Franz Josef Degenhardt

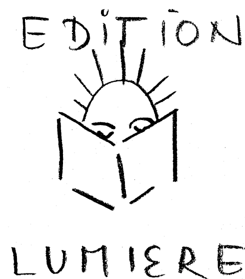
Deutsche Lieder – German Songs

Aus dem Deutschen in das Englische übersetzt von

Translated from German into English by

Stephan Lhotzky

Mit einem Vorwort von/ Foreword by Holger Böning



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Foreword

For half a century from the early 1960's to the beginning of the new millennium, Franz Josef Degenhardt was the most important German-language political poet. His song lyrics are works of art that are part of German literature even when not set to music or sung. That they were sung afforded them poetic force in much the same way as the songs of Georges Brassens, who was Degenhardt's great inspiration.

Degenhardt quickly became one of the main representatives of the German song revival after 1945. The audience was simply overwhelmed by his *Minstrel Songs* which Degenhardt himself liked to call "Stanza Songs". He was a master on the guitar, incorporating all European musical traditions in his songs and presenting them with a caustic and striking voice. His lyrics were completely new and, at that point, unimaginable to his audience. On stage he ignited fireworks of farcical and macabre images and sang of strange and eccentric characters. With subtle allusions and intimations requiring the listeners' complete attention, he held his audience captive.

It is not only Degenhardt's poetic skills and his masterful presence on stage that made him well-known seemingly over night. In the middle of the 1960's, his songs articulated a growing discomfort with the stagnation and restoration attempts at the end of the Adenauer era in West Germany. In 1965, his song "A German Sunday" rendered a meticulous description of the desolate and uneventful life of a malignant society unwilling to move and unwilling to deal with the mountains of corpses of those murdered before 1945. Even half a century later, one detects in Degenhardt's songs the horror of a younger generation discovering that their fathers had been murderers.

It is the art of Degenhardt that poetically articulated the uneasiness of younger West Germans in 1965. At that point, Degenhardt's criticism was not openly aggressive, but rather descriptive of what he observed in his country. His songs assured listeners they were not alone with their uneasiness in regard to their parents' generation that had come to terms with the new prosperity and refused to share the reality of Germany's fascist past with its children.

Before the West German university student uprisings of 1968, the lyrics of many of Degenhardt's songs included the horror of the crimes of their parents' generation. Part of this horror was the realization that, after the war, the parent generation occu-

pied all of the powerful positions in politics, the economy, the legal professions, and education. “Their children live in fear”, Degenhardt wrote in “Houses in the Rain”, “fear of the fathers on the dressers in remembrance frames. / Fear of their fathers’ role in the correct administration / of the big war that left them only fathers’ names.” In his songs, he turns to those responsible, the German elite, those who killed with the stroke of a pen, to the opportunists. The poet and singer created unforgettable character descriptions of those leaders in West German society who did not like to look back and classified German fascism as a kind of “industrial accident”. Degenhardt’s *Senators* and *Attorneys* became well-known: They have a good thing going with “moderation and determination” and with “resisting between the lines, back then”. They comment on the Nazi past with the phrase, “Only Auschwitz, that was a little too much”. Soon the singer and poet had nothing left for that generation but bitter and sarcastic ridicule, in particular in the song “The Lucky Charm”.

Examining the German past is central to the songs of Degenhardt; this examination made it possible to criticize the growing influence of the old and the new Nazis, their influence on German legislation, and the role of the “Free World” in the countries of the so-called Third World. For a brief time from 1965 to 1968, it was as though a curtain was drawn aside, revealing to the younger generation what had been hidden from them. University students who had only revered John F. Kennedy, found out what was happening in the name of freedom and democracy in the far corners of the world. Franz Josef Degenhardt is among the first singers to take up the topic of Viet Nam. In 1965, he sang a “pretty song” in which he told the story of a “burnt child” who is seeking to escape to a better country with plenty of rice. Only two years later, in 1965, the song “Fields Without Soil” displayed angry horror in contrast to the earlier sarcasm.

Overall war,
and all the land,
up to Hanoi,
is burnt to sand.
Poisoned dirt and rats a-biting.
No one flees from bombs igniting.
Killed like all the dirt rats biting
will be leathernecks still fighting.
A hundred years, or longer still,
the fields here have no soil to till.

Quickly, the politically organized German student opposition, as well as individual singers, became very radical. In 1968, Franz Josef Degenhardt sang the "Lesson of the Four Partisans", a song that memorialized the struggle against the seemingly all-powerful military power of the West in Viet Nam. The song "P.T. From Arizona" drew parallels to conditions in Germany. The songs in West Germany became politicized in a way similar to the protest songs in the United States.

