

Walter Sauer

“Ein grus an dig meine liebe frau”: A Civil War Letter from a Pennsylvania German Soldier to His Wife

Introduction

War letters have long been recognized as important documents for the reconstruction of the past. Located as they are at the crossroads of oral and written history, they represent important sources for the student of military and social history. Modern studies in these fields have therefore rightly taken such epistolary materials, many of them hidden in archives, private collections or among family papers, into account. This is especially true of letters written by soldiers during the Civil War.¹ While their contents have yielded new insights into important aspects of the Civil War, to my knowledge no such letters have been studied from a linguistic perspective. My short article selects one letter sent by a Pennsylvania Dutch Mennonite from Snyder County drafted into the Union army, Peter Stahl. The four-page letter was first made available to me in photocopy by a great-great-grandson of its author, J. D. Stahl of Blacksburg, Virginia, whom I thank for bringing it to my attention. The original is kept in the archives of the Muddy Creek Library at Fairmont Homes Retirement Community, Ephrata, Pennsylvania.² I am grateful to Amos Hoover for making it accessible to me and for his kind permission to edit and translate it and comment on its linguistic features.³

Transcription of Original Document⁴

[page 1]
JarKthauN verschinne
Mai. den 6. Abrill: den tag 1863
Ein grus an dig meine liebe frau
Erssten las ich dig wissen das ich gesund bin
so lan der herr. will ich hof die Par zeilen
werden eich gesund andrefen ich las
Dich wisen das wier guth glück gehabt
haben zinder das wier in der serwes
sind fehdes haben wier noch nichts
Gehabt und ich glaub nicht. das wier
ein beidel seen wier sind nau bald frei
Bis den 16 schulei zelig simmer frei
Dan Kommen Wier heim ich zehl bis
Den fieden schuelei werden wier hier

Jar Rthann der schinne
 Maidens. Abriill den 1 tag 1863
 Ein grüß an dich meine liebe b. frau
 Gernstien. laß ich dich wissen das ich gesund
 so laß der s. them. Will ich hoff die Par. ze-
 len. Werden dich gesund andresen ich laß
 Dich. Wissen das. Wier. gütlich glück gehabt
 haben. zinder das. Wier. in der. Jar. 2. 2. 2.
 sind. fahder. haben. Wier. noch. nicht.
 Gehabt. und. ich. glaub. nicht. das. Wier.
 ein. beidel. sein. Wier. sind. unambald. frei.
 Die. den. w. f. h. u. l. e. i. z. e. l. i. g. f. a. m. m. e. r. f. r. e. i.
 Da. m. K. o. m. m. e. n. W. i. e. r. h. e. i. m. i. d. i. g. e. h. l. b. i. s.
 D. e. n. F. e. e. d. e. n. f. a. h. u. e. l. e. i. W. e. r. d. e. n. W. i. e. r. h. e. i.
 m. e. r. d. e. n. y. e. r. a. n. n. o. h. e. r. e. s. f. a. h. l. e. i. z. u. g. e.
 g. e. n. s. t. e. b. r. e. i. c. h. b. e. r. e. c. h. n. i. c. h. t. s. b. a. n. d. e. r. q. u. e. n. d. e. r. e.
 W. i. e. r. W. e. g. e. m. e. i. n. e. r. f. a. l. a. n. g. d. u. s. i. n. d. e. r. g. e. s. u. n. d.
 D. a. m. W. i. e. r. w. e. r. d. e. n. k. e. i. n. d. e. r. f. a. h. l. e. i. d. e. r. e.
 (h. a. n. n.) u. n. d. y. e. r. d. e. n. i. n. d. e. r. f. a. h. l. e. i. d. e. r. e.
 K. a. n. n. u. e. n.

+ Preiset mich in den heiligen D. B.

... und ...

... der William: in giff ...

... in ...

... in ...

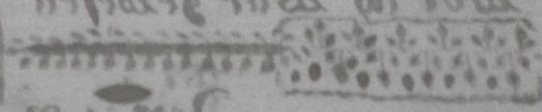
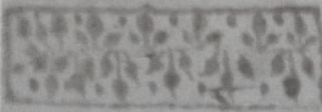
... in ...

... in ...

