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Eckart Scheffler, Vice President, Walter de Gruyter, Inc., NY

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Against the Grain

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Interview with Eckart Scheffler

(Vice President, Walter de Gruyter, Inc., NY <DEGRUYTER.NY@worldnet.att.net>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

NB: What a fabulous combination of fact and reminiscences by a long-time member of our community. Read on ... — KS

ATG: How did you happen to get into this business?

ES: I grew up in the book environment: My father owned a bookstore in a small town in the southern part of the former East Germany. The store still exists today, run by my sister. Life was difficult in East Germany, and I had to help in the family business every day, after school. To be permitted to operate a private enterprise, my father was not allowed to have any employees other than family members. Due to a paper shortage the print runs of books were severely rationed and publishers had to get permission from the government before publishing a book. Often we ordered 100 copies of a book only to receive one or two copies. We substituted our limited book offerings with homemade items such as framed pictures, handmade bookmarks, and all kinds of greeting cards. I remember, at age ten I spent a lot of evenings in a primitive darkroom developing black and white prints, which were sold in the store as greeting cards. During my later three-year apprenticeship at my father's store, I attended the booksellers' school in Leipzig as well as the local business school, and graduated with a bookseller's diploma.

ATG: Tell us your story on how you got out of East Germany.

ES: In September of the same year I left East Germany via the only way possible: With the help of my father I had obtained a job at a bookstore in East Berlin. Before the building of the Berlin Wall the city was totally isolated, surrounded by East Germany. While it was difficult to travel between East and West Berlin, it was possible to take a subway or S-Bahn between the sectors without being checked, and it was possible to fly to West Germany from West Berlin. The most difficult thing was to get from East Germany into East Berlin.

ATG: So how did you do it?

ES: To begin working at the bookstore in East Berlin I was granted all necessary travel and work permits, and I took the train to Berlin. At Berlin-Ostbahnhof I took a local train (S-Bahn), which had to travel through the West Berlin sector to reach its destination on the other side in East Berlin. I remember clearly: Upon entering the train,

carrying a small suitcase, I asked in a loud voice whether this is the right train to the destination in East Berlin. As the train traveled through the West sector and entered the station Bahnhof-Zoo, I moved to the door to exit. At that moment a passenger tapped me on the shoulder: "Not yet, young man, not yet!" I stepped off the train, into a new, exciting life in the free world. After a few days with friends, I flew to Stuttgart in West Germany to start working at a publishing house. Over the next four years I held four different jobs in bookstores and publishing houses in Germany and Switzerland.

ATG: And then you felt the impulse to come to America? Was it wanderlust, or did it have to do with business?

ES: In 1963, I had the urge to expand my horizon, and I sent resumé's to publishers and booksellers all over the world. Within six weeks I received four offers: The first one came from a German bookstore in a suburb of Cape Town, South Africa, the second one from a bookstore in Santiago de Chile, the third from Kroch's & Brentanos in Chicago, and the last one from the largest importer of German books in New York: Adler's Foreign Books, Inc. I still have the letter from Mr. Adler, he offered me a 2 year contract. I accepted, and in July 1963 I traveled from Zurich to Genoa, Italy by train and then took a passenger ship to New York. This unforgettable 10-day trip on the glorious Leonardo da Vinci was crowned by the arrival in New York, with the Manhattan skyline suddenly appearing in the morning fog. Mr. Adler picked me up and mentioned that one of his employees was out sick. My offer to go straight to the store was accepted,

so I wound up working the very first day I arrived in New York. Mr. Adler was so impressed by my willingness to help, that he immediately increased my salary by \$5.00 to the princely sum of \$65.00 per week. I remember that Adler's was selling large quantities of paper editions of original German texts into the course market and even German science titles in subjects where Germany was the leading force in the world. This very lucrative market has completely disappeared today: English is not only the language of science but has also extended into the humanities, and the teaching of German has strongly declined.

After a few years the company was sold. I became manager of the German department for the new owners, with **Helmut Schwarzer** (one of the few truly international booksellers, now with **Yankee Book Peddler**) and his wife, Margot, being in charge of the French and Spanish departments. I attended numerous conventions for Adler's. Back then we displayed an enormous amount of books from mostly European publishers; it sometimes felt like setting up a whole new store! I remember driving to the **Modern Language Association** convention in a number of cars, dragging the tailpipe of my overloaded station wagon all the way down to Washington. We sold books for thousands of dollars, again the market situation was totally different then.

