

Leonard Reissman

June 10, 1921 — January 29, 1975

Leonard Reissman died at the age of fifty-three in Ithaca, New York, on January 29, 1975, the victim of a heart attack that had struck him two days earlier. The day before he became ill was the opening of the spring semester, and in excellent health he had met his large class of students in Urban Society.

He had come to Cornell University as professor and chairman of the Department of Sociology in the fall of 1970. Before that he had held only one permanent teaching post, serving at Tulane University, New Orleans, for nineteen years, where he was the Charles A. and Leo M. Favrot Professor of Human Relations. From 1967 he was chairman of the Department of Sociology and director of the Urban Studies Center at Tulane. He also served from time to time as visiting professor or fellow at Columbia University, the London School of Economics, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

Len's parents were Polish Jewish immigrants who raised their children in the Workmen's Circle tradition, with its emphasis on non-Marxist socialism and secular (Yiddish) Jewish culture. Len grew up in Detroit and finished his undergraduate work at Wayne University just before World War II. After army service, he sampled several graduate schools: he studied at Wisconsin and Princeton and, under the auspices of a fellowship from the Social Science Research Council, was a visitor in the seminars of Robert K. Merton at Columbia and Talcott Parsons and Florence R. Kluckhohn at Harvard. But when his mentor, Paul Hatt, went to Northwestern, Len enrolled at that university and was awarded the doctorate in 1952.

During his years at Tulane he was engaged in a number of cooperative projects based on studies of the local community and its institutions. Among his partners were K. H. Silvert, J. H. Rohrer, R. V. Platou, and T. Ktsanes. They published many articles and monographs on local voting patterns, on the nursing profession, on the Jewish community, and on the urban South. Stimulated by these researches, his maturing theoretical interests focused on two interrelated themes: the nature of social stratification and the underlying processes of urbanization and urban life. The results were published in the two books that established him as a major figure in sociology: *Class in American Society* (1959) and *The Urban Process: Cities in Industrial Societies* (1964). Both reflected his creative talent at synthesis: the ability to absorb a huge body of empirical research and evaluate it with the eye of an experienced practitioner of the art and then exercise the higher skill of imposing theoretical order and coherence on what would otherwise be confusion and contradiction. He wrote with sophistication about complex matters

and led the rest of us toward understanding, and he did it without pretentious jargon; at its best, his prose was lucid and elegant, but it was never either fancy or oversimplified. He continued to read the theoretical masters of social science, both old and new (particularly Max Weber), and was always aware that social reality was more complex and challenging than our models could fully encompass. He learned new techniques, but never fell for new fads. Recently he again demonstrated his style in a critical review of current thinking on the linkages between social research and social policy concerning poverty in *Inequality in American Society* (1973), and the week before he died he finished the final proofreading of a book written with his long-time friend, Kalman H. Silvert, to be published as *Education, Class and Nation: The Experiences of Chile and Venezuela*.

Len Reissman was as steady in his family life and friendships as he was in his academic posts. He married Ethel Banner while they were both graduate students, and they were approaching their twenty-fifth anniversary. They have two daughters: Alison, who is a senior at Cornell, and Carla, who is a freshman at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His great warmth and blunt honesty, coupled with his earthy sense of humor, tied him to a network of friends that was started during his student years and never weakened. In turn, many of his own students joined the network and along with colleagues became a part of the Reissman family circle. He was at Cornell for fewer than five years, but the people who came to his memorial service from the local area and from miles away overflowed a large chapel on campus and thus attested to the impact he had made on so many lives. We wept, although Len would have preferred that we laugh in remembrance of the good times we had shared.

Recognizing his devotion to students, Ethel has asked that we establish a memorial fund for their benefit. Contributions may be sent to the Trust Office, Cornell University, Day Hall, Ithaca, New York 14853, with the request that they be deposited in the Leonard Reissman Memorial Fund.

Joseph A. Kahl