Preliminary Reflections on the Life and Times of Hansjürgen Müller-Beck
(* 13. August 1927 in Apolda – † 02. August 2018 in Bern)

I always tell my students to not write that their reports or papers are preliminary, but in the case of the eventful physical and mental life of Hansjürgen Müller-Beck it seems like any assessment could only be preliminary, or at the best, highly incomplete. On Thursday August 2, 2018 Hansjürgen Müller-Beck died just short of his 91st birthday. Müller-Beck was one of the leading and perhaps the most influential German speaking Paleolithic archaeologist of his generation. Here I will remark briefly on his work and on the man I came to know well during the years I followed him to the chair of Early Prehistory and Quaternary Ecology at the University of Tübingen in 1995. Müller-Beck had held the professorship from 1969 until 1995, after following his Doktorvater, Gustav Riek, to the position. Müller-Beck, were he able to, would also likely point out that, while I headed the Department (Abteilung) of Early Prehistory and Quaternary Ecology, within the Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte und Archäologie des Mittelalters, he headed the Institut für Urgeschichte, which Müller-Beck often referred to as the Institut für Jägereische Archäologie (Fig. 1).

Hansjürgen Müller-Beck was born on August 13, 1927 in Apolda, Thuringia. I suspect that other people might know more about the details of his early life and biography than I do. I do not know how long he lived in Thuringia, but he always told me that he grew up in Berlin with his family. He often spoke of his father who worked in publishing in Berlin. Müller-Beck also mentioned his mother, but less often and with fewer specific recollections, which could perhaps be taken to suggest that his early years were in part characterized by a more traditional patriarchal familial structure. This being said he usually said positive things about his family and about growing up, which suggests that he had a good childhood despite the major political tensions that were growing during his early years.
Although Müller-Beck often stressed to me that he was a *Berliner*, he also regularly praised his adopted country, Switzerland and Bern in particular, where he worked early in his professional career and where he later maintained a home with his wife for nearly sixty years, Katharina Müller-Beck (1922-2015) and where his son Christian Müller still lives today. “MB” as he was nearly universally known among his students and among many colleagues, never told me that he had great affection for Tübingen, but I think at some level he did. Certainly he studied and worked for decades in Tübingen, and he had a wide network of friends, colleagues and acquaintances. MB frequently talked to me about his work as the Keeper of Schloss Hohentübingen (*Schloßvogt*) and all the building and renovations to the historic castle that he supervised. He liked to talk about the concerts in the castle courtyard and *Faschingsfeste* in the largest room of the castle, the *Rittersaal*, attending the *Feuerwehrkneipe* and many other activities that he participated in at the interface between the university and the city of Tübingen. Müller-Beck was renowned in the *Kreis* Tübingen for writing dozens if not hundreds of letters to the editor to the local paper, the *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*. He voiced his view on all manner of topics from minor local issues to major global issues. As in conversation, MB had what seemed to be an almost physical or emotional need to communicate. I suspect that if he had been born to a later generation he would have been extremely active on social media.
Müller-Beck’s youth was in many respects shaped by the Nazi era, and countless topics related to Nazi Germany accompanied him in daily life until his death. In fact, more than any person I ever met Hansjürgen Müller-Beck talked openly and often about the Nazi era, its causes, consequences, ramifications and implications. I had only met Müller-Beck briefly before being offered the chair of Early Prehistory and Quaternary Ecology in late 1994, starting in 1995 I had nearly daily contact with him for two decades. Through this intense contact and interaction, I got to know him well. My comments and remembrances here are very much in keeping with the spirit of MB. As mentioned above in connection with his numerous letters to the editor, more than anyone else I have known, Müller-Beck was communicative. He would speak at length to anyone who would listen, and generally people enjoyed listening and discussing with him. I certainly enjoyed talking with MB and learned much about prehistory and all manner of other topics from him. There were few topics upon which he was poorly informed, and there was no topic he was unwilling to explore.

