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# Arthur Wensinger Oral History Interview, 2012 [1]

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Interview One with Arthur “Jerry” Wensinger by Kanyakrit “Yu” Vongkiatkajorn, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 2012.

KANYAKRIT VONGKIATKOJORN: I am speaking with Professor Wensinger for the Olin Library Oral History Project. May we begin with a brief biography, sir?

ARTHUR “JERRY” WENSINGER: I was born in Michigan at the end of the 1920s, so that already makes me suspect.

I went to public schools in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, where I was born. It’s a rather upscale community, and everybody says: “Oh, La-de-dah; you came from Grosse Pointe, very fancy place.” I certainly did not grow up as a poor person, but not one of the very rich---and Grosse Pointe was mostly made out of very rich people. I will say, I was comfortably brought up, with a fine mother, and a fine father, and a brother and a sister, and cousins, and all that—a very straight, protected American upbringing. At the time, of course, one might have thought that I should have been in anguish, with all kinds of great problems, but I wasn’t. If you look back at it, I was far too privileged.

I went to a public elementary school, and junior high school. I was a good student—but in a way a sort of crummy one. I hated mathematics, I hated stuff like that, because I didn’t have good teachers. Now, I wish I had, because I think mathematics and economics are great fields. I could possibly have fallen into those areas just as easily as anything else, but I was sort of unformed clay at that time. In any case, I was transferred to Andover for the last couple of years of senior high school.

The transfer was very hard, and I had to make up trigonometry and solid geometry, all that kind of stuff, which I had basically flunked. So I went to summer school there a couple of years. This was of course during the war, and they didn't stop for summers or anything like that.

I was just old enough so I was not drafted into the Army or the Navy. I was at that very strange cusp where I was too late to be pulled in—far too young for the beginning of the war, and then, by '45, I was out of Andover and into college. There, you were more or less protected. I did try to enlist, but they didn't want me because my eyesight was so awful, and I don't know what else they found; maybe they thought I was crazy. Whatever it was, the Army didn't need me by that time. I had a full year and the equivalent of a second year at Andover, and was graduated in 1944.

I make a point of the summer school because I was in Paul Revere Hall at Andover, and the dorm master was a mysterious gentleman who taught German. His name was Dirk Hugo van der Stucken.

Vongkiatkajorn: How do I spell that?

Wensinger: Oh, D-I-R-K. And Hugo—H-U-G-O, and then small V-A-N, and small D-E-R, and capital S-T-U-C-K-E-N. Dirk Hugo van der Stucken. He wasn't Dutch, and he seemed to have been German. He was in America. He was a very interesting man; perhaps in OSS, the precursor of the CIA. Anyway, he knew a lot that most people didn't know. He had radio equipment in his rooms. He taught all the grades, and of course Andover was completely male at that time, as was Dartmouth, where I went after that. So I lived in a totally male environment.

Van der Stucken taught German. I had had a little German in junior high school, and I liked it. And I liked literature---and all kinds of the easier humanities. I mean, it's so easy to be an art history student, it seems to me,

because you're talking about beautiful things that you love. You don't have to memorize pages and pages of trigonometric tables and all that kind of stuff.

He impressed a lot of us at our final examination in 1944 by having us translate a passage that he had written out that morning in German. It was on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, 1944; that was D-Day. That was the invasion of Europe by the Allied forces from England. Nobody had heard anything about it at all—not on the radio, not anywhere! He had got it on the wireless set somehow. I don't know that people could have telephoned him very easily from Europe at the time. And so we got the latest flash of international news in the form of a final examination in German. Well, everybody thought that was pretty nifty.

I then, as I say, I did not go into the service. A lot of my associates did, but half of them didn't. I'd applied to a number of colleges, among them Yale, and I thought maybe I'd go to Yale. Well, I went there for a very short while. I hated it. I don't like big cities, and I didn't like the smell of New Haven. And I had seen Dartmouth. I'm a romantic at heart, and it was so beautiful up there. It's difficult to recall precisely: Kids can now zip up there on an Interstate, but it took a couple of days driving from Detroit through Ontario on Route 20 to and then get this little stop-and-go Route 5. It was really isolated up there at that time. And you didn't get away very often. If you wanted to have a "heavy date" or something for a weekend, and you had to do that pretty fast, you could get down to Smith. But, I don't know; social life was not a huge deal there, not in those days. You studied; you didn't party, except on certain weekends. Dartmouth being Dartmouth, you know, all these men are waiting for a weekend, and you say, "Here's some beer." I mean, things did get kind of crazy.

