

University of Minnesota Sesquicentennial Diversity Project

Interview with Gerhard Weiss

Interviewed by Ann M. Pflaum

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Gerhard Weiss - GW
Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: My guest is Professor Gerhard Weiss, who is doing his second interview for the history project. He has already done one. This is real kindness to come back. His first interview was with Professor Chambers. The first question I'm asking him is a quick recap of how he got into the field. So, I'll turn it over to Gerhard.

GW: Your question basically concentrates on international education, which would actually not mean courses taught here but rather our concern with contacts with students abroad and opportunities abroad.

AP: Yes, exactly.

GW: I think Minnesota was a little bit of a latecomer in this for a variety of reasons, many of which probably were economic. When I came to Minnesota in 1956, which is shortly after the period that you begin to work on, there was very little in international education. There was quite a bit of lip service about it and relatively few realities. There was SPAN, the Student Project for Amity among Nations, which had been a student generated program that still exists and was carried by the enthusiasm of students. Every year during the summer students went to usually about four countries that had been selected, and the novelty of this was that they had a careful one-year preparation before they went. They then spent the summer abroad and did a particular project that had been designed beforehand, and then returned in the fall and enrolled again in a course in which they completed their project, and then handed that in and they were graded and received a grade. They did not go to universities abroad, but they worked on family problems in Lower Slobovia or whatever it might have been, and each student working on her or his own interests. It was a Minnesota cooperation. Students from Hamline, from St. Olaf, Macalester, Carleton, and so on, participated in that, so it was not just University of Minnesota. One of the first leaders in this was Mitch Charnley, who I believe took the very first group to Ireland shortly after the end of World War II. Russell Cooper, an associate dean at that time in the College of Liberal Arts, both were very much involved in that; and Horace Morris, who was another very strong proponent for SPAN and for this kind of student broadening of horizons, we might call it. We also had for a good number of years the Berlin Exchange. That was an actual academic exchange, where one

student—sometimes two—would go to the Free University of Berlin for a year, and students from Berlin would come and be students in any department of their particular interest area here at Minnesota. That was in 1956. There may have been some other exchanges in the Asian area, with which I'm not familiar. We did have every summer a fairly sizable number of Korean students here who were introduced to studying in American. They had language and culture courses got them going for their eventual study at one of the American universities to which they had been accepted. So during the summer we would find quite a few students from Asia here. To what extent it was a direct exchange, I don't know. SPAN did go anywhere. Some SPAN groups went to Japan, to Korea, and India and so on. The actual study abroad component really began much later. It began with departments establishing contact abroad or, in a few instances also a university contract signed with, for example, the Free University of Berlin or with Munich or with London and other places. That would then offer our students the opportunity of studying at a European university or Asian university and get credit for it.

What was even more important and what took an awful long time to get established, was to get financial aid. The continuation of financial aid . . . The legislature was initially highly suspicious of study abroad. They considered it academic tourism. Financial aid was initially not available. SPAN established its own scholarship fund in which they supported students with only a portion of their expenses. Later that became possible that students could use it as their regular term and therefore they were bona fide students here during the summer or fall or whenever they did, and could get that financial aid. That made it much easier, of course. Again, it was for a long time the entrepreneurs in departments that established this. It was not a university-wide component. Speaking again from our personal experience, we established summer programs at various German universities where one of our colleagues would go over with a group of ten or twenty students, and they would take special courses. They were not integrated into the regular courses of the university, but they would meet on the premises of that university, and then returned in the fall and that was done through the summer session office. Students paid summer session tuition plus whatever extra cost there was to pay for the study abroad expenses. That, however, worked well only as long as the departments really supported it. While departments were very much interested in it, departments usually are small and have a limited number of faculty, and eventually we started to run out of faculty who were willing to go during the summer. There was no special compensation possible beyond the summer session salary and the airline ticket, so it was quite disruptive. That became very difficult, and when we finally got to the point that we couldn't really staff it anymore, we contacted the Global Campus, which at that time was beginning to develop.

