# Imagine Europe S1E1: Transcript

## San Diego, CA

**Clarissa:** Hello and welcome to Imagine Europe, a new podcast by the Department of European Studies.

**Edith:** And we are live from San Diego!

**Clarissa:** That we are, that we are! Welcome Professor Benkov. Welcome Edee of course. My name is Carissa Clò. I am the Chair of the Department of European Studies. We are experimenting with the new technology, which is not new at all for a lot of other people, but it is for us. Our new podcast, department podcast, entitled Imagine Europe; which is also the name of our speaker series. We wanna use this as a venue to showcase our fabulous faculty, students, and staff and hear their stories; what they're up to; what they were up to; what they will be up to! We also think that this is a vacuole for stories about ourselves in the past that may be of interest to people in the future. So we're kind of also recording for posterity here. Or someone else, we are recording for our obsolescence. Edee welcome! How are you doing?

**Edith:** I'm good, I'm doing good, I'm doing good. I just love, I love this year, it's been so great, so many wonderful things have happened. I'm not sure what they are, but they must have happened somewhere. Yeah, that's, it's a good year.

**Clarissa:** Yes, we should also probably disclose the fact that today is November 6, 2020. So you know, for those of you who are living in the moment, in the present, are following the news, you may be just, may just be on edge like everybody else. So Edee, we just really, you know, like you are well known on campus and this of course is also…

**Edith:** Infamous maybe?

**Clarissa:** Oh come on! This is, of course, also a podcast that we would like our colleagues in other departments to listen to. But perhaps, people in the community may not know you, you know enough, let's put it this way. So you want to say a few things about yourself? Of course maybe I should say, you just retired, sadly, from our department after X number, X decades of service and you have been a scholar... well you are a scholar of early modern French and Italian; you are also, you know, you were foundational in so many initiatives on campus. So, just how would you introduce yourself to the world?

**Edith:** Oh gosh! The world! That makes it much more difficult. I've been... I was... I still am at SDSU. I mean, even though I have the title of being a retired Professor Emerita, I still am running, co-directing, a research consortium on campus. So I'm not, I'm not quite totally gone and I'm still on a number of MA committees. So, the notion of I think retirement, when you're talking about people who've been in the university, is not meaning that you're going to... now get on a... Well you wouldn't get on a cruise ship these days but; in the past, people think of getting on cruise ships, traveling, reading books all the time... and I do a lot of that. I did more in the past, actually than now. But I think we don't really ever retire because what we did, it was not simply a job, it was an intellectual pursuit. And it's, and it's, and it's something that's extremely important. And so, I say I'm a Professor Emerita and I'm still working with students on campus; I'm still involved in certain initiatives in my department and other departments and I love to travel; I have a gorgeous dog and I also have a house in France. So you know, it's not too bad of a life.

**Clarissa:** No, not too bad at all. I'd like to visit that house in France. So how do I do these days? How about for inviting oneself... Well, I actually should also say that, you know, this podcast is also... the occasion for it is the celebration of the 20th anniversary of our department, the Department of European Studies. So, since you are such an institution at San Diego State and certainly we're present and involved in the foundation of the department, would you like to tell us a little bit about... what went down?

**Edith:** Okay, the history of our department is a very strange one. In many ways it started in 1991-1992 when there was a major budget crisis in the CSU. And we're all, we're used to budget crises but, it was one in which a lot of departments were scheduled for elimination. Unimportant things like Anthropology, Chemistry, and also things like French, Italian, German, and Russian. So, at that point things got better but, we were left with; most of the professors in German and Russian had retired and I... at that point was chair of French and Italian and I became acting chair of German and Russian. So we had this de facto relationship. The German and Russian and French and Italian had the same department Chair…

**Clarissa:** What year was that? Can you…

**Edith:** ‘92 ‘93, I mean it went on for a long time...

**Clarissa:** Oh wow! So you were Chair of these two departments simultaneously?

**Clarissa:** Well a long time, okay.

**Edith:** Yeah, and you know. There was this feeling that we didn't want to just, you know, push the two departments together and have the four languages. Because the only acronyms we could come up with were FRIG, and that didn't sound very good, or GRIF…

**Clarissa:** So it's even worse…

**Edith:** Yeah, you know, GRIF we pronounced it, you know, in French *griffe.* It just didn't seem right. So, I and a number of other people in the department at that time tried to think of; was there a positive way to put things together? And this took years and years but we eventually realized if we put the four language programs, language culture programs together, and tried to have something that united them, it would make sense. Another department had a major called European Studies and so we politely stole that major from, from the other department; I'll leave them unnamed for the moment and that way we would actually have a department that had a certain coherence. There would be elements in the major and so from that early 90’s beginning of thinking how to organize things, we wound up in 2000 with the new Department of European Studies.