ATG: When does de Gruyter come into the picture?

ES: In the late '60s Adler's began to represent German publishers in the U.S. on an exclusive basis; one of the larger ones was **Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin**. I had since been promoted to Vice President at Adler's and traveled to Berlin to sign the contract with de Gruyter for Adler's to handle distribution. We had a complete stock of de Gruyter publications and all orders from North America were fulfilled from Adler's New York location at 162 Fifth Avenue. On January 2, 1971, Walter de Gruyter founded its own U.S. branch in New York. I was hired by de Gruyter on April Fools Day 1972 to handle promotion and exhibits in North America, while Adler's still fulfilled the orders. In 1973 I rented a small office in the **Flatiron Building** right under the nose of **St. Martin's Press** and **Springer-Verlag**, across the street from Adler's. Over the next three years, I visited most of the major libraries in the U.S. and Canada, as part of my job promoting de Gruyter books and journals.

In 1976 de Gruyter Berlin bought the Dutch firm **Mouton Publishers**. With its

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well-known and respected program in Linguistics, Mouton added approximately 3,000 titles to de Gruyter's list of approximately 16,000 titles.

Now the time had come for de Gruyter to set up its own distribution. We moved the entire operation out of New York City into a corporate park in Elmsford, New York, basically across the street from Pergamon's Country Club U.S. headquarters. I met **Colonel Maxwell** and more often, the charming, **Otto Rapp**, and was fascinated by Otto's stories about his bookseller days in Leipzig.

ATG: What about Aldine?

ES: In 1978 de Gruyter New York, prior to that time limited in its activities to distribution, acquired **Aldine Publishing Company** of Chicago, a publisher of advanced course-related texts and monographs in the social and behavioral sciences. The Aldine backlist included a number of modern classics, including earlier works by **Milton Friedman**, the Nobel prize-winning economist; **Anselm Strauss** and **Barney Glaser**, who effected major changes in the ways people would do interpretive sociology; **Victor Turner**, a central force in cultural anthropology in the later 1960s; and **Albert Trieschman**, whose work on residential settings has altered the ways people deal with troubled youth.

The acquisition of a high-profile American imprint, focused by that time on a known academic market, rounded out de Gruyter's program nicely and helped us learn how to publish, promote to, and sell books into college courses. That has remained a goal for the imprint ever since. We have introduced a number of new series, mostly in sociology, both quantitative and qualitative. Our **Foundations of Human Behavior** series, originally publishing research in biological anthropology, is expanding into the newer area of evolutionary psychology, of which a book on *Homicide* by **Daly and Wilson**, written about recently in the *New Yorker*, was a precursor.

Aldine has also developed an interdisciplinary quarterly journal with an evolutionary thrust, *Human Nature*, and continues to consider a few other journals, though journal startups are most difficult in the present economic climate and we therefore prefer to look at established ones.

With the needs for housing the Aldine inventory, the offices and warehouse moved to a new, larger building in **Hawthorne, New York**, where we are still today.

In 1991 de Gruyter acquired the list of the former **Foris Publications** of Dordrecht, The Netherlands, which specializes in language and linguistics, thus complementing the **Mouton** list acquired earlier.

ATG: So — where are you now?

ES: This year de Gruyter New York is celebrating its 25th anniversary as the North American branch, handling promotion, warehousing, and fulfillment for all publishers within the de Gruyter group. The largest two divisions have been renamed **Aldine de Gruyter** and **Mouton de Gruyter**. In addition to publishing under the Aldine imprint, we are producing a number of de Gruyter titles in New York, especially those with strong U.S. sales potential, since the cost of production is substantially lower in the U.S. than in Germany. For example: we are working on the 15th edition of our *American Universities and Colleges*, produced with the collaboration of the **American Council on Education**, Washington, which is scheduled to be published in July 1997.

ATG: I think we're missing some important information, though, about your parent company. Can you tell us more about your full range of publishing activities? From what I know, it is rather impressive.

ES: **Walter de Gruyter & Co.** is a leading international publishing house serving a wide spectrum of academic fields including the humanities; language and linguistics; the social sciences; business and management;

in German intellectual history are given access to the de Gruyter archives in their search for primary documents. As you can see, de Gruyter is deeply rooted in the political and cultural history of the past two centuries, and will celebrate its 250th anniversary in 1999.

ATG: Some of your catalogs show the facade of a building. Is that where de Gruyter is located?