He would leap comfortably between archaeology, ethnology, history, politics, technology, and one had the sense that he was sincerely interested in all topics. He often stressed that he was a liberal in the German sense of the word, and he certainly valued personal freedom and freedom of speech highly. He was generally more interested in non-conformists than conformists. He liked to mention that he had the same birthday as Fidel Castro, and suggested that Castro, contrary to reports of his being born in 1926, was likely actually born on MB’s birthday in 1927, since he would have wanted to appear a little older than he actually was. In part through the recollections of my mother, who grew up near London and often discussed her experiences as a girl in England in the war years, I had many links to Müller-Beck. Both of them could describe the September 3, 1939 like it was yesterday. My mother, for example, described a beautiful but alarming late summer day in Surrey filled with dread, while Müller-Beck described having something akin to a brunch at a hotel, where his family often dined in Berlin on this momentous day with clear blue skies and brilliant sunshine. He could describe what he likely ate and who was with him as well as the mood. His father was a Social Democrat, so there was little enthusiasm for the Nazis in his home. As a young man the excitement of the coming war was not lost on him.

MB would describe what it was like growing up in Germany as it became increasingly militarized. Although he attended the Mommsen-Gymnasium (high school) in Berlin, he did not talk so much about his classes. He could, however, explain in detail what kind of paramilitary activities he participated in and the love of military technology that was widespread among boys and young men. My daughter, Stella, once prepared a school project on MB and his experience at school in the Nazi period. She was fascinated by his stories and felt a sincere fondness for MB, despite the 70 years in age that separated them. Clearly he had endless stories about growing up and school that he could tell, if anyone bothered to ask.

Once I asked MB about Goebbels’ “Totaler Krieg” speech. Like many Germans, MB heard most of the big speeches live on the radio. He told me that the Totaler Krieg speech left him cold, but immediately said that Hitler’s New Year’s speech in 1945 was inspirational. MB was never a Nazi and was certainly far from it as a grown man after the war. Nonetheless, he was able to describe what he had experienced in a way that seemed
honest and unabashed to me. I think his rational approach to the excesses and horrors of the Nazi era made him the liberal democrat he was and contributed to his tolerance for different ideas and perspectives. This experience contributed to his profound curiosity about how people today and in the deep past lived their lives. Many of my senior colleagues, including Hans-Peter Uerpmann, emphasized that MB was always open for new methods and new ideas at a time when most of the senior colleagues in prehistory were highly conservative and opposed to the use of methods from the natural sciences in archaeology. On my fiftieth birthday MB gave me a copy of Sebastian Haffner's biography of Hitler, which he said was one of the earliest and still the best biography of Hitler. I read it immediately and could well understand his point of view.

Late in the war Müller-Beck saw active duty in the Wehrmacht. I am not familiar with all the nuances of the German military, but he said that he served as a Panzergrenadier, and that he had received a degree of training for elite soldiers. We did not discuss the details, but he made it clear that he saw a good deal of combat as the war came toward its end. He repeatedly told me with a sense of pride that he ended the war on his own terms, which somehow seemed to imply that he told the Nazis they could go to hell and surrendered, in what I think was Austria or thereabouts and to what I assume would have been the Red Army. He frequently told me that someday he would tell the story of how the war ended for him, but he waited so long that I never heard the story, although I am sure it was important to him.

I also assume that because he was seventeen when the war ended that he was not punished by his captors and could return to civilian life without too much trouble. MB told me that he returned to school with many former soldiers and earned his Abitur in 1948 in Gießen. I remember one meeting of the classical archaeologists in Tübingen having dinner with a professor of classical archaeology, who had been in MB’s Gymnasium. They talked about old days with a sparkle in their eyes and laughter, but they also made it clear that Gymnasium in the 1940s had its serious sides.

Interestingly, Müller-Beck did not talk so much about his years as a student. He studied with Ernst Wahle in Heidelberg, with Hans-Georg Bandi in Bern and earned his doctoral degree in 1955 under Gustav Riek in Tübingen with a thesis on *Das obere Alt-paläolithikum in Süddeutschland. Ein Versuch zur ältesten Geschichte des Menschen* (Fig. 2). Seen from today’s perspective, one could argue that MB was right to stress that there is no clear break between what today is called the Lower and Middle Paleolithic. Although the development of the “Out of Africa” hypothesis by Günter Bräuer and Chris Stringer was thirty years off, MB saw the main break in the Paleolithic record at the end of what is now generally called the Middle Paleolithic and the start of the Upper Paleolithic. Müller-Beck, like R. R. Schmidt and Riek before him, saw this break in connection with the spread of modern humans and the end of the period of Neanderthals. MB always stressed that little separated the Neanderthals from modern humans, and in the 1950s he, like François Bordes and other contemporaries, assumed that Neanderthals evolved into modern humans in Europe.

