## **PREFACE**

AN earlier version of this essay was presented in October, 1980 as the presidential address of the American Folklore Society at its annual meeting in Pittsburgh. The general response was lukewarm at best. Comments indirectly reported to me ranged from "inappropriate for after dinner" and "too long" to "an insult to members of the Society of German-American descent."

Immediately before the address was given, a group of German-born members of the Society, sitting together in the very front row and knowing the nature of the subject matter, rose and draped my shoulders with toilet paper. During the beginning of the lecture, the German group was in high spirits and good humor, and seemed to thoroughly enjoy the paper, laughing loudly and often at the various examples of folklore presented. As the argument developed and such matters as Auschwitz were discussed, there was less laughter. By the end, several of the Germans were so violently angry they were unable to speak.

In April of 1982 I had the opportunity to present an abridged version of the paper in Berlin at a conference devoted to the relationship between Volkskunde [folklore] and Völkerkunde [anthropology]. The response in Germany was more positive than that of my American colleagues. Senior scholars (mostly

German) may have disliked my argument but were too polite to say so. Their general comment (reported to me by a helpful colleague) was to the effect that they already knew about the theme but that the thesis was dismissed on the grounds that there was no such thing as national character. Younger scholars and the few students in attendance were more sympathetic, offering me numerous additional examples to buttress my conclusions. A sensitive young scholar from Tübingen told me in private "When I first read your abstract, I was very angry. Then I asked myself, why was I so angry? There must be something to the thesis after all to have caused such a strong reaction."

As should be clear from the above, this study may prove to be offensive to some readers. Even colleagues sympathetic to my research have been quick to joke about it. One has termed it a "turd de force," while another has urged that prospective readers be warned that "anyone with the vaguest interest in the subject matter cannot fail to be offended by it!" The response of a third scholar, from England, was simply that there were some things he preferred not to know. It is always difficult to investigate a taboo subject without running the risk of engendering emotion and resistance. Folklorists who work with ballads are familiar with the stylistic device called "incremental repetition" in which lines are repeated with a slight increment or addition each time. The present essay might be said to have employed a comparable technique that could perhaps be termed "excremental repetition." Yet to support the thesis proposed (and also in the interest of ars poetica), such repetition is probably unavoidable.

Despite the difficulties I encountered, I remain convinced that the subject of national character is an important one and that any attempt to clarify the concept is a worthwhile endeavor. I did not make up the folklore data cited in this study. The vast majority of it was readily available in the published record. The fact that no one has chosen to study the subject before is more of a comment on academic mores than on the legitimacy of the topic.

I am a folklorist with an interest in showing how folklore can be analyzed to reveal patterns of thought and worldview. I should stress that I am not a professional student of German language and culture. I have therefore elected to present many of the texts I cite in the original German, dialect spellings and all. The poetic qualities of rhyme and the cleverness of much of the word play are inevitably lost in the prosaic English translations. Since it is my hope that this research may prove of interest to readers who lack knowledge of the German language, I have attempted to provide faithful translations into English.

I wish to express my indebtedness to Dieter Rollfinke's interesting unpublished 1977 doctoral dissertation, "Menschliche Kunst: A Study of Scatology in Modern German Literature." His in-depth analysis of Wilhelm Busch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and Siegfried Lenz, plus other literary references to Jakov Lind and Thomas Mann, I found helpful and perceptive.

Many colleagues, friends, and students have generously offered me assistance, both in locating relevant materials and in solving problems of translation. Some of the items of folklore not specifically cited from printed sources came from some of the individuals listed below. I wish to thank them and all those who shared their expertise with me including Reinhold Aman, Florence Baer, Gunther Barth, Burton Benedict, Marianne Birnbaum, Stanley Brandes, Lisa Brinner, Felicia Browne, Pack Carnes, Elke Dettmar, James Dow, Alide Eberhard, John Fetzer,

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None of these people should be held responsible for errors I may have made or for my analysis of the materials they may have provided. I am aware that several of them were noticeably embarrassed by the whole project and that is why I am all the more appreciative of their kindness.

I owe a special debt to Professor Howard Stein, editor of the *Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology*, for publishing an earlier version of this paper in that journal in 1981. One reason for my gratitude is that the editor of the monograph series of the American Folklore Society elected not to consider the work for possible publication and decided this without even bothering to send it out for formal review.

Charles Webel, former Social Science editor of Columbia University Press, proved from the start to be enthusiastic and helpful in the magical transformation of manuscript into book. I also appreciate Leslie Bialler's conscientious and careful editorial suggestions for revision.

It is my sincere hope that anyone who takes the trouble to read this essay will find a persuasive case for the concept of national character as well as for the methodological advantages of utilizing folklore to outline the nature of the character of particular nations. My own understanding of Germany and German-speaking peoples has been irrevocably altered by the materials assembled in this study and I would like to think that most readers will also come to view Germany differently as a result of examining the same data.

For reasons which will become clearer to the reader later, I should like to dedicate this research to my great grandfather Anselm Rothschild of Heldenberger (near Frankfurt am Main), who was born January 22, 1834, came to the United States in 1852, and died in New York City on October 31, 1902.

Alan Dundes



Each nation has a peculiar set of manners, and some particular qualities are more frequently to be met with among one people than among their neighbors.

David Hume, "Of National Characters" 1748