Then the Global Campus took this over, and the Global Campus has been doing it for many departments. But I think that is, if I remember correctly, from the early eighties on that the Global Campus has been the manager. That also, of course, has placed this whole study abroad experience on a university-wide level and no longer an ad hoc, one department, because I know "so and so" over there, they're going to have a little

exchange. That is the student aspect. We never had a campus abroad, and before we always envied Stanford and others. We never had the junior year abroad. It had always been my hope that we would link up with Wisconsin, Michigan and Wayne State, who for many, many years had this excellent junior year abroad at various places, where the students were taking special courses but also took some regular university courses. We never had that. Now it is too late. It's getting to be too expensive, and also, students have developed a tremendous ingenuity and many of them go on their own. There are very few people now, for example, in my department, who are seniors who haven't been abroad. A large number of them have done it on their own. There is, of course, also a financial advantage since European universities usually do not charge tuition, so they can go without having to pay the tuition. If they sign up for one of our programs, we charge tuition. It is more expensive to go through a University of Minnesota program than to go on your own. Obviously you miss all the amenities that the University of Minnesota program will offer you, plus you have a heck of a time getting credit afterwards. So in a way you are paying by not being able to transfer credits.

AP: I remember a little vignette of the rarity of going abroad. One of the St. Paul campus newsletters in the early fifties gave one of the senior administrators—it might have been J. O. Christianson or Stakman or somebody—a toy boat at the campus holiday party. The reason they did was that he had been to Europe so many times, and this was so unusual. Now you wouldn't give a faculty member a toy airplane because he has been abroad. It just wouldn't be remarkable.

GW: I think that also leads to the other side, namely the faculty. That, I think, is also very important. There, I think, we have had an internationalization which started probably in the 1960s and had mushroomed, and the opportunities for faculty to go abroad getting grants are much greater now than they've ever been before. The opportunity to teach at universities abroad is also much greater than it was when I started. When I started here, opportunities to teach abroad were practically non-existent. Now, in any field, you don't have to be in the language or literature field where you happen to know the language. People in philosophy have been teaching at Gratz, Salzburg, Austria; they have been teaching in Germany; they have been teaching in Japan.

Engineers, medical people, the broad spectrum of our university has been represented there. People like Tom Shaughnessy, the director of the Minnesota libraries, spent some time in Poland recently as guests of the University of Lublin in Poland. There have been exchanges with Poland; there have been exchanges with Russia, and the particularly interesting thing is that during the times of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain, we always had people from Eastern countries here, and our own faculty was able to teach at various universities in the East. We've had in the German department for many, many years an exchange of instructors from the Humboldt in East Berlin. One of our Ph.D. candidates would go to Germany to East Berlin and work in their American Studies department as native informant. One of their people from their German section would come here and teach in our German department. That worked very, very well. Obviously, some of the

people that came were also had an appointment and an assignment with their state security service, but we knew that, and others were quite open. It was certainly a very valuable exchange. Frank Hirschbach in our department had initiated that. That worked our very well. Then we have had visiting lecturers and continue to have them from Germany through the German Academic Exchange Service. That's another program that we initiated here many years ago. We at the department felt that it would be good to have somebody directly from Germany to talk about contemporary German issues and be here for two years or so and then go back. Then somebody else would come, so you would always have somebody who is current. We approached the German Academic Exchange Service and asked whether they were interested in something that we could co-sponsor. They said at that time they couldn't because they didn't want to interfere with the American job market. They knew that jobs were hard to get, and they didn't want to appear as if they are taking away jobs from Americans. We, at that time, had a position that we would have cannibalized for it, and didn't do it. Years later, we got a call from them, "Coming back to your idea, we now can do it." We said, "Now we've got a problem" because we couldn't keep that position open or we would have lost it, so we filled it in the meantime. However, we then took a teaching assistantship and the German Academic Exchange Service was generous, and so we put our monies together and this is going on to this day.

