Among Harvard's Libraries: A librarian's challenge

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A LIBRARIAN’S CHALLENGE

Kenneth E. Carpenter

Michael P. Olson, Librarian for Germanic Collections in Widener Library, is making a powerful statement about the need for more funds for Germanic acquisitions, for he himself has just established two book funds.¹ Income from these endowments will buy publications from the German, Scandinavian, and Dutch-speaking areas of Europe.

By coincidence Mike Olson has made these gifts to Harvard as this issue of the Harvard Library Bulletin goes to press with two articles related to Archibald Cary Coolidge, who also built the Harvard Library with his own funds, beginning in the 1890s when he was a professor of history and continuing into the period from 1910 to 1928 during which he was also director of the University Library. Among the many acquisitions that Coolidge himself made possible were those that form the core of the Germanic collections, specifically the von Maurer library of 10,000 titles and the Hohenzollern Collection, the name given to the 10,000 volumes paid for by Coolidge during several years of the first decade of this century.

Others who have worked daily within the walls of the Library have also supported the Library with endowed funds, not to mention gifts for current use. Samuel Shapleigh’s bequest of 1801 was the first. Michael Olson’s gifts of 1995 are the most recent.² Mike explains his motivation:

I would like to make clear in the strongest possible way the importance of continuing to increase the endowed funds available for building Harvard’s collections of German, Dutch, and Scandinavian-language publications. They are great now; the need is to insure the capacity to build on strength.³

It is not possible to say exactly how many of the Harvard University Library’s nearly thirteen million volumes are Germanic, but it seems that fourteen percent are. These serve very well the students in the eighty-five courses offered by the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, plus those offered in the History Department and in others.

What is less well known is that the Germanic collections serve scholars around the world, for their breadth gives them a particular utility. Each national library in the Germanic realm does an excellent job of acquiring domestic publications, but each covers inconsistently foreign materials, even the publications of other Germanic countries. Harvard’s collections in the humanities and the social sciences cover the entire Germanic realm in depth. Harvard’s Germanic collections are virtually nonpareil.

In absolute terms, however, more should be collected at Widener. Titles currently published in the Germanic realm exceed 5,000,000 per year—an all-time high. The German book trade enjoyed its most productive year ever in 1994. Just under 72,000 titles were published, an increase of five percent since the previous year. The Austrian book trade produced 7,000 publications in 1994, an increase of forty-seven percent from the previous year.

Electronic publication, though increasingly important, has definitely not overtaken print.

Prices also cause anxiety about keeping up. The publishing situation in eastern Germany has stabilized, meaning that its titles, no longer the very inexpensive productions of the German Democratic Republic, now bear prices in line with western German book prices. Additionally, the German mark (likewise, incidentally, the Swiss franc and the Dutch guilder) is at its strongest versus the dollar.

¹ Three bring to forty-three the book funds that support Widener’s Germanic collections.
² A list includes Charles Berlin, Paul H. Buck, Oscar Handlin, Carol Johnson, William Vernon Jackson, Frederick G. Kegner, Walter Lichtenstein, Jean Neudell, Foster M. Palmer, and Edwin E. Williams.
Among Harvard's Libraries

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY

THE EVA AND CLARENCE OLSON GERMANIC BOOK FUND

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY

THE "FRIENDS OF THE HARVARD GERMANIC COLLECTIONS" BOOK FUND

These facts would be of no concern if the titles were irrelevant, but Germanic publishing is rich in titles of immediate and long-term interest to Harvard. In fiscal year 1995, Widener ordered 22,000 monographs and received 16,000 serial items. These latter entail costly and long-term commitments. More funds are needed—for today and fifty years from now.

I personally want to do my share in seeing to it that Harvard can buy the Germanic publications it needs, but I also want to enlist the assistance of others.

One endowed fund that Mike has just established is the Eva and Clarence Olson Germanic Book Fund in memory of his parents. The other is the Friends of the Harvard Germanic Collections Book Fund.

Mike would especially like this latter to grow, and to that end he has established the Friends of the Harvard Germanic Collections. Annual membership is $50. Members will receive an annual report on the collections as well as occasional publications. Gifts enter the Friends of the Harvard Germanic Collections Book Fund, the income of which is used to develop Widener's Germanic collections.

Those who become a Friend of the Harvard Germanic Collections will soon receive announcement of a particular challenge. In April of 1996 Mike is going to run in the 100th Boston Marathon, and he is asking for pledges of $100 to be paid when (not if!) he finishes the race, plus an additional pledge of $1 for each minute run under four hours. He thinks a realistic goal is $30, which means that a "100th Boston Marathon pledge" could total approximately $130. Payment from pledges will be added to the principal of the Friends of the Harvard Germanic Collections Book Fund.

Mike has never before run in a marathon, but his commitment to the continued excellence of the collections is such that he will surely complete the race. Richard De Gennaro, Roy E. Larsen Librarian of Harvard College, thinks so. "Mike Olson's initiative to establish the Friends of the Harvard Germanic Collections is superb. I'm delighted to be one of the first to sponsor his run for the Friends in the 100th Boston Marathon next April. A bet on Mike is a sure win for Widener. Join me!"

Mike, I join Dick De Gennaro. Count me in too, and I'll also, from a comfortable chair, cheer you on as you run up Heartbreak Hill.

Readers interested in becoming a Friend of the Harvard Germanic Collections, making a "100th Boston Marathon pledge," or establishing a Germanic Book Fund, should contact Michael P. Olson, Librarian for Germanic Collections, Harvard University, Widener 197, Cambridge, MA 02138 (tel. 617-495 2426; fax 617-495 0403; e-mail olson@fas.harvard.edu).