Müller-Beck always spoke highly of Bandi and maintained close ties with him and his family until Bandi’s death in 2016 in Bern at the age of 95. He also talked about the colleagues in Tübingen, including Riek, Ludwig Kohl-Larsen, Robert Wetzel and Wilhelm Gieseler. His harshest words were for anthropologist Sophie Ehrhardt, who worked
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in Tübingen long after the war and continued to conduct racist research. Müller-Beck had few kind words for Wetzel and colleagues of his generation, but he did seem to have respect for Kohl-Larsen and Riek. As a student MB worked on Kohl-Larsen’s collections from the expeditions to Deutsch-Ostafrika in the 1930s, and his love of hunters and gatherers may go back in part to his exposure to Kohl-Larsen’s collections from the Hadza who live near Lake Eyasi in Tanzania. Until his death MB remained interested in the fate of the Kohl-Larsen’s vast collections that are housed in Tübingen. He often included them in his teaching and in his exhibitions in Blaubeuren and in Castle Hohentübingen. This is one project I hope to continue, and I am sure that Müller-Beck would be happy if we could finally organize and publish all of the Kohl-Larsen Collection properly. MB spoke occasionally about Gustav Riek. He did not deny his questionable political past, but he did stress that Riek was a good archaeologist who had made major contributions to field research and had founded the Urgeschichtliches Museum in Blaubeuren in 1965. Müller-Beck was never an apologist for the Nazis or for Riek, but he did try to contextualize what had happened in the field of prehistory in the 20th century and tried to give credit where credit was due. This view is seen by the fact that he dedicated the major volume Urgeschichte in Baden-Württemberg to Gustav Riek. Müller-Beck also always had a well-developed appreciation for the Vogelherd figurines that Riek discovered in 1931,
and he went to great lengths to exhibit them well and often wrote about the Vogelherd figurines in the contexts of his publications on Ice Age art.

After earning his doctoral degree, Müller-Beck engaged in more than a decade of fieldwork and productive international research. In 1965, his habilitation thesis entitled *Das Blattspitzenpaläolithikum Nordeurasiens und Nordamerikas* was accepted by the University of Freiburg/Breisgau before he was named to the chair of prehistory in Tübingen in 1969. He would occasionally say that I was too young to head a department when I was hired, but ultimately he did seem to have some respect for what I was doing. He also respected field archaeologists, which is something we shared. A detailed assessment of all he did would go beyond the scope of these remarks, but MB excavated at Seeberg, Burgäschisee-Süd near Bern and this was perhaps the dig he loved most, although his later excavations on Banks Island in northern Canada would be a close second. Before coming to Tübingen MB joined excavations in Bolivia and traveled widely in North America. He seems to have met nearly all the leading researchers in the New World in his years as a postdoc. The time as a visiting researcher and instructor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison left a lasting impression on him. He recalled the open reception and warmth he experienced there as well as his valuable exposure to interdisciplinary research and Quaternary studies. He enjoyed enormous freedom and traveled widely working on many topics, most notably the question of the first settlement of the Americas, which remained a major research interest of his as long as he lived. After he had earned his habilitation at the University of Freiburg under the guidance of Edward Sangmeister in 1965, Müller-Beck served as a *Privatdozent* in Freiburg, but never mentioned having such strong links to Freiburg to me. Although he was remarkably communicative, in some ways MB was extremely independent and a free thinker who avoided joining anyone else’s school of thought. He was his own man in science and was not one to try to ingratiate himself to people of influence. He also clearly viewed himself as a citizen of the world, if not a citizen of the universe if there is such a thing.

I do not remember all the details, but MB would talk about how Eduard Peters resented Gustav Riek being awarded the professorship in Tübingen. He would also talk about the competition between him, Gisela Freund and Karl-Dietrich Adam for the post in Tübingen. He thought, perhaps correctly, that his wealth of international experience helped him earn the job as Riek’s replacement and as the first German professor of prehistory, who was officially in a faculty of natural science.

