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ORAL HISTORY

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Stanley B. Kimball
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SIUE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Summer 1991

Paul Guenther Interview May 8, 1991

Interviewed by Stanley B. Kimball

FILENAME: Guenther. 58

Q: Professor Paul Guenther, Foreign Languages Department, Professor Emeritus, thanks for stopping by my office today and for being willing to share your reflections and memories on tape to be archived for posterity. Paul, why did you come here in the first place.

A: Well I served for the preceeding eleven years, from '49 to '60, at Vanderbilt University at Nashville, Tennessee. This was originally a prestigious and pleasant job and Nashville is a delightful city. Two of my sons were born there. But in due time Vanderbilt developed a kind of Ivy League complex represented by the then college president who was a man whose merits I've never been able to figure out.

He was a theologian from the south and a defender of the publish or perish racket, enforced by a fairly cowardly stooge who was the dean; they developed all sorts of principles which made it sort of difficult to live with them.

And I cooked my goose anyway when in a matter concerning the Student Christian Association in which I was the representative of the Jewish student body. I protested an uncalled for measure which I considered offensive to me. This resulted in the assertion by the

president's stooge that I was talking too much. At which point my belief that Vanderbilt was radically losing its attractiveness to me was greatly reinforced so I began to look for another job.

At a professional meeting at Chicago I met people who were already members of this faculty and they were looking for staff and I liked what they told me about the place. A brand new university in an advantageous location. What fascinated me most was the apparent willingness to let the faculty do without breathing down their necks too intensively. They wanted people who were humanists, good teachers, potentially so. I believe I always was a good teacher who would not be too thoroughly interfered with this. It turned out for the longest time they lived up to those promises largely because of the leadership of the late lamented Nicholas Joost.

And I came here quite aside from the fact that the material improvement over my Vanderbilt pay was certainly nothing to sneeze at. They had a principle at Vanderbilt announced by the president. He liked gentlemen of independent means and the pay in those days was quite negligible. They got people like so many of us by playing the prestige angle, see. It was unsatisfactory and what I'd learned about SIU sounded very positive so I accepted an invitation to come here and I appeared here. It must have been August of 1960.

Q: I came in August of '59.

A: So did many of my friends in the pioneer group.

Q: Yes. A lot of us came early. Were you interviewed by or did you meet Harold See?

A: I was not interviewed by See. I remember meeting him. He didn't have apparently too much to do with my coming here. The main agents there were Joost and Bill Going. I also remember Mrs. Kilchenmann.

Q: Yes, Ruth.

A: Ruth, who was then functioning as the head of the language department. And one or two other people whose names do not come to mind. But at that meeting, it was the usual annual Modern Language Association's shindig. I met other faculty members including Bob Duncan of English, other members of the english faculty. They all seemed to be sort of livable with and I liked the place. I liked the whole idea of the university being newly created and lets face it at that time it was quite well heeled in terms of support by the state.

Q: You came to the Alton campus as did I.

A: Yeah.

Q: And not to East St. Louis.

A: No. Although I had an assignment in East St. Louis together with the Alton one. I think one year I went there late in the day. One year it was in the middle of the morning and they used to run a bus from there to Alton you know. So we'd constantly be gallivanting between two campuses. But it was all right.

Q: I don't know why; I never deliberately avoided it, but for some reason I was never assigned to the East St. Louis campus. But I know a lot of people, as you, did spend a lot of time going back and forth between the two centers as we called them.

A: It may have had to do with the personal situation in your department you see. Remember they had groups of people who served only there in East St. Louis.

Q: Yes. I remember quite well when you came because I was heading up the History Club and you may remember we invited you to speak and at that time you were doing a lot of work on various utopias and I can remember it as if it were yesterday you sharing with us.

A: It was...it came out of my doctors dissertation. You see I took a doctorate in Comparative Literature at University of North Carolina and the idea of using, somebody steered me that way, one of my graduate school professors steered me, to the idea of dealing with the idea of utopia as a literary topic. I know it wasn't particularly original, but it was extremely interesting and I loved that joy of doing it.

Q: Why have you stayed so long?

A: Well there are numerous points to be made here. In the first place for a long time I was able to say that the sort of promises implicit in our discussions of this place were largely realized. My working relationship with the late Nicholas Joost was absolutely

magnificent. He was a great and dear friend. And the student body was very interesting, also the colleagues. They were very, very dear people.

