

## ~ On the Subject of Translations ~

by Walt Vogdes



Les Hopper, compiler of "*1,001 German Beer Stein Translations*", is to be thanked for his totally voluntary and uncompensated efforts to support the hobby of stein collecting by helping collectors understand their steins. Not having the ability to translate the German expressions on his steins himself, when he started this project he turned to his friends, and was promptly told "they can't be translated." As Les states in his book, "Of course the expressions can be translated word by word with the help of a good dictionary; but they really don't make sense in this form. What [these] friends meant was that the expressions probably would lose their true meaning in translation." Not ready to accept defeat, Les pressed ahead, and with the aid of many friends and fellow collectors was able to compile 1,001 translations into book form, which was distributed to all members of Stein Collectors International at no cost. Some may disagree with the translations he has published, and some may argue that they could have (or should have) been stated differently, but if it was as simple as making sausage, we'd just feed the German text in one end of the sausage maker and take our translations out the other end.

Many of the German expressions or verses which we find on steins were written more than 100 years ago, using the idiom of the time. The German language has always included numerous regional dialects and variants, and the writing itself (the alphabet as well as the spelling of certain words) has changed over the course of time. Further, the German form of expression, especially sentence structure, is quite different from American-English expression, and it's common for two knowledgeable German-speaking individuals to disagree on a translation. Further complicating the matter is the fact that idiomatic expressions rarely lend themselves to literal interpretation (imagine the confusion likely to result in translations of "raining cats and dogs", or "drop-dead gorgeous", or "a face that could stop a clock", or "between a rock and a hard place"). Finally we have the problem of rhyme. Not only is it unlikely that the English counterparts of two rhyming German words will themselves rhyme, it is unlikely that they will even appear at the end of the translated phrase in English! For example, the simple verse *Frohsinn und Heiterkeit, Willkommen allezeit* is translated as "**Happiness and merriment are welcome any time**", preserving the meaning, but surrendering the poetic feeling. Consequently we must realize that translations of these expressions and verses is imprecise, and involves compromise.

Let's consider two examples, one quite short and the other a lengthy verse, both of which have caused debate about how they should be translated.

First let's consider the German expression *Gegen Bier und Tabaks Dunst Ist alle Weiberlist umsonst*. Les Hopper's "*1,001 German Beer Stein Translations*" tells us this means "**Against the aroma of tobacco and beer, all women's craftiness is for naught**." When this was posted in SteinTalk, a visitor suggested a better translation could be obtained by using an English-German dictionary, which produced the following: "**All of women's beguiling ways can not hold up against beer and the smoke of tobacco**". That was held to be better, and another alternative proposed: "**All of womens's beguiling ways and cunning are in vain against beer and the fumes of tobacco**."

At this point I think we have to stop and ask if we really see any consequential difference in the above translations - I certainly don't, but that judgment is based exclusively on comparing three expressions in English, and not on any first-hand knowledge of the German involved.

The next bit of controversy arose over an article appearing in the front of Hopper's work entitled "*An Outstanding Example of German Expressions on a Stein*". That article contains the original German verse shown side by side with a translation by Art Maethner, a native German and an active student of German language, culture and art. Basically the criticism said the translation was nonsensical, and challenged "those fellow collectors who rely mostly on what is written in these so-called stein sayings translations, especially those who immediately came to the defense of LH and attacked the original critic, to take the best available dictionary and then try and match the translations offered to the German words or phrases that are actually written on Mettlach stein # 171."

This points out one of the major difficulties in translating verse, that of maintaining not only the original meaning, but the lyricism and the rhyme in a translation. No word-for-word translation is likely to be satisfactory. Mr. Maethner's translation is entirely in rhyming verse, in an attempt to retain the lyrical quality of the original German verse. This certainly required taking some liberties, and it is up to those who seek translations to determine if they prefer a literal, word-by-word translation, or an attempt to portray the lyric style and sense of the original phrase or verse.

Let's look at the twelve-stanza verse which appears on Mettlach relief master stein number 171. The first column shown below provides the verse as it appears on the stein. Note that this inscription was written in a style which

preceded the use of umlauts (in the first verse, we expect to see the words written as "Jänner", "füllen" and "Fässer"). The second column shows Art Maethner's published translation, while the third column shows a more literal translation. Which one is correct? Which one is wrong? Or are they both useful in their own way?

Please note that I have tried to faithfully reproduce both the original verse and the translations performed by others. Any errors in transcription may be attributed to me.

Note: If you wish to print the verse and its translations, or to view them in a larger font, you may use the links which appear above each version of the verse. Use your browser's BACK button to return to this page..



