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WILLIAM E. WRIGHT
IN MEMORIAM
1926 – 2017

William E. Wright – known to all of his friends and associates as Bill – was among that pioneering generation of Fulbrighters who participated in the earliest years of Austrian-American exchanges in the early 1950s. After graduating from high school in California in 1944, he enrolled in the U.S. army and starting in July 1945 served for two years as a non-commissioned intelligence officer with the U.S. Fourth Armored Division that participated in the U.S. occupation of Germany and Austria as a constabulary force. Already obviously an aspiring historian while he was stationed in Vienna, he purchased 300 Josephinian-era brochures for next to nothing, which he later donated to the University of Minnesota's archival collection. He reported that heating material was so scarce in postwar Vienna that people in their desperation resorted to burning 18th century books and documents.

After returning to the United States and completing a B.S. in Business Administration at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 1951, he decided to do graduate work in history, completed his M.A. in 1953, and applied for a Fulbright award that brought him and his wife, Norma, to Vienna for in 1954-55 for a year of archival research for his doctoral dissertation. He enrolled at the University of Vienna as an *außerordentlicher Hörer* and dedicated much of his time to archival work on the reign of Emperor Joseph II at the *Hofkammerarchiv*.

As a Fulbright grantee, he experienced the last year of the Allied occupation of Austria and the quadripartite division of Vienna. On May 15, 1955, he was in the crowd that assembled at the Belvedere Palace, where the Austrian State Treaty was to be signed. He witnessed Austrian

Foreign Minister Leopold Figl's appearance on the balcony of the palace with the other signatories of the document, which Figl demonstrably held up to show to the assembled below and proclaimed: *Österreich ist frei!*

Bill Wright returned to the University of Colorado to complete his dissertation in 1957 under the supervision of S. Harrison Thomson, a specialist on the later Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation in Bohemia who – along with Hans Kohn and Arthur J. May—was one of the pioneers of American scholarship on the Habsburg Empire and successor states. He then was hired by the University of Minnesota as an instructor of history, and this appointment began his association with an institution which he served in a wide variety of different capacities until he became an emeritus professor 36 years later in 1993.

Bill Wright returned to Vienna as a young associate professor and a Fulbright research scholar for the 1962-63 academic year, where he did extensive archival research for a historical biography of Emperor Joseph II. In his final report, he noted: “Almost all Austrian history is an open field to American historians; certainly anything earlier than the nineteenth century is nearly untouched by English speaking historians. . . . I intend to publish the biography and also a book concerning the agrarian reforms of Joseph II in Bohemia.”

The later project came to fruition in his monograph *Serf, Seigneur, and Sovereign: Agrarian Reform in 18th Century Bohemia* that appeared at the University of Minnesota Press in 1966. As his student James W. Miller has observed, he was the first English speaking scholar “to describe the development of serfdom in Bohemia over the two hundred years prior to Maria Theresa’s accession to the throne and how the reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph altered traditional relations between the peasantry, their lords and the monarchy. Although focused on Bohemia, the book was broader than that — it made clear just how radical a program Josephinism was.” One of Wright’s enduring interests was the relationship between agriculture and modernization, and this book on enlightened agricultural reform was a preliminary study for Wright’s more ambitious and extensive project: a biography of Emperor Joseph II.

During Bill Wright’s tenures as a Fulbright grantee in Vienna he made many life-long personal and professional friends and established a broad network of institutional contacts. His stays in Vienna informed his sophisticated understanding of Austrian history and institutions, and they were the source of his profound and enduring interest in Austrian culture and Central Europe in the broadest sense of the word.

As an aspiring young scholar, Bill Wright had many talents and interests. He was an enthusiastic teacher of Habsburg and contemporary Austrian history on the graduate and undergraduate levels

as well as German and Central European history and a regime of surveys of European history. The PhD candidates he supervised remember him for his unflagging support and encouragement, his meticulous professional rigor, and his good humor and personal warmth.

After his second stint as a Fulbrighter in Vienna, he devoted an increasing amount of his time and energy to university service and administration. He became the Director of Graduate Studies for the Department of History in 1967, the Associate Dean of the University's Office for International Programs in 1969, and Associate to the Vice-President for Academic Affairs and the Director of International Programs the following year. In this capacity, he played an instrumental role in the development of the University of Minnesota's exchange and research programs in the 1970s. He worked across disciplines throughout the University on programming, which as a land grant institution had special interests in agriculture and development, and he travelled globally to develop institutional contacts and partnerships.

