



Finding Frederick “Fritz” Kittel: Interview with Johannes Feest

By Christopher B. Bell & Ladrica Menson-Furr

August Wilson Journal Editors

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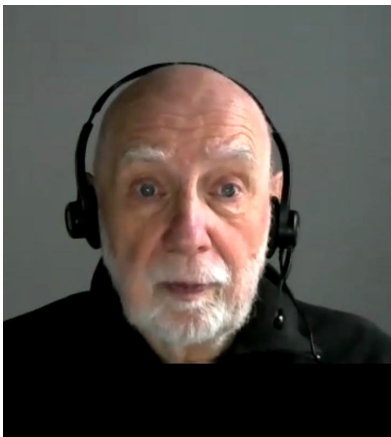
-Johannes Feest

Abstract

August Wilson Journal editors Christopher B. Bell and Ladrica Menson-Furr interviewed Johannes Feest via Zoom about his research into August Wilson’s father Frederick “Fritz” Kittel. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Keywords

Interview, History, Kittel, Frederick “Fritz” Kittel, August Wilson Journal



Johannes Feest

AWJ: Our understanding is that August Wilson is not well known in Germany. How did you come to learn about him?

JF: I came to Pittsburgh in 2012 to help care for my granddaughter. My daughter was in Pittsburgh earning her Ph.D. and she needed a babysitter for a while. But the baby was in daycare most of the time anyway, so I was looking around for what to do. I learned that the University of Pittsburgh has a nice program for seniors, so I signed up for the one thing that had to do with Pittsburgh, which was Dr. Laurence Glasco’s class on August Wilson and Pittsburgh. In his very first lecture he mentioned that Wilson’s father, Frederick “Fritz” Kittel was supposed to be a Sudeten German. And my

father was Sudeten German. So, I immediately walked up to him and asked to learn more about that. But Dr. Glasco didn’t know much more. So, I used the next two months I had in Pittsburgh to research this question. Also, during my last two days in the United States I went to Ohio and met relatives of August Wilson living there today. So, this is how I learned about and gathered research about Frederick “Fritz” Kittel, August Wilson’s father. When I returned

home to Germany in the summer of 2012 I went to northern bohemia, which is now the Czech Republic. I then found some of the descendants of Fred Kittel living there today.

AWJ: In your research, you have uncovered that Fritz Kittel has mistakenly been labeled Sudeten German and that it is more accurate to label him an “Austrian” or “Bohemian” German. Can you explain the differences between these designations?

JF: You have to realize that at the time Fritz Kittel was born, this was old Habsburg, Austria. The Kittels lived in the northernmost part of the Austrian empire. Since the mountains of this area are called Sudeten, at some point in the twentieth century people began to call these people Sudeten German. Even before the first World War, German nationalists tried to make a political issue of labeling these individuals as German, even though they were actually Austrian. Hitler picked that up later on. Finally, Italy invaded Czechoslovakia and they were suddenly German nationals. The Kittel family all lived in this area. Meanwhile, Fritz Kittel and his brothers had already immigrated to the United States, and they were received there as Austrians. Therefore, the label Sudeten German is a rather strange one because German nationalists labeled everyone in Czechoslovakia Sudeten German, even those, like my father, who had never lived near those mountains. In fact, “Sudeten German” is a tainted term, which is why I prefer to refer to these people as “Austrians” or “Bohemians” or, even better, as “Bohemian Austrian.” This is all confusing even for Austrians.

AWJ: What have you uncovered about the Kittel clan arriving in America?

JF: There were at least five brothers that came to Pittsburgh. As best as I could find out, they left Europe because there was an economic crisis. The brothers’ father, Anton Kittel, was a successful blacksmith, as the Kittels lived in an industrial area where such a skill was quite needed, but there was still no place for a second blacksmith. So, the first born, Emil, became a sailor and traveled to the United States in this capacity but initially did not stay. It is unclear what brought Emil to Pittsburgh permanently. One story has it that Emil fled when Austrian authorities came to his part of Bohemia to recruit soldiers for the first world war. Eventually he settled in Pittsburgh permanently. However, documents show that Fritz came to Pittsburgh in 1913, which is before the war, and we know Emil went first. Whatever the case, once he settled in Pittsburgh, Emil opened a bakery, although there is no evidence that he had done any of this kind of work while in Bohemia. But he was very successful, and after he started to be prosperous the family decided to send more of the sons to him. Fritz was one of the first brothers to follow him. Eventually, four of Anton’s sons settled in Pittsburgh. I obtained a family photograph taken in Pittsburgh in 1914 of Anton and his sons. Anton returned to Bohemia shortly after this. According to family lore, he did not like it in Pittsburgh. (See fig. 1)