While Müller-Beck often talked to me about Nazi Germany and his many personal experiences, he also loved talking about anything from ethnology to ancient Greece and Rome to the politics of the Soviet Union, Russia or China. He also had many colleagues in Eastern Europe and maintained good contacts with Dietrich Mania and other experts on the Stone Age working in East Germany. He respected scientists from all countries and all systems of government who did good work. Müller-Beck clearly had a particular affection for the United States. He was proud of his outstanding English, and admitted to being weak in other foreign languages. He frequently mentioned his many American and Canadian friends and colleagues, and he often stressed how much he enjoyed his time as a postdoctoral researcher based in Madison and on his travels through the Americas with a good salary paid by the DFG. MB was very knowledgeable on the Cold War and Soviet and Chinese politics. He could be highly critical of American politics in Cuba and
elsewhere, but he always made it clear that he was glad to have the Americans on the side of the BRD. He told me that he read every issue of Der Spiegel from cover to cover, and in his next breath he would tell me about the air force exercises he did every morning to stay fit for his fieldwork. He never questioned my authority as new department chair, at least not in my presence, and he insisted that he was now working under me and was awaiting orders. When I would ask him officially to represent the department at an event or meeting of some kind, he would always say “Yes sir” and stress that he was an old soldier and respected the chain of command. Of course, his response had a degree of irony and humor that was not lost on either of us.

Müller-Beck was proud of his many research projects in Europe, North America, South America and Asia. His fieldwork in Canada, Turkey, Thailand and Cambodia showed his love of travel and exploring the world. Many of his former students (see Appendix) today still talk with great joy and tell stories about the expeditions to Banks Island to dig and learn about the prehistory of the high north. After he became an emeritus professor, MB would still lead expeditions to Thailand to study the Mani hunters and gatherers and the prehistory of their region. He worked in Cambodia to help train a new generation of students and he took students to Cuba to pursue one of his favorite topics, the first peopling of the Americas.

Müller-Beck always emphasized the link between living hunters and gatherers and past societies and was sympathetic to the arguments of the original ‘Man the Hunter’ conference in 1968. I think that he attended the meeting in Chicago, and I know that he was well acquainted with the many highly respected archaeologists at the University of Chicago. Like Julian Steward and later Lewis Binford and others concerned with Paleolithic archaeology and the ethnographic record of hunters and gatherers, MB always emphasized the direct links between human adaptations and the many different environmental zones. In some of his publications and museum work he developed a cultural taxonomy based on the ecological zones occupied by past hunters and gatherers. In this context it is not surprising that Müller-Beck was active in DEUQUA, INQUA and the Alfred Wegner Society.

The institute in Müller-Beck’s day was always filled with students and researchers from around the globe, and everyone was always welcome. Many people from all over the world that I have met over the years studied at or visited the Institute of Prehistory in Tübingen, and without fail they stressed Müller-Beck’s kindness and the openness of the members of the institute for people regardless of from where they originated.

Despite his focus on hunting, Müller-Beck’s work did not reproduce stereotypic gender roles, and he definitely welcomed the work of his student Linda Owen and other researchers that questioned the projection of gender stereotypes into the past. MB was also as supportive of his female as of his male students and his women students speak extremely highly of him, particularly in light of the obstacles that women faced in other institutes of prehistory and other fields. In his museum work, he also went to considerable lengths to include women in reconstructions of the past.

Müller-Beck’s students always said that he was remarkably open-minded and respected people who advocated new or provocative ideas. In my experience, he was usually a generous grader and, although he had strong opinions, he respected people who
defended perspectives and points of view that were different than his own. MB and I occasionally administered oral exams together. I would try to have a plan of what I would ask and would try to cover a broad range of topics. MB would, from my point of view, happily ramble on his part of the exam seemingly leaping from one whim to the next and often entering into short monologues. His classes are widely praised by his former students, and again his open-mindedness characterized his teaching. He was always keen to pursue new methods and went to considerable lengths to establish archaeometry, zooarchaeology, achaeobotany, geoarchaeology and other scientific areas of expertise in the Institut für Urgeschichte. The later successes under my direction of the Institute of Archaeological Sciences would have been impossible without the groundwork lain by MB.

