

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BWB-13
Old Wine in New Bottles:
The German Burschenschaften I

Im Rosental 96
53 Bonn
West Germany
14 September 1969

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

We've been fighting in the Deutsche Burschenschaften since 1965 about the duel. We want to get rid of the Mensur so we can have time for more important things--like university reform--so we can be accepted as respectable discussion partners by other students and professors and politicians.

--member of the Burschenschaft Alemannia zu Bonn

We only have a Mensur day three times during the semester. Why don't the newspapers and television take notice of our political discussion evenings as well?

--member of the Burschenschaft der Norddeutschen
und Niedersachsen

These two comments are from the liberal and conservative wings of the Deutsche Burschenschaften, a tradition-rich, perhaps tradition-rotted, silent minority of the German university students. When the Burschenschaften were founded at Jena in June 1815, this type of student fraternity represented the avantgarde, the radicals, among the students of that era. Many of the young men who adopted the black, red and gold colors of the old German Reich as the symbol of the new Burschenschaften had just returned from defending "the German Fatherland" in the Napoleonic Wars. Exhilarated by their victories, they anticipated the founding of a liberal German nation, planned to propagate democratic freedoms for their fellow citizens, and lift the moral code of their fellow students. Freiheit, Ehre, Vaterland (Freedom, Honor, Fatherland) were the words by which they lived.

The heirs to these 19th century ideals have become an anachronism in the 20th century German university picture, in which a more vocal minority, that of the left, has captured the romantic aura and often the popular support of the German students. Still clinging to their traditions of the Bestimmungsmensur (the student duel), fraternity discipline and "brotherhood for life," the fraternities attract fewer pledges now than in days of old. Although their importance is on the wane, much as Greek fraternities are losing popularity in the United States, they still play a noteworthy role in German society.

The Burschenschaften provide career insurance for students who plan to enter medicine, law and education. They also nurture among their members a conservative bias, an uncritical attitude toward the state, and a rather antiquated brand of

nationalism. After university graduation, Burschenschaft brothers join the loyal Alte Herren (old grads) in positions of community influence as physicians, teachers and lawyers, forming a conservative elite in modern West Germany.

Of some 54,000 German students organized into societies, political groups and fraternities, 30,000--or one-third of all males and nearly two-thirds of all organized students--belong to a Korporation, the general term for fraternities which includes the choral and denominational fraternities, the 5,500 members of the gymnastic clubs and Landmannschaften belonging to the Coburger Convent, the 6,000 members of the Koesener Senioren-Convents Verband, the 2,500 members of the Weinheimer Senioren-Convent, and the 5,500 members of the Deutsche Burschenschaften. Among the Korporationen, two-thirds still practice the Bestimmungsmensur or student duel. In addition to these active members, an estimated 150,000 Alte Herren support the fraternity tradition through annual dues, and boosts up the career ladder for their fraternity brothers.

Obviously, the fraternity student in Germany has far from disappeared. After World War II, it first seemed likely that the storied traditions of the Deutsche Burschenschaften would be relegated to the history books. Returning war veterans and younger students entering the partially-destroyed universities showed little interest in such relics of the Reich, particularly since many of the fraternities had been absorbed by Hitler into the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund. To reinforce the prohibition, university rectors banned the wearing of colors and dueling in 1946.

But the old grads revived the fraternities underground, and as the "Restoration" returned them to positions of power in governmental ministries, the courts and industry, the fraternities flowered again. After West Germany's allies decided to re-arm the nation, any formal resistance to the "militaristic" fraternities faded away. By the early 1950's both dueling and the wearing of colors were again acceptable, if not as fashionable as in the old days.

German men who attended the university in postwar days recall that the bloom was off the rose, but the dueling fraternities still attracted many youths. "I tried to persuade students against them at the University of Marburg," a diplomat friend of mine said, "and I was able to convince one Burschenschafter to drop out. He was the star of a university theatrical production I was directing, and about two weeks before the performance he told me he couldn't be there on opening night because that was the day for his first Mensur. It took some talking, but I finally satisfied him that he would show more courage by facing the derision of his fraternity brothers, if he dropped out, than if he stood there for a duel and let himself be cut up."

