

# Brigham Young University Remembers Walter Kempowski

*Alan F. Keele*

German writer Walter Kempowski, who passed away in late 2007, had a long and interesting history of involvement with Brigham Young University, so it seems fitting that a small commemoration of his life and work take place here in Provo to echo the nationwide commemorations in his native land.

It is likely that Kempowski is Germany's best-known writer in the broadest circles of the German population. It is extremely rare to meet a German who doesn't know his name and something about his works. This is due in part to the spectacular popularity of two television films by Eberhard Fechner, aired as a series in Germany during the late seventies and early eighties and based on two of the nine historical novels about Kempowski's family—a kind of German “everyfamily.” The author collectively entitled these historical novels *Deutsche Chronik* (German Chronicle), a vast literary arc through the tragic history of Germany in the twentieth century. (The closest American analogy is probably the television series *Roots* of 1977.)

Kempowski's printed works themselves—often called “faction,” a blending of fact with fiction—have invariably been bestsellers, widely read and discussed in Germany (though only a few have been translated into English and remain nearly unknown in the United States). As a result of the popularity of his novels and the films, many quirky mannerisms and witty speech patterns of members of the Kempowski family as described in the *German Chronicle* have found their way into current idiomatic German usage. “What does the proud oak care,” Walter's older teenaged brother Robert is wont to proclaim, for example, whenever he is annoyed

by something, especially by his younger brother, “if a wild pig comes along to scratch its bristled hide thereon.”<sup>1</sup>

Kempowski’s writing style is unique. Basically, he is a collector and archivist of historical facts and linguistic artifacts. He arranges bits and pieces of language on the page, as a graphic artist might arrange a collage or as someone might place snapshots into a scrapbook. But the juxtaposition of these snaps and scraps is brilliantly accomplished, for much profound meaning resides in the gaps between utterances.

To cite an example, for one of his books, Kempowski had advertised widely in Germany under the heading “Did you know about it?” (with “it” clearly being the Holocaust). In response he received thousands of personal narratives from people who invariably wrote things like “No, I didn’t know about it . . . *but* . . .” and then proceeded with accounts of mysterious trains going through their town at night, of mysterious smells, of rumors and talk in the neighborhood, of families disappearing overnight—all of which, in juxtaposition with other bits of evidence, told the chilling macrotale: yes, they had known about it after all, and, in fact, everyone had known about it but had managed to convince themselves they hadn’t known about it. (Kempowski’s home—now a public museum and archive, the site of concerts, readings, and lectures—is the repository of many hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of such responses and other collections of artifacts about life in the twentieth century.)

Kempowski’s vision for his work was as gigantic as his collections. To underpin the nine volumes of the *German Chronicle*, as though building a pyramid in reverse order, he planned to lay an even larger course of stones as a foundation: this eventually grew to ten nine-hundred-page volumes, which he entitled *Das Echolot: Ein kollektives Tagebuch* (Sonar Soundings: A Collective Diary).

Kempowski applied the same structural principles as in the *German Chronicle* but broadened them: the *Collective Diary* interweaves not just elements on the scale of Kempowski family utterances about the events of their lives but also—centered on a critical date in history—longer bits and pieces of diaries and communiqués from Hitler and Churchill and Roosevelt and a common German soldier and a common Russian soldier and an American bomber pilot and people on whom the bombs fell and countless others involved in the titanic and historical struggles of the twentieth century.

But Kempowski wanted to underpin the *Collective Diary* as well. He imagined an even bigger foundation, a megascrapbook consisting of many book-length accounts by varied eyewitnesses to the historical events in the *German Chronicle* and in the *Collective Diary*. Before he died, he

succeeded in getting many of these published, including a very important one with an intriguing BYU connection.

His relationship to BYU started out inauspiciously, with one visit and a lecture here in 1980 as part of a broader U.S. tour under the aegis of the Goethe-Institute. Because my specialty is postwar German writing, I was assigned to be his host. I had no prior knowledge about Kempowski, so I went to do some research, only to discover that the Harold B. Lee Library had none of Kempowski's books either. (This oversight has been corrected: Dr. Richard Hacken, German and European Bibliographer at the HBL, has become one of Kempowski's leading bibliographic experts, and the HBL's Kempowski holdings are among the best anywhere in the world.)

One minor fact I was able to glean about Kempowski (in those ancient days before Google) was that more than anything else in the world Kempowski hated to be kept waiting. As fate would have it, when I went to pick him up at the airport, I was delayed by road construction and arrived a few minutes late. Kempowski was nowhere to be found. I had him paged, to no avail. Embarrassed and frustrated, I was standing perplexed at the curb when a taxi suddenly pulled up and Kempowski leapt out.

