

# Professor Henry Wasser and the Henry Wasser Travel Grant for Ph.D. and MA Students in NAAS

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*Thanks to the generosity of Solidelle Fortier Wasser and her son Professor Frederick Wasser NAAS now has a travel grant named for their husband and father, Professor Henry Wasser, for the participation of PhD and MA students in our national and Nordic conferences. Although dearly remembered by Norwegian Americanists of my generation, Henry Wasser may need an introduction to my younger colleagues in NAAS. The following is a brief outline of his participation in and contribution to American Studies in Norway in the early 1960s as well as a note on the continued involvement of the Wasser family in American Studies in the Nordic countries.*

When Henry Wasser came to the American Institute at the University of Oslo in the summer of 1962 this was his second appointment as a Fulbright Professor in Europe. In 1955-56 he had been in Salonika, Greece, so he came to us with considerable experience both of the Fulbright system of exchange and of European academia. He clearly impressed Professor Sigmund Skard, the professor of American literature at Oslo, both as a scholar and as an administrator. Wasser was appointed director of the American Institute when Skard was in the United States in 1963, the year I began my doctoral studies at Yale University. Henry Wasser concluded his two years at the University of Oslo with his participation in the second conference of the Nordic Association for American Studies, held at the University of Oslo in June of 1964, with a paper on "The Changing Intellectual Climate in the USA Since World War II." This conference, hosted by Sigmund Skard, was chaired by the first president of the Association, Professor Lars Åhnebrinck of Uppsala University. After his return to New York, Wasser continued his

close cooperation with Skard and they were co-editors of the first volume of *Americana Norvegica: Norwegian Contributions to American Studies*, published by University of Pennsylvania Press in 1966.

Henry Wasser's dedication to the Fulbright program and interest in international education led to three later European appointments, first to the University of Sussex in 1972, then to the University of Bergen, Norway in 1989-1990 and, finally, to the University of Alveiro, Portugal in 1993. A further recognition of his experience and understanding of the interplay of the Fulbright exchange program and European academia was his appointment as a consultant for the United States Information Service in visits to universities in Poland and Romania in 1993.

In his correspondence with me Frederick Wasser has observed that his father's "commitment to an intellectual education for the working classes is a lasting legacy of his upbringing in Akron, Ohio, the center of the rubber industry and the site of the kind of labor politics we associate with the auto industry. This also accounts for his deep love of Norway and the Scandinavian approach to social democracy." After completing his doctoral studies at Columbia University in 1951 Henry Wasser taught at University of Akron, New York University and George Washington University and worked as Assistant for Americana at the Library of Congress. On his return to the United States from Oslo in 1964 he embarked on a long and distinguished career at several divisions of the City University of New York, only interrupted by an appointment as Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of English at California State University at Sacramento in 1973-74. He began as Professor of English at Richmond College on Staten Island, an institution for third and fourth year students that became part of College of Staten Island in 1974. Here he also served as Dean of Faculties and Academic Dean. Much of his time, however, was spent at the Graduate School of the City University of New York in Manhattan where he was Director of the Center for European Studies (1979-1993) and Professor of Sociology (1980-1993).

Gradually his main research interests became focused on the governance of higher education in Europe (particularly in Sweden and Norway) and the United States. This research took him to numerous conferences and seminars and resulted in several edited volumes (one of these co-edited by his wife Solidelle Fortier) and a great number of articles. One example of how his interest in Scandinavia had an effect on his study of higher education is the conference he organized in Denmark in 1983 on N. F. S. Grundtvig's

influence on American education in 1983. Henry Wasser was preoccupied with university governance and particularly in how the influence of professors in university governance had been weakened, particularly in the United States but more and more also in European countries. His interest was not only theoretical and he served for many years in the City University of New York Faculty Senate, as secretary 1978-80, as vice-chair 1879-80, and then as chair of the senate from 1980 to 1986. He also served as the Faculty Trustee on the Board of Trustees, the highest governing body of his university. His service on the Senate and Board of Trustees of City University of New York may be, writes his son, "his biggest source of pride."

Henry Wasser's main area of research and teaching has been American literature and his most of his academic appointments have been as Professor of English. From the beginning of his career however, he has been involved in American Studies and been active in the American Studies Association, serving as president of the Metropolitan New York Chapter of the Association 1958 to 1961. In later years of his career he applied his insight into area studies to the study of Europe and became director of the Center for European Studies at the Graduate School of the City University of New York 1979 to 1993.

It is Professor Wasser's service at and deep interest in Scandinavian universities that has led his family – his wife Solidelle Fortier and his son Frederick Wasser – to contribute so generously to the establishment of the Henry Wasser Travel Grant. It should be noted that also Solidelle Fortier, an economist in the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the US Department of Labor, shared her husband's interest in both Scandinavia and in American Studies as evidenced in the fine article they co-authored in *American Studies in Scandinavia* in 2007: "Veblen and Fitzgerald: *Absentee Ownership* and *The Great Gatsby*," a comparative study of the main works of these two Midwesterners. It may be added that it is the continued interest in the next generation, represented by their son Professor Frederick Wasser, in both Scandinavia and in American Studies that has awakened the family's interest in doing something for the Nordic Association for American Studies in Henry Wasser's name. The idea of such a grant was born with Frederick Wasser's appointment as the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair at the University of Helsinki for 2013-2014 where he worked closely with such a pillar of Scandinavian American Studies as Professor Markku Henriksson. While in Helsinki Frederick Wasser was invited by Professor Lene Johannessen to lecture at the University of Bergen where his father had taught twenty-

five years earlier, and here they had conversations about the possibility of a travel grant. Frederick Wasser's main areas of research and teaching in American Studies are film and media studies and he is currently at work on a history of Twentieth Century Fox. Thus the Henry Wasser Travel Grant, which honors the past contributions of Henry Wasser to Scandinavian as well as American academia, may also remind us of the continued involvement of his family in Scandinavian academia and American Studies.