But I was a very serious student; I came out at the top of my class-- although, as I told you, I didn't take all hard subjects. I took a course in economics once, and I simply hated it, because the guy was such a bad teacher. And I didn't take any more math there. However, I did take a lot of biology, mostly in the form of botany, and there were a couple of wonderful teachers there. Fred Lyons was one, and I thought that field would be a good major. So in the end I had a double major up there---in biology and German.

Life sort of takes hold of you one way or the other after graduation. I did graduate with my class in June. You know, we used to start fairly early in September. You worked; you had a little vacation at Christmas time, maybe a week, and you had a couple of weekends off, but there was no such thing as spring break or anything like that. I think the hours that we spent in college were infinitely more than what you have right now. Not that we were any better or brighter, or any more educated. We just spent more time there. On the other hand, if you were at Dartmouth, what else were you going to do anyhow? You could ski—and I skied; I had an awful break of one leg, for one thing.

Vongkiatkajorn: Oh, no.

Wensinger: Well, it forced me to spend time studying.

I'm rambling a lot. I liked botany. I liked art history a great deal at Dartmouth. There were also some wonderful people there, and there was a terrific library. But the German kept coming back at me; also, I was the president of the German Club, and we organized German plays and other activities.

I graduated in, as I say, June of 1948. I was Phi Beta Kappa—that and some of the things that were really not that hard to get in those days—this kind of scholar and that kind of scholar.

So my father said: "Well, that's fine, you're out of there now." I was totally taken care of. I never had to pay for anything, you know. And he told me: "You know, you have the makings of somebody who has been really spoiled, because you've never done any work in your life, so far." I did do a little lawn mowing in the summertime, for other people; but I was a spoiled kid. Still---what do you do, now that you're out of there?

I'd heard from a man named Donald Watt, in Putney, Vermont, who had organized---in the late twenties, I guess---something called the Experiment in International Living. The point being: Get young people--Americans and foreign students--in groups of about ten, a dozen at the most, to go to foreign countries and live with families there for a week or two, and be involved in social or educational projects of one sort or another.

Mind you, this is just a couple of years after the war, and I, of course, chose Germany. I was sent with a group—I can't remember if it was eight or ten other guys---that went to Munich. I was partnered with a fellow named Hermann von Leeb, whose father was one of the handful of field marshal generals in the German army.

I will not say the Nazi army; the man was not a Nazi, but he was a military man. At that time—this is now 1945, '46—he was in detention in Nuremburg, and he was going to be tried by the Allies in the Nuremburg Court. Hermann had lived in a little town called Hohenschwangau—you can get all these spellings later—with his mother. He'd had a brother who was killed in the last days of the war, in Poland and another brother who was released after a number of years from a prisoner of war camp in Russia. That brother came back, and then he killed himself in a motorcycle "accident." And his father died fairly soon after his release from the Nuremburg detention, though not by this time. His mother, a very sweet woman, had lost

her hearing from a bomb attack when she was in Munich during the war. It sounds like a really sad story, and it was, of course. She died in a mountain-climbing fall later.

But they were a very devoted, devout Roman Catholic family, of the highest social class in Bavaria. They had been kicked out of their house (and some dopey American captain was put into their mansion), and then they lived in an attic above some shops in this little town.

I was partnered with Hermann, and we went there first for a week, where I did a lot of mountain climbing. I hadn't done much of it, but this was a mountain climbing family. Extraordinary! Every Sunday after church, the mother would go and do a major mountain, even if she couldn't hear. Sadly, some years after I arrived, the mother fell to her death from a mountain.

Vongkiatkajorn: Oh, no!

Wensinger: Our group—let's say nine Americans and nine Germans—then went back to Munich and lived in the cellar of a bombed-out dormitory at the University of Munich. Our job was not only to achieve international harmony and friendship, but to actually get some work done.

We worked; I mean---it was one of the first times I really worked. What did we do? We mixed mortar, we mixed concrete, we cleaned old bricks, we made piles of sand, we helped the professional masons. We helped rebuild part of this bombed-out thing. Some of the German boys who were there before we arrived had already begun, and had cleared out certain patches.

And Munich was, of course, an unbelievable mess of destruction. All over Germany, practically, there was very little that was left standing; the Allied bombings had been so fierce. Deservedly or not, who's to say?

Of course, at the time not much was known about the Holocaust, really. There was very, very little talk about the extermination of the Jews. We didn't know of any of these facts, for sure, until some years after. I'm talking about 1948, right, by this time. But everyone was in agreement that Hitler was a monster. I would certainly stick to that. Mr. Stalin was a monster, too. The world was full of monsters, as it still is, so nothing new there. But we did agree that the Germans somehow had to suffer terribly for having gone along with all of this insanity. This is not the place to discuss all of that.

