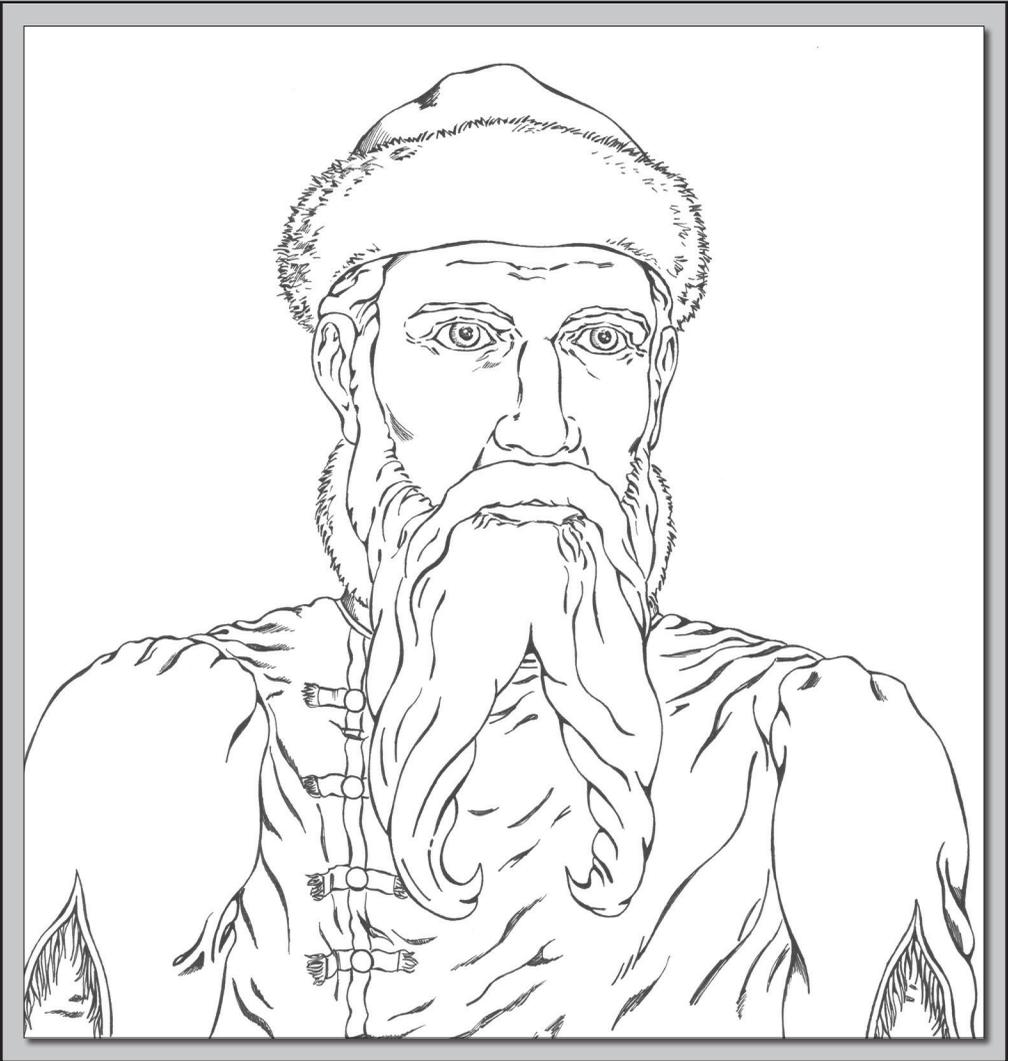


WHO IN THE WORLD WAS THE SECRETIVE PRINTER? THE STORY OF JOHANNES GUTENBERG

by Robert Beckham
Illustrations by Jed Mickle



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CHAPTER 1



GROWING UP IN MAINZ

About six hundred years ago in the times of knights and castles, a baby boy was born in the town of Mainz, in the country of Germany. His parents named him Johannes.

If you were walking through Mainz on the day Johannes was born, you would see the Rhine River flowing on the other side of town. Boats float by, carrying travelers, and perhaps loads of cloth and other supplies to be sold in the city.

A strong wall stands around Mainz. People go in and out through four gates. There are towers at each gate where guards stand watch. The wall was built to help the people defend themselves when they are attacked by their enemies.