**Clarissa:** Sounds like a story that is both satisfying and needs more exploration so that's definitely interesting to hear. The, I mean, you know, origin stories are always, you know, like, somehow flawed, but also important as well. What do you think are the achievements that the department has... was able to accomplish in these 20 years?

**Edith:** Well I think there are a number of things. One of the most important, especially at this time that we're living in is, we wanted to focus on contemporary Europe. All of the other programs have a wide range, but our European program, well relatively wide range, but our European program is one that really focuses on Europe today. Gives you a background of how Europe got to be that way, but it was to bring an element of important multinational, multicultural perspectives on Europe. And in doing that, one of the things that we did was to I think change and, I hope this is true, this is at least what I think, that we've changed the perspective. European Studies does not mean studying a lot of dead white men. You know, we look at other areas, we look at post-colonial, postcolonial era, we look at how the diaspora have functioned, so we're not just sitting in you know, staring at the Eiffel Tower, we're staring at many things in places where Europe has been a major influence. But also, rethinking what Europe is, and what Europe means in the 21st century. So I think, I mean, in a sense for me, that's the major accomplishment of allowing us to function in a way that was not being done before on campus.

**Clarissa:** Wow, you make me feel so proud to actually be part of European Studies. But of course, this is the interest in contemporary Europe, in a multicultural, anti-racist, anti-fascist community; or you know range of communities is certainly shared among several of the colleagues in the department. I remember actually, I was, as I was thinking about the podcast I remembered when we first met, which happened to be at the MLA in Philadelphia back in 2005...

**Edith:** Oh right!

**Clarissa:** You know, like, a part of what attracted me to the department; obviously the fact that, you know, there was an Italian position available; but also that it was in San Diego, and that it had this cutting-edge description about the contemporary moment. Which I think, we have probably built upon, as well. Do you...like, you've touched upon the fact that, you know, like, we don't want to talk about, you know, old, and certainly dead white men...

**Edith:** We do still talk about some of them! They're not all bad! I mean, they have a place in the world.

**Clarissa:** Absolutely, absolutely. We do want and need some of them as well. I do want to ask you though, the shift that you've seen between the departments of French and Italian and German and Russian and European Studies. I mean, I think it's also been a shift, larger shift in our disciplines in the university... obviously we're talking about San Diego State but we can be talking about other larger trends in our profession. Our disciplines have gone through a lot of shifts and the faces of those who are present are different too. I mean, I wonder whether you may want to comment on, on when you started at San Diego State?

**Edith:** We'll leave out some of those things from the past, they're better not remembered. But I think in... I mean, in a sense one of the things you're talking about is... that... how the disciplines have evolved. And, we, people always thought of us as first, you know, language. So, all we were doing was teaching language; and we were sort of a utilitarian; we were a tool. But literature was okay, so it was language and literature. Which brought us back to all those dead white men. And that would be something, because, I was thinking about when I first got here, I don't think there was a single woman on the MA reading list for French. There might have been one or two women authors but, I mean, that was it. So, you know, as things developed, literature went beyond literature. We included cinema classes. Our, our department actually has more cinema classes in any department except the department of film.

You know, so you know, we included things that weren't in the traditional curriculum and we didn't just study literature for the beauty of it, though I still think that is a valuable study, we looked at it in historical context, we look at the the effects it could have outside of its, of its own realm, you know what happens when a book gets translated, how does it function in another country and so all of our disciplines slowly expanded and many of our faculty are very, very interdisciplinary. I have a second, I mean a second specialty in LGBTQ+ Studies, so that was something I wasn't doing when I came to SDSU but as things were more, became more flexible and interdisciplinarity was supported, then I was able to do that. I also, many people think I'm a historian, they have no idea that I'm in a literature department and what was used to be thought of as a literature department, but you know, I also was able to do the work in history that I liked to do and so I think that's what we have, we have this freedom to, to explore different areas whether it be digital humanities, whether it be a racist, anti-racist studies and we can do that and not say we have to be you know, penned into this little, little box.

