

Oakland University Chronicles

Laszlo J. Hetenyi

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: February 7, 1998

Interviewer: Paul Tombouliau



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Oakland University Chronicles

LASZLO JOSEPH HETENYI

Date of birth: March 8, 1921

EDUCATION

B.A.	Penn State University	1942
M.A.	University of Michigan	1946
Ed.D.	Michigan State University	1956

PRIOR TO OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Associate Professor
University of Florida

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

1960 Associate Professor, Director of Teacher Education

Other positions held:
Professor
Dean of Teacher Education
Dean of Performing Arts

1982 Retired

1-11-89 Distinguished Professor Emeritus
of Performing Arts and Education

SINCE LEAVING OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Courtesy Professor of Humanities
University of South Florida
Tampa, Florida

CURRENT OCCUPATION

Retired

Current as of February 5, 1998



Photograph of Laszlo J. Hetenyi

February 7, 1998

Photographer: Alice Tomboulian



Laszlo Hetenyi
*Professor and Director of
Teacher Education*

Photograph of Laszlo Hetenyi

MSUO Yearbook 1963

Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with LASZLO HETENYI
February 7, 1998

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is one of the interviews in the Oakland University Chronicles Project, supported in the second year by a special university allocation. Today is February 7, 1998 and we are speaking from the studios of public television station WUSF-TV16 [at the University of South Florida] in Tampa, Florida. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University. We are going to focus on the first few years, the time prior to the graduation of the first class. My name is Paul Tomboulian and I have been a professor of chemistry at Oakland University since 1959.

My guest today is Professor Laszlo Hetenyi who came to MSUO in the summer of 1960 to be the director of the teacher education program, which he did with distinction. Dr. Hetenyi retired from Oakland University in 1982, and currently resides in Temple Terrace, Florida. Les, welcome to the OU Chronicles Project.

LASZLO HETENYI: I'm delighted to be here and delighted to see old friends again.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: In a way, your coming to MSUO was the inevitable result of a series of academic experiences that began around 1943. Could you briefly describe that history, perhaps maybe even starting with when and why you came to the United States?

LASZLO HETENYI: I came to the United States because Hungary was not a very good place to be at that time. We were increasingly shifting into the German orbit, i.e. Nazi orbit. By the way, there's a little historical element there. It wasn't that the Nazi party took over, that didn't happen until the German occupation. But the governing party kept moving further and further and further to the right, and more and more in line with what the official Nazi party was advocating. So I didn't find that a very good place. Furthermore, I always wanted to get out. Hungary seemed much too confining.

I won't go through all the changes and rigamaroles, suffice it to say that I got enrolled at Case Institute of Technology, as it was then called, because I had a naive notion that I wanted to be an engineer. I learned later on that I was not for engineering and it wasn't for me. But after all kinds of trials and tribulations of visas and so on I finally landed in Hoboken, New Jersey, the headquarters of the front line ships of the Holland-America line in those days. I can't remember the exact date, but I think it was either at the end of the first or the beginning of the second week of August, 1939. I presume to us in Europe that date was more significant than it was in America, because the Germans attacked September 1, starting with Poland. I was lucky to get out when I did.

I had no objection to going in the army—in fact, eventually I did, and that's a whole story in itself. But I wanted to be in the right army and somehow the Hungarian army allied closely to the Germans wasn't my ideal. So I came over here to Hoboken, was enrolled at Case, studied there for a semester. One of my troubles was that on paper the gymnasium degree which I had from Hungary listed all sorts of good things that I had studied, including differential and integral calculus, and so on. The trouble was that it was taught as a humanistic discipline and utterly unsuitable for engineering. I would start at this end of the blackboard and derive a formula over here, with which all the other students started, having memorized it.

So it turned out that that wasn't the right thing, so then I transferred to Penn State into a B.A. program. Back in those days commerce and finance, as it was called, was a major in the college of liberal arts and so you took a minimum of those courses, and the rest I took all in music and philosophy. So already I started to be atypical. And as it will turn out—in fact it probably has turned out from earlier interviews—when eventually somebody got to Oakland, they discovered that [he] was atypical. So that was a good start for me.

[Insert placed in chronological order.] But [after] that time, there was passed what some called the GI Bill, and when I finished teaching in the Army ASTP Program at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, this program kicked in and I got my masters at the University of Michigan in musicology.

Then I started to teach music in the liberal arts program [at the University of Florida], what here [at the University of South Florida] would be called humanities, but also picked up various and sundry other things. But about that time, since I was on leave from [teaching summer school] at Michigan State, Dr.

Hannah, then president, decided everybody had to have an earned doctorate. It mattered not in what. I had colleagues in the Quonset colony where I lived who were professors; one particularly was a professor of engineering and got a degree in, I think, educational curriculum at the secondary level or some such thing, but he had earned a doctorate eventually.

I won't go through all the trials and tribulations about trying to find an outfit that would give me a degree, which was geographically close enough because I had a wife and child by that time. What with one thing and another, I wound up in the college of education at Michigan State. In those days you could pursue a doctorate even though you had a tenure track faculty position. And they were magnificent. They, in effect, except for a few absolutely necessary courses—necessary, i.e. they were written down in the catalogue somewhere—with the exception of those, they let me write my own curriculum, and I admired them for that. I particularly admired my major professor, Milosh Muntyon, who very much believed in letting me do these things. So that's where I pursued my doctorate.

So now I had a bachelor's degree [1942]—a B.A., not B.S.F. or something like that—in commerce and finance as it was then called, a master's degree [1946] in musicology, and now I'm trying to pursue a doctorate in philosophy of education because that was the nearest thing that I could get in a geographically proper place. That's how it happened to be that I was a suitable candidate for this new institution called MSUO.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But then that was about 1956?

