

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 35
Beer and Freedom

West Berlin
July 5, 1958

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New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

"This race," says one of Schiller's heroes, "cannot enjoy itself except at the table." Enjoyment hardly describes Germans at mealtime. They seem to do more than happily fill themselves. They fulfil themselves. The dining table is a confrontation with temples of meat and citadels of potatoes surrounded by moats of gravy - all to be seized and devoured by the zealous feeder.

France has its gourmets, and Italy its epicures. But Germany is the land of the Vielfrass, the glutton. Eating is a national duty.

Yet there is a table where Germans sit and enjoy themselves, pure and simple. It is called the Stammtisch, the tavern table reserved for a group which meets regularly to drink and chat. Nobody knows how many Stammtische exist in Germany, but there must be tens of thousands.

There are those that started among university students. There are those that devolved from large families, from office departments, from mine shafts, from army units, from craft guilds, from summer resorts, from bowling clubs, and from school friendships. And if there is any national institution which can be called typical, by right of ritual or tradition, then it is the Stammtisch.

Those other signs by which we know the Germans are not sufficient to brand the nation. The militarist stigma faded after the dissolution of the Prussian officer corps during the Third Reich. So did the tradition of the impeccable civil service (since the war, both East and West Germany have been rocked continuously by scandalous corruption cases in public offices). Only youngsters and sporting grownups wear the Bavarian Lederhosen. Sauerkraut is not a national dish. And many Germans prefer wine or schnaps to beer, advertising and consumption rates notwithstanding.

But the Stammtisch has survived inflation, poverty, wars, national destruction, liquor shortages, yes, and even the post-war prosperity. Like the family, it is a basic social unit. One good reason, perhaps, is the fact that the "regular table" provides a sense of belonging which is important to Germans. Besides, it is less dangerous than belonging to a political party, and less demanding than a social organization.

Is the Stammtisch a democratic institution in what is still rather an authoritarian country?

Friedrich Meinecke, one of Germany's great historians, cites a remark which would indicate the contrary. In his "die deutsche Catastrophe" (1946) he quotes Siegfried v. Kardorff as saying, "The Weimar Constitution was destroyed at the Stammtisch."

Meinecke adds: "...that is, the schoolmasters and district judges who sat here (at the Stammtische) together, made it contemptible through their arrogant condemnation of it in terms of the Stab-in-the-Back legend..."

It would be reckless to compare the Stammtisch to America's townmeetings, England's Hyde Park orators, or Switzerland's cantonal referendums. Nevertheless, personal experience tells me that there is something appealingly egalitarian about the Stammtisch - particularly the one I know in Giessen.

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It is a Friday evening, but it could be any other night in the week. A few stores are still lit for window shoppers. Couples hurry past the Marktplatz to the movie theaters. Teen-agers in tight jeans and windbreakers lounge in threes and fours outside the "Fast Sausage Stands" and the jukebox joints. The night watchmen start their first rounds with lantern and keyring. Motor scooters and cycles fulminate through the narrow streets. It is 9 p.m.

If you peer into the side streets, those winding medieval alleys with names like Steinstrasse, Rittergasse, and Schlossweg, you may see the menfolk heading for the taverns - some limping (the wounded veterans), some carrying umbrellas (the civil servants), most of them wearing slouch hats and loden coats or mantles.

The taverns, called Gasthäuser, are usually shy buildings, tucked away in courtyards or stooped between two larger houses. Modest scutcheons hang above the doorways, illuminated by lanterns whose windows advertise the brand of beer served. These shields bear traditional names: "At the Sign of the Crown", "The White Eagle", "The Golden Star".

Some of the Gasthäuser are ancient - half-timbered buildings that lean against their neighbors, with leaded panes and creaking floors; hunting horns, elk antlers, and old banners on the walls. Some are new, with contemporary paintings, modern drapery, and parquet floors. But the tables are usually the same; unpainted wood, the tops scoured clean with a stiff brush, bare or covered with checkered cloths.

But more important than the taverns' appearance is the personnel. There is an Oberkellner ("headwaiter" hardly describes the distinction and bearing of a European waiter) who combines dignity with cordiality. The wife of the proprietor is the silent motherly type. Without these two personalities, no Stammtisch can succeed.