**Clarissa:** Absolutely. I, I totally agree. Are there any cultural events, any, anything that the department or the French program has organized over the years that you feel particularly proud of?

**Edith:** On the French side, because I always kind of know that one best, on the French side we've actually had a French theater, the only French language theater in San Diego for about, I want to say 35 years now. With the exception of one year, there's always been a production so it's been, it's been a long-running, a long-running enterprise and it's one that students love. I mean, it brings groups of students together, they make friends and, and I can see when I'm on Facebook, if I look at the friend circles of different students, they're all friends with the people they were in the plays with. So you know, it creates a major community. The other thing that French did, we've had a French Film Festival since the early 2000s and one of the things we tried to do in the French and Francophone Film Festival is to bring films that were not simply sort of typical French films but also look at documentaries, look at Franco-African films, Belgian films, films made by French directors but could be in another language. So again, it's it's something that's really marked what you can do if you have this, this freedom of the department. I know we have our Imagine Europe series, so we've been bringing, now we've been bringing a lot of interesting and well-known lecturers together to, to the university; so I mean, we, I think, the department has done a lot. Clarissa, you have brought so many people I can't even begin to count them. You do so much for Italian and for European Studies so you know it also helps, you do, you do, you do. So I mean, it's kind of an exciting place to be around when we could actually be there.

**Clarissa:** Absolutely, right? I think we're all missing that, which is maybe also another excuse for doing something like this because when we enjoy each other's company... we bounce off ideas and you know, like we just wanna, you know thrive when we are around people so we have to just leave with, what we have here. I wonder if since you've touched upon your work for the, for the LGBTQ Consortium, if you would like to say a few words about it. How did it come about because that was an important initiative that you spearheaded in you know, in the past few years?

**Edith:** Well, it was, it was during the period when the university was talking about developing certain areas and hiring a large number of faculty in those areas. So, people had to put in a long, long, long request justifying why it'd be so super to have more people in a specific area. The digital humanities is one of those, one of those areas but the odd thing we found is when we were talking about well, let's see if we can have, you know, a group that specifically does LGBTQ stuff, we realize we pretty much had a core faculty already. So it, you know, it's like well, yeah, we can try but and we didn't need to focus on any one thing because itself, it's so interdisciplinary, you couldn't say we, we need absolutely to do this so instead of that I wrote a proposal to the Vice President for research and said: Could you try to fund this group? You know, we don't need the hires that you're talking about but we need to get more people to know each other. To have events that bring them together to, to be, to work with the major that's on campus as well because those students didn't have a lot of other activities going with their major that were, that were scholarly focused in that sense. So, I got a fairly sizable grant which has lasted six years and we're now going to meet with the new dean just, so we can squeeze a little more money out of her. That's next week, trying to get a little bit more…

**Clarissa:** I definitely think it is worth it, I mean, I have participated in some of those events. The speaker series that you have organized or co-organized has just been fabulous. Let me also remind, two major conferences on campus that brought scholars together as well. I think this was a marvelous initiative that certainly deserves more, more support. Let's put it this way.

**Edith:** Yeah, yeah we're trying. I mean, one of the other things that I was able to do since I was also in French, when you had a film festival, I tried to get at least one or two films that might have LGBTQ+ themes, so that made it even more interdisciplinary for those majors who might not have had any idea about what was going on in Europe. So, you know, so this notion of working with other departments, working with other programs, being interdisciplinary is something that I think really is what makes our department and other departments so vibrant on campus.

**Clarissa:** Yeah, and we should also remember that, or remind our listeners that you are teaching also for the LGBT, were teaching for the LGBT major; also one to highlight because I think it's like, one of the few in the country.

**Edith:** Yeah, there are a couple more now, but we were the, the second to actually get a major. We had a minor, major; we have a graduate certificate and, and that again, that was something where we were sort of, things take a long time to develop and, and I started working with a with a former professor a while back in the early 2000s to see if we could put together a major and a minor but you know, somehow we didn't quite get it finished and then Esther Rothblum, who's in Women's Studies, said well, I'll work on the, on the paperwork if you tell me what I need to do. So, she did it and so we wound up with minor, and then a major and now a graduate certificate. So it's, it's again, things sometimes go slowly but I've seen them come to fruition pretty well.

