

Oral History Interview Transcript

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Institution: University of Chicago

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Transcript for Oral History

Interviewer: Ava Hedeker

Interviewee: Don Hedeker

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Interview conducted on Zoom, recorded with Otter.ai

Ava:

Do I have your permission to record this interview and upload it as a transcript?

Don:

Yes, you have my permission.

Ava:

Thank you so much, Dad, for letting me interview you for this project. I thought you would be helpful to interview since you have a pretty good background on European history, along with US history, and you experience a lot of pivotal historic moments in energy within the US. So could you give us a little background about who you are, and what interests you about European history, politics, both in Europe and in the US?

Don:

Sure. I'm a lifelong Chicagoan and I've lived here my whole life, mostly on the north side. My parents are from Europe, from Germany, essentially. And so I've always had an interest in, especially German history, but also French history. I went to Germany for the first time in 1968 when I was just 10 years old, then spent a whole summer there in 1972. When I was a little older, I've been there many times, and just noted differences between the way things are in Europe and the way things are in the USA. I always have thought that Europeans have to be a little bit more economical because they don't have as much land in the US. We've got much more. If we could just adopt their practices, it seems like we will be way better off. But in my experience, that has not happened to a great extent.

Ava:

Yeah, that's a good point. I think the first point of interest that would be interesting to talk about is just how you've experienced two very pivotal oil shortages. In class we have recently discussed the 1973 oil shortage but you said you remembered the 1979 oil shortage more. Could you talk more about your direct experiences in these shortages and what you remember about them?

Don:

Both of them, you know, caused lines at the gas stations, people in a rationing gas, so the gas stations weren't open 24 hours, you had to go certain times, that kind of thing. And it also was made, like in the 60s, all the cars in the US were gas-guzzling huge monsters, they looked really cool, but they weren't fuel efficient at all. So the first time of the gas shortage in 73, the only countries that were making small cars that were more gas efficient were places like Japan, Germany, therefore imports. The US manufacturers General Motors, Ford, Chrysler started to make smaller cars in response to that. So when I bought my first car in 1976, when I was a college student, I bought an American Motors car, and, you know, for me for sure, the primary thing was the gas efficiency. Which, you know, you go back, say five years, nobody would have thought about that. But that was to me, it was an important concern. Now, I thought everybody would be concerned about this. But it seemed to be just a short-lived thing. And you know, ultimately you know, now we have people driving tanks, SUVs all over the place. Now, some of those are hybrids, I guess, but I think this idea of conserving energy, you know, is largely not on many people's minds. And in our country, unfortunately. It should be.

Ava:

For sure. During that time, do you think your hope that the US would be more energy-efficient and conserve energy for the long term after the oil crisis was something that other people thought? Was it ever talked about in the media?

Don:

Well, I think it was in the media for a little while. But, it's the kind of thing that with your peers, sure, because you surround yourself with people that think like you and you don't experience people who don't think like you, except, you know, that's, that's most of the people out there in the world. It seemed like the American car makers, at least they had, they would have a token car that was a small car. So I even remember when I went to get my second car, which was about 1980 or so, I was hoping to buy an American car and I went to several dealers. But what they were offering compared to what was offered by Honda, let's say it just wasn't even close. So I wound up buying a Honda Civic. And again, I've always been interested in cars that were fuel efficient. I thought it was important. And, I remember at that time, there was a real movement in the USA, of you know, buy from Detroit, meaning buy from GMC, Ford, Chrysler, the big motor companies. I went on a road trip down to New Orleans, and I got a lot of dirty looks when I was filling up my Honda car in various gas stations on that trip. And it's just like looks, I wanted to buy an American car. It just wasn't competitive. The fuel economy on any small American car versus a Japanese car wasn't even comparable and the price wasn't even comparable. It's again, it was like [the American companies] just made a token effort, I felt to satisfy that market, but they didn't really care about that.

Ava:

That makes sense. It's very interesting that by going somewhere like in the south, which can be very different from Chicago, that you were essentially publicly shamed.

