Heinrich Stammler (1912—2006)

Memorial service, Danforth Chapel, 10 February 2007, 10AM

Remarks by Marc L. Greenberg, Chair, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Kansas

Ursula Stammler, Heinrich’s charming and soft-spoken wife was kind enough to ask me to say a few words about Heinrich. When I came to Lawrence in 1990 to accept the assistant professor position in the KU Slavic Department, Heinrich and Ursula were among the first people to invite Marta and me into their home. At that time I knew of Heinrich primarily through his reputation as a Slavist and as an emeritus of the Slavic Department. Though we both came from different eras and different worldviews, we were united by some fundamental traits of personality. Each of us became deeply attached to cultures other than the ones in which we were raised. We were both bibliophiles, though I was unable to match at least one achievement in this regard that Heinrich had and I had not: he assembled a library whose items could be identified not only by date, author, title, format and ex libris, but also by the rich aroma of fine cigar smoke. We also shared a respect for traditional approaches to philology.

Books also linked us to people. We often think of our six degrees of separation as a metaphor for linking ourselves to people across the synchronic map. Heinrich allowed me to link just two steps away to the figures of a seemingly distant past. In one of my first conversations I mentioned that I could not get very much of my work done without a classic handbook of Balto-Slavic lexical correspondences by Reinhold Trautmann (1883—1951), a yellowed book in Fraktur typeface, published Heidelberg in the 1920s. “Ah, yes,” Heinrich told me, “Trautmann was one of my professors in Prague.”

Heinrich’s erudition and wide-ranging knowledge across the humanistic endeavor and including, but not limited to, the vast and variegated cultures of the Slavs, from the Balkans to Russia and to Poland and Prague, marked him as a great multiculturalist. His breadth of knowledge spanned theology, European philosophy, literature, and intellectual history. His skills ran the gamut from literary analysis to translation and the writing of fine poetry. As all humanists understand, the human experience cannot be described nor understood from a single vantage point.

Heinrich was the first chair and an early builder of the Slavic Department at the University of Kansas, a Department that has grown and changed in the succeeding decades along with epochal changes in the region it studies, and yet in so doing, it has carried on Heinrich’s intellectual legacy. Now, as then, the Department pursues understanding of the world through the lens of the Slavic experience, the civilization that links the West and the East, and embraces interdisciplinary approaches to its subject matter. It is my fervent hope that Heinrich will look upon us with approval from his new vantage point.