LASZLO HETENYI: I got the [doctorate] degree in '56.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So sometime later than that, you came to hear about MSUO.

LASZLO HETENYI: You see, the last actual course that I took towards the doctorate program was conducted by a gentleman named Tom Hamilton who later on became, I can't remember the exact title, academic vice president or something of that nature. By further coincidence—showing how life depends on coincidences—I was renting a place from a faculty member who lived only

about a block and a half from Tom, and we visited back and forth. He had a marvelously equipped basement, which you would never guess would be a basement, it had a much more combination "bier-stube-kneipe" quality to it.

Then [later] he mentioned to me this project that the president had put him in charge of, trying to set up a new institution based on the geographic donation and the cash donation of Mrs. Alfred Wilson. So Tom Hamilton approached me once and asked, "How would you like to join the Michigan State faculty full time"—because at that time I was just summer school faculty—"and go on the so-called planning committee"—it had a name but I can't remember what it was—"to map out this new institution?" I was very much tempted but at that same time a dear friend of mine became chairman of my department [in the liberal arts program] at the University of Florida and I felt, certainly not legally, but morally obligated not to leave him in the lurch, right when he took over this department. So I said, "Well Tom, I hope you're not going to just forget about me, but this year I just can't do it."

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And what year would that have been? The gift came in early '57.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, then it would have to be '57. So I went back to Florida, and my wife Mary and I were talking about it, and I said, "I don't think I'm going to be at this institution next year at this time." But all sorts of changes occurred [at MSUO], one of them being—not at all uncommon at state universities—here was the financial crisis. As a matter of fact, I am told, and I don't know this first hand, but that same year when I eventually joined the [MSUO] faculty, there were some "payless" paydays—not on the faculty but in other parts of the state government.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There's a story about that, yes.

LASZLO HETENYI: I don't know whether it's true or not, but that's what I heard.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It was a threat.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. So then I discovered that Tom Hamilton would not be the chancellor. I admired him very much and I liked him very much but for whatever reason, President Hannah felt he needed him on the main campus.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But your prior contacts had all been through Tom Hamilton? And he was the person that seemed to be in charge of this project?

LASZLO HETENYI: As a matter of fact, he was freely spoken of as the chancellor of this new institution. (In contrast to Florida, where the president is the head of the individual institution, and the chancellor is the head over all.) So then somebody else was named chancellor, a gentleman by the name of Durward Varner, Woody Varner.

I had known Woody from back when I was on the Michigan State faculty, and at that point I thought he was a great guy, but I somehow wasn't impressed by him. I said, "Well, now that Tom isn't going to do it, I'm going to look elsewhere." At the same time there was a university starting down here in Florida, namely where we are now at the University of South Florida. In fact I got an offer from them, but the offer was not what I had hoped for, or what I expected. Within days of that offer, Woody Varner asked me to come up to Oakland.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And that would have been about 1959?

LASZLO HETENYI: Correct, and it was an amazing thing. I finally got taken to the campus. I think George Karas took me, George Karas whom you also interviewed. When I came there it looked like nothing so much as a not-too-big consolidated high school, and that sort of gave me a jolt. We had North and South Foundation Hall and the not-yet-fully-developed Oakland Center. But then, I went out to Woody's house, and we had a party and we met the dean, Bob Hoopes, etcetera, and a number of other people. I met, I think, all the faculty, because what were there, 25 faculty members?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: At most.

LASZLO HETENYI: And now I became very impressed. Woody was a very different person from what I remembered, and Tom Hamilton had alerted me to that. He was very impressive, adventuresome, so much so (this actually happened later) that my wife [Mary Hetenyi] referred to him as a “great buccaneer.” But I was very much impressed.

He said, “Look, I can’t give you an offer right now, you have to get back, but you met with a number of people and I have to touch base with them.” I stayed at the Willow Run airport at that time, and at six o’clock in the morning prior to the plane taking off, I got a phone call with an offer. So I said, “Look, I can’t accept. You had to touch base with all the faculty, I have to touch base with my commanding officer known as my wife.”

We arrived—at that point the Gainesville airport was nothing—so we landed in Jacksonville, and she met me there and we drove back to Gainesville and conversed. It was something like 70 miles in those days; with expressways I don’t know what it is now. So we discussed the situation and she wasn’t negative about it. In fact she was so positive that I had not yet taken my overcoat off when I called Nadji White, who was Woody Varner’s number one secretary, and accepted the job. That’s how I got to Oakland.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And you would have accepted when, about 1960, early ‘60?

LASZLO HETENYI: Very early ‘60, yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But you couldn’t come.

LASZLO HETENYI: That was the problem. I had already accepted a teaching assignment for the summer school at the University of Kansas. I had never been to the University of Kansas, but I had a couple of good faculty friends there (plus in connection with Frank Harris, you heard quite a bit about the University of Kansas; I don’t think I should go into that). And now what do I do? I said, “Woody, I accepted a job; do you want me to come early?” I think it was something like July 1 or maybe even June, because [I knew that] trying to fit the various things together into a viable teacher education program was going to be a weary job.

Then Woody said, "Well, there is a gentlemen's agreement among presidents and chancellors and so on, but if it's really necessary and it doesn't put the other person in too much of a bind, they'll release you." He talked to them—I can't remember who the president of Kansas University was in those days—and he released me, and asked if I could at least make a recommendation. (I did, and the person went.) But that's how I managed to be shaken loose so I could appear on the MSUO campus.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Let's talk about Woody Varner, the man who needed you, and who pulled off this buccaneer activity.

LASZLO HETENYI: That even became better known later on, which is beyond the time span we're discussing, I think, with the Meadow Brooks [the music festival and the theater]. Woody Varner was a fascinating guy, a graduate of Texas A&M, an "aggie." He, I think, to all intents and purposes, completed all his doctoral work, with the exception of the dissertation. I don't know whether he had taken his prelims or not, but he had everything else. He was going on leave [from MSU] to finish the degree.