It would be very difficult to adequately characterize Franz Josef Degenhardt's development during the following four decades in a few sentences. Overall, however, it can be said that he became a kind of annalist of the break-up of the student revolt after addressing the students directly. He was searching for a new political orientation and described it in a song about Rudi Schulte, the old communist, who can't quite accept the younger comrades' new ways but who will certainly fulfill his party duty the way he was taught. Even Degenhardt's adversaries did not accuse him of opportunism, but they made certain that this off-and-on favorite of the media would be banned and could reach his audience only via concerts, LPs, and his books. The oft-touted tolerance reaches its limits when a singer is no longer willing to make compromises in exchange for making money.

Degenhardt characterized himself as "a total dissident regarding the current state of affairs and the common opinions about aesthetics, politics, and philosophy – in short, in disagreement with things the way they are." He refused to abandon his dream of a totally different world, "in which there is no more money nor goods to sell", a world that cannot be achieved through elections but "is based on a user- and need-economy as the foundation of democracy and the end of exploitation". Even after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, Degenhardt did not part from his utopian world view and kept singing for those carrying on the dream of a just society from generation to generation.

It is gratifying that the most important songs of Franz Josef Degenhardt are now available in English and can also be reviewed in the country that played such an important role for the singer. He criticized and admired that country at the same time: Songs of solidarity about the murder of Sacco and Vanzetti or the trials of Angela Davis were the other side of the United States. This is why Degenhardt wrote the following lines in the song, "The Killers' Language":

But it is also the language
of Charlie Parker
and Luther King

and of millions
who scream
and are speechlessly silent,
the language of the songs
we like to listen to.
With all our rage –
Don't forget that.

It is good it is now also the language of Franz Josef Degenhardt.

Holger Böning

Stephan Lhotzky: Introduction

The *Liedermacher* Phenomenon

"A new song, and a better song / my friends, I will write for you; / it's here on earth that we will make / the promise of heaven come true."[1] While Heinrich Heine, desperately frustrated by the repressive political conditions in Germany during the first half of the 19th century, spoke of a "new song" figuratively, the West German Liedermacher (Song Makers) of the 1960's became equally dedicated to writing a new song. That song, however, was indeed meant to be sung for a post-World War II Germany that sought to recover from an immense blow: utter defeat in a war caused by the hybris and aggression of a fascist regime attempting to convince a nation that it was the master race. In 1945, the country lay in ruins and was completely defeated; time itself seemed to have come to a standstill, and Germany was no longer. Time, of course, never stands still, and the allies had made plans for a Germany after Hitler. Eventually, those plans led to the division of Germany into East and West and, finally, to the formation of two German states that, without much love lost between them, lived side by side until German reunification in 1990. The historical facts are known. What happened, however, to the psyche of a defeated people? In both the German Democratic Republic in the East and the Federal Republic of Germany in the West, the survivors of the gigantic World War literally picked up the pieces of their country and tried to look ahead. The horrors of the death camps in which millions of human beings had been exterminated like vermin were collectively pushed aside by the drive to rebuild – rebuilding the infrastructure with bricks and mortar became just as urgent a task as the rebuilding of daily life and what was left of cultural values. With the American occupation of a large part of western Germany, daily life quickly included long sought-after entertainment, and entertainment meant primarily musical entertainment during the 1950's. The new German "Schlager", modeled in large part after the American pop song, was created and proved highly popular. The Schlager shunned controversial topics; it was primarily a silly and invariably shallow form of mass entertainment. It was the vast success of the Schlager, however, that carried within itself the seed of the German Liedermacher.

The Schlager dominated the West German musical scene throughout the 1950's; it represents a thriving industry to this day. To post-war German intellectuals,

mostly from the younger generation, the superficial lyrics of the Schlager came to represent an equally superficial society in denial about its Nazi past.[2] Among the early Liedermacher, there was a pervasive feeling of distrust toward the parent generation, parents whose role during the twelve years of fascism was unclear at best because widespread discussion of the subject was avoided. The youth coming of age during the 1960's began to wonder why, with the post-war years of such immense and stunning West German economic growth made possible mainly by the American Marshall Plan, fascism was off the agenda of public discussion. Part of the younger generation became deeply suspicious of this silence regarding the recent national past. The Liedermacher clearly articulated questions about that past and offered an intellectual alternative to the mindless Schlager at the same time.

