



HEINZ E. ELLERSIECK
(1920 -)

INTERVIEWED BY
SHIRLEY K. COHEN

February 25, 2004

Photo by Rick Mendoza, ca. 1970

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Pasadena, California



Subject area

History

Abstract

A February 25, 2004, interview with Heinz E. Ellersieck, associate professor of history, emeritus, in the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Dr. Ellersieck received his undergraduate and graduate education at UCLA (AB 1942, MA 1948, PhD 1955). His father was German violinmaker Hellmuth Ellersieck, who emigrated to Denmark before the outbreak of World War I, where he met and married Dr. Ellersieck's mother. In 1914, to avoid extradition to Germany to serve in the Kaiser's army, he and his wife moved to Norway, where their children were born. In 1926 the family emigrated to Los Angeles.

Dr. Ellersieck attended Alta Loma Elementary School and Los Angeles High School. After his graduation from UCLA in 1942, he joined the army, spending almost a year in the infantry in Fort Meade, Md., before joining the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] and studying Russian at Cornell. He attended intelligence school at Fort Meade and in 1945 was sent to England, to the air force intelligence branch. He was discharged in the summer of 1946 and returned to

UCLA, where he studied Russian history with Waldemar Westergaard and Raymond H. Fisher.

After receiving his MA, Dr. Ellersieck spent fourteen months in European archives gathering material for his dissertation on the 17th century czars Alexei Mikhailovich and Feodor Alexeevich. In 1950, he was recruited as an instructor in Caltech's Humanities Division by Professor Rodman W. Paul and the division's new chairman, Hallett Smith, and he discusses their efforts to turn it from a teaching division into a division emphasizing research and scholarship, on a par with the institute's science divisions.

He also recalls joining, soon after his arrival, Caltech's Project Vista, which the air force had asked the institute to undertake in preparation for a possible Soviet invasion of Western Europe. (Ellersieck was recruited because of his military and intelligence experience and his knowledge of Russian history and language.) He comments on the report that resulted and the air force's unhappiness with its recommendations against the use of tactical atomic weapons. He comments on his further studies of the Soviet Union during the years of the cold war. His retirement in 1988 coincided with the end of that war.

He also discusses his continuing interest in Pasadena civic affairs, especially his involvement with Pasadena preservationists and with police community relations.

Administrative information

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Preferred citation

Ellersieck, Heinz E. Interview by Shirley K. Cohen. Pasadena, California, February 25, 2004. Oral History Project, California Institute of Technology Archives. Retrieved [supply date of retrieval] from the World Wide Web: http://resolver.caltech.edu/CaltechOH:OH_Ellersieck_H

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH HEINZ E. ELLERSIECK

BY SHIRLEY K. COHEN

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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Interview with Heinz E. Ellersieck
Pasadena, California

by Shirley K. Cohen

February 25, 2004

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

COHEN: Good afternoon, Professor Ellersieck. For starters, give me a little background on your parents.

ELLERSIECK: My father, Hellmuth Ellersieck, was German, the son of a violin maker. When he was young, he was apprenticed to become a violin maker, which he did, in Germany. This was before World War I, of course.

COHEN: What city was he in?

ELLERSIECK: Well, he was born in Rostock. He did his studies in Markneukirchen, and then he became a journeyman. However, after his military service, he left for Denmark. He was told there were better opportunities in Denmark, and he got a job in Copenhagen with Emil Yorck & Sons, which was the leading music firm in Copenhagen. There he met my mother, who was Danish. She was working in the movie industry there—not as an actress but as someone who painted the films or put captions in for foreign films. They were very poor, both of them. They had a long engagement, and in 1914, when the war came, he was of course a German reservist, and Denmark had a treaty with Germany for the extradition of German reservists. Well, he didn't want to go back to serve in the Kaiser's army, and my mother—who was something of a pacifist—didn't want him to go back either, so they borrowed my uncle's Danish passport and they went to Norway. My father got a job there with a Norwegian violin firm, at the request of his Danish boss.

COHEN: He must have been a good craftsman.

ELLERSIECK: Well, he was an excellent violin maker. They then proceeded to live in Norway during the war. It turned out, though, that the Danes never did send the reservists back; the Germans apparently didn't ask them to. And Norway did not have that kind of treaty, because while Denmark was under the German thumb, Norway was under the English thumb. So they lived in Norway. All of us children were born there. I was born in a villa named Liberty.

COHEN: Now, was this a hospital?

ELLERSIECK: No, everybody was born in their houses in Norway back in those days. Pregnant women were told to eat for two, and they bore huge babies. We were all huge babies born at home, but we thrived and were healthy, except I had something of a skin problem—winter eczema—which was worsened by the woolen clothes we wore.

So, we prospered. Father, in a few years, took over his boss's firm and not only made and repaired violins but sold them. He did very good business after the war. However, both my parents believed that there would be another war in Europe. My mother also had the wanderlust. She had married a German because she wanted to get out of the slums in Denmark. Both my father and mother were, I guess, what you would call mentally talented minors and had always starred in their schools, up to the age of fourteen—that's as far as people went in those days. And they read English, and that included California Chamber of Commerce advertisements about oranges growing below snowcapped mountains and the wonderful beaches and the opportunities here. So they decided to leave Norway. They tried in 1924, but they had some problems with visas, because they had lived for a couple of years with my uncle's passport. [Laughter] And that had to be straightened out—and it *was* straightened out.

