

Poems of Gemütlichkeit, chuckles, and Umlauts: The work of Kurt M. Stein

By Kevin Kurdylo, MKI Librarian

The Max Kade Institute has long been involved in studying the linguistic and sociological impact of German dialects in the United States. One aspect of this impact involves the oftentimes humorous application of German dialect in literature. For an example of such writing, let's take a peek at several books of poetry written by Kurt M. Stein in the early twentieth century. Employing a form of dialect poetry that mixed German words and grammatical structure with English loan words and idiomatic phrases, these books have titles indicative of their content, including *Die Schönste Lengevitch* (1926), *Gemixte Pickles* (1927), and *Limburger Lyrics* (1932).

Reading these poems requires a basic understanding of German along with a certain amount of both concentration and relaxation, as sometimes the true meaning of Stein's sentences comes through suddenly with a sense of *Aha!* In the title poem, "Die Schönste Lengevitch," two pairs of German immigrants meet on the street in an American city. One couple has lived here awhile, while the other two are "Greenhorns," or more recent arrivals. When one gentleman asks a question in "gebrochenes" English, the other seeks to answer in his English-influenced German, with the result being that these two men from Germany cannot understand each other in either language!

Den andern Abend ging mei Frau
Und ich a Walk zu nehme'.
Of course, wir könnten a Machine
Auffordern, but ich claime
Wer forty Waist hat, wie mei Frau,
Soll exerzeiseln, ennyhow.

Und wie wir so gemütlich geh'n
Elang die Avenoo,
Da bleibt a Couple vor uns stehn.
Ich notiss gleich ihr' Schuh',

Und sag zu meiner Frau: "Christine,
Ich mach a Wett' das sein zwei Grüne."

A Greenhorn kennt man bei sei Schuhs
(Das muss ich euch erkläre).
Ich wunder wie sie's stende tun
So tighte boots zu weareh.
Es gibt mir jedesmal a pain-
Doch dass iss somet'ing else again.

Der Mann stared mich a while lang an
Als wollt er etwas frage,
Denn blushed er wie a Kid bis an
sei hartgeboilten Krage',
Und macht a Bow, und sagt zu mir:
"Pardong, Sir, holds ze tramway here?"

"In English," sag ich, "oder Deutsch
Da kann ich fluent rede,
But die Sprach wo du talke tuhst
Die musst du mir translehteh."
"Sie sprechen Deutsch? Na, lieber Mann,
Wo hält denn hier die Straßenbahn?"

"Ah, wo die street-car stoppeh tut!"
Sag ich, "das willst du wisse'!
Well, schneidt hier crast die empty Lots,
Der Weg is hart zu misseh',
Und dort wo du das Brick House siehst,
Da turnst du and läufst zwei Block East."

"Ich fürchte ich beläst'ge Sie,"
Sagt er, "mit meinen Fragen;
Doch würden sie so gütig sein
Mir das auf Deutsch zu sagen?"
"In Deutsch!" schrei ich. "Na, denkst
denn du
Ich talk in Tschinese oder Soouh?"

Bieted der Nerf nicht einiges?
By gosh, es iss zum lache'.
In vierzehn Tag' vergisst der fool
Sei eig'ne Muttersprache.

Wenn's net for uns old Settlers wär
Gäb's bald kei Schönste Lengevitch mehr.

The irony is that the “old Settler” sees himself as a guardian of his native German language, and is unaware of how much his speech has been affected by English words and phrases. Notice how English words are assimilated and inflected in the German manner, e.g., “affordern,” “exerzeiseln,” and “translehteh.” Other English words have simply been incorporated fully, such as “walk,” “blushed,” and “fool.” Finally, some words have assumed new, mixed forms between the two languages, revealing a German pronunciation of English words, using English endings for German root words, or vice versa, as in “Avenoo,” “Nerf,” “Schuhs,” and “tighte.”