The Liedermacher, through their songs, did not stop at articulating questions. They began to analyze the entire value system of their society and to describe their findings: They sang about the stale and stifling atmosphere in a country refusing to confront its troubled past. They described a nation of petit bourgeois stubbornly clinging to the exact same simplistic values and behaviors that had brought Germany, both as a nation and a culture, utter ruin and destruction: Hard and honest work is clean, and obedience to authority is essential. Some Liedermacher, through their song lyrics, concluded that Nazism had never been effectively eradicated. In the highly charged political climate of the late 1960's, that recognition resulted in the logical deduction that the West German political system itself was deeply flawed and ought to be opposed and eventually changed. What the political radicalization of many Liedermacher gave to a large segment of young Germans at the time was an increased political awareness – perhaps, and in hindsight, the Liedermacher's most important and lasting contribution to critical thinking in German society.

It is not surprising that the West German Liedermacher began writing and performing their songs in the 1960's at a relatively low level of acceptance among the general populace. Usually accompanied by their own guitars, they began singing locally in clubs frequented by like-minded audiences comprised of the country's intellectuals, mostly university students. What enabled the Liedermacher to gain wider popularity was a series of song festivals at Castle Waldeck in the Hunsrück mountains; the first concert was organized in the spring of 1964 with the title "Chanson Folklore International – Young Europeans Sing."[3] It was the expressed goal of the organizers to foster the "democratization of all of Europe" and an international awareness through song.[4] The effect of the Waldeck festivals on the German audience was two-fold: Songs from the tradition of the German workers' movement as well as some forgotten German folksongs were re-introduced, thereby proving that the German song could be much more than the woefully unsophisticated Schla-

ger. Through foreign language song performances from other European countries, the audiences at the festivals were challenged to embrace the idea that, if critical and meaningful traditional and contemporary songs could be sung successfully elsewhere, the German song had the same possibility in Germany, where the folk song had been so flagrantly abused by the Nazis.

Popular culture in the United States played a role in preparing the ground for the West German Liedermacher in a way that must neither be under- nor overestimated. American counter-culture was growing in the 1950's and was exported to other Western countries primarily through music; its most prominent representative was Elvis Presley. When American Rock 'n Roll first reached post-World War II Germany, it had an effect similar to that in the United States. It began as and remained a cultural and social phenomenon, illustrating the generational conflict between consumption-oriented middle-class parents and their children in an increasingly affluent and monotonous society. It was the U.S. involvement in Viet Nam that gave focus to the protest by young Americans. While Rock 'n Roll remained popular in Europe, the politicized younger generation in West Germany shifted its attention to American protest songs that originated in the folk song, and Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and others became popular among young German intellectuals. Again, the Liedermacher provided a German-language alternative to the Schlager as well as to the critical contemporary songs sung in other languages, mostly in English.

While the majority of the Liedermacher's models consisted of songs from America and England laden with political conflict, one element of European singing tradition, the "Bänkellied", began to merge with songs from the United States and the music of the "Beatles" and later the "Rolling Stones". The long-standing German tradition of the "Bänkellied", the minstrel song, dates back to the late Middle Ages, when news and political and social commentary were provided to the public through song. Franz Josef Degenhardt, in particular, finds himself deeply rooted in that tradition and makes extensive use of it in his own songs.

As the Anglo-American musical influence overtook the West German alternative scene like an avalanche during the 1960's, there were also voices singing from west of the Rhine river that influenced the Liedermacher. In France, a hybrid song had long been cultivated from the beginning of the age of radio, a kind of song that was neither pronouncedly commercial and shallow like the German Schlager nor overly demanding in the realm of the intellectual. In German, this song is called a "Chanson", a song performed to entertain yet artistically sophisticated; it can also be highly poetic. Many names of artists singing in French are associated with this kind of song, among them Edith Piaf, Yves Montant, Jacques Brel, Jean Ferrat, and Leo

Ferré, some with a clear political agenda, some without. Georges Moustaki's pensive ballads are the only songs that gained broader appeal and commercial success in Germany. At the same time, a giant and controversial voice had been making itself heard throughout France, and its biting social and political commentary could not be ignored: the voice of Georges Brassens, who was the single greatest influence on Franz Josef Degenhardt.

The German Liedermacher of the 1960's and 1970's reacted to the demands of their time. The tradition of the German political song, grossly neglected and mostly down-played during the 1950's, was in need of being rediscovered when the Schlager overtook the entertainment industry. The lack of public discussion about the recent Nazi past frustrated the younger generation. In this environment, foreign-language songs became an impetus for the search for the German song tradition interrupted by National Socialism. The German Liedermacher provided not only a link to a powerful song tradition but gave countless Germans a political awareness and identity that went far beyond the trivial and potentially dangerous idea of nationalism. Even today, their substantial contribution is to internationalism and humanism.