However, first this MSUO situation developed and secondly, not unusually for the state of Michigan, also not unknown in the state of Florida, there were foul-ups with the legislature: the budgeting process and the control process, and so on. So President Hannah called him back. The net result of which is that though he got honorary degrees, he never finished his degree.

But he was a fantastically quick learner. Now, when I first was talking to him about music, for example, he liked certain kinds of music but he didn't know beans about it. By the time the fourth Detroit Symphony series [at the Meadow Brook Music Festival] took place, he not only understood much of music, but he had a very well-developed taste. It might have been not your taste or not my taste—it was too romantic for some of us, although I love the romantics—but he had a very definite concept of what he liked in music. He had never heard of Lutoslovsky, for example, but he discovered a certain affinity there and became a great Lutoslovsky fan. So he was a very quick learner. In addition to that he had his ideals, he had his goals, but he was a very practical person.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: In this case, when he wanted you, he clearly was looking for something different in a school of education.

LASZLO HETENYI: First of all, what he looked for was not a school of education, and in those days I was opposed to it, too; I had to change my mind [later]. Because of my very mixed background, heavily "liberal artsy"—even when the official degree wasn't that, but still all-in-all heavily liberal artsy all around—and that was, after all, the general direction in which that new university was supposed to go. I found out years later—he actually showed it to me—that there was a pile of applications this thick of ex-superintendents, ex-principals, people who knew much more about public education than I did in those days. But he picked up on this weird combination that I had, and for what he wanted that was the right mix.

Unfortunately, he also was very practical and he said to me, "Les, remember it's not going to go that way. There are reasons why colleges of education—schools of education—develop the way they do. It was not on somebody's whim, so be prepared that what you're trying to do isn't going to work." For example, I had that marvelous idea and everybody on the faculty supported it, that the people who taught disciplines in the liberal arts should teach the corresponding disciplines that are required for teacher certification. Furthermore, that [teacher certification courses] be kept at an absolute minimum. And this worked fine as long as the faculty was interested in doing that. But as it so often happens, based on their own graduate work and so on, they were less and less interested, not just in teacher education, but in general education, which is a big point in the history of MSUO.

So I finally got to that point where I had to go to the chancellor and say, "Look, these things have to be done, the schools won't hire our graduates if we don't do certain things." I mean, for example—I don't mean to pick on this one department because in certain other respects they were very cooperative—but the English department made up a teacher education curriculum which, with the exception of the general education requirement, consisted of nine literature courses, no courses in grammar, no courses in reading, and these people are going to be sent out into the inner city schools of Detroit and Pontiac. Well, of course this was a catastrophe. I finally had to go to Woody and say, "Look, we can't do it this way," and he said, "Well, I told you so."

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But did you think it would work, or were you just hopeful?

LASZLO HETENYI: Hopeful, hopeful.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Hopeful that you could try a different strategy, something that was different from the traditional school's educational program?

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. You see, I believed my colleagues when they said, "Oh, that's important, we have to do it, we have to be prepared to do it," and so on. I learned not to [believe them], because as a matter of fact, when we had not yet graduated our first class, they were already talking about graduate programs—which, of course, is antithetical to something like this. One of the problems was that they came out of fine graduate schools. As a matter of fact, I, with my doctorate from Michigan State, felt definitely low man on the totem pole in terms of degrees. But then they were surprised that they couldn't just transfer these programs. In fact, how many failing grades were passed out in the first year? Something like 60% or something of that nature, I can't tell you the exact figure.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There were a large number. [The first quarter was the worst, when about 40% of the students failed at least one course.]

LASZLO HETENYI: All right, but it was the recognition that the group of students that we were working with were not Ivy League. Also some people believed fervently—I mean, not pretending—that this was going to be a small institution, probably more like Williams, than like, say, Harvard. They kept calling it the Harvard of the Midwest, but the dream was really more the Williams of the Midwest. They were surprised to discover that somehow growth was being built into the institution. As a matter of fact, when I was having an interview of some sort with the chancellor, a purely mundane thing, he showed me a piece of paper on his desk which was projecting 10,000 students.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And this would have been very early, right?

LASZLO HETENYI: Very early. I would say '61, '62, something like that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So he already knew or had plans that the institution probably would be [large]. Did you get the sense that this was an inevitable thing, or that this was something in his mind, or he had to sell this? How would you characterize it?

LASZLO HETENYI: Let me say my personal opinion on this matter. I think Woody had been around higher education long enough and well enough to be aware that, except in highly specialized institutions, it was very common that although large institutions weren't always good, it was almost a 100% correlation that small state institutions were not good. He didn't want to fall into that because, as you know, legislatures drive the appropriations process by way of enrollments, and you have to have something to play with. If you just get exactly enough money to do what some formula tells you that you have to do, it's not going to work.

That's one of the reasons why Woody—although he never told me this—but I'm sure he was convinced based on the University of Michigan, and based on Michigan State, that you have to have wiggle room. If you have a very tight small institution and it is not privately supported through a foundation or something of that nature, it's not going to work. So as I say, as early as that, while still many of the faculty members thought that this was going to be a nice, tight, small liberal arts institution, Woody wasn't fooled.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Do you think they talked themselves into this? Where do you think this [came from]? There's several kinds of conflicts you've mentioned, [such as] this apparent conflict [felt by] some faculty who wanted a small liberal arts orientation, which is one message they got somewhere.

