

Willie Gesch & Frank Rehberger, Trpe I  
11/8/84  
WFC/GA-04-R(PM)

PM: We're live, and should we have it?

W: Absolutely!

PM: Okay.

W: Du kleine Fliegen (06-09: Sings song)

PM: Is there a title for that?

W: Well, I would call it "Du kleine Fliegen," which means "you little fly," and the words mean: you little fly, if I catch you, I'm going to tear your little leg out and then you're going to have to limp around on one less leg. Oh, little fly, what's goona become of you now? That's the meaning of the little song.

PM: Could I ask you where you learned it?

W: I learned that song from my Dad. When I was a little boy and my father was born in Berlin, but my father's father was born in Gunteburg, which is north of Berlin somewhere. I think it's in the Polish zone now. And he taught me that. Okay, let's fire another one.

PM: Sure.

W: He taught me this one. Every night I go to bed I have to sing this. (18-24: sings Mi der bin ich gezuruck.)

W: That's a little bed-time prayer. And it means, means I'm tired and I'm going to rest.

If you translate it exactly it means I'm going to lock my eyes up for the night, but it means I'm going to close them. And then you say

Did I do anything bad today?

means Lord, don't look on it.

Your grace, I think is Gnade, and Christ's blood make all bad good. And that's a little bedtime, and I sing it every night. I learned that from my father too, and my mother, but my mother was born in the United States, but my Dad was born in Berlin and came over here when he was about 17 or 18 years old and he was the oldest boy in his family and technically he was supposed to report back to Bermany, but he knew because of World War Two that he'd never get out again, so his father kept all his 5 sons over here and never sent anybody back. It's very interesting. I don't know if you can gather all this stuff up, because I also have 5 sons, and I'm teaching them the same songs. At first they don't

know what they're talking about. I suppose I didn't either but until I was in fourth grade I could speak as fluent German as English, and from then on my English took over.

PM: You say you learned these from your father. Did he sing around the house, or did he sit you down and teach you these, or how did

W: We would sit, at night we would have to go by the bedside and then my mother and he would sing it to me. And it went over and over and over until I knew them. And we would also speak verses like (44)

That's another one, oder here's another one, (46)

Then he'd nod his head. And that is a Scripture verse, by the way: What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world, or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul. That's the way I learned most of them. And then my father was one of five boys, and about once a year the 5 boys would all come to visit our house and we would sit around the table and this is not for publication now, they put a great big mug or two of beer in the middle of the table. And then they would break out into this lusty song. (54)

And that means there's a song going around our table. Rumpditty boom, that's just an expression, and then "drei mal drei ist neune" is just some ridiculous thing, three times three is nine. Du weisst, they'll say, you know what I mean. Es geht (59)

and then some guy would have to start a song. Like they pointed, you or me, and they say, okay you start, and then you'd say ah - "Ach du lieber Augustine, Augustine, Augustine, Ach du lieber Augustine (64)

And then somebody else would say, that's all I want to hear of that one, and you'd just, we'd stop right there and break right in and say (65)

until you couldn't stand it anymore, and somebody'd break it in, like Frank is going to break in on one. Come here, Frank. You sit over here. Sure. Come on Frank. If you and I were singing around the table, Frank,

F: I'd rather stand when I sing.

W: I've never noticed a difference. It's equally bad. Mine doesn't get any better at all.

F: Well, I'd rather stand.

W: Okay, now if we were singing, Frank, and I was singing (70)

[F: picks up song]

W: and now you would sing

[F: continues song]

W: You'd better break into another song now. It's your turn.

F: Okay. I'm going to sing.

W: You don't have to say it, just start singing.

F: Well, just a translation, "I Lost My Heart in Heidelberg" in German  
(76: sings)

and this is a translation for that last song: It's such a beautiful day, this day should never disappear or go away, but they all do just like the clouds drift away, and then it repeats again, Such a day

W: [sings] Es geht

That's the clue that you're going to start a new song. And you paid no attention to etiquette or anything. You wouldn't say "Oh, we shouldn't interrupt that lovely song," you broke right square in the middle.

F: M-m-m.

W: You said, that's all, man, and then you start a different song. And anybody could do this. If we were all around the table, anybody could all of a sudden beller in between us, "Geht ein..." and then the poor guy had to quit singing. And we'd keep that all up and, of course, they all had glasses of beer. That was nobody was drunk,

F: To oil up your throat.