Don:

Yes, and it was around the time when Reagan was elected for the first time in 1980. I just couldn't understand how this guy could get elected as president. But when I traveled outside of Chicago and out of my little sea of friends, I could understand that I'm in fact the outlier. I'm not the normal person here, I guess.

Ava:

Yeah, that's interesting. I think it must have been very eye-opening because it's very easy to stay in your own bubble. One question I thought about was that there was a rise of environmentalism in the 70s, and the recent establishment of Earth Day. I was wondering if you saw any of this discourse of conserving energy to be related to the rise of environmentalism or did it seem like a lot of the discourse for conserving energy in 1979 was due to economic reasons?

Don:

Earth Day, as I recall, started, you know, in the late 60s, I remember being in grammar school, we went on an Earth Day walk around the neighborhood or whatever. And, the EPA was started around that time, early 70s, I believe. The thing is, they knew about all this stuff way before that, right. So it was kind of late to the game number one, and number two, it just always seemed to be kind of you know, just the token effort again. It just never seems to matter to many people in our society, unfortunately. Now, with climate change, there's more of an awareness, but still, I just feel people aren't, you know, we're not doing what we need to do. And unfortunately, it's many people in my generation, older white males like me, that are the problem. You know, if young people rule the world, we'd be way better off than having old white men rule the world as we currently have.

Ava:

Yeah, that's a good point, and is related to my thesis, broadly looking at how we can shift individual responsibility in a more collective and effective manner.

Don:

So I think other countries have seen that to a greater extent than the United States. USA

is kind of like built on individual freedom, you know, you do your thing. And the heck with everyone else. You know, that, I mean, that has produced some great things, but I think, to get out of the mess we're in, that's not a good strategy.

Ava:

Given how you mentioned Reagan getting elected, we talked briefly in class about neoliberalism, a term commonly used to describe the rise of Reagan. I was curious to know if that was a term being used while Reagan was president. Additionally, what shifts did you personally notice when Reagan was president?

Don:

When Reagan was elected, I just couldn't believe it. In a way this guy was the next actor. He was super conservative at that time, now he wouldn't be even in the Republican Party, I guess. I don't know. But, you know, it just doesn't make any sense. You know, it was sort of my dawning that living in a country where there's a lot of people that don't think the way I think, you know, and the way me and my friends think. Over time, things have gotten very isolated. It's more like an urban versus rural dynamic that's developed. I just don't know how we find our way out of this because every state has urban areas that are largely liberal, progressive, whatever label you want to give it. It used to seem to me that the two groups could at least work together. But it's rare that that happens [now]. It seems like a troubling time right now. But then again, in the 1960s, I was just a kid at that time. You know, the Vietnam war was going on, there were all kinds of demonstrations. You know, kids getting shot on college campuses, happened at Kent State in Ohio. That was a very troubling time in our history and our country, too. So we've had these kinds of things. And so maybe this is just one of those things that five years from now, it will be completely different, hopefully.

Ava:

Interesting. When it comes to the oil shortage, do you think that the rise of fuel efficient cars to conserve energy occurred mainly due to government intervention or individual demand?

Don:

All of this stuff is driven by demand. People were paying more at the pump. Back then if you had a car that had 20 miles per gallon, that was a fuel efficient car. Because by and large, the cars were like 710 miles per gallon, but gasoline was very cheap in the 1960s. So [the fuel efficiency of cars] didn't really matter, I guess. But yeah, with these oil shortages happening in the 1970s, people started to pay attention. No, I don't think there was any governmental actions, I don't recall there being any incentives for say GM to build, you know, the Chevy Vega or whatever. There was a demand for this kind of car to some extent, again, it was kind of short lived. To me, it's always been something to think about but by and large, it was a passing thing for the large majority of Americans.

Ava:

You mentioned earlier about the prominence of gas-guzzling cars. I know you tend to love looking at old cars, pointing out cool old-fashioned cars if we are going somewhere. Do you think that those old cars you point out to look cool tend to be the gas-guzzling vehicles?

