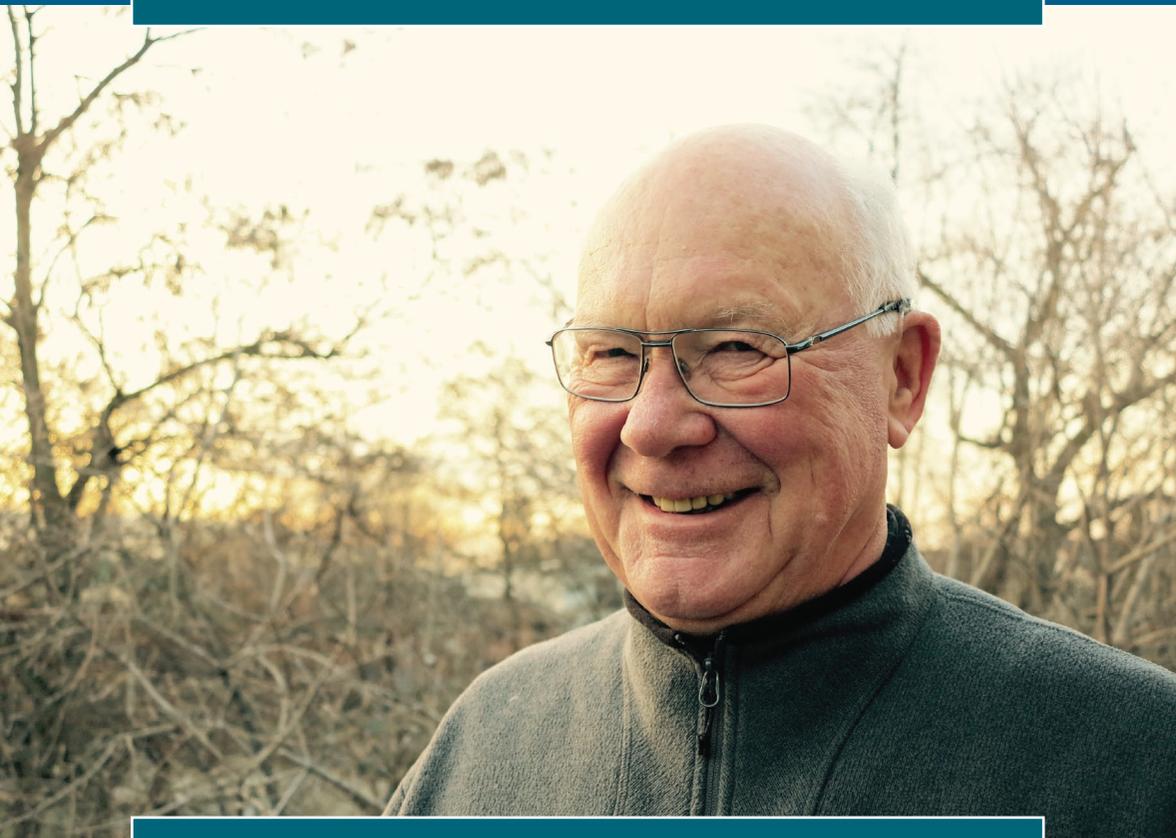


Dieter Misgeld

A Philosopher's Journey from Hermeneutics to Emancipatory Politics

Hossein Mesbahian and Trevor Norris



SensePublishers



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Life and Works	17
Chapter 2: Gadamer and Hermeneutics	77
Chapter 3: Habermas and Modernity	105
Chapter 4: Postmodernity	135
Chapter 5: Rorty and Neopragmatism	145
Chapter 6: Education	151
Chapter 7: West/East: Clash or Dialogue?	169
Chapter 8: Canada and the World	179
Chapter 9: Third World Perspective	199
Chapter 10: Human Rights	217
Chapter 11: Closing Thoughts on Philosophy	227
Appendix I: “The Distinctiveness of Europe, the <i>Geisteswissenschaften</i> and a Global Society: Reflections on Some Recent Writings by Hans-Georg Gadamer,” by Dieter Misgeld	233
Appendix II: Dieter Misgeld’s Retirement Speech	249
Appendix III: Selected Bibliography of Dieter Misgeld	261
About the Authors	267

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INTRODUCTION

Professor Dieter Misgeld taught Philosophy of Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto for over thirty years. When we first arrived at OISE as graduate students, considerable mystique already surrounded Professor Misgeld. Many attested to his brilliance, range of knowledge, and at times intimidating personality. But there was also considerable curiosity about his intellectual shifts and what led him to turn away from philosophy. As described by the former chair of the philosophy program, “[F]or the first fifteen years when Dieter arrived in the philosophy of education group, he continually berated us for not being philosophical enough. For the last fifteen, he accused us all of being too philosophical.”¹ We were intrigued by how someone who had received such an exceptional education from thinkers who have shaped much of 20th century thought could eventually turn away from philosophy and describe it as no longer useful. It is this transformation that we sought to understand.

Philosophical biographies are not new; there are countless biographies about all of the great philosophers in history. They are sought out for their capacity to cast light on the person behind the ideas, the key transitions in their thought, and the ways in which life experiences impact intellectual development. What emerges from their study is the grounding of thought in the personal character of philosophical reflection, and the drama of ideas as they unfold throughout a lifetime.

Philosophical biographies are certainly not as exciting or dramatic as the lives of military leaders or political figures, adventurers and explorers. Perhaps the most extreme and famous example of this is Immanuel Kant, who never in his life ventured far from his village. It is said that townspeople and shopkeepers could set their clocks by the predictable routine of his daily walks.

Every thinker invariably goes through changes. To speak otherwise would imply that a thinker establishes their philosophical position as fixed and unchanging, based on reference to a permanent Archimedean point from which to view the world. This is characteristic of an age that is dominated by the assumption that knowledge and human understanding is contingent on distance and impartiality and the removal of human interests from the knowing process. Only philosophy under the influence of modern science would suggest that we can know the objects of human thought better as the knower moves away from them rather than through personal involvement. For insofar as philosophy is based on subjective experience and particular perspectives rather than unalterable positivistic method, positions will invariably shift through time.

Misgeld is quite an unconventional thinker—not the usual leftist or radical, yet not at all rightist; not a conventional secular thinker, yet not an anti-religious Marxist. He was not in any way a typical philosopher or writer, but had a role

INTRODUCTION

that would seem strange to many and difficult to explain to all. It soon became apparent to us that Misgeld defied easy categorization: he was political when he should have been philosophical, historical when a political response would have been expected.

Because we have both been drawn to philosophy and sought to understand why Misgeld gradually turned away from it. Our central motive and guiding question is: Why would someone educated in one of the most exciting intellectual environments of the 20th century slowly turn away from philosophy? We interviewed Misgeld in the fall of 2005, asking a total of 75 questions. In the following article we explore three central factors that influenced this shift: his reading of Richard Rorty, his personal encounters with Buddhism, and his sometimes radical reflections on global politics and the new security regime, particularly in the context of Latin America.

The questions we asked Misgeld begin with his arrival in Canada and journey to take up his first university position in the icy and isolated northern mining town of Sudbury, Ontario, and then his career teaching philosophy of education at the University of Toronto. We then turn to his tumultuous childhood during World War II, and then move to his years in Heidelberg where he studied philosophy (classical and modern) with Hans Georg Gadamer, participated in debates about Hegel and Kant with Heidegger, and saw the beginning of Habermas' career. Thematically, we explore Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Heidegger's politics, Habermas' account of modernity and modernization, and Misgeld's reflections on the limitations of postmodernism and the influence of Rorty. Educational issues include the influence of the Frankfurt School on the development of critical pedagogy, the role of the modern university in global politics, and shifts in education previously understood as self-formation (*Bildung* and *Paideia*) now couched in terms of students as 'clients'. We conclude with global political issues such as East/West relations, the fate of Canada in the world, and the importance of a Third World perspective and human rights.

