

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BWB-14  
Old Wine in New Bottles:  
The German Burschenschaften II

Im Rosental 96  
53 Bonn  
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

"O Alte Burschenherrlichkeit" remains one of the most popular fraternity songs for the 5,500 German university students who are active members of the Deutsche Burschenschaften. Its sentimental text celebrates "the good ole days," yet it was written during the high-minded heyday of the fraternities, back in 1825 shortly after the founding of the original Burschenschaft in Jena. Here are three verses:

O alte Burschenherrlichkeit, wohin bist du verschwunden?  
Nie kehrst du wieder, gold'ne Zeit, so froh und ungebunden!  
Vergebens spaehe ich umher, ich finde deine Spur nicht mehr.  
O jerum, jerum, jerum, o quae mutatio rerum!

Den Burschenhut bedeckt der Staub, es sank der Flaus in Truemmer,  
der Schlaeger ward des Rostes Raub, erblichen ist sein Schimmer,  
verklungen der Kommergesang, verhallt Rapier und Sporenklang.  
O jerum, jerum, jerum, o quae mutatio rerum!

Allein das rechte Burschenherz kann nimmermehr erkalten;  
im Ernste wird, wie hier im Scherz, der rechte Sinn stets walten;  
die alte Schale nur ist fern, geblieben ist uns doch der Kern, un-  
den lasst fest uns halten!  
O jerum, jerum, jerum, o quae mutatio rerum!

O student glory of old, where has it gone?  
It will never come again, the golden time, so happy and unfettered!  
Futilely I search, I find no longer any trace.  
O jerum, jerum, jerum, o quae mutatio rerum!

The student cap is covered with dust, the fabric is in shreds,  
the saber has become rusty, its brilliance dimmed,  
stilled the student songs, the sound of rapiers and spurs faded away.  
O jerum, jerum, jerum, o quae mutatio rerum!

Only the true student heart can never be cold;  
the genuine memory will rule in earnest, as here in jest;  
only the old shell is gone, the kernel remains with us, and we  
will hold fast to it!  
O jerum, jerum, jerum, o quae mutatio rerum!

The Bestimmungsmensur, now the most controversial symbol of Burschenschaft life, originally combined two parts of the kernel of fraternity life--the principles of order and honor. Early Burschenschaften, and their forerunners the Landsmannschaften and the Corps, evolved the Bestimmungsmensur from their attempts to control the wild student life of the 18th and 19th century. By setting up their own rules for the carrying and the use of weapons, the student organizations gradually brought the wild student fights, which had terrorized the citizens in university towns, out of the streets and cafes and into the enclosed courtyards of the Burschenschaft and Corps houses.

In his book describing the development of fencing at German universities, Henner Huhle remarks that the Mensur or student duel had been practiced in various forms since the 1740's "as a knightly form of battle which serves to test courage and aggressiveness through practice with weapons." By the late 19th century, however, Werner Klose writes in Freiheit Schreibt Auf Eure Fahnen that "the Mensur, the duel of the armed students, is...to be understood as a prestige substitute. Just as lower grade pupils copied the weapons-bearing students, they imitated the officers. The duel belonged...to a code of honor, one of the forms of self-defense and self-justice taken over by the general officer corps from the feudal way of life."

The Mensur originally was the student's method for "taking satisfaction" when his honor was besmirched by another. If a student called one of his fellows a "dumb boy" or "stupid," he might well be challenged to a duel. Gradually the students tired of using honor as an excuse and began to practice the duel for its own sake. Fencing masters were hired by the fraternities, and young men who were equally facile with the rapier were purposely matched against each other. Judges and seconds kept a closer watch on the rules.

Everybody was who anybody duelled. As a member of the Corps Hanovera in Goettingen, Otto von Bismarck, the future Iron Chancellor, fought 25 Mensuren in three semesters, but in 1833 he wrote that only one duel had nicked him slightly, "just the tip of the nose split." Karl Marx, a Bonn law student who was a member of the Trier Landsmannschaften (a fraternity formed of students from the same town or region studying at the same university), carried the forbidden weapons, but he reportedly only duelled once.