LASZLO HETENYI: Let me tell you where; I'm sure you know also. We had a PR man by the name of Loren Pope, and he was handing out this propaganda right and left. As a matter of fact, he once had been affiliated with the *New York Times*—if I'm not mistaken—so he had a certain cachet, and he was pushing this idea everywhere, all over the place. I am also certain that Woody had hoped perhaps that this could be done. He never told me that, but he knew well

enough that practically speaking it wouldn't work. But the Pope propaganda was going all over the country. I think that was one of the factors.

There was another factor too, and you know that as well as I do, and not just in higher education. We like to believe what we wish for. I think to some considerable extent with some people—I stress that, with some people—what they wished for became somehow father of the actual thought that it's going to be that way, and then they were terribly upset when it didn't. In some ways, through a curricular fight which culminated in something we used to call "Black Saturday," this really came to a head.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The other thing that you mentioned is there was this mismatch—the word some folks used—between the student body that we got, and what appeared to be a fairly sophisticated curriculum.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. And not only a fairly sophisticated curriculum, but an unusually heavy proportion—pardon me, I'm not speaking of you—but of young faculty excellently trained but with limited experience in the practical world in higher education. I mean I was 40 years old and I was considered ancient.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You were almost the oldest. I think Gertrude [White] was a little older.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes, and George Matthews might have been the same age, but that's meaningless. The fact was that gradually Woody came to recognize, and he said so, that sometimes it was most difficult to move a young faculty, because their security blanket is a graduate program and they are very uncomfortable if they deviate too far from that. On the other hand that was utterly improper for all the student body, which was a very interesting student body.

First of all, they were overwhelmingly first generation college—I mean overwhelmingly, I can't give you the figures, but heavily so. With a few exceptions, they were regionally bound in their thinking, in their actual origins, and so on. I remember, for example, when we were getting close to the end of the first cycle, I was talking to students about what were they going to do, where

were they going to go, and it was a rarity if a student was willing to conceive of his going further than 50 miles from Pontiac. Here we were trying to give them a world outlook, area studies, other civilizations, etcetera, and their dream doesn't extend more than 50 miles beyond Pontiac—notable exceptions granted. There were some very impressive ones, though often their preparation didn't match their intellectual impressiveness. There was a young hefty man by the name of [James] Drummond for example, an English major, who I think had all the makings. It's just that he was not yet adequately prepared. And there was a mismatch: a cosmopolitan-thinking faculty and a hidebound student body.

Secondly, I don't mean to sound too snobbish, but I guess to some extent I am. The socio-economic background was pretty low, by and large. Again, exceptions granted. One of the most telling and, to me, one of the saddest incidents happened during the first year—well, my first year. It was the second actual year of Oakland, the student body was still small and so those of us in charge of some programs specifically would try to have a little coffee hour, or tea or cookies or something like that, with the students who were expected to major there. I can still remember we were out on the deck of our house, which is a story in itself.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So you had students invited over to your house? So you were doing student-faculty [get-togethers]?

LASZLO HETENYI: Lot's of other people did it. I'm not taking credit, by any manner or means, but it just happened. There were two boys; I was never sure whether they were twins or not and their names are long gone. My wife passed out a little tray of cookies and they got a cup of coffee or whatever it was. Then she came around with the cookies again and one of them said, and I will never forget that, "I already had one." Think about this for a minute: "I already had one."

There's another incident which goes much further along in Oakland's development, but again it shows something of that. The commencement speaker, I think, was Sargent Shriver. He had previously to that done something in the Pontiac ghettos, and was named head of the Teacher Corps or something of that nature. He was telling that they had one of those thematic perception tests, and one of the figures in it was a teddy bear.

It was overwhelmingly identified as a rat. He said, "If I want to put in a nutshell what my goal is, it's that in the inner city schools no student some years from now will identify a teddy bear as a rat." Now this is much later on and only partially parallel, but you can see the parallel to "I already had one."

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The challenges were clearly there.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes, and now to this particular student body, our faculty tried to add, or had to present, an elegant elite curriculum with excellent readings and so on, which was completely beyond their comprehension. Then of course there were other curriculum messes, but I think I'd like to talk about those when we get to Black Saturday.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Let's talk a little bit about that, because we're getting to the areas of curricular development, and things are coming apart at the edges and there's little bits of unhappiness. It seemed like the first year there was a lot of getting started and enthusiasm, and "let's get the show on the road" and "we're all in this together" and "Woody's the leader." But it didn't always go that way.

LASZLO HETENYI: Let me tell you about when I came into the situation, which was a little later. My first assignment was—and I can still remember the graph paper that I was using, quarter inch graph paper—trying to fit together the general education requirements, the requirements of a major, and a minor in case of teacher certification, and the courses that the state Department of Education—or whatever their name was, I think that's what they called them—set down as absolute requirements. In other words, you don't get a teacher certificate unless you meet these things. Now, that was getting to be a little "horsey."

I forget now what the exact number of credits were, but it seems to me that the liberal arts major was 36 semester credits—if I remember correctly. Then there were heavy general education requirements, including a two-year language requirement (about which more later), then there would be roughly 20 credits of things that the state Department of Education demanded, to get you certificated, as it's called. And I use that term not because I think it's a better

term than certified, but so often you say "so-and-so is certified" and that means something else.

I tried to fill those boxes, and things were always hanging out, this couldn't be done or that couldn't be done or something else couldn't be done. At the same time, I am a great believer that there ought to be enough flexibility that at the absolute minimum, and I say minimum, it should be possible to give two electives to the student. Okay, I couldn't make it come out. If I got everything in that I had to get in absolutely, there wasn't room for a single elective. And the other professional program that I know something about, the engineering program, had the same difficulty. They didn't have to fight this business about state certification but they still had all the professional associations.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Just to ask a question here: Why, with all this curriculum planning, and facade of approval by the Meadow Brook Seminars and committees, why did they miss this problem or difficulty of trying to get all those courses into the curriculum?

