

Joachim Stieber

PETER BOROWSKY, MEMBER OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY IN
RECURRING VISITS

aus:

Zum Gedenken an Peter Borowsky

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Professor Peter Borowsky of the Historisches Seminar at the University of Hamburg was a frequent visiting member of the Department of History at Smith College. His colleagues in the Department remember him as an esteemed and congenial colleague. I was fortunate to have known him during his seven visits to the College, which extended from 1974 until 1998. Five of these visits were for a semester and two of them, in 1984-85 and in 1993-94, for an entire year.

Professor Borowsky's association with Smith College began in 1969 as an Instructor in our Junior Year Program at the University of Hamburg which was then in its first decade, having been established in 1961. At the time, Peter Borowsky had just received his doctorate in history at the University of Hamburg and was at the beginning of his career as a highly regarded member of the faculty at its Historisches Seminar. Smith College was indeed fortunate to be able to draw on the talents of such an engaging and effective teacher to introduce our Junior Year students to the substance and style of acade-

mic life at the University of Hamburg. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. To teach American college students during their study abroad represented an opportunity that Peter Borowsky appreciated, since, like many other young German academics in the 1960's, he looked with interest to the organization and the manner of teaching at universities in the United States as a possible model for the reform of German universities. In West Germany, this concern for an institutional reform of universities had been preceded in the 1950's by a general interest on the part of young German academics in new methodologies developed since the end of the Second World War in various disciplines at American universities. Thus, while Peter Borowsky acted as the intellectual mentor of Smith students, introducing them to the study of German history during their year at Hamburg, our Junior Year Program became for Peter, their teacher, a window into American higher education at the college level.

The directors of the Smith College Junior Year Program in Hamburg soon came to appreciate his qualities as a historian and his gifts as a teacher, and encouraged Peter Borowsky to explore the possibility of teaching for a semester in the Department of History at Smith College. Peter's initiative was welcomed by the historians at Smith, and in 1974 he was ap-

pointed Visiting Lecturer and, in 1977 and subsequently, Visiting Professor in the Department of History. At Smith College, Peter Borowsky was highly regarded as a teacher, and his colleagues greatly appreciated him as a fellow historian with whom one could always have a stimulating discussion on the state of the discipline of history on both sides of the Atlantic. Initiated on a personal basis in 1974, Peter Borowsky's success as a teacher and as an appreciated colleague contributed to the establishment in 1977 of a formal Faculty Exchange between the University of Hamburg and Smith College. Since that time, two Faculty members have visited the other institution each year, either for a one-month-long visit or as a teaching member of the Faculty in a Department for one semester. Peter Borowsky himself returned four more times on the regular Faculty Exchange, two of which were supplemented by a second semester as a Visiting Professor. As a result, he spent the entire academic years 1984-85 and 1993-94 at Smith College. His last visit was in the Fall Semester of 1998.

The Department of History was delighted to welcome Peter Borowsky on his return visits and this for a very practical reason. He came not only as a stimulating visitor, but he also helped with administrative tasks, including the supervision of Special Studies by our students. Of his nine semesters in the

Department, five were spent taking the place of regular faculty members on leave. In short, Peter was able to help us meet our ongoing curricular obligations. The courses he taught followed a consistent pattern over the years. They included the following: *German History since 1870; Revolutions in Modern Europe: 1789, 1848, 1917; Twentieth-Century Europe*; and once even our basic survey course, *The Transformation of the European World, 1600-1950*. During his first two visits in 1974 and 1977 as well as during his last visit in 1998, Peter Borowsky taught a seminar on Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. During his last visit, he taught this topic in an interdisciplinary format as a colloquium together with Professor Hans Vaget of the Department of German Studies. Entitled *Hitler in the Context of German Culture*, it was a highly successful interdisciplinary venture, made possible by the more flexible academic structures at Smith College that Peter appreciated so much.

The foregoing overview of Peter Borowsky's courses at Smith College makes evident his preoccupation with modern German history in its European context and his special concern with the person and role of Adolf Hitler and the twelve-year period of the National Socialist regime. For Peter's generation of young German academics who studied in the 1960's, these were indeed troubling concerns that touched not

only upon their professional formation as academics, but also upon personal existential issues such as the definition of Germany's identity in the context of a new critical examination of its history. The political and moral dimensions implicit in this critical process are evident in the subject of Peter's doctoral dissertation in 1968: German policy toward the Ukraine during the First World War. It was a topic that had been suggested to him by his academic mentor, Fritz Fischer, best known for his study of the hegemonic aims of imperial Germany's foreign policy before and during the First World War.

In Peter Borowsky's case, the professional historian's interest in German history in the 20th century was heightened by a personal dimension. He was born in 1938 in Angerburg in the Masurian region of East Prussia, from where his mother with her two children, including six-year old Peter, fled on one of the last trains to cross the Vistula River in January 1945. Peter's father was one of the over four million German soldiers who did not return home from the war. Growing up after the war, Peter and his family shared the experience of millions of other war refugees who created a new life for themselves in what became the Federal Republic of Germany. Initially, this meant the challenge of reestablishing material security, but it also meant reaffirming German cultural values and poli-

tical traditions that pre-dated National Socialism. At Bethel bei Bielefeld, Peter attended the Friedrich-von-Bodenschwingh-Gymnasium, a name which evokes the older religious and humanitarian values that were reaffirmed during the 1950's. At the same time, many younger Germans of Peter's generation also looked to the United States as a political and cultural model. It would appear that Peter's interest in Smith College as well as his extensive travels in the United States can be placed in the context of such a broader interest in America.

The interest in America on the part of Peter Borowsky's generation in West Germany during the 1950's was due, on the one hand, to the somber realization that it was only the willingness of the United States to engage its military power in Western Europe that prevented the Continent's domination by the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the interest in America, especially on the part of the younger generation, represented also a response to the generosity of American policy toward Germany after 1947 that actively looked toward the economic reconstruction as well as the moral and political rehabilitation of a former enemy. This policy led not only to the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany but also to making West Germany a partner in creating a new cooperative economic and political order in Europe. After 1950, American policy to-

ward Germany was, to be sure, also motivated by the aim of making the Federal Republic a military ally in the Cold War, yet it continued to be based on a generosity of spirit and an optimism and courage, to which particularly the younger generation in Germany responded with a genuine interest in all things American.

Peter Borowsky's academic career at the University of Hamburg illustrates his personal commitment as a scholar and his dedication as a teacher to lead the next generation to a new critical understanding of modern German history. His colleagues and his students at Smith College were fortunate to be able to participate, from time to time, in that critical discourse. Peter's association with Smith College, and especially with its Department of History, represented a particular generous German response to America's generosity of spirit in envisioning a new role for a new Germany in Europe and in building bridges of friendship across the Atlantic.

Our sadness in taking leave of a respected colleague and, for many of us, a dear friend is balanced by our appreciation of Peter's contribution to the lives of those who were privileged to know him as a stimulating colleague and an inspiring teacher. We remember his quick wit, keenness of intellect, and also his unfailingly unassuming and upbeat manner. As an

academic teacher and in personal conversation, Peter's manner was clear and convincing, occasionally enlivened by a touch of humor, but never overbearing – I am tempted to say it in German: "klar und überzeugend im Vortrag, oft mit einer humorvollen Pointe, aber niemals überheblich". It was only one of the many qualities that make us cherish his memory.