Misgeld provides a dramatic account of his first arrival in Canada to take a position at Laurentian University in Sudbury, and the shock of this new country so far from the intellectual richness and picture-postcard beauty of Heidelberg:

I arrived in Montréal in 1968. I arrived by boat from Liverpool on the Empress of Canada, which was a boat which had carried many immigrants from the British Isles to Canada. The reason I went there was because I had a contract to teach in a college affiliated with Laurentian University in Sudbury. They were paying for the trip. It allowed me to transport our family goods, the furniture, and so on. After arriving in Montréal, I continued by an overnight bus to Sudbury in Northern Ontario. I remember that very early in the morning, past Ottawa I looked out the window, and all I saw was emptiness. There were very few towns. I was not used to that. Germany is very, very populated; every

ten minutes, there is a village or a small town. There are no empty spaces. In Canada, there were rocks and very low trees, which I was not used to either, which made the landscape look even emptier. This is called the Canadian Shield, though I didn't know that was what it was called. That was really my first impression. This very empty landscape was something really completely new for me. I found myself in a very small and new university, the campus of which was outside of the town between two lakes. Heidelberg had been very different because the university was spread through the city; there wasn't just one campus location. I spent most of my time in the humanities and philosophy. We were in some of the oldest buildings, some from the 17th century. We were always in the center of this old town. And here I was on this new campus. This Canadian university had been built just before I arrived, and had been built on top of rock. Sudbury is known for its huge nickel mines, especially Inco International, formerly a big US company, and tall smokestacks dominated the landscape, including the tallest smokestack in the world. There was smoke bellowing out and spreading throughout the area. Not only that, but in the process of nickel refining of extracting nickel from the rock, chemicals had been used which also enter the air and did much damage to the area, as had open pit mining and open pit smelters in the past. The rocks look burned. I'd never seen anything like this—black. This was my experience of a place that was as far away as possible from anything I had ever encountered in Heidelberg. Philosophy or theory or any of these fields, especially my German traditions that I knew, seemed to matter very little.

Misgeld describes how the invitation to move from Heidelberg to Canada came about:

After completing my doctorate in Heidelberg with Hans-Georg Gadamer, I had begun a second program of studies in social psychology and phenomenological psychology, supported by a Volkswagen grant and on the recommendation of the Director of the Institute for Psychology with whom I had contact. I wanted to move into social science, after much classical philosophy. But very soon I got tired of having to study areas which really did not interest me, such as statistics and physiological psychology. I had expected to be able to move into my areas of interest more directly. An acquaintance from Quebec who had studied in Heidelberg and knew that I was fluent in English and had a reading knowledge of French, suggested that I come to Sudbury, the new Laurentian University where he taught and I could then see what I wanted to do next. I accepted, as did my then spouse, also realizing a strong desire for greater personal independence. In Sudbury I taught social and political philosophy, philosophy of culture, philosophy of the social sciences, also authors such as Kant or Heidegger etc. I also taught existentialism and phenomenology. My colleagues recommended that I teach these courses, second year undergraduate courses, and then mostly third and fourth year, plus extension courses for extra income

INTRODUCTION

(we had debts). Thus, I taught 12 hours of formal teaching per week, as well as teaching during the summers. Sometimes more.

What is in the background of this is that I had wanted to come to North America, primarily to the US, having graduated from High School in Chicago as an exchange student. I had in fact applied to the New School for Social Research in order to study social science, but was told that this did not make sense, given that I already had a doctorate in a field not altogether different. But this also was the time of the Vietnam War, and it seemed important to me to maintain distance from the US, to develop a critical position, something which accompanies me to this day.

From this beginning in Sudbury, Misgeld moved to the University of Toronto. Although he was new to the field of philosophy of education and to a faculty of education, he gained familiarity with it while teaching about the Frankfurt School at OISE. At the time, the very active intellectual life at the University of Toronto included the famous literary theorist Northrop Frye, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, political theorist Allan Bloom, political economist and critic of liberalism C.B. Macpherson, Canadian nationalist and political theorist George Grant, and even Misgeld's former teacher Gadamer who took a position for a few years at McMaster in the 1980s, and usually taught there for a few months in fall.

During my third year in Canada, and after an earlier visit to Frankfurt with Juergen Habermas' team, I met Albrecht Wellmer, close associate of Habermas and important Frankfurt school philosopher in his own right. He was then going to OISE for a couple of years and suggested that I consider replacing him there, should he get an offer from New York (and later Berlin, which he did) and should I be accepted at OISE. I left Sudbury after having taught there for five years, also having been quite involved in faculty organizing activities (faculty association, university reform) and some politics (Canadian independence movement of the time). This then led to my planning to stay in Canada, given the attractiveness of the academic environment, and Toronto, as a city of great diversity.

At OISE I taught a few courses similar to the ones taught in Sudbury, except that they were now geared toward education. But given my growing affiliation with Juergen Habermas' project, or my interest in following it and reconstructing it, more and more elements of Frankfurt school thought became part of my work. This even included pragmatism and John Dewey, also as an alternative to the form of theorizing represented by the Frankfurt school, and building on Habermas' early remark that the two thinkers who had had the greatest influence on him in his youth had been Karl Marx and John Dewey. Thus I taught Democracy and Education more and more frequently, always differently, focusing on Dewey or Freire, or Buber, plus some Habermas, and later Rorty. I also taught School and Society, which I used to learn more about

standard philosophy of education. Later, after 1989 or so, human rights and human rights education as well as human rights theory, became an important interest. For I had then begun to work in Chile, a few years later in Mexico, often with groups in human rights and education. I had also begun to learn Spanish and to work with organisations in Toronto, such as The Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. I joined the board of this organisation at some point and worked as a research director for them for a year in an applied and extremely practical project.

This work also led me to participate in activities of the Association of Moral Education, publish a special issue of the Journal of Moral Education with Mary Brabeck, and I became president for a year of the AME. While at OISE I also had the chance to teach the development of the Frankfurt School, its social philosophy, in the department of philosophy. I also taught hermeneutic philosophy and always brought my full time OISE graduate students together with my U of T group. In this way I was fortunate to consolidate an unusual approach to philosophy and philosophy of education in Toronto, under more flexible conditions than I would have found in Germany.

Turning now to his childhood and education, Misgeld was born just as World War II erupted, “the overwhelming presence and experience of my childhood.” His father was held in a Russian prisoner of war camp for three years, having been drafted into Hitler’s army in 1939, and as a result he was raised primarily by his mother. The family fled their war-ruined town, becoming refugees within their own country, and struggling to survive for some time. Because of the tremendous social turmoil in Germany after the war, he says we children were raised “like orphans in the wild.”

The war proved very disruptive for Misgeld’s education:

I didn’t read much until I was eight. In fact, my mother said she was giving up. She thought I’d never learn to read. I didn’t have dyslexia; I had no illness. I was intelligent enough to learn. If you ask me why, it is because there were other priorities. I was surviving in the countryside [and] in the street. I was part of the war. School was an artificial world. It closed after four months before I even knew what it was. The other important experience was looking for food. I was looking for things to eat all the time. It was nothing different. Whether you went with a teacher, or on your own, you were always looking for something to eat. Thus the last week of school we spent looking for berries in a forest.

Misgeld comments on the chaotic state of the German university after the war:

There was a lack of organization and structure and bureaucracy. On the one hand, there was an incredible openness, and on the other, it was a bit like the child in the War: you lacked many things but you were also extremely free because the adult world didn’t function so they couldn’t impose their rules on younger people as easily.

INTRODUCTION

As a result, “much of my studying was done without teachers. It was continuing this wild education that I had had as a child because most of my exchanges were with friends.”

Misgeld’s interest in philosophy grew as the war years passed, motivated by a reaction against the situation in Germany at the time. His learning was quite self-directed:

I think I began to study philosophy out of rebelliousness. In the last year of high school, I’d begun reading Heidegger and Christian existentialism, which led me to an interest in Protestant theology, having been brought up as a Catholic. I had no guidance, I had no teacher. I began studying Being and Time completely on my own. I think something that did draw me to philosophy, maybe unconsciously at the time, was a certain pessimism. Something that does come through with Heidegger and his resistance to modernity is the sense of despair, that there may not be a good solution. There is a rejection of expectations of progress, of “a better world.” This willingness to suffer through the disillusionment with various great projects of modernity drew me to philosophy, because one could not really be very hopeful about the future of human beings. I was drawn to philosophy not because it would have explanations where other disciplines did not, but it would allow us to express our fundamental sense of things being out of joint, and without necessarily having a remedy.