... in ...

... in ...

... in ...



17. Darthron ist nahe bei den ronen ...
eigen harten ...
schlagens gemeinlich haben ...

Do schid ich meine Johanes chslan ...
not nod und 2 send nod das macht ...

Auf mich nur der ioannes chslan gut aber ...
es macht ...
es haubtsch ...
von mir ...

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sterden fier noch herresbark zu
geen ihr breicht eich nicht bardren und dru
Wlen wegen mier so lang das ich gesund
Bin Wier sind noch in der ford iarik
thaun und drillen noch an der grosen
Kannunen

[page 2]

Kanuinen Wir dunen
zWei 2 stund formietags mit den muschgetch
ten drille und numietags dumer 2 stund an
Den grosen Kanunen trillen ich lasz dich
Wiesen das hier ser viel regen weder
ist ich las dich wiesen das wier den dreißig-
den abrill eingemosderd geworden sind sier
bezahling ich las dich wisen das doverganen
ein bedel War in sovoock. sie hen unsre
zwei hunderd rewel Prisner genomen
und 6 hunderd Kannunen nur 6 misket genomen die Per-
sching und die obs sachen haben geblit hier ich
las eich wissen das die das es karneren hier hat
bis den 16 diesen monad sind wier zweihu-
Derd tag. hier 63 tag henner nonch zu
steh unser regement ist dasz beste regement
geheisen dasz noch von Penselwene gekommen
ist dasz ist gemeint unig den getreften leid

[page 3]

WiEr. HEn Ein schmerde karnel
Das Mus ich sagen mit warheiden
unser regemend: HAT Dreich
Hunderd und 10 Taler Aufgemacht fier ein
GAul und sadel zu KAufen fier
unser KArnel Dieser Prif. Hebt
Auf bis ich heim kom legt den brif weg
Ich will dieser brif will ich aufheben so. lang
Das ich leb dan. Kan ich seen imer
Wo ich War gewesen.

Der 34 Psalm

Danksagung für Gottes Freundlichkeit.

1 ein Psalm Davdis, da er sein Geberde verst-
ellte vor Abimelech, der ihn von sich trieb und
Er weggieng 1 Sam 21,13.⁵

2 Ich will den : Herrn loben allezeit, sein Lob soll
immerdar in meinem Munde seyn Ps. 9,2

3 Meine Seele sich rühmem des Herrn daß die

Elenden hören und sich freuen Jer. 9 24

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4 Preiset mit mir den herrn,

Der William: m. gift had das gefrackduurd
im iar unsres herrn 1863 Mai den 5 tag hab
ich es getahn Jarkthaun verschinne iets mus ich
beschliessen so viel von mier william. m. gift

19 Der herr ist nahe bei denen die zerbroch
enen herzens sind und hilt denen die zer-
schlagenes gemieth haben Ps. 51. 15

Da schick ich meim Johanaes Ebslon 50 send
not nod und 25 send nod das macht 75 send
Jus mie nur der iohannes ebslon gut oder
es macht wen ich heim Kom dan maht
es haudisch. Jets mus ich beschlisen so viel
von mier Pieter stahl zu meier lieben: frau

English Translation of Document

Yorktown, Virginia

May 6, 1863

Greetings to you, my dear wife. First, I am letting you know that I am in good health. As long as the Lord wills. I hope these few lines will reach you in good health. I am letting you know that we have had good luck since we came into the service. We have not yet had any fighting and I don't think we will see a battle. We will soon be free. I reckon we'll be free by July 16. Then we'll come home again. I reckon we'll start for Harrisburg on July 4. You needn't worry and trouble yourselves because of me as long as I am in good health. We are still in Fort Yorktown and drilling with the big cannons. In the morning, we drill with the muskets for two hours and in the afternoon we drill two hours with the big canons. I am letting you know that it is very rainy here. I am letting you know that on April 30 we were mustered in for payment. I am letting you know that there was a battle in Suffolk recently. They captured two hundred rebels and six canons and six hundred muskets.⁶ Peaches and fruit have bloomed here. I am letting you know that there is sweet corn here. By the 16th of the month we will have been here two hundred days, sixty-three more days we'll have to stay. Our regiment is called the best regiment which has come yet from Pennsylvania, that is among the drafted people.

