

## Lester Wilhelm Julius (“Smoky”) Seifert 1915–1996

On September 3, 1996, the University of Wisconsin lost an esteemed colleague when Emeritus Professor Lester W. J. Seifert passed away at his Madison home after a long and courageous battle with cancer. The close proximity of that home to the University’s Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies reminds us, however, that our loss is shared by the entire field of study to which that facility is dedicated and which Professor Seifert’s work helped to establish.

Seifert was born on August 15, 1915, on a farm near Juneau, Wisconsin, a community founded in 1843 by immigrants from the Oderbruch; the Low German of that region was his mother tongue. He received his A.B. in 1937 from Northwestern College in nearby Watertown, Wisconsin, his M.A. in 1938 from the University of Wisconsin, and his Ph.D. in 1941 from Brown University. That he was destined for an academic career in German studies was already indicated by his being chosen to deliver the “German Oration” at his college graduation ceremony (topic: “Die Briefe Luthers an Melanchthon aus dem Jahre 1530”). His M.A. thesis dealt with “Manuscript problems of Wolfram’s *Parzival*.” For his doctoral dissertation, he collaborated, under the guidance of Hans Kurath, with Carroll E. Reed on a study entitled “The Pennsylvania German dialect spoken in the counties of Lehigh and Berks”—a work that laid the foundation for modern Pennsylvania German studies. Reed and Seifert 1949 and 1954 are based on this coauthored dissertation, and arrangements are now underway to insure the posthumous publication of a final derivative of that research: Seifert’s long-awaited *Word Atlas of Pennsylvania German*.

Upon completion of his doctorate, he was offered an instructorship at Brown, which he held until March 1942, when he enlisted in the army. He served in the Signal Intelligence Corps, primarily in Africa and Europe, until the end of the war. In 1946 he accepted an appointment at the University of Wisconsin, where he remained until his retirement nearly four decades later, in 1985. His association with the University of Wisconsin did not end with his

retirement, however. During the last eleven years of his life he stayed in close contact with the UW Department of German, and until shortly before his death he could often be found doing research at the Max Kade Institute.

Various articles on Pennsylvania German (e.g., Seifert 1946, 1947, 1967, and 1971) and the groundbreaking work on Wisconsin German, which is reported on in Seifert 1949, 1951a, and 1963, reflect Seifert's lifelong interest in the fate of the German language in America. If most of his publications identify him as a specialist in German-American dialects, however, the graduate courses he taught and the eighteen doctoral dissertations that he directed revealed him to be an unusually versatile scholar who was as knowledgeable in medieval literature and historical Germanic grammar as he was in modern linguistics. An English translation of a significant portion of Otfrid's *Evangelienbuch* (Seifert 1977) was, for example, an outgrowth of one of his many seminars on Old High German topics. Given the breadth and depth of his expertise, it is ironic that during much of the first half of his thirty-nine years on our faculty he was not afforded the opportunity to teach graduate courses. It was only in the 1960s after an upturn in enrollments and the retirement of some senior colleagues that he was finally able to share his knowledge of Germanic philology and linguistics with graduate students. Until then, much of his time was spent in the UW Extension Division, where he chaired the German department. He made the most of those years, however. Not content to conduct traditional correspondence courses, he became a pioneer in televised language instruction and was able through that medium to bring a "Conversational German" class to thousands of non-traditional students throughout the state.

Seifert's scholarship, teaching, and service to the profession earned for him a number of awards and honors, including an appointment as visiting professor at the University of Marburg (1966–67), the Distinguished German Educator Award of the Wisconsin chapter of the AATG (1985), Distinguished Service Award of the Society for German-American Studies (1987), and the Bundesverdienstkreuz erster Klasse (1989). The volume arising from the 1991 conference on "The German language in America, 1683–1991" (Salmons, ed., 1993) is also dedicated to him, as is a special issue of the journal *Monatshefte* (Eichhoff, ed., 1988).

Seifert was a man of great warmth, gentleness, and humanity. In the thirty years that I knew him, I never heard him utter an unkind word. He had an astonishing command of the field of German and of diachronic and synchronic linguistics, but he was not one to flaunt his erudition. The maxim “Mehr Sein als Schein” seems to have been a part of his Oderbruch heritage. A twenty-seven-page pamphlet chronicling the history of the Lutheran congregation (Seifert 1951b) to which he was to belong for the rest of his life is significant not merely as an indication of his willingness to engage in public service but as a reflection of a strong religious faith that sustained him in difficult times and enabled him even at the height of his illness to respond to concerned inquiries about his condition with a cheerful “Oh, I can’t complain!”

Many scholars manage to earn the respect and admiration of their students and colleagues. It is much rarer to encounter individuals in our profession who inspire love in those around them. Smoky Seifert was such an individual. He will be truly missed. [DONALD A. BECKER, *University of Wisconsin–Madison*]

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