ES: **Walter de Gruyter** built the attractive period house in the center of Berlin. It was spared bombardment in World War II, and yes, it still accommodates the Berlin staff today. The original printing plant, also built by **Walter de Gruyter** on the outskirts of Berlin was situated, after 1968, outside the Berlin Wall. It has been returned to the company after German reunification. After extensive reconstruction, preserving part of the historical structure, it is now a state-of-the-art facility handling all warehousing and distribution for the de Gruyter group.

De Gruyter also owns a typesetting and printing plant, re-erected in West Berlin after 1968, which specializes in the production of scholarly texts, especially the typesetting of editions of Classical Greek texts.

ATG: Is the company still privately held, or is it a public corporation?

“... it is possible to transmit book-length studies ... electronically.”

ES: The company is owned by the grandchildren of **Walter de Gruyter**, among them

its current president, **Dr. Kurt-Georg Cram**, and by the next generation of great-grandchildren, grown and growing up. The current corporate management is made up of three directors, two of them coming from outside the de Gruyter family: **Dr. Helwig Hassenpflug** and **Hans-Dieter Brandhoff**.

In recent years the firm has ranged abroad in its growth by acquisition of well-established scholarly imprints with an international cachet, such as **Aldine** and **Mouton** mentioned earlier, and we are constantly seeking to acquire additional imprints. The diversification of the de Gruyter list, which came about as the result of the company's history, certainly appears opposed to modern trends towards specialization. In a time of market fluctuations, however, the breadth helps to stabilize the economics of the business. It is, in addition, an inspiring factor in all de Gruyter publishing activities, and adds panache to de Gruyter's image among publishing houses.

De Gruyter publications, whether it is a matter of a one-volume monograph or a multivolume set, have historically been known for their impeccable scholarship and the quality of their production. Among the renowned sets are *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* (ANRW); *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (TRE); the historical and critical editions of **Friedrich Nietzsche** (also available on CD-ROM) and **Friedrich**

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law; mathematics; medicine; and the natural sciences. Located in Berlin, Germany, de Gruyter publishes approximately 400 book titles and 60 journals a year, and maintains a backlist of 12,000 titles.

The formation of **Walter de Gruyter & Co.** in 1919 was the result of a series of acquisitions of several existing companies some dating back to the 18th century by the scholar, **Dr. Walter de Gruyter**, whose name the parent company retains. Among the publishing houses that became part of the present-day de Gruyter were **Georg Reimer** (founded 1749), publisher of some notable German Romantic writings, such as **A.W. von Schlegel** and **Tieck's** classic translations of **Shakespeare**, and the memoirs of **Carl Schurz**; **G. J. Göschen** (founded 1785), the first publisher of **Goethe**; and **Karl J. Trübner** (founded 1872) publisher and antiquarian bookseller in Strasbourg. Along with the imprints of those four celebrated publishers, de Gruyter now continues the publishing tradition of several other former German imprints: **Guttentag**; **Marcus & Weber**; and **Alfred Töpelmann**. As a consequence of de Gruyter's long history, the firm's archives contain a treasure trove of old letters and other documents, among them a letter from **Queen Luise** of Prussia to **Göschen**; most of **Schleiermacher's** manuscripts; **Reimer's** royalty account for the German poet **Heinrich von Kleist**; and the last letter of **Carl Schurz**. Scholars working

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Schleiermacher; and *Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science* (HSK). De Gruyter regularly publishes new editions of standard reference works, such as *Concise Encyclopedias* in the fields of biology, chemistry, and biochemistry and molecular biology; both a German/English and an *English/German Law Dictionary*; and *American Universities and Colleges*, mentioned earlier.

De Gruyter's complete catalog is available on a CD-ROM, and detailed information on our titles can be found on our Web Site: <<http://www.degruyter.de/index.html>>.

ATG: *I know this is a touchy issue, but will de Gruyter continue to publish scholarly monographs?*

ES: It is a lot harder for any academic publisher to publish monographs today, and a number of presses, including many university presses, will no longer publish them at all. The market has changed despite the pressure from universities and research centers to produce monographs remaining constant, because today it is possible to transmit book-length studies, both one's own and other researchers', electronically. The market has narrowed because fewer institutions and very few individuals are purchasing monographs today, thus driving up unit costs and sales prices.

