

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE GHI: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE INSTITUTE'S FOUNDING DIRECTOR, HARTMUT LEHMANN

To mark the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the German Historical Institute, we interviewed Hartmut Lehmann, the first director of the GHI (from 1987 to 1993). We asked him to reflect on the GHI's early years. The interview was conducted (in English) by Carola Dietze and Richard F. Wetzell during Professor Lehmann's visit to Washington on November 17, 2007.

Prior Experiences in the US

Before coming to Washington as the founding director of the GHI in the summer of 1987, I had spent about four and a half years in the United States. I first came here as a high-school exchange student in 1952/53, spending a year on a dairy farm in upstate New York and graduating from high school in 1953. The next stay was in 1968, when I taught at UCLA for the summer quarter. Right after that, in 1968/69, I had a research fellowship at the University of Chicago. In 1973/74 I was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton. In 1984, I returned to Princeton as a fellow at the Princeton Theological Seminary and the history department. Finally, I spent a year as a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School 1986/87. Having been back and forth between Germany and America a number of times, I saw the Institute as a unique chance to make a contribution toward a better exchange, toward better understanding of historians of both sides. Through my stays, I had gotten to know a number of people, so that when I started in Washington, I had friends on whose advice I could rely. This was extremely helpful for me and I don't think I could have done the work here the way I did without the help of these American friends. I had also been to conferences at the German Historical Institutes in Rome and London, so I knew these two Institutes best.

Founding of the Institute

For me, the *Vorgeschichte* of the Institute began when one day in 1985 Rudolf Vierhaus called us in Kiel and said: "Can I come and visit?" So he came and over coffee he said; "The plans to establish an Institute in Washington are now entering a concrete phase. I think this would be something for the Lehmanns. Would you consider becoming the director?" So I was among those who were invited by the *Gründungskommision*, which included Erich Angermann, Karl-Dietrich Bracher, Klaus

Hildebrand, Peter Graf Kielmannsegg, Wolfgang Mommsen, Thomas Nipperdey, Gerhard A. Ritter, and Michael Stürmer, among others. The main decisions had already been made. The concept had been spelled out by the *Gründungskommission*; and it had been decided that the Institute would be in Washington, rather than New York or Chicago. So in 1985, I traveled to Bonn and presented my ideas for a profile of a German Historical Institute in the United States. In my opinion, it was important to begin with creating an effective infrastructure: spring and fall lecture series, an annual lecture, an English-language book series, a bulletin, occasional papers, and so on. I also suggested that the Institute should cover a broad spectrum of topics of interest to both sides. In other words, go beyond German-American relations only covering diplomatic and political affairs. The Institute should address cultural history, religious history, the history of historiography, economic history, social history, and it should reach back to the Middle Ages. A broad range of topics should be covered. I also recommended that the Institute should not have a *Forschungsschwerpunkt* (research focus) from the start, but rather establish an open field, and that the decision about a *Forschungsschwerpunkt* should be suspended for four or five years.

There were two candidates. The commission couldn't decide. So they offered two names to the Ministry. Several months later I received a letter inviting me to become the first director. This is what I know first-hand about the *Vorgeschichte*. In fact, the *Gründungsgeschichte* goes back to the 1970s. When the GHI London was officially opened in the early 1970s, German historians present at the opening asked: Where do we go next? Vierhaus told me later that this was when the idea of a GHI in Washington was mentioned for the first time. Following up on this, Erich Angermann convened a number of German-American conferences in the 1980s in Cologne, to find out if there was a common basis for establishing an Institute.

The GHI and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

When I came to Washington and began talking to some journalists and people at the Embassy and others, I was confronted with the rumor—and, I stress, rumor—that there was a connection between the official opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum and the German Historical Institute; even in the way that some people said: “Oh, you are the guy who is providing the German answer to the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum,” which deeply shocked me because I saw my role as a completely different one. I must note that such a connection was neither mentioned nor hinted at in any of my conversations with Minister Riesenhuber of the Forschungsministerium or at the German Embassy