Franz Josef Degenhardt

Over the course of his long and prolific life as a songwriter, poet, and novelist, Franz Josef Degenhardt was primarily a controversial commentator on German politics. It is safe to say that all German intellectuals knew his name during the politically turbulent times of the late 1960's and early 70's. It is also safe to say that West Germany either loved "Väterchen Franz" (Daddy Franz) for the political message in his songs or hated him for it. To various groups on the political left, Degenhardt's message was not radical enough. The political right demonized him as a communist agitator attempting to prepare the ground for a Soviet-style system in Germany. Actively going on tour throughout Germany twice a year up to shortly before his death, Degenhardt described himself as a Liedermacher and called all of his songs "political songs"; a slight modification might be in order here: Degenhardt is certainly one of the most powerful poetic voices in German literature in the second half of the 20th century, politically or otherwise.

Franz Josef Degenhardt was born on December 3, 1931, in Schwelm, a town of 100,000 in the Sauerland region on the edge of the heavily industrialized Ruhr area, today a part of the German federal state of Northrhine-Westphalia. His ancestors were mainly from the Sauerland region, "working the land or the forest, small cottagers. When they moved into the towns, the women became maids in fine estates,

the men became independent artisans, cobblers, tailors, carpenters, but almost all of them went broke and ended up in the factory, the 'Schwelm Iron Works.'"[5]

Degenhardt's childhood and early adolescence were crucially shaped by the end of World War II. Like his peers, he witnessed the Allied bombing raids and the utter destruction they brought. Because he was raised in a "militantly catholic and anti-fascist family", he understood at an early age that it was the Nazi dictatorship that had caused the chaos in the world surrounding him.[6] Before Hitler's Third Reich collapsed, young Degenhardt found a home in the Catholic Church and even became an altar boy. Being so close to the church, however, he also became aware of the "contradiction between the altar rituals and, in particular, the behavior of one priest in the sacristy – he devoured hands full of the host, drank the wine for mass out of the bottle, and farted demonstratively. … Later I copied him."[7]

The actual end of the war came as true liberation: "Liberation from the bombing terror as well. The Americans marching in – in our part of town we all had white flags despite the threats from the SS – we received them almost jubilantly."[8] The horrors of the Third Reich, however, were not forgotten. Decades later, Degenhardt remembered his parents' role during the fascist reign of terror: "I think I am still resentful toward my parents for not having been active in the real and organized resistance. Whatever they said or did was always a bit shy and over-cautious."[9] This unforgiving attitude towards everybody and everything enabling fascism was eventually articulated in many of Degenhardt's songs in which he relentlessly denounced the spineless opportunists during the era of German fascism.

Toward the end of his time as a student in the Gymnasium, the nine-year German college prep school, Degenhardt later criticized his teachers as "fellow-traveler Nazis who now defended the exculpating thesis of totalitarianism" and were "not even fit for the caricaturist depiction in which some fellow students engaged."[10] The only exception was a history and social studies teacher who, after the war, "was again barred from his profession just like during Nazi times."[11] That teacher opened the student's eyes and made him see the "explanatory pattern of historical materialism."[12] At the same time, Degenhardt, the later poet and novelist, became disillusioned with yet another aspect of his formal schooling, namely the study of literature. While he read the assigned works, he later called them "all that frightening stuff that was sold as modern literature."[13] With the same vehement antipathy with which he had come to loathe those who had made fascism possible, Degenhardt, until his death, professed a deep-seated suspicion towards bourgeois literature, including the works of Thomas Mann.[14]

Consistency of political thought combined with strong self-discipline is one of

Degenhardt's main characteristics, a trait that did not facilitate his life as a university student. From 1952 to 1956, Degenhardt studied law in Freiburg and Cologne and graduated in 1960 with the second State Exam. He received his Doctorate of Law from the University of Saarbrücken in 1966. Later, he recalled the reasons for his choice of study:

> I believe … that I began my study of law … mostly because I wanted to learn the laws governing situations such as fascism or the anachronistic catholicism from which we must liberate ourselves. … It was, of course, more than naïve to believe that the study of bourgeois law would reveal the laws of the social class it serves. I suspected this soon after, and, I assume out of this suspicion, my first poems were written. For these poems … introduced … my problem: life in a post-fascist society which tried to forget everything prior to its existence; engaging in a course of study that would not take me any further; being on my own – I was not part of any organization, and, looking for something like meaning in yesterday and today, I did not know where to turn: I was at my wits' end.[15]