Müller-Beck seemed most proud of all he and his colleagues in the Institut für Urgeschichte (Jägerische Archäologie) achieved under his direction. He is well known for having run the institute with an unusually high level of democracy and open discourse on all academic and non-academic topics that came into the institute and broader world in general. He told me he based his ideas on his positive experience with politics of cantons in Switzerland. Based on my experience, MB took every comment, grievance or suggestion seriously, and from this point of view, his most characteristic traits were his liberal and democratic attitudes. He always emphasized that after having grown up in the Nazi period in Berlin, having served in the Wehrmacht, and having seen what a world is like without freedom of ideas and expression that he particularly treasured individual and societal freedom.

Contrary to the expectations of some, Müller-Beck and I got along well from the start. When I moved to Tübingen in April 1995 he was retired, and the department was without a head, since I had to wait for a six month hiring freeze from February to July of the year to pass before I could formally begin my duties. During these months we actually shared the office of the chair, and I used the long hours we spent together to ask MB about the job and my future duties. Previously, I had been an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut and did not have the slightest idea about what my duties in Tübingen were or how I was supposed to deal with the three main areas of the job: research, teaching, administration (akademische Selbstverwaltung). MB would calmly say with élan that as heads of the department we could do whatever we wanted and that if there were no complaints from students, colleagues, deans or rectors, that we had something close to unlimited freedom in running the affairs of the department. Anyone who knew Müller-Beck would know that he was unabashedly self-confident, at times uncritical. He was always willing to try almost anything that he thought might serve science, society, or even just be fun to pursue. He happily spent all of the departmental funds for 1995 before I took my post, telling me that I would have no trouble getting additional funds. He was capable of being gullible and would be willing to give almost anyone a chance to excel or fail on all kinds of projects. Unlike some researchers who would rigorously execute one project after another MB had countless ideas and would start several or even dozens of projects in the anticipation that some of them would work out and lead to success, and many did lead to success. The ideas and projects that did not work out and small setbacks would be quickly forgotten as MB moved forward. In this respect he was characterized by an unusual light hearted spirit and optimism.
I always thought MB was funny with a good sense of humor, and he often made me laugh. He, however, considered himself to be serious and attributed this to his Prussian background. He addressed me and almost everyone at the whole university with the formal Sie. Other than Gerhard Bosinski, my former professor at Cologne, I cannot think of anyone he addressed with the informal Du. Nonetheless, I found him to be a very warm and friendly person to me and to nearly everyone. Interestingly, as his life neared its end, Müller-Beck insisted that all his old students and I address him with the informal Du, and around the time of his ninetieth birthday MB became Hansjürgen. I think he found this liberating and consistent with his strong democratic views. He did not want to leave us as an aloof professor, but rather as a friend.

One aspect of Müller-Beck’s need to communicate and interact with people and society at large is seen in his long and intense commitment to Museum work. He headed the Urgeschichtliches Museum in Blaubeuren from 1969 until 1995. Together with Joachim Hahn and many students from Tübingen, MB turned the Urgeschichtliches Museum into a larger and far more dynamic museum than the one started by Gustav Riek in 1965. In many ways the Museum reflected MB’s explicit universal view of history. He was willing and able to address any topic of universal history in his thoughts and in his exhibits. The URMU, as it is now often referred to, in MB’s day began with the Big Bang and continued through the entire history of the universe with clear emphasis on human evolution and the Stone Age before ending with chainsaws and spaceships and projecting universal experience into as of yet unknown future. Those who knew MB were not surprised to hear his farewell lecture at the University of Tübingen on July 20, 1995, focused on universal history and again starting with the beginning of time and extending into the future. That hot summer evening MB hosted a large retirement party at Castle Hohentübingen.