**Clarissa:** No, I think this also is something to be, to be said about the wide range of interest in our, you know, that our department has, you know...like you are a scholar of French but you're also a scholar of LGBT. I mean, the intersections of all of these interests and how they also come to bear and tell us stories about a new Europe, you know, like this is the Europe that we'd like to imagine and to conjure as well. So, I think that's something important to stress.

**Edith:** Yeah, one of the fun classes I taught recently, knowing, knowing that I was getting near the end of my teaching... I taught a course called Queer Europe. You know, we looked at Europe in the 20th and 21st century and different themes looking like at architecture, how cities relate to queer spaces, obviously queer film, queer music and it was just fun. I mean I had, I had a great time teaching the course and doing all the work for it were, where sometimes you know, you have fun teaching a course but all the work for it is something you say “Oh god, do I have to do this again,” but no, that was just, it was just a sure pleasure to have that opportunity as one of the things I could do.

**Clarissa:** Absolutely. I mean, I should definitely ask you to pass that information along because we should continue that tradition, that course should be in our books as well.

**Edith:** Well you know, I can always come back and teach it, you just have to pay me.

**Clarissa:** Oh yes, let me work on that, okay. I also, you know, wanna, wanna stress for those of you who are unaware, the tremendous amount of work you've done for the university in terms of service. Service to the university for sure, this is a fact for our department. When I arrived in 2005, you were the chair and you have been the chair, you stayed chair for a number of years so I, I have observed you in that position but you then moved on and, and higher up; you had, you were already I think in those years perhaps chairing the senate?

**Edith:** Yeah, I think I was, I was not quite, I was on the senate executive committee at that point, then I became the chair of the senate, then I became an administrator for five years, then I came back to the department but you know, kept sort of doing all my academic stuff even though I was in administration because, I like the academic and research part more than administrating.

**Clarissa:** Yes, I'm sure that you know, like that there's much more satisfaction in the, in the teaching and research portion of it but we should also acknowledge though that you, you had what was it, like, that would, that be the third in command; the AVP of faculty affairs, like under the Provost, then there's the President, the Provost and then a position like...

**Edith:** Luckily, we didn't have to do anything to step in for the Provost. Most of the time, Nancy Marlin was Provost, Professor Marlin, and she was, she was a very active Provost so I didn't have to, I just stopped by and said “Hello, and how are things going?” a lot. I didn't have to worry about what was going on in her office.

**Clarissa:** But since you've mentioned that Nancy, and I mean, you also worked with her and I think perhaps you still do, in an important initiative talking about students, right? And where our passion really lies, when it comes to what faculty really care about... students. The Fulbright scholarship, you've been working on that for a number of years, you want to say a few things... because these are, these are important initiatives to allow our students to travel and actually experience the cultures and languages we teach now.

**Edith:** One of the things, I mean, I had started with for a long time. I was director of our, of our Paris program and we had a program in Paris for 25 or so years... but back to the world of budget cuts it, it fell into that area that was not as easy to fund, but I've always been interested in international connections and certainly our department requires students to study abroad. So, it was fairly logical when Nancy Marlin, who had been my, my past boss, so to speak, was going to take over Fulbright advising, she asked if I would be willing to work on Fulbright advising with her and focus specifically on students who were in the humanities or who wanted to be English teaching assistants, because that was.. humanities and arts and English teaching assistants and so that's sort of my area and she did hard sciences and research and so that... I actually technically am no longer, we just finished the cycle so I said we'll have to see for, for next year how this is going to go because it was very difficult to do during the pandemic. You lose, you lose a lot of students by the wayside who just, you know can't deal with zooming all the time and find it harder to keep things going but, but Fulbright, you know, we've had lots of students get Fulbrights and to places that they were, I think more adventurous we've gotten. Some who've gone to Malaysia; Bulgaria has been very big recently. I've pushed a couple people to go to Bulgaria because it turns out my name is both “Best name as Bulgarian,” so maybe it helps if they, I never knew that, but I found it, so maybe they, they were you know lucky to say “Oh Bulgarian advisor.” Not at all, but it was just, you know, trying to get them to think of places that weren't just France, Italy, England. I mean, that was basically.. Oh in Spain, that's where everybody wanted to go.

