

*Jaroslav Prosek*  
German III, IIIX  
French IV, IVX



## **MY PERSONAL THOUGHTS AND MEMORIES OF MY FRIEND, JERRY PROSEK**

**Kent Porter, August 9th, 2011**

Jerry (Jarolsav) Prosek died in Roseville on Tuesday, August 2, 2011 at the age of 84. Jerry was not only my teacher of French at Saratoga High School for three years, but he was a mentor, colleague, family friend and personal friend for over 45 years.

I first remember meeting Jerry well before I got to Saratoga High. My mother was Vernon Trimble's (the Principal's) secretary, and Jerry was my sister Susie's teacher of French. He invited our family over to dinner several times at his home in Los Gatos before I was in high school. I remember that he was flamboyant and colorful, he had opinions on lots of subjects, he had an interesting background, and he was in to gardening. I recall that his family served us wonderful pies made from the apricots that they had grown in their garden behind their house.

When I arrived at Saratoga High on the first day of my Freshman year in 1967, I was late to his French One class. The band teacher Bill Trimble had kept us beyond the bell. Of course, I caught it from Jerry. He barked a joke about my name, "Porter! Report to class on time!" I learned right away that you had to pay attention in his class, follow his rules, and do the homework. Jerry's bigger-than-life demeanor seemed to solicit a variety of reactions or responses from his students, but, because I had known him before getting to high school, I knew that

under that crusty exterior was a great guy, a superb teacher, and one who cared about his students and their futures.

Throughout his life, Jerry was one whom the French would call “engagé”, engaged in life. He had a very colorful past, and he told many stories about his experiences before becoming a teacher. In the early 1940s, having been raised in Prague in the former Czechoslovakia, Jerry was drafted against his will at the age of 15 into the German Army. Shortly thereafter, towards the end of WWII, he deserted and fled back to his family in Prague.

After the war, when the former Soviet Union began to rule his country with an iron fist while using puppet Czech leaders, Jerry plotted his escape. He planned to leave his homeland for over a year without telling anyone in his family. He knew that if they became aware of his efforts, the security police would imprison, torture, and perhaps kill his parents and siblings. He somehow acquired a pistol and made his way toward the Austrian border. At the frontier, he watched the border guards pacing back and forth. He told me many times how he counted the seconds that it would take them to turn around so that he could figure out whether or not he could cross in time. He considered firing on one of the guards to allow his escape, but didn't have the heart to take an innocent person's life who was just serving as a pawn for the Soviets. After an initial failure to cross because it was too dark, and upon finding himself back in his own county the next day after a mistake in direction, he made it into Austria the following night.

In Austria, he was turned over to the British and American authorities and eventually was allowed to go to London. In England, they put him to work in a hotel kitchen. After a period of time, he made his way to the United States by agreeing to join the U.S. Air Force. After a stint in Chicago, Jerry was sent to March Air Force Base in California, where he ran the Officer's Club. When he was honorably discharged from the Armed Services, Jerry got his Bachelor's degree from San Jose State and his Master's degree from U.C. Berkeley in foreign languages.

Once he was employed at Saratoga High School in 1962, Jerry taught both French and German. He was fluent in four languages--Czech, German, French, and English--and also knew some Russian. At Saratoga, he started a German Club and

began offering all kinds of field trips to his students--San Francisco, Tahoe, etc.. During his first sabbatical year spent in Europe in 1968, he witnessed firsthand (at great personal danger to himself because he was an escapee) the Soviet tanks rolling into Prague. While in Germany that same year, he connected with a teacher of English in Munich. The two teachers together decided to start a home-to-home exchange program for their students during the summers. Saratoga High students would spend 4-5 weeks in June and July in Munich with their German counterparts, then the two groups would return to Santa Clara County for the month of August.

I was hired as the teacher of French at Ukiah High School in Mendocino County in the fall of 1976. During my second year in Ukiah (in 1977-78), Jerry contacted me while he was on another sabbatical. This time, he was in Strasbourg, France. He asked me to be a chaperone that year for a new summer exchange program that he had just set up with a teacher at the Lycée Kléber in Strasbourg. I jumped at the chance, and that summer I accompanied 16 of Jerry's students on the trip. That trip in 1978 sparked a friendship with a person who was my French counterpart, a teacher of English at the Lycée Kléber. He and his family remain my closest friends in France, and I hope to keep that strong bond with them for the rest of my life. I have Jerry to thank for having put us together as chaperones on that first group.

Our joint exchange program took off. The next year, I took a mixed group from Saratoga and Ukiah High School. Jerry was the organizer back in the States, and I was the guy to go with the students. It was a wonderful working arrangement that we repeated for quite a few summers during the 1980s, perhaps five. I well remember the great series of trips that we set up for the exchange---a week in Paris with the Americans, a hiking trip in the Ardèche River Valley during the summer that we went to Provence, the three to four week home stays, trips for both French and Americans during the month of August to camp for a week in Yosemite, day trips to San Francisco, the General Motors plant, and Carmel. Jerry's organizational skills were in full swing on those trips, and I learned a lot by working with him. I have done many similar trips with my own students since.

In one of his final acts, Jerry demonstrated once again his life-long devotion to students and former students. Jerry had been invited to attend the 1964 reunion

of graduates from Saratoga High. At a lunch I had with him in June in Roseville, he told me that he was worried that he wouldn't remember all of the graduates that might attend the event. Just three days before his death, Jerry drove by himself from his home in Roseville to Sunnyvale, where he met up with a friend of his. He came up to my mother's home with his friend to borrow my sister's yearbook for a few hours before the reunion at La Rinconada Country Club so he could study the names and the pictures.

I know that I have Jerry to thank for the influence that he had on me. I will miss his bellowing laughter, his "hooray", "shows to go you", "holy suffering", "you bet you" exclamations, his never understanding even after I corrected him many times that my name is really pronounced "Kent" and not "Ken", but most of all, his fundamental goodness as a human being.