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Playing the Game: Schafkopf in the Palatinate

After our positive experiences of Gaigel and Binokel at the IPCS 2018 Convention in Leinfeld, and our visit to Central Baden to play Dreierles, an ancestor of Cego, which was described in the previous issue of this journal, we next travelled to the Palatinate (Pfalz), specifically to the small village of Erfweiler, about 20km west of Landau in the middle of the Palatinate Forest. Our motive was to meet Gerhard Zwick, the author of an impressively detailed web page about a card game called Bauernstoss¹. Very little has been written about card games played in the Palatinate, so we were intrigued to try out this game, which is a form of Schafkopf, and to find out if any other interesting card games were played there.

The name Schafkopf, like Gaigel, Binokel and Cego, will be familiar to collectors of German playing-cards because it appears on packs of cards intended for that game. But the game of Schafkopf and its close relatives have a much wider distribution than these labelled Schafkopf cards, which are used only in Bavaria and Franconia. Schafkopf games are found not only in various parts of Germany but also in Eastern Europe, in the Baltic and Nordic countries and in the regions of North America that were settled by Germans in the 19th century.

Gerhard Zwick welcomed us to his house in Erfweiler and introduced us to his friends, and we enjoyed some hours playing Bauernstoss. This is a point-trick game played with the same 32-card French-suited pack as the German national game Skat, and using the standard German card values Ace=11, Ten=10, King=4, Queen=3, Jack=2. As in Skat, the four Jacks are permanent top trumps ranking in the order clubs (high), spades, hearts, diamonds (low) followed by the remaining cards of the trump suit A, 10, K, Q, 9, 8, 7. The other suits have just 7 cards ranking in the same order. But unlike Skat, Bauernstoss is a game for four players in fixed teams, two against two, and the trumps are chosen by whoever proposes the longest trump suit.

A game of this same format is included in the earliest account of Schafkopf known to us, which was published in 1811 in a game manual by Paul Hammer². "Schaafkopf" as it was spelled by Hammer, was evidently quite a well-established game by this time, as Hammer's book already covers nine different versions. It is the first of these versions that is most closely related to Bauernstoss. It is described by Hammer as "*die erste und ursprüngliche Art des Schaafkopfs*" - the first

¹ www.erfweiler2.de/UDN/UDN2_Bauernstoss.htm

² Paul Hammer, *Die deutschen Kartenspiele*. 1st ed 1811, Weygand, Leipzig.

Three further editions appeared 1813, 1815, and 1817.

and original version of Schafkopf. This game reappears in the encyclopaedia by von Alvensleben (1855)³, who copies Hammer's rules word for word, and can also be found in many later books under the name "*Deutscher Schafkopf*" – a strange name considering that the other variants of Schafkopf described alongside it are no less German. Until we encountered Bauernstoss we were not certain whether this early style of Schafkopf – four players in fixed partnerships with the four Jacks as top trumps and trumps chosen by whoever has the longest suit – had really survived anywhere in Germany or had merely been copied by authors from book to book.

As one might expect, the game of Bauernstoss as now played in Erfweiler does differ in a few ways from the "original" Schafkopf from over 200 years ago. One obvious though superficial difference is that while all Hammer's Schafkopf games use German-suited cards, Bauernstoss uses French-suited ones. Also, in the versions Hammer describes the 10 ranks low, between Ober and 9. Another is that in Hammer's time the tie-break to decide trumps when two players had equally long suits was the total value of each suit using Piquet values for the cards, while in Bauernstoss priority goes to the player whose lowest trump is higher, and if these are equal to the first player in clockwise order.

A more interesting difference is the criterion for winning. In the original game the trump making team simply needed more than half the card points – 61 or more – in their tricks. In Bauernstoss, the team that won the previous deal is said to 'have the chalk' – presumably this relates to a former practice of using a chalk slate for scoring, though we used pen and paper. The team that has the chalk needs only 42 or more of the 120 card points to win. So this team tends to win a series of deals while the other team struggles to make 79 or more card points and wrest the chalk from them.

There is also a difference in the play of the cards. In Bauernstoss, unlike other forms of Schafkopf, a player who has no cards of the suit led is obliged to trump, and if there is already a Jack in the trick, any later player who plays a trump is obliged to beat that Jack if they can. This rule may well account for the name of the game, Bauer being the word for a Jack.

As a result of publishing his web page, Gerhard Zwick was contacted by Gerd Pressler from Niederhochstadt about 30km to the east where they play a very similar game which they call Alter Schoofkopp. So far as we and they know, this type of Schafkopf is only played in these two villages and is not known anywhere else in the Palatinate, although a possibly related game Bauerchen using only 24 cards is played in Kaiserslautern⁴. There are a few differences between the

³ Ludwig von Alvensleben, *Encyclopädie der Spiele*. Leipzig 1855. According to Oscar Stein, *Geschichte des Skatspiels*. Berlin 1887, p 13, the same description also appeared in 1842 in G. U. von Enther, *Das Ganze der Kartenspiele* (cover title). Quedlinburg and Leipzig; we have not seen Enther's work.