Inside the city, the steeple of a beautiful church rises high in the air. You may hear bells ringing. The main streets are paved with wood planks. Smaller streets are only mud. All the streets are crowded and noisy with people. You must watch out for the farm animals, too! Horses, cows, pigs, and sheep share the streets with the people. As you can imagine, the smell is pretty bad.

Along these crowded streets, you would find shops and inns. But you would not find libraries or bookstores in Mainz. One small bookstore now has more books than all the books in Germany when Johannes was a boy. That is because each copy of a book had to be written by hand. People called scribes would take a book that had already been written, and copy the words into another book. The scribes worked carefully, but of course, they sometimes made mistakes. So the copied books would have errors in them. And books took many weeks or months to copy!

Most of the books were owned by the Church leaders, with their Bibles and prayer books. Very rich people also owned a few books.

Johannes' family was among the rich people of Mainz. Johannes' father owned a big house and also a farm near the town. He received these things from his parents after they died. Johannes' family was honored and respected. His father was a leader in the town. They were known as an Old Family.



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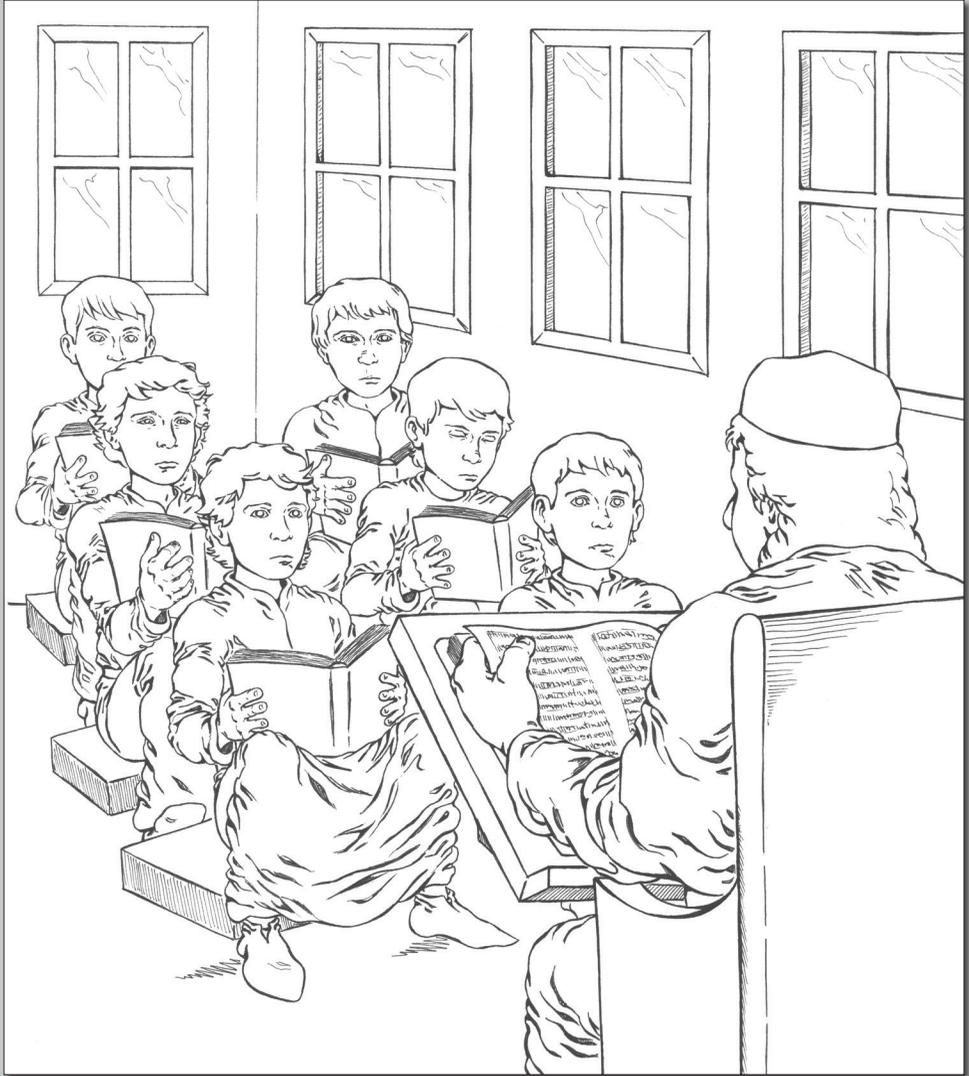
Johannes' father was an Old Family man because his parents were an Old Family. He did not have to do anything to become Old Family. He received special privileges and favors because of who his parents were.

