

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERNST DICK

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Oral History Project

Endacott Society

University of Kansas

ERNST DICK

University of Münster, Germany, 1950-56

Ph.D., German, University of Münster, Germany, 1961

Service at the University of Kansas

First came to KU in 1968

Professor of German, 1968-2002

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Q.: I am speaking with Ernst Dick, who retired in 2002 as professor of German at the University of Kansas. We are in Lawrence, Kansas, on October 16, 2002. Where were you born and in what year?

A: I was born in 1929, in East Prussia at a place that nobody would know here.

Q.: What were your parents' names?

A: My father was Wilhelm and my mother was Berta.

Q.: What were your parents' educational backgrounds?

A: Typical education in elementary school, as was the case for most people at that time.

Q.: What was your father's occupation?

A: That's a long story. Let me just tell you he was a bookkeeper for the greater part of his life.

Q.: Did you have brothers and sisters?

A: Yes.

Q.: How many?

A: Four altogether.

Q.: Did you grow up in the area where you were born?

A: More or less, yes. I was really raised in two separate villages in the country. I was at home in three villages, basically, because of the family situation. I went to secondary school later on in a city close by.

Q.: I don't know what your educational system was like. Is there a primary system like our elementary school?

A: Yes, that is the only thing in common with the system here. The major difference is that at that time the vast majority of all children stayed there through age 14 and that was it.

Q.: Then did you have to pass some kind of test to go on to what we would call high school?

A: Yes, you had to pass a real test for a full day to be admitted to what you call high school. It is a very different thing from high school, much more demanding.

Q.: How old were you when World War II started?

A: Ten years old.

Q.: Did you have family members in the war?

A: No, not a single member of the family was directly in the war in military service. But my father, who had lost one leg during World War I, was drafted by the army as a bookkeeper in some kind of office. He served in the occupied territory in east Europe.

Q.: What was it like on the home front during the war?

A: Well, the area in which I grew up noticed not nearly as much of a difference as the rest of Germany, and the rest of Germany was not severely affected by the war either in the first one or two years. But that was in the area that was protected almost until 1944-45, the last year of the war, basically. We had no air attacks. We didn't see much that reminded us of war, other than what came through on the radio, except that the food was short and you couldn't buy many things in the stores without special permits to be gotten from the mayor of the town, etc. Everything was in short supply.

Q.: I'm not quite sure where East Prussia is.

A: Well, if you look at the map today, you won't see it. It doesn't exist any more because the Soviets and the Poles took care of it.

Q.: Would it be in what we called East Germany?

A: If you say East Germany now, you mean the ex-G.D..R. No, it was part of a much larger East Germany, but it was completely split off from Germany proper in 1945. It was under Polish and Soviet administration first. But a few decades later they finalized that.

Q.: Did it become part of Poland?

A: Yes. That simple. Another part of East Prussia went to the Soviet Union because they wanted access to the Baltic Sea for their navy. That simple.

Q.: Was there bombing toward the end of the war?

A: The end of the war was a disaster for anybody who lived in that area. We paid much more heavily toward the end of the war than the other people in Germany did, despite the air attacks there in the cities. As the Allied forces were advancing from the West toward the center of Germany, everyone stayed where they were. They just tried to avoid contact with the military and not provoke anything. But in our case, in East Prussia, anybody who could possibly move tried to get out, and many people couldn't get out. Because we knew what was ahead of us with the advancing Soviet troops. They had been officially encouraged and urged to kill and murder and rape wherever they could, by official officers.

Q.: Did your family move at this time?

A: My family was not able to move, basically. But arrangements were made from the start of it by the person in charge of trying to get the people out of the village, half a day before the Soviets moved in. So everything was far too late in a way. Wagons had been provided, also horses and a prisoner of war as a driver. With the five kids and my mother alone—I was the eldest—we got onto a wagon. We grabbed whatever we could in

a few hours and took off. So we went a few miles the first day and tried to find a place to stay for the night. That could have gone on for weeks, but after two or three days like that we were bombed. The Soviet air force had nothing better to do than bomb refugees.

The treks on the road were an easy target. Nobody could fire back. So the wagon was gone, the horse was dead and the prisoner of war, who was supposed to take care of the horse, fled. He escaped the first chance he had.

Q.: Did your family survive?

A: The family survived to some extent. It took us four weeks to get out of the East Prussian area and on across the Baltic Sea. This was the only exit open at that time for any civilians to get out of there. The Russian Army was hot in pursuit. The people who could handle it themselves with their own horses and wagons and were not bombed proceeded up to the frozen bay area of the Baltic Sea, and then they left everything behind and went on foot over the ice. At that time it was February. We couldn't do that. Three of the children in our family were ages one, two and four. I was 15 and the oldest brother was age nine. There was no way we could do anything without any help. What we did was try to see the German Army whenever we could and say to an officer, "Can you help us?" And he often did, but it was a long and laborious process. Then the Soviets moved in and took charge of the area. We were hiding in basements and cellars, etc. and feared the worst. Then the German Army fought the Soviets back for a day or two and so we got out and begged for a ride on some truck. Bit by bit we got up to that area where most people had tried to make it over the ice. We couldn't do that either. Also, many of those on the ice, by the way, fell in. And they were bombed on the ice too. So in our case, the German Navy took care of mothers with children who couldn't

help themselves. We were put into a freighter from one place to the next little harbor.

There we took another freighter and then a third time a major boat and we got into North Germany, and that was the end of the escape proper. All our baggage was lost. We still had something left at the end before we were shipped there and that was lost. They never loaded that. Some of these big boats—there was an anniversary last year for one of those, the Gusthoff—were torpedoed by the Russians too and went down with all the refugees, in one case 10,000 to 11,000, on board. So much for the war experience.

