Professor Siegbert Prawer

Leading authority on German literature and culture whose theatrical lectures held his students in thrall

Siegbert Prawer was Taylor Professor Emeritus of German Language and Literature at Oxford and a Fellow of The Queen's College. Few scholars in his subject covered so wide a range, from German poetry to comparative literature to film, nor was more international-ly recognised, from America via Europe to Australia. He held visiting professorships at New York, Chicago, Helsinki, Stockholm, Brussels, Hamburg, Canberra and Dunedin. He was more than once invited to stay in the United States, but never succeeded. There were accolades and off-erances, including honorary fellowships of his Cambridge and Oxford colleges and honorary doctorates from universities in Britain and Germany. He was made a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA) and a member of the German Academy of Language and Literature (DRL).

Son of a Polish father and a German mother, Siegbert Salomom Prawer was 14 when his family left Nazi Germany, probably late in 1939. As a boy in Cologne he had witnessed Kristallnacht and seen Hitler open an SA building. The family arrived in Britain safe but penniless. This led to their Coventry姑娘, where the family, including Siegbert, went to school at the city's King Henry VIII. After the bomb- ing of Coventry (he remembered dumping an unexploded fire-bomb in a bucket of sand) the school was evacuated to Oxford, where he and a friend were billeted on the Devey family's fish-and-chip shop, a connection he maintained ever after.

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Prawer made his name as a scholar of poetry but his wide interests included Thackeray, Marx, Freud and the cinema ever after. As a performer, an aspect of the scholar's work too little recognised in today's research-obsessed academy. He had acted in minor roles at Cambridge, and folk-memory has it that he took a prominent part in German productions at Birmingham. There seem to be no records of this, but with his pale, fine- drawn features and beard he can be readily imagined as the severe King Philip in Schiller's Don Carlos or — properly to balance the account — as the humane Nathan in Lessing's Nathan-on the Wiese. He never played a Shake- spearean role, to his regret since he was devoted to Shakespeare, in earlier days staying every year at Stratford to take in the new season's productions. The part he did play, as an every sense dramatic comeback in his very last year, was the Lord in a student production of Goethe's Faust Part One in Queen's College. As a scholar, Prawer first made his name as a reader of poetry, especially of the lyrics and satire of Heine, to whom he returned much later with exhaustive surveys of the writer's "Jewish comedy" and his treatments of "Frank- enstein's Island" (English). Equally comprehensive was the study of Karl Marx's knowledge and use of world liter- ature, echoed on a smaller scale in his last book, on Freud's English literary culture. In all these studies the method remained the same: a meticulous tracing of motifs that built up chap- ter by chapter a coherent mosaic. Early and late he wrote on film, which had been his passion since contriving as a very small boy to creep into Cologne cinemas. He kept up an enormous collec- tion of films, and was as knowledgeable about the old as he was continually eager to see the new. He also made a brief biography of one of the Merchant-Ivory films on which his sis- ter the novelist Ruth Prawer Jhabvala collaborated two lines as the questioner in an interview in "Hollywood End." If film had been part of university syllabuses earlier, it might well have become his prime specialisation.

In retirement he wrote as least as many books as when in post, his pro- ductivity scarcely hampered by the long slow progress of cancer. Each new book was to be "his last," a declaration colleagues met with increasing scepticism. Almost as an aside, he wrote a whole trilogy on Thackeray, a not very fashionable subject to which he was at- tracted by a fascination with graphic art as embodied in the novelist's own illustrations. He listed drawing as his pastime in Who's Who, and was indeed no mean artist, as witness the portraits published fortnightly over some years in the Oxford Magazine, and the rogues' gallery of fellows of Queen's, images swiftly captured during the less demanding days of governing body business. When felling went right he would sign off letters and notes to friends with a lighting self-assurance.

He took lasting pleasure in the col- lege community at Queen's. For several years in retirement he served as Dean of Degrees, always preceding the ceremony with a luncheon talk to the graduands and their families on some aspect of the college or the university. Until the very last he made an effort to get to special college occasions, and still made an evening appearance on Thursdays, talking to people over breakfast, coffee and lunch, always in the picture about their family, always supportive and interested in the progress of their work, which he could discuss with a mind blessedly still as sharp as ever. These many relationship- ships with colleagues and college staff made him universally popular, indeed loved. All in all, these autumnal years were a triumph. They culminated in a public lecture, given in the college's new Shulman auditorium, on a Yiddish poet he had come to Yiddish as a new enthusiasm late in life. He announced it as his last public appearance. This time he was right.

In 1949 Siegbert Prawer married Helga Schaefer, who had also escaped from Nazi Germany by the skin of her teeth. They had two sons and two daughters, the first-born, David, lost during the London years in a particular- ly tragic car accident aged 17. Throughout their marriage, Helga in her own clinical- ical tradition facilitated the life of the spirit, organising Siegbert's academic travels so that for him they were just the relaxation of his study. She died in 2002.

In his last decade Sieg- bert formed a happy partner- ship with the former Queen's librarian, Helen Powell. She gave him mobility and love and cared for him with devotion up to the end.

S.S. Prawer, scholar of literature and culture, was born on February 19, 1925. He died on April 5, 2015, aged 87.