AP: Does somebody from here go there?

GW: Yes. The German Academic Exchange Service has many opportunities for Americans to teach abroad, but this is not a one-to-one kind of basis. This is just getting somebody here. We started that, and our visitor stayed for five years instead of the two that we had initially planned. She became later on the director of the American desk of the German Academic Exchange Service in Bonn, and has been a great help for us. Then we've had a number of people usually in the history department because their basic discipline is history or political science, and they also teach a course in the German department. So we buy courses from each other.

AP: I have a question. The German Academic Exchange Service, does it serve the whole country?

GW: It serves the world.

AP: But it started here.

GW: No. This kind of teacher exchange, bringing in a person to teach in the department, that started here. The German Academic Exchange Service started, I think, in 1905 or something like that.

AP: That's what I was confusing.

GW: It's a venerable institution.

AP: I'm interested that you feel that we were not as progressive as we thought we were. Now we had some traditional ties—Saudi Arabia, American University in Seoul, Korea, and then we had a big agricultural tie to Hassan University in Morocco.

GW: You see, this is St. Paul campus, and that is what was certainly not . . .

AP: Immediately in your back yard.

GW: I knew also that there was something in Algeria, and then of course O. Meredith Wilson went down to Chile. These were attempts, but we did not have the visibility of an international program integrated into the College of Liberal Arts for the general student. There has always been exchange among specialists. As a general educational experience, lip service, yes; we've been talking about the internationalization of our curriculum at the same time when we abolished the language requirement, for example, long, long ago. Then, of course, we reinstated the language requirement, but we did away with area studies, also in the name of internationalization. Internationalization has been battered about. There have also been very interesting courses offered on preparation and re-entry for a student studying abroad. So there have been always some people on the margin interested in doing these things, but we never had the well-planned program integrated in the degree requirements.

AP: This is terrific. This is exactly what I hoped to get—a feel for what we were doing. Now I remember Ed Griffin had a program for Fulbright Scholars.

GW: Right. He brought teachers . . . But again, that was fairly late. That was in the late seventies or early eighties. He brought high school teachers here, and in the summer program I participated in that. I gave some seminars in it, and it was wonderful. Again, the effect of internationalizing the curriculum or the campus, no, because it was summer special programs.

AP: Who must have kept fairly much to themselves.

GW: Yes. They were here but nobody else was. They stayed in the dorms and then they went back. But extremely valuable because American Studies at this university of course has been superb. I think that was one of the best American Studies programs in the country. So that attracted people, and also some people from the American Studies program would be Fulbright teachers in Europe. So certainly that contact was there. Again, to come back to the language area, of which I'm most familiar, one would imagine that a major in a language should spend a year or at least a quarter or two abroad. To have that available to them at no cost beyond their normal studies has not been possible.

AP: Would that be possible at Michigan or Wisconsin or Illinois?

GW: I think probably some of the same problems will be there. The thing is, of course, in Michigan and Wisconsin, students have the expense of housing, which many of the students here don't because they live with their families at home and they have their job; they live in the big city. In university towns you can say, well, okay, I have to pay a little bit more for tuition, but I don't have to pay the housing costs here. I think that's what makes it more attractive. Wayne State may have a problem there in Detroit. Those programs also are quite expensive, the junior year abroad.

AP: One of the things I'm looking for is people who can describe some of their exceptional students. I think one of the things that's important for people reading the book is to really realize that there is a large volume students here, but there are also some just exceptional students. Does any particular student come to mind, and it's always easier when you're writing a book to talk about specific people rather than to say the students worked very hard.

GW: A number of students come to mind. I would also like to think about students who have completed their work and who have proved themselves in the world. We certainly have some. I can think about that a little bit.

AP: Send me an e-mail.

GW: I think that's important to think of some.

