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## German Heritage and Culture in Louise Erdrich's *The Master Butchers Singing Club*

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# GERMAN HERITAGE AND CULTURE IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE MASTER BUTCHERS SINGING CLUB*

THOMAS AUSTENFELD

Since the publication of *Love Medicine* in 1984, the first novel that won her wide popular and critical acclaim, Louise Erdrich has created a fictional universe of increasing complexity, set mostly in the landscapes of the Dakotas and Minnesota. Evoking various historical periods of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and largely concentrating on the life of one or two fictional characters and their relationships to both ancestors and contemporaries in each new novel, Erdrich has steered a middle course between the ritualized storytelling found in

some Native American literature, such as N. Scott Momaday's *Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), and linear, plot-oriented storytelling in a Euro-American tradition.<sup>1</sup> In "The Stories We Tell: Louise Erdrich's Identity Narratives," E. Shelley Reid has recently described the fruits of Erdrich's mingling of these two narrative traditions.<sup>2</sup> Reid suggests that Erdrich's formal experiments generate "a new set of textual gestures" (67) that may do justice to multiple voices as well as to individuals, the community, and the reading audience.

Reid's discussion of the formal properties of Erdrich's work helps explain the author's popular appeal. Moving easily between urban and rural settings, between reservation culture and mainstream culture, Erdrich has been evoking the various sets of social and historical circumstances that define the lives of contemporary Native Americans in the Great Plains. In *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003), Erdrich turns her attention explicitly to her own part-German ancestry and fictionalizes it, thereby bringing an element of both thematic and autobiographical relevance into prominence.

*The Master Butchers Singing Club* is Louise Erdrich's only novel so far in which German

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thematic elements clearly predominate. Biographical sketches of Erdrich routinely mention the author's mixed ethnic heritage, and readers have glimpsed Erdrich's occasional references to German culture in the upper midwestern states where German immigrants, among others, settled, yet her German ancestry has led a submerged existence beneath her evocations of contemporary Native American life. The preponderance of criticism, as well, has focused on Erdrich's portrayal of Native American culture, prompted by the complexity and sensitivity of her interlocking novels set on and off the reservation. Still, the influence of Erdrich's German heritage upon her works has not gone entirely unnoticed; Peter Beidler, for instance, references an interview in which Erdrich asserts that "her grandmother's life 'vaguely resembles the life lived by Mary Kröger,'" who is the subject of a series of interconnected poems titled "The Butcher's Wife," first printed in *Jacklight* (1984).<sup>3</sup> Selected motifs from Mary Kröger's life are developed in part 2 of *Baptism of Desire* (1989). A re-edited and recombined sequence is presented in *Original Fire* (2003). This paternal grandmother, identified by P. Jane Hafen as Mary Korll, mother of Ralph Erdrich, "was of German descent and ran a butcher shop, much like Mary Adare in . . . *The Beet Queen*."<sup>4</sup> The German-ness of these characters is obvious in the poems and in the novel, but it is largely incidental to the plot of *The Beet Queen*. Before the appearance of *The Master Butchers Singing Club*, German characters and German lore constituted a noticeable but unobtrusive facet in Erdrich's work that rarely seemed more prominent than, say, French characters or French names. As Erdrich gained increasing prominence as a novelist, the prominence of German elements in her poems, always stronger than in her novels, was temporarily forgotten. In placing German experience at the forefront of *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003), Erdrich articulates fresh facets of her writerly universe and opens the door to a considerable expansion of her literary repertoire.

Erdrich's three published volumes of poetry illuminate both the genesis of the novel and