Don:

You see these old 1960s red Cadillacs, something like that, yeah for sure, that's not a fuel efficient car whatsoever. But it's a beautiful looking car. So you know, it's a little bit of a nostalgia but I would never own such a car myself, but I do admire the aesthetic of it. For sure. I think you know, many of us, it reminds you of your childhood in some ways. You remember seeing those cars when you were a kid. And you know, they've got the fins and they're very beautiful, but they're not efficient cars. In the fuel sense whatsoever.

Ava:

That's an interesting idea, I feel like people don't think much today about how different cars look now compared to a couple of decades ago. Meanwhile people seem to point out more often how they don't like modern buildings, thinking that they are characterless and boring.

Don:

Right. Around the University of Chicago, you see gargoyles, right? Where do they ever put gargoyles on any architecture these days?

Ava:

It's an interesting comparison to think about, honestly. But at the same time, there still are very cool, interesting, modern buildings being created. But yeah, that's a whole other topic. But I think this could be a good segue into your experience in Germany, and going more into detail about the differences in energy usage that you personally noticed in Germany versus America, while you were growing up in the 20th century in general. So could you give us a background about your time in Germany, perhaps your first impressions, and we can go from there?

Don:

Sure. I went to Germany for the first time in 1968 when I was 10 years old, for about a month. It's kind of interesting, because before that time growing up in the US as a kid of immigrants, I didn't really feel like an American. But then when I went to Germany I came to realize I'm not German either. Because, you're in between in a way, but the thing I noticed right away is of course, the cars are all smaller than in the US. There was more of an interest in conservation, I

thought, everything is smaller. God you go to the US, you can't get the size of anything small, everything is larger and larger. But it's not that way in Europe. Over the years I've been to many different countries. But you know, they don't have lots of open land. So for us, we don't worry about this but we should. There they don't have that so they have to be a little bit more careful and efficient with their management of the land, so their garbage cans are smaller everywhere. I mean, you go here, any place in America, the garbage cans are huge, right? You go to Europe, they're small. It just hits you immediately that they're very conscious of conserving things and just not being so wasteful because they have to be that way. Now, it would really behoove us to be that way. You know, it would get us ahead of the ball for sure. But anyway, that's what I noticed. And so I went there in '68. I stayed for a summer there in 1972 at my grandmother's house. I've been back there five or six times since then to Germany, been to other European countries, France, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Netherlands. It's the same thing you see, that everything is more on scale. And here in the US, it's just out of control, basically.

Ava:

When you first visited Germany in 1968, where was your family located?

Don:

My dad's family is from Bavaria, close to Munich, so we first went there. And it was interesting, we were there for about a couple of weeks. I got kind of used to the language down there. I learned German when I was a kid. Then we went to visit my mom's relatives who are in the north of Germany. And when we first got there I couldn't understand anything they were saying, the dialect was pretty different. They called it Huchdeutsch, high German, in the north. It's kind of like in the US we have the South and they have this drawl kind of thing, right. And we don't have that in Chicago or the northern states. It's similar down there. Where we went first, the south of Germany, they have a certain way of speaking. And the way of speaking in the northern part of Germany is very different. At least it was back then. So it took me a while to adapt to that, the Huchdeutsch. And when we were there, we also went very close to the wall between East and West Germany. And they had the sign, I still remember it, that said like this wall separates a town, separates families, etcetera. It was very chilling to see how there was this electric wall that didn't allow people to go back and forth. I have never experienced that before to see that. That was in the north of Germany where my mom was from.

Ava:

Oh interesting. Was the sign at the wall written in government-official text?

Don:

No, that was like a government text. But we were on the West German side, okay. So it was written by the West German government because there was a real conflict between East and

West Germany at that time. And until they got united. That was an interesting time, we have this one country Germany that got separated by two very different political kinds of entities: the East which was controlled by Moscow a communist country, and the West which was dominated by the US, France, England, essentially that is how it wound up about the Second World War. My mom told me this, she said, because she was like a refugee at that time, that you knew where they were drawing the border, basically. They came through East Germany, they made sure to get out to the part that was going to be West Germany. And they were. They were in Wolfsburg, which was just beyond the East German border, because they had been from Russia and they didn't want to be a part of that anymore.

Ava:

Didn't you tell me that you had a friend that was on the East side of Germany?