W: Yeah, to grease up the wires, so then you'd keep that up all night. Of course, then when that was over, then we'd have one that, people's birthdays. And then you'd say, this is the way this would go. (112: sings)

and you'd keep singing, "drink aus, drink aus, drink aus," until the glass of beer was empty. And then you'd go on again, "Und wer (116)

See, there was prejudice there. They had nothing for left-handers, (118)

and then we'd use a slang word, I'll use it on here (119)

and then it goes

and then everybody around the table would drink along with the guy whose birthday it was. By the time you got to December, you had to show him where the door was.

F: Or probably lead him out.

W: Sure. And we would also do this on weddings. We'd go and make what they call "Katzen-Musik," which translated means Cat Music, Katzen-Musik.

F: Or like chivarees, you might say.

W: That's what it is. It's a chivaree, and then you'd make, somebody'd shoot a gun and at the shooting of the gun, then everybody would make a racket. They'd pound on gas cans and we'd have big saws, those great big round saws, and they'd put a rod through the hole in the middle and hit on there with hammers, all the guys would, and it would be a racket! And sometimes you'd have to sing at the wedding. The bride and groom would come out and they'd look over your gang, and if there were 5 or 10 people, they'd maybe give 5 dollar bill and if you thought he was pretty tight, that wasn't enough, bang it would go, and you'd start rattling again, and he'd have to, you'd stay there and interrupt his wedding celebration until he'd pay what you think you were worth. Sometimes you'd give speeches at the weddings, but sometimes you'd sing. And one of the verses that we used to speak, I don't know if you're interested in speaking, but we had a little verse (138)

oh, now I know how it starts (139)

I lived in a little town called Franklin. And the last line was (145)

which means, Frank, a Reise is like a trip.

F: Trip.

W: Wandern is like a wandering and then we said, "And don't you forget the Franklin bunch." And then the guy'd have to pay off, see?

PM: So this was outside of the chivaree?

W: Yeah, outside of the house. You'd go by the house and you'd just make so much racket until the bride and groom came out, and when they came out, and then I tell you what we did, we, 5 dollars was a pretty good haul for 8 or 10 people, and you could buy an eighth of beer for a dollar 80 cents. So we'd go to the tavern and buy an eighth of beer and 10 guys and then we'd go and get some raw beef and onions and chop that in here and salt and pepper 'em and some loaves of bread and you'd just slap the hamburger right on top. The beef on top and

F: One thing I could never eat. I tried it.

W: on the bride and groom. And then of course then we'd sing again.

F: Raw beef never agreed with me. I'd rather have it fried.

W: Okay, what else can we

PM: These, the Katzen Musik, you were doing that when you were a young fellow?

W: From when I was 5, 6 years old. My brothers would carry me along, and I could go along. We were part of the gang. It was almost always all men, though, it was always fellas. I don't recall that we had ladies along with The Katzen Musik. And the last time that I ever heard Katzen Musik chivaree was at my wedding when a little gang of young kids came and that cost me like a couple dollars would shut them up. So I was a little bit more of a cheap skate, 'cause I got married during World War 2. He hasn't changed at all, he's going to say, he's still a cheapskate. What else would you like to know. Ask

PM: Do you have another song up your sleeve?

F: Yea, The Linden Tree, by Franz Schubert. Let's see, I gotta think of it.  
(171: sings)

W: Now, Frank, where, where did you learn that?

F: Ah, I belonged to a church choir for 32 years. And every year we had what they call a Sangerfest. The choir is no longer in existence, because of the lack, the fellows got older and we couldn't get young voices. They had something or other always. They didn't care to sing. And, ah, that's how we got to learn some of these secular songs and church songs.

W: Well, you were born in Switzerland.

F: No, I was born in Austria.

W: Where in Austria?

F: About, oh about 2½ hour train ride south of Vienna. The eastern-most province of Austria, called Burgenland. I came over in the age of 9. My parents had been over here already. Those days, and I'm speaking of 1907, my folks left me in the care of my grandparents. They had the idea they both come to work and they always thought, you know, the streets were paved with gold, you know, everybody talked that way. And left me in the care of my grandparents until 1913. I was only 2½ years old, but they just had the idea they'd come back in 3 years. Well, then an aunt of mine, a sister of my mother, came to Chicago. Her husband had been there before and when I came over my folks were like strangers to me. I didn't know my parents. It's quite a hard thing to get used to because you know, here since you remember I called my grandparents, my mother's parents, I stayed with them and lived with them, so I had to learn a new language and I went to a Lutheran school at first. I didn't pick up the English fast enough, so my mother took me out after a half year and went up to public school

W: Oh, oh, that's Frank Rehberger. Now my grandfather was a prosperous owner of a furniture factory in Germany, and this is way, way back in the early 1900s, when he got fed up with unionism. Can you imagine, his labor force started organizing on him and he couldn't control them any more. And he was fighting all the time. So he said, "let's get out of Germany, out of Berlin, and he sold his whole furniture factory and packed up his 5 boys. And he got on board a ship and he took, there was like dritte Klasse, zweite Klasse, erste Klasse, and it was worse you know down lower.