So the sunshine in California was one of the attractions. My father had the opportunity to go to centers where there were many Germans and Scandinavians, like St. Louis or Chicago, but he was going to go all the way west. So in 1926 we gathered everything together, the house was sold, they packed eleven huge wooden crates with our furniture and our books and our possessions, and we set off just before Christmas. We spent Christmas with the family in Denmark—my mother's brothers and sisters and aunts and so forth—and that was quite an adventure. We children were told not to tell anyone that we were going to America, but my four-

year-old sister, in the midst of the celebrations, piped up and said, “We’re going to America!”
[Laughter]

COHEN: Why did they not want it known?

ELLERSIECK: Because it would make the family very unhappy.

COHEN: Oh, just the fact of leaving.

ELLERSIECK: We were going, we would never come back, and so forth. So my mother had laid that secrecy upon us. My brother, Frank, who is four years older than I, was the enforcer in the family, and he swatted Edith on the ear—boxing the ear was the normal way of chiding someone at that time. Well, anyway, Frank didn’t do that very much, and it was always in order to instill discipline or to make us better citizens. I love my brother. He’s still alive.

COHEN: Is he here in California?

ELLERSIECK: He worked all his life at Lockheed—first as an engineer and then as a general problem solver.

COHEN: So did the family come straight to Los Angeles?

ELLERSIECK: We came to Los Angeles by way of northern Germany and then London. We saw the Tower of London and the other sights, we saw our first black person [laughter], and we got on the ship at Southampton. It was the *Asturias*, which was a medium-size Cunard Line ship, and we sailed for ten days, across a very stormy North Atlantic. This was in early January.

COHEN: It sounds awful. Do you remember anything from this? How old were you?

ELLERSIECK: I remember an awful lot. This is one of my burdens, or virtues, you can call it either one: that I have an excellent memory. That’s why I’m a historian, I suppose. We got to New York, and we visited with one of my father’s nephews there, an orphan from World War I

whom we had raised in Norway. He had come to the United States a year before. But we didn't tarry. We went on to Chicago by train and then by train across the United States on the Santa Fe. We stayed in the Knickerbocker Hotel, on a hill near downtown Los Angeles. We walked everywhere. And then we rented a house in west Los Angeles.

COHEN: You were already in school by this time?

ELLERSIECK: When we arrived in Los Angeles, my brother, four years older, was immediately put in school. And when the authorities heard I was six and a half, they said, "Oh, he should be in school, too." So they put me in the first grade, in Alta Loma Elementary School, which was torn down and rebuilt after the '33 earthquake. And there I was, the only Norwegian speaker in that school in the first grade. Nobody spoke Norwegian, so I was rather unhappy until Mrs. Reddish, with the polka-dot dress, swatted me on the back of the head and said, "Shut up," or the equivalent. I can't remember exactly what she said.

COHEN: You got the idea.

ELLERSIECK: Yes, and I was off and running. My schooling began immediately, and I started to learn English very quickly. My brother was advanced to a higher grade, because he had been in school in Norway. One of his classmates at Alta Loma was our Jack [John E.] Roberts [Institute Professor of Chemistry, emeritus].

COHEN: Now, was everybody Caucasian in this school?

ELLERSIECK: It was an Anglo school, yes. We had some Jewish kids and we had one or two Hispanics, but they all spoke English.

COHEN: Did your father get back into violin making?

ELLERSIECK: My father sought employment with some of the music companies in Los Angeles. They wanted to assign him to a repair room in the back, at a very meager salary. A secretary at one of these companies took him aside and said, "You don't have to do this. You can set up your

own business in California. You know how to buy and sell, and I'll help you." And she became his secretary and helped him rent a place in the Loew's State building at Seventh and Broadway, where he took pictures of Lindbergh's arrival. He immediately began to get customers. He had brought instruments with him from Norway, and he also did repair work and built violins, so he prospered. We moved out to Washington Boulevard, where La Brea now cuts through, and rented a very nice little bungalow there, with a view of the Hollywood sign to the north and the big 57 on the Baldwin Hills to the south. And of course everybody referred to me as "Fifty-seven," because of Heinz.

COHEN: Of course!

ELLERSIECK: There we had a good time.

COHEN: So you really are a Los Angeles product. What high school did you go to here?

ELLERSIECK: I went through Mount Vernon Junior High School and then Los Angeles High School. I walked to both of them—there was no thought of busing in those days.

COHEN: Well, Los Angeles was a small place then.

ELLERSIECK: But the main thing was that we immediately bought an automobile and began traveling around, up and down the state, up to Washington and Vancouver, visiting the beaches and so forth, learning what sunburn was. We all became terribly sunburned on the beach at Santa Barbara. We explored the mountains—I guess we longed for the Norwegian scenery but not the Norwegian weather. And I guess we were very happy.

COHEN: It sounds like it.

ELLERSIECK: Yes. The schooling went well. By the third grade, I was skipped up a half grade. I remember those years mostly happily. One episode I could not understand. Some boys had had an eraser fight—you know, chalk dust all over, and so forth—when the teacher went out. When she came back, she couldn't find out who did it, so she kept everybody after school.

COHEN: Collective punishment.

ELLERSIECK: Collective punishment, which is something my mother was irate about and I was never willing to accept. One of the reasons I subsequently was irate over these totalitarian countries, like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, was because they dealt with people on a collective basis—punishment of the group in order to control individuals.

COHEN: You then finished high school here in Los Angeles?

ELLERSIECK: I finished high school. There were seven pictures of me in the yearbook, because I was the chief orator for the school. I gave the valedictorian speech, and I had won the city championships in oratory. So I was readily accepted at UCLA. In those days, there were very small fees.

COHEN: When did the Westwood campus open?