Q.: So you ended up in a different part of Germany.

A: We had no idea what would happen because we had no destination, no place to go. One of my grandmothers stayed behind, by the way. She and my grandfather decided not to get out. Another grandmother was in West Germany. We thought, well, if anybody asks us where we will go, we will go there. But we couldn't. We didn't know how to go there and we had no money, transportation or anything. This was understood by the organization in charge, which was functioning fairly well, actually, at that time, just months before the end of the war. They put all these refugees who came via the sea onto a train, one train after the other in regular passenger cars, not freight cars. We were in a little compartment with six seats or so, with three families packed into that. Well, that's where you go. Nobody asked you what you had in mind, or where you were going. You were just told to go there. The train started moving and sometimes it would stop again. Then there was a bomb alarm again. This went on for about a whole week all through north Germany. We would stop at a station for some soup, provided by the Red

Cross. We would try to nap while we were sitting in these seats, and one morning we woke up and looked around and it didn't look like Germany any more. There were funny signs in a different language and we realized we had been moved into Denmark. Of course, that was an enormous relief at that point, since we knew that Denmark was under German occupation at that time. The army would take care of the refugees, somehow or other. We were no longer in a war zone, so the worst was over. And everybody in the family had survived up to that point. So we were first put into a typical emergency shelter, some gym halls, etc., hundreds of people on the floor. This went on for a few weeks. Then they put us into smaller camps and larger camps and on and on like that. In the process of moving from one place to the other, we had no clothing other than what we had on when we got from the boat. We got food in those places. It wasn't so bad, but no clothing and nothing else. Two of my brothers and sisters died within weeks and months. Then my oldest brother developed tuberculosis of the lungs and died a year and a half later. So three of the five children died. I would have been the only survivor with my mother, if it hadn't been for a miracle. The Danish population certainly didn't like the Germans. They didn't like the German military and they didn't care for us. But we didn't have any unpleasant encounter with the Danes personally. I was impressed with their attitude as people. This one brother who also survived, 12 years younger than myself, developed a very serious mid ear infection. So there was no help for it in the camp, no doctor, nothing. He was doomed. My mother lost her nerves, basically, she panicked. At that point we were still free to leave the camp. So we walked through the streets of a small city and asked around. Somebody said if you have that problem there is a specialist. So my mother found the place and knocked on

the door and was admitted. The doctor took care of it for no charge. So that saved him.

He is still suffering from that, of course. That was a very serious operation, but he survived it. That was the end of the escape from the Soviet brutality. So my mother and I and this brother survived and had no way for years to get out of those camps. Of course, the German army was out of Denmark at the end of the war. So the Danes and the British forces—the British military was then in Denmark—took care of the refugees, and from then on it was a very different situation. They tried to concentrate all of these refugees, a quarter or a half million people, I think. There were 200,000 in one major camp and there were two or three major camps. Those were regular camps with barbed wire fences. You couldn't get out. Food was getting more and more scarce. We were hungry at times. There were regular watch towers with Danish soldiers with guns. There was no way of getting out of Denmark because Germany was split up into zones, Soviet, American, French, and British. And they refused to take any refugees. Ironically, the only zone that eventually developed a different policy was the Soviet Zone, called East Germany (G.D.R.) later on. They said that those refugees in Denmark (and maybe other places) who had relatives in East Germany may apply to be admitted. And we did. In the meantime, through the Red Cross we had found the address of my father, who had been left behind in East Prussia by that time, in a major city, in Königsberg (Kaliningrad). So we had his address. He had made it to West Germany. Some of our relatives in East Prussia had made it to East Germany. And we had their address. So we stated their address and after several months we were moved out by train and then by boat and got to East Germany. My father came over from West Germany, crossing the border illegally. We had a reunion with the relatives for about a week.

Then he said, "Now let's pack up." He built a little cart with two wooden wheels and a few boards put together. We put our belongings together and he said, "Let's move on to the train and head towards West Germany." He knew which areas were favorable for crossing the border. We marched about three or four miles towards the border, only to see a Soviet soldier waiting for us.

"Stop, stop!" he said. He waited until everybody was collected and then he took us into a barn and I thought, "Now we will all be shot." The next morning he said, "You got your lesson. You know you can't do this, and you go right back from where you came. And don't you dare take one step in the direction of the border." Then he disappeared and we, of course, went to the border. So we made it over.

Q.: Into West Germany. There were quite a few years when you weren't in school, I suppose.

A: It is still difficult for me to talk about this period. I left the secondary school after three years only. It was an eight-year system at the time. We had no junior high. There were four years in elementary and eight years in secondary, and I had only three years of secondary school before getting out of East Prussia. The last year was interrupted by bombing alarms, etc. When I got to West Germany to the place where my father had settled in a village just to be safe and to have some food to eat, because most Germans in West Germany (and East Germany) were really starving at that time after the war, my father said, "Let's go up to that town and see whether we can get you into that school." That worked, because in Denmark in that huge camp, which in many ways was like a concentration camp—let's call it an internment camp—the refugees on their own had gradually organized a sort of substitute school system on the secondary level. So some

banker would teach math and some former school teacher would teach English and somebody would teach German, etc. There weren't very many subjects. About four or five subjects were being taught. So we did that and when we left the camp we got certificates with grades in these areas. I showed all this to the school director in West Germany and he said, "Oh, it looks good. This is great. I think we'll move you right into such and such, which was the third last year, which was approaching the end by that time. So I had missed at least three or four years. And you can imagine how I did in class because it is all strictly regulated in the German school system. You don't take courses of your own choice. All subjects were required. Everybody had to take everything. And if you had missed a year, you had almost no hope to go on. But I had missed three years and I had to catch up somehow. The first three months were rough, but then I was okay.