AP: For example, Duluth had a student that just graduated this last year. He came from, I'm going to blank on the country—an eastern European country, and he chose Duluth because he heard they played hockey. He didn't make the varsity team, but he got into the school, and his parents were professor from behind the Iron Curtain. I think it was Yugoslavia. Anyway, he graduated Summa cum laude from Duluth and was accepted in the Harvard M.D./Ph.D program in, what would the Ph.D. have been in—I think neuroanatomy, in a combined M.D./Ph.D program at Harvard, full scholarship. I interviewed him by telephone at the end of his first year at Harvard, and he said, "You know, I really feel I've been as well prepared as anyone for this experience." That's a tremendous compliment to Duluth. That's the kind of thing I'm looking for.

GW: Are you looking for students who have come from abroad?

AP: No, not necessarily. Any students.

GW: We have a sample of students in various fields. We don't only have the people in medicine, but also people in other fields such as agriculture, the liberal arts. It's also an interesting kind of way to talk about student life and what they've done because each story is so unique. Again, I'm never sure in the end whether it's going to get in the book or not. We're doing some other things with the material, so nothing will get lost.

GW: Also, just filing it away for whatever.

AP: Exactly. We'll probably do a little essay on that, and even if we can't use all the essay, I'll put it in the Archives because this sort of thing of the impact of students and wonderful story of a woman who is an M.D. She started at the Duluth Family M.D. program, and then went down to the Twin Cities, got her M.D., and is a clinician in a small town in northern Minnesota. The story of those people that came out of that Duluth Family Practice. That's ranked number two in the country, and they have just a real passion for medical service in small towns.

GW: It just occurred to me that there is one student, and I just talked to her fairly recently, particularly interesting. She was an athlete, women's basketball team, I think she was. She was a German major and did very well. In the end she went on to medical school and is now a doctor. I will check her exact name.

AP: That would be terrific, because something like that is . . .

GW: She's interning, I think, over here. It would be possible to get her to talk a little bit about her experience. Of course, one gets these occasional little notes from people that you have long forgotten and who say, "Just wanted you to know I graduated in '59—you don't remember me—but I've been profiting from it ever since." That's the kind of stuff that's gratifying, but it's also, I think, exactly what we want to . . . We are not a diploma mill that turns out people who then go on and are never heard from anymore. We are creating something in society. We have made a difference.

AP: I think to end the book on an up note about . . . Right now we've got only one quote about students, and somebody who says the students aren't as good as they used to be. I think that's probably true in some fields and some students, but even this person, I think, if you pressed them and said, "Come on, every student can't be terrible."

GW: We may have a larger number of students in certain fields than we used to have.

AP: I'm sure that people read less than they used to read.

GW: Yes, but they do other things. They know more about computers than they ever did.

AP: Exactly. I'm trying to get a little more balance.

GW: They can set up a web site and I can't.

AP: Right.

GW: I can read books, but things change.

AP: And they do some interesting public service.

GW: Of course

AP: I've just picked up from Student Affairs, they've just done a extensive student survey, the graduate's opinion of the university, which will be very interesting to see.

GW: Did you see this morning's *Star Tribune*?

AP: No.

GW: There is a picture on the front page of Albanian refugees arriving at the airport and being greeted by Julie May serving as an interpreter. Julie May is a graduate student in linguistics here at the university. She was an undergraduate student in German, and she is working with I think a Lutheran refugee service, and she is now going to Albania to work with the refugees there. She is one of the few Americans who have no Albanian contact who have learned the language in order to serve the people there.

AP: That's the kind of story. She may not have read as much Aristotle as somebody did twenty years ago, but the impact, that's phenomenal.

GW: Precisely. Then she seems to be totally service oriented.

AP: What a wonderful story. That's great.

GW: She's going to leave for Albania in a relatively short time, but I saw her yesterday at a graduation ceremony in linguistics.

AP: If I called the department secretary . . . She's probably in the directory, too.

GW: She's in the directory, yes.

AP: That's very interesting.