with Ambassador Ruhfus. So I was shocked by the rumor, but I had to react. And I reacted in several ways: For example, I was present when the corner stone for the Holocaust Museum was laid in the fall of 1987, shortly before the official opening of the GHI that November. It was a big ceremony with Ronald Reagan; of course, I was a little figure sitting somewhere in the back, but it was important for me to be present. More importantly, I came into contact with the team that was laying the groundwork for the scholarly work of the Holocaust Memorial Museum. They had a team of scholars and we decided that we would organize an event together on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht* in November 1988. This was one of the first events of the GHI, a cooperative enterprise with the Holocaust Memorial Museum, and we agreed that Hans Mommsen should speak. It was a joint invitation and a joint event sponsored by both institutions. We also agreed that we would remain in contact and that we would cooperate in the future. Of course, they were just beginning, and we were just beginning, so the concrete cooperation was suspended. But we didn't forget it, and when the Holocaust Memorial Museum was officially opened in 1993 I was present at the ceremony and shortly afterwards there was an official visit of all the members of the GHI to the Holocaust Memorial Museum, including a private tour of the museum and research facilities. It was clear then that we would want to cooperate in the future.

Establishing the GHI and Its Academic Programs

In my view, the Institute had several different tasks or functions. First, to be a forum for the exchange of ideas between American and German historians—through conferences, lectures, workshops, through a number of different instruments. Second, to serve as a kind of *Basisstation* for German scholars abroad, especially for young German scholars who are in the United States for the first time: to provide them with the necessary knowledge and with the contacts that they need to be successful. Third, to provide information to American scholars who want to do archival research in Germany, so that they can do productive research from the first day in Germany. And, fourth, each individual research fellow should be able to pursue a research project and bring it to completion within three to five years.

The initial challenge when I arrived in Washington was overwhelming because we began with zero: there was nothing. So everything had to be arranged: furniture, stationery, office machines. In the GHI budget for 1987, the Ministry had listed one typewriter, so one of my first battles with the Ministry for Research and Technology (Bundesministerium für

Forschung und Technologie) was to convince them that we needed computers. Initially, we rented rooms, while we looked all over Washington to find a suitable building, until we finally found this beautiful building on New Hampshire Avenue. At the same time, of course, we also had to start an academic program. I strongly believed that we should not delay this. You cannot build the infrastructure and then begin with an academic program years later. So we started a spring lecture series already in 1988, after half a year, and held our first conference in the fall of 1988. It was important to me that this first conference address a topic that related to the past of German-American relations in our profession—the refugee historians. I'm still grateful to James Sheehan that he agreed to co-organize this first conference with me. We were also very grateful that several of the refugee historians themselves, who had emigrated to the United States after receiving doctorates in history in Germany before 1933, attended this conference. In that sense, it was not only a conference, but also an emotional event for all sides involved. I think this conference helped to place the Institute in the right environment and opened many doors for us. I asked Catherine Epstein to join the Institute to research a bibliography—published as *A Past Renewed* in 1993—that documented the work of the refugee historians and where their papers were located.

We then systematically planned conferences on a broad spectrum of topics ranging from medieval times and the Reformation to contemporary history. It was also very important that only half of the conferences took place in Washington, while the other half took place at American universities all over the country—in Denver, Philadelphia, Kalamazoo, and Atlanta, for instance. There are hundreds of universities and colleges, of course, and you cannot be everywhere, but we managed to hold conferences at about a dozen universities in the first two years, which I thought was important. And we organized all conferences with American partners: developing the idea together, designing the program together, organizing the actual conference together, and publishing the proceedings together. We also shared the financing, not always fifty/fifty, but all of the conferences received American financial contributions. So there was cooperation on all levels. For me, it was part of the mission that we had to improve the exchange of ideas; and you can only improve this exchange if you discuss concrete ideas with concrete people. This is also why we had a commentary after the annual lecture: this, too, was an attempt to have a German-American discussion. So if we had a German speaker, there was an American commentator, and vice-versa.

Then, of course, the library had to be started. In the library, it was our mission to help Americans who wanted to do research in Germany. We built a collection of archival guides very early on, so that if Americans asked where they could find what, we could look up in-house which

archives had which kind of holdings. Also very early on, we found out that it was an obstacle for young Americans studying German history, especially early modern history, that they couldn't read the handwriting. So we started the archival summer seminar, a tour of German archives in connection with courses in paleography, learning the old German script. Already in the first year, these archival seminars attracted some of the best students from the best American universities. The task was to find concrete ways of how to fulfill our mission: archival tours, archival guides, and so on. There were two Washington institutions that were particularly important for us: the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) and the Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University, which had just been founded. In order to establish regular, long-term relations with both institutions, I was able to obtain a special grant from a German foundation. This allowed us to start the Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar in cooperation with Georgetown and a series of postdoctoral fellowships in cooperation with the AICGS.