Vanderbilt was a good place and I still have friends there. But there was just a tiny bit too much of the havoc and the Harvard on the Cumberland syndrome. Anyway and of course I got used to the place. You know I had family and all that. I liked the location, not so much the mid west per se, but the location of this place very close to what I still consider a very major and good city like St. Louis.

Economically it was good, especially after the level of pay at Vanderbilt University. And though I occasionally thought I might consider doing something else, I actually did have offers from places that appeared to be worth looking into, like a job at the University of Idaho I believe it was. Very nice. Asking for everything that I was good at, you see. I never wanted to be tagged a language teacher let alone a German teacher with all the idiotic prejudices this engenders in the minds of the innocent. Seeing the German teacher as some poor schnook who has mismatched socks and wants to be buried next to his emperor.

The truth is I do not like Germans you see. And I actually was hired here as a Professor of Comparative Literature and there were glorious times when I was able to teach almost nothing but.

I am from Berlin. My wife is from Vienna. We have lived in some of the largest, greatest, grandest cities in the world. How much more of the sticks do we want? This place we came to had the enormous advantage of being next to St. Louis.

Q: Now let me ask you a sensitive question perhaps. You have enjoyed it here. You indicate you have been well treated. You have stayed here. You've retired here. You're still here. Were you ever aware of much of any kind of discrimination on this campus?

A: None whatsoever and rest assured I wouldn't have taken it lying down. As a matter of fact I think Nicholas Joost once told me sometime after I had settled here, he said I always wanted a Jew on my faculty and you are it. No, no I have never been the recipient of anything of the kind. It is possible that maybe I have grown too obtuse or too proud or whatever. If this would come to me I would consider it with like a pile of dog turds in the road. But no, no, no, no, nothing like that was ever visited on me.

Q: Good. I wanted that on tape from someone who has been here thirty-one years. I think that is a noteworthy observation, situation. It needed to be recorded.

A: If I may add this, Stanley, I have through all the years I've been here always asked for the privilege of being off on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur both of which frequently fall into the fall term, and this was always granted courteously and gleefully, no problems.

Q: I'm very pleased, of course, and proud of this university and having it documented by you means a lot. Now over thirty-one years when did you retire, Paul?

A: '82.

Q: Oh good heavens has been that long?

A: Yes. I would have been 70 in '83.

Q: What do you look back on as your greatest accomplishments or achievements or contributions over the twenty-two years prior to retirement?

A: Well in general I think I managed, although not single handedly, to help maintain a humanistic dimension at this place. To engender some interest in books of literature and language. I was at times blessed with magnificent students and I think I was able to make a modest contribution to the overall ambience. I remember that one of my closest friends when I retired said to me without you it wouldn't ever quite be the same. Although I didn't deserve this kind of accolade, it left me with some splendid feeling you know.

The interesting thing is that many of those friendships have developed with the people of the English Department. I probably thought wrongly that a foreign born scholar who will go to his grave with an accent might have several strikes against him, but I adore the English language. I think the literature of the English speaking people is the greatest there is and so I've always felt very much at home you see.

Another thing that I liked here very much was that unlike other schools, especially some Ivy League schools and even European universities, there was no segregation between various fields. I

remember asking a top notch Germanist at the University of Vienna an innocent question and he answered rather huffily that this was not his field and I should ask colleague such and such and it wasn't a question that necessitated a very specialist bit of knowledge you know.

I do work, bless the memory of my father, with the belief that the arts are indivisible and there should not be a historian of literature who doesn't weep over the Ninth Symphony. There should not be a French teacher who is ignorant of basic history and you being a historian will like to hear me say that to me history is the absolute alpha and omega of the whole schmere.

Q: Thank you.

A: It may not only be that way I don't know, but in the early years here we had a bonafide collective pioneer operation.

Q: It has been important. It is important that we have had foreign scholars on our faculty to add a dimension, a cultural dimension, an academic dimension...

A: Yes.

Q: ...and you have played that role very well. I'm happy to know that you have not only played that role, but enjoyed it and considered it one of your significant contributions.

Over the years has the interest in the German language around here in taking courses in it risen or fallen or stayed about the same.

A: I have no details about the current enrollment figures. You know that after some very glorious initial years we went into a bad slump in language and in other fields. That apparently we have overcome and we have enough competent faculty and apparently enough students to justify the existence and almost all of these people have doctorates so the situation may not have dramatically improved, but it has certainly not deteriorated to the extent to which deterioration might have been feared some six, seven, eight years ago.

Q: I hope you know that the History Department has always fostered, if that is the word, the language department...