Except for annual conventions and occasional uniformed parties, the Burschenschaften and other fraternities now form an inconspicuous part of university life. For the last two years I have lived across the street from the three-story, white-painted Victorian fraternity house of Bonn Alemannia, and I can testify that these students make "good neighbors." Our politics are not sympathetic, and their Kneipe or beer-busts are not my taste for regular amusement...but my other German neighbors seem to find my occasional long-haired and bearded leftist student visitors more remarkable and less palatable

than the Burschenschaft's lusty singing on Friday and Saturday nights.

"My general opinion of the students is good," confided Frau Auen, the corner baker's wife who is the neighborhood clearing house for gossip. "They don't disturb anybody, they're neat and clean and polite." I asked if the image of the Burschenschaft had changed over the years. "Since the war, the outsider hardly noticed it when they had a dueling day. While dueling was still forbidden, they used to have lookouts posted to watch for the police. And some thirty years ago they dueled almost every week--one fraternity against another one. Then there would be ten or twenty men running around bandaged. If they give it up, I'm glad--some of them are nice boys and they used to be so scared. I asked once why they did it, and they said it was a test of courage."

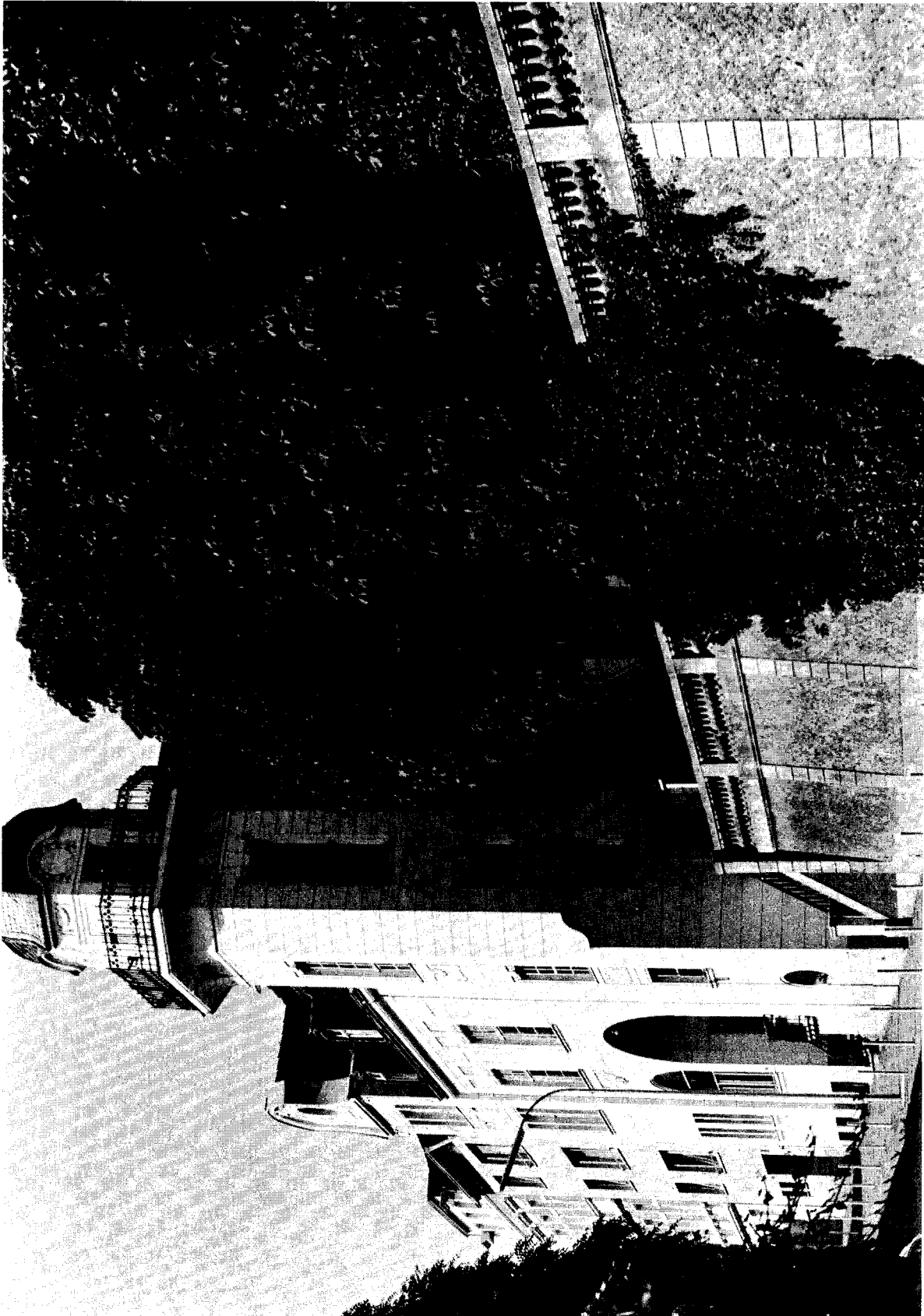
Members of Bonn Alemannia still defend the Mensur to outsiders, but at the Deutsche Burschenschaften convention in Landau this spring the Bonn fraternity brothers led a reform group who want to strike the Mensur requirement from the national statutes. Curiously, the early Burschenschaften had considered their fraternities a purified, more political version of the older Korps, and the Mensur was not accepted by all its members until the 1870's. What began as radical liberalism became conservative, and the postwar Burschenschaften anchored the Mensur in its constitution in 1954.