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In March, 1957, I was invited to attend the Stammtisch "S.B." in Minchen-Vogt's Zur Sonne tavern on the Sonnenstrasse. The man who took me there for the first time was Erich Decker, the high school teacher (D.B. - 3). I continued to attend for the next 16 months.

The "S.B." (Saxo Borussia) was originally a student fraternity attached to the Giessen University. Some 30 years ago, its members used to meet in the old Minchen-Vogt saloon across the street for a traditional pint once a week. Like Germany, this Stammtisch has changed much in the last three decades. The original tavern, a quaint and storied den with uneven floors and oaken chairs, was bombed to dust in 1944.

The one that replaced it lacks atmosphere.

Those carefree students who once caroused and dueled in the last days before Hitler are spread far and wide today - a dozen buried on the battlefields of Europe and Africa, others in East Germany, still others in various parts of West Germany. Only three attend the Stammtisch regularly today; Decker, Karl Eger, the meteorologist, and Willi Friedrich, the dentist.

Meanwhile, others have drifted into the circle - men who never went to the university, but who were amiable enough to be invited to join: Heinrich Heyder, director of a private commercial school; Hermann Dinges, bookkeeper at the university; Heinz Schwender, clerk. Something else distinguished the "S.B." from most other Stammtische. Since 1954, married members have been bringing their wives to the Friday evening sessions. This is a dread violation of the unwritten law that the Stammtisch is a stag affair. But it makes the "S.B." more pleasant.

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What is it about a Stammtisch that is attractive? As a member you are not obliged to go. You can turn up once a year and still be as welcome as if you went every week. It's not that you feel you ought to go; you want to go. Nor must you be on time - in contrast to most German occasions.

But at 9 p.m. on Friday evening, you're sitting in your home and you think: "My friends are there. Hermann will tell some outrageous joke. I can hear what they say about the Bundestag debate or tell them about my vacation in Swabia, or war stories. Who's gotten sick. Who's gotten well. And besides, I'm thirsty." So nine times out of ten instead of going to the movies or visiting neighbors, you go to the Stammtisch.

You push open the outer and inner doors of the "Sun" tavern and walk past the tables towards the bar where Hans Perthel presides. He is a tall and imposing Thuringer with curly grey hair and a thin nose in the middle of his broad face. His black cutaway is immaculate and his large white apron is not. He bows. Behind him is the proprietress, a toothless stringy-haired woman in her seventies. In 16 months I never heard her say anything more than "Guten Abend" and "Auf Wiedersehen." She smiles a close-lipped greeting.

The air is a bit thick with the smoke of cigars, pipes and cigarettes, and the fragrance of the beer taps.

You turn right past another table and a pillar with a slot machine and enter a second room. There is the Stammtisch, three or four odd-sized tables pushed together, a pile of beer coasters and a basket of pretzels in the middle, and the welcoming faces around it.

They nod a greeting and you rap your knuckles on the table to announce your arrival. Then you shake hands all around. Hans Perthel has already drawn a glass of beer and it is now foaming before you on its coaster.

Hans Becker is talking at one end of the table: "I'll never forget the day I went to visit the old Archduke (Ernst Ludwig) in 1924. There was a man. (sigh) He knew every officer in Hesse by name. (Becker assumed a military bearing as he recalled the prince). The Archduke said to me, 'Your father was a captain, wasn't he?' I answered, 'Jawoll!' And he said, 'I always told your father not to risk his neck...'" Becker beamed to the whole table.

Lawyer and notary public, organ player in the Old Cemetery Church, amateur historian, veteran of two wars, Becker is a boisterous Hessian patriot. He has the classical square head, thatched with white hair, buck teeth, and a lightbulb nose. When he is in form, he belts out long anecdotes, interspersed with loud gasps and snorts, Russian and French expletives, and much popping of the eyes. After his sixth beer he sputters to a finish and his head sinks towards his stately paunch, jerking up now and then until it concedes the struggle against torpor.

Heinz Schwender is exchanging war stories with a friend he brought to the Stammtisch. "...And a great big Negro came up to us. What a breath he had on him. We surrendered our weapons. He took our watches and rings. My mother's ring wouldn't come off and he said he was going to cut off the finger... But one thing I'll never forget. My commander was captured by an American unit only a few kilometers away. And they turned him over to the Russians. He came back in 1952 after seven years as a P.O.W. Me, I got back in two years..."