Q.: So then you finished secondary school.

A: I finished secondary school at that city in West Germany, Verden an der Aller,, which is a famous historic town. It is about 1,000 years old. It had its anniversary recently. It's history goes back to the time of Charlemagne.

Q.: Oh, it was that old.

A: He was fighting the Saxons in that area all the time. I'm not sure the town officially existed in his time. The 1,000-year anniversary would move it closer to the year 1,000. So there is a 100 or 200 year gap there. There was the famous slaughter of the Saxons by Charlemagne, 4,000 of them, right there in that area.

Q.: When you finished secondary school--this would have been under the Occupation--were the colleges running then?

A: Oh yes, by that time—this was 1949—actually the spring of 1950, I think. This was roughly five years after the end of the war. West Germany had become a new state. The Occupation forces were still there but they only controlled the administration in a general way, otherwise the schools were running on their own. The universities were running on their own. There was very little interference. There had been a cleansing process right after the war, so it was safe from their perspective. It worked very smoothly. We had no problems on that line.

Q.: Did you go to college directly after secondary school?

A: Yes. That's what I wanted to do. My father had no career plans for me, but he was really responsible for my getting into the system. Most people, in the situation in which he lived in the country, would say the eldest son is going to do something similar, naturally. He had from the beginning this ambition to send me to a secondary school. Then once I finished that he said, "Well, it is up to you of course what you want to do now." In fact, I almost quit a half year before finishing because living conditions were so miserable, so hard to watch at home. I wanted to go and work on a farm some place. At least there would be some relief, I would be taken care of and maybe I could get some food, etc. My teachers talked me out of it, thank goodness. So at that time I had made up my mind that I wanted to go to the university and study. My father didn't know what to do with that because he couldn't support me. Some kind of advanced study was necessary, he realized that. His notion was probably, "Well, go to such and such academy. You can become a village teacher later on." I didn't think too highly of that. So I just decided to wait and see and try to collect a little bit of money on my own by tutoring in the city where the school was. Actually, I qualified for unemployment

compensation because I had no job. The German system was very generous in that respect. So I collected a few German marks here and there and had enough to take a train to the university to which I had applied. I had applied at about six different places, but acceptance was really no problem. I had good grades. I wanted to find some place where I would have some support from the university.

Q.: Like a scholarship?

A: A scholarship or some stipend for free meals, fees or tuition paid. One university indicated that there was a professor who could take care of some of these aspects, the University of Münster, in North Germany, which at that time was a relatively small but very good university. Now it is one of the largest in Germany and a very famous one. So I went there for that reason, basically. And I never regretted that because there was indeed a person who cared for helping students with insufficient means.

Q.: You mean a specific professor?

A: A specific professor. It was not an organization like student offices, etc. You don't have that in Germany. You never did and you still don't. It was a physics professor who on moral grounds made it his duty to spend a certain number of hours in a Student Union office, to sit there and be available to students. He could make decisions regarding free lunches at that place, free tuition, etc. That helped me. Then in the summer I tried to find some temporary work. So for a year or two it was pretty rough.

Q.: Where did you live? I don't suppose you were able to live at home.

A: No, this was several hundred kilometers away. That was a big question. I arrived at the train station and had a bicycle with me, I think, and got to the youth hostel, the cheapest place. Every city had one. For starters I thought I could get meals there and start

looking around for how to find a room cheap. I put an ad in the paper, saying I was looking for a room, as a student, I offered tutoring at the same time, hopefully for payment for a free room if possible. So I got one response, and it worked.

Q.: Somebody provided a free room for you?

A: Yes, it was a free room essentially, a very small attic room with a little stove. They heated it for me in the winter. They provided breakfast, actually and at first they said something like 20 marks a month would be sufficient. Later, I paid no rent at all. There were two children to be taken care of. One needed to learn more English for a commercial school and one was a girl in grade school who had trouble learning things like math.. So I took care of that and spent several hours a day with those children separately and had my cheap room. I stayed there for several years actually, but not quite till the end of my studies.

Q.: What was your major?

A: You had to have two majors officially for the main line of study, which in our field would usually be to become a secondary school teacher. You could go up to the doctorate with two majors and one minor. Quite a few secondary school teachers do have doctorates there. It is a very different kind of training process, a very serious academic process. It is not like going through the School of Education. My majors were English and German with some philosophy and education courses in the first two years. The preference between the two majors was never decided really. I studied extensively in both fields. That was basically it. If you wanted to go on for the doctorate, which later on I decided to do, bypassing all the exams for the school system, then you had to have three fields, two majors and a minor. Here you have one major

field and that is it. My minor was philosophy

Q.: Our undergraduate system is a four-year program. Was it something like that?

A: We can cut that short by stating that there was no undergraduate system in that university system. In a way there still isn't, although the Germans have nothing better to do than to try to copycat the American system now. They even want to have a B.A. now. They act as if they have an undergraduate system, but actually the secondary school system takes care of a lot of things that students do as undergraduates here.

Q.: So when you go to university, it is like starting a master's.

A: Exactly. At least in the Humanities. I have been graduate director here for decades. Students who come in to start the master's in German do exactly the same things that I was doing coming out of the secondary school. Nobody told you what to take. You can take seminars, go to any kind of lecture courses, etc. There are no exams in between. Decades later they introduced some intermediate step, which is supposed to sort of mark the undergraduate/graduate division. But it is not like that at all. Basically, you start like a graduate student, and you behave like one too.