GW: Also, it's a little bit exotic. It is not something everybody does.

AP: Exactly, and you want certain stories like that. One of our continuing education stories is a student who is a French major in Morris, but she is from Laos. She majored in French because French is the second language of Vietnam and Laos, and so on. So that was the reason for the French major. But she has now become an interpreter, and she came back to us to finish up in night school. She had an illegitimate child so she became a single mother, had to work her way through school to support herself.

GW: That's the same story with that student who is now a doctor.

AP: Very interesting story, just tremendously interesting. That type of person doesn't usually end up at Gustavus or St. Thomas. They usually end up here, so it's part of the cosmopolitan fabric.

GW: Another student, Anne Bilek . . . Do you know Mary Bilek?

AP: Yes.

GW: She is Mary Bilek's daughter. Anne Bilek is an amazing woman. She is graduating now. She wrote a superb senior paper, for which she won the departmental senior paper award. That's fine, but she has also been a computer expert; spent several years in Germany in Berlin at the Free University and was known as their computer expert there. She is the most unassuming young woman. You see her and you think, well, she never opens her mouth. But when she starts writing, she is brilliant. Working on the computer, she has her mother's math skills.

AP: Is her degree in German?

GW: Yes, her degree will be in German. She may also have another degree. She's a slow mover; she's been around for a long time. But then, of course, she has these little hobbies such as spending two and three years at the Free University of Berlin and working with computers. But she is an undergraduate who is our product.

AP: That is remarkable. I was talking to Wendell Anderson the other day . . .

GW: Oh, yes, Wendy.

AP: His son is a graduate in Liberal Arts, and he has become a freelance writer and reporter and food critic. He lives in Washington, D.C., worked his way through school. His sister is an M.D. from here. Wendy just bleeds maroon and gold. His parents were Swedish immigrants and saved every penny so he could come to the U.

GW: Of course, the hockey team.

AP: The hockey team did well. As he says, the big man on campus was Paul Giel when he was there. He actually played on the team with John Mayasich, who was the absolutely premier . . . So even though Wendell was a good hockey player, he was not the greatest. On his team he was the only person not All-American. He was varsity and very, very good.

GW: This is true in the past, also. People took a real interest in athletics. Now I get asked, "What does the faculty say about all that?" We don't talk about it. It's over there.

They react like any other citizen, but it's not really part of what's happening to the university. When Bierman was still here and Murray Warmath . . .

AP: And we all went there . . .

GW: . . . and we all went there, and when you heard the gun go off you knew another touchdown. You had a feeling of, that's belonging together, but now going downtown it's . . .

AP: I'm thinking of making a short list, just for my own use—it won't go in the book—of the biggest mistakes of the last fifty years, and I think moving down there would be on the list.

GW: Right, and tearing down Memorial Stadium. It also goes to show our very short memory. We tear down the memorials. The stadium was built in honor of World War I students, and it lasted just a few years. Now nobody cares anymore. There's an arch left there, so it will go with many other memorials lest we forget.

AP: One other question, Gerhard. If you're describing the Minnesota culture or what Minnesota is like, and you try to compare it to Wisconsin or Illinois or Ohio, or another Big Ten school, and someone said, "Just tell me how is Minnesota different?" is there any answer that you know how to give that? I think sometimes when people move here and you want them to read the book and get a sense of this place . . .

GW: I have problem with that because it takes intimate experiences and not just visiting. My intimate experiences are Wisconsin and Washington University-St. Louis. Washington University-St. Louis, was relatively small at that time—private institution so it doesn't count. It's a totally different kind of atmosphere, and I was an undergraduate there. University of Wisconsin, I've always sensed a major difference between Wisconsin and Minnesota. In Wisconsin, as soon as I arrive in Madison, I sense the university. When I arrive at the airport in Minneapolis, I do not. Here we are part of a larger metropolitan community; Madison is the university. To be sure now, industries have moved in there, too, and the city has grown.