its curious title, *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. While the novel opens with Fidelis the butcher and closes with the vision of "a world where butchers sing like angels," the "singing club" is featured only in a few episodes, begging the question of the title's relevance.<sup>5</sup> Erdrich lavishes her greatest narrative care on the psychological development of Fidelis's two wives, Eva and especially Delphine, the mystery of whose birth and survival is not revealed until the very last pages of the novel, and then only in Step-and-a-Half Waleski's interior monologue. Such attention to the central female characters suggests that the life story of Erdrich's paternal grandmother helped deliver *The Master Butchers Singing Club* as well as the earlier *Beet Queen*. Erdrich's poems prove even more instructive when we examine their dramatis personae. In the early collection *Jacklight*, the section "The Butcher's Wife" is dedicated to Mary Korll. Excepting three poems about "Leonard"—a complex trickster figure—the sequence of fifteen poems meditates from Mary's point of view about her husband Otto's physical strength, his courtship, his proud sister, the aftermath of his death, and the unwelcome courting and subsequent suicide of Rudy Jacklitch. In *Baptism of Desire* (1989), a sequence of six new poems takes up the theme. "Rudy Comes Back" and "Mary Kröger" contain references that might retrospectively be read as hints toward the future novel, including the story of "poor Clare / who bore her child then threw it down a well,"<sup>6</sup> a foreshadowing of Delphine's birth revealed only at the novel's conclusion. Erdrich's latest book of poetry, *Original Fire*, again prints a sequence entitled "The Butcher's Wife," this time without the specific dedication, and this time containing fourteen poems of which twelve come from the original sequence in *Jacklight*, augmented by two ("Rudy Comes Back" and "The Carmelites") from *Baptism of Desire*.<sup>7</sup> The thematic and verbal relationships—*Jacklight* and Jacklitch—among the poetry collections are as strong and as suggestive as those among Erdrich's novels, inviting the reader in turn to seek out further connections between the poems and *The Master Butchers Singing Club*.



FIG. 1. Meat market. Courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society, #WHi-9351.

“From ‘The Butcher’s Wife’ to the butcher’s wives” might be a suitable summary of the narrative transformation from the poetic sequences to the novel. Leonard appears reshaped in Roy Watzka as well as in Cyprian Lazarre, tricksters both. Rudy Jacklitch is now Sheriff Hock, who pursues not the butcher’s wife but her friend, the mortician Clarisse Strub. Hock’s life does not end in suicide; Clarisse dispatches him. Step-and-a-Half Waleski, introduced in *Jacklight*, becomes increasingly important as the novel develops, and provides the concluding narrative consciousness. Otto has become Fidelis, who lifts not just “a grown man by the belt with his teeth” (*JL*, 39) but very specifically performs this feat on the sheriff (*MBSC*, 125). Mary (Korll or Kröger) has

become both Eva and Delphine. Reading the poetic sequences and the novel in conjunction is thus instructive in several aspects: it allows readers to see the expansion, refinement, and increasing complexity of Erdrich’s plotting over the course of twenty years; it reveals the compositional differences of the two genres; and it explains why the novel’s title appears to refer only to a portion of its plot. The plotlines of all of Erdrich’s novels connect with each other and frequently provide refractions of the same episodes. In the case of *Master Butchers*, Erdrich’s poetry is more instructive as a mirror of the novel than any of her other fictional work with the exception of *The Beet Queen*. This is not to suggest that the novel is prepared *in nuce* in the poems, or that the poems are



FIG. 2. Interior of a butcher shop, probably in Ericson, Nebraska. Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society Photograph Collections, #RG3542.

mined for material not otherwise available; rather, a knowledge of Erdrich's poetry aids in filling the perceived lacunae in the novel's plot. Erdrich's poetry is frequently so personal as to amount to confessional poetry, and with the publication of *Master Butchers*, Erdrich invites the reader into a portion of her own biography as early as one's first glimpse at the dust jacket.

In the *Master Butchers Singing Club*, all the German material that was previously latent in Erdrich's fiction finally comes to the fore.<sup>8</sup> The dust-jacket picture for the first edition of *Master Butchers* shows a portrait of Mary Korll's husband, Louise Erdrich's grandfather and namesake, Ludwig Erdrich, who arrived in the United States some time after 1912 with his knives and sausage samples.<sup>9</sup> A fuller understanding of the German themes in the novel will require a closer explanation of three elements that would almost certainly remain hidden to readers lack-

ing fluency in the German language: Erdrich's careful and suggestive choice of names for her characters, her cultural embedding of the singing alluded to in the title, and finally, the political resonance of the epigraph, all of which help reveal the novel's considerable complexity. Erdrich not only takes her craft into new linguistic and political territory but also offers her readership a cultural experience unlike that of her earlier works.