Some of the special favors helped Johannes' father to earn money. He sold cloth for making clothes, and he was given a share of the profits from coin-making at the Mint (a place where money is made). Only Old Family people were allowed to do these things.

The honor of belonging to an Old Family was passed from parents to their children. So Johannes expected to be an Old Family man when he grew up. He too would receive special favors. Because his family was important, Johannes had a last name.

His last name, Gutenberg, came from the name of the house where his family lived. You see, most German people in 1400 did not have a last name. Only people who owned land and large houses and had money had last names. These last names were often taken from the name of the house where the family lived. So when Johannes' family came to live in the Gutenberg house, Gutenberg became their last name.

Johannes had a last name and special favors. He also got to go to school. But in his school, Johannes had very few books. One book helped him learn to read and write Latin. Latin was the language of the Romans, who had once

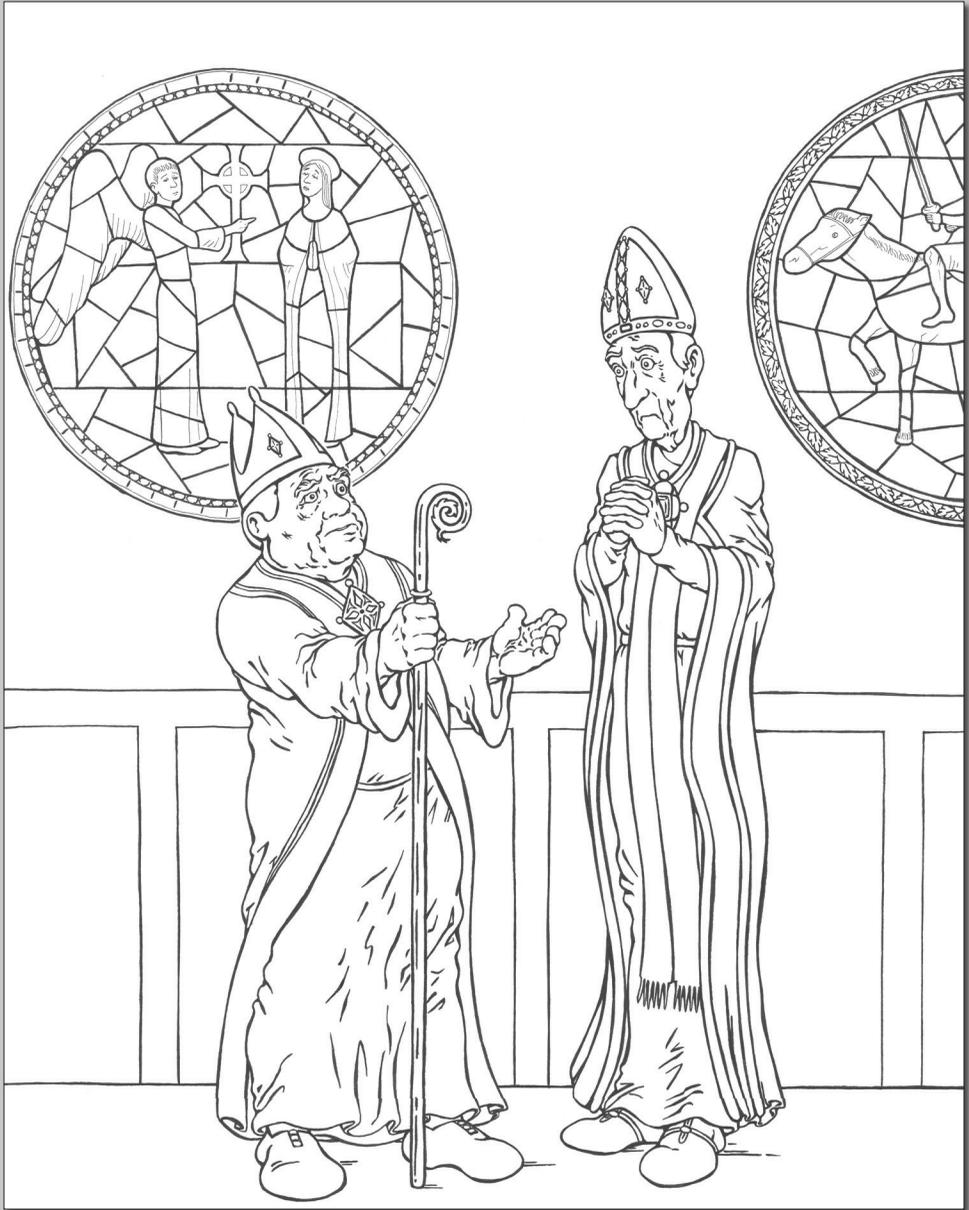


Johannes had very few books.