Don:

Yeah, more recently with my band we've played in Berlin and we opened for a band called Polkaholix that are from Berlin, and these guys are all from East Berlin. They grew up in the DDR, the Deutsche Demokratische Republik, what they called East Germany. And so that was really interesting to learn about their experience. One guy told me it was great when they were kids, because the government had all these programs for sports and things like that. So when you're a kid, he said it was fantastic. But once you kind of got aware of things, when you're a teenager and beyond, it was not good. The thing that really startled me is he told me when the wall came down, they were able to look at their files that were on that were there. Stasi was a secret police in East Germany. They could see their files, and he went to see his file. And in his file, was a description of a meeting where he had with two of his friends, right? So he knows one of those friends was a spy for Stasi. Imagine that, that's the kind of thing that went on. I know another guy, he was a statistician who was in East Germany. He was put to jail because his mom died in West Germany and he wasn't able to go to the funeral. And so he put up a little sign in Leipzig as a protest while he was arrested. Well, here's what the East German government did. They had this guy who's a scientist who was valuable to the west. Well, they traded, they needed money, so they would sell this guy to the West if they got a certain amount of money. Right I mean it's what's going on now with Russia. Basically, they've gotten many US journalists jailed, and they're trying to extract something in trade for these people that are not rightly jailed, and it was the same thing in East Germany. So he got out eventually and that's how I eventually met him, but he was jailed in East Germany. So it just seemed like a terrible place.

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[Start of second section]

Don:

All right. So I was talking about this East German statistician who got jailed by the Stasi, essentially, which was the secret police in East Germany. And then he got bought by the West German government. And eventually made it to us as a very talented guy but that's what they would do. And he's German, because they needed money. They didn't have a whole lot and so the West was relatively stronger throughout that time, and I mean, that's why we put up the wall because so many people were leaving the East for the West, so they needed to thought that and that's why they put up the wall between East and West Germany and also East and West Berlin. Now, when I went to Berlin, I think it was 92, which was just a few years after the Berlin Wall came down, but still you could even at that time sense which side you were on. There'll be like cobblestone roads in the West, it was not like that. It was a great time, and unfortunately, it seemed like it got so commercialized in what was previously the center of East Berlin. That was like prime real estate. For a while, it was where artists went, but then they got forced out because it became too expensive.

Ava:

Do you know what those areas are now? Is Kreuzberg one of the areas you were thinking of?

Don:

A place like Kreuzberg was in the West, which was very close to the wall. And historically, that was a very arty area, and what I've heard is that it's like Wicker Park, at one point it was the place where artists actually lived. But that's long gone.

Ava:

When I went to Kreuzberg in September, it definitely was a very cool place to be. I think there There is still a strong presence of Turkish immigrants there. Yes, yes. And they have the best doner kebab place. They're everywhere. We went to Berlin, and yeah, they had a lot of good, I think events going on there. But yeah, and there definitely was a lot of street art and whatnot, but at the same time, there were like, there were very expensive stores there. I remember there was this one store called boost or like very expensive clothes. Definitely a store you would see in Wicker Park now. So yeah, it does.

Don:

Right. And it wasn't like that in Wicker Park or in Kreuzberg, whatever 20 or 30 years ago. But anyways, it's the way things work. But, the reason that in Berlin, they got a lot of people from Turkey is to have a lot of people from Mexico from Central America, working jobs, trying to

better themselves. It's in Europe, they draw upon more from Turkey, Syria. Places like that. And Berlin of course, is a big conference for multiple cultures.

Ava:

Didn't you play in Kreuzberg?

Don:

I played with Algebra Suicide. We played in Berlin in 91 or 92. I believe we played at a place in East Berlin. At that time, there was a festival called The World. I don't know what the heck it was called, but we were part of that. And we played there and then with Polkaholix more recently, because the band that we played with in Berlin, Polkaholix, they're from East Germany. We played in a lot of places that were in the East. So we played in Berlin, but we also played in Cottbus and in other places that were previously part of East Germany.

Ava:

Did you see any differences between East and West Berlin?