Upon landing and finding no one to pick him up, he had jumped into a cab and ordered the driver to take him to Provo. A moment later he thought to ask how much this would cost. A quick U-turn brought him back to the airport right where I was standing at the curb.

Sometimes great friendships have such rough beginnings. In a later novel, *Letzte Grüße* (Last Greetings), Kempowski would remember this airport episode in Salt Lake City in great detail as he described the (fictionalized) visit to BYU of a (fictional) author named Alexander Sowtschick, who was picked up at the airport by a certain "Professor Flower" in an ancient yellow Cadillac with a five-hundred-cubic-inch, eight-liter engine—something most remarkable for a fuel- and cubic-liter-displacement-conscious German—and a carburetor Flower described as being like a toilet sitting atop the engine. Pressing the gas pedal down was like hitting the flush handle. ("Flower" now owns a Prius.)

Actually, Kempowski conflates in this novel his first visit and his later, second visit among the "members" in Utah. (Everyone he met here wanted to know, "Are you a member?") He returned to Provo with his daughter Renate to be a visiting lecturer in fall semester 1986.

In preparation for this longer visit, in which Kempowski conducted a seminar on his *German Chronicle*, he had begun to pester me about finding him a bomber pilot. He wanted a book for the book series or, at the very least, a shorter account of the experiences of an American bomber crewman who had participated in the raids over Germany.

I had placed ads in the newspaper and had contacted the Veterans of Foreign Wars, so Kempowski was able to interview a number of older vets or “Kriegies” as they call themselves—short for “Kriegsgefangene” (POWs). But on the way back from a lunch at the Skyroom in the Wilkinson Center, Kempowski buttonholed Professor Ray Hillam of Political Science in the elevator. “You look about the right age,” he began. “Were you a bomber pilot?” No, Hillam replied. He had served in Vietnam, but he knew someone who had been a bomber crewman, Professor Ray Matheny of Anthropology.

Kempowski and I headed straight for Matheny’s office in the Kimball Tower. Ray listened for a moment, then opened his desk drawer and brought out a book-length manuscript. “My story,” he said. Kempowski borrowed the manuscript and took it home with him to his apartment near the stadium (made available by Professor George Bennion of the English Department).

When I picked him up there the next morning, Walter was ecstatic. He had spent the whole night reading the manuscript from start to finish, he said. It was an absolutely gripping narrative about Matheny’s life from the time this young technical genius lied about his age and joined the Air Corps to his 1945 liberation from a Stalag Luft POW camp in Austria where the Germans had imprisoned him after they shot down his B-17 over Germany. Kempowski immediately and professionally translated the manuscript (no small feat, as it reads in part like a technical manual for the Boeing B-17 bomber), and it appeared a little over a year later, in 1988, as *Die Feuerreiter: Gefangen in Fliegenden Festungen* (The Fire Riders: Imprisoned in Flying Fortresses), one of the first volumes in Kempowski’s series. (One of my enduring claims to fame among Kempowski scholars and cognoscenti is that I am the one who helped Walter find “the bomber pilot.”)

Another claim to fame also came about by serendipity. In the time between the first and second visit, I had acquired and read all the books in the *German Chronicle*. Because others in the College of Humanities such as Randy Jones (German) and Steven Sondrup (Comparative Literature) had paved the way by learning how to make literary concordances, I decided it would be particularly useful to have a word concordance of the *German Chronicle*, in order to quickly find related matters among all nine of these complex linguistic “photo albums.” With the earliest scanner (a very expensive Kurzweil<sup>2</sup> provided by a generous grant to the College of Humanities), a multimillion-dollar IBM 370 mainframe computer (likewise a generous grant to the college), and the expertise of Mel Smith and his staff at the Humanities Technology and Research Support Center, I was

able to present Kempowski with a paper copy (in binders extending four linear feet on a shelf) as well as a microfiche copy of this concordance.

Kempowski was thrilled and began to look closely at this modern gadget, the computer. When he returned to Germany, he acquired a computer of his own, along with an expert to help him use it, for in the computer he could now see a way to manipulate all those many texts he wished to weave into what became *Das Echolot*, the *Collective Diary*, including a gripping account he was given by BYU German Professor Walter Speidel of his experiences as a young communications officer attached to Field Marshall General Erwin Rommel's headquarters in the famous *Afrikakorps*. (Because of this chain of events, my second claim to fame, although I am in no way a computer whiz, is that Kempowski dedicated *Das Echolot* to Alan F. Keele.)