The historical facts of twentieth-century Germany, especially the traumatic events surrounding World Wars I and II, are built right into the structure of the novel. We meet Fidelis Waldvogel as he returns from a sniper assignment in World War I and prepares to emigrate to the United States; we witness one of the most wrenching episodes of his family's life when his son, who has completed his adolescence in Germany, is taken prisoner of war by

Americans during World War II and is transported to a POW camp in northern Minnesota, and we read of the end of Fidelis's life after his postwar return visit to Germany in the 1950s. The twenty-one interwar years, from 1918 to 1939, are the focus of Fidelis's life story and the central subject of the novel.

Erdrich recognizes the political ghosts she will conjure up in writing about Germany. In writing the story of this German butcher, Erdrich also necessarily confronts twentieth-century German history, which in turn is virtually impossible to do without taking a position on the thirteen years of totalitarian Nazi rule. The manner in which Erdrich accomplishes this task makes *The Master Butchers Singing Club* a work of cross-cultural communication—this time not between Native American and mainstream American cultures but between American and German versions of history—and turns this fictionalized biography into a moral exploration.

Erdrich expertly weaves German culture, from an immigrant's point of view, into the novel, though a few linguistic gaffes were apparently overlooked by the copyeditors. Among the most compelling characters in the novel is "Tante," Fidelis's rapacious, mean-spirited spinster sister. In the cultural embedding performed by this novel, which is often centered on the inner workings of marriages and marriage-like relationships, "Tante" reveals the fate of the unmarried. In a culture where marriage all too often equaled validation for women, the sheer dearth of marriageable men after both world wars in Germany led to the existence of countless spinster aunts more or less firmly attached to their brothers' households, in this case a "Tante" who left Germany after World War I but still would not find a partner in North Dakota. The manner in which Fidelis is attracted to emigration when he sees a slice of industrial white American bread in his German hometown illustrates many an emigrant's naïve belief in the superiority of American consumer culture. At the same time, Fidelis's pride in the superiority of his workmanship and the outstanding quality of

his sausage-making also conform to the experience of many European expatriates who found an eager market for their traditional, individual skills in bland, corporate America. Erdrich's brief sketch of the re-acculturation of Fidelis's younger sons, the twins Erich and Emil, into an increasingly totalitarian Germany in the early 1930s surprised me—a reader reared in Germany in his early years—the most: the insidious indoctrination that "nazifies" them during their impressionable teenage years is presented with an evidentiary overtone of inevitability that speaks to Erdrich's political sensitivity. American readers and writers, accustomed to the prevailing freedom of thought in this country, may sometimes fail to grasp the literal meaning of "totalitarianism," the ever-increasing totality in which life in Germany was dominated by Nazi thought after 1933, the effective "thought control" exercised by party organs, and the almost total absence of alternative information. Erdrich refrains from excusing Erich or Emil, but when she imagines Erich's thoughts upon seeing the American landscape, she surely represents what many a German POW must have felt:

They were all waiting to gloat over the miles and miles of bombed-out cities, the devastated countryside, blackened crops, dead farms they were promised by the radio reports back in Germany. And yet, they had penetrated farther and farther into a curious, cheerful, teeming, spectacularly untouched country. The prisoners were tragically awed, bewildered. Later, some would feel betrayed. (349)

This discussion of the POWs gains even greater significance when set into the context of Erdrich's epigraph, the song "Thoughts Are Free," which I will discuss below.

The men's chorus that provides the title for the novel, the *Männergesangverein*, is a characteristically German institution. The vast musical literature available to these choirs ranges from folksongs praising forest solitude and the beauty of Rhine maidens

to sophisticated arrangements of oratorios by Mendelssohn, cantatas by Brahms, and excerpts from Wagner's operas. If one can muster the fortitude—as difficult as this is at times—to consider the cultural strength of this mostly nineteenth-century music as an expression of art—and not under the shadow of its later totalitarian misuse by the Nazis who recklessly exploited German art and music in their shrill desire to conquer the world—one can acknowledge its resonance in Fidelis's adopted hometown of Argus, North Dakota. When the choir meets, the musical exercise heals political and personal divisions.