LASZLO HETENYI: Let me suggest a few possible explanations. Nobody told me this, I have no empirical evidence, but I have an opinion. One, remember when I said a little bit earlier that sometimes a wish is father of the thought? In other words I think there were times when wishful thinking prevailed. Secondly, and this is true, all these things could be fitted into the straight liberal arts program. Sometimes with a little shoehorning, but it could be done. But the minute you added the professional qualifications, be they engineering or be they education... I suspect, and this you would know more about than I, that to the B.S. in chemistry it would be that same way, as this thing for the B.A. in education. These [things] they just didn't consider, is my guess.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So they were working at a different planning level or different thinking level. They weren't thinking about the practicality of credits and courses and the demands of the professional societies and communities when they were planning those [programs].

LASZLO HETENYI: Right. Also speaking now just for education, you and I both know that there were an awful lot of paper requirements that were useless, and I spoke openly and I was disliked for that by education colleagues. I mean, for example, there would be planning courses and with the exception of one or two slight differences, you were threshing straw, and I was all against that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Explain what you mean by that.

LASZLO HETENYI: For example, there would be a general curriculum course in education. We have a general curriculum course and you talk about things like planning. What do you call those things—I hated them and so I never used the term—lesson plans, and you had to be exactly at the same point at the same time. Then you had another course, and what do you know—with a few changes in words it was the same damn thing again!

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: For a different subject.

LASZLO HETENYI: Not even for a different subject. One was something like general lesson planning and the other was lesson planning for, say, mathematics, or something. I had the feeling that, as this was usually the case—not always but usually—probably what you did there could have been done in one course, two at the utmost. On the other hand, the basic things which you call foundations for philosophy of education, and even psychology of education, would get short shrift.

That was another bone of contention, because the psychology department wanted to do the psychology of education, and with very few exceptions did a hash of it. It was a little bit like trying to create a psychology of education course which starts with the most basic of all basic theories, Watson or somebody like that, and never gets down to the real problem. So I could see that there were too many of those courses and I was in full agreement with my more liberal-arts-oriented-colleagues. And I suspect because Woody surmised that I had these feelings, that's why he picked me.

But even so, the methods course, for example, had be cut down to a single course of four weeks given during the semester when student teaching also took place. But you still couldn't fit it together and some people said, "Fine, a five-year

program for teacher education," and this is where my lack of idealism, or dominance of practicality, came in. I said, "Look, if you can get a bachelor's degree, a major, a minor, the required courses for the state Department of Education and your name is the University of Michigan or Michigan State, or in those days Wayne State, and they do it in four years, what will little upstart Oakland do to attract any students who all have goals to earn a living?" "Oh well, hmm, hmm [imitating a mumble..." and gradually the faculty split on this one. We had a meeting which some of us—I don't know how widespread it was—but some of us in my circles called Black Saturday, where this whole fight came out into the open.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think it was February of 1961.

LASZLO HETENYI: It was very cold. It was a Saturday, and I remember eventually we had to raid the refrigerators in the Student Center to get something to eat. But the faculty and some people who were in the academic staff but not faculty—and I'm thinking of course of [Loren] Pope—split. The battle was hot and it was heavy. Now I can't remember anymore, after all these years, precisely at which point it really blew up. At one point a very junior faculty member, who since had a very nice career at Oakland, became the dupe of a somewhat more senior faculty member who eventually went, of all places, to Notre Dame. They were the ringleaders of the [position that] "no professional program is to impose anything with restrictions on general education or majors."

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So this conflict really had to do with not giving up the sacred core of liberal education that they wanted to protect, or at least a subset of the faculty [wanted].

LASZLO HETENYI: That's right, and I will get to one point of that. The thing got so bad that a person who didn't have tenure, didn't even have faculty status but in those days was in the Senate, in effect proposed a vote of no confidence in the chancellor. I think you can guess who it was. And the young faculty member who had been given specific instructions to make that motion, at one point openly said, loudly, "What do I do now?"

The thing in some ways—and now I speak very personally as well as politically—in many ways concentrated around foreign languages. Somebody, whether it was in the planning committees or the Meadow Brook Seminars or what, had developed the shibboleth that learning foreign languages ("learning" in quotation marks) at a basic one-year and two-year level, somehow is a hallmark of a liberal education. Now, by that time I had a year of teaching languages behind me at the University of Pennsylvania, where there was a very select student body because the ASTP people had to show considerable language ability to be let in.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Explain what those letters mean.

LASZLO HETENYI: Army Specialized Training Program. They had it in engineering, they had it in the various sciences, and they had it in foreign languages. My first full-time teaching job was in that language program, and I became convinced that the usual way of teaching languages in school, for the great majority of people, results in no practical command of the language.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And you knew several languages—you weren't coming to this as a novice.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, no. At that time, I was fluent in three languages, and some in two others, plus Latin. But you see, that made it even more difficult, because people would say, "Oh, no wonder you'd say that, you know all of this, you don't have to fuss about it." Anyway, there was a two-year language requirement at Oakland as part of the liberal arts core, because some people felt that having studied two crummy years of foreign language educates you liberally.

