

AN ALCHEMICAL JOURNEY TO THE BLACK FOREST

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The first alchemist I ever met was named Merus Favilla, a tall, thin Italian man with deep brown eyes and unruly black hair. He had set up a laboratory in Prague but fled the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and settled in Vienna in 1968. I met him at the University of Vienna, where he worked as a lab assistant.

At the time, I was a twenty-five-year-old graduate student who spent most of his time translating old alchemy manuscripts in the library. When I found out Merus was a practicing alchemist, I asked if he would teach me some laboratory techniques. Fortunately, he was seeking help with a long experiment he wanted to start.

Merus came from the *Mutus Liber* tradition that focused on isolating an elusive essence known as the First Matter. Alchemists believe it is an ethereal substance existing between energy and matter that is the source of all physical transformations. The First Matter is hidden in blackness everywhere in the universe. Blackness is its signature.

Merus explained the primary source for the First Matter in Europe was in the dirt from the Black Forest in southwest Germany (see map on next page). We would have to drive there to get some dirt and bring it back to his laboratory. Alchemists, he said, have been going there for centuries.

All seven metals of alchemy are found in the Black Forest, and some mines have operated continuously for over a thousand years. Many alchemists lived isolated lives deep in the woods to be close to the source of the metals. According to Merus, it is the concentration of First Matter that causes the metals to mature underground



and makes the trees, plants, and animals to grow so large there.

In the Middle Ages, the Black Forest was an almost impenetrable woodland. The trees grew so close together that the thick canopy they formed blocked out all the sun. Even in the middle of the day, it was like night in the woods. The forest became known as a crossroads between worlds, the home to all kinds of primal spirits and strange creatures.

We began our 500-mile trip to the Black Forest in the most uncomfortable vehicle ever made—a 1957 Puch 500. Produced by an Austrian bicycle company, the Puch had a roll-back canvas roof with windows glued into the doors. The body was only 52 inches high and 52 inches wide. Merus replaced the front seats with two children's beach chairs so he could sit up straight behind the wheel. I had to lay sideways in the rear seat. There were no springs anywhere in the vehicle. The

upholstery stunk from mildew, and I quickly nicknamed the car “the Puke.”

It took eleven grueling hours to go from Vienna to the Black Forest in the Puke. We stopped in Staufen, a quaint town just a few miles from the entrance to the Munstertal Valley at the southern tip of the forest. We checked into the *Gasthaus zum Löwen* (“Inn of the Lions”). Merus had reserved Room 5, where the famous alchemist Dr. Johann Georg Faust spent the last years before he died in 1539.

Everyone there insisted this was the same Faust on whom Goethe based his legendary character. Supposedly, Faust returned to Staufen in his declining years to be close to the nourishing energies of the Black Forest. There was even a painting of him hiking alone in the dark woods.

After breakfast the next morning, we packed up and drove into the Black Forest. We followed the main road into the valley and parked off the road near Mount Belchen. I took two burlap sacks and a small wooden spade out of the front of the car, and we headed off on our haphazard hike in the woods. After we got deeper into the woods, Merus began sniffing the air and kicking the dirt. A few times he stopped and stood in complete silence for several minutes. Three times



in different places, he paused to urinate in the dirt.

As we snaked our way through a dense, dark part of the woods into a small clearing, Merus got very excited and announced he had found the “virgin earth” he was looking for. With the tip of his shoe, he gently marked the spot with an “X.” I threw the sacks to the ground, and took out the carved hardwood spade alchemists used in handling materials thought to contain First Matter. At no time should metallic utensils or containers come in contact with First Matter, since it grounds and changes the energy.

I knelt down and started digging. The hard crust gave way in clumps, revealing the black soil beneath. I was surprised how loose and airy the dirt was as I dug deeper. It was just the opposite of what I expected, so I put down the spade and pulled out the dirt with my hands. Carefully, I placed each scoop of dirt deep in the sack.

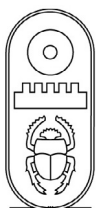
Suddenly, a root or something tangled around my hand and seemed to be tightening its hold. I gasped, yanking my hands out of the dirt. When I looked at my right hand, I could not believe my eyes. Coiled around my fingers was the ugliest creature I ever saw.

Nearly two-feet long and thick as a cigar, it looked like a mutant snake without any skin. I felt tiny claws on its underbelly digging into my hand, while its toothless mouth popped open wide. I whipped my arm downwards in a spasm of disgust, flinging the creature to the ground. The stunned snake stretched out and slowly began crawling back toward the hole.

“There’s a snake!” I screamed.

Merus replied calmly: “It’s just a worm.”

As it turned out, he was right. There is a giant earthworm called the *regenwurm* (“King of Worms”) that lives only in the





Black Forest (see photo above). Merus said the First Matter in the soil caused the worms to grow so big, and it was a sign we had found a good place to dig.

I decided to start using the spade again and eventually filled two sacks half-full of the precious black soil. We hauled them back to the Puke, and, after an excruciating ride back to Vienna, we safely sealed away the dirt in a large clay pot in Merus's cellar.

The next step in the process was to prepare the "menstruum," an alchemical term for any solvent used to extract essences from materials. In our case, the perfect menstruum was morning dew, so we began collecting dew from the grassy lawn in the park. We made three collection frames of burlap stretched on door-sized wood frames and suspended them about four inches off the ground. After the morning dew condensed, we unhooked the fabric and wrung out the precious liquid, which we stored in clay jugs. We did this every day for over a month, until we had enough. Merus then added sap from trees and living plant material to the dew, which he now called the "alkahest" or "universal solvent."

On the first day of Spring 1971, Merus began the tincturing work. He took out some of the Black Forest dirt

and began drying it. Then he filtered it through a mesh screen and poured the sifted dirt into a large glass retort about the size of a five-gallon water jug. Next, he added the menstruum and gently heated the vessel. Gradually over several weeks, there formed a layer of matted material like peat moss. This is known as the "Turf of the Philosophers," which indicates the First Matter is still viable and the work can proceed.

The layer of turf and another inch or so of loose material just below it was removed and dried. Then it was placed back in the retort with more dew, sap, and plant material. The concoction was distilled repeatedly. This whole process from beginning to end was repeated over and over. It would take Merus eleven years to complete his tincture.

During this time, I returned to the United States and lost touch with Merus. When I went back to Vienna in 1986, he told me he was working on the Philosopher's Stone from the isolated First Matter. He thanked me for my assistance and admitted he could not have made his tincture without me. He told me it was a great success and a German pharmaceutical company was interested in testing it. But despite repeated requests, he would never give me a sample.