<u><a href="#">Original verse in German</a></u>	<u><a href="#">Translation by Art Maethner</a></u>	<u><a href="#">Translation by Wolfgang Stein</a></u>
<p><i>Januar - Eismond - Hartung - Jaenner (Jenner)</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Unser jenner ist kalt Hat Sonnenschein - Drum fuellen wir Faesser und Schlaeuche mit Wein.</i></p>	<p>January - Month of Ice and Hardship</p> <hr/> <p>The weather's cold - Though sun may shine - So we fill kegs and jugs with wine. And tarry long o'er grape and berry. One must be wary in January!</p>	<p>January - Ice Moon - Hartung (old German word for January) - Jenner (southern dialect)</p> <hr/> <p>The Weather is Cold Has Sunshine That's why we fill Casks and Jugs with Wine</p>
<p><i>Februar - Hornung - Feber - Sporkel</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Hornung ist fasznachtzeit, Der den Narren macht ist gescheut.</i></p>	<p>February - Month of the Horn</p> <hr/> <p>The shrovetide farce in February Is not a season to be wary. Join the fun and play the fool. Now is the time to loose your cool.</p>	<p>February - Hornung (means dehorning animals, in this context the month of February got dehorned, or was short changed, because it has the fewest number of days of any month) - Feber (still used today in Austria) - Sporkel (southern German dialect).</p> <hr/> <p>February is Carnival Time (Mardigrás - Shrovetide Festivities) He who plays the fool will be avoided</p>
<p><i>Maerz - Lenzing - Lenzmond</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Er ist nicht zu trocken - Nicht zu nasz - Er fuellt uns leuten Kist und fass.</i></p>	<p>March - Month of Spring and Rejuvenation</p> <hr/> <p>March makes our labors pleasant tasks And fills our chests, as well as casks. It's not too dry, and not too wet. A month we simply can't forget.</p>	<p>March - Lenzing / Lenzmond (old German for March)</p> <hr/> <p>He's not too Dry Not too Wet He fills us People Crate and Cask</p>
<p><i>April - Ostermond</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Sind end april die reben noch blind, So freut sich der herr un's hausgesind.</i></p>	<p>April - Month of Easter</p> <hr/> <p>Should April's ebb young vine slips spy The vintner's house will sigh, "Oh my!"</p>	<p>April - Easter Moon</p> <hr/> <p>If at the end of April the grape vines haven't budded (because there's usually a late frost afterwards) The master (Vintner) and his domestic servants are happy</p>
<p><i>Mai - Wonnemond</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Alles liebt im mai Jeder, vogel leegt sein ey,</i></p>	<p>May - Month of Joy</p> <hr/> <p>The month of May is a month of love. Hawks lay their eggs, as does the dove</p>	<p>May - Blissful Moon</p> <hr/> <p>Everything loves in May, Each bird lays his Egg,</p>

<p><i>Es ist pfingstregen, Darum weinseegen.</i></p>	<p>And the gentle rains at Whitsuntide Bless sparkling wines on every side.</p>	<p>It is Whitsuntide Rain, May the Wine be Blessed</p>
<p><i>Juni - Brachmond</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Juni bringt keinen frost mehr Der dem wein gefaehrlich waer.</i></p>	<p>June - Month of Fallow Land</p> <hr/> <p>Though frost may touch the vines of June, Its harm is slight - a blessed boon.</p>	<p>June - Moon of the unplowed Land</p> <hr/> <p>June brings no more Frost that could be dangerous to the Wine</p>
<p><i>Juli - Heumond</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Jetzt geht mit dem rechen Wenn flieg enn bremsen stechen Am abend magst zechen, Dich ruhig schlafen legen.</i></p>	<p>July - Month of Hay</p> <hr/> <p>March to the fields and rake that hay Flies may "bug" you all the day, Yet think of all the joys ahead, A "stein" or two, and then to bed!</p>	<p>July - Hay Moon</p> <hr/> <p>Now go with the Rake When Flies and Horseflies sting In the evening enjoy a drink and be merry Lay down quietly to sleep</p>
<p><i>August - Erntemond</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Im heuen recht gegabelt, In der erndt recht gezabelt, Beim essen und trinken recht geschnabelt.</i></p>	<p>August - Month of the Harvest</p> <hr/> <p>After one has pitched the hay, And laid the harvest well away, The time arrives to drink and play.</p>	<p>August - Harvest Moon</p> <hr/> <p>Pitched a lot while making hay Kept very busy during the Harvest Gossiped while Eating and Drinking</p>
<p><i>September - Herbstmond</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Maria Geburt gingen die Studenten und Schwalben furt.</i></p>	<p>September - Month of Autumn</p> <hr/> <p>In this birth month of our blessed Mary Students and swallows do not tarry.</p>	<p>September - Autumn Moon</p> <hr/> <p>Birthday of the Virgin Mary Students (back to School) and Swallows (going south) are leaving</p>
<p><i>Oktober - Weinmond - Gilbhart</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Wein und obst - Was gott beschert Ist nutzbringend und dankeswerth.</i></p>	<p>October - Month of Wine and Changing Color</p> <hr/> <p>God bestowed - To ease our load - Fruit and wine - A gift divine.</p>	<p>October - Wine Moon - Gilbhart (wilting heart, foliage and leaves are wilting)</p> <hr/> <p>Wine and Fruit What God bestowed Is valuable and deserving of our Thanks</p>
<p><i>November - Windmond - Nebelung</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Viel hasen - viel spring - Viel jage - viel sing.</i></p>	<p>November - Month of Wind and Fog</p> <hr/> <p>The rabbits root, before they spring. The hunters shoot, before they sing.</p>	<p>November - Wind Moon - Nebelung (foggy)</p> <hr/> <p>Many Rabbits - A lot of Water (from the spring) Many go Hunting - Many Sing</p>
<p><i>Dezember - Christmond - Heilmond - Julmond</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Schwein schlachten, wein trinken, Haering essen, wachtel fangen Kraut schneiden - Sind des monats freuden.</i></p>	<p>December - Month of Christ - The Savior - Yule</p> <hr/> <p>Slay the swine, sip the wine, Dine on herring in the brine. Quail and herbs are also fine, Broiled on embers in December.</p>	<p>December - Christ Moon - Healing Moon - Julmond (old German for December)</p> <hr/> <p>Butchering a Pig, Drinking Wine, Eating Herring, Catching Quail, Dicing Cabbage (for Sauerkraut) - Those are this month's pleasures</p>