

University of California: In Memoriam, 1997

Siegfried Puknat, Humanities: Santa Cruz



1914-1997

Professor of German Literature, Emeritus

Siegfried Puknat was born in Hamburg, Germany on August 28, 1914, when the First World War was just three weeks old. It was not the most auspicious time for someone who was to spend his professional life interpreting German culture to Americans. But in his birthdate there was also another--and better--portent for a future professor of German literature: August 28 is the birthday of Goethe, Germany's greatest poet.

Sig's father had close ties to Kaiser Wilhelm the Second--he actually rode the Kaiser's racehorses--and he named his two sons after the two greatest warriors of German history and myth: Hermann, destroyer of the Roman legions, and Siegfried, the German Achilles, hero of the great national epic, the *Nibelungenlied*. But in spite of this nationalist sentiment, the Great War seemed to leave no rancor in the Puknat family, for Puknat senior and his siblings soon moved to America one by one, and Sig was a naturalized American citizen by the time he was 14 years old. What did remain with Sig from these beginnings were the three greatest intellectual interests of his life: he read everything he could get his hands on about the origins of the Great War, he was always rethinking it, and as he died there were two books on the subject at his bedside; he taught Goethe's Faust, the pinnacle of German literature, as often as he could throughout his career, both in the original German and in translation, by himself and with others; and he would always go anywhere to see a performance of the Ring, Wagner's version of the *Nibelungenlied*.

Sig grew up in Los Angeles and graduated from UCLA in 1935. It was only a mild exaggeration to say that the cultural center of Germany at that time was Southern California, because so many great

figures had settled there having fled from Nazi Germany. It was a highly stimulating intellectual environment for someone with Sig's dual background, and he always spoke with great fondness of that period of his life. After a master's degree in French from Berkeley, a Ph.D. in German from Minnesota, and eight years teaching at two small colleges--Beloit and Carleton--he began what would be 34 years of full-time service in the University of California, first on the Davis campus, and then here at Santa Cruz.

We all knew Sig as a man who held nearly every post there was in both the administration and the faculty Senate, each time carrying out his duties with great shrewdness and good humor, but before he arrived in Santa Cruz he had already done as much on the Davis campus. And his service to Santa Cruz began three years before we saw him at work here: already in 1962 Sig was helping to shape the new campus as a member of the small advisory committee set up by President Clark Kerr to help Dean McHenry plan it.

The new campus was to have an unusual collegiate structure and so the first group of faculty that began teaching in 1965 was predominantly young and enthusiastic about educational innovation. But the President and Chancellor also saw a need for the experience and moderating influence of someone who was well-versed in the folkways of the University of California. Clark Kerr and Dean McHenry picked Sig for that role, no small compliment to him, for there were thousands of other old Senate hands on the other campuses for them to choose from. It is easy to see what made them go to Sig: he understood so thoroughly the great traditions of the University and its remarkable system of self-governance through the Academic Senate. Many of the younger faculty at UCSC--myself included--learned how it worked and why it was so important from Sig.

Most of us remember Sig in the early years of the campus playing the moderating role that he had been given, and playing it with great skill, and so we are apt to forget that he was also responsible for some of the most important and lasting innovations of those early days. For example, the campus decided to view literature as a single field, rather than one spread over many departments. That was Sig's idea, and a very important one it proved to be for the development of the field at Santa Cruz. Another idea that shaped the way a whole department developed here was the Music Board's decision not to separate musicologists from performers, but instead to make all their faculty scholar/performers. That is now a distinctive aspect of the music program at Santa Cruz, and again, it was Sig's idea. In his

teaching, too, he was anything but the resident traditionalist that he was supposed to be; he was an important member of the team that taught the interdisciplinary Cowell College core course.

Sig had the distinction of being the very first full-time faculty appointment at Santa Cruz, but that was only one of an impressive list of other firsts. He was the first chair of the literature board, the first campus representative to the statewide Academic Senate, the first chair of the all-important

committee that monitored new appointments and promotions on the campus, the first to be elected twice as Chairman of the Academic Senate, and the first to have held all the administrative titles of Vice-Chancellor, Dean and Provost. Everyone knew that if they wanted a job well done, they had only to turn to Sig. The German literature faculty was always a very small group, but our presence on the campus seemed much larger because Sig was one of us.

The most important thing that the early members of the campus had to do was to recruit a first-rate faculty that would set the tone of the new campus for generations to come. Sig's philosophy of recruiting was simple. He used to say that our job was to make sure that the campus was constantly improving, and to do that we had to find people who were better than we were. That was the standard, if you were recruiting together with him.

Sig was genuinely devoted to the University of California; he had a deep respect for its traditions, and he carried on those traditions as a major figure on two of its campuses. During times of crisis--and I think especially of the campus leadership crisis of 1975--he was often the man that we turned to for a steady hand and firm guidance.

The other great devotion of Sig's life was his wife Betty. They met teaching together on the faculty of Carleton College, taught side by side again in Cowell College, and even shared their lives as scholars, publishing jointly. When she died in 1972 at a tragically early age, Sig virtually stopped writing. To the end of his life, the generous gifts he made to the University were always jointly in his name and Betty's.

Sig had a very special position on the Santa Cruz campus, a unique one of affection and respect. Everyone has their own favorite memory of him. Mine is of intellectual arguments with him, which he loved. He was a formidable adversary, exceptionally nimble and deft. My fondest memory of Sig is when he was building his case relentlessly to its logical conclusion and seemed just about to deliver the coup-de-grace, when he would suddenly stop, and there would be a twinkle

in his eye as he said: "Of course, I could be wrong." The essence of this wonderful personality seemed to appear at those moments; the sparkle together with the seriousness, the intellectual toughness together with the kindness, the assertiveness and the self-effacement, the commitment to ideas together with the affection for his friends.

By most standards Sig lived a long and full life, and he certainly had a satisfying and long retirement, but it's hard for us not to feel cheated out of another dozen or more years with him, because the normal rules of aging never seemed to apply to Sig. He was always more mentally and physically agile than many people who were half his age. On both his mother's and his father's side of the family there were many who had lived well into their nineties. For a time we thought that his Aunt Emma was going to be the first to break 100, but when she fell by the wayside at 99, I began to think, or to hope, that Sig himself would be the first of the family to get there. But I was forgetting that birthday--Goethe's birthday, August the 28th. Because Sig's life

not only began on that same day in August--it also ended, just as Goethe's did, in late March of his 83rd year. Sig died just a few days younger, tactful to the last.

John Ellis