A front-line infantry officer through six years of the war, Schwender has never really gotten over the experience. A sixth of his life was spent in combat. Now he goes to war films religiously - there is at least one a week showing in Giessen. Tonight, he and his comrade are discussing the latest production. The friend says, "I'm interested in films. Even got a book on 'em. They just don't make films the way they used to, (he sips some beer) they just don't make films..."

Erich Decker raises his newly-filled glass and toasts the company, "Prost!" The others tilt their drinks ceremoniously to each other and take a swallow. Then Decker picks up the conversational thread. It is the familiar theme of the war. He tells pedantically of experiences with a coastal battery in Holland. His voice is deep and uninflected. He relates about confiscating bicycles from Dutchmen he had befriended ("I was able to warn most of them") and about parties in the bunkers. The others nod. They've heard the stories half a dozen times before.

Heinz Schwender and his guest start up their conversation again. The friend says: "The automobile is ruining the people. Why don't you Americans walk? That's one thing, the auto..."

Then Heinie Heyder breaks in: "Let me tell you, the other day a motorcyclist nearly ran me down on the Frankfurterstrasse. 'Get out of my way you old ass,' he said. Just then I saw a cop. (Heinie winks a watery blue eye) and waved at him. The motorcyclist snarled at me again, 'You old ass, do you want me to get arrested?' I told him, 'Yes, you blockhead.' The policeman came. I said, 'Herr Wachtmeister, write down that I'm an old ass.' So he fined the boy two marks. (He chuckles) But then I had to pay two marks for saying blockhead. Today's youngsters..." He raises his glass.

The word 'youngster' spurs "einz Schwender to speak again. "You know, when I read that stuff today about the Hitler Youth I have to scratch my head. I grew up with it, (Schwender is in his late thirties) and swallowed it all. I'm cured. I just couldn't fit in again..."

Herr Heyder is still musing about his youth. He turns to you and murmurs in a confidential tone, "My son got married last week and he hasn't even finished his studies yet. I grew away from my sons during the war...I'll give you an example. One day I came home on leave, (Heyder was a Wehrmacht paymaster) and my kid ran into the kitchen and said, 'Mother, the father is back!' I was a stranger in my own home. After that, I didn't say anything to them. Kept silent. I'm comrades with my sons, but they don't want to listen to me. They talk about television, radio, cars..."

Frau Decker raises her glass to you. She has the flat, impassive yet serene face of the High Westerwald. "Here's to the bloom (the foam in the beer glass)," she toasts.

Hermann Dinges pulls at your elbow. "Did I tell you about the camping trip we took on the Mosel? Ach camping. It's wonderful. We bought a case of wine and a keg of beer and got some women... That's camping!"

Hermann was an ardent Nazi; he still believes in most of the National Socialist ideas. When he's had a few beers, he puts his hand on your shoulder and says, "Let me tell you how it really was. You won't hear it from anyone else. I know what it was really like..." Then his mobile face assumes an iron cast and his china blue eyes seem to darken.

If Hermann starts talking National Socialism, the others turn away. If he persists, as he did once last spring, they tell him to shut up. On this last occasion he was hurt and he didn't come to the "S.B." table for eight weeks.



When he returned, he was welcomed heartily. Hermann sat down a little shyly. Then he grasped his glass and proposed his favorite toast. "Beer and Freedom!" he cried, and quaffed the half-pint in one gulp.

I have never been tempted to hear Hermann Dinges tell "how it really was". Nearly every German I ever met was willing or even anxious to tell "how it really was." This story, whether personal or generalized, usually boils down to the same ingredients: an era without ideals (the early Thirties), joblessness, street riots, insecurity, despair. Then came Hitler with the promise and the program of a "new order". There were the blinding successes, the passionate war, followed by the inexorable hours of reckoning and finally the shock of disillusion.

Hermann and those millions like him who invested all their hopes and dreams in the Third Reich try now to seek some mitigating justification for the awful waste and betrayal.

"Well, some of the ideas were good," he says, "the Autobahn, the Labor Service, stopping the political strife, social security..." The arguments are usually the same ones.

Rather than listen to this from Hermann, I prefer to recall some other things. For instance, his Stammtisch companions point out that Hermann never joined or approved of the anti-Semitic actions which his Storm Troop undertook. Indeed, one out of town member of the "S.B." is Franz Kirchheimer, a so-called "half-Jew". Dr. Kirchheimer is a noted geologist in South Germany, and when he comes back to Giessen he goes straight to the Stammtisch. He and Hermann Dinges have always gotten along.