ELLERSIECK: It had opened some years earlier [1929]. So I went to UCLA. My teachers had steered me toward education from an early period—when they skipped me up, when they asked me to do this and do that, you know, play the lead in the plays and things of that sort. And I guess I took the easy path. I mean, I did what I was good at, and they encouraged that. I read, and I avoided the harder science courses, because I really wasn't that interested in science. I don't know how I would have done in it, if I had tried it. My brother became an engineer—that was his hobby, and he became very good at that. My sister went into education, and she became a music and art teacher. UCLA was a cinch for me—Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude at graduation.

By that time, I had a steady girlfriend—a young woman of German ancestry [Ruth Riemer], who was much more brilliant than myself, as a matter of fact. Much more diligent, too. I did everything so easily that I didn't work as hard as she did. She had the highest grade-point average of any woman who went through UCLA, up to that point. She became a sociologist, and we were engaged by the time we were twenty. We announced it when I turned twenty-one and we went on from there.

COHEN: Now, you said you went to high school with Bob [Robert W.] Oliver [professor of economics 1959-1988, d. 1998].

ELLERSIECK: He was a grade behind me, actually—in my sister’s class. His father was the principal of the school, Los Angeles High School. His brother was a bass player in the school orchestra and brought his bass to be repaired by my father. That was our only early connection with Oliver.

Anyway, I knew a lot of people from LA High School, and the high school reunions I went to for fifty years, rather than the UCLA reunions.

COHEN: Were there any other notables in that class of yours?

ELLERSIECK: Notables? Well, I didn’t know that Ray Bradbury was one of my classmates until much later, when he started being famous and coming to reunions and doing his usual wonderful story-telling. Some of the girls went on to marry important men, like Goodwin Knight, who became governor of California. One named Mildred Eberhard, who often sat next to me in classes with alphabetical seating, married Evelle Younger, California’s attorney general, and pushed him through his career. She came from a well-connected Republican family—they were close to Earl Warren—and rose in politics on her own. She urged me to go with her to USC. Her ambition was to become a champion debater, and she did. But I didn’t have the money for USC. Several of the boys might have become notable if we hadn’t lost so many in World War II. In most of my classes I associated with the better students, who were on a track. They went into the aerospace industries in large numbers.

COHEN: Well, those were warriors, weren’t they?

ELLERSIECK: Not then. My God, we were all anti-war! We were all raised on the criticisms and revisions of World War I, and we were against the merchants of death. And we established the Yanks Are Not Coming committee.

COHEN: In high school?

ELLERSIECK: No, in college; the war was not that imminent in high school. I didn't participate very strongly in that movement, but I saved all the handouts we got at the games and so forth and went to some of the peace rallies. That was a very interesting time politically.

Oh, yes, you asked about other high school classmates. Well, John Rubel and his brother Jack. John was one of our very best students academically. His brother came to Caltech; he died in World War II. John became, at one point, assistant to the secretary of the air force, Harold Brown, and during my career at Caltech John came out and propagandized for getting the presidency of Caltech for his boss, Mr. Brown [Caltech president 1969-1977]. So there was that connection. Yes, we had a lot of important people, who went on to do various things.

At UCLA, once the war started, I was marking time, knowing I'd be drafted—I wasn't enthusiastic about that. I was working in the Beverly Hills Public Library, where I had been working for two and a half years as a page and all-around roustabout. I made 35 cents an hour, which paid for my engagement ring and my gasoline for going back and forth to UCLA. I was sort of unhappy when they replaced me with a girl who got \$1.25 an hour for doing less than I had been doing. [Laughter] But that was a good experience. I enjoyed it, because I would come early and I would read the books. [Laughter]

COHEN: Your mother must have been particularly unhappy about your being drafted.

ELLERSIECK: My mother *was* unhappy. She wrote to the newspapers that she hadn't raised her sons to become soldiers. She belonged to the America First committee and the rallies around Lindbergh, and so forth. I took a more matter-of-fact view of it: This is what happens in societies. I was very unhappy with Franklin Roosevelt, because I felt he was illegally getting us involved; he was doing everything he could to get us into that war against Germany. I realized later that he was doing the right thing even though it was not popular. Of course, in western America, we were less interested in saving Britain than some of the East Coast people were. We were more concerned with Japan, among other things.

COHEN: How did you feel when all the Japanese people got sent to their camps?

ELLERSIECK: Well, I went with my Japanese friends out to Santa Anita to see them off. My parents had Japanese clients, and they took in and stored the piano from the music teacher. We

were unhappy about it—we thought this was wrong. Of course, some of our German friends were also incarcerated, which hasn't received the publicity that the Japanese incarceration did. It wasn't quite on that scale, but *they* were also innocent people. But of course, we know what *happens* in war. *We know* what happens in war! It was so fortunate—I've thought ever after—that we left Norway when we did, because my brother and I would have been in severe circumstances had we been in Norway and of military age when the Germans came. The Germans would have had us on the list to, you know, help Quisling, and the Norwegians would have been suspicious of us. It would have been a bad time.

So I got into the service. My brother did not. He was excused because he was employed by Lockheed. When he was due to go in, Lockheed would call him out, so he got through the war without going into the service.

I graduated from UCLA in 1942. In August of '42, I volunteered for the parachute troops, and I trained in Georgia with a unit that subsequently became famous as the Band of Brothers. After they found out that I spoke various languages and had a college degree—which was unusual among the paratroopers, except for the officers—they assigned me to the medics. But I broke my foot making a jump from a tower in the obstacle course, and they washed me out. Then I spent almost a year in the infantry in Fort Meade, Maryland. When the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] program was initiated for engineering, they told me to take the test, and somehow I passed it. I didn't think I was an engineer, but I passed the course. And then I was pulled out—in August of '43, I guess—and sent to an ASTP unit. By that time they had said, "You should study languages." So they sent me to Cornell, to the ASTP program there, and I could study either Chinese or Russian or German or Italian. Well, I thought, Italian is a wonderful language, but it's passé as far as modern affairs are concerned. German I could pick up on my own, I thought—and I could. Chinese was too difficult, and I didn't want to go to the Orient. So I took Russian. I was there in Ithaca for nine months. I had not washed out at the end of six months, which was unusual for those of us who had no background in Slavic languages. [Laughter] One of my colleagues, incidentally, in that program was Richard Pipes, who subsequently became a Harvard professor and a member of the Reagan administration, and he has just written another book, which I read with very great interest.