During the late 1960's, a time in which Degenhardt's songs met with growing resonance among the increasingly politicized young Germans, the poet and singer found himself in an ever more difficult struggle, namely the one between personal conviction and political strategy. In 1961, Degenhardt had become an active member of the left-of-center Social Democratic Party (SPD). He was by no means the only person for whom the SPD offered hope in regard to political and social reform toward greater social justice. Degenhardt had joined the SPD with the awareness that systemic change can be achieved only by an organization strong in numbers. While he accepted the formation of the government of the Great Coalition of the SPD and the conservative Christian Democratic Union in 1966 as a compromise in order to achieve certain political goals on the road to a socialist Germany, those same goals became watered down by the same Great Coalition. The compromise had gone too far. Simultaneously, the socialism practiced in East Germany proved it did not represent a viable alternative: "Like most non-communists … I disliked the methods of execution of power as well as the forms through which it presented itself."[16] The conflict between the socialist and the SPD was unavoidable.

After his move to Hamburg in northern Germany, Degenhardt began to work as one of the defense attorneys in the trials against members of the Außerparlamentarische Opposition (APO), a group led by university activists opposed to the workings of the political establishment, the SPD being part of that establishment. While working on the APO cases, Degenhardt became increasingly disillusioned with the

SPD, and his songs became increasingly radical, and only one trigger incident was needed to formalize the rift between the poet and the party: When Degenhardt argued for cooperation between Communists and Social Democrats, the SPD acted quickly and removed the outspoken socialist from party membership. Degenhardt was expelled from the SPD in 1971 after ten years of passionate work for the party and a presumably common goal. He downplayed his reaction later: "And when the SPD kicked me out, I was almost sad."[17] Staying true to his political convictions as well as his ever-present awareness of the necessity of organization, Degenhardt became a member of the German Communist Party (DKP – Deutsche Kommunistische Partei) in 1978. The heated fight for political change in West Germany with the help of Social Democrats seemed over.

In the early 1970's, a major West German radio and television network, the ARD, began to boycott Degenhardt's songs and drove "Degenhardt into isolation in the public music scene, an isolation which was meant to destroy his identity."[18] As a result of this targeted shunning by broadcasters, Degenhardt's songs were no longer aired on German radio. Nevertheless, Degenhardt continued to release his political songs and was called a "poetic megaphone of the West German left" during the 1980's.[19] The problematic re-unification of the two German states in 1990 seems to have only reinforced Degenhardt's quest for political change; even then he was listened to by an audience comprised of those who had experienced the launch of his singing career as well as of members of the generation just coming of age. To the latter, the political turbulence of the 1960's and 70's was not a reality experienced personally. Nevertheless, they listen to Degenhardt today, 40 years after "Daddy Franz" sang his first songs, despite the media boycott.

Why do Germans still listen to Degenhardt's political commentary? The answer lies in the poet's life itself – in his stubbornly unwavering insistence on singing his true convictions. Combined with an acute awareness of the function and possibilities of song, Degenhardt's demand for a political system that reflects a just satisfaction of the needs of all human beings makes him an important humanist of our time. That he had the gift to put his ideas into rhymes with reason makes him an important poet.

The Songs of Franz Josef Degenhardt

For 50 years, Franz Josef Degenhardt made his voice heard throughout Germany, a voice as gruff and distinct as the social and political criticism of Degenhardt's songs is biting and relentless. Few of these songs are soft and rich in lyrical pastel colors; many of them are loud and angry. Degenhardt's lyrics and their political message

are never wavering or ambiguous, and it is clear where the poet stands. His large audience of young Germans during the 1960's and 70's attests to the need for Degenhardt's voice in the political forum at that time. Countless German high school and university students had a complete collection of Degenhardt albums. The name "Degenhardt" came to be the epitome of outspoken disagreement with the established system of the industrial countries of the West. Initially, however, Degenhardt's songs acted as a catharsis of youthful protest against the parent generation, perceived as and named the generation of the "Nazi fathers".[20] Before a critical examination of West German society could be conducted in a meaningful way, the recent past of that very society needed to be confronted.[21] During the second half of the 1960's, Degenhardt was one of the leading Liedermacher and poets to emphasize the lack of public discussion and condemnation of Germany's Nazi past. "It is the art of Franz Josef Degenhardt that, around 1965, gave poetic expression within the younger generation to an initially unspecified view of a conservative and benumbed society."[22] While Degenhardt's early songs were a more lyrically-oriented and softer expression of the poet's own perceptions, he also reacted to young people's feelings of unease in regard to the Germany in which they lived. "Degenhardt does not formulate aggressive criticism but a description of minutely observed characteristics of West German society. He was able to do that like almost no other."[23]

