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The Origin of Gandalf and Josef Madlener

Manfred Zimmerman

Marburg University, Germany

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

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The Origin of Gandalf and Josef Madlener

Abstract

Disputes the story in Carpenter's biography about the origin of Gandalf in a picture postcard Tolkien acquired in 1911, pointing out that the painting on which the postcard was based was painted in 1925 or later.

Additional Keywords

Madlener, Josef. *Der Berggeist* (painting)—Relation to Gandalf; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf; Manfred Zimmermann

The Origin of Gandalf and Josef Madlener

Manfred Zimmerman

"The origin of Gandalf?" I hear people ask, "don't we all know that Olórin came as an emissary from the West, to help the free peoples of Middle-earth in their struggle against Sauron and his minions, and to move Elves and Men and all living things of good will to valiant deeds--Olórin, who was Mithrandir among the Elves, Tharkûn to the Dwarves, in the South Incānus, in the North Gandalf? Or in terms of our primary world, has it not been known for quite some time now that Gandalf got his name from the Old Norse dwarf list of the Völuspá and the Snorra Edda?"

Yes, but there is a different aspect to the story. On p.51 of his Tolkien biography, London: Allen and Unwin 1977, Humphrey Carpenter states that in 1911, during a tour of Switzerland, "Tolkien bought some picture postcards. Among them was a reproduction of a painting by a German artist, J. Madlener. It is called Der Bergegeist, the mountain spirit, and it shows an old man sitting on a rock under a pine tree. He has a white beard and wears a wide-brimmed hat and a long cloak. He is talking to a white fawn that is nuzzling his upturned hands, and he has a humorous but compassionate expression; there is a glimpse of rocky mountains in the distance. Tolkien preserved this postcard carefully, and long afterwards he wrote on the paper cover in which he kept it: 'Origin of Gandalf'."

Some time ago, Rhona Beare of the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, directed my attention to this passage and asked, if I could not discover more about this curious postcard or even get hold of a copy. It was not too difficult to find out that 'J. Madlener' should actually be 'Josef Madlener'. He was not one of the big names in art, but he was important enough for entries in art reference books from the twenties to the fifties. Paintings of his were said to be in several small municipal galleries in Southern Germany as well as in a Leipzig museum. Inquiries there had rather limited success, but I was able to establish contact with the daughter of the artist, Miss Julie Madlener. The facts of his long life were as follows:

Josef Madlener was born 16 April 1881 in Amendingen near Memmingen (west of Munich). He studied in Munich and worked as an illustrator for various periodicals, newspapers, and magazines. From illustrating he later changed to painting, especially rural scenes from his native area and motifs from fairy tales. He was particularly successful with his Christmas pictures. He died 27 December 1967, never having realized his contribution to literature. In 1981 his home town Memmingen organised an exhibition of some of his works to honour his 100th birthday. In his old age he seems to have had quite an impressive face, if we can go by the photograph on the frontispiece of the accompanying catalog: if his eyebrows had been sticking out just a bit more, he could himself have posed for Gandalf.

The surprising bit of information was that Tolkien could not have bought a postcard reproduction of Der Bergegeist during his Switzerland tour of 1911, since that picture was not painted before 1925/26. Miss Madlener--born 1910--maintains that she can distinctly



remember her father painting it. My first idea on hearing this was that he had at that time produced a second edition of a work that had already been in existence about fifteen years earlier. This turned out to be impossible, too, for prior to World War I Madlener had been working in a quite different style. Miss Madlener also stated that a postcard version of Der Bergegeist was published in the late twenties by Ackermann Verlag München, in a folder with three or four similar pictures with motifs drawn from German mythology: a fairy lady of the woods, a deer carrying a shining cross between its antlers, 'Rübezahl' (a fairy-tale character), and possibly one more.

I subsequently wrote to Mr. Carpenter and asked if his dating of the postcard and connecting it with the tour of Switzerland was based on positive evidence or if it was an educated guess--where else should Tolkien have got hold of a thing of that sort? He told me that, as far as he recalls, his statement "was based on some notes that he (Tolkien) wrote on the envelope which contains his copy of the card; but since I do not have the envelope to hand, I cannot verify this, and in any case he (T.) may well have made a mistake himself" --getting things mixed up decades after the event. Mr. Carpenter also feels that he ought to have reproduced the card in his biography, as he gets "endless inquiries from Tolkien enthusiasts who want to see a copy, and who cannot find any trace of it."

