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A WITTENBERG BIBLE

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, an old book helps us to see things whole. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

In 1534 Martin Luther finished translating the Bible into German. It wasn't the first time that'd been done, but it was the first time anyone had applied a new concept of translation to create a Bible for the people.

Earlier Bible translations were word-for-word, usually Greek or Hebrew into Latin. Now Renaissance scholars said: You can't go word for word from one language into another. Language doesn't work that way. You have to find the sense of the words in the first language, then recreate that sense in the second language.

Luther spent twelve years making his translation and the rest of his life revising it. He pointed out that, since you must make subjective sense of the words, any translation is subject to error, including his. German Protestants still use versions of Luther's so-called Wittenberg Bible. But first editions are rarer than hens' teeth. We know of only two in the United States.

Now Van Lesley tells how the Soviet Army looted a private German library and shipped its books off to a Lithuanian warehouse in WW-II. There they sat until 1987. Finally the base commandant ordered those useless old books thrown out -- pitched into an open field. A year later, the head of the Lithuanian Library heard about it and asked the Russians for the books.

The officer in charge said, "Take them, they are" Well, he used the barnyard term for excrement. After a year in rain, sleet, and snow, they were indeed decaying into organic waste.

And there, in the pile, lay a 1534 Wittenberg Bible, its pages torn and waterlogged, its binding destroyed -- the hopeless wreck of a once beautiful and overwhelmingly important book. Along with it were other treasures -- an edition of Mozart's string quartets inscribed to "his friend Josef Haydn."

Van Lesley shows us the tired, and proud, face of Brone Snitkiene -- a Lithuanian book conservator. Snitkiene wept as she first tried to wash the mud from the Bible's pages. For five years she's literally rewoven ruined paper.

As she holds the rebuilt pages we realize that she offers her own subtle trick of translation -- her own sense beyond literal words. For she is a Catholic in an intensely Catholic country. This book was as basic to the Protestant Reformation as Luther's 95 theses were. And she has made it whole again.

This has been an act of love -- for a fine old book, for Lithuania, for the cause of healing and repair. She sends a message about reintegration. She utters the sense of it -- not word for word, for the message cannot be said word for word. She has translated evil into good -- in the surer tongue of action.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

Lesley, V., Abandoned in a Field: Librarians Save a Rare Bible. *American Libraries*, June 1994, pp. 582 and 584.

See also various encyclopedia articles on Martin Luther, Bible translations, and Luther's city of Wittenberg. I am grateful to Barbara Nytes-Baron for leading me through the UH Special Collections copies of later Lutheran Bibles and their pages, and to Pat Bozeman, Head of Special Collections, for calling my attention to the Van Lesley article in the first place and for providing me with a copy of it.



From an 1883 German Bible

Martin Luther: Click on the image for a full-size picture