We have a smart colonel. That I must say in truth. Our regiment has raised three hundred and ten dollars to buy a horse and saddle for our colonel. Keep this letter until I return, put the letter away. I want to save this letter as long as I live. Then I can always see where I have been.

The 34th Psalm⁷

Thanks for God's Friendliness

1 A Psalm of David, when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, who drove him away and he departed. 1 Samuel 21:13

2 I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
Psalm 9:2

3 My soul shall make her boast in the Lord: the meek shall hear thereof, and be glad. Jeremiah 9:24

4 O magnify the Lord with me.

William M. Gift wrote this (in Gothic letters) on the fifth day of May in the year of our Lord 1863. I have done it at Yorktown, Virginia. Now I must close. This much from me William M. Gift.

The Lord is nigh to them that are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite heart. Ps. 51,19

Here I send my Johannes Ebslon a 50 cent note and a 25 cent note, which makes 75 cents. Put Johannes Ebslon to work well or else there will be a spanking when I come home. Now I must close. This much from me, Peter Stahl, to my dear wife.

The Sender

Little is known about the sender of these lines. According to information received from his descendants, Peter Stahl lived in Snyder County, Pennsylvania, was the son of Frederick (1801-81) and Susanna (Shottsberger; 1803-84) Stahl, married Mary Herrold and is buried in Chapman, Pennsylvania. No precise dates are available for his life. His great-grandfather was Frederick Stahl, a native of Switzerland. His Civil War records state that, although a Mennonite pacifist, he was drafted into the 172d Regiment, Company A, on October 28, 1862, at Camp Curtin (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania) for nine months. He proceeded to Washington, D.C., on December 2, then to Newport News, then to Fort Yorktown (where the letter was written). In July 1863 the regiment was ordered back to Washington, D.C., then to Hagerstown, Maryland and attached to the XI Corps, pursued confederates to Williamsport, and crossed the Potomac to Warrenton Junction. When his term expired, Stahl returned to Harrisburg, where he was discharged on August 1, 1863.⁸

Date, Handwriting and Spelling

The document, consisting of one folded sheet measuring 15 x 25 cm and decorated with floral ornaments is written in one hand. It is signed by a certain William M. Gift,⁹ who dated his work on May 5, 1863. Peter Stahl must have dictated the letter to him, which may indicate that he was not able to write himself, at least not in *Fraktur* letters. The actual date for the letter is not so easy to ascertain. It must have been started in April and finally dated May 6 in the space left empty before the word

"Abrill," which accounts for the strange dating of "Mai den 6. Abrill." Apparently the writer forgot to delete the words "Abrill den," which no longer applied. "Mai den 6." must have been added a day after William Gift's explicit dating (on May 5) and the subsequent addition of a Bible verse and three more valedictory sentences. The long time span between the beginning and the completion of the letter corresponds with the poor quality of the handwriting and spelling. Quite obviously, William Gift was not a skilled writer or speller. His style does not show the hand of an expert penman. He must have spent many hours on this letter, painstakingly writing, or rather drawing letter after letter. This is also shown by his indiscriminate use of small and capital letters not only in word initial position, but also in the middle of words, his almost consistent use of the "long" German "s" in places where it does not belong, frequent omission of letters, deletion of wrongly placed letters and the addition of forgotten letters above the line as well as other corrections. Overall, his German spelling is quite deficient and points to a man with little education, but able to read and write and willing to make the effort. Peter Stahl's insistence on his wife keeping this letter would indicate that it might be the only one she would receive during his nine months' service.

Language

The letter is generally written in German, the language familiar to nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Dutch people from church, the Bible, devotional literature, hymnbooks and German language newspapers. It is, however, sprinkled with vocabulary items typically Pennsylvania German (PG), the language spoken on a daily basis when not communicating with the "English." In some cases the writer's (and sender's) Pennsylvania German accent accounts for phonological and orthographical peculiarities of the text. The grammar also shows occasional PG elements. These items do, however, not make the text a document consistently written in the PG dialect. It is these linguistic features which we shall examine in some detail in this short paper.

