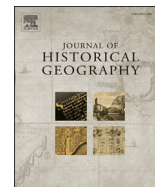




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## Obituary: Karl Wilhelm Butzer, 1934–2016

With the passing away of Karl Butzer on May 4, 2016 in Austin, Texas, after a short illness and in the company of his close circle of family, students, and colleagues, the geographic community lost one of its most accomplished members. While perhaps best known for his pioneering work in geoarchaeology, a term he coined, his contributions to cultural ecology, his advocacy of 'applied geomorphology', fieldwork at multiple sites on four continents, and his demonstration and devotion to an expansive historical geography all deserve to be not only remembered, but celebrated and emulated. Review of his record of self-identified interests and expertise over his sixty-year career, shows several constants with some minor shifts or variations. He lists geomorphology and archaeology from start to finish, adds cultural ecology and historical geography in the 1980s, and environmental history after 2000. Judging simply by these declarations of subdisciplinary engagement, one would have to conclude that he only developed his historical geographic interests in the second half of his career. However, a closer look at his publications and two extended autobiographical statements, reveal threads of historical geography throughout. He may not have been a guild member in good standing, in the sense of attending historical geography conferences, offering frequent courses in the subfield, or directing his research and publication within its more restricted precincts. Yet his historical geographic vision and virtuosity was, in fact, far grander. Reflecting on Carl Sauer's late career musings about the 'farther reaches of human time', Karl dove into the Pleistocene and dug deeply and incisively, extending the temporal horizons of human geography far back and beyond its conventional bounds. In his estimations and excavations, human geography was expanded to include not only *Homo sapiens*, but also their hominin relatives and the environments they altered over the past million years. His environmental (geo)historical approach to the study of ancient Egyptian and Axumite civilizations was equally creative as well as empirically grounded. The Medieval historical and archaeological studies he and his wife Elisabeth carried out in Spain, and the colonial historical studies they pursued in Mexico brought him close to the present — but not quite. It is probably safe to say that Karl (un)covered more ground and traversed greater time spans than any other historically oriented geographer.

He was not averse to sharing details of his own history and geography, although considered himself to be a fairly private person. I draw on his recollections and reflections on his early life and account of his professional life up to the mid 1980s.<sup>1</sup> These two

documents are quite candid in recounting adversities and insecurities that he encountered as an exile and immigrant. They are something of a counterpoint to his record of obvious, and some might say overwhelming, accomplishments. He was born August 19, 1934 at Mülheim an der Ruhr, in North Rhine-Westphalia close to the Dutch and Belgian borders. In this part of Germany, the inhabitants had remained adherents of Catholicism, and resisted the Prussianification unleashed by Otto von Bismarck after the unification as well as Nazification after 1933. Catholics were ostracized and marginalized after unification in the 1860s. Karl's extended family members were devout Catholics, as much by community solidarity as religious conviction. His father, Paul Anton Butzer (1893–1984), had to leave school at thirteen to seek work in a factory when his father died of industrial toxic exposure. The family had been prosperous farmers until losing their land to speculators and was then buffeted by the industrial revolution. Paul Butzer apprenticed as a machinist and took private lessons to learn English and French. Drafted in WWI, he contracted typhoid on the Eastern Front. This ended his military service, and he returned to his trade, eventually earning an engineering degree at night and with a leave from the steel mill. At the Technical University of Aachen, he met Karl's mother, Wilhelmine Hansen (1902–1986), the first female mathematics student at the university. She spoke fluent English and French but had a strong patriotic streak and an abiding respect for German culture. Karl's father, on the other hand, was less than sanguine about German nationalism and a steadfast supporter of Rhenish regionalism and local traditions. Karl inherited his mathematical talents from his mother and his broader interests, including archaeology and anthropology from his father. His father once confided that in another life he would have become an archaeologist and followed in the footsteps of Heinrich Schliemann, excavating in Egypt or Greece. Whether conscious or not, Karl paid tribute to both his parents' enthusiasms. His first degree was in mathematics, and much of his career was devoted to archaeology in the lands his father had fantasized about.

At a very young age Karl received lessons in the perils and privations of an increasing portion of the modern world's population — political oppression, illegal migration, internment, and ethnic persecution and prejudice. By 1934 it was clear that as Catholic non-conformists resisting Nazification, the family was in an increasingly precarious position. Fortunately, Paul Butzer had convinced two close Jewish co-workers and friends, both engineers at the Thyssen steelworks, to emigrate to England in 1935. They established their own firm in London and, later, a subsidiary in Canada. By 1937 the future seemed clear — it would be catastrophic to remain in Germany, but by then it was illegal to leave. Paul Butzer resigned his position and arranged a fictive job with an uncle in Aachen. This

<sup>1</sup> K.W. Butzer, Center, periphery, and back, in: P. Gould and F.R. Pitts (Eds), *Geographical Voices: Fourteen Autobiographical Essays*, Syracuse, 2001, 52–80; Coming full circle: learning from the experience of emigration and ethnic prejudice, in: P. Suedfeld (Ed), *Light from Ashes: Social Science Careers of Young Holocaust Refugees and Survivors*, Ann Arbor, 2001, 361–398.