And so he went in search of a teacher:

I decided to move from Bonn to Heidelberg because of Hans Georg Gadamer, because I discovered Truth and Method one day on the shelves in Bonn. The beautiful new university library, right on the Rhine, had a practice of displaying new acquisitions, and I came across the book Truth and Method. I looked at it and thought this was wonderful. I didn’t know anything about Gadamer before I saw this book, and then I went to Heidelberg. Before I met Gadamer I really didn’t have an academic teacher who was formative for me. He became formative for me because then I was looking for someone to guide me. I knew I needed someone. I wondered: where did Heidegger and this thought that I jumped into, like Being and Time and these existentialist themes, come from? I felt the need to have someone who really is, in the best sense, an academic teacher. In his older world Gadamer had the same experience, as you see when you read his autobiography.

He also talks about the personal relationship that may develop between an academic and his student:

The personal relation was very important. If something changed, you could feel like an abandoned child. It was a bit of a father/son relation. Gadamer was a master at exploiting it, for being a very formative teacher. He was a very formative teacher, probably the most formative in German post-war philosophy. But it was hard to get away from that.

Misgeld contrasts that particular form of relationship with that prevalent in contemporary North American education:

I always stress that we, as academic teachers in North America can never have the influence on students that someone like Gadamer had on me and many others. There is no one equal to Gadamer for me. With him, we grew into an older world. When Gadamer died, we lost a philosopher who was a living memory of our past.

However, problems began to emerge in the course of his dissertation. Gadamer insisted Misgeld work through more of the Western philosophical tradition before writing on Heidegger, beginning with Husserl's works. But Dieter was already becoming too interested in social theorists like Adorno and his critique of Heidegger, and through him, Habermas. At the same time that he was becoming interested in the newly-formed Frankfurt School, Gadamer asked him to co-teach a seminar on the Pre-Socratics: "Concerning the dissertation, in some ways I stopped writing what I wanted to write because it became clear to me that I had to leave the context in which I had worked with Gadamer."

Adorno provoked a major shift for Misgeld:

When I began to read Adorno in the 1960s, the whole intellectual universe changed for me. It was a direct attack on Heidegger and ontology and the talk about authenticity. I suddenly became aware that I had never learned to think sociologically. It was a bridge for me to the social sciences from philosophy and hermeneutics. Adorno stood for the urbane, incredibly sophisticated, artistically, culturally advanced world of metropolis like Frankfurt and Berlin, very important during the years of the Weimar Republic and centres of resistance to Nazism environments which Heidegger has always resented. Adorno was much more cosmopolitan, and could detect Heidegger's references to a peasant existence, which he says is archaic.

Gadamer had resisted many of the features of the modern world. Misgeld described Gadamer as erudite but old fashioned:

Gadamer always said he was not Heidegger, that he would never compare himself. I would say, his work is rooted in a form of erudition which is very hard to have in our day, and hardly exists any more. For example, he could easily converse with people doing very highly concentrated and specialized studies in classical philosophy. He was extremely erudite, learned in the old fashioned, scholarly sense, and had a vast knowledge of different fields and different historical epochs. I think this is going to be hard to find. In some ways it makes him inaccessible, because no one can put the Western tradition together like that, the way he did. But at the same time, he is sort of old fashioned. I think the world he understood ended with the Weimar Republic. Although he was quite astute in observations on politics, they were always

INTRODUCTION

very cautious, reserved, without deeper commitment to political intervention or convictions. He was quite capable of living in the modern world, but he was not a friend of it, sometimes even to the point that he said these very amusing things, for example that "privacy was lost with the invention of the telephone."

Although Misgeld is no longer as deeply interested in philosophy as previously, as a former student of Gadamer he is well versed in hermeneutics and philosophy. Misgeld stated in his contribution to a book on Gadamer that "Gadamer takes a strongly anti-utopian position, which includes the rejection of emancipatory politics as a real possibility of social transformation."² Therefore, his political position is thought to be deeply conservative. In his "Is Hermeneutics Necessarily Conservative?"³ Gary Madison responded critically to Misgeld, arguing that this is not a fair assessment. He acknowledges that while Misgeld does clearly show that Gadamer takes a strongly anti-utopian position, Madison asks if Gadamer's anti-utopianism necessarily makes him a 'conservative'. Misgeld responds:

My difference with Madison already emerges when you look at the title of his essay. I would never use the phrase 'necessarily'. If he means to ask if hermeneutics is 'necessarily' conservative, no, it's not and nor is Gadamer's.

Misgeld adds that there is not a correlation of necessity between anti-utopianism and the rejection of emancipatory politics, insofar as the latter can be a search for a real possibility of social transformation. Misgeld asserts that he neither argued that hermeneutics was necessarily conservative, nor that Gadamer's anti-utopianism necessarily made him a conservative:

What I was arguing there was that Gadamer's understanding of politics is deeply conservative, in the sense that he has tremendous doubts about our capacity to change and a major change such as has happened in the formation of European modernity can be extremely risky. To him, large scale change is best not aimed at or planned, because it can rarely, if ever, be achieved. More than anything, comprehensive planning is the problem for Gadamer.

In spite of this, it does not at all follow that Misgeld lacks admiration for Gadamer. He suggests there is no necessary antagonistic relationship between admiration for a mentor and a critical attitude towards some aspects of his thought. Misgeld remembered Gadamer as the professor whose door was always open to students, as the one who joined them in many discussions, and made philosophy an unforgettable experience.

One of the notable features of studying with Gadamer was that Heidegger was occasionally present for seminars and social outings. Gadamer would host weekly discussion groups in his home which Heidegger would occasionally attend:

There were occasions when Heidegger came and gave lectures, and we would have private seminars with him and then go out and drink wine. He would get quite annoyed with us in the seminars. He said "You're trying to translate me

back into Hegel. I'm not a Hegelian. In fact, that's what I'm trying to escape." But there were a couple of pretty belligerent and capable people who were always trying to do that. Heidegger, who was a little man, would go from table to table. He was incredibly quiet. As forceful as he was in public as a speaker, he was extremely discreet and quiet with us. I don't remember him saying much, commenting much on what he heard around the table, in a café or nice little old restaurants in country inns where we'd go and drink regional wine. This was not the Heidegger whom one had heard about, the Heidegger of 1933 who had become rector of his university, the University of Freiburg in Baden. That other, younger Heidegger was very ambitious, and wanted to be the national philosopher under Hitler. He became quite ruthless for a couple of years. There are letters which did much harm to people, which led to their being fired. As a rector, he was ruthless. My guess is that it took from about 1933 to about 1938 before he woke up a little.

Misgeld suggests that Heidegger's support for national-socialism was due to his beliefs about metaphysics and technology, combined with his naive and romantic nationalism.

Heidegger was a real National Socialist. That is my reading of Heidegger. What does that mean? A National Socialist is someone who believes that the socialist system benefits national sovereignty. Germany was to wake up as a nation, to assume its destiny as a collectivity. This would be the meaning of socialism, as the collective project of Germany as a nation to be rebuilt. For Heidegger, Germany was worth defending its history, its language, its culture. But it could not be defended and would not survive as a liberal democracy. He was not alone in that. Parts of the Left thought this as well, but his was coming from something that I think only existed in Germany, National Socialism, which the Nazis then transformed into what we always hear as just racism. But there were different forms of it. There was a form which was a kind of socialism rooted in German ethnic identity or national history and language, and was an alternative to Bolshevism on the one hand, probably even before they knew how Stalin had distorted and perverted the Communist International. On the other hand, commercial cosmopolitanism, which as many Germans such as Nietzsche saw coming from the Western liberal democracies, they perceived as rooted in commercial empires. That's not so wrong when you read history backward from the United States to Britain. Germany for them was a country in the middle. Even later, Heidegger would say this, that it was neither east nor west, neither liberal nor commercial democracy. To many Germans critical of the West at the time, the two went together. Liberal democracy would also be commercial—another phrase for capitalist—not that this realization would lead them toward Marx and his critique of capitalism. But for them, it meant that what Nietzsche would call the mentality of the merchant would prevail, on the one hand, and on the other what they saw as the collectivist proletarian

INTRODUCTION

internationalism of the Soviet Union. Germany was caught between the two. Heidegger had a commitment to Germany as a nation, as something that had been hurt and violated by the defeat of the First World War and the Versailles Treaty. He was someone who could never align himself with Marxism, but even more so he had no comprehension of it, only disdain and fear of it.

