

IN MEMORIAM

WALTER WETZELS

1930 – 2020

Our esteemed colleague, mentor, and Germanic Languages Department Chair, Walter D. Wetzels, died on September 9, 2020, after a stroke. He is survived by his wife, Pamela Wetzels, and will be buried in a family plot on a farm hillside just outside of Conway, Massachusetts. Those of us who knew him during his twenty-two years with the department appreciated his extraordinary collegiality and ability to negotiate both internal and external conflicts on behalf of fellow professors, worthy programs, and innovative ideas. Such skills were evident from the onset of his time with us. As a new Ph.D. from Princeton, he was hired by the departmental chair, Helmut Rehder, on the basis of an interview and warm recommendation from his doctoral advisor, Theodor Ziolkowski.

Walter Wetzel's intellectual horizons spanned interests and education broader than the usual Ph.D. in German. Although he specialized in eighteenth-century German literature at Princeton, his previous focus and *Staatsexamen* in Germany had been on mathematics and physics. During the fifties and sixties, such knowledge was in high demand in the United States, particularly given the interest in space travel to put a man on the moon. As a result, Germans were offered positions in the United States to teach these subjects. Walter, already a tenured teacher at a German gymnasium at that time, relates in his British Studies memoir, "Growing up in Nazi Germany and other Adventures," that by 1960, when he was in his early thirties, he found his permanent career as a tenured teacher in a German gymnasium "too predictable" (p. 414. in *Burnt Orange Britannia*, pp. 404-19). The German boy who had run out of class to a field in the farming community of

Usingen during World War II to try out his English on a descending American parachutist had grown up with a curiosity to see the rest of the world.

In 1961 Walter left Germany on an American program designed to improve the level of math and physics taught in American high schools. His first year was at a private boys' boarding school in Rhode Island and then, wishing to see more of the United States, he accepted a position at a newly founded girls' high school in Colorado. During his two years there he met and married a fellow teacher, Pamela Taylor. Unfortunately, the couple's two children both developed an incurable disease. Through the years before their children's premature deaths, Pamela and Walter were both active in efforts for the care of their own and other handicapped children. In particular, they were active in a local group addressing the need for such children to attend public schools to learn and have instruction with peers who enjoyed good health. Here, as with friends and colleagues throughout his lifetime, Walter remained an invaluable support for his wife and children.

When he joined UT's Germanic Languages faculty in 1968, Walter Wetzels was somewhat older than most of the younger professors and more mature as a result of his experiences in war-torn Germany. There was in that era some friction between the younger "rebels" and the older, tenured faculty in regard to such issues as Budget Council representation (younger faculty were ineligible), grant opportunities, and course assignments. Walter was always the cool head and expert negotiator in those early days as later in life; he was able to see both sides of issues and to get along with the disparate parties—a talent invaluable then as well as later in his role as departmental chair.

Walter was also available at the personal level as a mentor and friend. Janet Swaffar recalls with gratitude the academic guidance and occasional editing he did for her and others among her

fellow professors. In his characteristically convivial style, he and John Weinstock began making bread together, bread of the kind that was then unavailable in Austin, and in large quantities. The bread available in shops was mostly white and not very healthy. Weinstock had acquired a commercial mixer and, more importantly, an unusual recipe for whole wheat bread baked in round coffee cans that tasted like a variant of German *Vollkornbrot*. Walter and John (and sometimes Janet) got together every couple of months to make bread, a delightful experience that lasted until Austin acquired better stores and bakers.

Walter Wetzel's research record was substantial. In 1973 he published a revised version of his dissertation with de Gruyter, a prestigious publishing house in Germany. In addition, he published a number of articles on topics ranging from the relationship between literature and science to fairy tales and the German author Goethe. He had an expressive gift in his book reviews and the autobiographical piece mentioned above, which appeared in a volume edited by his Texas colleague William Roger Louis and whose Friday British Studies seminars he often attended.

Walter Wetzels also had an excellent record of instructing and advising students. His teaching included numerous graduate seminars on such authors as Goethe, Schiller, and Thomas Mann, and undergraduate courses on scientific German, German literature, German culture, history, and politics, as well as German grammar and composition. He also chaired or was a committee member for numerous graduate theses as well as dissertations. His most recent dissertation committee membership came in 2004, eight years after his retirement.

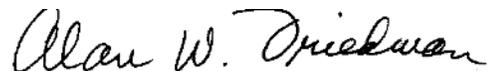
Shortly after his retirement in 1996, Walter and his wife Pamela gave the department a generous financial legacy that has been invaluable in maintaining the identity of our department during a period of shrinking enrollments and independent identities of German programs across the country. This legacy, which supports the Texas Chair in German Literature and Culture,

represents his characteristic generosity and remains one of his enduring contributions to the maintenance and welfare of our department, and we are extraordinarily grateful for it.

Walter Wetzels will be missed for his personal as well as his professional qualities. He had the knack of addressing the small as well as the big issues in the lives of his colleagues simply by caring and taking the time to talk over concerns both professional and personal. Those conversations often made a difference in the day's work and departmental collegiality. Those of us who knew and worked with him gratefully remember his talent for mending fences and cherishing those inside and outside of those fences. A caring person, he cared for and about all of us, all the time.



Jay C. Hartzell, President
The University of Texas at Austin



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary
The General Faculty

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Robert King, Janet Swaffar, and John Weinstock.