Q.: More responsible for your own studies.

A: Most are serious students, no kidding around.

Q.: Because a very small percentage would be going.

A: That is one thing. That has changed since that time. But in my time it was a very small percentage, right.

Q.: How long were you at the University of Münster?

A: A long time, actually: about six years of course work. I interrupted that by getting a scholarship for a stay in England in 1953, so that was a break after three years.

- Q.: Was that a way to study English further?
- A: I could study whatever I wanted to.
- Q.: You went to a university in England.
- A: Sheffield. This was after three years. After returning I got into more demanding courses, that determined my future career. I would have been ready for getting into thesis work around 1956 maybe, that means in the sixth or seventh year. You didn't have a master's. There was no such thing in the German system. They introduced that later on.
- Q.: But you went for four or five years.
- A: Studying. No real exams until you have finished your course work. If you have a seminar there may be a paper.
- Q.: You mean you don't have a lot of tests.
- A: No tests. You go on year after year. There are students in Germany who have been studying forever and nobody stops them.
- Q.: That is different.
- A: From the first year on they are told, "Take what you want." If you want to study medicine there will be required courses, but every student will traditionally spend the first year studying some classics, maybe and some art and some psychology. You spread out first and then there is no coercion to consolidate that in any way, at least in the humanities. They changed that about 10 years ago. But in my time you could go on forever and do whatever you wanted to. You decided when you were ready. Then comes one big set of exams. That decides everything.
- Q.: That would be rather frightening, I would think.

A: Yes. Absolutely.

Q.: Then you took these finals.

A: I took the finals, but not too soon. Two years after I came back from England I was ready to write my dissertation and was in the process of preparing it. In a year or two I might have done that, about 1957 or 1958. In the meantime, one day in the English Department the director approached me and said, "Well, we have two possibilities for our students to go to the United States for a year on an exchange basis. You would be one, if you are interested." The other one was my closest friend. My friend was invited to go to KU in 1956, and in my case the professor said, "We want you to go to Johns Hopkins," because they had lost their philologist in German. The famous linguist and Medievalist in the German Department (Arno Schirokauer) had died two years before that. He said, "Their graduate students need a course on the history of the German language." It was a required course in all graduate programs, at least it was at that time. Since he had noticed that I was working on my own on the history of the German language, he said, "You seem to be prepared for that. Why don't you go?" So I found myself at Johns Hopkins University, without a Ph.D., teaching an undergraduate class plus this graduate course in the history of the German language, replacing the famous deceased German professor. That was very unusual.

Q.: How long were you at Johns Hopkins?

A: A year. I had good friends in the course of that year. We went out eating, having coffee, etc. They were mostly T.A.s. I associated mostly with that group, not the professorial group, although I went to quite a few of the professors as an auditor. I wanted to see what these people had to say. It was a great year. So these students

started kidding me, saying, “You don’t want to go back to Germany from here, do you?”

I said, “Of course. I have no choice.”

“But you haven’t seen America yet.”

“Why should I? I have seen Baltimore (and New York and Washington).”

“You have to see the West. You have to see the Rocky Mountains. You have to see people dressed like this. This is what you wear.” (They had bought me two colored ‘cowboy shirts’).

So we talked about it for weeks or months and finally I said, “Well, if I were interested, what would I do?”

“Why don’t you send out letters of application for the position of instructor of German. There are plenty of colleges who might have an opening.”

So I did. I sent out about 15 letters, and about six or seven responded, “Yes, maybe. We don’t know yet. Just keep waiting.” One day I got a phone call from someone who said, “Are you still available?”

I said, “Yes.”

“How about this summer? Would you also teach summer courses?”

“I said, “Yes, sure.” So this was the answer to that question. I spent my second year in Montana.

Q.: So you continued on after the summer then.

A: Yes. Shortly after the end of the academic year at Johns Hopkins I got this call, and since I was supposed to teach summer school in Montana, I didn’t have a summer in Baltimore, actually. I got myself on a Greyhound Bus and went all the way from Baltimore to Missoula, Montana.

Q.: That must have been quite a trip.

A: It was four days. I stopped in Chicago for a break. I also wanted to stop in Bismark, North Dakota, because I was searching for another place in the middle between Chicago and Missoula. Bismark looked like the biggest place in between. I got my stuff out of the bus and looked around for a minute. That was enough for me. Then I put my stuff back on the bus and moved on. That's how I got to Montana. At the end of the year I returned to Münster to complete my degree.

Q.: What did you think of the American West?

A: I was fascinated in many ways. It was so different from the East Coast. Those people were right. And I could see myself sitting there and settling down and thinking about what I would be doing there, not being a hunter. I'm not that type. But it is nice. You have very pleasant surroundings with great scenery. In fact, we returned there later on. When I finished my degree three years later, I married at the same time, and there was a wait situation for an assistantship for the academic career. My professor told me, "Don't worry about it. We will get you something. But for a semester or so we don't have anything right now. I'll find you something else."

Q.: What is your wife's name?

A: Renate.

Q.: Was she a student also?

A: She was a student in the library school in Cologne. But she had already finished by that time and had a position as a librarian in Münster. She had also worked in the English Department of the university before that as a head secretary for some time. So I knew her from that time. We got closer after I came back from the States. Then we married

in the same month that I got my Ph.D.

Q.: What year was that?

A: That was 1961. I simply said, "Maybe we should not just sit here and wait, but get out for a while and then come back and start." So we did.