Misgeld describes Heidegger's retreat from national socialism: "It's clear when you look at some of the lectures from 1936 on that there are certain clear reservations expressed that were against Nazi ideology on race, which he says is of a degenerate metaphysical category." Yet, Misgeld certainly remains deeply critical of Heidegger:

I actually think, and I can feel it in the writing, that there had been much suffering on Heidegger's part, but that he felt that he had to deal with this himself. But that is coupled with this megalomaniacal streak, with this tendency to think that these are things only he can and only he has to answer in his work. That he felt that in his work as a thinker it would be addressed in the deepest possible way and so he didn't have to give an explanation. What comes through is that he was not a very dialogical thinker. He was not attuned to communication with others. The social dimension is like an externality to him.

It was the lack of consideration for a 'social dimension' that led Misgeld to Habermas, who he helped popularize in Canada and North America. Although Misgeld was never a student of Habermas, and his connection with him was formed primarily when he was already teaching in Canada, he has written numerous essays on several aspects of Habermas' thought, both critically and admiringly.⁴ Promoting Habermas was initiated by Gadamer: "Without Gadamer, Habermas would not have had the career that he has. It was Gadamer who recognized him very early on when one or the other among Habermas' teachers in Frankfurt had problems supporting his career." Later on, Misgeld was among those who expressed the view that Habermas should be discouraged from accepting any of the numerous offers from prestigious American universities which he had received.

I believed that he should not to leave Germany, not leave Europe. He would become one among many, as his translator, Thomas McCarthy, had mentioned to me. He'll just be another academic; he won't be a John Rawls. Habermas would never reach their stature because his way of thinking is too alien, too technical, too complex, too unclear because he tries to put together so many considerations. Why does he do that? Because he wants to combine so many different traditions. In the States, that doesn't wash, as Americans say.

Misgeld would often return to Germany in the summer to follow intellectual developments and meet with the Frankfurt critical theory group as well as Habermas himself at times.

I'd finish teaching in Toronto and then right away go to Frankfurt, because the summer semester there was in process, and would go from April until

July. I could be there for several months. You couldn't come there and not give a paper. Juergen Habermas would say, "what are you going to present? What are you doing now?" You could hardly come into his room and not get into very intensive discussions. I remember once coming to Starnberg at his Institute,⁵ and he involved me right away in this whole "speech theory" business, communicative action, types of speech action, before I entered the door. I really couldn't follow ... but I could just see what he was working on. That's just how intense he is.

Yet Misgeld is deeply critical of Habermas' theory of modernity. He regards it as too impractical.

*The problem with the concept of modernity is that it is not forceful enough as a critical contrast to modernization ideologies that come from the international financial institutions and powerful governments. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas distinguishes modernity and modernization—and then he escapes into philosophy. That is a real cop-out, because the issue is very real. Modernization theories cost lives. They destroy peasant societies, without giving a significant alternative. They feed into models that are ecologically extremely harmful. They feed into the whole mega-project way of thinking. So you only have two options: either a highly exploitative system where some people will have golf courses and swimming pools, which use enormous amounts of water; or as I've seen in Latin America, not every household would have water and people would have to walk hours to get water or they get it every second or third day. Massive inequalities: that's the future. There is no other. No modernization theory or theory of modernity I've seen is realistic enough, tough minded enough, and fearless enough, to face these situations. Philosophers are generally not capable of facing realities... Only those who share Habermas' philosophical dreams think "modernity" is a concept that describes reality. The problem with so many global or comprehensive philosophical concepts is that they have no purchase on reality.*

Misgeld easily moves from critical views on Habermas to larger questions about philosophy itself:

I've become more sceptical about theories that explain and philosophies that try to express how things are out of joint. Perhaps sceptical is not the word. I look for other remedies. I don't find them sufficiently strong as remedies... I don't want to work on developing "a theory" of anything anymore. I want to work on realities, realities of human beings. Sometimes some theorizing is useful, but I wouldn't privilege it, let's put it that way. In many ways, I think concepts never really give us the whole reality of who we are as human beings, and so it's important not to get stuck on them... Philosophy leaves everything as it is. That certainly used to be a tendency in analytic philosophy. They would

INTRODUCTION

ask: why do you want philosophy to have an impact? It has nothing to do with that; it's a second-order inquiry. You can say that analytic philosophy is fairly honest, and it downplays the importance of philosophy. But then why would anyone want to stay with philosophy if its human impact is so marginal—unless they like intellectual games. When I look for remedies for the problems, I don't look for foundations. I would look for ways of life that are sustainable for people which are not harmful.

Much of Misgeld's critical attitude towards philosophy emerges from his reading of philosopher Richard Rorty:

I think I agree with Rorty, and the post-moderns, and in the end with Heidegger, that as a foundational discipline, philosophy is no longer viable... the philosophers we have talked about represent, as Habermas honestly once said, 'Old Europe'...Rorty made me think more about theorizing and its limits. The Frankfurt School had no sense of limit. They tried to theorize the impossible, the non-theoretical and the non-utopian, while at the same time maintaining and reinforcing utopian anticipations of a society beyond what we know society to be.

These critical attitudes were deepened through his meditative practices and engagement with Zen Buddhism:

There's absolutely nothing in Western philosophy that would prepare me for the radical rejection of concepts as something that matters, as in Zen Buddhism. It's better not to look for concepts and conceptual explications.

Misgeld finds a link between Zen Buddhism and Heidegger:

Heidegger gave evocative descriptions of experiences which require a different environment, that one's relation to things is not functional but rather a lived relation of association and connecting, even with things. I learned to appreciate this through Zen Buddhist practice, where there is much emphasis on, for example, bare surfaces, where you always prefer less rather than more. Heidegger has much of that sparseness.

These reflections on Zen Buddhism led him to reconsider notions of home and homelessness in the context of his changing political identity in moving from Germany to Canada to Latin America, and from German to English to Spanish. When asked "Do you ever feel 'Canadian'? Where do you feel at home? Do you feel that such a thing is necessary or possible?," Dieter replied, "I would like to feel at home, but I actually don't feel at home anywhere." In response to his experience of homelessness as he has moved from a German youth and education to career teaching in Canada to Latin American politics, Misgeld claims that

There's only one place where one can be at home, and that's the place one has to leave. We all have to die. Homelessness is the human condition. I've learned

that from Zen. We are not made to be at home permanently: The only thing permanent is impermanence. From that point of view, I don't think it is good to be too deeply attached.

This changing political identity and diverse political experiences combined with his extensive teaching and writing about human rights, dialogue among cultures, and the Third World perspective leads him to a deep concern about the hazardous situation of the world in our day:

Whenever I think of the global situation, I get quite anxious. We may face something quite vicious for some time. When I think about our times, I don't think anyone really knows what the future holds. I think in some ways Heidegger's pessimistic vision is plausible. I think we will encounter several major political catastrophes. I am hopeful with respect to some parts of the world. Not with respect to the so-called developed industrial societies. I think they are the ones that are most endangered, and they are the world-wide danger.

Misgeld referred to various aspects of globalization which are profoundly harmful, ranging from the neglect of the interests of poorer nations and marginalized populations, a corporatist agenda intent on constricting the freedoms of individuals in the name of profit, the flow of savings into the United States rather than developing nations, and the imperialistic aspect of globalization. Misgeld also referred to the broad anti-globalization movement which includes national liberation factions, left-wing parties, environmentalists, anti-racism groups, and libertarian socialists. While reformist groups are arguing for a more humane form of capitalism, Misgeld argues for a more humane system than capitalism. While many such as Noam Chomsky have decried the lack of unity and direction in the anti-globalization movement, Misgeld believes that this lack of centralization may, in fact, be a strength.

Given our interest in philosophy we found Dieter's characterization of its lack of relevance particularly provocative. Despite his remarkable philosophical background he argues that philosophy is no longer helpful for responding to or shaping social and political change because the problems of the world today are of political rather than philosophical importance. The world is in a political rather than philosophical crisis, so it is politics rather than philosophy that is required:

I've become more sceptical about both theories that explain and philosophy as expressing how things are out of joint. Perhaps sceptical is not the word. I look for other remedies. I don't find them sufficiently strong as remedies.