Methods of dueling, according to Huhle's book, have changed little since the 1850's. The cast of characters for the Bestimmungsmensur consists of two duelers, two seconds, and a judge who decides whether a strike has been made. All are students, as is the spare-time surgeon who will sew together any wounds at the end of a Mensur day. Some earlier critics scoffed that the whole procedure was merely a "cosmetic operation" to place an elitist "caste identification" on the cheek or chin of the Burschschafter or Corps student. But the slanting scars that identify Alte Herren (the old grads) are seldom seen on the younger students. Since dueling itself has become less a prestige exercise, Volker Leuoth told me that student duelers now deliberately try to strike the head rather than the face, so that hair will grow back to cover the scar.

The dueler's costume has been devised to offer as much protection as possible from the blade or its point. The student wears a leather apron and his throat is closely bound with a wide scarf "so that his head won't wobble." He wears metal grillwork goggles to protect his eyes, and thick padding covers his shoulders



Burschschafter Volker Leuoth being readied for a Mensur

and upper arms.

"The joke of the Mensur is that you almost can't be a coward," said Leuoth. "The reaction is to move your head and avoid the strikes, but that would make it more dangerous. The neck-binding steadies your head and protects the throat." Leuoth fought the Mensur himself before his Burschenschaft der Bubenreuther in Erlangen gave it up. "You have to remember that the duelers are no longer enemies--the Mensur is a relic of the past, a symbol for courage and a demonstration of loyalty to the fraternity." Then he joked, "I'm really more afraid of diving ten meters (about thirty feet) from a diving board than of fighting the Mensur."

The rapier measures 110 centimeters (about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  feet) and is blunted to prevent wounds caused by sticking. The duelers face each other from a distance of "two handles and two blade-lengths," according to the Coburger Convent author Henle, adopting either the cover or the steep position. In the covered position the right fist, with the right elbow bent, is about a hand above and in front of the left forehead, with the rapier pointing diagonally left and down. In the steep position the elbow is straight and the arm nearly rests against the right ear; the arm and rapier are pointed up, with one rapier resting on the blade of the other, or both freely pointing upward.

The duel itself consists of thirty bouts, and each bout consists of four strikes. Most Burschenschafter go through three or four Mensuren during their years at the university. The Norddeutschen und Niedersachsen Burschenschaften requires its Fuechse (pledges) to practice their first Mensur at the end of two or three semesters, before becoming an active member. The second duel qualifies him as an "inactive" member, usually in the third or fourth year at the university.

A fraternity brother who studies medicine is always on hand to sew up Mensur wounds immediately afterward--but without the use of anaesthetic. One brother presses with his thumbs beside the patient's ears to stop the pain, while another sews up the wound. Leuoth mentioned that some of these student surgeons are practical jokers, and occasionally they may sew a button onto the wound. A Mensur cut deep into the cheek is the most painful, said Leuoth, because it must be repaired from the inside. "The worst thing about that is that you can't drink beer for eight days or it might infect the wound."

But the Mensur, said Hans-Ulrich Rebling of the Norddeutschen und Niedersachsen fraternity in its defense, is one way in which to keep the fraternity membership rolls from being degraded by "students who just want to come here to drink for four semesters."

Drinking and dueling--the usual outsider's image of fraternity life--are indeed not the only ideas contained within the Burschenschaft kernel which its members hold dear. They make much of the Wissenschaftsprinzip or science principle, which demands that the Burschen study hard, earn respectable grades, and complete their university education as quickly as possible--usually within eight semesters or four years. If a student fails, he is dismissed from the "brotherhood for life." "Burschenschafter do better exams, and do them more quickly, than the average university student," the fraternity men insisted.

The diligence and efficiency with which these students attack their books is praiseworthy, yet it smacks as well of learning lessons by rote, of memorizing

just what the professor says in order to repeat it back to him on examinations for a grade, and skipping the major educational job of a university--to teach its students to think and question and, if necessary, to criticize. In a 1966 article setting guidelines for a fraternity of the future, Professor Walter Erbe warned that the fraternities should not become "a storage bin for those students who run through the university without having experienced a trace of its spirit, who perhaps pass a very orderly examination, but at the same time never understood the essence and purpose of the university."