It was the extent of the physical destruction of the place that was mind-boggling, you know. And Munich was considered one of the places not so badly hit. It was only, underlined in quotes, it was "only 65 percent destroyed." Some other major cities in Germany were just basically uninhabitable after the war. And I'm talking about towns of 100,000—200,000 people. That sort of fixed something in my head. I thought: here are these Germans, and what do they have to say? How can they tell it to me if I don't know more German? I really worked to perfect my German---just like your English, which is impeccable.

I worked there for several months; and we got around in little vans when we could get gasoline. We didn't drive; other people did. We had the privileges of the army PX because we were in the American zone of occupation. There was also the French Zone, the British Zone, and the Russian Zone, radiating out around Berlin. We saw quite a bit of Germany, one way or the other. And this was supposed to last only from roughly the end of May until the beginning of the next school year—when either you would go back to college, or go on into graduate school.



I had graduated by the time I went over there, so I wasn't in a great rush to come back, and a friend of mine had been offered a job as an actor in a movie that was being made there.

We had a farewell party with this group in Munich, in what was left of the Bayerischer Hof Hotel---nothing much there, really, except for a couple of places where you could go down to the cellar and get something to eat. A few rooms had been spared, oddly enough, from the bombing, and one of them was where they put on the little farewell party for all of us.

There was a table in the distance, where a bunch of people sat who kept looking over at our table. One of them came over, introduced himself as a producer of a film. The script of that film had been written by a German: Fritz Kortner, a celebrated stage actor in Germany before the war. He was Jewish, and he went to England, then New York, but his English was terrible. He was in a couple of films at that time in America but didn't have much success at all. I just happened to see one, maybe two or three months ago. I can't even remember what it was, but there he was, and I said, "My God, that's Fritz Kortner," speaking his kind of awful English. He really wasn't very good.

Anyhow, he had written this film, and he had worked with producers---two brother named Koenig. It was a mostly autobiographical story which goes like this: There is a gentleman who is a very popular lecturer at the university---it isn't named, but it's clearly Munich---before the war. He had been driven out of Germany, and was in America at the end of the war. Then the war was over, and what was he going to do? Well, he was called back to his old position at his old university, and he was tempted to go back and start over again---as a Jewish professor.

The fact is, however, that there was latent and sometimes quite vocal anti-Semitism still going on in Germany after the war. We all have to find a scapegoat; they found one in the Americans, and in the Jews that had been expelled and came back. There were a bunch of very right-wing students at this fictional university, and they caught hold of this guy. Although many people had warmed up to him when he came back, these others had not. They thought of him as a traitor, as a Jew, and as an outcast. Well, that was what the whole thing was about.

So, Bill—his name was Bill Sinnigen—my friend who ended up as a professor of history at UC, Berkeley, and then the head of history at Hunter College in New York—was a very good-looking guy. They wanted somebody like that. Bill had had a little practice as a stage actor, but was very much an amateur. Other Americans as well were hired for this picture, which was filmed in both German and English.

The program with the Experiment was over at the end of August and we were supposed to go back and be American students again. Well, several of us said no, we wanted to stay on in Germany. We were pulled in on this, and we got this job with movies!

This film was then finally made. It can still be seen; it's kind of corny, but pretty good. It was called *Der Ruf*. I forget what it's called in English-- "The Last Illusion"?---but there's an American version out, and you can get it at your favorite corner DVD store. We made another movie, too, but I won't go into that.

But it was done, and it was professionally done. We had to work at night, because electricity was rationed in this period, and so we had to do all this work at night when the demand for electricity was less. We got paid outrageously. My job was to sit with Mr. Kortner and help produce an

English language version of the script, because it was shot, as I said, in both languages—one version of each scene filmed after the other. And they also stuck me in some crowd scenes at the University and all that sort of thing. I've got a lot of photographs of that. I also made a DVD, "Munich, 1948."

Why am I telling you all of this? Well, this is sort of how I got into German language first, and then German literature later. It's what happens to people. I don't know what's going to happen to you. I'm sure something's going to grab hold of you after you get out of the COL, and you'll find you have choices to make. You don't want to be a barista.

Vongkiatkajorn: [Laughs]

Wensinger: We came back then, after New Year's of 1949. Bill was still an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. My home was not that far from Ann Arbor, so I came home. Then I thought: what am I going to do now? I know German, but what am I going to do? Bill was there, and I thought, I'll follow along with Bill; we can room together at Ann Arbor, and I'll get a Master's in German Studies. They didn't say studies then, the name of that department at the University of Michigan was Germanic Languages and Literatures.

So in a year, I had finished all of that. Excellent. What do you do then? Well, then you hunt around for ways of not really going to work, like further education. Why not go on and get a Ph.D.? Well, first you have to have a fellowship. So---I don't know how to this day—the man who was head of the German Department at Dartmouth said: "We're beginning a program here called the Reynolds's Fellowships for Graduates of Dartmouth. You've got a gift. Why don't you apply?"