After becoming an emeritus professor, he continued to contribute to exhibits and museums. Together with Martin Porr he prepared an exhibit on the Hadza and the Kohl-Larsen Collection. He worked with me to put the final touches on the exhibit of the Vogelherd figures in Castle Hohentübingen that opened in 1997. He also worked with Wolfgang Schürle, Stefan Holdermann, Ulrich Simon and me to prepare an exhibit and a publication on the Paleolithic art of southwestern Germany. This exhibit was a more modest and up-to-date version of the outstanding exhibit on Ice Age art that MB and his colleagues put on in the Kunsthalle in Tübingen to considerable national and international acclaim. MB was very committed to the idea of having visitors to the Castle be able to examine the Vogelherd figurines from all sides. The Vogelherd ivory figurines were displayed behind thick glass, but a rotating mechanism under the display case allowed visitors to personally rotate the figurines and to view the magnificent finds from all angles. This new exhibit was a vast improvement over the early exhibit tucked away in the main university library on the Wilhelmstraße. Not surprisingly school children loved spinning the figurines at maximum speed, and we soon had to freeze the special mechanism to protect the priceless Aurignacian figurines. Müller-Beck also worked on many other exhibits from Spain to Russia and beyond. He was particularly fond of Harald Meller in Halle and made no secret of the joy he experienced working on the permanent and temporary exhibits in the Archäologisches Landesmuseum in Halle. Meller and his team loved working with MB, because he was not afraid to discuss in detail how people lived in the past and to describe their technology, subsistence, mobility, beliefs or anything else that was required for an exhibit. MB’s museum exhibits were personal and full of life, scientific
content and vitality. Not surprisingly, he wrote many publications in connection with exhibits and he was always delighted to speak to reporters from newspapers, magazines, radio reporters or to make film documentaries. He also enjoyed working at archaeological events like the URMU’s yearly *Tag der offenen Höhle* or the annual *Petersfelstage* in Engen. In these settings he would happily discuss prehistory and other topics with old people, small children and everyone in between.

In 1988, Müller-Beck initiated the foundation of the *Gesellschaft für Urgeschichte* (GfU), the society that supports the URMU and associated research projects, and became one of the founder members. Following Joachim Hahn, who was *1. Vorsitzender* (chairman) of the society from 1988 until his death in 1997, MB headed the GfU until 2004, when he retired from that post at the time of Georg Hiller’s election as chairman.

Hansjürgen Müller-Beck was not religious in a conventional sense, and he cared little for Christianity or other large global religions. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think he was not interested in beliefs and spirituality. Several of his publications touched upon Paleolithic forms of religion. He often told me that he felt closest to the beliefs of the Inuit and other northern peoples and imagined a spirit world where he, like all hunters, would ultimately reside. Despite his age and a few bouts with serious medical problems, he always spoke and looked to the future. Even in recent years, Müller-Beck would discuss his complex and wholly unrealistic plans using various forms of high-technology, flying machines and computers to continue his research in prehistory. In my last communications with him, he, as always, looked to the future and the need to work on the Kohl-Larsen collection or to expand the scope of department’s prehistoric research. If he feared death, he never showed it to me, and he sometimes explicitly said that he would end up in the same spirit world of northern hunters and gatherers he so admired.

**Appendix**

**Doctoral theses supervised by Hansjürgen Müller-Beck as first supervisor**


Owen, Linda Rae: Blade and Microblade Technology - Selected Assemblages from the North American Arctic and the Upper Paleolithic of Southwest Germany (1988).
Pookajorn, Surin: Archaeological Research of the Hoabhinian Cultures or technocomplex and its comparison with Ethnoarchaeology of the Phi Tong Luang, a Hunter-Gatherer Group of Thailand (1987).
Torke, Wolfgang: Fischreste als Quellen der Ökologie und Ökonomie in der Steinzeit Südwest-Deutschlands (1978).
Zimmermann, Andreas: Das Steinmaterial des bandkeramischen Siedlungsplatzes Langweiler 8 (1982)

**Master’s theses supervised by Hansjürgen Müller-Beck**

*as first supervisor*

Owen, Linda: The microblades from the pre-dorset site Umingmak: A quantitative and qualitative analysis (1982).
Schulz, Hans-Peter: Das Quarzmaterial der Station Tervola 20 Törnävaara (1986).
Torke, Wolfgang: Das lithische Artefaktmaterial der Pre-Dorset Station Umingmak auf Banks Island, Arktisches Kanada (1974).