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Rough transcript of an interview with Alphonso Frost conducted July 27, 1988, at Howard University, Washington, D.C., by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb for the German Historical Institute

Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb: I'm talking to Dr. Alphonso Frost at Howard University on July 27, 1988. We'll interview him about his recollections of German refugee scholars who taught here. We're sitting in his office in the German and Russian Department at Howard University. Dr. Frost, let's start by you just sort of saying whatever you can think of, about the people whom you recall from the period in question. Professor Darmstadter?

Alphonso Frost: And Dr. Seiferth.

GSE: And Dr. Seiferth. Go ahead and then I'll ask questions if I find the need.

AF: Okay. I came here in 1960 as an undergraduate and so Dr. Seiferth was one of the German professors at that time. I think he was more or less full-time; Dr. Darmstadter would be brought in on an as-need basis. He may prior to 1960 have taught for a more extensive period of time but I wasn't aware of that.

Dr. Seiferth, I had several courses with him. He was an avid scholar when it came to Goethe, and he was a member of the Goethe Society here, in the city. I would imagine they must have some records of the times; I think he was president of the Goethe Society.

GSE: I heard him speak there, long ago.

AF: Aha. Okay. He would try to take us to some of the meetings of the Goethe Society so that we would be introduced to the society and topics. I remember once, when it came time to write a paper or research paper, he would say, Well, why don't you write about Goethe? and we would say, Well, there's volumes and volumes on Goethe. And he would say, There's still more to be written.

I don't have a great deal of information on his personal life, but as a person he was a very kind, warm, gentle person. You hardly could imagine him raising his voice.

I think but I don't know for sure he came over to this country, I don't know if it was in the late '20s or '30s, exactly. In the '30s? Okay. I wish I could remember the name; I had another German professor at Berkeley who evidently must have come over around the same time. He knew him very well.

But my courses with Dr. Seifert; he was only one of several teachers I had in the department. But he was very instrumental in my getting a Woodrow Wilson fellowship. After I left he became chairman of the department. He was chairman for several years and then his health started to decline and he retired.

His publications: He has a book on the synagogue in Germany. I don't know if I can get my hands on a copy but I'll try to see if I can come up with it. He worked I think also with the humanities program; he must have been one of the people who was instrumental in putting together the humanities course, which was a general education requirement in the college. Everyone had to take this course, a two-part course, which would cover not just literature, but architecture, art and music from biblical times up to the present. It was a two-semester course.

GSE: Do you still have it?

AF: Not as a requirement.

GSE: Too bad.

AF: Yes, it's very regretful. When I first started teaching here, one of the first courses I was given was that course. It's wonderful. It's unfortunate they abolished it as a requirement, but that's the way things are.

As far as Dr. Darmstadter was concerned, I don't think he was a regular member of the staff but he was brought on periodically. I know very little about him except I did have one or two courses with him. He had a hearing aid which, sometimes you had to talk loudly so he could hear you. He had a very interesting habit; he would tap his foot very rapidly. I don't know if it was nervousness or what but it was one of those idiosyncrasies a student would home in on. Also, like Dr. Seifert, very warm, very kind, very gentle type of person.

Another thing that really impressed me about them as teachers was the breadth of their knowledge. They seemed to know so much about so many things. And in my mind, as a student, I equated breadth of knowledge, and depth as well, with German teachers and German professors. And it goes back to my experiences with Dr. Seiferth and with Dr. Darmstadter.

So that's more or less my general recollections of them. Perhaps you've got some more specific questions that I can try to answer, but I just don't know.

GSE: I don't know whether Seiferth was Jewish or not but both of them were a product of the emigration that followed the succession of Hitler to power in Germany. I know Dr. Darmstadter was a religious Jew. Did they ever discuss the historical situation out of which they came?

AF: To my knowledge, never.

GSE: So there was never any talk about Germany as it existed before, during, since the Weimar Republic.

AF: I remember taking a survey course in German literature with Dr. Seiferth. As I recall — it's been years now — it began with Goethe and ended with Goethe. It never got up to the 20th century, when you would have had an opportunity to talk about current issues and may have

brought in the background that was involved in his departure from Germany. There were other teachers who would handle the more modern period and Dr. Seiferth stayed more or less in the 18th and the early 19th centuries.