At the Landau conference Bonn Alemannia proposed that individual fraternities be allowed to continue or drop the Mensur at their discretion. Of the 126 fraternities, 73 voted for the reform, 36 voted against and 6 abstained--not enough for the three-fourths majority required to delete the Mensur passage from the statutes. Three fraternities who had already done away with the Mensur were barred from the national convention. Bonn Alemannia retained its membership because the fraternity has not "officially" given up the duel, although the members no longer practice it. (A movement to give up the Mensur within the Coburger Convent also failed this year. "We voted it down with a three-fourths majority," the convent secretary told me.)

"It's difficult for anyone to understand the Mensur unless you've stood there yourself," said Volker Leuoth, a 26-year-old medical student who joined the Burschenschaft der Bubenreuther in Erlangen while he studied there, and now is living in the Alemannia house with all fraternity privileges. "We've all gone through it. It was not pleasant, but the fraternity was important to me. Even though I found it hard, and I still find it foolish, I did discover a fraternal feeling in this way."

But Leuoth and his Alemannia fraternity friends feel the disadvantages of the Mensur outweigh the advantages. "It is harder to get people to join the fraternity if fencing is required. We want to have some influence on university politics, but we aren't respected as sensible discussion partners as long as we duel."

The Bonn Alemannia petition circulated at Landau argued that "fencing is no intrinsic characteristic for a Burschenschafter" and that the practice of dueling could "no longer be accepted as a method of teaching and rearing which



Home of the Burschenschaft Alemannia zu Bonn: summer parties are held on the spacious tree-shaded terrace overlooking the Rhine, and at last year's anniversary celebration a pair of tipsy fraternity brothers serenaded the neighborhood at 4 a.m. from the widow's walk atop the tower.

further the fraternal spirit."

"We've tried to do university work," explained Ulrich Schuler, 24, of the Alemannia Burschenschaft during an evening in which I invited three of my student neighbors to join me for some bottles of wine and a discussion about the color-bearing fraternities. "But the government, the students--all are prejudiced against a discussion with us. We have to get rid of this psychological barrier before we can be taken seriously." Respect for the Burschenschaften had fallen so low, added Leuoth, that some professors declined invitations to fraternity parties.

When I talked with members of the Burschenschaft der Norddeutschen und Niedersachsen on another evening, they blamed the declining enthusiasm for fraternities on the press and television's "biased interpretations" of fraternity life. "They try to find something spectacular," said Hermann Oldenhage, 25, a medical student who seemed as touchy as some leftist students when I asked his name and age. "We have fencing classes for three-quarters of an hour at midday, a general meeting of the fraternity every week, nine political or social evenings during the semester, and three Mensur days. In the spring a television team was here and they wanted to film the Bier Kneipe and the Mensur. We said 'okay, but you have to show the political evening as well.' When the program was aired, they only showed the Mensur."

The fogginess of Burschenschaft goals confuses prospective pledges, added Hans-Henning Steinbiss, 25, a biology student who was the Norddeutschen und Niedersachsen fraternity chairman last semester. "Before the war...that's when the people came. But after the war, it's hard for us to talk about a reunited Germany when the politicians don't. The younger students see a dichotomy in the fraternity goals...some say the social life is important, others say we should put the emphasis on politics, on a united Europe instead of a reunited Germany."

