Spotlight on AYA Salzburg Resident Director: Dr. Manfred Mittermayer
Dr. Christina Guenther’s Interview with Dr. Manfred Mittermayer, May 2019

In late May 2019, Christina Guenther met with Manfred Mittermayer for an interview. Here is the interview in its entirety.

Christina Guenther: Thank you for agreeing to this interview! Let me launch this discussion with a very personal question. You have such a range of interests that include music and art history. What prompted you to study Germanistik and Anglistik at the University of Salzburg?

Manfred Mittermayer: My father was a secondary-school teacher, so it was almost a matter of course that I would follow in his footsteps. I played piano and had planned to study music as my primary subject and Germanistik as my secondary subject. Unfortunately, a year before my entrance exam, I developed tendonitis in my left hand and could not continue playing piano. That narrowed my options, so I chose Germanistik as my primary field or major. I had already been an avid reader as a child. In fact, I remember how in my enthusiasm for one of my favorite authors, Erich Kästner, I wrote him a long letter. I was delighted that he responded to my letter with a kind, even if short, reply. That had quite an impact on me. As I grew older, I was fascinated by Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett and contemporary authors, such as Peter Handke. I considered studying at the University of Graz for a time, but then decided on the University of Salzburg because of its reputation and Professor Walter Weiss, who helped establish one of the most innovative and exciting programs in modern German Germanistik there.

English literary studies became my second field of specialization. I was drawn to English by the exciting literature that I discovered early during my studies. I can remember being enthusiastic about the English poet Philip Larkin and Virginia Woolf, among many others.

Guenther: As student (and then instructor of German-as-a-second-language at the University of Salzburg), you had early contact with exchange students from all over the world. Did you also have a chance to study abroad during your studies at the University of Salzburg?

Mittermayer: I was always fascinated by the international students at the University of Salzburg, especially since we had contact with them in the dorms. Looking back, I realize that while there were exchange programs at the University of Salzburg, with Bowling Green State University, for instance, it was not really something on my radar. English was my minor, and going abroad was simply not as popular or prevalent in those days. In the end, I arranged and financed my stays abroad in England myself during my summer holidays. I enjoyed them immensely and am, to this day, an Anglophile.

Guenther: What kind of an image or impression did you have of the United States when you began studying at the Institut für Anglistik/Amerikanistik in Salzburg. To what extent has your contact with American students in your courses influenced your impressions of the U.S.?
**Mittermayer:** Growing up in Austria of the 1960s and 1970s, I was introduced to the U.S. via films, documentaries, novels, and popular culture in general. I was curious about this country about which I had read so much. At university, I got to know “real” Americans. In the summer of 1986, I began teaching in the *Internationale Ferienkurse* under the direction of Professor Adolf Haslinger and got to know the American students rather well. My most intense contact came through the Bowling Green Exchange Program at the University of Salzburg. In fact, I had the opportunity to visit Bowling Green for the first time in 1995 when I was invited to hold a lecture on Thomas Bernhard there. Together with my wife, we combined the visit with a longer tour of the United States that included the New England States and the Midwest. I remember being impressed by the architecture in New York and in Chicago, by the small towns, the varied landscapes, and the atmosphere in general. The Americans are very friendly. It has been a pleasure to have been invited back several times to Bowling Green State University for presentations and workshops, most recently, as keynote speaker at the Austrian Studies Association Conference 2019.

**Guenther:** Aside from your trips to Bowling Green, what aspects of your association with the BGSU Program have been most interesting or satisfying for you? Do you have favorite memories or encounters with BGSU students or faculty?

**Mittermayer:** I truly enjoyed the survey courses that I taught for BGSU’s graduate students in Salzburg for over 20 years. Actually, I preferred those courses to the usual spate of courses that I teach regularly at the University of Salzburg because they allowed me to engage in a broader perspective and integrate music history, architecture, history, the visual arts, and, of course, literary studies. I often had curious and excellent students, too, which was a pleasure. I’m still in touch with a few of my former students.

I also thoroughly enjoyed helping plan and taking part in the larger BGSU excursions—to Vienna and to Berlin. I enjoyed introducing students to parts of Germany, such as Weimar or Bamberg, to name two towns that I like a lot.

**Guenther:** You have been at the University of Salzburg since the late 1970s. The university and student life have changed significantly since then. What changes do you think are most significant?

