

Interview with Rudi Prusok  
March 22, 1995

int: What was your name?

RP: It's Rudi Prusok. I teach drama at Northern I've been here since

Int: What was your background before coming to Northern?

RP: I was in graduate school.

Int: Here?

RP: No, I was at Washington University in St. Louis and before that I studied geology at the University of Iowa.

Int: Studying geology?

RP: Yes I studied geology at Lafayette College, and Eastern Pennsylvania and then at the University of Iowa, two degrees in geology, worked for the U.S geological survey, and water quality provision in St. Louis, and for some city area ? and one in Quebec, El and El Minerals that was in 1957 and then I got this illusion with rocks and went to a high school for a year a private school and I thought I'd like teaching so I went back to school and I thought I liked German literature so I just went on for a grade

Int: Had you had German in high school?

RP: No, in high school there was only Latin, French and Spanish I wasn't going to take Latin for a language and who speaks French in this continent so I took Spanish and I went to Quebec.

Int: Then what did you do with your Spanish in Quebec? From high school then you took your German.

RP: I took a year of German in college but my parents were German came from what used to be East Germany but they never talk about exualtinulism or things that I would need later.

Int: So you already knew some German, could you speak German?

RP: Yeah, but it was pretty much ? German and no grammer.

Int: So after you finished up your German studieds was your first job here?

RP: After German studies, yeah came here. I went to a MLA convention in New York to look for a job that's how you do it for the job market and I talked to Humlet Cripes who was in the English department here and '67 they decided they were going to



form a language department with three languages French, Spanish, German and Humlett interviewed us a bunch of people who applied for jobs and interviewed everybody in mass in a hotel room it was strange and one day I got a call and he said "Hello Cripes" and thought it's the second coming Christ has come back "do you want to go to Northern Michigan?" and I said yes, yes sure terms like that well, so I came here and my colleagues were hired at the same time, Humlett had a office in the basement of the library next to the Peter White building and then we took over chemistry and physics moved out of Peter White building we were allowed to use some of their rooms some of them were old ? our bathroom had showers in them and my colleagues were Peter Huff who taught Spanish and ?? a black fellow from Haiti who taught French who was only here for a short time because students didn't like him and ?? he had problems one year when his enrollments in his classes were zero so what to do about that

Int: Word of his reputation spread or something?

RP: Yeah, and a vietism fellow but I don't remember his name

Int: Tin Lee or something like that.

RP: Yeah right, Tin Lee he was always was washing his hands because he thought that students sometimes don't wash their hands and we handle the papers and that's all we had. Oh and Madaline ?? I called her Madaline Roobin and she'd be pissed about that and ?? and then we moved over to Jamerich Hall which our offices were right there. Then we moved over to the library in those temporary offices.

Int: I remember that yeah.

RP: That was twenty years ago and then a few years ago we moved here in Magors Hall

Int: Is the department bigger now then it was?

RP: Yes we have six people now. The problem is that one of them the department head has half of the time teaching and so she's a French ? so one of the German people has to fill in one of the French courses so the German and French courses are both lacking a course which makes it difficult in terms of majors. Spanish is alright. Spanish has full time people and we had an extra full time Spanish person through Rosa Parks she was a women from minorities, hispanics minorities and she was black and she was the woman who sat in the back of the bus in defiance.

Int: Oh yeah I know that but I was wondering who that instructor was did you not hear anymore?

RP: There had been three spending has been cut off. When I look back on the history it goes back to John ? who was the son of the architect



Int: Ok I recognize that name.

RP: He came from St. Louis also, went to Howard University, Howard College which is now a black college education, in St. Louis but he was finishing up his dissertation since he'd been up here I talked to his wife Ida she told me he was going to defend his visitation rights ? I don't know what institution it was but and he saw in a bookstore window a book bearing title of his very own topic somebody had published first and he came here I think it was 1903 and he built a house across from Kaye Hall and the reason why I know this is because I lived there for about five years.

Int: Lived in that house?

RP: Lived in that house so I knew Ida very well, and I meant John the architect I had the use of his John's German library and he taught German and French and he introduced sociology to Northern and with great effort because I also thought sociology was a form of socialism and no one wants that and the tribulations.

Int: So then he switched departments eventually he was a modern language person but he went into sociology.

RP: and I don't know the people in between you have some of them written down here but I gotten them also from the old catalogues and I never knew any of them.

INT: So those names don't mean anything to you?

RP: No except Natilie Ruben(?) and Revenue, and ?,

INT: they were here when you were here?

RP: ? came with me, revenue, and ? were here and the others were here before. I try to be plot the progress of languages between 1903 and 1967 and it seems there were ups and downs, during the war years German was in ?, the French and Spanish were ?, I think they had Russian for awhile. And during the ? they even had book burnings antiGerman feelings German books were burned, I thought that had been ironic because that happen in Germany during the Hitler years, it could never happen here. That is all. I been meaning to go back to document that. Miriam Hilton has given me some newspaper sources where she found that information. Miriam Hilton has written a book on the History of Northern some years ago. And I have been meaning to look that up. And I never have.