Remarkably, he asserts that he has come to this conclusion via philosophy itself. Considering the stature of his teachers and the depth of his own philosophical capabilities, his insistence on the limitations of philosophy compels us to reflect on our own assumptions about the promise of philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

With Dieter Misgeld, we see the seductions of philosophy when studied among this century's greatest practitioners. We also see the reversal of conventional life narratives, which as Robert Frost claims, often begin radical and slowly turn conservative (although we do not claim this of Misgeld): "I never dared to be radical when young for fear it would make me conservative when old."⁶

Ironically, we as authors and interviewers have been motivated by things Misgeld is no longer interested in. When asked if he felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to study with and know some of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century (Gadamer, Lowith, Adorno, Heidegger, and Habermas) in such an extraordinarily dynamic intellectual environment, Misgeld responded:

I can't even see who I would be without having had that experience. I certainly feel that I am indebted to them. Fortunate is probably not the word. If I hadn't had that experience, nothing else would have touched me as it has...I could very well see ways of life that I might have chosen which would have never led to any attachment with philosophers, or theorists or philosophy, as equally good to what has happened to me, or with me, where I would have possibly been happier. I'm not sure that being part of great intellectual projects is always conducive to happiness or well-being. Sometimes simpler ways of living are preferable, but I think it would take us a long time to understand that in our culture.

What we find in Misgeld is of interest not only because of his philosophical background or remarkable transformations, but because he provokes us to understand and re-examine our own motives for philosophical reflection and to recognize the limits of philosophy. What emerges from this biographical study is both a philosophical profile of the second half of the twentieth century, and a portrait of a pedagogy of hope based on Misgeld's own utopian aspirations, emancipatory politics, and wariness about philosophy. In sum, it is not only an intellectual biography or an account of particular political positions and philosophical reflections, but a compelling life story.

In a dramatic statement, Misgeld communicates his emancipatory political project: "I already know what I ideally want; that's fairly easy—the universal emancipation of humanity from bondage and suffering where possible."

His emancipatory politics became more apparent to us when Misgeld was asked to accept the invitation from the Iranian "International Centre for Dialogue Among Civilizations."⁷ The first question he asked was if it was useful for Iranian people in their political struggle. He didn't consider the invitation to be an opportunity to go abroad and participate in an adventure. This position was also clearly articulated in his comments on an academic visit to Iran, published in "TPS Quarterly" under the title "Zarathustra's Land Beyond Good and Evil." He says there that "[h]esitating initially due to my doubts about the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 (and knowing that it had been extremely brutal in its aftermath), I accepted the invitation after President Bush's speech mentioning Iran as belonging to the 'Axis of Evil.'"⁸ This revealed something significant to us about his own political inclinations. In his

view, it was important not to accept this demonization of a country with a very rich and ancient history, so frequently abused by Western powers such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Most exceptional philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Juergen Habermas have lectured in Iran for similar reasons, believing that communication has to be maintained and opened up.

Misgeld's talk at the Iranian conference addressed the hegemonic role of the US, with reference to elements of pragmatism as its philosophical tradition, contrasting it with a Latin American vision of the Americas. Some of this work, first published in Mexico, is now being continued, especially an exchange with Argentinean friends and colleagues. The focus is on Latin American humanism (Freire, liberation theology) as an alternative to 'American' technological humanism (pragmatism). Practical commitments and work in oppositional and human rights organisations at the community level are part of this project.

We end by expressing our gratitude to our unconventional teacher, Dieter Misgeld. He encouraged us to be ourselves, to trust intuition above all else, and find our own individual path. He is the teacher of hope, vision, and creativity, who seeks to teach through paradox. Sometimes it seems he may have sent us in the wrong direction or presented an odd perspective so as to provoke a reconsideration of our philosophical assumptions. He would avoid providing answers, but compelled independent thought. It was inspirational to witness such an unconventional figure teach something for which he had such passion. Beyond his significant impact on the development of our own intellectual orientations, his perspective on the world's philosophical and political issues presents an exciting and new cross-cultural perspective that should be broadly engaged. While Misgeld's life narrative is certainly unconventional, it raises questions that may be of interest to the larger academic community.

Misgeld says of Gadamer that "With him, we grew into an older world." Yet with Misgeld, just as we grow into the world of philosophy, we are cast off into the turmoil and troubles of the present global political system. Yet through these shifts, Misgeld's thought resonates with wisdom and inspiration, offering a refreshing perspective on human values and lives.

NOTES

- ¹ Dwight Boyd, personal correspondence, 2006.
- ² Dieter Misgeld, "Poetry, Dialogue and Negotiation: Liberal Culture and Conservative Politics in Hans-Georg Gadamer's Thought." In *Festival of Interpretations: Essays on Hans-Georg Gadamer's Work* edited by K. Wright (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 170.
- ³ G.B.Madison. "Is Hermeneutics Necessarily Conservative?" <http://www.ualberta.ca/~di/csh/csh10/Madison.html>. Accessed July 21, 2005.
- ⁴ Misgeld, D. (1976) "Critical Theory and Hermeneutics: The Debate between Gadamer and Habermas." In J. O'Neill (Ed.), *On Critical Theory* (NY: Seabury Press): 164–184; Misgeld, D. (1985) "Critical Hermeneutics versus Neoparsonianism? A Critique of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action," Special Issue on Jürgen Habermas. *New German Critique* 35, (Spring/Summer 1985): 55–83; Review of J. Habermas, "Justifications and Applications," *Review of Metaphysics* 48, no. 3

INTRODUCTION

(March 1995): 657–58; Review of J. Habermas, “Knowledge of Human Interests.” *Dialogue* 11, no. 4 (December 1972): 639–643; Review of J. Habermas, “Toward a Rational Society,” *Dialogue* 11, no. 1 (March 1972): 155–159.

- ⁵ Habermas was a director (one of two) at the *Max Planck Institut fuer Erforschung der Lebensbedingungen der technisch-wissenschaftlichen Welt* at Starnberg, Bavaria, FRG.
- ⁶ This statement is attributed to Robert Frost. Alternatively, consider Sir Winston Churchill: “Any man who is under 30, and is not a liberal, has no heart; and any man who is over 30, and is not a conservative, has no brains.”
- ⁷ In response to the proposal made by the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United Nations’ General Assembly declared 2001 as the year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. The Iranian government subsequently founded the International Centre for Dialogue among Civilizations (ICDAC) in February 1999. ICDAC is primarily an organization intended to promote the concept of a global structure based on mutual understanding and tolerance. For more information about the center see its official website: <http://www.dialoguecentre.org>, (Accessed July 21, 2005). Misgeld participated in an international seminar on “Centre and Periphery” organized by ICDAC’s Department of Philosophy May 1–2, 2002, in Isfahan, Iran. Twenty one lectures (eight by Iranian thinkers) were delivered during the two-day event. Participants came from a variety of countries including the U.S., and speakers included Fred Dallmayr, Mahmood Dolatabadi, and Daryoosh Shayegan.
- ⁸ Dieter Misgeld, “Zarathustra’s Land Beyond Good and Evil,” *TPS Quarterly* 3, no. IV (July 2002): 3.

CHAPTER 1

LIFE AND WORKS

QUESTION 1

Our first question of this section is about your childhood, your parents, your experiences in Germany before you left it for the US. You mentioned in your retirement speech that you were born a little more than a year before World War II began. Having more information helps us and our readers to understand the circumstances in which you grew up.

Misgeld

You're asking about my childhood and experiences in Germany. I was born close to the beginning of World War II. I was born in 1938 which I think is when Hitler had already reoccupied the Rheinland,¹ then a kind of French protectorate. Later on, in 1939, Austria was 'fused' with Germany, and then he marched into Czechoslovakia, before entering Poland, which triggered the war. That is usually treated as the beginning of the War, because under International Law, the League of Nations' Agreements at the time, that was a completely illegal invasion—nothing like what happened now with the Iraq War, where there was a long discussion in the United Nations. This was much more abrupt and aggressive. Of course, I have no memory of what it was like when the war began, whether there was jubilation or the opposite, etc. Now there appears to be some evidence that the German population was actually quite apprehensive. Then after Poland came France. The clearest memory I have of this is what my father told me when I was a teenager. In 1939, he had been a beginning high school teacher. He was part of the German forces that moved into France, and within a short time, totally unexpectedly for everyone, within 8 months they were in Paris. They had found very little resistance. This was quite different from the First World War, which was the worst trench warfare experience in human history, and that happened in France, or on the Belgian border.