Q.: Did you come back to the United States while you were waiting?

A: Yes, we came back to the States. The thing to do at that time, I thought. So I said, "I can't simply apply at any university. From abroad, I don't have a good chance. But I have these contacts still in Montana." I knew that the time at Johns Hopkins was a special situation, an exchange. I don't think that would have worked very well, although I had good relations there. But I simply wrote a letter to Missoula, Montana, and said, "Would you want to have me again? We are willing to come back now together." I didn't quite specify for how long because that could have ruined it. And I left it open. I thought it could be a couple of years, maybe three years.

So they wrote back and said, "Yes, we are interested. Let's do the formalities." They got me a special visa with preferential treatment so that it wouldn't take that long because time was running out. So by the beginning of the fall semester of 1961 I was in Missoula, Montana, again.

Q.: And you were teaching German.

A: Yes. Well, they had no graduate program in German there at that time. I think they have something now. So it was mostly undergraduate courses up to the B.A., some literature courses, but language courses primarily.

Q.: How long did you stay in Missoula?

A: One year only. I thought, "Now I have responsibility. I am a married person. I'm not

just an adventurous bachelor. I have to look for the future of the career now.” It became very clear that Missoula, Montana, would not do for me what I needed. I was totally isolated there academically and there was no graduate program. We got into a sort of happy go lucky situation where nothing was a challenge any more. Everything was easy. We just needed to forget the world and be happy. We borrowed a TV on a rental basis and all we found to watch was boxing fights. This couldn’t go on forever. So by Christmas time we went to Chicago by train to attend the Modern Language Association and to look for job opportunities. Several things seemed to be opening up. In the meantime I had personal contacts with former friends from Johns Hopkins. One of them went to Virginia. He said, “Why don’t you apply at Virginia?” So I applied there. Sooner or later I got an offer from there, weeks after I got an offer from Germany to be the head assistant of a major English Department in West Germany. I think I had already accepted that German offer by the time the Virginia offer came through. Finally I decided in favor of Virginia. We were going across the country by car, the first used car that I bought, after I had learned to drive. With that car and a U-Haul trailer we went all the way down the Rockies to Denver and across to the Midwest to Virginia.

Q.: Why did you decide to stay in the United States instead of going back to Germany?

A: The decision was actually made on that trip, not before that. We left it still undecided when we were ready to move East. Moving East meant we had made a commitment to Virginia, but I had not yet said no to the place in Germany because I didn’t quite know how to handle it, and the time factor was still very uncertain. So we saw so many interesting things on the way, National Parks and all that, that we decided it would be a shame to just spend one year in Virginia and tell them we have to go to Germany. We

thought we might want to stay longer than that, maybe two or three years and then go back, and then real life would start, the hard life. So we wrote a thank-you note to the University of Giessen in Germany and hoped the director there would understand. He was very understanding. So I had an assistant professorship in Virginia. I was supposed to build up a graduate program, which had existed there for a long time, but had been reduced to zero by the time I got there, because the major professor had died and he apparently hadn't built up another graduate staff. It was just all himself and nobody else. So Virginia's famous university was interested in rebuilding the graduate program in German. That was the interest in getting me there. I couldn't be happier, so I went there and tried. But for two or three years I didn't have a chance of doing that because of two associate professors who apparently had different interests. Eventually they got out of the system. They were really more administrators than scholars. So they left and I was now in charge of the German section. It was merged with French, Italian, and Spanish at that time. We started rebuilding. I taught the first graduate courses, recruited graduate students and developed a graduate program. At that time I made a big mistake. The Dean gave me the go ahead to hire a person as chair, because I was still a very young person. I went to the MLA and met a candidate with whom we had corresponded. We found a person who looked very competent. And when we got him we found out he was a disaster. All he was interested in was bringing in his own people and not really building the department. We had some clashes and I decided to leave. Now you want to know what went on after my time in Virginia, where I spent five years, between 1962 and 1967.

Q.: Yes.

A: In 1967 I got an offer to go to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This was just the time when I thought, "This won't work out in Virginia because of the new chairman. I was an associate professor by that time. He couldn't touch me, but the working conditions changed rapidly. That guy had the departmental mail brought to his desk by the secretary. He wouldn't release any before he had checked on every letter. Things like that, or magazines that I had subscribed to. He took them home. I asked him, "I didn't get anything in several weeks. Would you know?" "No, what is it? Oh, I will check at home. It might be there." And it was. Or the mail for research grant applications, it just wouldn't get to me. Anyhow, the two other people who followed me in that position, also left for the same reasons. They became distinguished professors in the field. So I had this contact with Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I got there as full professor. I had started as assistant professor in Virginia and after three years I was promoted to associate professor. When I was hired by Milwaukee I had more publications, so I went there as a full professor. It was an exciting year. I had to teach four courses instead of two or three courses a semester, but wonderful students, all very enthusiastic and highly motivated. But the purpose of that position was also to help build up the program—not the graduate program, they had that—but they didn't have a Ph.D. program. So we got going because the politicians in Madison were all in favor of having a second major university practically at the same level as Madison. Well, politics are very unreliable in any state, I think. So after a few months we realized that politics in Madison had changed, and there was no real way we would ever have that kind of university like Madison. I was of course supposed to stay, but I had been approached by KU already the year before that, while I was still in Virginia. This involved a position in German

dialectology? Because of the German background in the state, the German dialects are spoken here. Since I was not specializing in dialectology, I could not accept it, at that time. But now I was interested in finding another place and KU was trying to hire more senior faculty. So I came to KU.

Q.: When was that?