ruled over people in many lands—people who spoke many languages. These people used Latin to speak with each other.

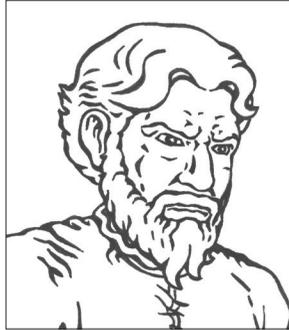
By the time Johannes was born, the Romans did not rule anything, and nobody spoke Latin in their everyday activities. So why did Johannes learn Latin? Because all educated, Christian people were taught Latin. Latin became the special language of the Christian Church. Just like the Roman Empire, the Christian Church spread to many lands where people spoke many languages. The leaders of the Church could talk and write to each other in Latin. Even the Bibles that they used were written in Latin.

Johannes also learned simple arithmetic. He was probably taught arithmetic using the same kind of numbers—0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9—that you learn today. These numbers were first invented in India. Then, Arab people learned them. Finally, knowledge of the new numbers spread to Johannes' country. The new numbers made arithmetic much easier. Many German people still did arithmetic with Roman Numerals that looked like letters of the alphabet: I, V, L, C, M. Even easy adding or subtracting was very hard to do with Roman Numerals.



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and write to each other in Latin.*