I enjoyed the ASTP very much. I didn't work terribly hard. I learned enough Russian to pass and so forth. Afterward we were sent out to different infantry divisions. But after an

experience down in the swamps of Louisiana in the summertime, I was hauled out with other members of the Russian group and sent to Utah, to go in the pipeline to Great Falls, Montana, and the Soviet Union, to help with the shuttle bombing, which was to take place from the Ukraine to Italy—back and forth. The Russians, however, didn't like that program and didn't want the Americans there. We lost a lot of airplanes on the field at Poltava; we thought that the Russians let the Germans come in and strafe us. So we were put on hold, and then we were sent to various schools. I was a corporal, and I could not advance while going to school, so I continued to be a corporal. I went to intelligence school at Fort Meade, Maryland, and then to Amarillo Air Force Base to learn to be an airplane mechanic. That was an interesting experience—I was the only one in the group who had ever held a screwdriver in his hand. The others were all New York boys who were excellent Phi Beta Kappas, and people like that. We passed the exams as the highest of any group that had gone through the Amarillo Air Force Base, but we couldn't get an airplane fixed, because none of us were good mechanics. [Laughter]

Then in 1945 we were shipped out to England. We went across on the *Elizabeth I* to Glasgow, and I spent the rest of my time in the intelligence branch of the air force with a squadron. I was all over the place, in Belgium, England, France, and Germany in 1945 and '46. In southern France, we were flying missions in a program called Casey Jones, to map Europe and North Africa from the air, and I was in the map room. I handled that part of it. It was a very interesting time.

I came back to the United States in the summer of '46; I was discharged from the air force and went back to UCLA. On a furlough in Copenhagen in February of '46, I had run into my mentor, Professor Waldemar Westergaard, of the UCLA history department. He was the cultural attaché there, and he said, "Oh, Heinz, what have you been doing?" And I said I had been learning Russian and speaking it and so forth. And he said, "Oh, my, my! You know, we have a new professor of Russian history at UCLA, Ray [Raymond H.] Fisher, and you would be perfect to take a joint doctorate in history from me and Ray Fisher. I'll see that you get a scholarship or a teaching assistantship." And of course I wanted to get back to California. I could have gone to many other schools, but I went back. My wife was taking her sociology degree at UCLA. By that time, we were married; we had married while I was still at Ithaca. So we set up in the veterans' housing at UCLA, on Gayley Avenue. I got my car back from my sister, but I gave it up, because we didn't need that transportation.

COHEN: So then you were in the PhD program at UCLA.

ELLERSIECK: Well, in the master's program first. And I taught—I had a teaching assistantship.

COHEN: How did you get to Caltech? Because it was not too long after that that you arrived at Caltech.

ELLERSIECK: Well, I took my master's degree in June of '48 and immediately went to Europe for fourteen months to gather materials for my doctoral dissertation. And those fourteen months of '48 and '49 I spent in the archives—Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, The Hague, in Hamburg, in England, in France—traveling everywhere on a shoestring. We had saved \$4,000 and we spent fourteen months in Europe, living from hand to mouth.

COHEN: What was your subject?

ELLERSIECK: My subject was to be the history of the reigns of Alexei Mikhailovich and his son Feodor Alexeevich, just before Peter the Great. The Scandinavian materials had never been exploited for Russian history—at that time I could not go to the Soviet Union for study, but I read whatever Russian materials were available in the libraries—in Helsinki and so forth, and the German and the French and the other materials. But mostly I spent my time with the original documents from that period. Wonderful collections, and I loved it, just loved it! I built an apparatus to take microfilm for further study. They didn't have those at that time in the European archives. It was very interesting to set up my apparatus, and they were very helpful. But they were doing their work under very dim lights, because there was still fuel rationing in Europe, and when I came, requiring 200 watts, they said, "Oh, no! We can't allow that," so I had to rewire my apparatus, to cut it in half. And that required that I take timed shots, and the page could move, so sometimes my thumbs or my wife's thumbs are on the manuscripts.

[Laughter]

COHEN: So then you came back to UCLA.

ELLERSIECK: I came back to UCLA in 1949.

COHEN: And you came to Caltech in 1950. How did that happen?

ELLERSIECK: Well, I was spending an infinite number of hours in the microfilm room writing out, translating, and so forth, the materials I had gathered and other materials. And in early 1950, Rod [Rodman W.] Paul [Edward S. Harkness Professor of History, d. 1987] from Caltech, who had been employed there not long before—and I didn't know anything about Caltech, except that it was a good school—came to the UCLA campus and apparently talked to the history department. I learned later that this was in connection with Lee DuBridge [Caltech president 1946-1968] having come, and Hallett Smith [chairman of the Humanities Division, 1949-1972], and they were retooling their recruiting processes at Caltech. They wanted a more broadly based population, including athletes and leaders of political groups at schools, rather than only nerds. And among other things, somebody told them, “You should not recruit only from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. You should at least ask the western colleges if they have anybody.”

COHEN: So that was something instigated by DuBridge?