Although fraternity members may belong to a political party (and the large majority support the conservative Christian Democrats or the nationalistic wing of the Free Democrats), neither the individual fraternities nor the national Deutsche Burschenschaften endorse any party. The Burschenschaften do not see themselves as a political student group, such as the radical-left Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund or the CDU-supported Christlich-Demokratische Studenten, but they consider it their responsibility, said Steinbiss, "to train responsible citizens, to see that a student doesn't read just the sports page of the newspapers, but the front page too."

"The Burschenschaften support the nation and serve the nation," my neighbor Leuoth had explained to me some evenings before. "A high percentage of those who have graduated work as civil servants. By tradition we wouldn't be expected to lean toward the left, but there are several fraternity brothers who belong to the Social Democrats. Our organization system is an authoritarian one, which the leftist students wouldn't like."

Discipline and respect for one's superiors are still cardinal virtues in the Burschenschaft community, with stiff punishments for breaking even a minor rule. "Sometimes the fraternal life must come first and the personal life stand completely in the background," explained Bernd Holzhausen, 27, of Bonn Alemannia.

"Once as a Fux (pledge) I had to pay a penalty--they can range from 12 cents to 50 cents--for watching a soccer game on television when an active member told me not to. And another time when I didn't want to spend three-quarters of an hour in fencing practice one day, I was punished with 21 days of silence--no fraternity brother would speak to me for three weeks."

"If a person isn't willing to restrict himself somewhere, if he can't subordinate his own wishes, then he won't be a good member of the fraternity," said Hans-Ulrich Rebling, a 22-year-old medical student who wears the colors of the Norddeutschen und Niedersachsen. "You can't have a community of individualists."

The Burschen are a clean-shaven, close-cropped lot who disapprove of the long hair, beards, and casual to sloppy dress of leftist students. "Well, I suppose a fraternity brother could wear long hair if he kept it clean and tidy, but not shoulder-length," said Oldenhage. "And if he wears long hair as a protest against society, that means he feels ill at ease in our present society. We don't. Of course we don't try to force all the members to think the same way, but a member can't expect to wear our colors and look disreputable in public."

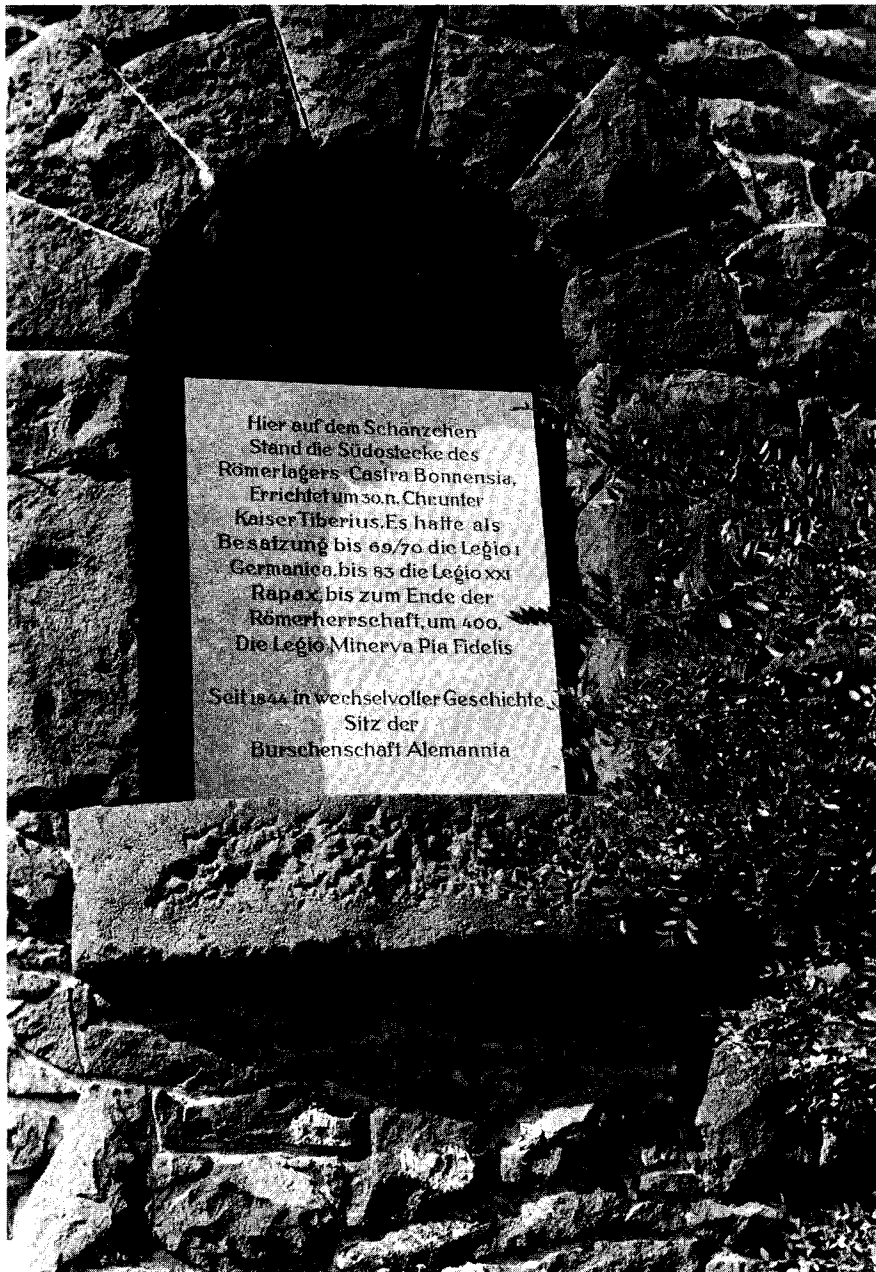
Steinbiss said the Norddeutschen und Niedersachsen had tried to expand their membership among the workers' sons who attend the university, but with no success. "The workers' sons remain isolated among themselves--that's why we need to go down to them." But then he admitted that "we live like academics here...it's another world for them." Fraternity members must watch their table manners and wear a coat and tie to evening meals and meetings..."that's the minimum," emphasized Oldenhage.

