

C. Richard Beam

Ernest Waldo Bechtel (1923–88): The Leading Pennsylvania German Poet of His Generation

In his splendid *Pennsylvania German Anthology*, published in 1988, Professor Earl C. Haag includes two of Ernest Waldo Bechtel's Pennsylvania German weekly newspaper columns which appeared in the *Ephrata Review* on 4 December 1975 ("Em Buschgnibbel sei Zeit," an autobiographical piece) and on 3 June 1982 ("Uff em Barig," a humorous piece about Tscheck Yokel) and two of his very best poems "Die gross Ladann" (The Great Lantern, 1951) and his masterpiece "Der Mensch" (Man).

Ernie Bechtel, "Der Buschgnibbel," lived his entire life in the same house in Reinholds, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. He was educated in Reinholds (grade school), in Ephrata (high school) and in Philadelphia (The Philadelphia Institute of Barbering). The only time he left Reinholds was for his period of service in World War II. Bechtel's literary output consisted of approximately sixty-seven Pennsylvania German poems, twelve dialect plays and the eighteen years of weekly Pennsylvania German columns in the *Ephrata Review*.

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To honor our friend and colleague in his eightieth year we have chosen a brief selection of Emie's poems. In "Die Dichder" (The Poets) he writes as a poet on poets. Bechtel writes typically: "Er waard bis die Wadde kumme mit Mehning un Licht,/Noh un yuscht noh, hen mir en Gedicht." (The poet waits until the words come with meaning and light,/Then, only then, do we have a poem.)

Die Dichder

Was sin Dichder? Aus was sin sie gmacht?
Iwwer die Froget hawwich oftmols schunt glacht.
Sie schreibe ihr Gedichder, duhne sie noh uff Babier,
Schreibe vun Mensche, die Landschaft un Gedier.

Festschrift for Earl C. Haag

Sin die Dichder dann en baddiche Leit,
Umringt mit Lieb un ganz frei vun Schpeit?
Odder gschickt mit Wadde, Sume fer Gedicht,
Un en Gschenknis as gaar net weist uff em Gsicht?

Ya, ich muss lache, fer ich wees wie sie sin—
Sin net zufridde haus odder drin,
Drowwe odder hunne, driwwer odder draus,
Im Land, uff em See, im Barig odder Haus!

Umruhich wie die Welle uff em wilde See
Sin die rechde Dichder, gross odder glee.
Sie sin gschpuckt mit Wadde as raus misse heit,
Odder gehne verlore fer en ganz Ewichkeit.

Die Wadde kumme hell un scharef un schnell
In Mehning so glaar wie es Gling vun re Bell.
En Dichder is reddi un fangt yeder Watt,
Macht nix aus sin sie leicht odder hatt.

So widder muss ich lache, iwwer die Gschicht.
Ich laaf net im Dunkle, fer ich schteh do im Licht.
Der Wadde annechocke mit Gedanke un Gwalt
Macht die Gedichder so schtump un so kalt.

So en Dichder is net immer epper as schreibt:
In Gedanke is er ruhich, is schtolz un er bleibt.
Er waard bis Wadde kumme mit Mehning un Licht.
Noh un yuscht noh, hen mir en Gedicht.

The Poets

What are poets? Of what are they made?
About this question I have often laughed.
They write their poems, put them on paper,
Write of people, countryside and animals.

Are poets a special sort,
Surrounded by love and quite free of spite?
Or quick with words, seeds for poems,
Or a gift that makes no trace on the face?

Yes, I must laugh, for I know how they are—
Are not satisfied out or in,
Up above or down below, over there or out,
On land, on sea, on hill or in the house!

Restless as the waves on the wild sea
Are the real poets, great or small.

Ernest Waldo Bechtel, Pennsylvania German Poet

They are haunted by words that have to emerge today,
Or be lost for an entire eternity.

The words come bright and shard and quick
In meaning so clear and the sound of a bell.
A poet is ready and catches every word,
Makes no difference are they easy or hard.