ELLERSIECK: I think so. There were other things he was initiating, too. So Rod Paul came out to UCLA, and he was told, “Well, we have Ellersieck. He's over in the library.” So somebody called me over and I met Rod Paul. I was in my shirtsleeves, of course, and it was quite informal. I was invited to come to Caltech, which I did. Apparently they found it an opportune time to get a UCLA graduate who didn't have his degree yet, but that was not uncommon—all us veterans were in the works. Then I had to make a big decision. I had some tentative offers from Radcliffe and Swarthmore to go east, and Caltech, of course, did not have a humanities division that had other people who were interested in Russian history. It was not a place to go to pursue a research career. It was considered at that time to be a teaching division, intended to broaden the experience of Caltech students, who were mostly scientists and engineers. So in that sense, I knowingly gave up the notion of being a great research person.

COHEN: So you made the decision. You wanted to stay in California. You wanted to be at a small place, I gather.

ELLERSIECK: Well, no, I didn't care about that, but my wife was working toward her sociology degree, and she pretty well had been assured that she was going to get a job at UCLA. She and her mentor, Leonard—it was Bloom, but he changed it to Broom—wrote the first book on the Japanese experience in the camps. [Tape ends]

Begin Tape 1, Side 2

ELLERSIECK: They were going from concentration camp to concentration camp, interviewing and studying what the experience was doing to the Japanese family. That was a book called *Removal and Return* [*Removal and Return: The Socio-Economic Effects of the War on Japanese Americans*, by Leonard Broom and Ruth Riemer (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1949)]. If she was going to continue at UCLA, I shouldn't tear us apart by going east, and if I could have a Caltech job, that was just fine. Then we would both be in the same area—with our families, too. So that was my decision. And I started at Caltech in September of 1950.

COHEN: I gather that you then continued to work on your dissertation.

ELLERSIECK: Yes, I did.

COHEN: What was it like here at Caltech when you came in 1950?

ELLERSIECK: Well, I liked everybody.

COHEN: Who were your colleagues? I see that you came about the same time as Peter Fay [professor of history, d. January 2004].

ELLERSIECK: No, I came before Peter Fay. He didn't come until 1955. I came at the same time as David Elliot [professor of history, emeritus], who became a very great friend and a wonderful colleague. John [A.] Schutz was here [assistant professor of history, 1945-1953], and of course Hallett Smith. There were also a number of young fellows who were teaching American history. There was a great turnover in those first years—'51, '52, '53.

COHEN: Turnover in what respect?

ELLERSIECK: Young people were hired and let go. This was mainly Rod Paul's doing. I was not privy to the decisions. I was just an instructor, then [in 1955] I became an assistant professor.

COHEN: This was only in the Humanities Division?

ELLERSIECK: In Humanities. I didn't know what was going on in the other divisions, though I learned to know Mr. DuBridge through the Playreaders' group, which I joined in that first year. And I got to know a few people, like Naomi [Greenstein] and the other people there. But I met some of the economists—Mel Brockie, who had the office across from me.

COHEN: Now, you were in Dabney?

ELLERSIECK: All in Dabney. Alan Sweezy, who was great. The old-timers, like Horace Gilbert and the man who was on the Public Utilities Commission, another economist—

COHEN: Untereiner?

ELLERSIECK: Ray Untereiner, yes. But they were rather more distant. Sweezy and Brockie and Chuck [Charles E.] Bures, the philosopher, were pretty close. We used to eat lunch in Brockie's office, because it was the bigger office and we could have five or six or seven of us in there. We had [J.] Kent Clark and other people from the English department—Harvey Eagleson and his friend Roger Stanton. I got to know Stanton much better than I did Eagleson. It was a very nice group. We all got together and enjoyed things, and of course Virginia Kotkin was the mother superior—though she wasn't much older than some of us—who held everything together. She was *the* secretary for the division.

COHEN: And that included all the history, the English, languages?

ELLERSIECK: Virginia did all the stuff. Hallett Smith had his personal secretary, and that was it.

COHEN: Now, Hallett was the division—

ELLERSIECK: The division chairman, and of course we respected Hallett.

COHEN: Did you mix much with the scientists?

ELLERSIECK: No, I didn't, but some of the others did more of that. I was never ambitious to climb the ladder. And one of my—well, I suppose, handicaps—was that I have never asked for a promotion or a raise or asked questions about the decisions going on up above. I was sorry to see some of the people leave whom Rod let go in history. There was a consideration—and I have alluded to it before—that we were to broaden our searches, not only for students and so forth but also change the public perception of the Humanities Division and hire no more homosexuals.

COHEN: I don't understand that.

ELLERSIECK: Well, Hunter Mead, who was a philosopher and a very good teacher, was a homosexual, almost openly. Harvey Eagleson and Roger Stanton were probably closet people—very nice people, wonderful teachers. Somehow or other, Mrs. DuBridge had her strong opinions, which also extended, of course, to alcoholics. And this is where Brockie, who was an alcoholic, had his crucifixion ultimately—because ultimately, although he went dry for many years and worked very hard, he fell again and then was not promoted. And he took his own life.

COHEN: Oh, dear.

ELLERSIECK: But the influence was in the background there. It was never talked about.

COHEN: So Mrs. DuBridge had a lot of influence.

ELLERSIECK: She had some influence with DuBridge, who, you know, had a lot of other problems to deal with. And I think DuBridge was a wonderful man—a wonderful man for the institute, for everybody he touched. So that was probably another consideration in why John

Schutz was let go, for example. I don't understand, except that he was getting on toward middle age and he was still living with his mother.