provided cover for him and the family to move to that city near the border with Belgium and the Netherlands. From there he got permission to go on a sham business trip over the Dutch border and, once there, managed to contact his Jewish friends in London to wire him money and a job offer. The family essentially went underground, protected by nuns, and later made it to London in August of 1937. The stress did not end there, however. As Germans, they were under suspicion and officially interned after the war started September 1939. They were rounded up and placed under detention, shifting from one dirty and disagreeable urban location to another until finally placed in a camp on the Isle of Man. They stayed in resort cottages, it being the off-season. Once again their Jewish friends intervened and arranged for Paul to be transferred to their Montreal firm at the end of 1940. The family followed, and on January 24, 1941 they landed at St. John, New Brunswick, before traveling on to Montreal by train through the snowdrifts. For years thereafter, the family annually celebrated January 24. Moving down the social ladder, they settled in a neighborhood of working class self-identified 'Irish' and 'Scots'. They were at once viewed with suspicion, if not ostracized. Luckily there were German-speaking, Jewish refugees from Central Europe among the employees at the engineering firm, so there was at least workplace conviviality. At school, however, Karl found little solace and considerable malice. His grades suffered, and he eventually learned to box; once he had demonstrated his self-defense skills, his tormentors backed off. Summer vacations were a tonic. In 1942 the family spent several weeks vacationing at a tourist motel outside the city. There, Karl met Quebecois children who treated him as an equal. He began to learn French. The next two summers were spent in a cottage at Fourteen Island Lake, Quebec. Thankfully he was out of school, where his efforts were still desultory, and his neighborhood and completely into nature. The Butzers bonded with several of the French Canadian families and formed a tight knit group of non-Anglophones. They communed with these families for many summers thereafter. He began to read for fun, and Richard Halliburton's *Complete Book of Marvels* was among his favorite books. It introduced him to faraway peoples and places.<sup>2</sup>



Karl Butzer in northern Mexico in 1988 during a field trip with faculty members and students from the University of Texas at Austin. Reproduced by permission of Gregory Knapp.

By middle school, Karl's grades and his attitude had begun to improve, and while he continued to suffer ethnic harassment, he began to go on the offensive, both with fists and verbal retorts. Outside of school he began to read voraciously. He discovered historical fiction of the American West and was entranced by Zane Grey's depictions of southwestern landscapes. He read almost all of Grey's some fifty books. Karl also treasured two German atlases that his maternal uncle, who had been killed at Verdun, left his mother, and he became devoted to his family's 1890s German encyclopedia set. He was especially intrigued by the nineteenth century Near East and Africa. The encyclopedia was printed in Gothic typeface, but with his father's help he mastered that script, opening up a vast new array of exotic places to visit and historical details to absorb. Being able to read the old typeface proved crucial for some of his later historical research. By high school, with the war receding in people's memories and concerns, and his family's fortunes improving after moving to an English Canadian middle class neighborhood, he became more comfortable with his surroundings and began to set his sights on higher education.

He entered McGill University in the fall of 1950, having just turned 17. He elected to major in mathematics, following his mother's path, with a concentration in the physical sciences. He spent much of the summer between his junior and senior year reading Arnold Toynbee's multivolume *Study of History*.<sup>3</sup> This opened his eyes to possibilities of macrohistory. Having to take an elective his senior year, he chose geography. Within weeks, he realized this had been what he had been spending his spare time doing and reading since his earliest school years. The co-teachers were Theo Hills, working on South American savannas, and Hugh Thompson, a specialist on subarctic glaciers. He wrote his term paper on African savannas, an environment he wanted to see first hand. McGill's graduate geography program in meteorology and geography seemed a ticket to this destination. When he informed his parents that he was going to become a geographer, they were appalled, wondering if geography was really a legitimate discipline. They eventually acquiesced, although not entirely persuaded. He spent the summer after graduation traveling in Europe, the first time back in his native Germany, and then down to Spain, Italy, Austria, and back to southern Germany. He was able to finally see first hand what he had been reading about through his school and undergraduate years. The ship he took to Germany was a small freighter. He received a crash course in nautical meteorology from the crew. Thus primed, he entered McGill's master's program under the supervision of Ken Hare, process climatologist with interests in boreal and subarctic environments. For his thesis topic, Butzer opted for his long-term interest in the Near East, and did a study of climate change in relation to the movement of nomadic populations.<sup>4</sup> To stay at McGill would have meant working on a boreal or subarctic physical geographic topic, which did not really interest him. His previous summer's excursion in Spain had whetted his appetite for exploring quite different environments, especially arid ones. Sauer's geography program at the University of California at Berkeley seemed the obvious choice for doctoral work, and Sauer was keen to have Karl come, but an opportunity arose to study with Carl Troll at the University of Bonn on a German exchange scholarship and that sealed it: Troll, Bonn, and Germany.

Butzer, back in Germany, hit the ground not just running, but liberated. He found 1950s Europe exhilarating, with its relatively open minds and borders after the severe constrictions of economic

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 volumes, Oxford, 1934–1961.

<sup>4</sup> K.W. Butzer. Some aspects of postglacial climatic variation in the Near East considered in relation to movements of population, unpublished MSc thesis, McGill University, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> R. Halliburton, *Complete Book of Marvels*, New York, 1937.

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