As a reward for helping him discover the computer and no doubt because I was constantly lamenting his works' lack of notoriety in the United States, Kempowski once mentioned that he would be willing to allow me to translate his latest best-selling novel, *Hundstage* (*Dog Days*), into English. When I learned that my colleague Professor Garold Davis (German) and his wife, Professor Norma Davis (Humanities), might be interested in translating the book as a "fun" husband and wife project, I quickly arranged for it. Later, when they were called to be the first missionary couple in East Germany, I became the third translator on the team, in order to put the finishing touches on the book. *Dog Days* is the first novel about the fictitious, Kempowski-like author Alexander Sowtschick, the one who later visits among "the members" at BYU.

Kempowski was born in the East German port city of Rostock in 1929. When the war ended, he was sixteen. His father, a ship owner, had been killed on the Eastern Front and his ships sunk. Walter's older brother Robert had begun working for a shipping firm in town.

It was common knowledge that the Soviets were systematically dismantling East Germany's industrial capacity—factories, trucks, rolling stock, anything valuable of a technical nature—and shipping it off to Russia. But Robert mentioned that he had access to the bills of lading that showed exactly all the stuff being shipped away. Walter decided to slip across the border to West Germany in hopes of finding a job for himself. When he arrived in Wiesbaden, a friend helped him find his way to the offices of the American CIC, the Counter Intelligence Corps, forerunner of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency).

The CIC agents were, in fact, interested in these bills of lading and asked him to bring them some the next time he was in Rostock, and as a reward they gave him a job stocking shelves in the American commissary—a place

literally overflowing with milk and honey in these lean postwar years in Germany—where the Americans didn’t care if he took with him every day after work such treasures as dented cans of Spam or any of the rest of the so-called “broken stuff.”

In due time, he traveled back to Rostock to share this bounty with his family, but he was almost immediately arrested by the Soviet Secret Police, the NKVD, and charged with espionage. His mother and his brother were also arrested and sentenced to long prison terms called “a quarter” by the Russians (who meant “a quarter of a century”). After eight years, there was an amnesty and he was freed. He went to West Germany, where he attended university and became an elementary school teacher in a small village and began to write on the side. Naturally, he included the account of his arrest and imprisonment in the *German Chronicle*.

In 1994, Professor James K. Lyon joined the German faculty at BYU. He had made a distinguished career as an expert on the famous German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht, especially on the years Brecht spent in exile in the U.S. For his book *Bertolt Brecht in America*, Lyon had asked for and received under the Freedom of Information Act numerous FBI materials on the Marxist Brecht, who had been constantly surveilled while in the U.S. This gave me the idea of filing a request myself under the Freedom of Information Act, asking to see the CIC files on Walter Kempowski.

When they were made available, the files showed that Kempowski had told the story quite faithfully in his *German Chronicle*, though there were some critical and interesting differences, including some things he did not know about at the time. For instance, it was obviously his friend in Wiesbaden who had tipped off the Russians to his visits with the CIC.

In brief, the files have allowed me to show more exactly which portions of the *German Chronicle* are fact and which are fiction and to speculate about why Kempowski used that particular blend of the two.

This is my third claim to fame, but in order to protect the identity of the double-agent friend and to prevent other unpleasantness, I agreed with Kempowski not to publish much of this material until after Walter’s death. I presented my findings in Rostock at a conference there in the spring of 2009, whereupon all the German papers printed major articles about the sensational fact that “Walter Kempowski Really Was a Spy!”

There is much more to say about Walter Kempowski. He was an accomplished musician and a gifted amateur photographer, for example. But in the end, it is probably most important to remember that he enjoyed being associated with “the members” at BYU, teaching the students here about German literature and history and film, and finding remarkable and unexpected friends and resources here such as Ray Matheny, Walter

Speidel, Garold and Norma Davis, Richard Hacken, and Mel Smith. Of course, this is what universities do: they bring great minds to the attention of those who study great minds. In the case of Walter Kempowski, it was a nice bonus that this was a two-way street. The “members” at BYU will miss him.

---

Alan F. Keele (alan\_keele@byu.edu) is Professor Emeritus of German Language and Literature at BYU. He was born in Provo, educated in Laramie, Wyoming, and Wayne County, Utah. He attended the University of Utah as a chemical engineering major until his mission call to Germany in 1962. After his mission, he came to BYU to teach German in the newly created Language Training Mission. He earned his BA at BYU in 1967 and his PhD in 1971 at Princeton. He began his teaching career at BYU the same year. Keele is married to Linda Kay Sellers, and they have six children as well as eight grandchildren. He served twice as a BYU campus bishop. He is the author of a number of books and articles about German literature and the Mormons in the Third Reich and has translated German poetry with his late friend, the poet Leslie Norris.

1. Was kümmert es die stolze Eiche, wenn sich ein Borstenvieh dran wetzt?
2. Kurzweills cost on the order of \$100,000.