

## Gert Niers (1943-2016) In Memoriam

Gert Niers is a name well known to readers of *GL*, as he served as Associate Editor from 2003 to 2013. I first came to know him in the 1970s, when he was Editor of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung und Herold* and we corresponded regarding German-American history, literature and culture. Thereafter, he invited me to serve as Ohio News Editor for the newspaper and write about German-American events, history and culture in the Ohio Valley region for a section entitled the "Ohio Seite" or "Ohio Page," which I edited for several years. In the course of time, I came to know him well, and wrote the following article about his life and work, which appeared in my book *German-Americana: Selected Essays* (2009). It is reprinted here in memoriam of Gert Niers, friend and colleague, who passed away on Friday, August 5, 2016.

**Gert Niers is a name synonymous with excellence in the German-American press.** After coming to America in the 1970s, the German immigrant youth swiftly rose to chief editorial positions at the major German-language newspapers of the country: the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung und Herold* and *Aufbau*. His high-quality journalism soon won him accolades on both sides of the Atlantic, including feature articles in the *New York Times* and the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

Werner Gert Niers, who has always gone by his middle name, was born in Dresden in 1943, a turning point year during World War II. Fortunately, his parents had seen the handwriting on the wall, and made the life-saving decision to move west to Oberhausen, his father's hometown. The family thereby escaped the dreadful fire-bombing of Dresden on February 14, 1945. At the time of the bombardment, Gert Niers, his mother, and grandmother stayed with family relatives in Wolfen, a town well out of reach of events in Dresden.

Another *Glücksfall*, or stroke of good fortune, would bring him to America. After growing up in Oberhausen, he went on to study at the University of Cologne, and then to the University of Freiburg where he met an American student, Thelma Lynn Hurley, his future wife. Like many immigrants who follow friends or relatives to the New World, Niers adopted this pattern of migration: he came to America in 1971 and married Thelma, now a teacher of German. They settled in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, where they raised a family.

After learning the basics of production at an American newspaper in Lakewood, New Jersey, another fortunate turn in life took place when he per chance saw an issue of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung und Herold* at a newsstand and applied for a job at the paper. Quickly sensing the

newcomer's talents, the publisher of the nation's oldest German-language newspaper (established in 1834) hired Niers as News Editor in 1973. Soon the paper carried his articles, essays, reviews and interviews with German and German-American authors, which increasingly built the national readership of the *Staats* in the 1970s. His column, "Deutschamerikanische Literaturnachrichten" or "German-American Literary News," was especially popular for its coverage of the latest publications by and about German-Americans.

In 1978, he moved on to *Aufbau*, the newspaper founded by German Jewish exiles in 1934, where Niers rose to become Chief Editor. Here he demonstrated the same excellence in journalism for which he had now established a national reputation and wrote many articles about the German Jewish refugee generation, as well as about the many exile authors who had settled in New York City.

Niers developed his own unique journalistic voice. He writes: "What I found most intriguing during my editorial work was the German-language discourse in this country: there was the 'old school' of sophisticated journalism as it had been practiced in Berlin and in Vienna, particularly in the coverage of the arts, and there was the new American influence, a much more subjective, less academic style, which encouraged the author to speak up as the narrative and as the biographic ego." Niers' work may therefore best be described as a German-American synthesis of journalistic styles from the Old and New world.

His interest in the writings of German-American authors also led him to begin doctoral studies at Rutgers University, where he completed a dissertation on the topic that appeared in book form as *Frauen schreiben im Exil*, a pioneering study of German Jewish writers Margarete Kollisch, Ilse Blumenthal-Weiss, and Vera Lachmann. He accepted a fulltime teaching position for French and German at Ocean County College, New Jersey, in 1992, but continued to write as a freelance journalist and scholar.

His multilingual talents served him well, and readers of *German Life* no doubt have followed his bilingual columns on various topics. Aside from his German-American projects, he also reviewed works of contemporary French literature. A German-language volume of prose and poetry by Gert Niers came out in 1992 under the title *Wortgrund noch* (Still Word Ground). A collection of his lyric texts has also been translated into English as: *Landing Attempts: Selected Poems*. Reviewing this collection, Jerry Glenn writes that "direct evidence that the author is a German-American is found with some regularity in the prose...The architecture of Germantown, Pennsylvania, is reminiscent of a German town; the absence of skyscrapers in Washington reminds the author of Europe," for example. Additionally, Niers edited a journal devoted to German and German-American culture, *Schatzkammer der deutschen Sprache, Dichtung und Geschichte*, published

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at the Foreign Language Department of the University of South Dakota. Since 2003, Niers also served as Associate Editor of *German Life*.

Perhaps it was not *Schicksal*, or fate, but rather *Glück*, or good fortune that ultimately brought Niers all the way from the Saxon Florence on the Elbe to America, but there is no question that it was his exceptional style of writing that acquired him the reputation as the foremost journalist and editor of today's German-language press and a noteworthy author as well. A project now underway is his autobiography which no doubt will provide us with an inside view into the workings of the German-American newspaper business, as well as the life and work of one of the leading German-American journalists of our time.

Note: Gert Niers spent several years working on his autobiography, which appeared as: *Arrived at Last: An Immigrant Narrative* (AuthorHouse, 2014).

Don Heinrich Tolzmann



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### Dr. Joe Wendel Honored

Dr. Joe Wendel was recently honored with the Freedom Award at the 55th Annual Captive Nations Dinner in Cleveland, sponsored by the American Nationalities Movement in Ohio. In 1952 he immigrated to America along with his family from the southern Austrian state of Kärnten, finding a new home in Cleveland. For many years he was a teacher and administrator in the public schools there but also became active in German-American community affairs.

In 1955, he founded a German band, the Joe Wendel Orchestra,

which has played from coast to coast and from Canada to the Caribbean, but his major contribution no doubt consists of having served more than half a century as the host of German radio programs. In 1961, he became the host of a German radio program in Cleveland, and has been on the air ever since, currently with two programs on Saturday (WCPN 90.3 FM) and Sunday (WCSB FM 89.3). Congratulations to Dr. Wendel for his contributions to the German heritage and best wishes for continued success!

Don Heinrich Tolzmann

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