The fraternity also enforces strict rules for keeping the house and rooms orderly, but the fraternity brothers dispute an old story that a Fux is required to shine shoes or do other menial tasks for his older fraternity brother. (Students are called Fux or Fuchs (plural Fuechse) for the first two semesters; they become active members in the third semester, after their first duel.)

"When I eat," said Rebling, "I take the dishes back into the kitchen and clean up afterwards. It's one for all and all for one here. You can't allow people to just leave things in a mess if they don't feel like cleaning it up right then--look at why the Berlin communes went aground, partly because they were so dirty."

Even the Bier Kneipe are not the rowdy but innocent fun and games they appear to be, for drinking plays a role in fraternity discipline. Many of the old drinking customs, taken over from the early Landsmannschaften, have been forgotten. In his book Freiheit Schreibt Auf Eure Fahnen (Write Liberty Upon Your Banners), Werner Klose writes that the Landsmannschaften had "highly complicated and adventurous rules...all for the purpose of drinking as much and in as crazy a manner as possible. When several drank out of one glass that was called 'the Roman Empire,' and a drink from the same glass that ended with a kiss was called 'Lad and Maid.'"

The fraternity members with whom I talked claim that the old custom of drinking on command--in which the young Fux was always required to have a full glass in front of him, from which he would chug-a-lug a pint of beer in one swallow--are over. "That's so animalistic," said Leuoth. "They lay like flies



Historic plaque marks the site of the Burschenschaft: "Here on this embankment stood the south-east corner of the Roman camp Casta Bonnensia. Built in 30 AD during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. It was occupied by the Legion I Germanica until 69/70, by the Legion XXI Rapax until 83, by the Legion Minerva Pia Fidelis until the end of the Roman reign, about 400. Since 1844 in turbulent history the site of the Burschenschaft Alemannia.

on top of and under the tables. But drinking is not overemphasized nowadays. The Alemannia fraternity has purposely cut down on the number of Bier Kneipe each semester. Besides, what difference does it make if I drink here with fraternity brothers, or out in a tavern somewhere?"

The two Bonn fraternities disclaimed any knowledge of such extreme drinking customs as those a Berlin student related to me some months ago. A one-time Fux who later resigned from the fraternity, this student told me he had seen hollow walking canes at his fraternity house that were kept there for the convenience of the pledges during the Bier Kneipe. Forbidden to leave the room until the Kneipe was over--and full to bursting after two hours of steady beer drinking--the pledges had urinated into the hollow canes, under cover of the tables.