With Erich Angermann as the head of the Institute's Academic Advisory Council, it was clear that the Institute would play an important role for the *Amerikanisten* in Germany. And we had *Amerikanisten* in the GHI team from the beginning. But, at the same time, the mission of the Institute was much broader. When it came to conferences and workshops, we had to make sure that the *Amerikanisten* would occupy no more than a third of the program. Regarding scholarships we also established a certain quota. The German *Amerikanisten* understood this very well. The one group that was a bit more insistent in this regard were the German-Americans in the United States. I made it clear that the Institute had an interest in German-Americans as a part of a multinational scene in the United States, but that we had a much broader mission.

The GHI's Relationship with the Ministry of Research and Technology

It was my strong belief that the GHI should not only systematically cover different fields of history, but also address earlier periods. For this I found support in the Academic Advisory Council but not from the Ministry. The academic program was approved by the Advisory Council, and as long as they supported me, things were alright. But, from the beginning, there was some criticism by some officials in the Ministry who wanted the Institute to focus on contemporary history. I responded that we had to work in areas in which American and German historians had common interests and that one of these areas certainly was medieval history. So we organized a medieval history seminar and I'm very glad that this interest has been continued in recent years. The Ministry also never supported

that the Institute organized conferences on historiography, cultural history or religious history. But I insisted that these are fields in which American colleagues were very interested. Another area of disagreement with people from the Ministry concerned what they called “the dark sides” of German history, the National-Socialist past. I argued that topics relating to the Nazi period were a key testing ground for cooperation and that, if we did not convene conferences on such topics, we would have failed in our mission. The sentence that I heard in the Ministry, especially after unification, was: “Ist das noch nötig?” Why look back to the dark sides of the German past? “Yes,” I said, “das ist noch nötig.” And I insisted that the Institute continue addressing the Nazi past. In this regard I had complete support from the German ambassador and the embassy, by the way. Ambassador Ruhfus understood that historians have a different agenda from political foundations. After all, there were a number of German political foundations in Washington—as well as the cultural branch of the Embassy—so they did not need another political foundation.

There was one big crisis in 1989. Early that year, the Ministry indicated that there were extra funds available for the celebration of forty years of the Federal Republic of Germany: up to 200,000 Marks for a big conference. I said: I don’t need that much, I can have a great conference for half that sum. Shortly after that I received a call from Charles Maier at the Center for European Studies at Harvard, whom I knew from my time in Harvard. Maier said “We’ve been thinking about organizing an event on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Federal Republic. Could we do this together?” I gladly accepted, delighted that the German Historical Institute—just two years old—would be cooperating with world-famous Harvard University. So I flew up to Boston, and we agreed on a program, and I sent the program to Bonn asking for the promised funding. And I received a veto from Bonn on the grounds that our proposed program was too critical of the Federal Republic; they did not want certain speakers on the program. I responded that the program was mutually agreed on with Harvard and that we did not want to have a *Jubelfeier*. The point was to have a critical assessment of the Federal Republic. The Ministry said that under these circumstances we would not get the funding. I then talked to the head of the Academic Advisory Council, which held an emergency meeting, at which Ministry and the Advisory Council clashed. I gratefully remember the support that I got from Karl-Dietrich Bracher, Peter Graf Kielmannsegg, Wolfgang Mommsen, Thomas Nipperdey, and Rudolf Vierhaus. I didn’t have to do much talking myself. The only thing I said was: If you don’t give us the money, Harvard has enough money to put on the conference, and we will proceed with the conference with or without German funding. In the end, the

Ministry gave in and said they would support the conference financially. But this was a serious crisis because the autonomy of the academic program was at stake. I was determined to give up my post and return to Germany if I did not prevail. (I had a contract with the University of Kiel that I could return to my position with six months' notice.)