GSE: So, no Thomas Mann or any of that?

AF: Not with Dr. Seiferth, no.

GSE: What did Darmstadter teach?

AF: As I recall, his was probably language and maybe writing.

GSE: Any feelings of how they related to historically Black university and community? Which of course would have been totally foreign to them when they came to this country.

AF: On a couple occasions, only based on their responses to things, I think they were very proud of the fact they were teaching at Howard and they took a lot of pride in the students here. Other than that, the relationship was almost strictly limited to the classroom. There weren't times you would go to someone's home and you'd sit and you'd talk on an informal basis and you could find out these things. Those people who had access to the secretaries, and there was a secretary, Lea Wagner, who knew a great deal about Dr. Seiferth and Dr. Darmstadter because she was the secretary here during those years.

GSE: Was she German?

AF: Yes, she was. She may still be in the area here, and she has a great deal of information she could tell you. Would have to ask around and see if she's still in the phone book or not. She could be in the metropolitan area; she could have left. There are people at times that she kept in contact with. Dr. Logan was here when Dr. Seifert was chairman and he has a certain amount of information pertaining to those years. Dr. David Korn, who was chairman of the department, he might know where Lea Wagner is. And there may be other people; I was thinking of Dr. Maria Alter.

GSE: I wanted to ask you about her. I have her under the name of Maria Wilhelm.

AF: She married Dr. Alter. He was teaching, I think, at University of Maryland. I'm not sure about that. She married him. She got her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland.

GSE: But she also taught German here, and I have no records on her either except one piece of paper.

AF: That's all? I'm sure we must have a file here on Dr. Alter. But she didn't fit in the category of refugee.

GSE: She didn't?

AF: Maybe she did, I don't know. Dr. Alter was considerably younger than Dr. Seiferth and Dr. Alter. In fact, she got her Ph.D. in the early '60s, from University of Maryland. Dr. Alter occasionally is in touch with Dr. Logan. We also had her as a teacher. She taught primarily the 20th century, Brecht, drama, that sort of thing. She, too, would have information on Dr. Seiferth.

GSE: You perceived no racism on the part of any of these folks?

AF: Oh, no, I would think just the opposite of that. You have to think if a white person comes to a predominantly Black institution, if you have strains of racism in you, this would be a terrible place to come; I mean you're confronted by people —

GSE: I ask because of over some 50 people whom I've discovered in this category came here as a result of having to escape from their homes, they were in a difficult situation. First of all, they were in a new country, it was also Depression time, there was no great welcome. There was a sense this Hitler business would go away and they'll just leave again; then there was a sense who are these people and they've got a foreign accent; and jealousy of — don't take Americans' jobs, right? And they had no money because they couldn't take money out, and so they were supported by relief organizations and foundations and whatnot, emergency committee for the rescue of scholars, Rockefeller Foundation, and others.

What I'm saying is that racism or no, if they got a job in Mississippi — I'm just saying Mississippi — they went. That's why the assumptions that one would normally make don't apply. However, I have not discovered anything particularly. The only thing I have unearthed, if I may use that word, is such a terrible sense of strangeness: First of all, being kicked out of their home, totally marginalized, then come to this country, a totally weird place to start with, and then to go to segregated black America, because most of this was in the Deep South, you can imagine the sense of alienation some of these people felt, and fear and worry about the folks who they had to leave. So, I'm just saying this would not necessarily apply to the '60s at Howard University but some of the stuff I have from the earlier times and colleges totally isolated from any city, it's extraordinarily interesting because I find such enormous differences in individuals and in institutions.

AF: Howard has traditionally always had a sizable number of white faculty and so from that point of view I don't think it was so unusual. I tend to think in the case of Dr. Seiferth, for sure, there was probably a certain identification, having been persecuted abroad, identifies with blacks who were second-class citizens—

GSE: That is one of the core themes of this effort.

AF: I mean, it comes through more, I guess — and I don't think he ever directly expressed it, I'm drawing a conclusion based on observations and things like that — but I mean his reverence for Goethe, and Goethe as an ideal and this—

GSE: He's a culture hero, Goethe is.

