

Milton R. Konvitz

March 12, 1908 — September 5, 2003

Milton R. Konvitz was born in 1908 in Safed, Palestine, then under Ottoman administration. He died at the age of 95 in September 2003, in Oakhurst, New Jersey, after a brief illness. Mary, his wife, and his son Josef, and two grandsons survive him.

During the years of his active tenure at Cornell from 1946 until 1973, Professor Konvitz was one of the true giants of the university community in general and the ILR and Law Schools in particular. He was also instrumental in the establishment and building of the Department of Near Eastern Studies and the Program of Jewish Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Milton Konvitz epitomized an era in which a liberal education stood at the heart of a great university and was central to the life of the mind. No single individual, save Konvitz himself, could possibly capture in words the extraordinary breadth of his learning, wide-ranging commitments, and accomplishments. He was deeply schooled in philosophy, literature, and in the broad field of classical and modern Judaica. In particular, Professor Konvitz held the Hebrew Bible in high esteem as the foundational text of Jewish civilization. He was also drawn to reflect on the ways in which the Hebrew Bible seemed to speak, in his view, to the urgent legal and moral questions of the day. Professor Konvitz was thus a classical 20th century liberal thinker: he was and remained an optimist's optimist even though his life very nearly overlapped with a century awash in crimes against humanity.

Professor Konvitz joined the ILR Faculty as one of its earliest members in 1945 and began teaching the following year. He offered a course on Labor Law and also proposed a course on Civil Rights, then a subject of rising concern in America and accordingly, a new subject in American universities. At the time of his appointment to ILR, Konvitz was Assistant General Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and had taught courses on Civil Rights both at the NYU Law School and at the New School for Social Research.

Industrial Relations was in its infancy as an academic field when the ILR School was founded. Most labor-related courses typically were consigned to Economics departments in research universities. As such, the design of a curriculum for a four-year program in the field was necessarily innovative. Among the early and less successful curricular experiments was an ethics class taught in the Philosophy Department with the support of ILR. Konvitz, who had earned his Ph.D. degree at Cornell from that very department and a lifelong student of philosophy, was subsequently called upon to consider designing a course more attuned to the needs of ILR undergraduates.

His solution, which, as he described it, neatly avoided trespassing on any other department's turf, was a two-semester sequence, "The Development of American Ideals." In the first semester, Professor Konvitz led students through the intellectual and philosophical foundations of American ideals and institutions through studying pertinent Greek, Roman and European intellectual antecedents, selected essays of Emerson and significant passages from the Hebrew Bible. The focus of his second semester was a study of American legal history relating to the Bill of Rights and the Civil War Amendments with particular focus on Supreme Court opinions and decisions that affected how these documents were applied in contemporary American society.

Milton Konvitz applied all of the breadth of his immense classical, Judaic, and legal learning and his singularly philosophical sensibility to this celebrated course. American Ideals became one of the most popular courses at Cornell during the years it was taught by Professor Konvitz. Through it, Dr. Konvitz was able to touch 8,000 undergraduates from colleges throughout the campus among whose ranks numbered a future Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and future chairs of the Cornell Board of Trustees. Many of these students remember the two semesters they spent with Dr. Konvitz as the crowning intellectual experience of their Cornell education. At virtually every Cornell Reunion, a generation of students can be heard discussing their experiences in this course and their enduring respect for a beloved, inspiring, and masterful professor.

Preparing for and teaching American Ideals was also to have a profound effect on Professor Konvitz himself.

"Former students," he wrote, "have been kind enough to give me credit for the American Ideals course, but I give them and the course credit for the books that flowed out of it: Civil Rights in Immigration (1953), Fundamental Liberties of a Free People (1957, with a second edition with a newly written introduction published the year of his death, 2003), A Century of Civil Rights (1961), First Amendment Freedoms (1963) Expanding Liberties (1966), Religious Liberty and Conscience (1968) and The Bill of Rights Reader (1960, in its 5th Ed.). In 1973, also two books on Emerson and a book on American pragmatists."

Beyond his writings on the Bill of Rights, which have been cited in Supreme Court decisions and which have distinguished him as among the most significant scholars on the subject, Professor Konvitz was a prodigious writer of wide-ranging interests. In all he published nine books, edited eleven, contributed chapters to seventy volumes and wrote well over two hundred articles for or letters to publications as diverse as the *New York Times* and *Commentary*. Serving on the editorial board of 15 scholarly journals, Dr. Konvitz was particularly proud of his work as the Founding Editor of the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* and as the Co-Founder of *Judaism*, *Midstream*, and the *Journal of Law and Religion*. He was awarded seven honorary degrees from various universities and was the recipient of many distinguished fellowships and awards.

Perhaps Dr. Konvitz's most substantive, pragmatic contribution as a legal scholar was his efforts of nearly three decades as the Director of Cornell's Liberian Codification Project. On behalf of the Republic of Liberia, Konvitz and his research staff compiled that nation's legal code. The laws documented and codified in the project are still in force in that Republic today, despite its periodic political upheavals. Konvitz also edited the opinions of Liberia's Supreme Court. For these efforts, he received the Grand Band of the Order of the Star of Africa, Liberia's highest civil award as well as an honorary degree from the University of Liberia.

Professor Konvitz's lifelong commitment to study the intellectual history of the ideal of individual rights and the notion of human dignity bespoke of his engagement with the universally human and the particularly Jewish. He thus ranks alongside American Jewish thinkers such as Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Like them, the progressive outlook informing Konvitz's thought derives from a vision of social justice articulated by the classical prophets of ancient Israel. Konvitz's intellectual and personal commitment is exemplified in *Judaism and Human Rights* (1972), *Judaism and the American Idea* (1978), and *Torah and Constitution: Essays in American Jewish Thought* (1998).

Professor Konvitz was a masterful teacher and model educator. For Professor Konvitz, living the life of the mind at Cornell was a special privilege, even a sacred calling that represented a unique opportunity to be seized and relished as much as learning itself. So he endeavored to inspire his students and challenge them regarding the significance of ideas and ideals in life before sending them on quests of their own. That is why Professor Konvitz, twinkle in his eye, savored every letter, phone call, clipping, article or book he received from a former student.

In recent years, to visit Milton and Mary at their home was to witness firsthand a rare and affectionate partnership between two uncommonly fine people who shared so very many years together. Milton would be comfortably ensconced in the inner sanctum of his *steibel*, as Mary would call his library, reading or typing on what was surely the last, barely functioning electric typewriter in the western hemisphere, till a visitor would appear. Mary would summon Milton and the two of them, together as always, were the most eager and gracious hosts.

Former President Hunter Rawlings called Dr. Konvitz "the quintessential scholar-teacher," when he announced the establishment of The Milton R. Konvitz Professorship in Near Eastern and Jewish Studies in 1998.

The Cornell and Ithaca community along with members of the Konvitz family came together to pay tribute to Milton R. Konvitz's life and work in a memorial service held on October 23, 2003.

Richard Strassberg, Ross Brann