A: 1968.

Q.: Well, that was an exciting time coming up here.

A: Yes, I know what you are referring to.

Q.: There was a lot going on. Did that affect your department or your students?

A: Not directly. In 1968 there was nothing. I think KU got the impact a little later. The movement started in Berkeley, and it took a number of years before it hit here, I think. Because I remember major action involving police and shooting on Jayhawk Boulevard that must have been at least two years later. We had a German visitor, a friend of my wife's. I told her I would be happy to show her the campus. My department was in Carrouth-O'Leary. I said, "That's a safe area."

"What are you talking about?"

I said, "I'd like to show you the whole campus with Jayhawk Boulevard, etc. but it's dangerous. You have to fear for your life if you go there." One person was killed at that time. "So I'd rather not."

She said, "I can't believe it. What's going on?" She learned, not so much through her own experience as by reading about it.

Of course the Germans are still impressed by what they hear and read about some American situations. So when something terrible happens in Germany, they say, "Now

we have conditions like in America.” The other thing I remember vividly is the fact that in Carrouth-O’Leary faculty offices were on the second floor. Some were on the first floor. I remember going to a Modern Language conference at Kentucky at that time in the spring, I think, and talking to people from Virginia who had also come there. I told them how horrible it was, that I couldn’t even leave my office safely any more because you never knew what to expect. The building might be under attack. Carrouth-O’Leary got these iron grids in front of the lower windows. It was protected like a prison. I remember telling my friends from Virginia, “I have to start getting my books out of my office,” (I had quite a few books) “because I don’t think they are safe there.”

Q.: They probably had people on guard at night the way they did in some of the other buildings.

A: Yes. That’s about the extent of my encounter with the unrest at that time.

Q.: What classes have you taught at KU?

A: There’s hardly a course that I didn’t teach. At the undergraduate level, just about everything. Maybe I never taught a first year course at KU, because we had so many people doing just that. My most important area was, again, the graduate program. When the first year was over, we had a crisis in the department, a personnel clash. Four people were fighting the chair. That was the best chairman we ever had during my time, I think. He decided to quit because the administration did not give him all the support he deserved. So things were turning very rapidly. Another faculty member, who is now a distinguished professor, who was also hired the at same year that I was hired, moved to Irvine as a result of that. Before our chairman left, he asked me, “Would you care to be graduate director?”

I said, "Well, why not." But then we got another chairman from inside.

Officially I was graduate director, but I had nothing to do because he made sure he did everything himself. Three years later, there was a new change again in the administration of the department, and a new chairman from inside. And I was graduate director, basically, from that time on with very little interruption.

Q.: So you taught mostly graduate courses.

A: I taught graduate courses, possibly more than any other person in the department, which was my luck, but of course, sometimes that leads to friction in the department. I felt lucky and privileged in that way.

Q.: Did you originate any courses?

A: Yes, quite a few. Quite a few courses in my field were originated by me, e.g., a team-taught course on the Journey to the Other World, or an interdepartmental course on the heroic epic. Even before I was graduate director, I was more or less asked to develop a concept of a graduate program for my own field, but in such a way that it would interact and link with the rest of the graduate program. So I developed a system of courses which would be taken in a two-year cycle and operate on a three-level structure: introductory courses, main content courses at the graduate level for M.A. and Ph.D. students, and then special courses and seminars primarily for Ph.D., maybe some M.A. students. This then became the pattern for the whole department and we still have that pattern. That gave me the chance also to fully develop my specialization in Medieval literature and Germanic linguistics.

Q.: Those were your fields of research then.

A: Those were my research areas and my preferred teaching areas. But I taught mainly

undergraduate courses, as everybody else did. I taught just about everything on the second, third and fourth year level that could possibly be taught, including literature courses in more modern literature, modern, 19th century, 18th century. There isn't a century I haven't taught at KU or at Virginia.

Q.: You've had publications, I suppose. Have you written any books?

A: Yes. My first book had nearly 600 pages.

Q.: I suppose the title is in German.

A: The title is almost unrepeatable.

Q.: What was the subject?

A: I can paraphrase it a little bit. It followed a suggestion originally by my doctoral advisor in the English Department, a linguistic study—and that's what it started out to be—of a whole cluster of terms for 'salvation' in Old English. At the same time I was doing linguistic work with the major German professor there and I was trying to combine the two sides. So with all this talk now of interdepartmental studies, I did all that nearly 50 years ago, and also culture studies, I did all this work already at that time. So it was supposed to be a central group of words in the area of religion, the concept of salvation. I worked with early Old English texts primarily—the best sources available—but linguistically I covered the entire Germanic and Indo-European context. So I worked very hard on that for a number of years. That's why it took me so long, because I found over 100 words. And I had to collect something like 20,000 to 30,000 slips of notes until I suddenly had an inspiration. "This is it. I'll take one section only, out of several dozen major ones," because I had an idea what I wanted to do with it. My doctoral advisor was extremely cooperative. He said, "Do you think you can pull that off?"

Sounds interesting.” And I did. This was a pretty original concept.

Q.: It was very hard to do that kind of thing before computers, wasn't it?

A: Oh, yes.

Q.: Have you had honors?

A: I can't mention all of them. I had a number of scholarships, research grants, etc. The typical run from KU, of course. I had an ACLS grant, I had the Hall Center grant more recently. I had several of those. I had one teaching award. I was nominated for several others, but our small department doesn't get much of a chance. I just finished a book and sent it off to Berlin in Germany.

Q.: What is it about?