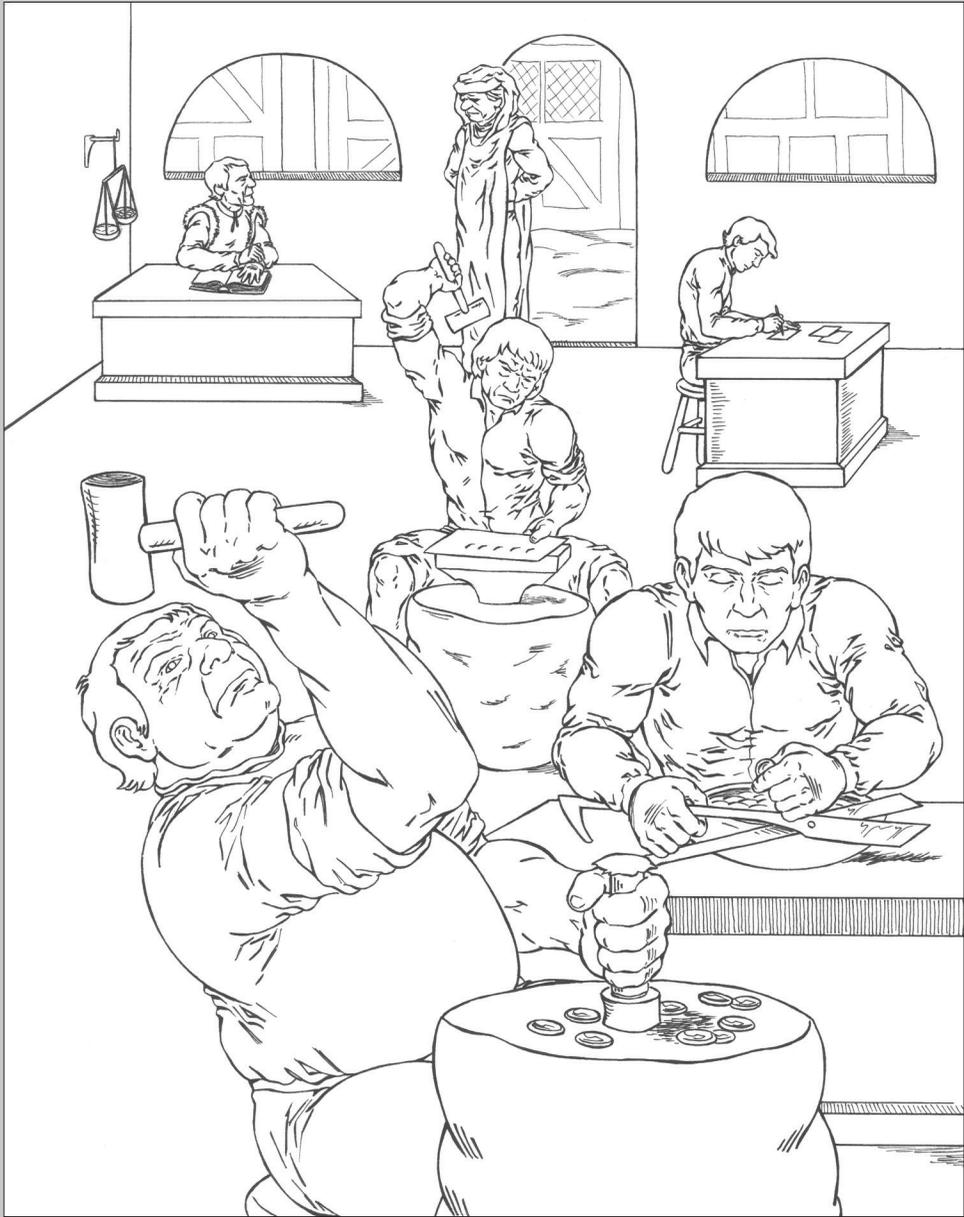
CHAPTER 2



WORKING AT THE MINT

When Johannes was a young man, in 1419, his father died. Johannes expected to be an Old Family man, just as his father was. But that did not happen. His mother did not belong to an Old Family before she married. So the other Old Families in Mainz decided that she and her three children could no longer be an Old Family. They lost some of their special privileges.

But Johannes' mother still had a lot of money and two houses. His older brother moved into the big house. Johannes didn't move into either house because he already had his own place to live. But he still depended on his father for money. Johannes got a small amount of money after his father died, but it was not enough to live on. He needed to find a job.



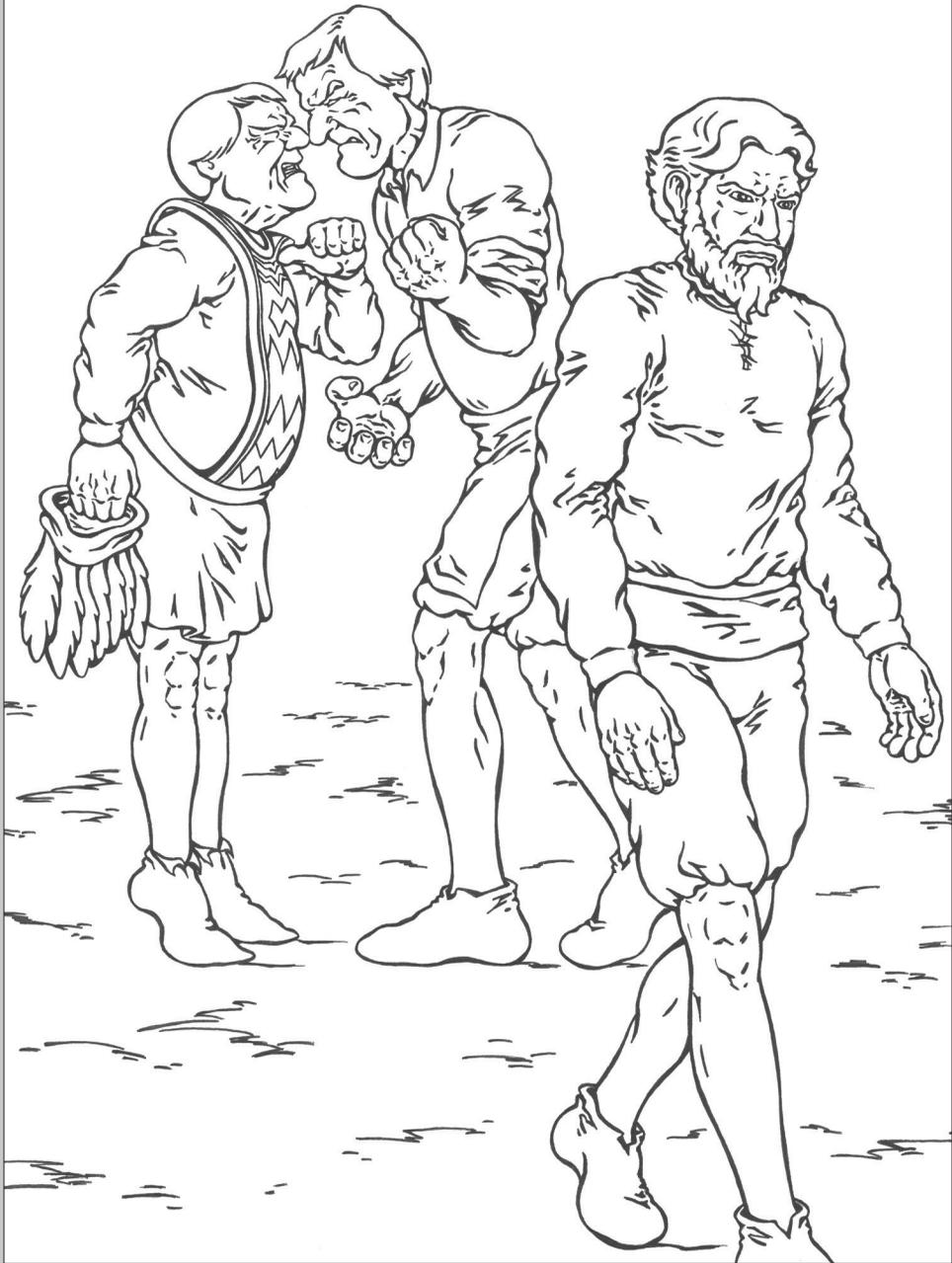
Johannes got a job at the Mint, where coins were made.