His tireless promotion of international education included service on the boards of a number of professional organizations, including the Board of Directors of the Council for International Educational Exchange. This pioneering work on the internationalization of university programming in the 1970s was time consuming and ultimately "came at the expense of his research agenda, . . ." as his former student James W. Miller has observed: "Though he [Wright] often expressed regret that he did not have more time to write, he never regretted the priorities that led to this circumstance."

However, Bill Wright's interest in Austria did not wane during his professional excursion into international educational administration in the 1970s. His expertise in Austrian history and program development served the University of Minnesota well in 1976 when the Austrian government decided to seize the American Bicentennial as an occasion to thank the United States for the generous support Austria received after 1945. The Austrian government raised \$ 1 million that was to be gifted to a worthy bilateral cause in the United States. This initiative resulted in the idea of establishing a center for the promotion of Austrian Studies in the United States, and fifteen universities submitted proposals in a competition to do so.

Bill Wright was instrumental in putting the University of Minnesota's proposal together, and it was short-listed in the competition with Yale and Stanford and then chosen on its own merits, including the existing interdisciplinary strengths of its faculty in Central and Eastern European studies, the University of Minnesota's central location in the American heartland, and its reputation as a top-notch public university that made it a logical partner for public institutions in Austria.

Wright served as the inaugural director of the Center for Austrian Studies from 1977 through 1988

– a position which allowed him to combine his scholarly interests with his organizational skills – and one can still see his signature in the architecture and the programming of the Center of Austrian Studies today. He positioned the Center as a multidisciplinary unit in the College of Liberal Arts and sought out an equally multidisciplinary faculty affiliation and advisory board.

He also managed to encourage R. John Rath, the founder and editor of the *Austrian History Yearbook* and emeritus professor from Rice University in Houston, to relocate to Minnesota, where Rath and the AHY found a new institutional home and anchor. This dual migration also made the CAS the seat of the Society for Austrian and Habsburg History. Bill Wright had a fine set of editorial skills which subsequently manifested themselves in his tenure as the editor of the *Austrian History Yearbook* from 1982 through 1989 as well as in three books of proceedings he edited that emanated from the nine international conferences he organized during his tenure as director.

In 1982, he also negotiated the acquisition of the personal library and papers of Robert A. Kann (Rutgers), the Austrian émigré historian recognized as the foremost expert of his generation on multinationalism in the Habsburg Empire, and Kann's papers found a new home in Special Collections at the University of Minnesota's Wilson Library. Wright also was responsible for the conception of an annual Kann Memorial Lecture Series that was inaugurated by Carl Schorske in 1984 and has become an institution in its own right.

As the inaugural director of the Center for Austrian Studies, Bill Wright always relied on his Fulbright network, and his appointment brought him back into contact with Willy Schlag: the legendary, first executive secretary of the Fulbright Commission in early 1950s when Wright was a student in Vienna. Schlag had a distinguished career that advanced him to the rank of *Sektionschef* at the Austrian Ministry of Science. His agendas included the promotion of international scientific and scholarly collaboration, and he had been involved in the idea of establishing a center for Austrian studies from the very start. Wright and Schlag became congenial partners.

If one looks back on many the different talents of Bill Wright and the stations of his career, a coherent pattern emerges. His avid scholarly interest in Austria and his association with the University of Vienna were key formative influences. The intermediate phase of his career focused on university service and the advancement of international education and research agendas. Then he drew his scholarly interests, his administrative expertise, and his personal and professional networks together to found the Center of Austrian Studies at the University of Minnesota.

Bill Wright had the professional distinction of having a big project and ultimately achieving what he set out to do. He established a center for the promotion of the study of Austria that would serve not only students and scholars from the University of Minnesota or the Midwest or the United

States but also an international community. He created an interdisciplinary forum conceived to facilitate the kinds of encounters and conversations that inform scholarly enquiry, good research, and quality publications, and he provided his successors with an organization with sound foundations upon which they have continued to build. He was one of those giants upon whose shoulders we stand.

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