A: That is something quite different from what I did in the past. In the past I was mostly writing articles and a good number of book reviews. I coedited several books. But this one is a major book, actually an edition of a rediscovered 17th Century text. Oh, there is one thing I should mention. I had a graduate teaching award from the KU Center for Teaching Excellence in 1999. One year I had a nomination for the Chancellor's Club Teaching Professorship.

Q.: What do you think makes a good teacher?

A: You would have to make a distinction, I think, between graduate teaching and undergraduate teaching. I think I have been successful in both areas. My preference is for graduate teaching. If I have a graduate course, I teach it with all the vitality that I can put into it. Usually the students appreciate that. I had some very, very, good graduate courses, undergraduate courses also. But what makes a good teacher? Show interest in the field first of all. Be fully committed to the field and get excited about not

just the field but also certain aspects that you have to get into in the course or happen to get into in the course. Pick them up with some enthusiasm, which has to be genuine. That means you have to have a research interest. That is absolutely essential. So many of our colleagues, I think, even at KU here, which is a research university, do their research like a burden. Being motivated by a research interest helps in being a teacher. It is one of the main requirements. I had a good number of doctoral candidates. German professors in Germany would have more. But in our system, we have much smaller classes. I just completed two doctoral candidates. One still has to turn in the dissertation, but everything else is finished. Altogether, there were 10 of them. Next week the department wanted to do something for my retirement, some kind of recognition. I said, "No. I don't want any speech making. I've seen situations like that. I find that embarrassing."

I have a very understanding and cooperative chairperson who said, "Don't worry, we'll do something simple, just 'in the family'."

Finally I heard what the plan was. It is for next week on Saturday. They contacted five of my former doctoral candidates to come here for a symposium where they could offer research papers or whatever they wanted to say in the form of a paper. All of them are coming.

Q.: That will be nice.

A: Hopefully, there will be no speech making there.

Q.: You were mentioning your recent book. What was that about?

A: My specialization is Medieval literature, which normally ends around 1500 or so. But everybody has heard about the most famous Medieval epic in German literature, the

Nibelungenlied, the epic of the Nibelungen. The reason why that is known is because of Wagner and his opera. The subject is well known. In Germany they have to study the Medieval text in secondary school in the old German language. The thing is that after the Middle Ages some of these great stories were sort of retold on a more popular level in the so-called chap books, folk books, as they used to be called. They are actually chivalric romances at the later stage. So there is, for instance, a story of Siegfried, the main hero of the Nibelungen story, from the 17th century, a totally new story. Basically, it is the same plot but it is retold in prose, not in epic poetry. I have never been interested in these things particularly. But at Johns Hopkins, that one year I spent there, I got to know the new chair of the German Department, who was famous for his baroque literature collection. He spent every summer in Germany and Austria. He had spent entire years before, doing nothing but collecting books, secondhand books. He has the most remarkable collection of rare books from that period, from about 1500 to 1700. So I knew his library. I had looked at it personally a number of times. I was very good friends with his assistant and lived together with him. We had rooms in the same house. In 1965 or so, years after I had left Johns Hopkins, this professor published an article on one of these books, which I didn't know he had in his collection. It was a chap book about the story of Siegfried's son. Now in the epic Siegfried has a son. It is mentioned that a son is born, and then he is totally forgotten after that. So there is no story on Siegfried's son. Suddenly this guy discovers a totally unknown book written in the 17th century about the story of Siegfried's son. That son has a new name also in the fashion of the new vogue of chap books. So he presented this find in public in a journal with all the introductory materials. I read this article with great interest. Ten years later I gave

a paper at one of these Medieval congresses about that myself because I had done further research on it. I had made a copy of the book, of which only one copy exists. Then when I got close to retirement I decided maybe now it is time to do something else and do an edition of that book. It is so rare and nobody has access to it, other than through microfilm. It is now in the Duke collection. So I made a transcription of the text and checked it word by word against the original at the Duke library, spending two weeks there going through it. I wrote a lengthy introduction and tried to determine the author, if possible, the background, and all the literary interaction with other stories, etc. That took a number of years, and now it is finished. For the future I would like to do some more research on that immediately, but I have other unfinished stuff also.

Q.: Did you have any other administrative responsibilities at KU, in addition to being director of graduate studies? Were you ever a department chairman?

A: Not really. One year in the 70s I was acting chairman for somebody who was on leave. But my main administrative duties were as graduate chair. That also got me into the Graduate Council and various committees of the Graduate School at the time.

Q.: Are there outstanding former students who have gone on to greater things?

A: Well, there are, actually, I think. At least five are professors at colleges and universities. Some are diplomats in other countries. One of the later Ph.D.s from my group is now on the Kansas Court of Appeals as a lawyer. He is one of those giving a paper at that symposium. Jonathan Paretsky is a well-known name.

Q.: Is he a son of Dr. Paretsky?

A: Yes. He got the Argersinger Award for his dissertation. I applied for that. It was an outstanding dissertation. The very first or second of the people who finished

dissertations with me in the early 70s had a pretty distinguished career. He started out with a position at Johns Hopkins, I think, a tenure track position, which he quit after three years because he felt they were not doing things right. He wanted them to pay more attention to the undergraduate program, not just entirely to the graduate program. The undergraduates were not getting the service that they deserved. Sure, people did something, but they didn't get recognized for that. He wanted to switch universities, so he got first a post doc grant for Stanford for two years, and then from there he had a year in Germany in between and then went to the University of California at Davis. After a number of years in that position he advanced from assistant to associate to full professor. He had the chair for over a decade, I think. He was out of the chair for a while and he is chair again now. And he also published and edited quite a few books. That's about the most remarkable career in the academic field. The majority of them have academic positions. Two females are full professors, both of them also on the program for next week. One is at the University of Utah and one is at a college of her choice because she wanted to be relatively close to her aging parents in Indiana. She found a college that was close enough, Bemidji State University.