Whether a questioning spirit can be encouraged within the present German university structure is itself a question--students of the left contend that the hierarchial, authoritarian system shuts out research and instruction that does not support and propagate the current society; the Burschenschafter, who take the conservative point of view, say "we want reforms too, but sensible reforms... the expertise and control in matters of curriculum and examinations should remain by the professors. An across-the-board tri-parity in all university decisions would be disastrous." Rebling told me primly that the Burschenschaften "do not consider themselves the colonial guards of the university." But little was done toward university reform until the left-wing students took over the majority of the student government offices--until 1965, sixty percent of the AStA or student government seats in German universities had been controlled by fraternity students.

Beyond the science principle, the original Burschenschaften also held fast to the Sittlichkeitprinzip, the principle of morality. Some Burschenschaften, among them Leuoth's Bubenreuther fraternity in Erlangen, even pledged their Burschen to vows of chastity. And a higher moral standard among the students was worth striving for--in his research into life in the university towns in the 18th and 19th centuries, historian Klose discovered that illegitimate children fathered by students formed a part of every university community. The Corps, Leuoth said, formerly took their pledges to the local bordel for male initiation rites.

The early Burschenschaften took a dim view of such carryings-on. In Jena the color-wearing students destroyed the windows and furniture of a "bad house," and in 1818 the Breslau Burschenschaft discussed boycotting the brothers and proposed that medical treatment for students with venereal disease should not be paid for out of the student health insurance funds, except in extreme cases. In an interesting sidelight to a section on student morality, Klose reports (in Freiheit Schreibt Auf Eure Fahnen) that rumors were circulated about the German poet Heinrich Heine that he was banned from his Burschenschaft because he broke the pledge of chastity. But Klose gives more credence to another explanation for his expulsion from the University of Goettingen--because Heine planned a duel with pistols instead of with the customary rapiers. Yet the Burschenschaft ideal did not spread widely--in 1906 the birth rates for illegitimate children in university towns were still far ahead of the national average (32.7 in Giessen, 37.7 in Marburg, 32.2 in Tuebingen, 25.4 in Heidelberg).

The Burschenschaften have slowly adapted their sexual attitudes to the times, but some semblance of a Kinder, Kuche, Kirche concept for German womanhood still remains. "It's no particular honor for a girl to be invited to a Burschenschaft party now," admitted Leuoth, "but it's still fun. Earlier, when about three-quarters of the male students were in a fraternity, of course all the girls wanted

to come. Now the girls are more independent," he said, with what seemed to me a trace of disapproval, "they can go alone to a discotheque and don't need to wait for men to invite them out." Only a few fraternities still follow the old custom of having their own "color girls"--daughters of Alte Herren or close friends who wore the fraternity colors and attended every party.

In my talks with the student fraternity members, I found their overly polite attitude toward women a hindrance to any probing discussion. When Leuoth and two students from the Burschenschaft Alemannia visited me for talk and some wine one evening, I could scarcely get the conversation going because one or the other was constantly bobbing up and down to check whether the wine glasses were full, whether my cigarette was lit, or would I like another, whether my appetite for potato chips or pretzels was satisfied. I had the feeling they also wanted to "spare me" the burden of stating any controversial opinions in front of me--if one student made a comment that raised the ire of another, the third would calm both down. This kind of exalted respect for women, it seems to me, is most often an indication of disrespect for her opinions and at the same time a signal for the male's own lack of self-confidence.

The Burschenschafter, Leuoth told me, still think of themselves as promoting a "clean life...and lots of theology students belong to a Burschenschaft." His Bubenreuther fraternity in Erlangen, however, gave up the chastity pledge some years ago, he said, but only against severe opposition from the Alte Herren. "We had more problems with changes in the moral principle than with the discussion about the duel (his Erlangen Burschenschaft no longer adheres to the Mensur requirement). The old grads were strictly against dropping the chastity requirement at first--but our opinion was that the fraternity is not the decisive factor in whether I love a girl or not."