INT: That is where I got my information from reading her History of the first 75 years.

INT: So what changes have you seen in the department itself since you started here, have there been changes in the mission and the approach to foreign language, or in the kind of students you have?



RP: yes, it seems like students were more able then and now were in those students have grown up with visual pd and ah don't read well or don't comprehend things as well as they used to. But I figured that from other ?. The other changes in the ? how you teach, in the 60's it was language lab was going save everybody, we don't need teachers anymore send them to the language lab and spend sometime in class and ah so Northern built a language lab, big massive thing in Jamrich hall and but exactly can't get passed the warm body if you ask me. And before that it was all grammer approach, before the war it was just reading knowledge. speaking was, now it is back to, it is called the communicative approach, no grammer. and everyone can her lecture, there is a combination of all those techniques, if you can find a textbook that isn't too one sided. Which is grammer, interaction and speaking and all that. And it is for the enrollments they go up and down, there were times when it is very slim and other times when it was boom times. And I was trying to figure out why, one was sputnik the Russians were ahead of us and there was ? and then there well Senator Simon, Paul Simon wrote a nation that ? Congress administration and Paul Simon wrote the compound America were losing out of business opportunity so I tried to ? and visited every high school in the U.P. and several middle schools and tried to talk out languages but it's like saying I think you outta do this you'll get the money somewhere and of course funding and apparently it wasn't persuave enough so I drank a lot of coffee with people and got no where and tried ?? seventy five or eight or six or seven and tried to get a lose sort of assosication in the U.P. foreign language teachers help conferences so teachers could come here and make transportation available for the state conference in Lansing every fall so that teachers could we could meet teachers in Marquette or pick them up along the way. It was a free trip all you got to do is pay for the hotel and meals and that was successful for a while but I think it's sort of a on weave for instance with the conferences the suggestion was shouldn't we hold conferences on Saturday so we don't interrupt our classes and it's a wonderful idea but the outcry from high school teachers was that no conferences are our day we get out of classroom it's a free day and were not going to give up our own time and I thought that was a bit snyical but it was driven home and I know longer ran conferences. I put out a newsletter that anyone else like to do that and nobody offered and I had trouble getting news even before I put out a newsletter so I just quite and things seemed to be on edge ?

Int: And you have had a German club you said right?

RP: Yeah French, Spanish and German clubs I think the Spanish club is most active and they have under the enthusiasm they have Spanish day. We did that in ? she did most of it early 70's we hired Marquette armory and had I think three hundred students all over the U.P. in all three languages and we had all the entertainment and did all the activities and it was just exhausting and I haven't done it again I'm not sure how successful that was I didn't check to see how ??? and the clubs



well they meant at people's houses the French clubs had suvaes and the German club also had parties at people's houses and usually every fall we take a slow trip down the AuTrain River and I point out parts of the canoe how do you say the crossbar in German and you know all those terms no one seems to pay attention to them it's pretty much to have a good time but the most ? one club activities are ?? the French and German clubs had a date about who gave the most to American culture and it was very enlightening a lot of things I didn't know and we had French and German baseball games but that was when the semester went into May and it was still warm and it's seems under the ? administration it was easy going and very lose and now there's worry about involvement and getting warm bodies in the classroom and it tends to say your enthusiasm for maintaining your personal pride.

Int: You felt the effect not as a department head but the administration in terms of the president or who ever that they except you to do.

RP: Yeah and it's their rightful concern they need to know our your courses well enrolled and if you have nice small classes maybe you should combine courses or something or change your curriculum but it's also your very existence depends on whether we have warm bodies in the classroom and it seems that nobody else cares whether anybody learns anything expect the professor and for years we've been working in that primace and it seems that nobody else cares and I think there's a sapping moral that if no else cares I don't care either.

Int: In terms of the students that can or the administration.

RP: In terms of the students not learning a whole lot because if you make easy courses you can pack the classroom cause people word gets around that's an easy course and infact there have been people who've gotten outstanding teacher award with cash award and I've seen the roster of one of those person's and it's straight A nobody even flunked, nobody even got a B and the sort snyical way of looking at it is that if students won't do the work give them a B it's great inflation and were just forsaking of all professional standards and I tried it I just can't do it. but and some of my courses ? and I know how to build of the moral

Int: Is there support from the administration in terms of methodology and things like that in terms of how college professors don't necessarily have background of teaching until they come to a university is there some support for new staff as they join and maybe how they present their classes, how they grade, and how they can do all those things, exceptions.