Johannes got a job at the Mint, where coins were made. The Mint was close to the house where he grew up. As a boy, he watched the men making coins, and admired their skill.

Look at the words and figures on a coin. You can read on the coin “United States of America” and “In God We Trust.” Perhaps a man’s head or an eagle is stamped on the coin. Words and figures were also stamped on coins when Johannes worked at the Mint, but the coins were harder to make. Someone first had to carve the words and figures on a small piece of metal, to make a stamp. Then, the stamp would be pressed down onto the coin. Craftsmen carved the stamps with small, very sharp knives. This was the hardest job at the Mint, but Johannes learned how to do it.

Johannes had a pretty good job as a craftsman at the Mint, but he could not hope to advance to a better job. All the best jobs were reserved for members of the Old Families, and Johannes was no longer an Old Family man. Also, Mainz was not a very happy place to be. The rich Old Families and the skilled workers like Johannes argued and quarreled constantly. Who should pay taxes? Who should receive special favors? Who should pick the city’s leaders? They could not agree on anything.

After his father died, Johannes spent about ten more years in Mainz. He did not have a wife or even a girlfriend. Johannes was close to thirty years old, and he had lived

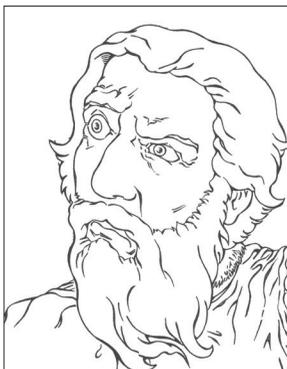


The rich Old Families and the skilled workers like Johannes argued and quarreled constantly.

in Mainz all his life. Now he was bored and restless. He decided it was time to leave Mainz and try to find a better place to live. He moved to the city of Strasbourg, which was a two-day boat trip up the Rhine River from Mainz.

About the same time, his mother died. Her money and two houses were divided among her three children. Johannes received a large amount of money, so he did not have to get a job right away. He moved to a tiny village just outside Strasbourg. There, with not many people around, he started doing something in secret.

CHAPTER 3



A SECRET PROJECT

The only thing his neighbors knew was that he had a small shop where he worked with gold and other metals. Perhaps he made gold jewelry. But he was doing something else, too, that he did not talk about. Even today, we are not sure what he was doing. We think he was already trying to build a machine that would print books. Why do you suppose he kept it secret? Most likely, he was afraid someone would steal his work.

When Johannes started building a printing machine, he already knew a lot about how to make letters of the alphabet out of small pieces of metal. He had learned this skill when he made coins at the Mint. Now he used his knowledge to make metal letters. These letters, made out of metal, are