

Memories of *Central European History*, 1997–2005

Kees Gispén

I became involved with what was then called the Conference Group for Central European History in early 1997, when I accepted Roger Chickering's invitation to succeed him as Executive Secretary and Treasurer. This put me in charge of preparing and distributing the biannual (now defunct) *Newsletter* and of carrying out a variety of other duties, including keeping track of the money and organizing the annual executive meeting and the *Bierabend*—a cash bar and convivial get-together for historians of Central Europe—at the annual conference of the American Historical Association. The *Newsletter* kept members of the Conference Group informed about matters relevant to Central European history, such as upcoming events, panels on German and Austrian history at the American Historical Association meeting, scholarships, fellowships, as well as events at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, including the annual Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar. At one point, it was mailed separately to members and then, sometime later, published in *Central European History*.

I suppose I had suspected it would be more work than I had been led to believe, but, as someone living in the relative isolation of Mississippi, I was excited, especially in the beginning, about the challenge and the contacts. With Chickering's good advice and that of others who made up the executive committee over the years, I managed to keep things afloat without trouble during the eight years I served. At any rate, I do not remember getting many complaints. I do remember moving the *Newsletter* online beginning in the fall of 1998; this eliminated many headaches, saved money, and taught me the basics of HTML. In 2004, I coordinated amending the bylaws of the Conference Group by streamlining and combining some redundant articles and adding language to make it an IRS nonprofit (501(c)(3)) (tax exempt) organization. I also remember a big rescue project that involved receiving, storing, donating, and shipping to libraries across the country (and some abroad) hundreds and hundreds of pounds of back issues of *Central European History*, which had remained at Emory since Douglas Unfug's time as editor and were going to be destroyed.

The editor of *CEH* when I started was Kenneth Barkin, who was most ably assisted by Ursula Marcum. Whereas Barkin was responsible for the principal editorial decisions, Marcum did most of the copy editing as assistant editor. Originally from Germany, Ursula had married an American serviceman after World War II and, later in life, earned her PhD in German history at the University of California, Riverside. As Barkin put it, "If the journal has been a success, much of the praise should go to Ursula Marcum, who sought to meet the highest standards of editing, and almost always did. She also managed to make many friends among our authors along the way."¹

¹Personal correspondence, Kenneth Barkin to Kees Gispén, March 2, 2004 (in possession of the author). [Margaret Lavinia Anderson wrote the following to the current editor of *CEH* in an email dated July 29, 2017: "Ken Barkin said that he could never have managed *CEH* without Ursula Marcum. Ursula was about 10 years older than he, a German woman married to an American, who after her children grew up, went back to university to get a PhD. Ken was

The three of us quickly developed a close working relationship and a great friendship, forged in a crisis that beset the journal in 1997 and 1998. The publisher of *Central European History* at that time was Humanities Press International (HPI), which had taken over from Emory in 1990, the same year that Barkin succeeded Unfug. But HPI was about to go under in 1997, and I remember receiving many agitated phone calls and worried emails from Ken Barkin, for the survival of the journal and a big part of his life's work were at risk. As he wrote in his own retrospective, "Roger Chickering and Kees Gispén helped guide the journal through a rough patch when our publisher, HPI, went bankrupt. They were calm and practical while I was experiencing wide emotional swings."²

I happened to have personal connections at the time at Brill and knew that it was expanding in the United States and might be interested in taking over *Central European History*—and indeed, it was. Brill started publishing the journal in the second half of 1998 after a brief hiatus. All this happened twenty years ago, most of it behind the scenes, and I do not have a good memory of the details. Brill agreed to an extra issue, I believe, or perhaps to one or two combined issues, which took care of the publishing hiatus and helped reduce an old (and new) backlog of accepted articles. The Conference Group started receiving a small annual royalty payment from the publisher again, which paid for the article prize, the book prize, and the *Bierabend*. The number of subscriptions grew, if modestly, even as *Central European History's* subscription price went up. What I do remember very clearly was, first, the great sense of relief the three of us felt at having avoided disaster, and, second, our exhilaration that the journal had survived.

In 2000, Kenneth Barkin made it known that he wanted to slow down and start the process of finding a successor as editor. It fell to me to coordinate this transition, which took almost two years. But after many phone calls, emails, and meetings with members of the Board of Editors and officers of the Conference Group, Kenneth Ledford was selected as *Central European History's* next editor—and I was thrilled. Ledford's appointment was approved at the annual meeting in December 2002, effective as of January 2003. He soon moved the journal from Brill to Cambridge (see his contribution to this commemorative issue), which opened another chapter in the history of the journal and represented a great step forward in the life of *Central European History*.

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her Doktorvater. She was perfect for CEH, not least because of her German. She was also good-natured, a good writer, and meticulous. Gold!"—Ed.]

²Ibid.