So again I must laugh, all over the face.
I walk not in darkness, for I stand here in the light.
To place words with thought and force
Makes the poems so dull and so cold.

Such a poet is not always one who writes:
In thought he is still, peaceful and he remains so.
He waits until the words come with meaning and light.
Then, only then, do we have a poem.

* * *

“Amerikaa, Wie Gross un Schee” (1976) clearly expresses Ernest Waldo Bechtel’s love of his country, which he served faithfully in the Second World War in Germany and came forth as a survivor of the infamous Malmedy Massacre. Even though Bechtel was critical of his fellow Americans (especially politicians and preachers), “Amerikaa is bescht.”

Amerikaa, Wie Gross un Schee

AMERIKAA, wie gross un schee!
Du bischt uns aagenehmt
Un immer welle mir bei dir schteh:
Die Welt rum un deheem.

Do wuhne mir alle Sadde Leit
Mit alle Sadde Schprooch
Un unser Draam is Eenichkeit:
Mir hewe des so hoch!

Mir hen die Weezefelder gehl:
Die Felder grie mit Graas.
Die hoche Bariye un die Schtedt
Mit Holz un Schtee un Glaas.

Ya, unser Land find uns gedrei
Un yeders dutt sei Gflicht.
Mir hewe hoch mit yeder Hand
Des deier Freiheitslicht!

Chorus

Ya, in die Nort un in die Saut,
Im Oscht un aa draus West,
In alle Schteet vun See zu See.
AMERIKAA is bescht!

America, How Great and Beautiful

AMERICA, how great and beautiful!
You are our beloved land
And always we want to stand by you:
All around the world and at home.

Here all kinds of people live
With all kinds of languages.
And our dream is unity:
We lift it so high!

We have the wheat fields yellow:
The fields green with grass.
The high mountains and the cities
With wood and stone and glass.

Yes, our land finds us faithful
And each does his duty.
We lift on high with every hand
This dear torch of freedom!

O AMERICA, how great you are!
No one can really understand it.
Yet we are happy to live here
In the land of the light of freedom!

Chorus

Yes, in the north and in the south,
In the east and also out west,
In all states from sea to sea.
AMERICA is best!

* * *

“Deemiedichkeit” (humility) is surely a singular Pennsylvania German virtue. It is best exemplified by the lifestyle of our Old Order Mennonites and Amish. Bechtel’s prayer is “Un fer en ganze Ewichkeit/ Geb mir yuscht Deemiedichkeit” (And for all eternity grant me only humility.)

Deemiedichkeit

Was is Deemiedichkeit, wu schtammt des bei?
Soll des Gottlich, geishtlich, adder menschlich sei?
Deweil as ich hock un denk do driwwer,
Kumme Gedanke imme Gschtiwwer.

Deemiedichkeit is en Watt as schteht
Fer eppes as mer net oft seht.
Sis net schwatz un sis net weiss—
Net hees wie Feier adder kalt wie Eis.

Ich seh in Gedanke en baddicher Mann,
Frei von Hass, net gschwindt im Zann—
Gschwindt fer helfe unne Bralle;
Sei Schtimm is sacht un dutt net schalle.

Er gebt sei Lieb net yuscht zu Freind—
Des gebt er as zu all sei Feind.
Lost sei Maerrick uff em Sand von Zeit—
En Aageschpiel zu all die Leit.

Was hot der Mann as ich net hab?
Er is net schtolz un laaft net schtrack.
Er rennt sich net die Hannshall ei
In die weltlich Huddlerei!

Yetz glaawich as ich nau verschteh
Un darich der Umglaab Newwel seh—
Die Mehning von Deemiedichkeit
Des schtammt von Gott sei Owwerichkeit.

Wann du, Gott, mich schtrofe musscht,
Dann nemm eweck der Hochmut Gluscht!
Un fer en ganze Ewichkeit
Geb mir yuscht Deemiedichkeit.