Degenhardt himself described the beginnings of his song-writing career:

> … I wrote poems, but my poems weren't published. … I, however, wanted urgently to reach the people with my poems. That was for the most comprehensible reasons. Besides, I needed to make more money. … Thus I sang my poems in public again, accompanied by my guitar, just like in my school days. After I had presented my songs, I was invited to jazz clubs, by experimental small theaters, by students to their parties, by companies to their festivities, and also by couples celebrating their silver wedding anniversaries. This is how I learned to make songs.[24]

While Degenhardt did not want to become a pop singer, he conceded the need to work "in a popular way if one wants to avoid being misunderstood. … This is what I did, and more and more people came; the halls became bigger, and the instrument selection as well, the whole thing, and I actually made money, even a lot of money."[25] In regard to the fast-growing popularity of his songs during the second half of the 1960's, Degenhardt also responded to a need of his audience, i.e. the young intellectuals of West Germany who wanted answers to their questions about both Germany's Nazi past as well as the bourgeois society they perceived as stifling.

At the beginning of Degenhardt's singing career, one was used to associating contemporary German language songs with the shallow pop song with its limited vocabulary, narrow thematic scope, and repetitious music woefully attempting to imitate British and American Rock. German intellectuals seeking meaningful lyrics were left with no choice but to listen to English language songs whose lyrics were not always fully understood because of the language barrier. The German song was reduced to mere entertainment. Degenhardt's audience, on the other hand, was asked to listen carefully to an intricate message, and intellectually challenging songs were received like fresh water after a long drought. It was not only the elements of social and political criticism his songs contained that made his songs so successful. Initially, the messages delivered were quite subtle and nuanced. It was not only Degenhardt's obvious poetic talent. It was Degenhardt's acute awareness of the history of the German song and the tradition in whose context he saw his work:

> I should mention that, in Germany, we have a long tradition of … "contemporary" songs, as I call them - from Walther von der Vogelweide to Paul Gerhard, Georg Herwegh, Hoffmann von Fallersleben, Ernst Busch up to Dieter Süverkrüp. These songs, similar to the songs of jazz or rock music, convey immediacy and, most of all, understanding, as opposed to the cynical and infantile balloon-text literature or the increasingly refined high literature only accessible to experts – and also as opposed to the increasingly childish and pompous entertainment music. Today, the contemporary song becomes something like the missing link between low and high.[26]

While the message of his songs was tantamount to Degenhardt, he very much depended on form in order to maximize that message. In Degenhardt's own account:

> [A song] must be understood immediately and while it is still being sung, i.e. within three and eight minutes at most. The listener must hear it and understand it and cannot listen to it over and over again as is the case in reading a poem. For mnemotechnical reasons, as far as the audience is concerned, one must mostly rely on the end rhyme as well as the refrain, but also on something punchy, something that can be understood quickly. It can be compared to a wood cut as opposed to a poem's fine stroke of the paint brush.[27]

The singer's ability and readiness to respond to the audience's need and expectations at the time, his poetic way of identifying critical issues, his awareness of the tradition of the medium he chooses, and the practical deliberations used in his performance – these were the key elements of Degenhardt's success at the beginning of his singing career and later on as well. The listeners responded in turn:

> The audience is overwhelmed by Degenhardt's Bänkellieder [minstrel songs],

as he himself calls them. He has command over the manifold techniques of guitar play, uses the musical traditions of all European cultures, and, with an acrid and striking voice, delivers lyrics that people have not been able to imagine before in the German language. He ignites a firework of farcical and macabre imagery, sings bitingly and sarcastically about eccentric characters. Through finely chiseled intimations and intermediate shades requiring a most pain-staking attention, he wins over the audience. The overpowering criticism, contrasted with a simple melody, makes people perk up their ears.[28]

As Degenhardt's popularity among West German intellectuals grew, the lyrics of his songs became increasingly clear and direct, his criticism of the political system more intense. This growing intensity can be attributed, at least partially, to the rising political awareness among university students and social structures perceived as reactionary. For Degenhardt, this development meant the lyrical expression of a more defined and more radical political position. These songs, while being crafted just as skillfully as the early ones, gave the political right a great deal of ammunition, and the poet was accused of playing directly into the hands of the East German regime and the entire Eastern Block. Degenhardt, however, always differentiated between his position and the state monopoly on power in the East, and there were songs of the time that the following statement from 1985 echoes:

