

INTERVIEW

Peter Etter President, Wilhelm Tell Guild

‘The entire community is involved’

are resounding throughout the meadows. There is a touching scene where Tell explains to his son (a young boy speaking excellent German) why the Swiss prefer to live among the dangerous mountain glaciers, amid avalanches, rather than kowtow to the likes of Gessler.

The stage is now set for the famous confrontation between Tell and Gessler, replete with soldiers carrying Gessler’s silly hat on a highly decorated pole. Townspeople scurry every which way to get away from saluting the blasted thing. However, Tell, carrying his vaunted crossbow, and his son, nonchalantly walk right on by it.

“Halt!”

Tell’s brave son takes center stage, inspired by his father’s talk, and insolently tells the governor that his father can shoot the apple off his head. The mounted Gessler grows increasingly enraged, as his horse snorts furiously along with his master, and Gessler, refusing Tell’s apologies, demands his entertainment. Walter confidently walks off in the distance, and soon comes back with half an apple for the now apoplectic Governor, who takes Tell prisoner anyway.

Interspersed among these exciting scenes is the deathbed appearance of Werner, Baron von Attinghausen, who is brought onto the meadow on a wooden plank, barely alive, and destined not to live to see the conversion of his heir-apparent nephew to the Swiss cause. There is great sacred music as a group of young boys, dressed as monks, lead the funeral procession.

Finally, the escaped Tell lies in wait for Gessler, who makes one last violent outburst against a petitioning peasant woman, when suddenly an arrow rips his heart, and ends his tyranny once and for all. The crowd cheers, as Gessler falls from his horse, and a local wedding party streams out of the woods into the meadow, featuring many colorful young girls twirling flower garlands and singing.

The play ends as all the players, and all the animals, return to the meadows from the thick forest, and Switzerland celebrates with a parade of all the flags of all its newly independent cantons! Bravo!

—Glenn Mesaros

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



Courtesy of Peter Etter

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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. 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 Gessler, 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 Parricida at the end?

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

Fidelio: The end of the play is a commentary on the question of the assassination 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 classrooms, 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 Germany, 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 civilization. Tell me about the performance, 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 audience, 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 audience, 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*.



EFIR/S/Glenn Mesaros

Above: Baron von Attinghausen's funeral procession. **Right:** Finale.

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 University of Wisconsin, started as a peasant. 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 college, 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

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

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.

The little girls are Swiss Miss dancers when they start out. They move up to wedding dancers, that's junior high. 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.



EIRNS/Glenn Mesaros

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

helped build this country. German immigrants helped bring Abraham Lincoln into the Presidency.

Etter: We know that. Who was Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of the Interior? Carl Schurz. Who won the Civil War for him? German immigrants.

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.