Humility

What is humility, where does it come from?
Should it be godly, spiritually or human?
As I sit here and think about it,
The thoughts come to me in a flurry.

Humility is a word that stands
For something that one often does not see.
It is not black and it is not white—
Not hot like fire or cold like ice.

I see in my thoughts a special man,
Free of hate, not quick in anger—
Quick to help without bragging;
His voice is soft and does not echo.

He gives his love not just to friends—
This he gives to all his enemies.
Leaves his mark on the sands of time—
A spectacle for all the people.

What does this man have that I do not have?
He is not proud and does not walk straight.
He does not crush his skull
In the worldly confusion.

Now I believe I understand
And through the fog of disbelief I see—
The meaning of humility
That comes from God's higher power.

When you, God, have to punish me,
Then take away the desires of pride!
And for an entire eternity
Just give me humility.

* * *

“Yuscht Gedanke” (“Just Some Thoughts”), introduces “Buschgnibbel” physically and makes mention of his wife, “die glee Minnie Maus” and their partner, Dick Beam. Bechtel expresses the hope that “die Alde Kummeraade” will be heard regularly on the radio.

Yuscht Gedanke

Wie guckt der Buschgnibbel? Hot er Haar uff em Kopp?
Is er dinn wie en Riggel odder rund wie en Gnobb?
Hot er grosse Ohre un wie sin sei Beh?
Is sei Gsicht arig runzelich odder is er noch schee?

Sei Ohre sin gross un sei Bauch is dick.
Er is schtump im Kopp un schwach im Rick.
Sei Beh sin haarich—graad wie en Hund,
Awwer schunscht is der Buschgnippel ordlich gesund.

An Alt Schaefferscheddel hen die Leit ihn gsehne
Un der Buschgnippel wett as Dael alsoch datt schtehne.
Der Verschaunt waar zu gross, der Buschgnippel hot Haar
Un glaabt's odder net, hot sie net kaaft im Sctor.

Der Buschnippel is bekannt gmacht warre bei die Minnie Maus
Zu zwee gude Weibslait un die Waahret waar haus.
Des is der Buschnippel im Fleesch un Blut—
Net ganz schlecht un net ganz gut.

Die Weibslait hen gschwetzt un alles waar schee.
Sie hen der Buschnippel beguckt von Kopp zu Beh,
Hab gwisst was sie denke in eens, zwee, drei.
Kann des fer en Waahret unser Buschnippel sei?

No guckt en Fraa mich graad in's Aag-
Fer en Minutt hab ich gmehnt: glei fliegt der Schtaab.
Saagt sie: "Was mer eibild von re Schprooch is oft net waahr.
Uff die Luft saagt deine, du hoscht ken Haar"

Mer bild sich ei wie en Mensch gucke kennt,
Wann sei Schprooch als darich die Luftwelle rennt.
Awwer oft is mer recht un mehner letz—
Sis gut as mer nanner seht als an die Bletz.

Yetz hab ich Dael von eich dann gsehne un bin so arig froh,
Das dir Abharicher seid zu unserm deitsche Schow.
Es Bischli-Gnippli, die glee Minnie Maus,
Un der Alt Buschnippel von Dummheide Haus.

Babier is geduldich: es weist yuscht was mer schreibt.
Was mer denkt kummt immer raus in Dinger as mer dreibt.
Unser Lieb fer eich kummt raus in die allezwee.
Mir winsche un mir bede das mir sehne eich noch meh.

Just Some Thoughts

How does the "clodhopper" look? Does he have hair on his head?
Is he thin as a rail or round like a dumpling?
Does he have big ears and how are his legs?
Is his face rather wrinkly or is it still lovely?

His ears are big and his stomach is fat.
He is dull in the head and weak in the back.
His legs are hairy—just like a dog,
But other than that the "clodhopper" is rather healthy.

At Old Schaefferstown the people saw him
And the "clodhopper" believes that some are still standing there.
The astonishment was too great, the "clodhopper" has hair
And believe it or not, it was not bought in a store.