Anyway, at one point [1955], George Tanham, who taught military history, went to work at RAND Corporation, and he began doing a lot of stuff at RAND. After a while, Hallett told him, "Look, you're either going to teach at Caltech or you're going to work at RAND." And because George was going through a divorce and needed money, he said, "It has to be RAND." So he gave up his job, and I got his war course, which was one of the things I carried through the rest of my career here.

The very first thing that happened to me when I came to Caltech was that they put me on Project Vista. We met in the Hotel Vista del Arroyo. The air force had given Caltech a contract to study how to defeat a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. We were trying to build NATO. Korea had been attacked, and we were fighting desperately there. And we were very worried that the Soviets might attack and overwhelm us in Western Europe. The air force wanted our opinions on how to deal with such an attack. The main thing they were interested in was how we would use atomic weapons. I was dragged in because I knew about Russia. I had had military experience, intelligence experience; I had been in Europe. Among other things, I had spent a couple of months in the displacement camps in Germany interviewing Russian refugees and displaced persons about the Soviet Union, and so forth. The State Department authorized that. So they put me on the PSYCHON committee—on psychological warfare—and one other committee, which I don't think ever met. I was supposed to draw up ideas as to how we deal with the Russians coming in.

COHEN: So this Project Vista was something from the federal government? And DuBridg would have had to say yes or no on this?

ELLERSIECK: Oh, yes, I'm sure. Caltech wanted the money.

COHEN: Did the faculty have anything to say about this? I'm thinking of later programs that came and the Caltech faculty wasn't happy.

ELLERSIECK: Well, the faculty is not dead set against defending the United States. I guess it was accepted with open arms. And the lure of money and taking of money—not just government

money—has a way of diverting research efforts and sometimes results. We were paid partly out of funds that the federal government provided. When we came up with the recommendations—and David Elliot wrote the study of that program—when it became public, the air force was not happy with it, because, although we talked a lot about other things, the main thing they were interested in was that our scientists said, “Don’t use the atomic weapons. Do anything else, but don’t use the atomic weapons.” So the air force deep-sixed it for many, many decades.

COHEN: They didn’t like the report.

ELLERSIECK: They didn’t want the scientific advice to be known. That’s not as cynical as it sounds. They did not want the Soviets to know that we might *not* use atomic weapons. At the time, the fear of that may have been what made Stalin pass up the chance to take Europe.

COHEN: How long did you work on Project Vista? How long did that last?

ELLERSIECK: I can’t remember—not more than a year or so. But it was indicative of what happened to me and others at Caltech. I was dragged immediately into—well, forget about your history. Teach a little history, but what’s going to happen tomorrow? What are the Soviets doing? What are—

COHEN: So you’re saying it was completely overshadowed by the cold war.

ELLERSIECK: I became a Kremlinologist willy-nilly. I was dragged into the twentieth century. Yes, I was allowed to teach one section on Russian history and to teach European history, and then, after a while, I got the history of war. But the students—who have had very little background in history or geography or any of those subjects—were more interested in the current things. So I continued to work on my dissertation and take my PhD seminars at UCLA, but Caltech was oriented in that way. And I often tell people that I was hired at the beginning of the cold war, I rose with it, I benefited from *Sputnik*, because then we got the Ford Foundation and then we got increases in our salaries. My salary when I was hired was only \$3,000 a year. My wife began working after a year, so we had two salaries, and that made us more affluent, but it was short. So I took off on the cold war, and when I retired [1988], it was at the end of the cold

war.

COHEN: So your career coincided with the cold war. [Laughter]

ELLERSIECK: Yes. And while I continued my interest in history, I got my dissertation written, and I subsequently went to meetings of the Baltic historians and the International Historical Association and engaged in the debates with the Soviet historians who were miswriting the history of that period—you know, in the light of the great Lenin and Stalin and so forth, and claiming a greater role for Russia than was true. That was very interesting to me. I read papers and I took part in panels, criticizing papers and so forth. I wrote book reviews, quite a lot of them, for the American Historical Association and some other publications. But, generally speaking, my focus could not be solely on that. I couldn't get into the Russian sources. After a while, the Russians stopped giving me visas to come in. I went to Russia in 1960. I got a Ford fellowship, courtesy essentially of David Elliot, who had an in with the Ford Foundation and the AUFS [American University Field Staff], which had been bringing these scholars to Caltech.

That AUFS program was a wonderful program, a program that was associated with our own program for seniors, in which we studied current events. The students had to read a section of the *New York Times* Sunday edition. One year, as a prank, the students broke into David's office and stuffed it completely full of the *New York Times*. [Laughter]

David Elliot got me a fellowship to go to Europe in '53-'54 and then again in '60. I was to study attitudes toward the Soviet Union and whether the biggest menace from Russia comes from Muscovites—that's what they are—or from Communism. My conclusion, from talking to people and studying, was that it is not just Communism, it is the character of those eastern people—their historical experience, and so forth. But anyway, I was in the Soviet Union in 1960 when [Francis Gary] Powers was shot down and the big spy scare was reigning, and so forth. I was followed everywhere. They took my film and wiped it out. They tried to recruit me to work with them—of course I said no. I've been to Russia subsequently but under different circumstances. My career here was in international affairs, really, rather than a narrow teaching of Russian history.

COHEN: History as such?

ELLERSIECK: Yes. But I did try to teach about the Greeks and the Romans, and how they fought wars, and about the revolutions—

COHEN: How did you find your students? Were they enthusiastic, or were they just very smart and did what they had to?

ELLERSIECK: There were some enthusiastic ones—a very few—who were serious students. There were quite a few who brightened up and listened to the stories. The majority were too busy with their scientific and engineering studies to give very much time to humanities.