A grandiose style in party-giving is also a part of the fraternity tradition--at least once a year for the anniversary party. The extravagance of Burschenschaft life today cannot compare with the 50th anniversary fest of the Corps Borussia in 1877 in Bonn, which Klose reports cost \$7,500. But my Bonn Alemannia neighbors spent up to \$2,500 this year for their three-day celebration of the 114th founding day, at which some 600 guests (including university professors, parliamentary deputies, Bonn's Lord Mayor, guests from other Burschenschaften and 300 Alte Herren) turned out. They dined and drank and danced at the fraternity house on Friday night, at the Beethoven concert hall on Saturday, on a chartered boat on the Rhine on Sunday afternoon, and again at the fraternity house on Sunday night.

The active and pledge members of the Burschenschaft have social obligations to fulfill at these parties, but they do not go unrewarded. "If you ask the wife or daughter of an Alte Herr to dance, he gives you money so you can offer to buy them something to eat or drink," explained Leuoth. "I was embarrassed after one party in Erlangen--I danced with four different ladies, and each man gave me \$10, but the women never would accept anything to drink."

Daily life in the fraternity house seems reasonably inexpensive. At the Norddeutschen und Niedersachsen fraternity, members who live there pay \$10 per month for a room. Of some thirty fraternity members, five to seven live in the house itself. At the Bonn Alemannia house, 17 members (or fraternity friends like Leuoth) are now in residence, paying \$18 each monthly for a double furnished room



Alte Herren in regalia,

and the young Burschen



"with all comforts." The house has a capacity for 29 members, but most of the 40 current fraternity brothers prefer to live in quarters separate from the fraternity house "because you can't get enough studying done there."

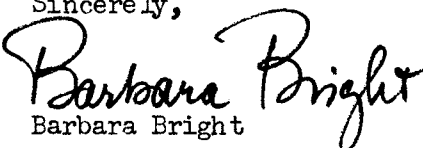
Although their membership in a Burschenschaft may politically influence them later, few students consider it a political decision when they join a fraternity. Professor Kurt Tauber wrote in a 1963 edition of the Political Science Quarterly that it is the Alte Herren, more than the pledges, who treasure the "discipline, subordination, social polish, manliness, courage" that are the traditional values developed within the Burschenschaft. First-semester students, on the other hand, are generally more atune to the Burschenschaft social life. "I wanted a nice group of people, and it wasn't important for me whether they dueled or not," recalled a member of the Bonn Alemannia fraternity. Another told me, "When you come to the university you either begin to fritter away your time, or you start to study--I wanted a little of both. I am an only child, so the fraternal feeling was important for me too. I like being a small link in a larger chain."

After describing the first-semester students' fears, Professor Tauber came to a similar conclusion: "For the first time in his life he is exposed to the rough winds of intellectual freedom that blow in the relatively open spaces of the campus, with all their stimulating freshness as well as their sometimes icy blasts of self-doubt and loneliness. It is no wonder that many freshmen respond by running for cover in the ritualistic community of the fraternity."

The shelter they run to, unfortunately, still propagates such ideas as these, taken from an article in the March 1969 edition, Burschenschaftliche Blaetter: "It should be clear to every fraternity student in general and especially to every Burschenschafter...that he has acknowledged a form of student fraternal living which is unique in the world in its characteristics, covers exclusively the German cultural area and those nations where the spiritual life orients itself on German culture. This fact has nothing to do with glorified nationalism, but is more the basis for fraternal self-understanding and the key to explaining why the fraternal idea has outlived the fiercest enemies and greatest catastrophes."

Perhaps an outsider misreads such phrases, but it seems to me that with such pan-Germanic ideas the Burschenschaften are unwittingly damaging the democratic state they claim to honor and serve. The "left-radicals" of the Bonn Alemannia are hopeful their reform proposal for abolishing the Mensur requirement will be accepted by the Deutsche Burschenschaft this fall. If this step away from a rotted and useless tradition is made, perhaps the old fraternities can heed the challenge made to them by Professor Henry Albers in 1966: "As Burschenschafter you have a great inheritance to supervise. The art of this supervision is always affected by time, and it will remain so. Tradition only retains its worth when it is reflected upon." Perhaps the Burschenschafter are reflecting upon their tradition in terms of the 1970's...perhaps, but I doubt it.

Sincerely,

  
Barbara Bright

Received in New York on September 24, 1969.