The "clodhopper" was made known with "Minnie Mouse"
To two good women and the truth was out.

This is the "clodhopper" in flesh and blood—
Not too bad and not very good.

The women talked and everything was lovely.
They looked at the "clodhopper" from head to toe,
They knew what they were thinking in one, two three.
Can this really be our "clodhopper"?

Then a woman looked me right in the eye—
For a minute I thought: soon the dust will fly.
She said: "What one imagines from the voice is often not true.
And on the air, your wife said you don't have any hair."

One imagines what a person could look like,
When his voice is heard over the air.
But often one is right and more wrong—
It is good that one sees each other at a place.

Now I have seen some of you and am very happy,
That you are listeners of our Pennsylvania German show.
The "little clodhopper," the "little Minnie Mouse,"
And the old "clodhopper" of the house of troubles.

Paper is patient: it shows just what one writes.
What one thinks always comes out in things that one drives.
Our love for you comes out in both.
We wish and we hope that we will see you more.

* * *

"Der Grosse Rund Balle" (The Great Round Ball), poses the question: "Schtöpfe mir glei rolle, odder rolle mir noch weit/Odder rolle mir un rolle mir, fer en faensi Ewichkeit? (Will we soon stop rolling or will we roll far/Or will we roll for all eternity?) In this poem Bechtel asks: How far will we (the earth) roll? He makes no reference to his Christian beliefs. Bechtel always asks the hard questions, the questions that engulf the universe. The survivor of the Malmédy Massacre had reasons to do so.

Der Grosse Rund Balle

Die Welt is en grosser Balle, gross Wasser macht der See.
Der Himmel bloh is unser Dach ganz drowwe in de Heh.
Die Blumme in de Felder sin gemacht fer Scheenichkeit.
Es Sach as waxt fer Esse, gebt Grefde zu de Leit.

Es macht em wennich denke, wann mer heert in dare Welt,
As dael Leit nanner madde, fer yuscht wennich mehner Geld—

Ernest Waldo Bechtel, Pennsylvania German Poet

As Brieder nanner scheisse, macht em denke alsemol
Uff unserm grosser Balle is net immer alles wohl.

Dael Leit sin weiss, un dael sin schwatz, un dael sin gwidde-gehl;
Sie schnaufe all die saeme Luft un yeders hot en Seel.
Zu Gott is alli Mann en Mensch, un alli Mensch is gleich—
Die Gscheide un die Dumme, der Aarem un der Reich.

Oh, grosser runder Balle, wu nemmscht uns endlich hie?
All von uns minanner, die Mensche un es Vieh.
Schtoppe mir glei rolle, odder rolle mir noch weit
Odder rolle mir un rolle mir, fer en faensie Ewichkeit?

The world is a great ball, the sea is made up of great waters.
The blue heavens form our roof way up above.
The flowers of the fields are there for beauty.
Foodstuffs grow—feed our nourishment, give energy to the populace.

It causes us to think a bit, when we hear in this world
That many murder for just a handful of money—
That brothers cheat one another, forces one to believe sometimes
On our great round ball all is not always well.

Some folks are white and some black, and some yellow as quince;
All breathe the same air and each has a soul.
To God all humans are equal and all humans alike—
Those clever and those stupid, the poor and the rich.

Oh, great round ball, whither are you finally taking us?
All of us together, men and animals,
Will we stop rolling or roll we onward.
Or do we roll and continue to roll, for a glorious eternity?

* * *

“Wadde” (Words), reminds readers that “Wadde sin’s Gscharr vun der Menner vum Duch!” (Words are the tools of men of the cloth); the group that deals with words is very large (Die Drupp as schaffe mit WADDE is arig gross)—and not all words smell like roses. Buschgnibbel cries “Hoch Ehr” to those who compile dictionaries (Sie schaffe un denke un dowe sich ab! (They work and reflect and plague themselves.) Bechtel wishes that everyone would see the value of a dictionary. In conclusion he declares:

“Ox mol Ox, saage dael is Blaar—
Die Schprooch un WADDE vumme unglannde Narr!
Awwer scheene WADDE am rechde Blatz,
Zoppe immer un ewich amme Mensch seim Hatz!”