So I got that, and I went back to Munich for a year, and studied and played. Then I came back and began work for my Ph.D. I did that for a year;

and then somebody said, “Well, why don’t you apply for a Fulbright?” So I applied for a Fulbright, and got that. I couldn’t apply to Munich because I’d been there too often before. So I wondered: what’s the closest place where I could apply that is not in Germany? I went to Austria, just south of Munich, to the University of Innsbruck.

I had had the Fulbright, and, with the equivalent of several years of graduate work under my belt, I began casting about for a topic for my dissertation. I asked myself: hmm, what would fit nicely there?

By this time, I really liked German literature, and the work of a very, very gloomy Austrian poet name Georg Trakl. So I thought, I’d write a dissertation on Trakl. That soured very rapidly. I mean, the guy was such a depressing writer, I couldn’t take it.

In any case, I wrote my dissertation on—equally depressing—a suicide. I chose a very great writer, Heinrich von Kleist. Not known by very many undergraduates here. In some people’s minds, he is considered to be not only the greatest short story writer—though he wrote fewer than a dozen short stories—but also the most interesting dramatist in nineteenth century German literature. Some say, even European literature. He wrote a handful of plays, but he never saw any of them performed. He’s an exceedingly interesting character. Died, killed himself in 1811.

Vongkiatkajorn: How did you discover Heinrich Kleist?

Wensinger: Oh, in a book there somewhere, I have it in my dissertation. The chairman of our department was an Anglo-German scholar named Nordmeyer. He was for a while the head of the Modern Language Association, and was a Kleist scholar. Other people at the University of Michigan who had also written on Kleist, said, “Look into him.” You know, this is back in the early fifties. There weren’t very many people in America

writing dissertations in German literature. And the University of Michigan turned out to have a superb department, one of the top three or four in the country. Better than Harvard's; on a par, probably with Yale, and Princeton, and with Berkeley.

At that time, Nordmeyer had written several papers on Heinrich von Kleist, sort of from a French critical approach. He was particularly interested in a play called *Penthesilea* and a couple of others. Kleist himself is interesting. His heroes in the writing of drama were the great names, like Goethe and Schiller, and so forth, who wrote iambic pentameter: very, formal, very rhetorical, very persuasive, and I guess very beautiful. But Kleist was one of those breakthrough people. This was just after the 18th century was over—he thought, no, this is it. This is the form I must use. I'll use the form. It will look on the page like the Classics, but it's not going to sound like Goethe or Schiller on the stage..

And so he wrote—[Professor Wensinger points to bookshelves] this is Goethe up to there; but beginning in this row is Kleist—from the *Bible of the World* there, all the way over to the door, and then the next shelf down all the way over to the door, and the next shelf down again, all the way over to the door—that's the accumulation of material I could use at the time. Of course, back then, the 1950s, we still got all of our information out of printed books. Google had not even been invented, not even thought of. We did all our work on paper. You sat in class and took notes on everything.

So, Kleist—he wanted somehow to be more honest, more—as it were--realistic. When he has something really important to say, and the situation is dire and emotional, his lines—although they still look like the classical French poetry of Molière and Racine on the page, or like Goethe and the rest---but he just tore them all apart. And when he really has something

important to say, he can't. His characters are not able to reel off beautiful verse in these high pressure situations. They stumble; they repeat themselves, and they sort of look at each other and they say; "Do you know what I'm talking about?" And the answer is: "Well, I think I know what you're talking about."

I wrote a dissertation called *The Language of Gesture in Heinrich von Kleist*, because they're always doing things with their stage directions. When they've got something really important to say, they can't say it, so it's not on the page. You have to interpolate it; you have to intuit it. So what I was doing was something really quite new---and I didn't know it at the time.

I wrote my dissertation, but back in those days, you didn't publish your dissertation. Nowadays, generally speaking, the guy or gal who completes a dissertation thinks, "Well, I've written my first book." They polish it for a while, and publish it, and a couple of people read it. That was not done in my day. Once you've finished your dissertation, your childhood is over; that material is not to be published. You can work on the same guy or theme or topic again, but you can't milk a cow twice in a day, you know. That's not a very good metaphor, is it? I didn't grow up on a farm; I wouldn't know.

Vongkiatkajorn: I understand

Wensinger: So I never did anything with the dissertation. Later on, somebody said, "Oh, this would be very interesting." But by that time, other people were doing the same sort of things and probably better. So there we are. I worked very slowly on my dissertation, because by that time, I had come to—here we are—Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

Vongkiatkajorn: And what year was that?