A: Oh yeah.

Q: ...for the simple reason that every historian should know one other language...

A: Yeah.

Q: I have a feeling that this university has lowered too much the language requirements, the foreign language requirements.

A: What is remarkable is that the decline didn't go any further. You see lets face it we have not always had the support of the majority of our colleagues. I am not talking about the likes of you who are movingly interested in such matters, but you as well as I, remember the somewhat acrimonious arguments we had in faculty meetings and others when the whole question of the so called usefulness of languages was batted back and forth.

And we, not I alone, have always tried to defend our position - not in the sense of defending my job, but simply from the point of view of what is of the humanist task. And apparently over the years people have finally accepted the fact that we should have languages even though everybody still tries to weasil out of telling their students you ought to take a foreign language. But we have not I believe in recent years experienced real sabotage as we did in the past at times.

Q: Now let's turn this coin over, Paul, and discuss some of your greatest frustrations here over twenty-two years.

A: Well among the greatest frustrations were what I just mentioned, the fact that many of our colleagues and the administration for that matter had learned to tolerate the idea of language instruction, but didn't particularly have their heart in it. This did not necessarily add up to sabotage, but the lack of support which this engendered came sometimes mighty close to it.

I remember that I and other members of the department, particularly during the short time that I was chairman of the department, tried a great many things to make it clear to the

university, to our students, to the faculty that languages ought to be an integral part, an intrinsic part and many people gave us good support, but it was all but the top rung of the ladder then the top rung was removed or sawed off.

We went through a period, I think it was during one year when I was on sabbatical, when the various documents coming off of the faculty conferences and such seemed to clearly indicate you know, foreign language is okay. We should accommodate those who for some reason want the language, but we shouldn't make an issue out of it.

Q: How would you rank the top administrators in their support or lack of support in foreign languages while you were in harness?

A: The best one undoubtedly was Nicholas Joost. Nicholas was a classicist.

Q: He was your dean?

A: He was a dean, classicist, latinest, a highly civilized man. The late John Rendleman I personally loved very much. He was possibly the finest college administrator I ever served under. But I do no longer recall when he made any great effort to support the languages except to the extent that I think he was a man with a strong sense of what was fit and proper and a strong sense of justice.

And Carol Keene. I thought she did many good things for the languages. The aggravation did not so much come from within even though I would suspect that there were some people in English who

just as soon would all of us see buried, but it came. I found it very sad to sit through a commencement and of, God knows what, 111,000 names graduating out of the School of Business and 3.2 people out of the Humanities. I found this totally, I would say, improper. And the other element of frustration even more I believe than the business people were our friends from education. I always thought with the business people you could talk, but most of these educationists were often arrogant I remember, he's still around but no longer a member of the faculty, we had a man who represented the truly worst. He once took students to Europe and, I'll take to needling him a little about this anti-cosmopolitan arrogance, I asked him, you got anybody who could function as the interpreter and his classic answer was, well we are picking up a bus driver in Amsterdam, the son of a bitch knows languages.

Then of course you know these people would take a Masters of Science in Education and for that they needed a little bit of language so we often participated in their examinations. For a while education went pretty much down the tube. It may be different now.

Q: Some of your best memories around here?

A: Some of my best memories concern some really glorious moments of cooperation with my colleagues, the enjoyment of the artistic and intellectual character of things that the university still possesses. It has been frustrating, however. In a place like this you could bring in fifteen Nobel prize winners to advertise the ultimate cancer

cure and offer free transportation and coffee and danish and you'd get a full house except for two segments of the population, the students and the faculty.

Well you see of course, I've made the point often, that some people in a place like this have an awful lot of commuting to do and I realize now as I get older how hateful this is, but even people who make wonderful contributions to the school, simply do not care. I could not see myself not attending a concert, not attending a play here; aside from the fact that I've always lived so close I had no excuse.

Q: You doubled in brass as a music critic for a long time.

A: For ten years.

Q: For the *Intelligencer*?

A: No. The *Alton Telegraph*. I did only very few reviews for the *Intelligencer* and that happened very recently.

Q: You also pointed out one of the weak things around here and I suspect everybody that ever invited a guest to this campus was afraid they were going to be embarrassed by a lack of audience. Part of that of course is our semi-isolation. You've already mentioned it yourself, the commuting.

A: Yeah.

Q: The fact that there isn't a great deal of campus life outside of the classroom and that has been a problem from the beginning and it may remain a problem until the end.