Q.: I think I forgot to ask you if you have children.

A: Yes, we have two.

Q.: What are their names?

A: Arnolf for the boy and Ina for the girl.

Q.: You've been on University committees, I suppose. Are there any in particular you'd like to mention?

A: I was on a lot of committees, naturally, most were in the department. But through my

graduate function, I got mostly into graduate school committees or graduate related committees. For instance, the grad school had in the 70s, into the 80s, I think, an administrative system, which they called area committees. There were four area committees. An associate or assistant dean would head these. So I was on these area committees constantly and at the end I even chaired one of those for two years. Then later on through a reshuffling of the graduate structure and the graduate school, I was on other committees, graduate school committees. From early on I was on the main research committee of the graduate school, not only on the subcommittees. I was on the decision-making committee of the graduate school repeatedly for a number of years and then again later on I also served on the committee for Tenure and Related Problems.

Q.: I suppose you belong to professional organizations.

A: I could give you a list.

Q.: Have you held offices in any of these?

A: Yes. Not in all of them, but in the ones closest to our field in general and also in my own field to some extent. The Modern Language Association, The Association for Teachers of German, the regional Modern Language Associations, especially the one in the Midwest.

Q.: How has the German Department changed while you have been here? Has it grown?

A: No, it has not grown, unfortunately. That is one of my big gripes about KU. When I came here we had a faculty of 15 plus a visiting professor each spring from Germany. Now the faculty is more like a handful.

Q.: Oh, really. Then it has gotten smaller.

A: Much smaller through continuous erosion in the funding.

Q.: Are less students interested in studying foreign languages now?

A: That's true to some extent, but that doesn't explain the whole situation. Students nowadays when they come to college are much less oriented towards taking German as a major than they used to be 20 or 30 years ago. They get that message in high school. Among counselors, German is not a choice.

Q.: I suppose it is not even taught in a lot of high schools. Spanish is more likely to be taught.

A: Spanish is pushing German out of the curriculum in the high schools. That is going to be tough for the future. Like many other departments, we didn't always have the support from the College office. So people would leave or retire and wouldn't be replaced, over and over again. "No, not this year. There is a hiring freeze." They found one reason after another. After three years were gone, they said, "No, we can't talk about that any more. If you have a need, you have to demonstrate it first." We have been treated badly. Also, we had a period in which not much of an effort was made by the departmental administration to push for positions.

Q.: Do you travel back to Germany?

A: Whenever I can, yes.

Q.: Have you been involved in community activities here?

A: Not really. As a noncitizen for most of the time, I didn't think I wanted to get involved. I am a citizen now.

Q.: When did you become a citizen?

A: About two years ago.

Q.: Why did you decide to after all that time?

A: We decided we were probably going to stay here anyhow, so we might as well be citizens.

Q.: So you plan to stay here in retirement.

A: Yes, I think so. Emotionally I am split, but there are many considerations. We have children here and many other ties.

Q.: Will you have continued involvement with KU?

A: I hope so. In fact, my students asked me in the spring semester in my last course, a graduate course, could I do another course in the fall? I said, “No, not in the fall.”

“How about in the spring semester?”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe.” I might volunteer a course.

Q.: What are some of the things you plan to do in retirement?

A: Well, most of it will probably be at the desk, I think.

Q.: Do you mean you are going to do more writing?

A: I hope so. I have a number of things unfinished that I hope to finish. And in the process I will discover other things that will start me working on that. So that is certainly an ongoing thing. That is not cut off at all. Beyond that of course there are some hobbies and I will have to put a lot more time into physical activities for medical reasons, if not any others.

Q.: You mean take up walking or some other form of exercise?

A: I have always been active but I will have to spend hours a day, I think, because of osteoporosis and spinal stenosis and scoliosis to boot, which is causing ongoing pain all the time. But osteoporosis is remedied to some extent by weight bearing exercise, so you try to be outside—sunlight is also good—to do as much as you can with your legs. I

don't like walking too much. I used to be running but I can't do that now. So I go out on the bike. I've always done that all through my life just for fun, at times out of necessity. Now I will try to do it more regularly.

Q.: Do you have grandchildren?

A: No, it doesn't even look like getting any.

Q.: What is your assessment of KU or your department, past, present, hopes for the future, that kind of thing?

A: Well, I think I have said it all.

Q.: Is there anything you'd like to add that I forgot?

A: I fully enjoyed my work at KU. I was never regretting that I did come here, because the reason for coming to a place like KU was a guarantee that I would not have to build up a graduate program but find a graduate program with actual graduate students in good numbers. This was fantastic in the first 10 years when we had graduate classes of 20 students and wonderful rapport and all that. Later on in the 80s that was depleted for various reasons. I think all the schools experienced that in our field. In the 90s it shot up again, miraculously, for at least five to eight years. That's when I was getting into my own as graduate director more fully than ever before. After that I quit because I went on phased retirement. You can't go on being director if you are on phased retirement, teaching only one semester each year.

Q.: I think you said you were on phased retirement for five years.

A: Yes.

Q.: Now the numbers are decreasing again. But during my time of tenure here I was lucky to have graduate students to work with. The 80s were a bit thin. I think we had no

doctorates produced by myself or hardly anybody else during those years. Then it got much better in the 90s. So for practically all the time I could do the things I came here for. That I am grateful for.

Q.: Thank you very much.