If you have ever taught foreign languages—and I am speaking now not of the immersion technique which we finally used at ASTP— but the usual kind of college courses, in two years, you do the most illiberal things you can do, namely lots of rote learning: vocabulary learning, and in the case of certain languages, cases and agreements of this-that, etcetera. The German language has this unique wonderful quality, but I'll talk about that in some other context.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So let me try to figure out what was going on here. The faculty was divided, apparently, and it sounds like they were looking for someone to blame this on, and maybe they were saying that the teacher education program was the reason that this was giving trouble. In fact there were many difficulties in trying to fit all these pieces into one curriculum, and the language requirement, the “sacred cow” so to speak, was not under discussion; it was off the table.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, it was and it wasn't. Some of us kept putting it on the table and others kept trying to knock it off the table. But let me talk about that whole language business a little bit. Partly I'm revealing my own position on it just generally, and partly I want to tie it to this whole situation. I happened to have spoken, understood, and read more languages at that time (I've forgotten many of them) than probably anybody else in the faculty. I was not bilingual, but trilingual—Hungarian, German, and English—and some Italian, some French, and of course eight years of Latin, six days a week. So I felt that I had a certain strength, that I was not just one of these guys that “he's agin it because he doesn't have it.” Secondly, having taught on the ASTP Program, which I mentioned before, I saw what that kind of teaching could do. But they were absolutely immersed; they were in special barracks, they were given instructions on geography of Germany or something, in German. The rest of us could make hand signals and everything else, but you could not switch to English.

I remember one of the things that we did. We had a Horn & Hardart not too far off the campus. And it was one of those—it wasn't an automat, but cafeteria style—and they had to give me the names [in German] of the things that they wanted, eggs or whatever, and I would take it to the cafeteria line and translate it into English. Then when the stuff was ready, I took a couple of people just as bearers, and we delivered these things in German to the students. Now you'd be surprised how quickly that learning went. They were in special dormitories, etcetera. They were selected for past demonstrated language ability, not in German, but in something else—since I was in the actual German section—and I saw what could happen.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But we weren't talking about that at Oakland, were we?

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes, but we were. Because I said, if we could give that kind of language instruction, I would support it. However, there's nothing in the two years of strictly old-fashioned academic language instruction that I see of any value in two years. Just possibly if it were to occur when you were about 6 or 8 years old, possibly yes. But when you are adults, no.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Now, this view probably didn't endear you to the language people.

LASZLO HETENYI: I suspect that they hated my guts, and if anybody hated my guts worse, it was some of these political allies of theirs. Let me mention something else that we talked about once before, though not I think in this context. The language requirement was set up in a beautiful way. I know of no union that would have felt about that better.

If you started from scratch: two years of basic language instruction, basic of the type that I've been describing before, as you do it in public schools or anywhere else, a limited amount of contact and so on—you simply had to take the regular academic course, which is most uneducational. It may be training under certain conditions, but it is not educational. Because to learn—I don't know—150 words, just *qua* rote learning, isn't going to contribute much to your intellectual development. At best and not often, it gives you some basic tools with which to work. But since even the most ardent supporters of the language requirement (and more about that later), could not prescribe more than that, they just couldn't see how that could be done. They came around with the most magnificent featherbedding scheme that I've ever seen.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is the Oakland situation.

LASZLO HETENYI: The Oakland situation, MSUO situation. If you had no foreign language experience, you had to take two years of this kind of basic language where you learned—except for a little rote learning of vocabulary—not a damned thing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: At least in your experience.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. But if you already had some, I can't remember whether it was two, three, or four [years], then you had to take two more years because now you could do something with it. It seems that was the most abject admission of failure of the basic concept that you could have. The only thing it did was give employment of foreign language faculty. I don't know when that was changed, I don't remember anymore, but I do know that even some of the most ardent supporters of the language requirement felt ill at ease with it. I can't imagine any other discipline, to my personal knowledge, where any previous experience is simply discounted so that they can give you more of what they have to offer. So to me, that was there for hogtying the student body for what I believed to be a useless requirement.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But apparently a lot of the faculty went along with it.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes, that's the interesting thing. I don't quite know where that came from: whether it had something to do with the two-year language requirement for the doctorate or something of that nature, whether it was a hangover from British secondary and higher education—although there are few people who pronounce foreign language more strangely than the Britons did. I can still remember when the guy leading a tour through the Louvre kept talking about the “Mona Leiza.” But where it actually came from, I think it had something to do with fact that in America and in England there were stratified [educational] systems, even though we don't like to admit it in America. And this was sort of a class distinction that you spoke a foreign language—not that you did after two years of it, but that somehow gave a cachet to it.

When I saw, and I think Bill Hammerle saw the same thing—because he was in charge of the engineering program—when he saw what that did to his program and when I saw what that did to my program, we became allies. I think I was more emotional about it than he was, but it was something over which we just clashed and it couldn't be reconciled. And since it couldn't be reconciled, eventually it led to the dissolution of the Senate, as the Senate then existed, by the chancellor, and then it was reconstituted. I have a feeling there was one other stormy meeting in between, but when it was reconstituted, all of a sudden not everybody was in the Senate anymore.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Woody did this?

LASZLO HETENYI: Woody did that, yes. And I think there was a recognition on his part that you just could not go on this way. If you tried to go on this way, the whole enterprise would collapse.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So one might conclude then, that in a really tough spot, Woody would in fact take more responsibility and more authority than we usually thought he would.

LASZLO HETENYI: And I might add, that's when my admiration grew for him. It was one of those situations that just had to happen. Either that or give up the whole thing: resign, give up the whole thing and become what we used to think of as the regionals. But eventually all of this was "papered over" at any rate.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So subsequently then a curriculum got developed which could fit in with both some liberal arts and the professional requirements, and the other schools and the major. You still kept the educational credits at a minimum.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. There were eight credits for the foundation of psychological and philosophical, and the rest was student teaching, and one four-week methods course—period.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And that persisted for a long time, or still does?

LASZLO HETENYI: A long time. I think they've added some other things now, particularly in elementary education, but it created such ill feelings. In those days the faculty was small and when we had parties we tended to invite everybody. I can't remember how many it was but I know they fit into our house. And the wife of one of the faculty members berated my wife, "How could we invite so-and-so?" because so-and-so was on the "Les side" of the argument. Mary looked at her completely bewildered and said, "That would be an extra reason to invite him." But that's how emotional it got.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It was the beginning of a change in the institutional spirit, for whatever reason, which might have had to come sooner or later, because probably the curricular directions were incompatible with long-term survival.