⁴ www.spielwiki.de/Bauerchen

Erfweiler and Niederhochstadt versions of the game and details of both can be found in German on Gerhard Zwick's page and in English on pagat.com⁵.

One notable feature of Schafkopf as described in Paul Hammer's book and in the other "Deutscher Schafkopf" descriptions that are based on it is that the score is kept by drawing lines which form a picture of a sheep's head, one line for each game point. In Hammer's version the first team to complete their drawing by scoring a total of nine points wins the game. Over time Hammer's elegant curvilinear sheep's head drawing was replaced by a simplified version drawn with straight lines (or no picture at all). Rulemann (1909)⁶ illustrates both types of sheep's head, explaining that the straight head is used when drawing a mark on the slate for each game point won, while the curly version is used when the complete head is drawn at the start of the game and one stroke erased for each point.

Hammer reports the assumption that the game may derive its name from this practice of scoring. Von Alvensleben rejects this and suggests the drawing originated as a joke based on the game's name. Hammer considered the name to be rather vulgar (Schafkopf is equivalent to blockhead in English). Folk games quite often acquire vulgar names as even a superficial survey of pagat.com shows.⁷



Figure 1 (left): Original nine-stroke sheep's head from Hammer, *Die deutschen Kartenspiele*, 1811.

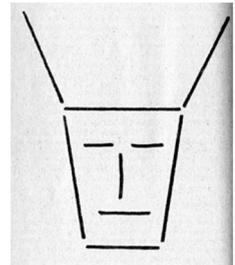


Figure 2 (right): Simplified ten-stroke sheep's head from *Spielregelbüchlein*, Altenburger Spielkartenfabrik, 1980.

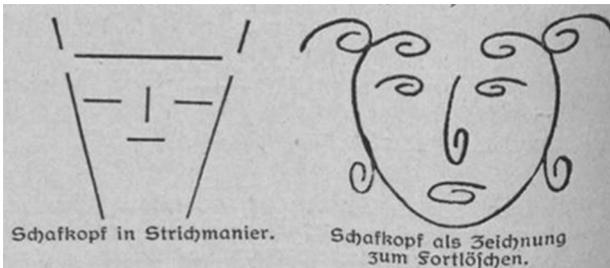


Figure 3 (left): Straight and curly nine-stroke heads from Rulemann, *Das grosse illustrierte Spielbuch*, 1909.

⁵ www.pagat.com/schafkopf/bauernstoss.html

⁶ Theodor Rulemann ed, *Das grosse illustrierte Spielbuch*. Berlin 1909, p 308.

⁷ There are, for example, Arsehole, Bullshit, Couillon (from testicle), Durak (fool), etc. Indeed, one of the earliest known European card games, Karnöffel, had such a name (see David Parlett, *Karnöffel*, *Historic Card Games*. www.parlettgames.uk/histocs/karnoeffel.html).

In Erfweiler we scored using ordinary tally marks, but during our visit we had a telephone conversation with Gerd Pressler who told us that in Niederhochstadt, where the winning target is 15 game points, they do sometimes score by drawing sheep's heads. We have not seen their version of the drawing but he told us that it consists of two horns (2 strokes each), two ears (2 strokes each), the outline of the head (4 strokes) the eyes (2 strokes) and finally the mouth (1 stroke).

After the Bauernstoss game we asked the players what other card games they played. They mentioned three games: 'ordinary' Schafkopf, Assrufen and Ramsch. From their point of view these games were not particularly noteworthy because they are apparently well-known throughout the Palatinate, but since we have so little information about Palatinate card games, we were eager to know more. It turned out that their 'ordinary' Schafkopf is not quite like any version of Schafkopf we have seen before, though it is made up of familiar elements. It seems reasonable to call it Palatinate Schafkopf (or Pfälzischer Schafkopf in German) since it is characteristic of that region.

Palatinate Schafkopf is a three-player game in which one player plays alone against a team consisting of the other two. Not only the four Jacks but also the four Queens are permanent top trumps, with the Queens ranking above the Jacks, so that there are 14 trumps and 6 cards in each non-trump suit. Ten cards are dealt to each player leaving two cards face down on the table. There are two rounds of bidding. In the first round a player can bid a Solo, in which they play alone with their original hand and choose the trump suit. A Solo in Hearts outbids a Solo in any other suit. If all pass there is a second round in which a player can bid an ordinary game in which they pick up the two undealt cards and discard any two cards before choosing the trump suit and playing alone. Players must follow suit but there is no obligation to trump or to overtake. The card values are the same as in Bauernstoss and the bidder's objective is to take at least 61 card points in tricks. The basic game is worth 1 game point with extra game points awarded for a Solo, if hearts are trumps, if the bidder holds or lacks the top three or more trumps, for Schneider (90 or more card points) and for Schwarz (all the tricks). Kontra, Rekontra and so on are allowed, doubling and redoubling the score.