Vocabulary

Lexical items of a typical PG, i.e., not High German (HG), character are of two kinds: Words borrowed from English (Engl) and words "inherited" from the German dialects of the early settlers, especially from Palatine German (PalG; Pfälzisch). In the following analysis, each word is listed in the original spelling in the order of occurrence, and with an explanation of its origin and meaning.

zinder 'since'; from PalG *sinder*, *sidder*.

serwes 'service'; from Engl.

fehdes 'fights', 'fighting' (from Engl *fight* and HG *Fehde* 'war' and HG *fechten* 'to fight').

beidel, *bedel* 'battle'; from Engl.

nau 'now'; from PalG *nau* and Engl *now*.

Zelig, *ich zehl* 'I guess', 'I reckon'; from HG *zähle ich*, *ich zähle*, contaminated with

the meaning of Engl *to reckon* (HG *rechnen*).
schulei 'July'; a phonetic spelling of the English month's name.
sterden 'start'; from Engl.
bardren 'bother'; from Engl; synonymous with the following word.
druwlen 'trouble'; from Engl and PalG *truuwle*, HG *Trubel*.
numietags 'afternoon'; from PalG *nummiddags*.
ingemosderd 'mustered in'; from Engl and from HG *gemustert*.
bezahlung 'payment'; the PG ending *-ing* (rather than HG *-ung*) is from PalG.
doverganen 'recently'; from PalG *do vergange*.
rewel 'rebel'; from Engl.
prisner 'prisoner'; from Engl.
persching 'peach'; from PalG *Persching*.
karneren 'sweet corn (ears)'; from Engl *corn* + *ears* (the plural ending *-en* being transferred from HG *Ähren*).
steh 'stay'; the meaning of HG *stehen* or PalG *stehe* may be influenced by Engl *stay*.
unig 'among'; from PalG *untig*, *unnig*.
getrefien 'drafted'; from Engl.
schmerd 'smart'; from Engl.
karnel 'colonel'; from Engl.
aufgemacht 'raised'; a typical PG meaning of PalG *ufmache* / HG *aufmachen*, reflecting influence from Engl.
Gaul 'horse'; from PalG.
gefackduurd 'written in Gothic (fraktur) letters'; from HG *Fraktur*.
nod, not 'then'; from PalG *nood*.
legt...weg 'put ... away'; a loan translation from Engl in a sense not typical of HG or PalG *weglege(n)*.
jus 'use'; from Engl. The word's meaning ('put to work') seems to be influenced by HG / PalG *anstellen* / *aastelle*.
haudisch 'spanking'; from HG *ich hau dich* ('I beat you').

In all, typical PG dialect words amount to little more than 8% of the total vocabulary (not counting the words quoted from the HG Bible text of Psalm 34). They nevertheless give the letter a distinctly PG flavor.

Grammar

The grammatical indicators for a PG provenance of the text can mainly be seen in the inflection of auxiliary verbs and some syntactical constructions influenced by English.

simmer 'we are'; from PalG.
sterden fier...zu geen 'start (for) to go'; the construction *fier zu* rather than HG *zu* may be owed to PalG *fer zu* and dialectal / archaic Engl constructions with *for to*.
wir dunen...drille 'we drill'; from PalG *mir dune*.
dumer 'do we'; from PalG.
sie hen, wier hen 'they have, we have'; from PalG.

henner (which must be a misspelling for) *hemmer* 'have we'; from PalG. *dasz ist gemeint* 'that is'; an unusual construction in both HG and PalG, probably influenced by Engl in a contamination of HG *das ist* and Engl *this means*. *wo ich war gewesen* 'where I have been'; the unusual word order (in HG and PalG *wo ich gewesen war*) must be due to syntactic influence from Engl. *henner* (for: *hemmer*) *noch zu steh* 'we still have to stay'; the construction itself is modelled on Engl, whereas the form *steh* exemplifies loss of the infinitive ending in HG *stehen*, typical for PalG and PG. *ein schmerde karnel; fier unser karnel; jus mie nur der Johannes; dieser brif will ich*: all four phrases show the typical loss, or confusion, in PG of "correct" (HG or PalG) inflectional endings for adjectives, pronouns and articles. Here, these would be *schmerder, unser(e)n, de(n), diesen*.