Don:

I had been to Germany several times, but always in the West. The bass player in my band needed to go to the pharmacy to get a band aid. And he didn't know any German. So, you know, if he went to Cologne and asked for a band aid, it'd be no problem. But there they didn't know what he was saying, because they grew up learning Russian. So luckily, on his phone could get the translation of what he wanted, but it was completely different in the eastern part of Germany, you know, and when I read is they had a lot of lot of young people that left the east to go to the west, because there's more opportunities, things like that. But it's a very interesting place. I enjoyed my time there.

Ava:

One aspect of Berlin that stood out to me during my time there was how great the public transit is. I think it is considered one of the best in the world, and I didn't have to use an Uber once. I was wondering what your experience on Berlin's public transit was like throughout your multiple visits?

Don:

Public transportation systems in European cities are way beyond what we have in the United States. They say Chicago, for example, has a good public transportation system. Yeah, I guess if you consider just US cities, but compare it to like, what's in London, in Paris or in Berlin? Forget it, you know, it doesn't compare. If powerful people [in the US] relied upon public

transportation, it'll get good. If only lower class people rely upon public transportation, it will never get good. Unfortunately, that's the truth, I don't say that's a good thing at all. I think it's a very bad thing. But that's what it is. And in Europe, executives rely upon public transportation, so of course it's better. You see that even within the US, I think Washington DC has got a really good subway system. And I often wonder, I've been here many times, does it go where people want to go, I don't know, I really don't know, but to places that I have to go as a tourist and as a visitor, it's fantastic. Much, much better. So, you know what this deal is like, I think until rich people need to use public transportation, it will never get better.

Ava:

I wondered about that too, because I think your assumption about DC transportation is similar to what I thought when I went to Boston recently. This was my second time going and I used public transit there for the first time, and felt like I could get everywhere overall pretty easily. But I was thinking that this is probably because I'm not from here and I'm just going to the prime places anyways. That just goes to show how important it is to talk to people who live in these cities to get a good idea on how reliable these systems actually are.

Don:

For sure, I mean, think about Chicago, if you lived around say Irving and Harlem, there's no good public transportation to get to anywhere. Or the South, if you lived in Hegewisch, forget it. To get anywhere, it's very difficult. There're many areas where they talk about food deserts, but there's transportation deserts too.

Ava:

That's true. I've never heard that term, but it's so important and should definitely be highlighted. Especially considering how the quality of someone's experience on the CTA can be quite dependent on where you live.

Don:

Yes, if you're close to the lake it's pretty good.

Ava:

Exactly. I think your idea about who's in power and whether or not they take public transit is very interesting. I think perhaps we are getting down that path in the sense that my generation is talking more about public transit. It's gaining more awareness and seeming like a "cool" thing to do. In a project I did in the fall quarter, I found that a significant indicator of how high transit ridership is in an area is due to age and education. Basically, once you turn 30, the likelihood of using public transit starts going down a lot. While it looks like my generation, which currently uses public transit a significant amount, I wonder if it mainly is just because we're not 30 yet and

that we don't have houses yet. Another interesting thing I wonder about is when fossil fuels run out for good, maybe there will be an "apocalyptic" moment where politicians end up having to use public transit, and maybe that will be the reason public transit will start to thrive for the long-term.

Don:

It's exactly right. If Senators or Congressmen had to use public transportation, it would get solved overnight.

Ava:

It reminds me of when I went on a career trek in DC, the spring break of my second year, and Dick Durbin came to talk to us. It was really cool. The main thing I remember is how he was on an airplane and apparently there used to be parts of airplanes where people could smoke legally and he had to get moved there. He asked an airline worker to not be moved there, but they kind of told him that he could do something about this. So he had an awful flight experience, and eventually got the smoking areas in airplanes banned. It just goes to show how much personal experience could influence what gets done.

Don:

That's the way it seems to always work, unfortunately. If it affects any person in power, then there's a change but until then, there's no change. But he does seem to me like a very reasonable politician and I'm glad to have him as the senator in Illinois, but, you know, that's the way it works.

Ava:

Yeah, for sure. I feel like this is a pretty good point to end off of, is there anything else you want to cover?

Don:

The one thing I would like to add is to promote my band the Polkaholics.