In a sensitive appreciation of this novel, the first published critical commentary of which I am aware, Marie Cornelia offers a reading of the conflicts between Fidelis's nationality and ethnicity—the former American by choice, and the latter German despite himself. Cornelia weaves a brief history of the figure of the German immigrant into her essay to show how Erdrich's awareness of literary history combines with her own heritage.<sup>10</sup> I cannot think of notable American books published in the past sixty years in which Germans are celebrated or presented as positive role models. We have to go back before the 1930s. Cornelia invokes Jo March's beloved Professor Baehr in Alcott's *Little Women* (1869). I would adduce, with Cornelia, the absent-minded piano teacher Professor Wunsch vegetating in *Moonstone*, Colorado, in Willa Cather's *Song of the Lark* (1915)—significantly also a musician, like Fidelis—to suggest culturally relevant models that have in common an old-worldly professorial bookishness inimical to pragmatic, business-oriented American life and that will be on the way to extinction by the novels' respective ends.

In the light of the post-Nazi historical situation, it is virtually impossible to read even Fidelis's butchering profession as innocent. True, there are other German butchers in American literature: Old Rogaum in Theodore Dreiser's story "Old Rogaum and His Theresa" is a butcher, though Lutheran while Fidelis is Catholic.<sup>11</sup> Yet given the twentieth century's

two world wars as chronological "bookends" to Erdrich's novel, it is tempting to read the "master butcher" of the title as an indictment of German warfare efficiency. As a sniper in World War I, Fidelis kills his opponents with surgical precision. Upon arriving in America, his butchering skills guarantee him economic advancement, but the sniper in him is buried just beneath the surface. When wild dogs come marauding around his house and kill a set of chinchillas his sons are raising for their fur, he shoots them with his accustomed precision and cold determination. The savage butchery of war and the precision butchery of animals, a master craft of long standing, are but two sides of the same coin, analogous perhaps to Frank Norris's eponymous dentist McTeague, who drills gold from the California mountains in his youth and drills teeth in San Francisco in his adulthood. Indeed, during one of the singing club's meetings in wartime, even Fidelis cracks, "'They're a bunch of damn butchers' . . . and the others laughed" (336). The novel's final phrase, "a world where butchers sing like angels" (388), suggests to me that Erdrich does not finally resolve the paradox of the arts of singing and of killing coexisting in the same person. Instead, she may suggest here that art will always remain unable to inoculate against misguided ideology or against violence.

I take Fidelis's home in Germany, the fictional Ludwigsruhe, to be a thinly disguised version of the actual town of Ludwigsburg, located in the modern state of Baden-Württemberg, also home to nearby Pforzheim, Erdrich's grandfather's home. Contemporary Ludwigsburg takes pride in being "the cradle of Swabian poetry."<sup>12</sup> This may help explain Fidelis's early infatuation with German poetry: "For a time, though his occupation was assured, he'd cherished the vision of himself as a poet. Therefore his shelves were stacked with volumes of his heroes, Goethe, Heine, Rilke, and even Trakl, hidden behind the others" (2-3). Then again, a preoccupation with poetry and a Romantic mindset are stock ingredients of German characterization in American literature.<sup>13</sup>

Further allusions to German culture, language, and folklore abound in *The Master*



*Butchers Singing Club*. Erdrich occasionally employs them in the manner of a local color writer, by inserting ejaculations at critical moments, *Zum beispiel* [sic] (118), *Heiligeskreuz* (126), *Sei ruhig* (171), *Gott Verdienst* (223), and so on. Some are buried so deeply that only a German speaker would detect them, suggesting in turn that Erdrich's knowledge of her paternal grandmother's heritage is greater than her previous novels led us to believe. Erdrich therefore provides the translation herself and calls attention to her characters' names in observing about "Fidelis Waldvogel" that "in this new country . . . more than one person would . . . note that Forestbird was an oddly gentle name for one whose profession was based in slaughter" (8).