LASZLO HETENYI: Long-term survival in that setting. Interestingly enough, when I was going around to schools as a representative of the teacher education program, I heard things about Oakland that made my hair stand on end. For example in certain schools, who shall remain nameless, advisors would never suggest Oakland as a possible option for their graduates. Teachers would say, “How am I supposed to work with this student teacher that you’re sending me? She knows her literature forwards, backwards, and sideways”—that is, the classical literature of English and American lit—“but she doesn’t know how to correct a spelling error.” And we were full of things like that: the lack of realism. Now I freely admit that as we adjusted more and more to reality, as we made more and more compromises, it sometimes made you cry. Then all of a sudden what we thought was so special about Oakland got to be less special.

Yet all in all as time passed, I think our students got a better education for it, because one of the things that they learned is that ideals may be wonderful, but they won’t feed you. There was one instance of a student which demonstrated that very clearly. I wish I could remember his name; he was in the charter class, a bright boy. One of the things he decided he would learn—and that was when the Cold War was going on—was, “I have learned how to say ‘I surrender’ in Russian. Now I have to learn how to do it in Chinese.” So there was also this very practical undertone among the students.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You obviously have a very unusual and special educational philosophy. Maybe you could just say a few words about that.

LASZLO HETENYI: I have to be careful not to pretend to do something that I am not doing. It took me the better part of a dissertation to say it half way well. For one thing, I’m not an absolutist, I detest absolutes. I have trouble seeing anything just in isolation, particularly in isolation from human beings. Without tossing too many philosophic terms around it’s that old story: “When

the tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound?" I argue it doesn't, and I won't go into why.

But therefore when you set up a curriculum in which you set up certain things as the tablets from the mount that you cannot alter, you cannot change, and they have no relevance to anything else, that doesn't sit too well with me. Now I can cope with it when I treat it as if it were so, if everybody around me treats it so, but I cannot accept it. I get to the point where, and as a scientist you may not buy that at all, but I have trouble stating as an absolute that the sun will always rise in the east. I know that this is pushing it very, very far and I push it that far only to maintain the logic of the discussion when I enter it.

But in a more practical sense, when you try to detach something from everything else—human needs, human wishes, human desires, consequences for human beings—when you try to detach that because there stands that wonderful absolute: I don't buy it. And unfortunately, I found that this general education program as we practiced it came perilously close to saying that. Now, if only somebody said, "Look, for this, this, and this reason, we should have foreign languages," now maybe I would disagree with the reasons, but now I would see some sense. But to simply say "It is a good"—I'm not a Platonist.

As a matter of fact, I find it very sad that our knowledge of Protagoras comes from his opponent, Plato. Protagoras' book was supposedly lost at sea. Now I'd like to speculate once in a while on: What would have happened if it had been his book that had been preserved, and not Plato's? Because his key phrase is "Man is the measure of all things—of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not." Now this is the kind of humanistic relativism that I can certainly subscribe to, and as you know there were times here, not that they don't exist now, where this sort of thinking was absolute heresy. I often wonder what if the two books, of which one was preserved and one wasn't, had been reversed? I don't think it would have made as much difference as one would like to think, because there of course was the other great movement called Christianity. And Protagoras would have been very difficult to reconcile with that, whereas Plato could be sort of "fitted in."

Now when you go back to Oakland, or MSUO as it was, I don't want to leave the impression that it was an all bitter experience: it wasn't. It was intellectually very stimulating. I remember, for example, that we had in the student union one room set aside for the faculty dining room, and there were

all kinds of interesting people sitting at the tables with highly divergent points of view, highly divergent philosophic positions. I'm trying to remember the name of that wonderful gentleman who came to us from Ford.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Ted Yntema.

LASZLO HETENYI: Ted Yntema. Now to have him at the table and get into the discussion, it could also be very funny, but it was very stimulating. And that sort of permeated everything. I sometimes suspect that with the exception of the gymnasium, which was my secondary education, very different from what you think of as secondary education, I probably learned more at Oakland and really more at these luncheon meetings than anywhere else. Certainly more than in the doctorate program as such, or the masters program as such, and so on. Above all, there were more challenges.

In other words, you could in schools, in colleges, bluff your way through a lot of things. At one of these luncheon meetings somebody would jump in with, "That's a heavy one, that's illogical, where do you get that?" I mean you'd have a Dave Beardslee, you'd have a Bill Hammerle; Dave Beardslee was a psychologist; Bill Hammerle was head of the engineering program though a physicist, I believe, by training. Then you'd have this man Ted Yntema who came from Ford Motor Company, where he was the one who hired [Robert] McNamara, that's how high up he was. You couldn't get away with that kind of behavior. And that I found incredibly stimulating and, in the best sense, educational. Now I wish we could have done more of that sort of thing, and not get constantly involved in territorial fights, in politics, in various economic considerations. But I guess that's the reality.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That's where we're getting into this conflict between the realism of the disciplines and the professional worlds, and the idealism of dialogue.

LASZLO HETENYI: You know that happens so often. I have at various times taught in or been connected with general education programs at several different institutions. And sooner or later the disciplinary prestige became more important than what you did for, and with, and to the students. More and more,

I won't say only "publish or perish" did that, but the whole perceived self-interest did that, and that is why it is so difficult to staff these programs.

I think even St. Johns had trouble with it. I don't know that first hand, you know the program I mean, the change in St. Johns' great books program. I have a feeling just from little remarks that I picked up here, there, and yon, that that fight continued there too. Maybe in a different way, maybe to a lesser extent, maybe because of Hutchins' enormous influence, it was "papered over." I can't tell that, but I think this is one of the things that I learned at Oakland. That as much as you would like to pursue a policy—a direction which you happen to approve of, and that's why you went there—sooner or later there are the little river rocks on the road, and you stub your toe. And unless you also think, "Okay, keep your eyes on the horizon but at the same time also keep them down on the path," unless you can do these two things, it's not going to work.