A: May I pick up on that?

Q: Yes.

A: I was asked once about the establishment of dormitory facilities and I gave a speech in which I stressed the importance of assisting in the creation of a resident student body. The funny part was that speech went over well enough; then I think it was the *Globe Democrat* which had a reporter there took me up on that and complained about the whole idea of so much money creating this bloody place. These rustics are too expensive as it is.

I wrote a letter back, and I admit that they had the common decency to publish it, in which I defended my position that it would be better if the campus would not be so totally isolated, as to still is.

Q: How about some of your worst memories, Paul?

A: It's not in my nature to dig into bad memories and maybe it's true with things that I sometimes say in jest because there's considerable validity. I survived the Nazis twice. What the hell can anybody do to me, you see.

Q: Well that is certainly philosophical.

A: I have negative memories. I remember stupid arguments. I remember one. Dr. Quillian who engaged in what can generally be called a violation of my civil rights and similar little things. Even Carol Keene whom I like and who was good to me was not above doing dumb things, saying stupid things, and being offensive because some of her colleagues have complained. The woman has a nasty streak and a tendency to be power mad.

Q: She was your dean.

A: Yeah. When the chips were down though she was very good to me. All this has to be admitted. So as far as Carol goes - okay bless her hide. As far as Quillian goes he never had any chance to do me any good and I wouldn't want him to do me any good. I think he's a fascist bastard!

Q: Well that's pretty clear and direct and thank you for sharing that with us.

A: Nothing I say here is off the record, Stanley.

Q: Well I'm glad to hear that, Paul. Now how about some humorous, unusual memories you have.

A: Unusual memories.

Q: Or humorous.

A: Or humorous. I don't really know, Stanley. There's probably good deal of it. The gently funny things sort of accumulate over a long long time. But I couldn't single out anything specifically. I am sure at 4:00 am this coming morning something will come to me.

Q: Well you will have a chance of course to add to the record when you get the typed up transcript then at 4:00 am why you may jot this down and add it to the record.

We haven't talked about students much - perhaps we should.

A: Oh, by all means.

Q: Tell us about your good, bad, humorous experience with your students.

A: Throughout the years that I served here I came to be extremely fond of almost all my students. I might have had a poor schnook and a born loser. But I was able, maybe undeservingly, to establish marvelous personal relationship with many of my students, many of whom have remained my friends especially the two dozen or so who went to Germany with me in 1970. We became family friends and I've always enjoyed the give and take, the respect tendered me. It was one of the compelling experiences I had here, the niceness, loyalty.

Q: How would you assess the contribution of the university to our area?

A: That I think is enormous. We're over that now, but when we first came here you know this place was from nowhere and I think the University enhanced other institutions in the area and other people's efforts.

Q: . How has the community accepted and appreciated us?

A: That's an interesting point. We had, in the early years, difficulties which are a matter of record and it took the community a little while. I remember I was, you may have been too, called in our first fall and winter year. There was an election in 1960. This election also asked the voters to support a very sizable financial outlay on the part of the state. I believe 90 million dollars for universities and it passed, but prior to that many of us here were sent out to brainwash the faithful to support the university. I remember going to remote places.

I don't talk enough to people outside of the University anymore. There is nothing like having to defend the University - to speak for the University. I have the feeling that it is not quite integrated into the area.

Q: Paul, did you ever have anything directly to do the educationally deprived or special education?

A: Yeah. For three years spring and summers I had an assignment, I wasn't the only one, to teach at what is now the Alton Mental Health Center. I taught at varying times a group of mature people from there.

Then I had a group, sort of an in between group - as mixed - and a group of young people who were simply underprivileged other than under educated and I remember once there was a black boy there about 17 years old, sweet, sweet soul and I asked him once, I was mostly a story teller, what he thought, what they thought why I was doing all this. He reproduced the old belief that the function of literature is to teach and to delight. You tell us these things because they teach us something and they are enjoyable. It was a wonderful time.

Q: I taught a little bit over there myself. Was this possibly with the Ed Hudlin grant?

A: Yeah.

Q: Well I shared that same experience.

A: I did it for three years.

Q: I presented family history.

A: Yeah.

Q: And I learned something which was very special to me that while these people weren't quite sure what was going on today and had terrific memory lapses I found that if I zeroed in on family they could relate to that and the real world.