The 1945 Calendar

	Jan	Feb	Mar
last quarter (6	5	7
new ●	14	12	14
first quarter)	20	19	20
full 0	28	27	28

Notice that the "dreadful nightfall" (Shire-March 22) was modern March 14, a New Moon; the thin crescent set just after the sun, so that it was a moonless night.

Once or twice Tolkien ignores the fact that the Shire month begins ten days earlier than ours; he says he chose December 25 for the setting out of the Company from Rivendell because December 25 is Christmas Day. Has anybody pointed out that the Quest is fulfilled on March 25, and in our modern Calendars March 25 is the Feast of the Annunciation?

ITHILDIN

In The Lord of the Rings, the chapter describing Frodo's arrival at the West Gates of Moria is entitled "A Journey in the Dark." The Nine Walkers reached the lake outside the gates when "cold stars were glinting in the sky high above the sunset," waded through a creek at its northern end as "the last gleams of the sunset were veiled in cloud" and walked a mile southwards to reach the two tall holly trees just outside the invisible doors. Gandalf passed his hands to and fro over the smooth face of the cliff, muttering a spell, and the west doors of Moria became visible.

The Moon now shone upon the grey face of the rock; but they could see nothing else for a while. Then slowly on the surface, where the wizard's hands had passed, faint lines appeared, like slender veins of silver running in the stone. At first they were no more than pale gossamer-threads, so fine that they only twinkled fitfully where the Moon caught them.

Gandalf explained that they were "wrought of ithildin that mirrors only starlight and moonlight". Since the cliff faces west, and the Moon is shining on it, the Moon must have passed the highest point of its journey and was beginning its descent to the west. Yet when the Company has journeyed for several hours through the Mines and Gandalf proposes a halt, he implies that the Moon has only just begun its descent. "We had better halt here for what is left of the night...The late Moon is riding westward and the middle-night has passed."

Barbara Strachey worked out the phases of the Moon for her Journeys of Frodo. Map 18 shows that the Moon was waning when the Com-

pany reached the west doors of Moria. It was January 13 by Shire Reckoning, i.e. Afteryule 13, which by the modern Calendar is January 4. A waning Moon rises after sunset and sets after sunrise; it could not possibly shine on the west doors of Moria an hour or two after sunset. Since the phases of the Moon for the year of Sauron's fall are (with a margin of error of one day) the same as those of 1945, the year of Hitler's fall, we can use Whitaker's Almanac for 1945 (though the latitude is wrong) to see when the Moon rose and set on January 4 (Afteryule 13). It rose 6½ hours after sunset, and set 3½ hours after sunrise.

Ithildin reflects starlight as well as moonlight; but the starlight would have to be unusually bright for Frodo to remember it as moonlight. From "The Mirror of Galadriel" we learn that Earendil the Evening Star was shining on Solmath 14, which by our Calendar is February 4. Whitaker tells us that Venus was an evening star in January as well as February of 1945.

Gandalf and Joseph Madlener continued from page 22

It now seems clear to me that Tolkien did not see the postcard on the wrapper of which he later wrote 'Origin of Gandalf' before the late twenties. Perhaps he got it--or the little folder Miss Madlener referred to--as a present from somebody who was touring the continent at that time. If that surmise is correct, the model for the outward appearance of the wizard came before the professor's eyes at about the time when he began to tell his children the stories that eventually became The Hobbit.

But are there any copies of the postcard left and, most important, where did the original painting get to? Unfortunately, I was not able to trace any more copies apart from the one among the Tolkien papers and one in the possession of the artist's daughter, with which she does not want to part, understandably enough. Where would you look for an obscure postcard reproduction made half a century ago? The publisher, Ackermann Verlag München, seems to be no longer in existence--it is not identical with today's F.A.Ackermanns Kunstverlag in Munich.

As for the original, nobody has the slightest idea as to its whereabouts. It might have perished somewhere in World War II, but on the other hand there is a chance that it might be--of all places--in America: At the time when he painted Der Berggeist Madlener sold a number of his works to the U.S., for quite substantial sums. Perhaps it is hanging on some American living-room wall or catching dust in someone's attic, unhonoured and unrecognized for what it is.

So keep your eyes open--you might recover a lost treasure. In order that you know what to look for I have provided a rough sketch. (The measurements of the original are 50 by 60 or 70 centimeters). For the limited success of the execution I crave the indulgence of the artists and illustrators among the readers of Mythlore.