We managed to play a few rounds of Palatinate Schafkopf but had little time left for the other two games. We discussed them but some more work is needed to check the details. Assrufer is a four-player Schafkopf game in which the players are dealt 8 cards each. The card ranks and values are the same as in Palatinate Schafkopf: all the Queens and Jacks are top trumps. In the basic game hearts are always trumps and the bidder selects a partner by calling a non-trump Ace. This basic game can be overcalled by a Solo in which the bidder plays alone with a free choice of trumps, or by Solo Du in which the bidder contracts to win all eight tricks.

Ramsch, like the Skat variant with the same name, is a negative game for three players in which the player who takes the most card points loses. We know that the Queens and Jacks are the top trumps, but beyond that the details remain to be investigated. We intend to publish full rules of Palatinate Schafkopf, Assrufer and Palatinate Ramsch on pagat.com when we have fuller information.

Connoisseurs of Schafkopf will immediately recognise a close similarity between Palatinate Assrufer and Bavarian Schafkopf. Apart from the use of French-suited rather than German-suited cards, the basics of the game are the same. Hearts are the default trump suit and partnerships are determined by calling an Ace. The preference for hearts as trumps is especially noteworthy because this is not found in other Schafkopf games in Germany. In fact the only other Schafkopf game like this that we know of is “Hearts Sheepshead”, a game similar to Assrufer played in eastern Wisconsin, USA, and described by Joe Wergin⁸. Many of the other Schafkopf variants described in Hammer’s manual and in later books and those played today have a default trump suit, but it is nearly always bells or the equivalent French suit diamonds. The affinity between Palatinate and Bavarian Schafkopf is not entirely surprising since the Palatinate was under Bavarian rule from 1816 until the end of World War II, resulting in many links between Palatinate and Bavarian culture.

Bavarian Schafkopf was described in detail in an article in this journal in 1978⁹. That article also attempted a survey of Schafkopf variants, but this was based on limited information and covered only well-documented games played in Germany. There have since been articles in the *Playing the Game* series on the related German game Scharwenzel¹⁰ and the Polish Schafkopf games Kop and Baška¹¹. A more comprehensive survey of Schafkopf games should now be possible, and it is worth setting out the main distinguishing features on which a classification of these games might be based.

- 1. The Top Trumps.** These are what distinguishes Schafkopf games from other trick-taking games. All the Jacks (Unters) and sometimes also two or all four Queens (Obers) are permanent top trumps, originally known as Wenzel. They always rank in the order clubs/acorns (highest), spades/leaves, hearts, diamonds/bells (lowest). Sometimes additional cards are also promoted to be high trumps.
- 2. Players and partnerships.** There can be three or more players. An even number of players may play in two fixed teams. In some games the holders of particular high trumps, for example the top two Wenzel, are automatically

⁸ Joe Wergin, *Wergin on Skat and Sheepshead*. MacFarland, Wisconsin, 1975, pp 79-84.

⁹ John McLeod, Schafkopf. *Journal of The Playing-Card Society* vol VII no 2, Nov 1978, pp 38-47.

¹⁰ John McLeod, Scharwenzel. *The Playing-Card* vol 35 no 2, Oct-Dec 2006, pp 127-130.

¹¹ John McLeod, Minimal Card Games: Kop and Baška. *The Playing-Card* vol 42 no 1, Jul-Sep 2013, pp 19-21.

partners. In some games the bidder selects a partner by calling a card. There are a few games in which there are no partners, but everyone plays for themselves.

- 3. Choice of trump suit.** Many Schafkopf games have a preferred or default trump suit. In some games, trumps are chosen by the player who declares the longest potential trump suit. In some, the bidder can freely select the trump suit or choose a suit different from the default by offering to play alone.
- 4. Objective.** Most Schafkopf games are point-trick games with the standard card values 11-10-4-3-2 and the objective is to take more than half the points. There are a few plain-trick games where the result depends only on the number of tricks taken. Some games or options within games have other objectives such as avoiding taking points or losing every trick.

The combination of four players in fixed partnerships and bidding by trump length, which is found in three of Hammer's nine Schafkopf variants including the 'original' prototype, and which survives in the Palatinate games Bauernstoss and Alter Schoofkopf, seems to be rather rare nowadays. The only two other games currently reported at pagat.com with this combination are Sjavs from the Faroe Islands and Avinas from Lithuania. The plain trick taking game Scharwenzel still played on the Baltic island Fehmarn features this combination too.

This scattered geography and our experience in the Palatinate reminds us how much remains to be discovered. It is quite probable that there are other regions of Germany where Schafkopf variants are played that are undocumented or were thought to be extinct, for example Saxony and Thuringia, where Schafkopf was formerly popular and about whose current card-playing culture we know rather little.

(Page filler: from Hammer 1817 - some cards from a pack with an additional fifth or "blue" suit intended for playing German Solo with five or four players.)