A: It's a great experience. I had just come back from Israel and I was full of the experience. Now many of these people were very solid church people. They knew their bible. They knew all the religious traditions too and they were marvelously receptive to that and I enjoyed it although it was physically incredibly strenuous, especially with the mentally underdeveloped, some lovely youngsters there. But also I remember it was extremely rewarding, so it was fun.:

Q: Yes. I found it emotionally draining. Very, very.

A: Another lovely experience, one of the loveliest experiences that Henny and I share was the two months we spent in Germany in 1970 together with some students from Carbondale. This had been organized I think by somebody at Carbondale. And I had twenty-four people with me including my two sons.

Q: Now this was an SIU abroad program.

A: Yeah.

Q: We need more of that, Paul.

A: I thought that this was a great success and everybody had a very lovely time because, in contrast to this frantic tourism business, if this isn't Brussels, it's Stockholm. If it's neither, what the hell is it?. We had eight weeks of it. There were not only several full fledged language courses and lit courses, but we traveled. We took

trips down the Rhine. We took trips to Heidelberg and to Cologne (near). Students sometimes had enough time to go take a short trip to Paris, later on Amsterdam. My sons were with me and my wife joined me and it was a delightful experience.

Q: I did the same thing in 1962 in Vienna and I'm sure you would agree that our University needs much more foreign, overseas, off campus educational programs.

A: Yeah that brings us back to a point that you made before that I didn't pick you up on, that is one thing that has been grossly neglected for no apparent reason. Possibly one could argue that many of our students are so poor they can't afford the outlay. Maybe so. We had a few such experiences in addition to what you did and what I did. Claude Francis took students once to Canada, French students. Sonya Lind took them to Germany once.

The year we went to Germany we also had students in Spain and the late Marian Taylor did it repeatedly, English course abroad.

But I always had the feeling that the university wasn't particularly interested in it. It was, in view of the economic situation of many of our students, a risky adventure. Although when we did it in 1970 it was ridiculously cheap. But there we lacked encouragement.

Q: Just let me turn this tape over here.

What would you like to record that most assuredly would never appear in an official history?

A: Well I've already made two points, one relative to Carol Keene and one relative to what's his name, Quillian.

Q: Ben Quillian?

A: Yeah.

Q: All right.

A: Of course it's conceivable that I do the man a serious injustice. I simply don't know him and frankly I do not wish to know him. With Carol I mean she has often been extraordinarily good to me. The late John Rendleman was one of the nicest, finest college administrators, but John being human, of course, also had his hang-ups and crutches. I don't really know how much support he brought to the languages except through the late Gertrude Marti.

Gertrude was a great woman, a wonderful friend with wonderful ideas. But she put us through this embarrassment of wanting to go to Africa, particularly to French Africa. And she did not professionally have any particular qualifications other than knowledge of the French language, but she had family in the Peace Corp. (You can just imagine what a wonderful surprise it was for her daughter when Gertrude showed up at the expensive state of Illinois which cost a fortune. The trouble was that a committee that decided on such things turned her down because there was no way to finance this out of the committees budget. When she went to Rendleman he paid for it.

Q: Well now let me ask one big, broad, open ended question, Paul, is there anything else on any subject you would care to put on the record?

A: Well I would like this place to prosper. Whenever I come here,- I still keep an office here you know. I still feel intimately connected with it. I can't bear this business of people retiring totally. Of course if you feel the need to go to another place like Florida it would be physically impossible to maintain a connection.

I wish this place well. It's been good to me and there were often moments particularly when I'm at a good concert perceiving incredible gorgeous efforts that our music and theater students make you know and I'm proud to have been part of it. I love this place. So I wish it well, the faculty well, even the very many people whom I do no longer know or the many new people.

Q: Now I have quoted you often but I want it on the record. I would like Paul Guenther's famous definition of what being Professor Emeritus really means.

A: I don't know. Did I define it at one time or the other?

Q: Remember, we did a series of lectures together. You on the Germans. Shirley Carlson on the Blacks. Myself on East Europe.

A: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes.

Q: You were always introduced as Professor Emeritus and you always got up and explained then what that meant. For the record explain what it means.

A: There is good news and there is bad news. The good news is that we never, never again have to cope with a committee meeting which by the way throughout my many years here have always been the bane of my existence. That's the good news. The bad news is that the very fact that you're emeritus means that your getting a bit long in the tooth.

Q: Paul, once again thanks for stopping by and walking down memory lane and sharing your memories and reflections with us.

A: Thank you, Stan. I enjoyed it. I know we have always had extremely good, extremely good talks together.

Q: Yes we have. I've enjoyed it.

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