

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Kathi Vieser Bianco*
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Martin Menke wants to show today's students how to learn more about tomorrow by studying yesterday.



Photo by Arthur Durity

Ask the average high-school student to talk about his or her social studies class and you're likely to be met with grimaces, rolled eyes and words like "boring" and "useless." Seemingly obscure facts, dates and people from decades or centuries ago can drive even the most motivated young scholars away from studying the past. As a high-school student, Martin Menke avoided the Weimar period of early 20th-century Germany. "It was too confusing," he says. "There were so many political parties, and high finance—reparations, inflation and depression—played such an important role." Fast forward 20 years and you'll find Menke, associate professor of history, law, and political science, building a successful academic career as an expert on the very subject he once eschewed.

Born and raised in Berlin by a German mother and American father, both teachers, Menke developed an interest in his own history at a young age, cultivated in part by family stories of life in Germany during the years preceding World War II. He came to the U.S. at 19 to attend Tufts University, then entered graduate school at Boston College, where his study of political Catholicism piqued a new interest in the Weimar years. After an initial flirtation with teaching secondary school social studies, Menke ultimately decided on higher education. “I like research, I like working with college-age students,” he says. “I also like the freedom to develop my own curriculum.”



Photo by Arthur Durity

“I think the best career advice I ever received was to stay alive as a scholar and learner; that to be a legitimate teacher, you have to remain an active scholar.”

At Rivier, Menke has combined a productive scholarly life with a mission to change his students’ sometimes negative view of history. “A good number of our students dislike history when they come to Rivier, so we need to graduate more social studies teachers who will enthuse their students.” As coordinator of both the bachelor’s and master’s programs in social studies education, Menke sees truth in the cliché about high-school students only learning dates and facts, and seeks to bring the past to life for his students by putting historical events in the context of their lives today. “Tariffs and cotton prices in antebellum America can be dreadfully dull, but when you see that America’s participation in the world economy made the South even more dependent on factors beyond its own control, the whole matter becomes more interesting. [Then] when you ask students whether or not jobs should stay in America, even if that means their clothes and computers become much more expensive, it’s relevant.”

Menke has also lent his expertise to a New Hampshire state committee charged with revising the guidelines for the K-12 social studies curriculum. These guidelines have been approved by the state board of education and are awaiting statewide adoption. “It’s been interesting to work with teachers and experts in other social studies-related fields to think about, given the little time there is for our field, what students really need to know about and what social studies skills are most important.” In addition, he has led lectures for the New Hampshire Humanities Council on the role of religion in Middle Eastern

politics, and is currently assisting the NHH staff in the development of teacher education activities related to the teaching of religion in the public schools.

As his most recent article, “‘Thy Will Be Done’: Nationalism and Faith in German Catholicism,” goes to press in the spring 2005 issue of the *Catholic Historical Review*, Menke continues his research with plans toward writing a book in the coming years. He will travel to Germany this summer to spend time examining the archives of the East German government, which are now housed in the same former U.S. Army barracks in Berlin where he attended mass as a child. And he will have some new traveling companions with whom to share the sights and sounds of his former homeland: his three children.

Menke and his wife, Angela—a middle-school Spanish and Italian teacher who recently earned her school administrator’s certification at Rivier—are the parents of Sophia, age 4, and 2-year-old twins Matthias and Christina. “Before I had children, I traveled to Germany once a year,” he says. “Now that I have to pay for five tickets, we won’t be going as often.” He is, however, passing on some of his heritage to his children by speaking to them in German as often as possible. “It’s hard when all the local media to which they are exposed, their friends and local relatives speak English. Growing up, it was much easier for me [to be bilingual] since there was such a strong American presence in Berlin.”

While his young family has naturally become his first priority, Menke remains firmly committed to teaching and continuing his research. “I think the best career advice I ever received was to stay alive as a scholar and learner; that to be a legitimate teacher, you have to remain an active scholar.” As the child of educators, the husband of an educator and an educator himself, Menke is now modeling that philosophy to the next generation of educators—the students in his classrooms and, perhaps, the children in his living room in Nashua. ■

* **KATHI VIESER BIANCO** is a freelance writer from Long Island, New York, specializing in higher education and consumer marketing. The winner of multiple awards for both nonfiction and fiction writing, she holds a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University and master's degrees from New York Institute of Technology and the City University of New York-Queens College.