My childhood was formed by this. I was born in the year in which my father was already in the Army. I doubt that he was home very much. I don't really know. But my mother did not seem to count on his presence very much. From what I know, what happened to him and many other Germans then, is that he was only home on leaves from the Army. When I was probably about three, I had a clear memory of him because he had a uniform. Smoking then was fairly common, and it smelled of something that I associated with father, which is the archetype of masculinity when

you're a child. This heavy army coat, it was winter I think. It smelled of nicotine, of smoking. He had a dagger, a kind of side-arm as they were called. So that was somehow for a little boy of three, something that one doesn't forget. But I didn't see him with any regularity until 1948. Then he came back after having been a prisoner of war in Russia, in the Soviet Union for three years. So the War and its consequences were what formed our childhood. It meant that I grew up with a single mother. Like my two brothers who were born after me: the fruit of the leaves from the "front." Many women were left looking after children, and the men were gone and often later on dead. In many cases, of course they would die in the War. They would fall. That's a German word I would never forget, that ingrained in my memory from very early on, which is *Gefallen*, "those who have fallen." We're talking about vast numbers of men who died, perhaps millions, and then later, of course, women and children from the bombings.

I grew up in the Ruhr Valley,² which is the industrial region. It used to be the largest industrial region in Western Europe, probably all of Europe. It now no longer is. It is between Cologne and Dortmund, in Northwest Germany close to Holland and Belgium. We were very affected by the War, though not so much in the district where I lived, which was a kind of middle class area. People who were public servants lived there mostly. We lived in a relatively quiet area, but just about 5 or 10 kilometers south there were many coal mines and steel mills. There was a huge transportation network, and all kinds of industries. Krupp,³ the famous machine construction company which made tanks, artillery during the war, otherwise trucks. Thyssen and Mannesmann which to this day, I think, are large companies. Thyssen was a very prominent steel manufacturer of whom it is said that without their support, Hitler would never have come to power. 8 to 10 kilometers south from us was heavy bombing by 1943. And largely the RAF, the Royal Air Force, in which Canadians participated, the British Air Force, was carrying out regular raids in this region. It's one of my earliest memories as well, of planes being high in the sky. They looked attractive to children, being high in the air, and my mother was saying, "this means trouble." So at night there would be lights coming down. They had phosphorous or something that would identify targets; they would come down at night. The bombings were mostly at night in order to not be struck by the artillery of the German defense. We called these lights Christmas trees, because they looked nice. As long as you didn't have the experience of something coming down in your backyard and then a bomb following it, it wasn't really threatening. It was always kind of several kilometers away. But the southern part of the city in which I grew up was devastated, and we only saw that by 1945 or actually '46, because we hadn't been able to stay in our home town. We had to go into the basement all the time. The basements were organized to be bomb shelters. There were brick walls about a meter wide, to protect them from the pressure of the bombs and so they wouldn't cave in. Quite often we had to go into the basement. I think it was late 1943 that we were "evacuated," i.e., removed from our home region to a less bombed area. The Nazi authorities decided that families in this area, which was heavily bombed, were to leave, when the men were at the front.

My father was then in the Soviet Union. We didn't know exactly where. There would be a postcard arriving once in a while. And we were taken to Saxony, to a city that is historically important in Germany, Herrnhut, the centre of Lutheran pietism and one of the centres of the Reformation. I remember distinctly, we were living with people with some connection to the family, the sister of a close friend of the family. This apartment was above a major street in this relatively small town. One night there was an enormous rumbling, and there was a procession of tanks passing through the town. They were going East, to the Front. I remember that the soldiers invited us to look at their equipment. They certainly seemed to have a sense that they would be victorious. Not much later it was the opposite experience. They came back, and even as a child I understood that they felt defeated. The slow march back. The tanks rolling back, much slower than before, and often damaged. My mother secretly listened to the BBC. She understood some English. That was supposedly to be punished by death. Hitler's Nazi terror system, which is not always recognized abroad, was also of course applied to Germans, especially in those years. For example, we now know that there were quite a few deserters from the Front, and they were immediately hanged if they were caught. So the terror was extended to non-Jewish Germans, as well as to others, except not in the same way. You had to be very careful listening to the radio. She knew that Germany was defeated by '44. From what I have read now many German women knew, and the men at the Front didn't want to know. That's something I actually have learned from my major academic teacher in philosophy, and doctoral supervisor, the great philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, because one of his students, Walter Schultz,⁴ who later became one of the better interpreters of Heidegger's philosophy, had been drafted, as everyone was between the ages of 18 and 45. He said that Heidegger's "Being and Time" made sense to him at the Front, because the only thing there was to face death. It was better to stay there than to come home on leaves and then to realize one was fighting for the wrong cause. Once they realized what Nazism was, that they were fighting for something that had nothing to do with anything that anyone could be proud of, that they were there to die, often they didn't want to return. In quite a few cases that may actually be true that people did actually seek out situations in which they would be hit by Soviet bullets. I've never heard my father say anything like that. I think he was much more naïve and probably a lot more frightened than someone like Walter Schultz. My mother knew, and then by the end of '44 we had to leave this area as well, because the Soviet Army was moving through Poland, and it became clear that they would come into Germany. Then my father, who was a Lieutenant—he had a small group of soldiers who had to obey his orders—he found someone from the German speaking area ("Sudetenland") of what now is the Czech Republic around Pilsen, where there were old large German farms, the son of one of these farmers was in his troop, and they said we could stay with them.

It was in that place in May, 1945 that I experienced the German capitulation. It's one of my first conscious experiences, because I knew what this meant. I knew it was a capitulation. I didn't really know what Germany stood for, or what the others stood

for, but I knew it was a defeat of soldiers who I had seen and who had been friendly with us, and now there were others who were going to come. The other conscious experience was school. In 1944, in Herrnhut in Saxony, we were to begin school. And we began school, with the usual ritual: A huge bag with sweets, which was the tradition which you would get when you began school. But after four months, it was over. School was closed. Then I didn't have school until I was eight. There was no school in this area. In the Czech Republic there were two weeks of school, during which we mostly looked for berries and mint leaves in the woods, because we were short on food. It was beginning to become serious since there could be famine. My mother spent days looking for bread, going to farmers more or less begging them, and often had to do that in situations which were dangerous. Before the capitulation, the Americans were coming into Czechoslovakia from Bavaria and Austria. There was something, which I don't think is used anymore in warfare now. They were called 'Stukas,' the planes that would fly very low and use machine guns to shoot at whatever moves. They were actually killing civilians. One of the things that she experienced when looking for food, was that they would strafe the highways with machine gun fire to stop any military vehicles, to stop all traffic and produce the breakdown, which then happened. One of these also shot at me at one point. I was in the field looking for corn ears that were left behind after harvest. (We did that for three years, looking for kernels of wheat or rye of the plants that were left behind from a harvest. There were no big machines to cut them with so there was always something left over that one could use.) Once there was one of these low flying planes with weapons, and it was pursuing me. I remember the machine gun bullets just right behind me. I was running like a hare, like a rabbit. The adults were standing at the exit of the farm. As a child I was naïve. You don't have a sense of danger as a child. People ask me about the war. Until you actually see someone die, or get seriously hurt, or seriously hurt yourself, you probably don't have much fear. So it was more like a game. My mother was furiously screaming. But I made it back. Then came the capitulation. That was another dangerous situation. A troop of German soldiers was lying in front of the building on top of an old wall around a big garden. Two or three people could lie on it. They had a machine gun. Far away we could see the highway, and we could see a white flag. My mother screamed, "of course, they had to be the first." There was a white flag and a red flag. The Communists. They were Czech communists. Understandably, they were welcoming whatever liberating force would come. But for my mother, they had betrayed the Fatherland. She was not very fond of Nazism, but I think she was Nationalist, like most of the German middle-class, which is why Nazism succeeded. It co-opted Nationalism, which was strong after the First World War. Then we could see the American battalion, something like 50 or 100 men coming into the village. We saw other German soldiers, and we could see the Americans. My mother was totally pale, and she later explained this to me, so some of this I probably didn't understand right at the moment. She said, "if these Germans fire, then we are dead as well," because then the Americans will destroy everything in this area, which was a small area. They were at one end,

and we were at the other. Fortunately these German soldiers then retreated. They lowered themselves into the garden and took off. There were about 10 of them. They were caught later when they ran into the woods. The Americans came in and there was dead silence. Dead silence. Nothing moved, and then there came a loudspeaker saying, "don't move, stay where you are, don't leave your house." We were in a smaller building of the farm, which was really for the servants. They took over the main building, and there was a whole group of American soldiers in there. For three days before the curfew was lifted we couldn't leave. But my little brother, who is now a professor of neurophysiology in Heidelberg, he was five years younger than I, he ran out of the building completely naked and was running after something. Then there came a huge man out of this other building, an American, totally black. I had never seen anything like this. He was a black American, and he took this baby and lifted him up, and was laughing. He was enjoying himself. And he brought him back to us. Then we as children became friends with him. So the soldiers became very different. The tension was broken. Later on when the Czech population re-established its government, the Americans were watching things so that there would be no killings. There was military authority, but the Czech's were interviewing us. We had to deliver whatever we had: camera, watches. One day an American officer came and said that we'd better get ready to leave in one hour.