RP: Yeah, I think sponsored by the education core seminars where professors and teachers can get together and discuss these things and learn things they might not have in graduate school because



in graduate school you get a degree usually in literature and it didn't help you with teaching in the classroom. The only model I had were professors I liked and professors I didn't like and I did what what the ones I liked did and put them together and infact I came to school I one semester thought I'd take the method course and my advisor said well you can do that if you want but it's not much and it truly wasn't but I think that people in undergraduate school should also have some familiarity.

Int: If you're going to teach it seems like that if your students are all coming from the high school population were the teachers have the care methodology and your exceptions might be that they get to school and get used to a certain kind of teaching atmosphere.

RP: And you also want to do what is effective and avoid what is ineffective

Int: The numbers have remained fairly consistent haven't they? I was looking at them myself in terms of I mapped out how many classes was offered of each class, of each language throughout the years they stayed equal Spanish, French and German in terms of the number of classes offered.

RP: Classes offered but the number of students in Spanish of course have sky rocketed.

Int: They have, o.k.

RP: And so that's why we had an extra teacher and all the classes were all full

Int: So you had three teachers and they were all full?

RP: Yeah we had three teachers and now were back to two and the administration was saying you have so much pressure for Spanish why don't you get rid of German? Well that might be efficient from their point of view of warm bodies but with the opening of eastern Europe I don't see how you can you know not offer German and infact we've also had Japanese courses which is very important with their trade with Japan and they've been especially supported but the teacher Candy Bays is in the English department and she has some Japanese background so she teaches one course in Japanese and two in English and the English department also feels the pressure but we need her for an extra English course so there goes Japanese and the support is how many people can you get in the classroom not so much what's valuable for the students to learn and they'll rush 'em to.

Int: Right, in terms of having I'm taking classes myself right now someone interested in a minor in a language even if their in business or something else those minors so they can have that language students should see it as a foot in the door you know



overall

RP: The ? schools are very good in that area they encourage their students take one or two courses and we had a study aboard program for years which was mostly not so much in German but especially French due to Rolands personal efforts considerable efforts which was very successful it had six or eight people a year, a semester aboard and that's now been streamlined and we don't have time to do it because were full time now its been stream lined into an office of international education and they hired I think two assistants and several graduate students but none of them know a language so it's do you want to study aboard here so here's the literature make your own arrangements again you have a good thing going and then you institutionalize it and you ??

Int: You lose that personal promotion of it

RP: Yeah you've got to have somebody there to help you. And students go there sometimes it don't work out you have to have somebody here to call who knows whats going on who knows how to get ya out of jams and who speaks the language otherwise it's a problem. It's even a problem if students who go aboard aren't mentally capable of the culture shock and how ? have it? ? went to Germany and killed herself, what do you think of that?

INT: She killed herself, while she went to Germany she killed herself.

RP: Yes, you need someone here that knows what is going on to be able to handle it.

INT: ?? we need someone who can personally recommend the program. That is the difference. you have no central communicators for the people. So what do you see in the Language department at Northern, in the future what do you see?

RP: Well there are new proposals. The problem with it is our undergraduate program is it we use to prepare students for graduate school, in the language, if your major was German you were prepared to be a professor and teach German. And that is no longer the case, very few have gone on to graduate school. One student went on for international for competitive literature, and is doing very well, and I think Northern prepares very well. Now It's much for the preparation of the business world and language being an insillary(?) skill for something else. That is where our emphasis in teaching, we no longer teach periods in literature. Famous authors, it is more of an overview, our emphasis is on language skills, speaking, and the ability to function in it, not the need to know who wrote what. And even our culture courses everything that had a culture course, it used to be taught in the target language, and then the enrollments are very low, and now it is taught in English and the enrollments are very high. And I think it is detriment of there major or minor



because they lose out on the extra semester of language skills. It opens up the culture to a lot more people, I think it is a good thing they are in English. And there was a ? in ?, it hasn't been proposed yet, we do not want to be a service department, we are also going to have majors and minors, because it is just talk now, the beginning courses are very necessary you want to put your best teachers in those. But then you want take your literature course and let your soul fly to. You want to talk about the things that really interest you. The trouble is when you don't have very many majors, the enrollment in those courses are very low. So it was Elans idea to why don't we emphasise the lower division courses to the Freshman and Sophomore and a grammar course or methods course that we need for our education students. And to say to majors if you want to major in a foreign language you have to take 12 hours abroad. And studying abroad is the best kind of education you can have.

INT: and not deal with the literature and ? at your end.

RP: maybe teach some literature courses in translation to attract some other students. and that hasn't been proposed yet and I don't know if I am for it either.

INT: Because you, then you would have to teach classes that didn't mean anything to you.

RP: Yah

INT: That are your heart and soul, maybe?

RP: on the other hand my feelings and what I like to teach shouldn't influence programs. I mean it should be what is best for students. I don't know yet, I don't know about that yet, I don't know where were going, there is talk about rearranging the whole University so there are fewer departments, so I don't know what is going to become of it.

INT: Well thank you.