**Mittermayer:** From my personal vantage point, two things have changed the most: Living in Salzburg was very expensive for us students from other parts of Austria, and we had no money for travel. So, we spent far more time in Salzburg than Austrian students do these days. That meant that we spent weekends with one another. During the 70s and 80s we spent many an evening talking politics. I’m not sure that this is still the case these days. My feeling is that many students head home after their last classes on Thursday evening, which is too bad if it means, as I suspect, that they no longer engage in what I think is an important aspect of university life: critical intellectual discussions outside of the classroom.

I also notice that the university programs are becoming highly regulated. In some ways, they have developed into extensions of the high-school system where the trajectory of each student is set in advance. There is very little wriggle-room, so to speak. The independence that I so
enjoyed in choosing my courses and exploring subjects that simply interested me seems to have diminished significantly, which is too bad.

**Guenther**: You have served as Director of the Literary Archive at the University of Salzburg for a number of years now. Would you describe your work there?

**Mittermayer**: The University of Salzburg’s literary archive is relatively new. It was established in the academic year 2011-2012, and I was named director in April 2012. Stefan Zweig’s literary estate and Peter Handke’s work constitute the main focus of the collection. We work alongside the Salzburg Stefan Zweig Archive to strengthen Zweig’s legacy, and this includes a close cooperation with the Daniel A. Reed Library at SUNY-Fredonia and the National Library of Israel. A major aspect of our work is digitizing our Zweig holdings in order to allow international researchers ready access to his writings.

The archive also supports the literary scene in Salzburg and the region. Thus, in 2013 I became one of the two artistic directors of the annual *Rauriser Literaturtage*, the major literary festival in the state of Salzburg held each year in the town of Rauris. I see our job at the archive as one that involves preserving literary works and in providing access to literature and literary life in general to as many people as possible. One way, in which I have worked as mediator of literature is as discussion leader at workshops and literary events. I have also mounted and curated a number of literary exhibits, something that I thoroughly enjoy doing, especially when the exhibits resonate with the public. I was invited to mount and introduce my 2001 literary exhibit on Thomas Bernhard, for instance, in several European countries and even in Brazil. I have since co-organized and curated a number of Bernhard exhibits and am quite proud of my Handke and Wedekind exhibits (in Salzburg and Munich).

**Guenther**: The BGSU Program has benefited from your expertise for many decades now. You have offered our students courses and advice. More recently, you provided internships at the University of Salzburg’s Literary Archive that some of our students have engaged in. Can you comment on those?

**Mittermayer**: Yes, we are always happy to accommodate students who are interested in completing an internship with us. We have very many manuscripts and materials that need to be carefully vetted and catalogued. We welcome the help of interns in that area in particular. We’ve been lucky to have had very good students. Interns have confirmed, too, that they garnered valuable work experience with us and gained insights about the literary worlds that have led them beyond their literary seminars at university.

**Guenther**: You have been very active in literary and film studies for a long time now. What role do you see the field of literary studies playing here in Austria in the future?

**Mittermayer**: It is my hope that literary studies will continue to play an important role in education and in the cultural life of our society. Literary studies and the humanities allow us to move beyond rigid systems, tap into our imagination as we experiment with different scenarios and perspectives, and confront the conundrums and ambiguities that challenge us. The
humanities encourage thinking outside the proverbial box; they provide spaces for divergent opinions and promote critical thinking. Not everything is limited to a utilitarian mindset or the laws of the market. We will always need stories; we need to relate them, and we need to stay curious about one another’s stories.

**Guenther**: One final question: what stories, what fiction and/or films have moved you lately. I know that you could probably reel off a long list, of course. But what novels or films that you read in the last month or so did you find particularly compelling and would you recommend to our alumni and students?

**Mittermayer**: Where to start! Well, off the cuff, I’d recommend *Wie kommt der Krieg ins Kind* by Susanne Fritz (Wallstein, 2018), Daniel Wisser’s *Königin der Berge* (Jung und Jung, 2018), and Natascha Wodin’s *Sie kam aus Mariupol* (Rowohlt, 2017). Three recent films that come to mind are Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Cold War*, Yorgos Lanthimos’ *The Favourite* and Koreeda Hirokazu’s *Shoplifters* (all 2018).

**Guenther**: Thank you very much for your time and your candor! As always, it was a pleasure chatting with you.