There was a big shift over the years. When I first came, humanities was accepted as a genuine subject. A grade in humanities counted as much as a grade in the sciences. Students were all funneled through a series of humanities courses. Grade inflation was taking place. I remember that my first year, in 1950-1951, David Elliot and I flunked over half of our freshman class.

COHEN: They didn't do the work?

ELLERSIECK: We came with ideas from UCLA and Harvard, respectively, as to what to expect, but the students were not up to it. And so we gave the grades, and then Hallett said, "We can't do that. These kids have to move on. You can't give all those D's and F's." So we began gradually to relax. Now, that process was a slow one at first, but then came all these reports: Caltech demands so much more from its students, and we can't afford to give them low grades, because as graduate students they're going to compete with people from other schools that are not as hard, and if they have lower grade-point averages, they won't get into graduate school the way they should. So then came all the relaxation. About the middle of my career, when [Robert] Huttenback [professor of history; chairman of the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences, 1972-1977] had worked his way up to be the division chairman, the emphasis was shifted onto social sciences. The economists wanted to be able to have graduate students, and they wanted to be stars in their own firmament. And we hired somebody—John Weir, I guess—who was a psychologist who wanted to recruit people on a different basis and make the Humanities and Social Sciences Division a major division, like the other sciences. Well, there were a lot of different thoughts about that. We were going to hire only stars—people who would

be stars and who would publish a lot and become famous. Well, we *have* hired people—mostly, of course, in economics—who have obtained prestigious jobs elsewhere, because this institute was not suitable for doing all these things. They were supposed to emphasize the mathematical aspects of the social sciences, and they brought in people who were supposed to be able to do that in the humanities. Well, the humanities doesn't take easily to that, and at a certain point in that process I gave up being anything other than a teacher, and of course a student, of history. There were several others of us, and when Huttenback tried to fire [professor of literature] Jenijoy [La Belle], I was one of those who resisted his doing that, even though I have no love for William Blake or understanding of him. Huttenback was a good friend of mine, a very charming fellow and a wonderful person, a promoter type, which is what it takes, I guess, to be a chairman. But he was a promoter type in a different way than Hallett Smith was, and he took us along on that course, and we lost some good people. But the economists—they come and they leave, and so on. And then they did away with the languages gradually, some of our good people. It was so strange that they could keep Annette Smith, who was teaching French. She had to switch, to be essentially a teacher of literature rather than a language teacher. The other language teachers left or were shoved aside.

COHEN: When this process was going on, who was the president? Was Harold Brown president then, when the social sciences got established? I think so.

ELLERSIECK: I don't remember. But the pressures for change were there and accumulating, and not only in our institute but in many other places. In the sixties, there was so much going on nationally about more choices for students. One of the things that damaged the Humanities Division was that you could take a course and drop it one week before the final if you weren't making good grades. Or you could take it pass/fail, which meant that a lot of people just barely worked enough to pass. And this undermined the pressure to do anything in humanities. We were all very distressed about that, but we had to go along with it, because the emphasis was on giving the students the chance and the choice to do the things they wanted to do. I remember our colleague in English, Oscar Mandel, saying that our students should be led to the things *we* think are important for a well-rounded, educated person to know. The other approach was to let the *students* decide what they wanted to learn. [Laughter]

COHEN: You said something about being involved in community politics. What was your involvement? Did you mean the community here at Caltech or the Pasadena community?

ELLERSIECK: The outside community. I was never involved in Caltech politics; I served on a couple of committees, but not very much. But my wife and I both—in fact, both of my wives—were very interested in politics, and on the Democratic side most of the time. We participated in Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaigns and things of that sort and did precinct work and so forth. And when Bob Oliver ran for the Pasadena City Council, with his background in Stanford research and so forth—and he renewed his acquaintance with me to some extent—he asked me to campaign for him, and I did, and he won. And he had an appointment to make to the Human Relations Commission, which had been established after the Watts riots, and he asked me if I would serve. Of course I said yes. So I was appointed to the Human Relations Commission. And I immediately became, after the chairman—the chairman was a nice fellow named Alexander Turner, a black man—I became the de-facto leader of the Human Relations Commission. They made me chairman of the education task group, and I had to do all the talking about the program going on then for the desegregation of the schools, in the late sixties and early seventies. So I began going around to the schools and making speeches and calming the waters and so forth. At that time, I met the woman who was to be my second wife, Astrid Haussler. She came from Lexington, Massachusetts, with a background in publicity in the school desegregation there. She had tremendous energy and talent and became a realtor. But when she met me at an NAACP party, she talked about the grants she had been getting through the Kennedys, and people like that, and going to Washington, and what could be done in the field of advancing integration, and so forth. She got herself hired by the city—by Bill Boone, who was in charge of human relations for the city—to be a secretary to the Human Relations Commission, which really meant being secretary to me. And she got publicity for everything I said. We became popular in some circles and unpopular in others. It became a major activity for me. You know, my first wife had somehow acquired narcolepsy, which destroyed her career and then destroyed our marriage, and Astrid and I were working together so much, and we got together.

COHEN: Now, Caltech was always happy with people doing community work, and that was fine?

ELLERSIECK: Yes. David Elliot had gotten me on the UNICEF committee, and I did serve there for a while, until the nice ladies there became unhappy with my, I thought, more realistic approach to things, like war and the political affairs of nations, and so forth. But I had dropped that, by that time. And then when we had the riot at Pasadena High School, I was right in the middle of that. And in that connection, I got involved with the police. Eugene Pickett got a bunch of black kids to run through the school corridors smashing trophy cases, scaring the white kids, and—

COHEN: What year was this?