We didn't have much because we were refugees. We packed and they put us on the truck and they said if you don't leave, you will end up in a camp. Then the Czech authorities put ethnic Germans who were left behind into camps. These were people who had lived in Czechoslovakia for centuries but due to Nazism had identified with German national projects. They put a lot of people into camps, and the conditions were generally bad because of the War. Nothing worked for anyone, but it was even worse in the camps. They took us to Bavaria. Then came a long odyssey that I remember very well because I was the oldest. I was my mother's main support with two other little children, and an aunt. I was the oldest in a group of five children. The two women were asking me to help a great deal. Then we had to find a way back and no one was there to tell us. Slowly one found out that there were trains moving. They were largely freight trains, and they were empty. People would pile into wagons. We were with vast numbers of people. You always were sleeping on the ground with a few hundred people. Slowly a transportation system developed. I don't know how, but engineers were found, and the locomotive moved. But it moved very slowly, and the reason was that you didn't know whether the tracks were still intact, or if there were bombs, and they would go off, or there would be mines. During that time the train would often stop, and I would always get out of the train. There are things that I don't remember, like I don't know what we would use as a toilet. It must have been the fields, because with so many people, you couldn't even sit in a corner of the vehicle. I realize how much one takes for granted of civilized life, then suddenly under these conditions that doesn't exist. I think fortunately, the train always stopped, so we were going into the fields looking for water and food, of course. I remember getting water from pumps from the train.

The old train system had something like a pipe through which water would come, which I think they put into the locomotives, the steam engines. And therefore we had water, but if you ask me how we did this, I have no idea. I know I was hungry, but it became so constant that I don't even remember that really. It was a constant condition. So I remember running into the fields when the train stopped, and it was summer, I actually found fields. I remember finding the pods of peas, pulling them off the plants and watching, because the farmers slowly were coming back and they didn't like their crop to be destroyed. They were harvesters. I think it took us at least two, possibly three weeks to get to our home area. Something which if you could take an ordinary train, not even the very fast European trains that one now has, you'd be there in 6 or 8 hours. The engineers had to find a route. There must have been some organization, but I have no idea how the organization came about. Somehow they must have divided people up into different trains going to different places. Otherwise, it would have been impossible. Some would live south, others north. We were all randomly put together in this voyage, and then at some point they had to figure out where to take us. This was very formative. And then going to my grandmother's, my father's mother's place, an old building of which I was told later by my mother that it was the only building that had remained standing on the entire street, because of the bombings. Then we came back to our place, which we had to share with another family. There was rationing of space, there was rationing of food.

All of this went on until 1948. By late 1946 I must have been in school. Life became more normal, and in '48 my father returned. And then I began the *Gymnasium* which is high school, which in Germany begins very early, at age 10. Then life became much more familiar from my present point of view. In this context I remember Gadamer saying that he was in Leipzig in East Germany, and in '47 moved to Frankfurt where he had his first Chair in West Germany. He said that when they moved, he was moving with his furniture because nothing would arrive unless you were there, so he was actually sitting in the freight car of the train next to his furniture and traveling in the train. He had his experience of the War too, though he was not a soldier, and was never drafted because of his health, because he had polio. So he had one short leg that did not function very well.

You get a sense of the War. The War was the overwhelming presence and experience of my childhood. It's not always negative. My oldest friend in Germany, and still very good friend, was almost killed by a Russian soldier who knifed him. I mean that's just how things are in War. There were the Russians who were furious, like a lot of East Europeans, for obvious reasons, given how the Nazis operated. For others, their houses were bombed and they barely survived. Others had lost their fathers. I think a third of my classmates grew up without fathers. We actually had not been touched as much by the War as many others. But it was still a very present experience in many ways, for example, playing with gunpowder—which we did. We literally took powder out of shells that had not exploded. Many children lost arms and legs. I didn't participate. But I say it's not all bad because in a sense as a child you grow up wild. The adult world isn't functioning. It's not really there. I grew up

in gangs of kids. We were always doing something. Playing, molesting the adults, or looking for something to eat. We had a home, we were not orphans. But you could actually in some ways feel very free, and I think my sense of adventure comes from there. I don't have a very strong sense of home. I have it, but I also don't have it. I also can kind of disconnect. There was not much that was very stable at that time. Fortunately there was one stable thing, which was our mother was present. I think it's much worse and much more hurtful when the mother would be killed by the first year of the War in a bombing or something, and then it's a very different life.

QUESTION 2

Just two clarifications—one is to quickly hear a bit more about what you heard from your father about his experiences as a prisoner and how long he was in Russia, and second you mentioned that you didn't go to school for a long time, so what kind of education or learning did you receive during those years? Was your mother teaching you or...?

Misgeld

My father was a prisoner of War from early '45, before the capitulation. He had already crossed the Oder, which is the river which now separates Germany and Poland. They were thinking they had escaped, and then they were caught by the Soviet Army and taken back into Russia, to northeast of Moscow. He was there until late '48. He said that they were almost always starving, but he was fair enough to say (because otherwise I'm not sure that his judgments would be very appealing to me or you today), that the Russians were even worse off. It's actually an interesting comment, because there was always the assumption that the Soviets were just as murderous as the Nazis. But that's not true. They actually treated the German prisoners of war much better on average, given their conditions, than Nazi Germany did Russian prisoners, of whom they had quite a few of during the War and who were used as slave labor. Soviet prisoners of war had to work, but many of them were ill. He said he was medically treated, and there were always doctors. He remembered very well that there were quite a few women doctors, which in the Soviet system was encouraged that women went into careers and professions. He said I owe my life to one of them. The Soviets tried to re-educate the Germans. We now attribute that to the Communist system. I will later talk about my re-education which was done by the Americans. There is no difference. There is only a difference of methods. But that has consequences to this day, in the sense that the Americans are still doing the same thing. It makes me read the Middle East very differently from many other people, because I know how it is done. I know how you get to be a friend of the United States. They make you a friend by treating you very well, and then without noticing it, you lose your connection with your own country and history. People like Ahmad Chalabi⁵ and the people who were parachuted into Iraq

to run things for the Americans, who to me are traitors of their country and their history because they have no real interest in the well-being of the population. The Soviets tried to re-educate the Nazis because they thought, with some good reason, that most Germans were indoctrinated by Nazism. And as good Communists, they said you have to educate them so they know the evils of Nazism. That didn't go very far. The Germans, especially the Officers, formed education groups of their own where what they were promoting was culture. It's remarkable what people did under conditions of duress, such as find people who remembered poetry. My father had taught Latin and German Literature, so whatever he could remember he would talk about with others. Others found music. The Soviets were very tolerant of cultural things. But they were not accepting of anything political. You could not criticize Communism in the Prisoner of War Camp in the Soviet Union. I know my father and his friends were extremely critical of people who would collaborate closely with Soviets. So there was lots going on in the Camps, but it was all, of course, under conditions of physical work. And if they didn't work, they had to be sick. And if they were sick, they were in the Camp hospital. And then of course quite a few died, and those who came back were very weak. I think he was down to something like less than 60 kilograms, for a man who would have been 180–200 pounds. I remember these trains coming with the prisoners of war, these men were totally thin and sick looking, coming in big old Army coats out of the trains. Those are the events I remember. There was obviously organization on the German side to maintain their identity, and in some cases it would be explicit resistance to what they perceived as Communist indoctrination. In other cases it would be just to maintain the culture life and to overcome the boredom, and so on. I don't really know more. I know that during the War, he said, "once I was stuck in the Ukraine," I think it was the time of Stalingrad. He said, "I was thinking I was freezing to death in some ice field"—just like Northern Ontario, I imagine, with an artillery. He said, "I was supposed to shoot at something and I couldn't see anything, there was so much snow." My memory of artillery is very different. My memory of artillery as a child is that it's like a carousel. I discovered this in a region in the Czech Republic where, since I was adventurous as a boy I took my brothers and we went and explored the fields, and saw this thing that had a gun. But you also saw that you could climb on it, and you could turn wheels, and this thing would spin around. So we had found a new toy. It moved like a carousel. We just didn't connect it with anything serious, until you see what can happen. My father had a very different experience. There are other things that I have never been able to speak about with him such as the deaths and destruction which he had witnessed or even participated in. And later on I had terrible conflicts with him, which I now know were common in families in Germany. I was asking about the War, what they knew, did they know about the Concentration camps. If they said no then I'd say "I don't believe you. You must have known." And then all hell would break loose. But today, now that I am more than 70 years old, I would now take a different attitude to all this, also because I am much older, and also formed partially at least by Buddhist philosophy. I would say we had no sense of them as victims of a

