

Felix Reichmann

September 14, 1899 — July 24, 1987

Those who knew Felix Reichmann well considered him to be the very embodiment of European culture, widely read, widely interested, with a thorough classical education, a life devoted to books—books as products of man’s total capacity, his technical skills, artistic ingenuity and intellectual power. He was a complete bookman, an expert in bibliographic history—especially the history of the medieval booktrade, the tradition of writing, illuminating and printing, book collecting, librarianship, and literacy in its highest sense of letters and learning.

Felix Reichmann was Viennese and he ran the family bookstore, one of the centers of the intellectual life in the Vienna of the twenties and early thirties. His preparation for such a career was not altogether typical for a Viennese intellectual in those days, having served as a cavalry officer in the Austrian army on the Russian front during World War I. But then, more suited to his future career as a bookman and art historian, he studied under the giants of the field, Julius von Schlosser and Max Dvorak among others. In 1938 at the time of the “amalgamation” (Anschluss) of Austria with the German Reich, Felix was interned in the infamous Dachau concentration camp and then in Buchenwald. A year later he was released, and he emigrated to America.

A new career began, still the career of a bookman, but now as librarian, first in Pennsylvania, and later, after a stint with the Office of Strategic Services, at the Library of Congress.

Therefore when Felix Reichmann arrived at Cornell, he brought unique qualifications for the tasks and responsibilities that were awaiting him. And, unusual as the extraordinary compatibility of talents to his responsibilities were, the timing of his arrival was even more so. It occurred at the moment when — after decades of neglect — the Cornell University Library was about to experience a period of revival and growth that placed it among the ten great research libraries in the United States.

The happy circumstance that was unfolding at Cornell after World War II just at the time of Felix Reichmann’s arrival offered the opportunity for the full exploitation of his rare assortment of talents. With the energy and capacity of the Library’s newly assembled leadership and the wisdom and vision of President Deane Malott ready to encourage and support the renewal of Cornell’s Library and its re-creation as a mighty instrument for scholarship and research, Felix was the man to accomplish the goals that were being set forth. He was a dedicated scholar with a breadth of knowledge and scholarship that equipped him to guide and encourage his fellow scholars at Cornell

in the development of the bibliographical resources he knew that they would need for the multiplying academic programs that characterized the post-war academic scene.

He was, however, first and foremost a librarian. He immediately established himself at Cornell as a leader among the library staff, earning their affection as well as their respect. Major decisions were not matters to be mulled over, referred to committees, delayed pending a consensus, or passed along for the consideration of some higher authority. A decision was something to be decided upon, and with the wisdom and experience that he had accumulated and the keen judgment that never failed him, he was ready to act. The shift to the Library of Congress classification and its cataloging rules and processes is a case in point. It involved major long term expenditures of thousands of dollars but the benefits that were realized are here today and will continue into the age of automation.

This small tribute to the memory of Felix Reichmann must also acknowledge how he and his wife, Lilly Dörfler Reichmann, helped to enrich life at Cornell. Much has been said on happier occasions than this about his attributes as scholar, bookman and librarian, but those who knew him and felt close to him — and there were many — knew him, too, as a gracious, witty and cultured gentleman. He shared this aspect of himself with all — not just within a small circle. One would not describe him as an extrovert, but as a whole person he opened himself to all with whom he shared friendship. This happy condition was apparent particularly among the staff with whom he worked. He held them in high esteem, respected them as human beings and fellow workers and as friends — and they in turn valued and esteemed him. Remarkably even the humblest among us seemed to acquire through our association with him a share of the cultural and humane values that were a part of him.

Recognition of the tremendous work that Felix Reichmann was undertaking in rebuilding the Cornell University Library collections and immeasurably extending their scope came about very quickly among the librarians and the research and teaching faculties. Word soon spread to the academic library community across the country and Cornell and Reichmann acquired a national reputation that continues. It was somewhat longer before formal and official acknowledgement came, in 1964, with his being named by the university as Professor of Bibliography recognizing both his scholarship and his success in achieving the goals that he and Steve McCarthy had set seventeen years before.

The qualities and attributes he demonstrated in his professional career at Cornell as assistant director of the University Libraries and professor of bibliography were complemented by his grace and distinction as a husband, father and friend to many of us. We are happy that we may share his memory with his wife Lilly, whose friendship

we cherish; his daughter Ingrid Reichmann Matheson; and his many friends and colleagues at Cornell and throughout this country and abroad.

H. Peter Kahn, Stephen A. McCarthy, J. Gormly Miller