**Clarissa:** Yes, those are also very coveted locations and so the competition is…

**Edith:** Right. So, so I mean, I think we did a good job and hopefully we'll figure out how to continue doing it, despite the fact we're, we're all still remote. The programs this year, because of Covid, were pretty much suspended all over the world. So, students are still waiting to go, when you get a node, yes, you can come there again, but right now they can't for most places.

**Clarissa:** Yeah, no, that's true too. Speaking of, as we, as we near at the end of the episode, can you tell us where your house in France is, so maybe, we maybe drive along there should we find anything.

**Edith:** Okay, should I really let you guys know where it is? Oh I will, I will. It's about six hours directly south from Paris if you drive fast. Eight hours if you obey all the speeding laws, but it's in a little town called Castelnau-de-Montmiral. It's a hilltop village that was built in 1225. It's one of the most beautiful villages in France and being there is like being in any cliched movie about having a house in the South of France. One of the things I like about it though is that there are actually real French people who still live there. There are, of course, a lot of expats, Bbrits, Canadians, Australians, Dutch. It's a little, it's a little Europe and United Kingdom but there are French people and so that's... it's, it's just really a nice little place.

**Clarissa:** Is it close to the James Baldwin house in the South of France?

**Edith:** No, James Baldwin's place is much to the East. You can, you could drive there in a day but the closest African-American celebrity house we have is Josephine Baker.

**Clarissa:** Well, that's good enough for me. But in any case, it's relatively easy to access all of these places because in Europe, everything is much closer than it is anywhere else, certainly here in the States. So I also would like to know, as a way of start winding down the conversation here, what is it that you are reading right now?

**Edith:** Okay, well a lot of times I don't remember the names of the books I've been reading but actually I can, I can tell you the names of two books I've just finished. One is called *Journey Into Midnight*. It's a, by a Hungarian author, Antal Zerb. It was written in, in the 1930’s and it's a very very strange novel. It's about a group of friends who become friends as teenagers and we follow them in sort of their, their life and their adventures. One of them is a young guy who has a death wish, so he tries to figure out ways to commit suicide. Another one is going to become a thief. Another one is just kind of, he doesn't know what he wants to do with his life and he's the one who's the hero. A typical thing for him is, he gets married, he's on his honeymoon, the train stops in Italy on their way to Rome, he goes out of the train for a minute and then he gets back and he gets on the wrong train and goes somewhere else in Italy and says, “Oh well, I guess I don't need my wife. I'll, I'll just explore Italy and she can go on to Rome.”

**Clarissa:** This is interesting because the 30’s would be in the, it was written in the 30’s... that would be during fascism in Italy.

**Edith:** It was. It’s, it's kind of, I mean, they refer to World War One a little bit but it's not... it, it does give you the idea that they're living in a very strange and upset world and there are references to Mussolini in it, so it's, you know, it's cognizant of its time. Most of it takes place in Italy, a lot, part of it takes place in Paris, the rest takes place in Hungary obviously, so it was, it was fascinating. The other thing I read, see I've read two books recently, it's called *The Final Days of Abbot Montrose* by the Norwegian mystery writer Sven Elvestad and that was written in 1900. So, it's a pretty interesting, you know, not quite Sherlock Holmes but very much like it. One of the things about Elvestad that was interesting, of course, he was, he was gay and was not out at that time, so the book in a way, Abbot Montrose, is the mystery in it and it in a way, perhaps reflects his own hiding his identity. So, those are the two things I read and, and I had a great time reading them. Now I have to move on to something else.

**Clarissa:** It sounds like retirement is a very good place to be. Lots of time on your hands to do a lot of great things. Thank you so much for being with us. We love to have you go first, because of course you are laying out, laying down the foundation for the following programs, the following podcasts. Thank you so much and until next time, stay safe and sound. Arrivederci!

**Edith:** Ciao!

Imagine Europe Podcast is a production of the Department of European Studies at San Diego State University; our theme music is provided by Holly Ransom-Thomson; production and sound recording by Susanne Forrayi; Project Management and Administration by Veronica Gonzalez. We would like to thank our host Clarissa Clò, and our guest Professor Emerita Edith Benkov and the Department of European Studies faculty, students, and alumni who support our vision and our programming. Thank you for listening and thank you for sharing.