

The 1996 Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award



Gerhard Sandner

It is a pleasure and a great honor to present **Gerhard Sandner** with the Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award for 1996. For me he represents both a mentor and a friend, and my own work as a geographer has been immensely enriched by having read his works, studied with him and known him personally. What follows is a modest attempt to encapsulate one of the most dynamic and unorthodox geographers of his generation. As he himself puts it, Sandner still lives his life at "full speed ahead," continually writing, travelling, discussing, debating, rebutting, teaching and sharing his endless curiosity and keen insight with those who are lucky to be near him. He still has many more surprises in store for us, no doubt!

Perhaps one of the most remarkable features of Gerhard Sandner as a scholar is that he managed to forge himself a reputation as a peerless authority both in the regional geography of Central America and the Caribbean and in the history of German geography. This quality has been reflected in the positions he held over the years: Chairman of the Iberoamerican Studies Institute of Hamburg (1969-1980), President of the German Geographers Association (1977-1979) and as the main editor of the review *Geographische Zeitschrift* for over twenty years (1973-1994)! His publications record is as impressive with 13 books (two co-authored) and 92 articles, not including reprints and additional publications in other languages. This provides us with an approximation to the life and works of Sandner, as one of the most remarkable and prolific geographers of our time.

Numbers, however, are a poor lens through which to appreciate Gerhard Sandner. To understand his personality and therefore what has been the meaning behind his work, it is necessary to go back to his past. Son of a German Protestant pastor, Gerhard was born in Keetmanshoop, Namibia, in 1929. After a brief return to Germany, his family fled the incipient Nazi regime in the mid-thirties to settle in Guatemala as Protestant missionaries. There, for five of his childhood years, Gerhard Sandner grew up in Guatemala, a fact that marked him and his work. With World War II raging in Europe and in the Caribbean, Guatemala declared war on Germany in 1942, and as a result many German nationals living in Guatemala were rounded up and their properties confiscated. Sander's father was sent to retention camps in the U. S. and he, his mother and siblings were sent back to Germany in a nightmarish odyssey. They were shipped to Trinidad and Tobago, along [end p. 151] with other German captives, and their ship was placed in the midst of an oil shipment convoy en route to Europe. This was 1943, at the height of the U-boat war between Germany and the Allied forces in the Caribbean. For some miraculous reason, their ship broke away from the convoy in the mid-Atlantic and headed for Lisbon, the convoy, it turned out, was sunk before reaching Europe ...

Sandner and his mother and sisters crossed a war-torn Europe to arrive in Berlin during the blitzkrieg. This dramatic episode marked him for the rest of his life, and fifty years later (1993) he published an article on the submarine war in the Caribbean, as the result of extensive research in military archives and private collections, in which he reconstructed the theater of operations which he had crossed five decades earlier. By 1945, Sandner was a full grown teenager and had to fend for his life like so many others in post-war Germany. His family settled in Pomerania and he finished his high school degree in Einbeck in 1949. Admitted at the Philipps University in Marburg, he chose to study zoology because, as he puts it: "at least there was food available after dissections." Gerhard went on to conclude his doctorate in geography and biology in 1955, with emphasis in geomorphology. Some of his earlier publications are essentially oriented to geomorphology and surface mapping.

As part of his "habilitation" at the University of Kiel (1961), Sandner was required to conduct field work in a specific region or country. This led him to Central America, where he arrived for the first time in Costa Rica in 1957. For the following 30 years, Gerhard Sandner traveled regularly (26 visits) to Central America and the Caribbean, conducting numerous applied research projects. As a field geographer at heart, he covered a lot of ground, traveling Costa Rica on foot, by mule and horse, by bus and boat and he shot some of the first aerial photographs for the Instituto Geográfico Nacional through acrobatic feats on small planes. His pioneer studies on the dynamics of agricultural colonization, the settlement geography and the regional development of Costa Rica are still considered classics to this day. He documented events, mapped processes and discussed issues that no one had considered before him. He also had the enormous merit of publishing his results in Spanish, thus providing Central American students with valuable material on which to build for years to come. His study of the regional geography of Central America, and his work influenced many after him, including classics such as West and Augelli's *Middle America* (1966). After completing his professorship at Kiel, Sandner moved on to the University of Hamburg in April 1965, and remained there until he retired (as Professor Emeritus) in 1994.

The sheer breadth and depth of his work on Central America, the Caribbean and Latin America in general is reflected in his publications record with nine books and over 50 articles on the region. If one considers the evolution of his work, the scope has moved from classic regional monographs and local studies in the early 1960s, to more conceptual and applied works in regional planning and development throughout the 1970s and by the 1980s his interests shifted to themes of political geography and geopolitics, particularly in Caribbean and European contexts. The mid-1980s saw the culmination of Sander's life-long passion for Central America and Caribbean with publication of what can be considered as his magnum opus: *Zentralamerika und der Feme Karibische Westen. Konjunkturen, Krisen und Konflikte 1504-1984*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985, 409 pp. [*Central America and the Far Western Caribbean. Economic circumstances, Crises and Conflicts, 1504-1984*] This book covers the history and geography of Central America and the Western Caribbean over almost 500 years, and constitutes a remarkable tribute to Sandner's unique capacity for synthesis and creating new knowledge. It also crowned over thirty year of relentless research and writing on Central America and its Caribbean rimland. It combines the virtues of a regional monograph while drafting an extraordinary synopsis of change and continuity in the geopolitical interests that have marked and partitioned this peripheral region. Sandner has been equally prolific in the 1990s with a book and over 16 articles published to date, mostly on topics of geopolitics, maritime boundaries and German geography. Sandner has taken on some of the most controversial issues in German geography (such as nationalism, imperialism, racism and anti-Semitism), and has vehemently resisted current tendencies to misuse geography in the forging of national identity since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. He constitutes an institution in and of himself, and while many colleagues of his generation have retired into the background, Sandner still holds the foreground of the academic debate on **[end p. 152]** the history of German geography today. Although his position at University of Hamburg has been taken up by new talents, such as Jürgen Ossebrügge, Sandner's steadfast stance in national and international debates concerning political geography will continue to inspire generations of geographers to come.

But yet again, Gerhard Sandner cannot be exclusively understood as an academic powerhouse, for his most redeeming qualities can be found at the human scale. Behind Sandner the towering academic, we find an extraordinarily humble and wholesome person. Unlike so many European academics, who use their status to shun and shine, Sandner is one of the most accessible, modest and endearing persons to be found. Father of two daughters, recently promoted to the rank of grandfather, Sandner has managed to combine an extremely busy and demanding profession with a rich personal life. We had the honor of having Gerhard as visiting professor at the University of Costa Rica in the fall of 1995, when he demonstrated to us once again his virtues of rigor, friendliness and generosity. Practically 40 years after he first set foot in Costa Rica, he came back to share with us his memories, his field notes, his insights and ideas. He visited old friends and campesino families which had housed him in the 1950s and 60s during his field work. In Mercedes Cajón, a small village in the central valley of Costa Rica, Sandner has systematically mapped the changes in land use and property configuration since the 1950s. In every visit to Costa Rica, Sandner took the time to visit the village talk to the locals and thus reconstruct at a micro-scale the evolution of this rural habitat over time. His incursions into the sober realms of geopolitics have not weakened his interest in the vernacular. This is an illustration of Sandner's unique human qualities: modesty, curiosity and perseverance. Gerhard Sandner remains an inspiration to us all, and his life and work well deserve the recognition bestowed upon him by CLAG. Felicidades Gerardo!

Pascal O. Giro[end p. 153]