Wensinger: The fall of 1955. I had not finished my dissertation. I had done everything else for the dissertation by that time, but Nordmeyer and my other advisors and teachers at Michigan said; “Young man, you have to get a job. You can’t just float through here; we don’t have fellowships for you.” I was a teaching fellow there at U of M, but that was just in language. I believe I earned a little bit of money. They wanted you to do that. And there were courses on the teaching of German literature. I had wonderful teachers there, really, but one realizes that only a little later.

So, it must have been at the end of 1955. Everybody looking for a job---the so-called slave market. They were Ph.D.s or ABDs, that’s “All But Dissertation.” I was an ABD. And I interviewed at the MLA, Modern Language Association, convention in the winter, between Christmas and New Year’s of 1955. No, it must have been 1954-’55. Yeah, that’s what I did.

I was interviewed by a number of places, some said, “Come back, come back, we’re interested in you,” some did not. The University of California said, “Oh, we’d like you to come out.” And so I did, but I didn’t like it. And then more closely, Trinity College up here offered me a job, and I didn’t like Hartford. And Dartmouth, my old stamping ground, they offered me a job. And in the midst of it—I don’t know how these people here heard about me, but they did---I was then contacted by three people from Wesleyan. I remember that I had never heard of Wesleyan. Of course, I’d heard the name; but I didn’t know anything about it. I thought it was a little college in Connecticut. Never been there, never known anybody who came here. My father had never known anybody in his gang who’d gone to school here. He didn’t know Trinity. The only other places at that time that one would have been interested in, the socially acceptable places, would

have been Bowdoin or, even more so, Amherst, and even more so Williams, and even more so Dartmouth, though that was beginning to get a little bit bigger than all the others.

I thought Dartmouth would be wonderful to go back to. I loved being there, but I was advised against it. It just makes it too circular, you know, too much in the family.

Well, I wanted to see Princeton, too; they showed some interest. But because Wesleyan had contacted me, and asked me to come look at the campus, I said sure.

I arrived here for campus interviews, and to look around. I was first interviewed at Wesleyan by Chadbourne Dunham, and I thought: "Hey, these are very nice people!" His name was really Theodore Chadborne Dunham, but we called him Chad. I was interviewed by Larry Gemeinhardt, by Art Schultz, I think those are the three people. They were not offering a tenure spot to me, just a starting job. I was twenty-eight.

Before I came, Larry wrote to me and said: "When you come, you get off the train in Meriden. I'm going to pick you up at the station there and bring you through. Don't shrink back in horror. The outskirts of Middletown are really ugly." Do you know Washington Street? It's just a strip, like all the other strips in America. I mean, it's not horrifying, it's just all messy business stuff: filling stations, places that sell mattresses and cars, and stuff like that. And they were quite right. I thought, "God, this is awful." But then when we got to the campus here, well, you know the place looks really very nice, don't you think?

Vongkiatkajorn: Yeah.



Wensinger: Wesleyan, in its own way, is very attractive. It has such a wonderful eclectic mix of architectural styles, and I thought: “This is so interesting. There’s a little of this, and this, and this. Yeah, this is pretty nice.”

When I was interviewed, one of the interesting things I learned is they set up interviews with junior faculty members first, so you can really talk on a more or less equal level. I met with a guy in the French department who became subsequently a very good friend, and died a short time ago—Carl Viggiani---and he seemed to be having a good time. They lived here—he and his wife: I don’t think they had a child by then. And then I met the other people in the German Department, the junior members, and one more tenured faculty. They all seemed just very nice---though I thought they were all laying it on pretty thick. And then I met other people in the humanities, and they also wanted me to meet some of the people in the sciences then. It was very thorough.

And the feeling I had of these people, and their politeness, and --- perhaps more than anything else—what I might call their modesty, impressed me. They were not trying to do a snow job on anybody, you know? You could see that they were very happy being on the faculty here.

Then I met the president, because the president basically was the person who decided whether you would be invited to come or not. The president at that time was Victor Butterfield—an exceptional man for a university president at that time. These were still the great days when the principle job of the president of a university or college was education—little to do with money. They were seldom out to raise money, or backslap with millionaires.

He was an enigmatic fellow, Butterfield. You couldn’t tell what he was thinking. But I think I saw a glimmer of a smile occasionally. “Oh, very

nice to see you.” He kept calling me Art all the time. My name is Arthur, but I’ve never been called Arthur by anybody who knows me. I’m always known as Jerry. He said, “Art, call me Vic.” And I was very smart; I said, “I will if you call me Jerry.” I think he maybe liked that.