I think what happened at Oakland, that at first with all these fights and compromises and so on, almost in a dialectic sense, we really got somewhere. I attribute that to a considerable extent to a succession of academic leaders: Woody Varner in the first instance; Don O'Dowd who replaced him and eventually got the presidential title; George Matthews who started as charter faculty, and still I think planned one of the best courses that was planned in the general education program. Did you call it Western civilization?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Western Institutions and Social Ideas. It was a big difference to those folks.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes, of course. But it is—what shall we say, to us who are not specialists—it is what in some institutions is called a Western civ course. Then we went on however, and George of course became the interim president. I will not continue the discussion of these subsequent ones.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You also contributed in other ways. One [you had] mentioned is interests that you had in the institution other than just the teacher education program. Maybe you could give us an example of one of those things that you feel particularly proud about.

LASZLO HETENYI: It happened a little bit later, in a way. I already had become a dean, we had gotten away from this notion of having just one dean. I discovered as we were working with other departments, that a gentleman had been recruited. He was a very fine musician and with quite a career, who was utterly unaware of academic hierarchy and so on, and he accepted an appointment as assistant professor. Now as far as I'm concerned, this was one of those cases where he probably should have started out for the full professorship. His works were performed in the various festivals, such as the Spoleto Festival. I'm not sure whether they did it in Italy, but certainly here. He got commissioned works, he was played by major orchestras, and so on, and here he was a little ol' assistant professor. I thought that this was a terrible thing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But this is not a person in your area, this is a person in another department?

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, yes and no. Remember, I was committed to the notion that, in the disciplinary sense, the departments should do as much of that as possible. There should not be a special math course taught by somebody with a degree in education; it should be, if at all possible, somebody from the math department, which they were trying to shuck until finally scared out of it. But also I had been always interested in the arts generally, in music particularly, and it doesn't pertain here, but my last assignments at Oakland were in that field. So I was very upset about this.

The gentleman's name was Stanley Hollingsworth. He was first rate, absolutely first rate, and not addicted to contemporary music. He was a pupil of Samuel Barber at Curtis, superbly trained, constantly performed. I mean not that his works replace Beethoven's Fifth or something like that, but performed very frequently relatively speaking, as far as contemporary music is concerned—that always has to be the modifier. I was breaking my back to get him a more appropriate rank title than what he had, and eventually, unless I'm mistaken, he was jumped over associate and made full professor, which is where he should have come in in the first place.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, I think he's retired actually, but he was a full professor and he was a very modest fellow. So modest that you wouldn't know that he was so famous.

LASZLO HETENYI: I was so impressed by the guy that Mary and I commissioned a work by him; I still have it. He acknowledged the commission but at the same time, Barber had just died and so he wanted to know if it would be all right to get him in on the act, and I said, "Of course." But he was so modest—let me give you an illustration. Here's a man with an international reputation, and I asked him how much he would charge for a rather short but still a commissioned work, and he said, "A hundred dollars?" I just about fainted. So obviously I increased it. But that was one of my administrative successes. There was another one but I can't remember what it was.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So you actually lobbied with the other deans and the [provost].

LASZLO HETENYI: I lobbied with the other deans, lobbied with the provost a great deal, and that provost was a very understanding one. That's one of the things I'll say, the provosts that I worked with were first-rate people. The first one wasn't even called a provost, he was called dean of the faculty; he had some real problems. He [Robert Hoopes] was a superb scholar; did you ever read his book, *Right Reason in the English Renaissance*? A first-rate book, and I might say that it was so recognized that in the United States it was published by the Harvard Press, and in Britain it was published by Oxford. Now that's pretty good work.

He was also a good teacher. But he had all kinds of difficulties and one of the difficulties was that he was so empathetic that if somebody presented a halfway decent reason, he fell for it. It got to be so that the dean of arts and sciences, George Matthews, and I finally had a whole routine. We both knew it but neither one of us admitted it. When we were in the waiting room to see this gentleman, it was always a question of who could delay longer so he could be the last one to present his view. So he had this shortcoming. But he was a very empathetic individual, too much so—he had trouble saying no.

But the same as we had first-rate presidents, we had in my estimation a first-rate intellectual as dean of the faculty, though with his problem. Then after, that we had a provost who I thought was exactly the right mixture of practicality, toughness, and intellectual respectability, and that was Don O'Dowd, who later moved up into very high circles. After him Fred Obear, whom you no doubt knew because he was a junior faculty member in your department. So we had very good luck with that.

And that's one of the things that I take with me from the Oakland experience: the kind of people that I worked with, and the kind of people that I worked for. I remember, for example, the senior member of the foreign language department in German—eventually he was acting dean in fact for a while—Jack Moeller, a person I immensely respected, and I think rightly so.

These people and their ideas and the rubbing together of these different ideas, almost like little rocks in a creek, are something I've taken away from Oakland, which is why I'm still attached to it. I was very much attached to it, particularly after several of these initial, very painful things died down. You saw that in my home yesterday. I have a big thick book that my late wife put together of my retirement party; and where is it opened? It's opened to a page like that [gesturing: a double page], one of them is the president and his wife, Don O'Dowd, and the other one is Obear.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It sounds like you really cared about Oakland.

LASZLO HETENYI: Very much so. I have not cared that much about any of the institutions whence I graduated. I admired some of the individuals very much in it, but the whole gestalt of Oakland did an awful lot for me. I wish I could feel as confident that it has remained that way.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Les, it's been very good talking with you, and thank you very much.

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LASZLO HETENYI
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February 5, 1998

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