Peter Etter, president of the Wilhelm Tell Guild in New Glarus, Wisconsin, is also Superintendent of Schools and Principal of New Glarus Elementary School. He has played the role of Hermann Gessler in the German performance of Schiller's “Wilhelm Tell” in New Glarus for the past fifteen years. He spoke September 8 with Schiller Institute vice president Marianna Wertz.

Etter: Let me tell you who I am. I am the Superintendent of Schools of the New Glarus School District, and in K-12 I have 700 students. In this capacity as Superintendent, I’m also the Elementary Principal and Business Manager all rolled into one.

When I came to New Glarus 21 years ago, I had a German program, and my German teacher had two classes and was also the librarian. When I saw that—how would you like to be a German teacher in New Glarus and have me drop in your classroom, since I speak the language!—I told her, Linda, you need to go to Germany and get this program going. She is now a full-time German teacher, our high school has 200 students, and she has an enrollment of 130 students in her classes.

The reason she is doing that is, number one, because she’s a good teacher. Number two, because she has German contacts now. I took her to Germany. We have a partnership school, we’re bringing German kids over every year and every year our kids go over to Germany.

Fidelio: What’s your partnership school?

Etter: It’s in Hessen, Bad Arolsen. The principal there is Dan Radeck. He even brings adult groups over here, which has really gotten us into the adult exchange program. On Oct. 3-12, I’ve got ten principals coming from the National Association of School Administrators in Wisconsin, and we’re hosting them here in New Glarus. They’re staying in peo-
ple's homes. I'm real proud of that part.
In doing this, I've also gotten Linda
involved in the Wilhelm Tell plays. In doing
this, I've also gotten Linda
involved in the Wilhelm Tell plays. I've
gotten her to use Schiller in the German
classroom, because, as you also know,
Schiller is a wonder, a great German
author. He uses the wonderful German
language and it's hoch Deutsche [high
German], it's wonderful hoch Deutsche.

We came to town here 21 years ago.
The Swiss have presented this play since
1938. A wonderful play. The Swiss do it
because of their cultural heritage. It's a
good story: Good triumphs over evil.
The big, mean Gessler dies, and well he
should, because he's an evil S.O.B. Since
I've become involved, we've gotten
more German speakers, as the Swiss
have died out. Now, we're doing it more
and more hoch Deutsche.

The biggest comment we got—from
the University of Wisconsin about ten
years ago—was, Hey, we love your play
because now we can understand it. We
are trying to do more hoch Deutsche,
because now we feel we have something
we can offer German classes.

**Fidelio:** Can you comment more on
your thoughts about the content of
Schiller's writings and their importance
for America?

**Etter:** Absolutely. The actual content
you can see in the hole Gasse, the narrow
passageway, where Gessler gets killed.
You're coming through the narrow
passageway and a woman confronts Gessler
with her two children. She says, I will not
go away from this place until you have
done right by my husband, who is in jail
awaiting you to pass sentence. I, as Gess-
sler, say, You are nothing but a miserable
people, good for nothing but to mow the
grass and herd your cows. This woman as
the audacity, the courage, to stand up in
front of me, the ruler, and say, Here I lie
with my children. Take your horse and
ride over me, because that's not the worst
you can do to me. That you have already
done. That won't even hurt us.

She's saying something about justice,
the injustice that the lords had towards
the common people. What more can you
do to me? My man's in jail. Ride over
me with your horse!

Then, of course, in the end, I get
shot. Wilhelm Tell, who was a very,
very common, down-to-earth hunter,
who didn't want to be bothered—in his
soliloquy he says, I was happy, I was
content, but you have brought out the
worst in me, you, Gessler, because you
treat the people so bad, now I have to
take something in my hand and do
something to the system and to you.

**Fidelio:** When you perform the play, do
you include the part of Johannes Parrici-
da at the end?

**Etter:** No, I'm not familiar with it.

**Fidelio:** The end of the play is a com-
mentary on the question of the assassina-
tion of a tyrant.

Schiller included it
to make clear that
Tell was not an
assassin by heart.
That Tell did it out
of necessity, and
that he does not
advocate it. Tell
tells Parricida, an
assassin who comes
to him seeking
refuge, that they
have nothing in
common. He sends
him off to Rome to
seek forgiveness.

**Etter:** We don't do that part, but it
comes out in the hole Gasse, which is a
big soliloquy, where Tell says, Up to this
time, I've been a happy man. You have
driven me to this.

**Fidelio:** In teaching Schiller in your class-
rooms, do you teach any of his poetry, his
ballads, or his aesthetical writings?

**Etter:** Very little. We basically zero in
on Wilhelm Tell. One time I was in Ger-
many, and I sat in on a class where they
were doing Die Glocke (The Song of the
Bell). If you take apart Die Glocke, and
you take that piece by piece, oh my gosh,
is that powerful!