F: Third class always had to go Ellis Island. First and second class didn't have to go through Ellis Island.

W: Yeah, it was interesting. This last year was the first time in my life that I ever was at Ellis Island. I never saw where they came to.

F: And Sunday, by the way, there's gonna be a show on TV, Ellis Island.

W: Well, my grandfather got on that boat with his, on that ship, with his wife and his 5 sons and when he saw the mess he was going to have to travel, he turned right around and took some more of his money and bought his way into zweite Klasse, instead of dritte Klasse. And that's what they came over. And he ended up in Milwaukee. From Milwaukee he spread out this way to Kiel, and there's a J.B. Loudon Company in Kiel, that's a furniture outfit, and they hired him and he became what you call a prototype maker of furniture. And until he was 80 years old, J.B. Loudon would come with his big Cadillac and pick up my shakey old grandpa, take him to the factory and show him what he wanted him to build - the sample. And after Grandpa, Herman Gesch was his name, had that sample built, he'd take him back home. He'd bring the sample in the factory and the men would produce it. What was mass-produce then, was probably not very much, but and until he got to be over 80 he was still going that.

F: I got to tell you. After I retired, that was 15 years ago, then a neighbor lady said they are looking for teacher's aide. The reason she mentioned that is because I always wanted to become a teacher and it never materialized. So I came over here and I, we, often wondered, I wished I, you'd a taped it when we first talked together. Now this is going to be my last year, 15 years I'll have. I'll be here until next May and then I'll be through.

W: Why?

F: Ach!

W: Why are you going to be done next spring?

F: Es hab alles an Ende, that means everything has an ending.

(263: exchange in German)

F: He's not going to be here, and I don't want to get in with anybody else.

W: I think that's real loyalty.

F: Yeah. It's been fun. I really enjoyed it. I'm a retired brick layer.

PM: You were going to tell about when you first came here.

W: How you met me.

F: Yeah. I wished he'd a taped it. I was probably half scared, you know, here I'm talking to a principal and an educated guy, and I'm just a dumb bricklayer. They used to call us - the dumb bricklayer.

W: He's no dumb bricklayer. He is a cultured

F: Ah, I wished they'd a you'd a taped it that time. Well, I'll tell you. We have been on the North Height radio station already, several years ago, and then later on we were on WHBL, for an hour. That I got taped. My wife taped it for me while we were down there.

PM: Can I ask you when you were born. What year?

F: Yeah, 1904. I'm 80.

PM: A-huh. You were born

F: in Austria, Burgenland, the eastern-most province of, there are 9 provinces of, in Austria.

PM: Was, did you grow up on a farm?

F: Yeah, they were mostly, they called them - the name they called famers, they called them Bauer, which is the equivalent of a famer.

W: They live in a village and they drive out to their land.

F: M-m. Now they, of course, they used to do that, Willie, but now they got the land closer. It used to be years ago, they inherited from somebody a piece of land there and another one some there and by that they were most of the time on their way getting to where they're supposed to work and they were, we had, I remember those days, horse-drawn, no wagons drawn by cars, by cows. And it took a long time to get to some of those places.

W: I had an old German book at home that I gathered up from my Dad's remnants, and I had, I was sick a couple years ago. I got rash all over me from eating aspirins. So here I sat at home. I couldn't come to school. And I started reading that book, and I really never was taught to read German - just in Sunday school, and I never had it, but I could just about figure out what the word meant because I knew so many words. And here I'm reading this book about a preacher from Indiana or Ohio somewhere, and I get in the middle of the book and it says, We went to visit our cousin in Berlin, Karl Gesch, and that is my grandfather's brother! And here I'm reading this book, and I read and Karl Gesch and my grandfather Hermann Gesch, this old guy who had the furniture for J.B. Loudon, they visited together as kids. And it's in this book! And they had a marble mine of some kind.

F: A quarry.

W: Quarry of some kind, and Karl is telling, this preacher is telling this story about it

W: Quarry of some kind, and Karl is telling, this preacher is telling this story how they went out to the quarry and he wanted to show my grandfather how he would blast. So they stuffed a charge of dynamite in there and they blasted it and they were too close and both of them were stone deaf from it. And they were afraid to go home and tell their mother. So they didn't tell. But the whole night and the next morning they couldn't hear a thing they were saying, and they were faking. They were faking they knew what Grandma was saying, but that, what a coincidence that I would read this book and it would tell about Karl Gesch, who was a carpet weaver and he migrated to Sheboygan and had a carpet-weaving shop on Michigan Avenue.