In due course, they offered me a position. So, I had to choose between four offers, and, after having discussed it with all kinds of people at home in Michigan, I took this. Wesleyan wasn’t very well known. People who did know it realized it was a great place. But it’s very small. Everybody said, “Oh, that’s a Methodist school, right?” And I said, “Well, it used to be, a long time ago. It is now, if anything, very, can we say, international in its way.” It’s all boys, men, no, all boys, and there are about 700-800 of them on campus. There are a lot of fraternities, because that’s where students eat—and some rivalry, and some intramural sports. They were not famous for any particular sport at that time, except that they did once beat the University of Michigan in football. Did you know that? You probably didn’t. This is a long time ago.

The facilities were very small. There was a nice swimming pool over there, and I used to play squash in where you now take most of your lessons in the C.O.L. Those were the squash courts, and behind it were the other athletic facilities. There was this building, Fisk, and I was given a little office here, after I was approved and made an offer. Since I didn’t have my degree yet, they offered me an astounding salary—I forget exactly how much it was; it was under \$4,000 a year. That’s per year, not per week. Which was considered par for the course for somebody who hadn’t gotten his degree. And that was plenty.

I settled in that following fall. They made the offer, and then....  
(Memory begins to fail a little. I think I made a mistake about when my

Fulbright was. That was '53-'54, and I was already working on Kleist, not Trakl. It's not important: this is not for my biography.)

What I'm trying to say is, one moves forward in uncertain slips and starts. Some people call it luck; some people call it fate. I don't think it's fate. But it depends on whom you know, where you are---you know, location, location. Something happens wherever you are, and sometimes that carries you into little back alleys and major boulevards that you wouldn't otherwise have taken. I followed this small thing having to do with German. And people said, "Well, you did it because you're a German, obviously." I said, "I'm not German at all." My father has a German name, but he didn't know any German. His parents didn't know any German. Their parents didn't know any German. They had all come to this country in the early 1800s. My mother's family were founders of Stonington, Connecticut, 1600s, and they didn't know anything. The most exotic thing in my blood is I have a grandmother born in Edinburgh—nothing to do with Germans. And she hated Germans!

Vongkiatkajorn: [Laughs]

Wensinger: The fact is that my name is German, and many people assumed that I was German. You know the saying: "Nomen est omen"—your name is your fate.

I saw your name on my caller ID thing, and I thought, who is that?

Because your last name—takes a lot of ink to write your name, doesn't it?

Vongkiatkajorn: Yes.

Wensinger: And it's Thai, eh?

Vongkiatkajorn: Mm-hm.

Wensinger: What does it mean?

Vongkiatkajorn: I don't know.

Wensinger: Well, who you are, you know, physically, emotionally, genetically, and experientially, dictates a great deal, and that's how I came into German lit. I was housed—you know where the Davison Art Center is?

Vongkiatkajorn: Mm-hm.

Wensinger: Then, coming this way, is a little white house, and then on the corner, a rather large house; and you go down Wyllys Avenue to the Usdan Center. Well, that little house right next to the Davison Art Center coming this way was the faculty house. On the top floor there were six rooms, one common bathroom. And that's where young bachelor faculty lived---they were all male at that time. When I came here there was no tenure-track woman teaching on the faculty. There were obviously some extremely bright women here who did, in a very informal way, do teaching, and helping out. But this was an entirely male enclave.

I had a room, and Hugh Harter across the hall had a room, and Clint Atkinson, and Alex Szogyi, and a guy named Evans. I think they're all dead. Not sure about that.

We had a heavy teaching load, starting out. Number one, we taught six days a week. Classes were held until Saturday noon. They very kindly gave us Saturday afternoon off. And then we had Sunday, and they expected students of course to go to chapel. Not faculty, but they were very happy to see some faculty faces at chapel. They didn't see mine very often, because I was raised an Episcopalian, fairly seriously, and I went to church a lot, for a while.

I did language first. The language requirement at Wesleyan was very strong. As was English, as was Math, as was a Science. Every boy had to take two years of two languages, or three years of one language---something like that. As a young guy teaching these people—and you're not that much

older than them actually—you faced sometimes, a little bit of a resentment. “Why do we have to take this damn stuff? My gift is not in language.” It wasn’t until 1967 that the language requirement was dropped at Wesleyan. Anyhow, we taught, I think, four courses one semester, and three courses the other semester. When I first began, we had seven courses we had to teach a year.

Vongkiatkajorn: That’s a lot.

Wensinger: With not a lot of prep, because there wasn’t much literature in there yet, but homework every night. No wonder we worked like hell, correcting and correcting. All for three, whatever, four thousand dollars a year, but nobody was unhappy. The tone on the campus was great. There was amateur music—good music. There was theater. A lot of very gifted kids. Students were exceptionally good, by and large. There was no theater department; everything was under English. There were few things that we now think of as extracurricular. There was no theater major, there was no dance. In fact, there wasn’t any kind of dance whatsoever. In later years, some boys who wanted to learn how to dance went to Conn. College by bus.