“Ox times ox, some say is bleating.
“The speech and words of an unlearned fool.
But lovely words at the right place,
Tug eternally and forever at man’s heart.”

Wadde

Dael WADDE sin bees un dael sin kalt!
Dael sin nei un annere alt!
Dael sin lang un dael sin katz!
Dael zoppe an der Bendel vumme Mensch sei Hatz!

Mer findt die WADDE in alle Schprooch!
In alle Land nidder un hoch!
Gedruckt uff Babier, yo alle Satt!
Doch viel geht’s lese gewiss arig hatt!

WADDE sin’s Gscharr vun der Menner vum Duch!
Sie lese un schwetze aus em Gut Buch!
Fer annere en Gscharr fer fluche un mache,
Weil annere ihr WADDE sin harrlich un lache!

Wu shtamme die Wadde im erschde Blatz bei?
Gewiss do muss ariyets en Antwatt sei!
Fer des frone is hatt un gebt Wranglerei—
Uneenichkeit findt mer do dabei!

In sell dief Wasser: “Wu shtammt des bei?”
Bleiwe mir eweck un heese des fei!
Dankbaar sin mir mit der gross Wissenschaft,
Das immer epper ariyets an der WADDE rumschafft!

Die Drupp as schaffe mit WADDE is arig gross,
Awwer net all vun der WADDE sin schee wie en Ros!
Deel sin dreckich un glee un gross im Gebrall!
Mer findt bessere WADDE in mer ganz annerer Shtall!

Hoch Ehr zu denne, as sie Waddebicher schreiwe;
Sie schaffe un denke un dowe sich ab!
Des wunnert mich nau naegscht do am End,
Is ihr Schwetzes, ihr Denkes un Schaffes wohl gschpendt?

Des is mei Hoffning, des mei Gebet!
Das alli-epper es Waert vumme Waddebuch seht!
Des gebt uns die Gwalt fer in Schprooch weider geh!
Un dutt unser Gedanke verleicht in die Heh!

Ox mol Ox, saage dael is Blaar—
Die Schprooch un WADDE vumme unglannde Narr!
Awwer scheene WADDE am rechde Blatz,
Zoppe immer un ewich amme Mensch seim Hatz!

Words

Some words are hot and some are cold.
Some are new and others old.
Some are long and some are short.
Some tug at the heartstrings.

One finds words in all languages.
In all lands low and high.
Printed on paper, yes, all kinds.
Yet many read with difficulty.

Words are the tools of men of the cloth.
They read and speak from the Good Book.
For others tools for swearing and such.
While others' words are lovely and laugh.

Where do words come from in the first place?
Certainly there must be an answer somewhere.
This is hard to find and results in disputes.
Disagreement is to be found here.

In that deep water: "Where does this come from?"
We'll stay away and be satisfied.
Thankful we are for the great knowledge.
That someone somewhere is always working with words.

The crowd that's occupied with words is very big.
But not all words are lovely as a rose.
Some are dirty and small and great in bragging.
One finds better words in another stable.

Praises for those who write dictionaries.
They work and think and plague themselves.
This amazes me here near the end.
Is their sweat, thinking, and work well spent?

This is my hope, this is my prayer.
That everyone sees the value of a dictionary.
This gives us the strength to continue in the language.
And perhaps elevates our thoughts.

Festschrift for Earl C. Haag

Ox time ox, some say is bleating,
The speech and words of an unlearned fool.
But lovely words at the right place,
Tug eternally and forever at man's heart.

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We dedicate these six poems from the pen of the late Ernest Waldo Bechtel in honor of Earl C. Haag's eightieth birthday, who in addition to his stellar achievements in teaching us to appreciate literature in Pennsylvania German, has completed twenty-five years as the Pennsylvania German scribe in the Call newspapers.

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