

Reminiscences of Walther Kirchner

By John A. Munroe

I worked closely with Walther Kirchner from 1945, when he joined the history faculty of the University of Delaware where I, though nine years younger, had already been a member for several years.

He was an independent man. I never knew him to subscribe to a newspaper but he seemed to know what was going on—internationally and in our university, but not necessarily in our city and state.

He was an industrious man. He spent many hours in his office typing. He preferred an office away from people, but he could be interrupted by a student or colleague and go right back to work when his visitor left. He and his wife were frugal. He did not think so, citing his almost yearly trips abroad as luxuries, but his colleagues thought otherwise.

He was ambitious. In his thirties when he began graduate study and nearly forty (possibly already forty) when he began his career at Delaware he felt in a hurry to establish his status as a scholar. He accepted invitations to give courses in the summer or at other times at Johns Hopkins, Lehigh, and Pennsylvania universities (all close to Delaware), as well as at others in Germany.

His greatest pleasure and most prized was as a visiting member, for one year, at the Institute for Advanced Studies, a “think tank” (a purely research group) at Princeton. He was so charmed by the life there and the people he met that he moved to Princeton and commuted to Delaware for the rest of his career. He and his wife are buried in the Quaker cemetery at Princeton.

After, as he told me, his few friends there had died, he moved to a retirement home in Baltimore where he had spent a happy summer at the Johns Hopkins University. He was also pleased to be only thirty miles from the cultural resources of Washington.

To me it seemed peculiar that he would not teach German history. His greatest concern seemed to be the preservation of German culture as he knew it in his youth. He taught European history and Russian history and he wrote text books for these courses. He was particularly interested in the connections between Russia and the West.

At UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) he wrote his doctoral dissertation under Waldemar Westergaard on the foreign relations of neighboring countries as affected by Danish Sound dues. Later he spent a year as cultural attaché at the U.S. embassy in Copenhagen.

In helping me locate German villages which some of my ancestors left for America, he said, “You are Swabian. When people in Germany learn you are Swabian they may smile or laugh. Don’t be alarmed. Swabians may be amusing subjects for jokes but they will like you.

Swabians are popular.” “On the other hand,” he continued, “I am from Berlin. I am a Prussian. Nobody likes me.”

He rarely made any specific comment on German affairs today. However, in a telephone conversation about three years ago, I said, “Hitler must have been crazy to open a war on two fronts.” I spoke of reading John Keegan’s military history (out of my normal line). “Hitler was not crazy,” he retorted sharply. “Hitler was evil--pure evil!”