The naming of other characters is similarly evocative. Eva is described in an extended scene in her garden (108-9), clearly a Garden of Eden in the new world, but an Eden already marked by Eva's imminent death. Yet when Fidelis goes to see Eva on his first errand after returning home from the trenches of World War I, she still is "Eva Kalb." Kalb is not an unusual name in southern Germany, yet it means "calf" or, quite literally, "veal" in butcher's language, suggesting a young and tasty morsel. Even Eva's first fiancé, Fidelis's best friend, who has died just before the end of the war, is given a substantive identity merely by his name. In naming him Johannes Grünberg and expressly identifying him as Jewish, Erdrich with one stroke sketches the tragic figure of a German Jew with a popular, traditionally Christian first name (Johannes) and a last name bearing a color adjective, *grün*, often found in German Jewish surnames. Of all the terrifying fates of German Jews in the middle of the twentieth century, the fate of those who served honorably in World War I but became undesirables after 1933 is among the most tragic. Erdrich's command of this history again enhances the complexity and deepens our appreciation of this novel.

Fidelis's four sons live out the fates of their names, if names can portend fates: Franz and Markus become thoroughly American; the younger twins Erich and Emil become Hitler

Youth Nazis, their "Nordic" names no doubt predisposing them to promising careers in an administrative structure built on such wrong-headed concepts.

The most far-reaching German embedding of this novel is accomplished through the epigraph. Composed of two parts, the first is a brief dedication: "To my father, who sang to me." No matter what sinister overtones will be associated with singing at a late point in the novel, this dedication sets the tone for a positive encumbrance of singing and fatherhood. The next page is a quotation, in German, of the entire first stanza of *Die Gedanken sind frei*, identified merely as "'Thoughts are free' (German song)." A German reader contemplating this song will probably feel two conflicting emotions simultaneously, as the lyrics wistfully evoke both the failed German revolution of 1848 and its polar opposite, the totalitarian Nazi regime under whose aegis even a "free thought" became an utterly meaningless concept. A closer inspection of the text reveals that some punctuation is missing and that the word *Mensch* should have been capitalized. Small infelicities notwithstanding, the meaning comes through loud and clear.<sup>14</sup>

I will make reference to the content of the other stanzas even though Erdrich quotes only the first. But clearly, the "teaser" of the first stanza invites the reader to explore the rest, and indeed, some of the key plot elements to which I have already alluded find a verbal echo or commentary in the remaining stanzas. This song is conventionally considered to be an anonymous folksong from around 1790 that originated in the southwest of Germany (Fidelis's ancestral home!), and was edited into poetic shape in 1842 by Hoffmann von Fallersleben, a patriotic poet who also composed the text of the present German national anthem.<sup>15</sup> The song praises freedom of thought. The first stanza asserts that no man may know what another thinks, and that no hunter may shoot down another's thought—this latter observation providing a nice commentary on Fidelis's sniper past. The second stanza celebrates the fact that any desires are



free as well. There is a hint of erotic fantasy in these lines: the slowly burgeoning relationship between Fidelis and Delphine, encouraged and sanctioned by the dying Eva, gains further legitimacy through this stanza. The third stanza defiantly claims that even imprisonment is no impediment to free thought, since it can rip away barriers and break down walls, leading to a happy disposition—now we are in the fourth stanza—even in the face of outward adversity. The POW camp in Minnesota suggests itself as a plot parallel to these stanzas. Erich's stubborn persistence in Nazi ideology during his imprisonment indicates that freedom of thought becomes the decisive issue for the entire Waldvogel family and, moreover, an index of the difference between life in the United States and life in the Germany of the 1930s and early 1940s.

The reception history of the song bears out an interpretation focused on political freedom. The song had wide currency as a political tract in revolutionary Germany both around the time of Napoleon in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when portions of Germany were occupied by French forces, and again preceding the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848. It found its way into student lore and became a popular drinking song until the Nazis banished it because of its subversive content. Clearly, one would not want to praise freedom of thought under a totalitarian regime. Through her shrewd and highly allusive placement of the epigraph, Erdrich reveals her political message about the ultimate boon of Fidelis's life in the United States—namely, freedom of thought. She also offers the German speakers among her readership the tantalizing suggestion that the German portion of her ethnic heritage, submerged until now beneath the exploration of her Chippewa ancestry, may give rise to additional analyses and fictional work in the near future.

