native of Lohr is the “Talking Mirror.” This magic mirror, 1.6 meters in height and ornately decorated, can still be viewed today in the [Spessart Museum](#) in the Lohr Castle. It has been proven to be a product of the Mirror Manufacture of the Electorate of Mainz (Kurmainzische Spiegelmanufaktur)<sup>3</sup>. The Mirror Manufacture was famous throughout

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□ Karlheinz Bartels: *Schneewittchen – Zur Fabulologie des Spessarts*. Lohr 1990, [ISBN 3-9800281-4-3](#).

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□ Theodor Ruf: *Die Schöne aus dem Glassarg. Schneewittchens märchenhaftes und wirkliches Leben*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1994, [ISBN 3-88479-967-3](#) p.66

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□ Werner Loibl, *Die kurmainzische Spiegelmanufaktur Lohr am Main (1698 – 1806) und die Nachfolgebetriebe im Spessart, Neustadt an der Aisch 2012* (in print); Loibl is the foremost expert in the history of 17th- and 18th-century glasshouses in Germany, according to Dedo von Kerssenbrock-Krosigk, Curator of European Glass at the Corning Museum of Glass (Corning, NY).

Europe. It was founded in Lohr in 1698 by the electoral prince Lothar Franz von Schönborn. This firm was controlled by Philipp Christoph von Erthal. The mirror was likely a gift from him to his second wife Claudia. It “spoke”, like many mirrors from Lohr, predominantly in aphorisms. The upper right corner of the mirror contains a clear reference to self-love (“Amour Propre”).

Geographical points of reference can also be found in the vicinity of Lohr. The “wild woods” (for all quotations cf. the English text translated by [D.L. Ashliman](#)) in which Snow White was abandoned could be the Spessart, which Wilhelm Hauff (1802-1827) later characterized in *The Inn in the Spessart* as a “terrible forest”<sup>4</sup>. Snow White’s escape route across “the mountains” was perhaps an allusion to an ancient mountainous route, which was already referenced in the fourteenth century and on which it was possible from Lohr to reach the mines near [Bieber](#) via the Spessart Mountains. In the middle of the eighteenth century approximately 500 miners were employed there digging for silver and copper. It is possible that the “seven dwarfs who picked and dug for ore in the mountains” were diminutive miners or children working in those mines. Bartels was likewise able to designate relevant literature describing the substance with which the evil stepmother possibly produced the “poisoned apple”: according to this theory, she saturated half of the apple with the juice of the legendary *Atropa belladonna*/Black Cherry<sup>5</sup>. This plant is also indigenous to the Spessart. Its berries contain the alkaloid atropine, which has an anesthetic effect and which may have produced Snow White’s [rigor mortis](#).

The “glass coffin” and the “pair of iron shoes,” in which the stepmother “was forced ... to dance until she fell down dead” as punishment, could readily have been manufactured in the glassworks or hammer mills of the Spessart region.

It was the people of Lohr who transformed Maria Sophia, on the basis of her praiseworthy virtues, into nothing less than a fairytale figure. M.B. Kittel, the chronicler of the Erthal family, characterized Maria Sophia as a noble girl, an “angel of mercy and kindness,” and as “charitable toward the poor and the suffering”; he attributed to her a “personal amiability.” In the “hearts and minds of the people,” namely the population of Lohr

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□ Cf. the text online in: <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/47123/>.

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□ Cf. <http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/n/nighde05.html>

and the Spessart, this daughter of the Erthal family probably represented the ideal image of a princess. Within a few years of the death of Maria Sophia the story was already put to paper, and in late 1812 the fairytale *Snow White* was first published by the Brothers Grimm.



The birthplace of Maria Sophia Margaretha Catharina von Erthal (Snow White): the Castle in Lohr am Main in the county of Main-Spessart, Germany, nowadays location of the Spessart ; Foto: Barbara Grimm



The "Talking Mirror" in the Spessart Museum in Lohr am Main; Foto: Manfred Scherer