Vongkiatkajorn: This is really fascinating.

Wensinger: Okay. It was quite cut and dried. The fraternities were grand, because very often they would have us—particularly young faculty members—in for supper. They had terrific parties three times a year, and it was not a dry campus.

Vongkiatkajorn: Did you go to the parties?

Wensinger: Right down there in the Deke house [pointing], they had rather bibulous parties with an awful lot of not just beer.

Strange times. That regimen for teachers, with all those courses to teach per year, kind of subsided slowly, until it became, in my later years,

two courses a semester, with a group tutorial, or three or four individual tutorials. At the beginning, the demand was very high. As it is right now, though, I think a lot of people in the first division now don't work all that hard on their teaching, except in the languages! They're expected to produce a good deal of published work also.

But you couldn't leave campus here. And you were frowned upon if you lived off campus, and I'm talking about off-campus in general. I'm talking about the faculty. It was, in the minds of some faculty, a little bit scandalous that some people would live as far away as Cromwell, let alone New Haven, let alone New York! That just wasn't done, you know. You had to be here. That's changed massively.

I think there was a sort of a head count at faculty meetings. It wasn't a prison, and there was a great feeling of conviviality, but also a strong sense of obligation on the part of the faculty. You were a member of a big family here. Of course, some of the invitations we got early were big yawners; you know, you went, and were polite. Had to sit and sip a little bad sherry, and eat tuna fish casserole that the other people had fixed for you. Saturday night was the only time for jollification of any kind at all, so you tried to avoid being invited to supper by senior faculty people on Saturday night, because that was mostly guaranteed tedium.

Vongkiatkajorn: [Laughs]

Wensinger: The colleagues were fine. When I first came into this department, there were two other junior faculty members, and I, one way or the other, outlived them all in tenure at the place. Some of them are still alive, but not many. We got to know the young people in all other departments, which was a really good thing. You could get friends teaching chemistry, or music, anything.

There was another point I wanted to make about that. It all seems tremendously old fashioned right now. We kept our doors open, and the boys would come in. I hope it's not offensive, but we really did call them boys. We wanted to call them men, but you don't come here at seventeen, eighteen years old and be talked about as men. I guess now you have to say men and women. There was great rapport between faculty and students—great. And you know what Downey House is, down here on the corner?

Vongkiatkajorn: Mm-hm.

Wensinger: That's where everybody met, faculty and students. And one had coffee and eggs and cereal, or whatever, every morning down there. The coffee was excellent, and we paid a nickel for it. And you'd be sitting with other teachers, you know, who had been here for a long time, or who had also just come, and students. Freshmen were a little bit more kept to themselves, in the freshman dining hall. I can't even quite remember where that was.

But it was a pretty democratic society here. And people were polite, very polite to each other. The horror of the McCarthy years hadn't really quite hit. Of course, Eisenhower had come and gone. And a very few patriotic expectations of all of us were made clear, but this was a quiet little nest in this area. I wasn't pressured at all much politically. I had come from a strong Republican family, and the first vote I could record, I think I voted Republican, but after that I thought I liked the Democrats more; they're more interesting. So I am, I guess, if I have to be aligned with some party, it'd have to be Democrats. If one could vote in the primaries in either party, I think I would definitely be an Independent. I'm never particularly radical. The exciting event in that field was, of course, the Vietnam War, and that came along considerably later, but that did polarize the campus

tremendously. We won't get into politics yet. I want to give you the feeling of what it was like to be a junior faculty member.

I'm not a rebellious kind of person. From everything I've said, you can probably understand why. But I did have a brain, and I had a pair of eyes that used to see pretty well, and a pair of ears that used to hear very well, and in those days I kept them open. We did get into New York sometimes. We would go in by car; somebody would drive in and we'd come back some time very early Monday mornings. Oh, by the way, nearly all of us taught at eight o'clock in the morning.

Vongkiatkajorn: Wow!

Wensinger: Yes sir, eight o'clock in the morning, six days a week.

Vongkiatkajorn: Wow!

Wensinger: I'm not saying it's good for you, but it keeps you alert, anyhow, until you fall asleep. I don't think there were many sleeping pills that were sold around here; we didn't need them. And the years wore on. As you get older, everything blends as if you were putting it into a blending machine. You know, the years come and go, but some things stay fresh. I've kept all my grade books, one way or the other.

Vongkiatkajorn: Really?

Wensinger: I keep them there; I don't know why. Somebody else can throw them out when the time comes. We never did have large classes; that's one of the great things about Wesleyan. At one point, of course, Wesleyan had a terrific student-teacher ratio, sometimes as low as eight to nine students to one teacher, I don't know, if you average it all out. I never did because of my field. I didn't have huge lecture courses. I had some, but the biggest lecture course I think I ever taught had maybe forty-five students in it, and that was



considered very large. That was a course on Kafka. Kafka in translation, of course.