It must be understood that I didn't come from the workers' movement, did not emit its scent, had become part of it only later. Particularly, I was still a stranger in regard to the revolutionary part of the German workers' movement. This, certainly, was caused in part by the Cold War propaganda against totalitarianism. I knew the Communist Manifesto and, yes, agreed with the concept according to which each individual's free development is the presupposition of the free development of all. Where in the socialist states, however, had that become a reality?[29]

The songs that quickly approached the agitation-propaganda (Agitprop) tradition of the early 20th century were not always well-received, and some other Liedermacher reacted negatively. Degenhardt explained his move from fable and description to political agitation:

It was, so to speak, the requirements of practical politics that caused the songs to be more concrete, more touchable, more direct politically – … Operative, directly active, and agitating pieces of art were called for then, and I accepted the challenge. Those songs determined mostly by function will not be the best, but that was not my goal at the time. In such times, much is created out of the aesthetics of the provocative moment.[30]

Degenhardt's louder, more direct and more aggressive political involvement in the late 1960's and early 1970's was thus considered a political necessity and artistic choice rather than the abandonment of an earlier approach. Mixed into these politically more provocative song selections were always those softer and recondite ballads populated by farcical outsiders in the almost mystical dark corners of the German psyche. As is the case in most artists' lives, it would be wrong to look at Degenhardt's poetic life in terms of consecutive, mutually exclusive phases, neatly separated from one another. At the same time, it is clear that some works were indeed defined by the time in which they were written, as Degenhardt, the realist, described:

> My suspicion was rather toward the operative possibilities of agitatory art such as myself and others were engaged in for a while, mostly during the revolt of 68 – faced, to be sure, by the actual manipulation of the masses by the actual mass media into which we were never allowed – even up to today. Slowly but surely I felt like a Jehovah's Witness, who, unheard, relentlessly holds up his Watch Tower no matter what happens around him, and, of course, that feeling was expressed in my songs.[31]

Degenhardt's success could have ended exactly at this point in the middle of the general mood-swing towards a Western World turning Yuppie during the 1980's – if Degenhardt had been only success-oriented. His style of singing, deeply rooted in the century-old tradition of the German "contemporary song", gave Degenhardt the impetus to continue his effort to plead for a political and social system much fairer and much more humane than that of capitalism. How else, one might ask, could he have continued to sing his songs after the demise of the Soviet Union and the re-unification of the two German states in 1990.

During his artistic appearances over the course of almost 40 years, Degenhardt proved steadfast when faced with gossip and hypocrisy, career-centeredness, and servility. This is why he can sing with his audience about many things without his performance becoming a taboo. Without literary glorification, human beings come toward us, the misunderstood, those without affluence, the outsiders. Degenhardt shows us their humanity, their buried originality in a differentiating and many-faced way – and in an entertaining way as well.[32]

Had Degenhardt conceded some sort of political defeat after his great successes during the tumultuous student rebellions of the late 1960's and early 1970's, his name would, in all likelihood, remain that of an outstanding German Liedermacher among several others. His renown is not because Degenhardt also published several successful novels for which German literary history will remember him: First and foremost, however, he is known for his songs. What more enriching study of modern

Western European history and civilization can we imagine than the study of Degenhardt's songs?

In the end, it should not be forgotten that, as Degenhardt was embarking on another of his two annual tours through Germany shortly before his death, he did so without the publicity of the radio and television networks that boycott his songs to this day. What makes his songs strong and effective and what makes a loyal audience of middle-aged as well as younger Degenhardt-fans listen to his latest songs hasn't changed in fifty years: It is his timeless ballad about the underdog and injustice and the struggle for equality and freedom for all, not just for a few. Degenhardt died in 2011, but continues to sing the ballad. His songs are here to stay.

Translating Franz Josef Degenhardt

Not many translators of literary works have the opportunity to work with the author – I was fortunate enough to not only correspond with Franz Josef Degenhardt in regard to my English translations of the songs in this compilation, but also to review the translations with him personally at his home in Quickborn, Germany. Discussing my translations with him was exciting and stimulating because Degenhardt was a translator himself and knew the intricacies of translation. He sang his own translations of the songs of his favorite French singer and poet, Georges Brassens.

There are two major methods of translating literature, including poetry. The literal method renders a text to the foreign language as accurately as possible, but can keep neither meter nor rhyme. The other possibility, the poetic translation, keeps the meter and rhyme and attempts, at the same time, to achieve the accuracy of a literal translation. In the case of Degenhardt's songs, I used the poetic approach for one obvious reason: The English translation should also be sung to the original tune. Degenhardt told me that he was looking forward to singing a few of his songs in English. Unfortunately, he never had the opportunity; I am certain it would have been one of the late highlights of his career as a poet and singer.