The feeling of everything centers around the university—the cultural events. Even when the symphony orchestras come, where do they play? At the Union. You have a feeling of belonging. The statement that has always been made in Wisconsin, that the Union is the living room of the state, is something that is missing here. Coffman Union is empty in the afternoon and evening. That may change now if we have more . . . because now everything is going to be under construction anyway. But after that is over, if we have more students who are in residence. But as a commuter campus we simply cannot have that kind of feeling of being together. That's for the general student body and in some ways also for the faculty. On the other hand, and here again of course my experience is limited to the faculty experience at Minnesota because I didn't have any faculty

experience in Wisconsin, I had the feeling that for many years the faculty here was indeed a team. They were together, especially on the Minneapolis campus and probably also on the St. Paul campus. But you had your St. Paul faction and your Minneapolis faction. With the decline of the Campus Club, or putting it the other way around, with a new culture developing that makes a Campus Club no longer a center of people coming together, people aren't here anymore. But I came . . . You were here. You didn't have that question, what are the days you are on campus? You were on campus, and you had your office hours. Of course you taught more, too. You were available and you had contact with your colleagues. Departments or groups of departments and buildings would come together for a bag lunch on Fridays. You knew each other. Then there were all these dining clubs, too, which I think were very, very good. There's one left of all of these. I've just been asked to join it, and I'm glad to do it.

AP: Is that the 39ers?

GW: Yes, that's right.

AP: There are two. There is the 39ers, and then there is the Town & Gown.

GW: The Town & Gown must be a continuation because they were always known as the one where they were able to drink. The others were without alcohol except for one of the beer places. I met a lot of people. I met Horace Morris that way. I met the librarians; I met people in history, and so on. It was a kind of education that I as a young faculty member got that our colleagues now don't get. They may meet each other on the Internet, but that's not a very close contact.

AP: I have one other question. What is your take on some of the student demonstrations of the late sixties and early seventies. Do you have any memories of those?

GW: I have very close memories. I was at that time associate dean for the humanities, and sometimes sat in my office. But I always had the feeling it was done with a certain amount of courtesy and with a slight sense of humor that nobody would admit but it was there, and in comparison to the harshness of the demonstrations you had at Wisconsin, for example, or many other places, we were blessed except for the very last one where the tear gas bombings, where Washington Avenue was . . .

AP: Right, in May of '72.

GW: But before that I remember the gentleness with which Moos and Fred Lukermann and Jerry Shepherd and so on dealt with it. When the students occupied Morrill Hall and I think Moos was concerned it might get cold at night, they had blankets delivered—the kind of politeness that was still there. Basically we knew they were our kids, and nobody was out to really destroy anybody. So it was serious and also, because I think most of the faculty felt the students had some valid points, it was something that I don't have a

trauma memory about it. Kent State would not have happened here. I also think that the university police probably handled it relatively well, avoiding confrontation where it could be avoided.

AP: People have talked about teach-ins outside . . .

GW: And people walking around with red armbands. I remember one of the professors in one of the departments while I was dean, was very upset because a T.A. just simply gave everybody an "A." We had to do a little negotiation there. But again, nothing . . . Some were kids' pranks, some were sort of the radicals who really didn't know what they were radical about and who wanted to save the working men but never really had had any contact with working men or women. Surely there were those things, and the strikes. I remember I took a letter to Morrill Hall and there were some students out there and they said I shouldn't go in there because of the strike. I said it was strike mail, so I went in with no problem. Of course we were late in Minnesota. When everybody else was already done, we started this. Also, probably some of the grievances that students had were not Minnesota grievances because Minnesota had always been quite open. We had student representation on committees and there was this student intermediary board that met with the deans, and so on. There had been avenues of talking to the authorities that perhaps at some other universities did not exist. And it was cold.

AP: Cold a lot of the time. Much of the demonstrations come in May, though. This is exceedingly helpful. I really appreciate that.

GW: My pleasure.

[end of interview]