My best teaching experience wasn't in the German Department at all. When I came here, and I should have mentioned this earlier, I'm sure that the people who were looking at me first said, "You look like a person who might be interested in teaching Humanities 1-2," which became Humanities 101, 102, which was known as 'Frosh Humanities,' which was known as 'Great Books, from Plato to whatever, Twentieth Century.' It was spurned by some of the snobbier members of the faculty as great books taught by people who never had to study them when they were undergraduates, by non-professionals in the field. Well, I worked as hard in the preparation of my humanities courses as I ever did as a graduate student. I mean, I had to read this stuff and study it very hard, because you have to stay ahead of the students for one thing. I was teaching stuff that I had never read. And Butterfield said, "That's exactly what we want." That is, young teachers being with much younger students, and confronting the material in a pretty fresh way. Although he assumed that we would know a considerable more about it than the freshmen.

The freshmen had a choice: they had to take either Humanities 1-2, or Western Civilization 1-2. Same thing—a year's course, dealing with great books and ideas. And you had the choice also—though I don't think you had a choice in the hard sciences---you had to take either Humanities or the Western Civ. (Is that what we called it? It was a non-departmental major.) There was no chairman of it, though Chad Dunham did call us together for a weekly meeting on the new book that each of us would be teaching from his own perspective. Also, a person who did know a lot about it came in and lectured the teachers, and sometimes the whole group, after which we would

have discussion groups. It is the birthplace of the C.O.L. This is what came out of it, except the C.O.L expanded beyond pure literature---but so did humanities. We taught Marx, you know.

And I taught that—gosh, I don't know how many years. It was pretty much abandoned afterwards, because there were no more requirements at Wesleyan after 1967. Still, it kept on anyhow, and a lot of people wanted to teach it.

I was the chairman of humanities for—I don't remember—some years. We would have meetings, but it kind of fell by the wayside because the students were confronted by so many tempting possibilities elsewhere. Including, making pottery and getting credit for it. That doesn't astonish anybody nowadays, but I always thought: "What? You can make a pot and get credit for that?" Yeah. "You can be in a play and get credit?" Yeah. But that hasn't made people dumber. I think people of your age and your generation are at least as bright as we are. You know, I think young people in this country right now are enormously intelligent. They do sometimes need a little guidance, and I guess they need a little rebellion, too, now and again. I've certainly not given up on that. It's just that the structure is so much more amorphous nowadays.

You have to touch down in various fields of expectations. I can see how the really brilliant people would say: "That's constricting us too much. I really don't want to do that. I'm not good at it. I will never be able to learn physics because my interests aren't there at all." Or, English literature. Why bother reading a bunch of books? What's the point of that? Talking about Henry James, or Racine. Okay, liberal studies—that's what this place is all about, and I'm very grateful. I had offers to go elsewhere, and I thought,

“Oh, no. I don’t want to. I’d have to pack up all my socks and underwear and move somewhere else; I don’t want to do that.”

I went pretty much by the book in my research. I translated a lot of books, and I did a lot of editions of books. I don’t have a long list of critical papers. I may be the first person ever to get tenure here partly on the basis of translated and edited texts from the German. Working only as a translator is not good enough to get tenure, but to take something and make a decent book out of it, that counts. And I did quite a bit of that. Did some pretty okay work. Have I dropped off the topic? We were talking about humanities.

Vongkiatkajorn: We were talking about your being junior faculty member.

Wensing: And getting tenure. Maybe we can save that for our next interview?

Vongkiatkajorn: Yeah. Do you think that’s okay?

Wensing: When could you do it again?

Vongkiatkajorn: We can—next week?

Wensing: Yeah.

Vongkiatkajorn: So, next Friday?

Wensing: And then I want to find a time you can see where I live, see my library.

Vongkiatkajorn: Okay.

Wensing: We could concentrate next time on how I got tenure, how I had to battle my way through. It wasn’t too bad! I guess I was a very good boy, and they just wanted me to stay. It was clear that I liked doing the job, that I got along pretty well with most students. Not so well with some other students. The interesting thing is that humanities course, which averaged around twenty to twenty-five students. Some terrific people came out of that.

They bring youth and commitment to it. I mean, teachers can’t take very much credit. You can take credit for finding out what goes on inside young people and bringing it out; getting them to express themselves. I’m

not a psychiatrist, but I'm a pretty good listener. You wouldn't believe it from my babbling on and on, but I do like to listen to other people talk. Okay, I know you've got ten minutes before you're going over to play squash. Think of me playing squash in that building.

Vongkiatkajorn: Okay, I will. And thank you for such a good interview today.

[End of Interview]