Any translation always means interpretation as well – the translator must choose among the many words and expressions offered in the other language; by doing so, he or she inadvertently manipulates the original – translation is always, to a certain extent, interpretation as well. As a native German, born and raised in Germany at the time when Degenhardt's songs first became popular, I am particularly sensitive to the societal environment of his songs and attempted to make certain I did not misinterpret him. Degenhardt himself refused to add commentary to his songs: To him, they were what he had to say, not more, not less. I hope that my translations are Degenhardt's lyrics in English with as little interpretation as possible.

Thank You

Franz Josef Degenhardt's songs accompanied me through my adolescence in Germany along with many other songs, most of them from a world that was attractive, yet foreign, to me: the songs of Joan Baez, Leonhard Cohen, Bob Dylan and all the others that were able to converse with young people around the globe. Degenhardt was the one German poet and singer that turned the songs of his many American counterparts into something more real and tangible, and also more political.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with Degenhardt personally about my translations of his songs. He was a very generous and gracious host and gave me many hints regarding my work. I will never forget my visits to his home in Quickborn and am also particularly grateful for having met Margret Degenhardt, his wife and ardent supporter of so many years.

The most important thank-you goes to Professor Holger Böning of the University of Bremen, publisher of this book. There were many times when I doubted the success of the Degenhardt translations and was ready to simply keep them in my drawer. Repeatedly, Holger Böning offered the publication of Degenhardt's songs in English and was the driving force behind this book. Without his unfailing support and numerous messages of encouragement, the English translations of this selection of the songs of Franz Josef Degenhardt would not be a reality today.

Many thanks to Dr. Sandra Looney, Professor of English at Augustana University and a dear friend, who offered many needed corrections for the introduction to the translations.

I would also like to thank my wife, Monica Oyen Lhotzky, for not only working on proofing the translations and working with me on the project, but also for reminding me of the importance of the work and for giving the support without which no project can ever be finished.

Endnotes

All quotes are originally in German and were translated into English by Stephan Lhotzky.

The Liedermacher Phenomenon

[1] Heinrich Heine, Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen (Hamburg: 1844).

[2] In this introduction, the main focus is on the Liedermacher of West Germany. The political situation was vastly different in the German Democratic Republic, although the development of the East German Liedermacher followed a somewhat parallel path – however, in a distinctly different environment. Holger Böning´s Der Traum von einer Sache devotes a chapter to the Liedermacher of East Germany.

[3] Diethart Kerbs, qtd. in Holger Böning, Der Traum von einer Sache. Aufstieg und Fall der Utopien im politischen Lied der Bundesrepublik und der DDR (Bremen: Edition Lumière, 2004) 59.

[4] Böning, 59.

Franz Josef Degenhardt

[5] Mathias Altenburg, ed., Fremde Mütter, fremde Väter, fremdes Land (Konkret Literatur Verlag, 1985) 80.

[6] Franz Josef Degenhardt: Väterchen Franz, 27 June 2000, 1 <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/9962/degen2.html>

[7] Altenburg, 79.

[8] Altenburg, 81.

[9] Altenburg, 79.

[10] Altenburg, 82.

[11] Altenburg, 82.

[12] Altenburg, 82.

[13] Altenburg, 83.

[14] Altenburg, 83. Also Franz Josef Degenhardt, personal interview, 7 January 2004.

[15] Altenburg, 84.

[16] Altenburg, 88.

[17] Altenburg, 85.

[18] Gerhard Folkerts, Verleihung des Kulturpreises des Kreises Pinneberg an Franz Josef Degenhardt (Pinneberg, Germany, 9 December 2001) 3.

[19] Franz Josef Degenhardt: Väterchen Franz, 2.

The Songs of Franz Josef Degenhardt

[20] Franz Josef Degenhardt, Kommt an den Tisch unter Pflaumenbäumen, “Fast autobiografischer Lebenslauf eines westdeutschen Linken“ (Rowohlt: Reinbek, Germany, 1986) 74.

[21] Böning, 73.

[22] Böning, 67.

[23] Böning, 67.

[24] Altenburg, 85-86.
[25] Altenburg, 86.
[26] Altenburg, 86-87.
[27] Altenburg, 86.
[28] Böning, 66.
[29] Altenburg, 88.
[30] Altenburg, 87.
[31] Altenburg, 90.
[32] Folkerts, 9.