Louise Erdrich offers a richly nuanced, culturally and politically knowledgeable appreciation of the German portion of her ethnic heritage in *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. She does not deny her traditional ethnic and

narrative territory, the Native American experience—indeed, she weaves a fictionalized, first-person account of Wounded Knee right into the narrative, as if to suggest a parallel to the two world wars—but she suspends her Native American identity temporarily in an inclusive, unflinching, yet celebratory gesture toward German culture. Nonetheless, Native American characters frame the novel: Cyprian, Delphine's companion in the early part of the novel, remains an important Native presence, and Step-and-a-Half Waleski dominates the conclusion. Such mingling of not just narrative strategies but cultural strands as well advances the American novel at the beginning of the twenty-first century. By opening the German chapters of her family's biography to critical inspection, Erdrich has enlarged her fictional terrain, drawing attention at the same time to the abiding contributions of German culture to the Great Plains.

#### NOTES

I wish to acknowledge fruitful conversations with P. Jane Hafen, scholar and friend.

1. The central portion of Momaday's text is composed of groups of three short texts—a myth, a historical account, a personal recollection—arranged on two facing pages to suggest the polyphonic complexity of describing an event.

2. E. Shelley Reid, "The Stories We Tell: Louise Erdrich's Identity Narratives," *MELUS* 25, no. 3/4 (2000): 65-86.

3. Peter Beidler, "Louise Erdrich," in *Native American Writers of the United States*, ed. Kenneth Roemer, vol. 175 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), 86; Louise Erdrich, *Jacklight* (New York: Henry Holt, 1984).

4. P. Jane Hafen, "Louise Erdrich," in *Twentieth-Century American Western Writers, First Series*, ed. Richard H. Cracroft, vol. 206 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1999), 86.

5. Louise Erdrich, *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 388. Further citations to *The Master Butchers Singing Club* are given in parentheses in the text.

6. Louise Erdrich, *Baptism of Desire* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 30.

7. Louise Erdrich, *Original Fire* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

8. Smaller explorations of the butcher's art occur in Erdrich's novel *The Beet Queen* and in her story "Fleur," set in Pete Kozka's sausage factory.

9. The acknowledgment, on page 389, identifies the young man as Ludwig Erdrich; the jacket cover itself names him Louis Erdrich and dates the photograph June 8, 1912, in Pforzheim, Germany.

10. Marie Cornelia, "Shifting Boundaries: Reflections on Ethnic Identity in Louise Erdrich's *The Master Butchers Singing Club*," *Glossen Sonderausgabe*, special issue no. 19 (2004), <http://www.dickinson.edu/glossen/heft19/cornelia.html> (accessed November 4, 2004). In a small geographical error, Cornelia misplaces Ludwigsruhe in "the Rhineland," although Erdrich deliberately places it in Württemberg.

11. "Old Rogaum and His Theresa" was first published in 1901 under the title "Butcher Rogaum's Door" in the magazine *Reedy's Mirror*; it was collected into *Free and Other Stories* in 1918.

12. See Ludwigsburg's Web page, <http://www.ludwigsburg.de/servlet/PB/menu/-1/index.html> (accessed December 14, 2004).

13. The reference to Georg Trakl (1878-1914) is particularly intriguing: this Austrian expressionist, barely known in his lifetime, evokes harrowing descriptions of death and decay in pre-World War I Europe.

14. The lyrics are easily accessible through various Internet sites. Not all textual versions are equally reliable. I have relied on this text: <http://ingeb.org/Lieder/diegedan.html> (accessed June 14, 2005). Another Web page, <http://www.gpa-fsg.at/lieder/lie06.htm> (accessed June 14, 2005), also reprints the musical score.

15. See Ernesto Handman's Web page, [http://home.arcor.de/juernjakob/texte/g\\_diegedanken-sindfrei.html](http://home.arcor.de/juernjakob/texte/g_diegedanken-sindfrei.html) (accessed June 15, 2005).