The Norddeutschen und Niedersachsen members admitted that an older member may order a Fux to drink the rest of his beer (Rest weg), "but only for some disciplinary reason, as a reprimand." They permit only beer--no hard liquor--at their fraternity Kneipe. "We don't want to make alcoholics out of our brothers," explained Oldenhage. "If he drinks too much and it hurts his studies, a member can be forbidden to drink at all, or he may be put on a ration of one pint a day." Indeed, misconduct under the influence of alcohol is punished more strictly than social sins committed while sober. Although it's hard to imagine, even a teetotaler may join a fraternity; none of the brothers are required to drink beer. "You can drink orange juice all night if you want to," said Oldenhage.

The Bier Kneipe is the favorite type of social evening at the Burschenschaften, with members excused from attendance only if they have an examination on the next day or if they are ill. The official part of the program lasts one and a half to two hours. The Fux speaker may choose the songs, and here are a few of the favorite ones (my unofficial translations):

Burschen Heraus!

Burschen, heraus! Lasst es schallen von Haus zu Haus!
Wenn der Lerch Silberschlag gruesst des Maien ersten Tag,
dann heraus, und fragt nicht viel, frish mit Lied und Lautenspiel.
Burschen, heraus!

Burschen, heraus! Lasst es schallen von Haus zu Haus!
Wenn es gilt fuers Vaterland, treu die Klingen dann zur Hand,
und heraus mit mutgem Sang, waer es auch zum letzten Gang!
Burschen, heraus!

Boys, come out! Let merriment ring from house to house!
When the lark's silver song greets the first day of May,
then come out, and ask no questions, fresh with song and lute-playing.
Boys, come out!

Boys, come out! Let merriment ring from house to house!
When it's done for the Fatherland, take the true blades in hand,
and come out with courageous song, even if it's the last bout!
Boys, come out!

Drei Klaenge Sind's

Three clangs are there, they ring friendly and pure with
harmony through our fraternity life.

Three clangs are there, which lift the free heart like
golden wine to happy pounding.

I'll prize them still with gray hair, until death pulls me down
into the shadows:

the clang of the swords, the clang of glasses, the clang of
songs...these will I prize now and evermore.

The clang of the sabers, it rings so sharp and bold, for
fraternity honor the blades flash.

By the clang of glasses the hearts glow so happily, it
carries aloft the spirits' wings of the wine,

The clang of songs uplifts to heaven...in the best of the noble,
good, high, beautiful,

the freedom song, the love song, it should resound with
golden sound through our life.

Three clangs are there of very special kind: they seem to us
the most glorious of all.

Therefore, my brothers, let your joyous song resound happily
to your fame.

Up, take the glass with golden wine in hand, and call it loud
in the old German way:

The sword as protection, the glass as health, the song as reward
for the great and beautiful German Fatherland.

After the songs, the speaker talks for fifteen minutes on a subject of
his own choosing, often some point of Burschenschaft history or some remarks
about the proposed university reforms. "It is a part of the social training,
so that members can learn to speak in public," said Rebling.

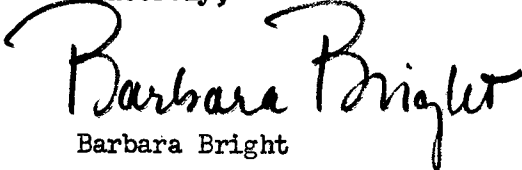
For the remainder of the program, the active members take over. They
choose a rival presidium of three members who try to present more clever skits,
jokes and pantomimes than the presidium of three pledges who directed the first
part of the program. "The rest of the program should be as much fun as possible,"
Oldenhage explained. "The important thing is that everybody laughs."

If members are studying for exams, they are allowed to leave the beer party
at 10 p.m., but the other members continue their drinking and frivolity until
about midnight, when the speaker of the evening retires from the podium with
the words, "I drink the Kneipe under the table."

Truant fraternity brothers can be fined up to \$1.25 for skipping a Kneipe
without good reason (if he lies that he has to study for a test and watches a
television program instead). For more serious delinquency, such as a minor
theft, a fraternity brother may be temporarily suspended from the fraternity,
and is not allowed to wear his cap or colors for two weeks. In the Norddeutschen
und Niedersachsen Burschenschaft this is called "being sent to the Black Forest."

In my next newsletter, I will return to a description of the student duel, and add some comments on why students choose to join the Burschenschaft.

Sincerely,


Barbara Bright

Received in New York on September 18, 1969.