**Walter Elsasser: Comments and Remembrances**

Andrew Dodge

**Walter and the Family:**

Walter Elsasser was my uncle by marriage to my mother’s half sister Margaret, who died in Utah in 1994. He would visit my mother, and the rest of the family regularly as far back as I can remember into the early 1950s. He would come to Washington, DC, for scientific gatherings and go to the Cosmos Club, but he always had time to visit. Walter was a quiet and reserved person who didn’t try to impress anyone. However, it was obvious even from childhood, one knew he did not live in the same world as others.

He was always very nice and solicitous, but he was just different. On our family vacations, we visited Walter and his family in Salt Lake City in 1955 where Walter’s daughter and son and my two brothers and I went “camping” in the backyard. In 1959 the families got together again in La Jolla, California. We all went to the beach together, and Walter asked if we wanted to go water skiing. This was another example of his being “different.” He was being very nice and wanted us to enjoy our stay, but I doubt if Walter had ever been in a boat much less gone water skiing. My father made a joke of it to us in private, but even at my age, I saw it as the professor trying to interact as a normal person.

In 1967 Walter moved to Maryland as a professor at the University of Maryland and later as Professor Emeritus at Johns Hopkins University. At that point Walter became a more frequent visitor. He would come over for lunch on a regular basis and would engage in some of our family doings. He gave my son a teddy bear when he was born, and it was his favorite toy until he grew up. In 1985, my wife and I and our children were moving to Bavaria, Germany, for a two-year work tour. For the occasion, Walter bought my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter a Dirndl, the traditional dress worn by women in the Alpine region of Europe. She loved it and wore it for our last family luncheon with Walter before we left for Germany.

In contrast to this, after our return from Germany, Walter was scheduled to go to Germany to receive an award. In preparation for this, he ordered the “cap and gown” for a person holding a Ph D degree from the university. When the robe arrived and he opened the box, he was taken aback by what he saw. The robe was black with white and red trim. These were the colors of the Nazi Party that forced him to flee Germany in 1933. He closed the box and never wore it.

When moving into an assisted living home and after Walter’s death, my mother and I helped deal with his personal effects. After my mother’s death, I found a collection of Walter’s personal papers and those of his parents in her home. It was a wonderful collection of documents, photographs and other papers. It was like looking into a time machine. After reading and deciphering the German in old script, I contacted Walter’s old department at Johns Hopkins and shipped all that remained of his papers and photographs to them so they could be preserved.

**Walter: Science and Teaching:**

Walter’s career in the sciences is well-known and can be easily researched. Upon completing my degrees, I entered teaching and the field of education, which was both of our chosen professions. Walter was happy that one member of the family went into teaching, but he made an interesting and revealing comment about teaching one afternoon after lunch. He made the point that the first year of teaching a subject was a lot of hard work establishing yourself in the institution with your fellow colleagues and students. The second year was easy and somewhat smooth sailing, but by the third year it became a bore. Looking back on this comment and his reference to himself as a “rolling stone” for going from one university to another, it seems that he always needed a challenge and new experiences. This would also help to explain the diversity of his scientific pursuits from geophysics to atmospheric and radar studies during World War II, and finally his interest in the study of biology and the probability of evolutionary development.

One interaction and his ultimate decision in the early 1940s would have repercussions later in his social and teaching life. Walter knew and was a colleague of Robert Oppenheimer while both were in a German university graduate program in the late 1920s. Oppenheimer recognized Walter’s scientific work and abilities, and when Oppenheimer became part of the Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb, he wanted Walter to join him in this effort. Walter refused, and on that point made the comment that he did not want to get into the mass murder business. They never really spoke with each other ever again. When Walter went to Princeton University in the early 1960s, where Oppenheimer was the head of the Institute of Advanced Studies with a number of his colleagues, Walter made it clear to the family that it was a very hostile and unpleasant place to teach. Oppenheimer’s attitude had not changed in the intervening years.

Many years later while he was visiting our family, Walter and I got into a private conversation about the atomic bomb. While I was making the point that its use moved the conversion from a theoretical point of view to seeing the practical results of the use of a bomb on a city, Walter stated to me that the building of the bomb was pushed by a bunch of hysterical people. Even though he was a German by birth, and the bomb was originally intended to be used on Germany, Walter never exhibited any support for the bomb or its military use. His work on atmospheric and radar studies during the war was of a defensive nature and did not directly involve the destructive nature of war.

As part or Walter’s research in atmospheric studies during World War II, he worked with Vannevar Bush who was head of the U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD). Bush was particularly interested in atmospheric studies as part of radar development. Bush had offices in the Empire State Building, and on July 28, 1945, Walter was at Bush’s office. On that morning an Army B-25 twin-engine bomber crashed into the Empire State Building. Walter was not injured and got out without incident, but it was part of family history discussed in the early 1950s.

**Walter and Art:**

I became aware of uncle Walter’s interest in art after he moved to Baltimore in 1974. My mother would make periodic visits to Walter’s apartment, and he and his wife Suzi would visit local art galleries. In the early 1980s, I went with my mother one day, and we spent most of the morning at the Baltimore Museum of Art near the Homewood campus of Johns Hopkins University.

In the late 1980s Walter took an interest in my own work in Chinese landscape art using ink and chalk. In sharing his appreciation of my work, he gave me a work done by Isoroku Ito, circa 1830, in ink of a Rhinoceros Beetle. I keep it in a special place in my home where I can see it every day.

In the late 1980s, when Walter moved from his apartment near the Johns Hopkins campus to an assisted living facility. I discovered other works of art he still had in his collection. All his pieces had recently gone to an art dealer. He had two items he still had not sole that were a huge surprise to me. One was a sketch drawing done by Leonardo da Vinci from the late 15th or early 16th centuries and the second was by Albrecht Dürer of Germany done in the same time period. I suspect that both pieces were purchased in Europe in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

Another instance of Walter’s love of quality art was the portrait he commissioned of his daughter. When Barabra was just three years old in 1945, Walter hired a well-known artist to paint a 16” x 22” portrait of her sitting in a rocking chair. I kept the painting for several years after Walter’s death and subsequently shipped the painting to Barbara a few years later.