system. When I look at the whole history I can see how you could have been trapped before you could even think. The people who would not be trapped were people with very strong religious commitments. They would never be attracted to Nazism. But that's not actually always true either. There were the German Christians who were a major support of Hitler, coming from the Protestant side. There was a section of the Catholic side, also. By religious I mean being really serious about the basic meaning of the Gospel. That is, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," or "Love Thy Neighbour as Yourself." Or people who had very strong political ideological commitments, such as the entire Left, from Social Democrats to Communists were opponents of Nazism, and were treated as such right from the start. But others fell into the trap, fairly easily. I don't think my father ever really understood that.

What came after the war was another form of re-education when they came back to West Germany. In the East it was very different, because they had to be rehabilitated very formally. In the West there was a similar, although much more lenient process. It was called De-Nazification. Pardon the expression, but knowing about the Second World War it sounds a bit like de-lousing. People had lice in their hair, so it was a bit like you spray them until they're clean. There are also all kinds of sinister connotations. I could not even express to you, unless you read quite a bit of German literature from the Second World War, just how sinister, how incredibly drastic, sarcastic or cynical one can be in one's descriptions of human conduct coming out of these situations. Our home town had never been a Nazi friendly town, largely because of the very strong Slavic presence. There were many miners, and coal miners in particular, who had been brought in from Poland (Silesia) or from Masuria, which is now part of Russia, on the northeast Baltic Sea. They had been brought in, but had never been treated as immigrants. The category "immigrant" really didn't exist, but they had been brought in and they became Germans. But one of my friends, for example, his father was from East Prussia, which was Masurian, a population that spoke a Slavic language that was different from both Russian and Polish. He hardly spoke German. He was a lovely man, but I couldn't get past five sentences with him because his German would fail him. He'd been a coal miner, and was very ill when I met him. He was characteristic of the population. They were given small houses, somewhat like in England, in industrial regions. Because they were poor people from the countryside, when they were brought there they were given a little bit of stable, a place where they might have a pig, and some chickens, a garden or plot of land, and so on. But otherwise, they worked in the mines. This population was not taken in by Hitler. There's no way, given their ethnicity and given their social status, they weren't fooled by that. Nor were they welcomed. So we had a strong basis of resistance in the region, not just in my hometown. It also meant that the municipal governments, and later most of the State governments, were Social Democratic. After the war the Social Democrats who had been persecuted came back. By '48, when the Federal Republic had been established in West Germany, they ran the De-Nazification programs. They looked at people like my father, who were going to come back as high school

teachers, of whom they knew had been the main purveyors of Nazi ideology (of nationalist ideology particularly, maybe not anti-Semitism directly, but certainly nationalist ideology), and they knew that these people had been their enemies and had persecuted them. Not directly, but had given support to those who persecuted them. They were not going to be that friendly with them. My father was always coming back furious after being interviewed and questioned at City Hall. I think it took him more than a year before he was re-integrated into the school system. Apart from family reasons, and some other reasons, if you asked me now I would say that they could have been harsher. They actually left us as younger people with too many teachers who had not rethought very well what had happened, and what they had participated in. It took younger teachers, who often had a hard time in the schools, who would actually openly talk about anti-Semitism, who would get German literature from people like Heinrich Böll,⁶ who had written things exposing Nazism and its vulgarity. To get back into the system was not easy. That was one level of re-education. They had to admit to not having “been on the right side,” so to speak. That’s what I think the Social Democratic authorities really wanted. They wanted them to look at things and re-think. That didn’t often work. These people were very resistant. Later, re-education came in the form of events such as the one that brought me to Canada in the end, which was programs of exchange at the high school and university level. That was in particular promoted by the United States with much generosity, but it was all based on the assumption that Germans needed to learn something about, dare I say, Democracy. And that we would learn about that by living in the United States. Sometimes they were not all wrong, compared to where we were at the time. That’s entering into the post-World War phase. So that was your first question.

QUESTION 3

You’d mentioned that for many years you didn’t have any schooling.

Misgeld

What did we learn? I didn’t read much until I was eight. In fact, my mother said she was giving up, she thought I’d never learn to read. I didn’t have dyslexia. I didn’t have a head injury. I had no illness. I was intelligent enough to learn. If you ask me now, why? Because there were other priorities. I was surviving in the countryside, in the street. I was looking after brothers. I was part of the War. School was an artificial world. And then it closed after four months, before you would even know what it was. The other experience was looking for berries. Well I was looking for things, all the time. It was nothing different. Whether you went with a teacher into the woods, or on your own, you were always looking for something. The first year I remember was very difficult in public school. There were still very repressive methods. I was

beaten a lot in the first three years by a teacher who had a status problem in relation to my father, knowing that my father was a high school teacher. I barely survived that, but I began to read, and read on my own when I was eight. But, then I learned very rapidly. But again, I'm not even sure that the school did very much. They taught me the basic reading skills, but most of the reading I did at home, and then read a lot. I think the gymnasium was very different. You had to take an exam. We were only at that period, 6–8 percent of the German population who would be in the gymnasium, which was an elite high school. But based on an exam, like the French. It had nothing to do with paying. You just had to have the ability according to tests. That was a very rigorous system. By age 10 (in my case, age 11) we began with Latin, and had Latin for 9 years, because the gymnasium was from age 10 to 19, for my cohort from 11 to 20, because of late entry. Probably much too long, but it was a rigorous schooling. I wouldn't say it was good in other ways but at age 11 we had to learn Latin, which has been very helpful for me. I recognize now that I don't think one would need to spend nine years on it. But prior to age 11 my education was quite random. It was quite disorganized. I think this disorganization lasted in Germany quite into the '50s. I think when I began University, University itself wasn't all that organized. And many of the structures were being formed. Even relatively old fashioned people like Gadamer would question the old system, but they weren't sure if they were going to go with something new, mostly coming from the United States, or stay with the old Humboldtian university. They were slightly disoriented. There was a lack of organization and structure and bureaucracy. On the one hand there was an incredible openness, and on the other it was a bit like the child in the War: you lacked many things but you were also extremely free because the adult world didn't function so they couldn't impose their rules on younger people as easily. For someone like Habermas it was so very different. He's ten years older. Jürgen Habermas was in the generation that was in a very dangerous situation because very often they were put into the Hitler Youth, which meant that they might have been most heavily indoctrinated. At least that was the Nazi plan. I think the ones a little older than me were the most vulnerable, and could also get injured intellectually. But he was in a group in danger because they were often used at the end of the War to fight for the SS, which in Hollywood movies is always described as a terrifying force but was in a part largely an organization of brutes and cowards. They used children to protect themselves towards the end of the War. They'd give them guns and put them in the front line and as the British or Americans or French came in, the children were shot and they would run. He's of that generation, who then became leaders because they became very conscious of the level of moral decline that Nazism meant. They saw it very directly. Imagine, you've never had a gun in your hand, but then you have to fight. The enemy is coming and they'll kill you, and then you see the very men who gave you the guns take off and disappear. This was a pretty devastating experience. But my education was very, very chaotic till the gymnasium, and somehow they got this back on track, fairly soon I guess.