The others say that when it comes to politics, Hermann Dinges has "a board in front of his face" - a blind spot. They know that otherwise Hermann is a man of goodwill. Hermann shouts "Beer and Freedom!" They know he means it.

Willi Friedrich, the paunchy dentist, was an enthusiastic National Socialist too. He became a Party Member in 1934 while still a student. Later, he was a Hitler Youth leader. In theory, Hermann and Willi agree. In practice, they don't. Friedrich regards the Nazi era as a thing of mixed curses rather than mixed blessings. Today, he is suspicious of the republican form of government.

One Friday, after his fifth beer, Willi confided in me, "I learned in the Nazi period that we didn't have a voice. We don't have any now under democracy." Hermann overheard. "That's right," he said.

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It would be impossible to speak of a common political orientation among the "S.B." Stammtisch members. Dinges probably became a Nazi as a result of his simple and unconditional idealism. Friedrich probably migrated to Nazism from his family's old-fashioned German Nationalist heritage. Erich Decker's non-Nazi attitude stems from a conservative burgher upbringing. Heinie Heyder rejected Nazism as a Catholic.

Therefore, political discussions are rare at the "S.B." Stammtisch. Occasionally, however, national issues like reunification come up in the conversations. When they do, the lines become drawn rather quickly. For instance, during the March debates on atomic armaments, most of the "S.B." members spoke out against the Government's position. "Never again," said Heinz Schwender. "Keep our fingers away from such weapons," said Willi Freidrich, cheeks trembling. On the other side, Heinie Heyder and Karl Eger defended the Adenauer policy with solemn conviction. Only Erich Decker hesitated to declare himself. After a long dialogue with himself, he joined the anti-atom forces.

These discussions had the dignity and mutual tolerance of an English debating society.

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There are several rituals at the "S.B." One of them is the signing of the guestbook, a simple quarto volume. Every week, Erich Decker pencils a sketch of some significant scene. Then he laboriously prints a suitable subtitle.

The rest of us affix our signatures. Those who belonged to the original fraternity add the monograms of the Saxo-Borussen, and "x.'s", indicating the offices they once held in that group.

Another tradition is the weekly contribution to the "S.B.'s" bank. Each member is expected to deposit a coin or two in the "chimney" that sits on the table. Proceeds from this "heating up" are sent to several Stammtisch members who live in the Soviet Zone. The collection box and the guest book are the only material signs of the "S.B.'s" existence. Other Stammtische have special banners or standards proclaiming "Stammtisch..."



When the mood is on them, or when there is some special occasion - a holiday or an anniversary - the Stammtisch breaks into song. It starts when Karl Eger raises his beer glass and gives the tone, his brown eyes snapping:

"S.B." Rituals - the guestbook and "chimney" in the foreground...

"An ancient village nestles snug in verdant Hessenland,
Constructed upon piles and stakes on Lahn and Wieseck strand,
Here, professor and dean bestow
The precious liquid of knowledge,
And many's the bung that springs from the cask
In Giessen on the Lahn..."

Then Dr. Eger starts up "Burschen Heraus" (Students Come Forth!) the revolutionary song from the War of Liberation:

"Burschen heraus! Let it resound from house to house!
Summon poesy to help against the pigtales and the philistines.
Then come forth by day and night, 'til it's free again!
Burschen heraus!"