ELLERSIECK: 1970 or '71, somewhere along in there. And one of the big issues was that the sheriff was called, because it was sheriff's territory. They came up from Temple City, and they overreacted, and it took a lot of calming down. Astrid and I staged—over the dead body of Ralph Hornbeck, who was the superintendent at the time—a show at the school which lasted from seven o'clock until after midnight. Everybody got a chance to speak, and the crisis was defused completely. But in that connection, we talked about the police reaction, and I established the Police Community Relations Committee, which brought together the sheriff, the chief of police, and the California Highway Patrol, and we started having meetings. Pasadena had a very good group of blacks—they were not real officers, except for Ralph Riddle, a sergeant, who gathered these people together—and they kept peace in the black community. A wonderful group of people! I made wonderful acquaintances with them.

COHEN: Now, did you have much to do with John Benton [Dreyfuss Professor of History, d. 1988]? Because he was always involved with the black community.

ELLERSIECK: Benton, a very bright man, was a friend of mine. His family was a friend of ours, mostly with my second wife. I remember we were warned against him. He came in the mid-sixties, and by this time I was hearing things from Hallett Smith, and Rod, and so forth, that he was a troublemaker in Pennsylvania. Well, he was. He was an activist, and on the right side of things, I think, for the most part. He also made his career at Caltech by sponsoring this and that and becoming a chief of the library committee in the humanities. When I came, we used to have sessions, all of us historians, where we would sit around and say, "Which books can we buy?"

And each person would have to justify every book we bought and how much it cost and how it would be useful for the students. I couldn't buy Russian books. I couldn't buy anything of that sort. But when John Benton came, he said, "I need a medieval library of all these medieval French sources," and he built a big library.

COHEN: He asked, so he got.

ELLERSIECK: He asked, he got, and he worked at it. He really worked at it and was persuasive and did that sort of thing. The emphasis changed from "What is useful for our students?" to what was going to make Benton a greater medievalist historian. And of course then he began building a medieval department within the Humanities Division. He got Eleanor Searle [professor of history, 1979-1993, d. 1999], a very nice lady from UCLA, who used the Huntington Library as her hunting ground. He got others—visitors and so forth—and he built the library. I don't know what has become of it after his death. He had a private library which he kept in his big office. [Tape ends]

Begin Tape 2, Side 1

COHEN: So you saw change go on in the division, from just being centered on the students to—but that was probably all over. Good people wouldn't come, I should think, who wouldn't be able to establish their research.

ELLERSIECK: Well, the notion was to build a division that would be the equal of the other divisions at the institute and attract important people, star-quality people, and get them working and increasing the reputation of the institute.

COHEN: Were you affected very much by whoever was president? I mean, you went through Harold Brown, and Murph [Marvin L.] Goldberger [Caltech president 1978-1987].

ELLERSIECK: I retired in '88. I liked [Thomas E.] Everhart [Caltech president 1987-1997] and I liked—

COHEN: Well, it sounds like they influenced what you did very little.

ELLERSIECK: No, unless they overrode a situation. I have enjoyed many of the people. Astrid, my second wife, became very active in the Women's Club, publishing—essentially editing—the bulletin. She saved it financially by getting ads into it. And she changed the design of it and so forth. I remember doing a lot of photo work in the offices for that. That was fun. And she sold a lot of houses to or for the astronomers—the [James E.] Gunns, and [Jesse and Naomi] Greenstein, and others. So, we got acquainted, in that way, with them. I would have to say—and this is going back a little way—that when I first came to Caltech, my most important social circle was the sociology-anthropology circle at UCLA, which was Ruth's circle of acquaintances. I had taken a second, or something, in sociology, in connection with my PhD. That was sort of courtesy of Ruth's UCLA friends, because I didn't really become much of a sociologist. I wrote some papers that astounded everybody, because I'm a free spirit [laughter] and I love to come up with ideas that are a little different. But then in recent years I began to associate, of course, with bigger groups—the realtors and the preservationists. I became very active, through Astrid, in Pasadena Heritage. Of course, Anne Paul had started us on that track when she was trying to save the Gamble house. We became members. Astrid was in the Friends of the Gamble House group, and I'm still in that. I go on tours with them and that sort of thing. And then she was selling so many Greene & Greenes, and I got to know that whole group.

COHEN: You mentioned something about being in Playreaders, also, when you first came.

ELLERSIECK: Well, who got me into that? One of the people in English said, “Hey, you ought to enjoy that,” and I did. I got to be good friends with Shirley Marneus [lecturer in theater arts]. Do you remember her?

COHEN: Sure. She's still going strong here.

ELLERSIECK: Well, I haven't seen her for quite a while. But her son used to come up to the rifle range.

COHEN: So, have you enjoyed being at Caltech all those years?

ELLERSIECK: Yes, I have. I had a long string—thirty-eight years, I think. I'm still going to the Caltech Playreaders. I have long strings in my history, long marriages. I've been over thirty years as the director of the Pasadena Junior Rifle Club, where I teach juniors safety and shooting and so forth, every Saturday morning. Now I'm on the advisory committee of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, appointed by [Los Angeles County Supervisor Michael D.] Antonovich, to do that. And I go to the meetings of the town council in Altadena and La Crescenta, and I enjoy that. I get out to all the conservancy things. I'm healthy enough. The last couple of weeks, I've been clearing the poison oak out of a piece of land up there in the foothills that the conservancy acquired. The other people are scared to clear the brush, and I'm an outdoor person. I gave up cross-country hiking just this last year. I've been spending over sixty years hiking in the Sierras every summer—when I was home, that is.

COHEN: I think that's a good note for us to finish up.

ELLERSIECK: I've had a wonderful life. [Tape ends]