Figure 1: Frederick "Friz" Kittel, standing middle, with his father Anton, seated left, and three brothers, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1914

AWJ: Let's talk about Daisy Wilson's marriage to Fritz Kittel. You have uncovered a timeline that is different from the established one. Prior to your research, we have understood that August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in 1945, the fourth child of Daisy Wilson and Fritz Kittel and the first male. Daisy lived with children at 1727 Bedford Avenue in the Hill District, with Fritz a sporadic presence at best. Scholars and biographers have noted that Daisy Wilson and Fritz were married at this time. It has also been previously reported that Daisy Wilson divorced Fritz Kittel at some point before leaving the Hill District in 1958, at which point she was married to David Bedford. The family moved to Hazlewood. By 1963, the family was back in the Hill District, and David Bedford, who died in 1969, appears to be out of the picture. What have you uncovered about Daisy Wilson and her marriage to Fritz Kittel?

JF: First, Daisy Wilson was never married to David Bedford. This is a rumor. No one has found any confirmation that she married Bedford. But she lived with him. As for Fritz Kittel, he had a legal wife who died in 1964. Then, Fred Kittel immediately married Daisy Wilson. A marriage license was procured in May of 1964 outside of Pittsburgh for reasons I do not know. Then, three months later, he asks for a divorce. But the courts refused. Then, of course, he died in 1965. Again, I do not know why he asked for the divorce. He was a complicated man, given to drink most of the time, as reported by family and others. But he was a working alcoholic. He worked at night and slept during the day, as bakers do.

AWJ: Your research revealed that August Wilson's living relatives in Germany of their relation to the American playwright. What was their reaction upon learning this fact?

JF: Fritz had a sister named Stephanie who was deported from Czechoslovakia during World War II and came to live in what became East Germany. I met her granddaughter, Fritz's grandniece. We had coffee together, and she was enthusiastic and interested to learn that a famous American playwright was an extended family member. But there was another strand of the family elsewhere who still live in East Germany. They were not very happy to learn of this addition to their genealogy. I found this second reaction consistent with much of my research. Some on both sides of the family are enthusiastic about learning of these distant relatives, while others have misgivings.

AWJ: Finally, you have learned interesting information about Fritz Kittel's funeral, or, more specifically, the wake. We understand that the children Fritz had with Daisy Wilson attended the funeral service but were not invited to the wake. Do you know why?

JF: I have never heard of any reasons. I received that information from Larry Glasco. Of course, we can all speculate about this, and we can assume that the Germans and the ex-Bohemians just didn't want the non-whites at the wake.

AWJ: Here is our last question. You have done this work on Wilson's German father, placing the playwright's African American heritage aside for the most part. Furthermore, you are not a historian, a literary critic, or a theatre critic. Yet you have uncovered more on Fritz Kittel than anyone working in these fields. What relevance do you think this research has on Wilsonian studies? What does it mean to separate his Bohemian Austrian heritage from his African American heritage?

JF: Well, I have wondered about that. At first, I was more interested on the impact the German heritage had on August Wilson and his siblings. But I was unable to uncover much about that. Then I wondered if any of this shows up in the work. If I were an American scholar of Black

American literature, I would delve into that and try to find out whether or not these hermetically closed plays, closed in the sense that there are no Germans in them, have any traces of Wilson's father's influence. That is a difficult question to investigate, but a good scholar could do it. Basically, I can see that most of these things we have talked about today do not have much relevance except for the fact that Wilson scholars should not be in denial of the fact of Wilson's German heritage. History is so full of miscegenation, and it is usually acknowledged. But in Wilson studies there seems to be a great reluctance to acknowledge this fact. Maybe this is because Wilson is still very close to us historically. Maybe it is still too touchy for the family. But that is my answer.

AWJ: Thank you very much, Johannes.

Johannes Feest's Bio

Johannes Feest (born 21 November 1939 in Berlin) is a German sociologist and a law professor at the University of Bremen. From 1995 to 1997 he directed the International Institute for the Sociology of Law in Oñati, Spain. He has done empirical research on the courts, police, and prisons. In 2019, he initiated a manifesto to abolish penitentiaries and other prisons.



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