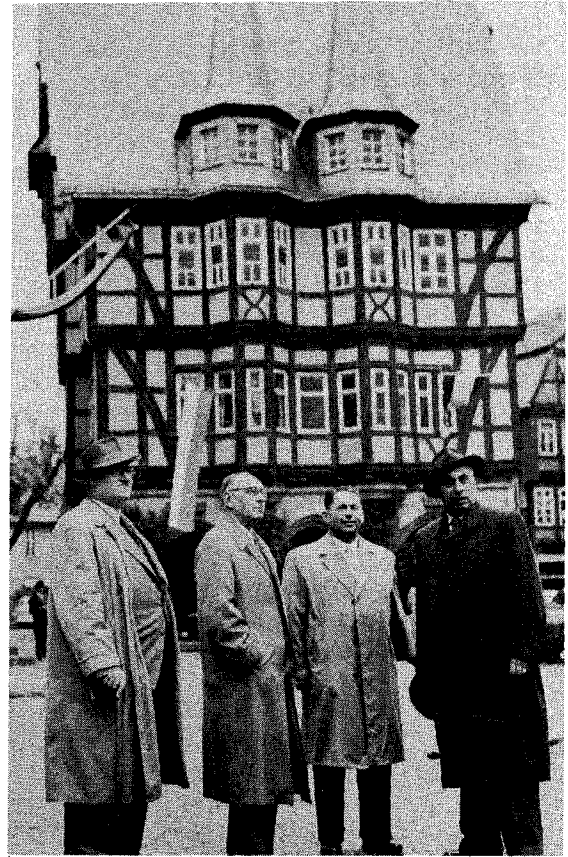


...Let it resound
from house to house...

The "S.B.", like most other Stammtische, makes occasional excursions into the countryside. In Giessen, such outings have a particular significance, since the town has always been "a homely nest", as its inhabitants are wont to say. But the surrounding hills and valleys, with their deep fir and beech forests, castle ruins, and quaint villages, are alluring bournes for the cityfolk.

Erich Decker loves to muse about the good old days when he and the others from the "S.B." would hire a horse-drawn wagon and drive up to the Staufenberg with a barrel of beer and a large thirst. "Herr Binder," he said, with an ear-to-ear grin, "by sundown only the horse knew the way home. And even he wasn't very steady."

Such a day we all hoped for on May 15 when five of us planned to drive to Ajsfeld for an "academic holiday" in the marketplace. It took half an hour to get Heinie Heyder out of bed, which caused the rest of us much pleasure and satisfaction. Unhappily, it began to rain then. We were obliged to gather in the village community hall instead of outside. But the brass band was there to blare out student songs. The burgomaster boomed out greetings. Hundreds of alumni and fraternity members joined in the morning drinking bout, and beer flowed in torrents. "Laufbier", was the way Heinie Heyder described it - the kind of beer that makes you run...



The "S.B." in Alsfield - Becker, Heyder, Eger, and Decker.

On the way back, Hans Becker steered us over back roads past the hunting lodge of the old Landgrave, past slumbering hamlets and herds of cattle, contoured fields of spring wheat and rye. He gave us a running commentary on the historical significance of each spot, firing off an occasional broadside at those Prussians, Thuringians, Bavarians, Rhinelanders, and Frenchmen who had sullied the sacred soil of Hesse. "Stop," he commanded as we topped a hill in Nieder-Ohmen. "Look there." We followed his sweeping gesture across the misty Vogelsberg heights. "Now, Herr Binder," said Becker, "you know why we Hessians cling to our green hills! They are our treasures."

Recently, Decker and his wife persuaded me to join them on another outing in the Westerwald. We drove to the village of Unnau, population 800; number of distilleries, eight. Erich and I spent the evening testing nine varieties of schnaps. Afterwards he fell asleep and snored diligently until dawn. Next day he didn't know how to spell schnaps.

With Heinie Heyder I went skiing many times, and with Willi Friedrich, hunting. In other words, the camaraderie of the "S.B." extends beyond the Friday evening session.

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Social relations are informal at most Stammtische. There is little of the bowing and stiff gestures which congeal so many German associations. At the "S.B." some members say "Du" to each other, while others remain Herr so-and-so and "Sie" after many years of acquaintanceship. But there seems to be no self-consciousness or awkwardness in either the one or the other form.

When a "S.B." member goes on vacation, he sends a postal card to the Stammtisch. This is dutifully passed around at the table for all to see. Afterwards, it is pasted in the guestbook. Likewise, the S.B. often sends cards to absent members.

A Stammtisch is a home and family combined.

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The other day, a journalist-economist predicted the decline and fall of the Stammtisch. He based this dire forecast on rising costs of beer in the taverns. "Meier and Schmidt," he wrote, "will buy their beer in bottles and take it home...saving three marks per head." For anyone who has attended a Stammtisch, this seems an incredible theory.

The Stammtisch is too robust to be killed off by high costs, and too vital a need to be dropped from the social pattern. It supplies something substantial and essential in the German diet - like potatoes.

Besides, the Stammtisch is just about the only place I know where Germans of opposite political opinions and different social backgrounds meet in peace and friendship - or as Hermann puts it, "beer and freedom."

David Binder
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Received New York August 11, 1958