Phonology

Even though the letter is not consistently written in PG, the writer's dialect is also visible in the spelling (and pronunciation) of some words. Here are some selected features:

v/w: the typical confusion of PG speakers (as indeed most speakers of all Germanic languages) of these two letters and sounds is reflected in the spelling of *serwes* (service) and *Penselwene* (Pennsylvania).

-ar-: The lowering of /o/, /e/ and /œ/ before /r/ clusters to /a/ is shown in *Jarkthaun, herresbarg, karn, karnel*.

Verschinne ('Virginia') and *schulei* ('July') may reflect a voiceless pronunciation of the affricate consonant in these and other words (rather than /dʒ/).

HG /y/ (written *ü*) is almost consistently represented as *i* or *ie*, as in PalG; e.g. *fier, wier, gebliet*. The only occurrence of *ü* appears in *glück*.¹⁰ *ie* is even found in the HG quotation from the Bible: *gemieth* (HG *Gemüt*).

The reflex of HG /oi/ is /ai/, as in PalG; e.g., *eich, breicht, leid*.

The consonant cluster /tr/ in the word *getrefen* ('drafted') shows an interesting case of hypercorrection. Since HG /tr/ usually becomes /dr/ in PG (e.g. HG *antreffen* as opposed to *andrefen* in our text) the writer's attempt at writing "correct" German made him change Engl /dr/ into /tr/.

Loss of final /t/ is shown in *iets* ('now'), cf. PalG *jetz*.

Concluding Remarks

When Peter Stahl sent his letter to his "dear wife" Mary in May of 1863, asking her to keep it in a safe place, he had no idea that it would survive into the twenty-first century, that it would be cherished as a treasure by his descendants, and included in an archive. And he certainly would not have dreamt of its ever being analysed linguistically. And yet for the linguist, as much as for the student of military and social history, his letter represents an important document. Although, with its mixture of HG and PG, it certainly does not reflect the everyday speech of its author, but rather his somewhat floundering attempt at writing German, it does grant us valuable

insights into the two codes available to PG speakers around the Civil War period, a time formative in the evolution of the PG dialect. It can be assumed that the study of other letters written by Pennsylvania Germans during the nineteenth century would yield further material complementing the interesting biography of Bischli-Gnippli's beloved *Mudderschprooch*."

Heidelberg, Germany

Notes

¹ Cf. e.g., David Valuska and Christian Keller, *Damn Dutch: Pennsylvania Germans at Gettysburg* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004).

² Thanks are also due to Jacob Stahl, Lititz, PA, for logistic assistance.

³ The letter is unpublished. It is mentioned in Christian B. Keller, "Pennsylvania and Virginia Germans during the Civil War: A Brief History and Comparative Analysis." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 109 (2001): 37-86.

⁴ The text is presented line by line in a diplomatic transcription including its erratic capitalization of letters, repetitions of words and almost total lack of punctuation. No attempt has been made to correct any mistakes. Crossed out words and letters are not transcribed. Letters and words written above the line are integrated into the text. The writing is difficult to decipher in many places where the letters show through from the reverse side. For a facsimile of the first and fourth page see pp. 68-69.

⁵ The writer copied cross references contained in his Bible.

⁶ The German original (see above) reads "six hundred canons," with the three words "only six muskets" written directly above the line. Obviously, the writer must have noticed his mistake and with the superscript words somewhat awkwardly tried to indicate that "only six canons" were taken as well as "six hundred muskets."

⁷ The English Bible text is quoted from the Authorized Version of the King James Bible.

⁸ Cf. Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5; prepared in compliance with acts of the legislature*, vol. 4 (Harrisburg: Singerly, 1970) 1182. Peter Stahl is listed as a private and "Not accounted for" on p. 1184. The regiment's "smart colonel" mentioned in the letter was Charles Kleckner, who also mustered out on August 1, 1863; cf. op. cit., p. 1182. I am grateful to David Valuska, Kutztown University, for pointing this source out to me.

⁹ William M. Gift is listed op. cit., p.1183, as a private and equally "Not accounted for."

¹⁰ The reading "glück" is, however, doubtful; it may be "*glieck*" or "*glick*."