**Fidelio:** Yes, I translated it into English.

**Etter:** I'm going to try to do that one.
That's a really good one.

**Fidelio:** That's the whole history of civ-
ilization. Tell me about the perfor-
ance, how did it go?

**Etter:** The performance went very, very
well. On Monday, which was the last
day, we had about 450 people in the audi-
ence, which was in English. On Sunday,
we had about 200 people in the audience
and on Saturday we had about 500.

We're disappointed with the audi-
ence, because I remember the days when
we had a thousand people. Right now,
we're competing against things like the
"Taste of Madison" and the "Cow Chip
Throwing Contest" and these important
cultural things!

**Fidelio:** The degeneration of culture in
this country . . .

**Etter:** Tell me about it! They'd rather go
throw a cow chip than see Wilhelm Tell.

We have good, clean entertainment.

**Fidelio:** You involve a lot of children in
your plays.

**Etter:** Do we ever! There's a regular
pecking order. My son, who's now
twenty years old and going to the Uni-
versity of Wisconsin, started as a peas-
ant. He was born in June. He was out
there in August. He was two months
old. He's been there every year since this
year. This year he came home from col-
lege, twenty years old, and he said,
Mom, I suppose I could be a soldier, but
if my buddies are all gone, I don't want
to be a soldier, let's go to the play and
watch Dad. My son, who doesn't speak a
whole lot of German, was sitting in the
audience listening to the German, just to
let me know how I did. I asked him,
what did you think? He said, "Dad,
that's pretty cool!"
The little girls are Swiss Miss dancers
when they start out. They move up to
wedding dancers, that's junior high. Then they move up to usherettes. The usherettes are the high school girls, who pass out programs and do the dances in between. The boys have the same pecking order. We start as peasants, then they become shepherd boys and choir boys, then they can become soldiers. All the time in between, they can have speaking parts. The entire community is involved.

Fidelio: This has been going on for fifty or more years?
Etter: The first play was 1938. It keeps us all together. Some people choose not to participate, and everyone participates for different reasons.

After the play, your [Schiller Institute] members came over and talked to Buzz Holland, who plays in the English play. They asked him some questions and Buzz—it's unusual—but he started crying. It was that powerful to him.

I have yelled at Wilhelm Tell in my role as Gessler and I have really gotten into it, because we do the German, and it's a strong German. I sound like Hitler, when I do my lines! After the play, he came up to me and cried. He said, “You were awfully tough! You really got to me.” Then when he comes back and shows the second arrow—“I would have shot you had I failed”—this is very powerful!

I have a theory. We have some people talking defeatism in our organization. I'm the president of the Wilhelm Guild, but we have some Swiss saying we should cut it to two, or we should cut out the German. I said you will never cut out the German. If you cut the German, I will quit. I don't care if there are ten people in the audience, the point is, Who are we doing it for? Are we doing this for tourism, or are we doing this to celebrate our heritage? In my case, it happens to be high German. I don't care if there are ten people in the audience, I will do my best.

If there are 500 people in the audience, it's much easier to do, because when your audience responds, it helps you. But the point is, as long as I can be on that horse and do my part—I don't even have to be Gessler. On Monday and on Saturday, I'm a monk, I'm a stone mason, I'm backstage. The English cast supports the German cast and vice-versa. We do this for the love of the piece of literature.

Fidelio: That heritage is in fact the heritage of America. German immigrants helped build this country. German immigrants helped bring Abraham Lincoln into the Presidency.

Fidelio: This is the reason, in fact, that Helga Zepp LaRouche founded the Schiller Institute in America. To remind us of that tradition of German-American friendship.

Etter: I'm partially to blame. A lot of times when you're in a bar having a drink, sooner or later they're going to ask you, are you German. Sooner or later they're going to ask you, where were you in World War II? My father happened to be in the Wehrmacht, he was a German soldier on the Russian front. I don't want to defend that! He was there because that was his job. He chose to come over to America in 1950. I don't need to defend my heritage, but twelve years of German history, when we had this person from Austria ruin it, we have to fight that. Everybody thinks that Germans are Nazis!

Fidelio: I recommend you read the Fidelio issue on Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Lessing. We published it in part for that purpose. In fact, Mr. LaRouche said, If you want to know the truth, the German general staff was a Jewish conspiracy, derived from the influence of the Jew Mendelssohn! Germany's great culture was developed through the efforts of Mendelssohn in his collaboration with Lessing. Our purpose is also to make clear that the highest of German culture is what was destroyed by Hitler, not what Hitler was.

Let me raise one last thing. You said you're operating off a poor English translation. The Schiller Institute began its work by creating English translations of Schiller that were poetical. I would urge you to take a look at our translation.

Etter: We have it, and I've already given it to our translation committee. We've been fighting with the translation. Our translation leaves a lot to be desired. For instance, "Verräter, diese Sprache deine Herrn!"—Gessler says near the end. It's translated, “Audacious boy, such language to your lord!” What's a Verräter? It's a traitor, not an audacious boy! That's the kind of garbage we have to deal with.

Fidelio: Thank you very much, Mr. Etter, and good luck.