Criticism from the Ministry continued to a certain degree. Prior to the opening of the Holocaust Museum in 1993, Werner Weidenfeld, the German government's special coordinator for German-American relations, visited Washington and asked the German cultural organizations to organize programs to accompany the Museum's opening. I agreed and organized a spring lecture series for 1993 that presented recent American research on the Third Reich. But when I visited the Ministry in Bonn, I was sharply criticized for doing that and I heard that sentence once again: "Ist das noch nötig?" By that time I had already been offered the position of director at the Max-Planck Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen. While the Academic Council recommended an extension of my contract until retirement age, the accumulation of conflicts over the years had been such that the Ministry seemed to be glad to be rid of me. At least, that was my impression. So I went to Göttingen in the fall of 1993.

The *Friends of the GHI*

I realized very early on that American historians were underrepresented in the GHI's two decision-making and advisory bodies: the Foundation Council (*Stiftungsrat*) and the Academic Advisory Council (*Beirat*). The *Stiftungsrat* consisted of representatives of the Ministry of Research and Technology (chair), the Foreign Ministry, the Max-Planck Society, and two German members of the *Beirat*. The *Beirat* consisted of eight historians: six Germans and two Americans. So the American input into the organizational structure was minimal. First, I tried to fill the ninth *Beirat* seat with an American; this was declined. That's when I had the idea of creating an informal body of "friends of the institute," in which American organizations and colleagues would be represented and would have an informal voice in the Institute. I discussed this idea with Mack Walker and Konrad Jarausch, and they were very helpful and explained whom to approach. That's how the *Friends of the German Historical Institute* were founded, with representatives from the Conference Group for Central European History, the American Historical Association, the German Studies Association, and the Society of German-American Studies. There was the additional idea that if we received donations, those could go to the *Friends of the GHI*, and the *Friends* could then finance certain things. But the most important goal was to have a group of American historians

who would be close to the Institute. And the *Friends* have, in fact, become a vital and productive part of the Institute's affairs.

Unachieved Goals and Hopes for the Future of the Institute

There were several things that I would have liked to achieve, but was not able to. The first was to create a position for a development officer to do fundraising. I did not want to give up a research fellow position, but asked the Ministry for an additional position. I said: Authorize the position for five years, and if within five years this position does not finance itself, plus bring in extra money, we will drop it. Once we were in this building, the Institute had a highly visible profile, creating the chance for a development officer to operate very successfully. But the Ministry declined this request. The second thing that I would have liked to have achieved was to start a GHI *dependance*, a regional branch office, somewhere in the West. The United States is so large that you cannot get everything done from Washington. It's as if you had an Institute for European History located in Lisbon—with no representation in Paris, Rome, Berlin or Moscow. It's very difficult to have an operation that does justice to the colleagues out there in the West, Northwest, and Canada. A third objective that I was unable to achieve was the establishment of an English-language book series with translations of recent German research on specific topics, for example, recent German research on Weimar, on the post-1945 period, and so on. There are many American historians of European history who do not read German. If you do not present the results of German research to them in English, they will not take note of it. I found a publisher, but I could not find the necessary money for translations from German into English.

My main hope for the future of the GHI is that it will continue to foster dialogue and cooperation with our American colleagues. This involves contacting American colleagues at academic meetings such as the annual meetings of the AHA and the GSA, and developing concrete cooperative projects with them. In particular, I hope that the GHI will succeed in drawing the new middle generation of American historians of Germany—the scholars who are now in their forties—as well as the younger generation of junior scholars into cooperation with the Institute.

In closing, I want to say that I could not have done the work here without the trust of American colleagues. And I want to thank all of them for placing their trust not only in the German Historical Institute, but also in me as a person. I was very fortunate to have deputy directors who were extremely helpful. I owe special thanks to Christof Mauch for carrying on some of the ideas and expanding some of the projects that I had

envisioned in the beginning and was not able to carry out. He brought the activities of the Institute to a new level. In closing, I want to send my best wishes for a successful directorship to Hartmut Berghoff, the incoming director of the GHI. And, last but not least, I want to thank my wife, who gave up certain professional plans at home and came to Washington for an extended period of time and supported me from beginning to end in a very generous and helpful manner.

Interview transcribed by GHI intern Anne Kurr and edited by Richard Wetzell.