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Camaraderie of youth gives way to nostalgia

*By Diether Haenicke
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Last week's mail brought an invitation to the annual reunion of the fraternity that I joined during my student days in Marburg, Germany, over 50 years ago. In the fraternity lingo of those days, my status was that of a "Fuchs" (a fox). My current classification is that of "alter Herr" or "old gentleman" or, in the unofficial jargon of the foxes, a "moss-covered person."

Eventually, my fraternity proved unable to recruit any new foxes. The very elite, traditional, medieval structures of these organizations, that admitted only men, simply no longer appealed to a modern, less formal and less traditional generation. And so only the moss-covered, old gentlemen are left to meet twice a year to wallow in memories, to revisit the homes where they roomed as students, walk the narrow, little streets of the medieval town, and to reminisce about their old professors, all of them now long gone.

Adolf Hitler had closed down all university fraternities. When I entered the university after the war, they had sprung up again. Although they held on to their traditional rituals, some were very progressive in their orientation toward democracy and the new state. I joined one of these.

For the weekly meetings, we wore the fraternity colors, in our case those of the old imperial flag: black, white, and red. We were quite formal. We wore dark suits, a colored velvet cap and a sash across the chest. Thus we met, in full color (*plenis coloribus*), gave each other detailed reports about our studies, and drank beer according to a firmly prescribed ceremony. Toasts and ceremonial commands were given in Latin. When we toasted a friend, we would say "fiducit" or "fiducia sit": "may our loyalty to each other last forever." And if someone needed to leave the table to visit the bathroom, he would be granted permission only after saying "tempus peto": "I ask for a time-out."

It was a wonderful time of academic brotherhood. Since in German universities every first-semester student in fact enters graduate or professional school, most of my fraternity brothers were medical and law students, but there was also a good number of brothers from the humanities, the sciences and the arts. We were very young and, as young people are apt to do, we dreamt a lot together. The young medical students wanted to revolutionize medicine; the law students sought careers in politics and public service in our new democratic society; and I yearned to become a good teacher.

We promised each other to remain friends for life. We had deep conversations about our plans, about the future of our country, about politics, philosophy, Marxism, or social justice, and we stayed together until the wee hours of the morning. But since much beer was consumed, I doubt today if some of our discussions were really as deep and thoughtful as I remember them.

Often, on warm summer nights, we loaded a few wheelbarrows with kegs of beer and walked into hills overlooking the picturesque, medieval town. There, safely removed from all human habitation, we settled down and talked, sang the same student songs that our fathers and grandfathers had sung, and did exactly what they had warned us against, namely not to drink more than was good for us. At last we rolled out our blankets, said a last "fiducit" to the closest brother, and slept till the sun or the cowbells woke us again.

When we come together these days, moss-covered and retired, we don't drink much any more. Our wives sit next to us and roll their eyes when we order our second glass of wine. We warn the young people not to drink too much, but they don't listen any better than we did.

Many of our dreams, though, came true. Some of us became compassionate physicians, famous politicians, or devoted teachers. We don't assemble any longer "plenis coloribus," although I still keep the old outfit in a closet. But we still say "fiducit" to each other and, with rusty voices, we still sing the old songs of our student days together. Sometimes, when I get very nostalgic, I even put them on my car stereo and sing along *molto vivace*.

Too bad I can't travel to Marburg this year.

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