Jacket blurbs from Stein's books call these poems “the most hilariously funny dialect verse in our literature. Certainly it is all of that and, in addition, is richly human and sympathetic.” The *Chicago Evening Post* claimed they were “Not a burlesque but the actual everyday speech of our parents or grandparents turned into some of the funniest verse in any language.” Of course, we cannot say for certain if this language was ever spoken by anyone's relatives, or if it is a unique creation of Kurt Stein. In an introduction to *Die Schönste Lengevitch*, Richard Atwater quotes Stein as saying:

[I]t is quite natural that the German peasant transplanted in this country used such words as steam-heat, gas-grates, or even street-cars, for he did not know their German equivalents, having had no occasion to use them. But even the better educated classes emigrating from cities, very soon fall into the habit of using English expressions for nearly everything met with in daily life....To me, the most interesting thing is the giving of new meanings to words through similarity of sound or association of ideas. For instance, the most common: like (adverb, *similar*): gleich; hence, *to like*—gleichen. Then verbal trans-

lations of idiomatic phrases: *I've made up my mind*—Ich habe meine Meinung aufgemacht (*for sich entscheiden or entschliessen.*) Or, Ich wunder (*I wonder*) for Ich möchte wissen. These are all very common.

While the poems may be based upon actual linguistic developments among German-speaking immigrants, we must also consider whether the humorous aspects might not be somewhat at the expense of the subjects themselves. Richard Atwater claims that “Americans have laughed, for more years than we can remember, over the fact, disclosed in the Sunday newspapers by The Katzenjammer Kids and on the stage by the “Dutch” comedian of the Weber and Fields tradition, that people of German ancestry living in the United States speak English with a noticeable Teutonic brogue.”

The predominant view of such dialect language is that it stigmatizes the characters who use it, making them appear inferior and the objects of derision. Dr. Holger Kersten, in “The Creative Potential of Dialect Writing in Later-Nineteenth-Century America,” points out that “the basic problem lies in the tendency to devalue certain forms of language use with reference to a standard form,” causing “deviant forms” to be regarded as inferior, a view that has serious consequences for the status of their users. He instead reveals that as writers used unconventional linguistic forms to “disrupt the routines of linguistic perception, they provided their audiences with a different kind of aesthetic experience and created opportunities for new and surprising insights and sensations.”

It certainly seems that Stein enjoyed playing with language. Some of his poems seek to convert traditional masterpieces such as *Tristan and Isolde*, *Aida*, *Hamlet*, *Faust*, and *Lohengrin* into his own “lengevitch.” The poems are advertised as “a delicate Treat für Eye, Ear, Nose und Sofort.... der ganze Gamut von Human Emotions, von Liebe zu Liverwurst, inclusive, wird darin getoucht.”

The merit of Stein's works receives a boost as well from this interesting tidbit:

A browse through the Internet shows that *Die*

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Schonste Lengevitch and *Gemixte Pickles* were in Theodore Dreiser's private library!

Works consulted

Kersten, Holger. "The Creative Potential of Dialect Writing in Later-Nineteenth-Century America." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 55, no. 1, June 2000, pp. 92-117.

Mulligan, Roarke. "Theodore Dreiser's Private Library." DreiserWebSource. <http://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/rbm/dreiser/library>

K. M. S. (Stein, Kurt M.) *Gemixte Pickles*. New York: Covici, Friede, 1930.

K. M. S. (Stein, Kurt M.) *Limburger Lyrics, Oder Odes in die Schönste Lengevitch*. New York: Covici, Friede, 1932.

Stein, Kurt. *Die Schönste Lengevitch*. Chicago: Pascal Covici, 1927.

Editor's note: A feature on the new acquisition of materials related to the founder of the Milwaukee Turners, August Willich (1810–1878), will appear in the Fall 2004 edition.



New Library Acquisitions

A listing of recent library acquisitions can be found on our Web site as a link from the News page or at the URL: <http://csumc.wisc.edu/mki/Library/NewAcqs/NewAcqs.htm>.

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A highlight from recent donations is the 8-page document, *Schmitt Family History*. The history was written in 1923 "by William H. Schmitt, who was born in 1852 in Barton, Wisconsin. He was the youngest son of Christian Schmitt [an emigrant from Alsace/Elsass/Elsace] who lived with his family in Barton Township, Washington County, Wisconsin, before moving to Minnesota. Georg Schmitt, older brother of William H. Schmitt, died in the Civil War. He was a member of the 27th Regiment, Wisconsin Volunteers. George W. Schmidt (name changed for unknown reason) was a grandson of Christian Schmitt who served for a time in the Wisconsin legislature. Another descendant of Christian Schmitt is Dr. Harrison H. Schmitt, a geologist and astronaut in the Apollo program. He was the only scientist and [one of the last men] to walk on the moon" (Dec. 11, 1972). Donated by Harold C. Habein.

— Kevin Kurdylo