

HAIKU LIFE IN GERMANY

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Germany's first contact with the haiku corresponded—as it looked like—to its former reputation as a country of “Dichter und Denker” (poets and thinkers), for it did not come about as in most other countries by scholars but by lyric writers. In this way we find the first independent examples of haiku about 1890, for instance the following taken from the collection “Polymeter” composed by Paul Ernst in 1898:

Eine Wasserrose,
Die aus der Tiefe auftaucht.
Kräuselt sich das Wasser.

A water lily
Emerging from the depth
Ripples of water

Peter Altenberg, Alfred Mombert and Arno Holz can be ascribed to the same group under the influence of impressionism. A second wave, around 20 years later, is due to the traditionally close literary connections with France when mainstream poets like Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Blei, Ivan Goll and Klabund directed their attention to the haiku. Typically enough, in one of his analytical papers Ivan Goll called it “lyrical epigram.” To be honest, there had been as well some early translations of Japanese poetry dating back to 1894, when Karl Florenz published his *Dichtergrüße aus dem Osten* (*Poets' Greetings from the East*) or Paul Adler, in 1910, his enlarged translation of Michel Revon's widely-read *Anthologie de la littérature française*, further Hans Bethge, Paul Enderling, Julius Kurth and Otto Hauser. Yet the two world wars with the time of great political turmoil in between were of course not at all propitious for the promulgation of that newly discovered genre.

Anyway the second phase of German haiku life was marked by Austrian literati, by the Sinologist Anna von Rottauscher who, in 1939, published her anthology *Ihr gelben Chrysanthemmen* (*You Yellow Chrysanthemums*) containing about 220 translations of classical Japanese haiku, and by Karl Kleinschmidt whose book *Der schmale Weg* (*The Narrow Path*) of 1953 comprised six different haiku sequences concerning their subject matters. Both authors, however, still disregarded the traditional 5-7-5 syllable pattern, often even exceeding the total of 17 syllables. On the other hand haiku henceforth bore the hallmark of that poetry of nature and spirituality in the wake of German Romanticism.

The next crucial date was 1962, again connected with an Austrian author, Imma von Bodmershof and her book *Haiku*. For she was the first both to definitely realize the aesthetic potential of this peculiar Japanese form of short poetry and to deliberately transfer it into German literature. Thus she not only used the 5-7-5 pattern as a general structural basis but also the season word (*kigo*), the cutting word (*kireji*), and the reverberation with the reader or auditor (*yoin*) as constituent elements. Besides she did no longer employ nature just in some stereotyped manner but considered it as quite a complex phenomenon of intrinsic value. Therefore we may call this second period the actual foundation phase of German haiku.

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On the one hand this Austrian authoress was hardly taken notice of by her contemporaries, on the other hand soon after, in 1963, appeared two greater anthologies of Japanese haiku, one edited and translated by Gerolf Coudenhove entitled *Japanische Jahreszeiten (Japanese Seasons)*, published in Zürich, Switzerland, and the other one by Jan Ulenbrook *Haiku – Japanische Dreizeiler (Haiku – Japanese Three-Liners)* published in Bremen, Germany. As a consequence most Germans learnt to appreciate and possibly also to write haiku through reading just these books rendering the Japanese masters in a popular press style. Moreover both editors were no real Japanologists, working mainly on the basis of other translations, passing on in addition that pseudoromantic view of things. Nonetheless they set the trend for others to follow!

Luckily enough, there were as well some loners to appear—though about 20 years later—who surprised the public with some daring experiments: in 1980, Michael Großmeier presented his haiku book *Mit Schneemannsaugen (With the Eyes of a Snowman)*, in 1982, *Haiku*, and in 1985, *Zerblas ich den Löwenzahn (Blowing Away Dandelions)* in German, English, and Japanese. Uli Becker published his post-modern volume of love haiku *Frollein Butterfly* in 1983 following the programmatic motto of the time “Cross the Border—Close the Gap” not even eschewing pornography. And one year later, in 1984, H. C. Artmann—by the way another Austrian—incorporated haiku into his specific surreal and parodistic way of writing. However that be on the whole this third phase was tantamount to some standby mode.

The fourth period began in 1988 livening things up to a greater extent since it was the year of the foundation of the DHG (“Deutsche Haiku Gesellschaft”/“German Haiku Society”). But let me go back a bit here to show you how it grew into it during a rather curious phase that had started already in 1981 with a so-called “Senryū Centre” publishing as well a small official organ called *apropos (by the way)* which, however, survived only for about five years. Thereafter it lasted two more years until this forerunner organization definitely turned into the newborn DHG offering its own haiku magazine *Vierteljahresschrift der Deutschen Haiku-Gesellschaft (Quarterly of the DHG)*. Remarkable in particular right from the beginning, great emphasis was laid on linked forms, such as *renga*, *kasen* (36 stanzas), *byakuin* (100 stanzas), a tendency which culminated in the publication of *The Great Book of Senku Poetry* (1000 stanzas!) in 1992 with an astonishingly wide-ranged international participation, basing on a 12-year-long correspondence taken up and completed by professor Carl Heinz Kurz who unfortunately died soon after. The consequence was rather fatal to the society, for in this way Margret Buerschaper, his foster child, was to remain its president for no less than 15 years until 2003. She not only doggedly pursued a policy of strict adherence to the traditional rules, the observance of the 5-7-5 format, etc.—acceptable of course up to a certain degree—yet in