F: Yes.

W: He had a long white beard. And, this all tied together.

F: Well, I told you once that my brother had a friend that lived on Michigan Ave. Now, that friend would have been, well, would be now, let's see, about 73 years old. But my brother, years ago when they lived in Sheboygan Falls, he lives in Denver now -

W: Well, this Karl Gesch would be 130 or 40 now.

F: Oh, oh, but it was somebody, a Gesch on Michigan Avenue they told me about.

W: Several years ago another brother to my grandfather had a son whose name was Konrad Gesch. And he lives in München, in Bavaria, in Germany. And his son, Hellmuth, started getting interested in all his relations, so he started writing to me and I started answering him. And pretty soon he called, he wrote, and wanted to come to visit and trace his family tree down. So we had him at our house. He spent like a week or more at our house and then visited all around here and he built this family tree and put it all together, and I can go back beyond I think it's before the 1700s, he has it. And when I was in Germany, Hellmuth's father Konrad, who was a captain in a German army and became a prisoner of war and was in St. Louis and was not a member of the Gestapo and had to help figure out how to re-build Germany. They didn't want anybody of the SS or the Gestapo to help rebuild the country. They didn't want to have the same troubles, so they took my uncle Konrad, who was a prisoner, and he had to do this. And that's the man I visited. And he got out a notebook. I want that notebook. It is the whole Gesch family tree. And with photocopies of documents, baptismal certificates, marriage certificates, and I said, Why did you do this? He said I had to. I had to prove there is no Jewish blood in me. He says und really, he says, as far back as I went, he speaks pretty good English, he says, der is no, no Jewish blood in the Gesch relation up until shortly before 1700. I says I really don't care if there is or isn't. But he says, I did, because if I couldn't have proved it, he says, I maybe would be, you know, in the ash pit myself. He's still living and so is his wife. And when my wife and I went there to visit, I walked in the house and I smelled the smell of that house inside and I started to cry, because it smelled exactly like my grandfather, Hermann Gesch in Kiel - his house (371)

and he says, why are you crying? I says I'm happy. You're happy and you're crying? Yes, I says, I found the little something of my past and it's just like my grandpa.

(German exchange at 376)



W: And then I looked at him and he looked exactly like my father's brother, and this is one generation removed. He looked like Uncle Walter. I says (379: German)

and here we sat. It was a glorious reunion! And his wife couldn't speak any English. She;d say "from the heart, welcome from the heart, from the heart, she says. And that's all she could say. And we just stood there and cried. It was, it was such a , that's the first time in my life that I had been in Europe.

F: Speaking of, that ah, that this fellow was in World War Two?

W: Yes.

F: I don't know if you watched it, but, ah, last night on channel 10 they had a 90-minute program of Albert Speer. He was supposed to have been Hitler's architect. And I read two of his books. He passed away a couple years ago. He was incarcerated in Spandau, Berlin prison for 20 years. He was released in 1966, and I believe about 2 or 3 years ago he passed away and in that prison now is Hess, who flew to Scotland or England during war and he is the only person in there. And he will not be let out just because Russia is the only one. America, France, and Britain would release him, but they got to all four unite, and so he's going to spend the rest of his life in Spandau.

W: What else would you like to know, Sir? I got another song.

PM: I'd like another son, yes, sure.

F: I'll sing one in Bavarian after a while.

W: Okay. (406: German)

W: We'd sing one of those songs. You may, you don't have to stay here and endure all of this.

(Woman in background says: we'd like to stay forever, but we've got to go, because we have to go to the hospital.)

W: Oh, okay. We have some American friends here.

F: Nice to meet you.

(Various voices in the background as people leave).

W: Well, we used to sing "Bier hier, Bier hier (419)

which means get some beer over here, get some beer over here, and then you say (422)

which means, should that beer lie down in the basement and I get the Omacht. Omacht, what does that mean?

F: Oma, grandmother. Opa is grandfather,

W: Isn't there something like Omacht? live overcome? I should faint because I haven't got the beer.

F: Oh, I don't know.

(429: German)

W: in other words, here we're gonna die and there that beer is in the basement.

F: Yeah, I missed that.

W: Another song. You got enough on there for him to

F: This is a wine song in the Bavarian dialect. (434)

W: Okay there.

PM: Where did you learn that?

F: You learned, you listened to programs. I used to listen to German programs. I still listen now. On every Friday night. It's a broadcast over the Sheboygan north high station from 8:00 until quarter to, quarter before midnight. And I know a lot of those songs. Well, and then you would, I learn them, Sangerfest.

W: It was, all one Frank and I, Frank can finish it. I can't start it. Are you finished there?

PM: I think I am.