ATG: *Where does that leave your company?*

ES: We have made our reputation on monographs of high quality, and (to answer your earlier question) we will continue to publish the best of them. The institutional market, however, has made that continuance problematic. We understand that libraries, in order to be cost effective, cannot buy everything, even in those areas in which their home faculties are strongest, and must share resources through networking. On the other hand, we hope that librarians remain vigilant and continue not to authorize unlimited use of materials under copyright. The information in monographs is not free in any sense; it is the fruit of scholars' and scientists' labors, and it is protected by copy-

right laws, just like trade publications. To dilute that protection will not only hurt publishers, and does hurt them; it also discourages original research, because scholars as authors expect that their work will be protected from piracy and unwarranted exploitation and circulation.

I do not mean to sound negative, or get off the subject. It is wrong to think of scholarly monographs as existing in a vacuum, unrelated to market forces, to piracy issues, to university pressures and university budgets. We should also remember that a company like de Gruyter must compete with academic presses that are nominally not for profit, and therefore pay no taxes and receive subsidies from their parent universities or sponsoring societies. That in itself would account for the higher prices we must attach to our monographs.

ATG: *We seem to be moving into the darker and gloomier aspects of publishing today. Are there some particularly vexing problems you want to address?*

ES: There are many other areas which concern us as much as any other scholarly publishers, such as libraries purchasing paperbacks instead of hardcover books; declining journal subscriptions (de Gruyter publishes approximately 60 journals); the used-book market for textbooks; the whole issue of desk and exam copies for upper-level course texts; the problem of getting bookstores to carry scholarly titles; etc., etc. A discussion of these issues of concern to any scholarly publisher would only repeat or elaborate on what has been said or written by people more qualified to comment on these matters.

ATG: *It is often said that publishing is moving from a print culture to an electronic information culture. What are your company's thoughts on this?*

ES: Like many other publishers, even some large houses, de Gruyter began to think about electronic products relatively late. (By way of contrast, many of the librarians with whom we do business got into computer networks early, and are far more knowledgeable about these matters than we are.) We work largely in the print media, and as a

result, much of the impact of the new technologies has discouraged us from continuing with certain traditional lines because they lend themselves more readily to electronic delivery.

In a rather careful approach, we have produced a number of CD-ROMs. For example, de Gruyter is the major publisher in the world of the works of the philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche**, including a lot of writings, (correspondence, notebooks, and the like) that were left unpublished during his lifetime. We are currently offering in both Macintosh and IBM editions, collections of Nietzsche materials in CD-ROM format as an alternative to print.

Another example is a new reference work, an *Encyclopedia of Plant and Animal Drugs*. In addition to the full printed version and a concise paperback version (for the individual and student market), we offer a fully searchable CD-ROM version. Also, in an edited collection that Aldine, our American imprint, is publishing next year, we will include a floppy disk as a tool for practitioners.

We are also well aware, as I believe the President of *Encyclopedia Britannica* has put it, that CD-ROM may be an intermediate technology. De Gruyter publishes many long-range projects that take decades to complete and does not want to invest in expensive technological delivery systems that will be obsolete before a work has been completed.

ATG: *Can you tell us a little about your private interests and your family? What do you like to do when you're not working?*

ES: My wife works part time as an administrative assistant; my son is a senior at **Hofstra University**, majoring in International Business. We enjoy outdoor activities, which I definitely need to offset long hours of sitting behind a desk. In the summer we like to play tennis and go boating on the Hudson River; in the winter we like to go skiing as much as conditions and time permit.

NB: *I'd like to know more. Wouldn't you?*

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members in their efforts to expand resources available to their users. These initiatives have been both opportunistic and planned, originating from a number of locations within the organization, rather than from the formal consortial committees. The CIC member libraries have successfully negotiated site licenses for many large information databases. Through these efforts, CIC libraries have realized cost avoidance and direct sav-

ings of some \$700,000.

Although there is some overlap between the efforts of the two consortia, OSU is really getting the best of both worlds. We receive more databases from **OhioLINK**, but we are also able to take advantage of those offered through CIC that may be even more specialized. Our participation in the OhioLINK acquisition of resources has aided CIC in that OSU is counted as a participant in the CIC arrangements when OhioLINK pays the bill. While OSU has certainly not ceased its efforts in the provision of elec-

tronic resources locally, it is clear that cooperative efforts can greatly expand horizons for our users. We are committed, in a variety of ways, to furthering these efforts while continuing to expand local resources for our campus.

(An earlier version of the paper was presented at the EBSCO Executive Seminar, Remote Access through Consortial Agreement, January 21, 1996.)