terms of content she, too, continued to cultivate that dubious sweetish pseudoromantic view approaching even kitsch and excluding everything else condescendingly as *senryū*. Moreover her management was accompanied by a policy of seclusion for fear of any negative influence from abroad. Like this the level remained rather poor resembling more or less that of a tea party celebrating mainly itself. Anyway it should not go unmentioned that the DHG succeeded in making the haiku more popular while establishing a solid structure with regional groups, members' anthologies, competitions, and biannual meetings. Really international contacts, however, were minimized for lack of competence and to avoid any risk of endangering one's rigid principles. Correspondingly one failed to go into a real study of any of the important international pioneering works by Henderson, Blyth, Yasuda, Keene, Higginson, van Tooren etc. Nor did the DHG achieve any real exchange of ideas with the German Japanologists of the time, for instance Horst Hammitzsch or Geza S. Dombrady.

Along these lines it is hardly surprising that the unimaginative name of the journal *Quarterly of the DHG* was abandoned only in 2005 under the guidance of Martin Berner, the new chairman, an active member of the busy Frankfurt group led by the eager *sogetsu-ikebana* master Erika Schwalm. In the end the board wisely opted for the significant new title of *Sommergras (Summer Grass)* signalling at last another era, the period of transition, the fifth phase from 2003 to 2009. Nevertheless for the time being it was not easy to free up space against those practices which had become a habit. Any attempt to relax the regulations could entail even a membership decline. Laudably the new chairman did not bounce back. He had already tried to establish international contacts before, mainly backed by the Frankfurt group. So he had represented the DHG on the occasion of the "First International Congress about the Contemporary Haiku" in Tokyo in 1999 convened by the Gendai Haiku Kyokai ("Modern Haiku Society"). The other panelists were Ban'ya Natsuishi (Japan), Stephen Gill (Great Britain), and Alain Kervern (France). The subject for discussion ran: "Haiku to Unite the Globe: Prospects for the 21st Century." In 2002, the Frankfurt group had been invited again by the Gendai Haiku Kyokai, and in 2003 and 2005 it deputized the DHG with a small delegation at the 2nd and 3rd Congress of Ban'ya Natsuishi's newly founded WHA ("World Haiku Association") in Nara (Japan) and Sofia (Bulgaria). But the highlight under the aegis of Martin Berner and his right-hand woman Erika Schwalm came about in the same year 2005 with the organization of the "First European Haiku Festival" in Bad Nauheim near Frankfurt on the Main with 61 participants from 17 countries. Mournful but true, Erika Schwalm died of cancer right in December. Meanwhile the cooperation with lecturers and scholars had also changed for the better, e.g. with Andreas Wittbrodt who edited *Tiefe des Augenblicks – Essays zur Poetik des deutschsprachigen Haiku (Depth of the Moment – Essays on the Poetics of the German-speaking Haiku)* in 2004 or professor Ekkehard May to whom we owe three outstanding publications: *Shōmon I* (2000), *II* (2002), *III* (2006) presenting not only the 10 wise men of Bashō's disciples but also 13 literary grandchildren of his famous school. May, unlike Coudenhove and Ulenbrook, sought haiku's beauty and truth through fidelity of translation consulting even Japanese experts. Anyway when Martin Berner passed his function on to his successor Georges Hartmann and another younger board the door was wide open for a definitely better future.

A last necessary step was done. The new board elected in 2009 guaranteed absolute transparency, openmindedness, changing anonymous adjudicators etc. Last but not least the free-style haiku was no longer discriminated. However the pivotal factor for the *volte-face*

had been—no doubt—the rapidly growing influence of the Internet which so easily allows computer users around the world to enter into contact and exchange information. A special house for publishing haiku came into being, the Hamburger Haiku Verlag (E: info@haiku.de / H: www.haiku.de), offering on its own a whole scale of activities: workshops, forums, discussions, competitions, an archive of *saijiki* (*Catalogue of Season Words*) etc. Volker Friebel started his best-of-yearbook *haiku heute* (*haiku today*) also already in the year 2003 (H: www.Haiku-heute.de). New websites, blogspots, weblogs, chatrooms, forums sprang up like mushrooms to share haiku and communicate ideas. Adequately the DHG's official journal *Sommergras* now presents itself far more diversified, more substantial, really international. And the celebration of the society's 25th anniversary in 2013 was a brilliant proof of this new orientation. And as soon as 2007, the Austrian Dietmar Tauchner already showed the initiative to found the bilingual (German-English) Internet magazine *Chrysanthemum* (E: chrysanthemum@gmx.at), run since 2012 by Beate Conrad, Gerd Börner, and Klaus-Dieter Wirth. Impossible to enumerate all activities that have emerged ever since! The most important achievement, however, is the fact that the general atmosphere now appears quite relaxed and free of tensions, and the nonchalant interchange has improved the quality of German haiku quite visibly. Accordingly the membership figure of the DHG has constantly gone up again being at present by 240. A promising development. At last!