AF: Yes, but I mean the ideals that associated with the Weimar and Goethe and Schiller, and the nobility, the grandeur of the ideas, those were very important to Dr. Seiferth. It wasn't difficult to transfer those ideals to a predominantly Black community, those were part of his nature, his being. He, by example, as far as I was aware, he lived up to those ideals. As I said, he was a very kind, very gentle person; he was just extremely decent, and I mean that in the best sense of the word. I can't imagine him doing anything wrong. Of course, I know that can't be, we all do things.

GSE: Well, then we have to always ask the spouse, don't we. [Laughs.]

AF: I'm not sure I ever had any contact with his family at all.

GSE: The Germans were reserved and it's a different world altogether there. The professor is there—

AF: I think Dr. Alter my senior year invited all the German majors, and even some minors, over to her house. That was very special, because I think it was the first time certainly that I could recall, I had a personal contact, another side of her other than the official, academic side.

GSE: And seeing her in her home environment, which is so revealing. What was it like? Was her husband French?

AF: Yes, yeah, he was. The furniture, I don't know the style, it was a very ornate inlaid wood type. Not overly furnished, not with these upholstered sofas and that sort of thing; you have a beautiful piece of furniture occupying a wall and you have a lots of room and space around it. Germans usually don't clutter their living environment quite like Americans do. That's my stereotypical thing— It's an openness, the space —

GSE: Where did they live?

AF: Up in the Maryland suburbs, in the vicinity of the University of Maryland. I think he was teaching philosophy; that's his field. They have since divorced. Now whether she's remarried or not, I don't know. Last I heard she was still Alter, still going by her married name.

In the case of Dr. Darmstadter, he lived somewhere in the Northwest part of the city in an apartment. For some reason, I must have had an occasion to go by, either to take a paper or to drop something off.

GSE: His son lives in Bethesda and happens to be a neighbor of a friend. I might call him and talk with him. I don't remember if I told you I telephoned Dr. Darmstadter at the Jewish Home for the Aged. He died a couple of years ago. I told him I would love to interview him, if he were willing. He was evidently very religious and he said, yes, after the holidays — it was Passover — call me. So I did and he changed his mind and wouldn't see me. Then when he died, I read about it in the paper and I've been thinking of calling his son.

AF: He might have some information. Dr. Seiferth evidently had a son; but now I'm not sure whether that was an adopted son or whether that was his natural son.

GSE: You never met with him?

AF: Never. The only place I ever saw Dr. Seiferth was here, and the one time we went to the Goethe Society meeting. Other than that, the relationship was very much here.

GSE: In closing would you be able or willing to summarize for me how you think the experience with these two Germans, Central Europeans, affected you in terms of your subsequent thinking, or development. Do you have a sense that they changed something in you? I mean good and important teachers change us, I think.

AF: Sure. I mean they had a lot to do with why I chose German as a major. Especially, I had more classes and more contact with Dr. Seiferth than I had with Dr. Darmstadter, so Dr. Seiferth would be the more formative person for me. But, I mean, just being around him, his enthusiasm for the subject, as I've said, the knowledge he had as a person, as a human being. He was short of stature, he was not very tall.

But I can remember, to give you an idea of his sense of humor a little bit, there was one class for majors, there were about four of us in the class, and we had been given texts. And one of the students forgot her text. And Dr. Seiferth, of course, was aware. And we were sitting at this table in his office and I was like sitting here [demonstrates] and the other student was sitting on the other side of the table and so I was kind of turning my text so she could see because he was asking her questions. And he said, Miss So-and-So [he addressed her by name], he says, if you're not careful you'll break your neck looking around corners. [Laughs.]

But that was about as sharp as he would get if he were going to reprimand you for doing something wrong. His anger was so contained. I'm sure there were many occasions here when he was angered, but he rarely showed it, or if it did it came out in an expression like that.

GSM: Irony.

AF: Yes, a lot of irony. But never raised his voice, got angry. That was just not his personality at all.

GSM: How was the accent, how was the English, in either case or both cases?

AF: Their English was great, it was fantastic. There was a certain accent, but it wasn't that pronounced. When you think about it, they came over in the '30s; by the time I see them it's the '60s. There was some accent there but not really that pronounced. It certainly didn't disturb or distract from listening to them speak at all. That's about it.

GSE: Thank you very much [Fades out.]