ROY M. MERSKY

A New Yorker by birth—he lived in a fifth-floor walkup in the Bronx—Roy (or RMM, as he was known to legions of librarians across the country and the world) went on to see the world, beginning with his service in World War II. He had initially failed his eye exam when called up for induction in late 1943, so, in his words, “I remember I went back, [having] memorized the eye exam. I could have been a 4-F, but I wanted to go in” and take part in the struggle against the Nazis. After training in South Carolina and England, he was sent to Europe in November 1944, where, as part of Patton’s Third Army, he took part in the Battle of the Bulge as a 19-year-old infantryman. Mersky received a Purple Heart, and his medal for having served in the European Theatre of Operations has four bronze stars in it to signify the four major campaigns he fought in. Though “I said I wanted to go into the military for the social-political-Jewish reasoning, once I was there and once we were fighting, all that became oblivious and it was just day-to-day survival.... Everything was just routine and this was life, with the one exception that all through this period I was planning my life afterward of coming back to college and the university.”

On his return to the United States, however, he first worked as an organizer for the United Electrical Workers Union. Although he had enrolled in NYU and taken pre-med courses prior to his induction, he decided to resume his studies at the University of Wisconsin, “which had the reputation for the best courses” in subjects dealing with organized labor. Also, “I wanted to get out of New York as fast as I could.”

After getting his undergraduate degree in labor economics, he went on to the University of Wisconsin Law School. While in law school, he took a job working in the law library. “[T]owards the end of my law degree[,] I realized that I didn’t know enough about law to be a lawyer at that time,” so he enrolled in the library school. Still, he did practice law for a few years in Madison and Milwaukee—it might be relevant that Wisconsin automatically admits into the bar any graduate of the University’s law school—before taking a job with the Milwaukee Public Library “doing adult education work, guiding people in recommended types of reading.” He was also posted to the Legislative Reference Office for the City of Milwaukee, where, among other things, he wrote speeches for the Mayor. In any event, he had found his calling as a librarian who literally loved working with people and introducing them to the riches available in a well-run library.

From Milwaukee, he went in 1954 to the Yale Law School (where he took a cut in pay from $4,100 to $3,600); he both worked as a reference librarian and took courses in legal history from Samuel Thorne, then the director of the Yale library. He left Yale in 1959 to become the librarian for the Supreme Court of the State of Washington at close to double his Yale salary. From Washington he went to the University of Colorado in 1963. In 1965 UT Law School Dean Page Keeton, having been, perhaps unwisely, told of Mersky’s excellence by a
proud dean of the University of Colorado Law School, decided to lure him to Texas. Mersky was in fact very happy at Colorado, whose officials supported him when, among other things, he marched in Selma with Martin Luther King. Not wanting to leave Colorado, Mersky "decided to ask for the world," including a "big book budget" and "additional staff." "[E]verything I asked for" Keeton gave him. Indeed, Dean Keeton solicited a $100,000 gift for the law library from the Dougherty Foundation. Albert Alschuler commented that he happened to run into Charles Alan Wright, then visiting at Harvard, the day that Alschuler decided to accept an offer from U.T. "Charley replied that I'd accepted on a great day for UT, as he had just learned that America's greatest law librarian also had accepted an offer to come to Austin." This wasn't hyperbole.

In spite of Mersky's initial doubts about coming to Texas, it is clear that it became his home, where he flourished in every possible way. Along with his law school duties, he found the time and energy to become president of the Central Texas Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, the UT chapter of the American Association of University Professors, and the UT chapter of the Texas Association of College Teachers. But, of course, he will be best remembered at the law school for fulfilling even the most exaggerated expectations that Dean Keeton might have had. At his death, Mersky was the Harry M. Reasoner Regents Chair in Law and director of research, possibly the only law librarian in the country to hold an endowed professorial chair.

Mersky presided over the growth of the Law Library, which now has well over one million books. But what was most notable, from the perspective of the grateful faculty, was not the sheer number of books, but, rather, the remarkable ethos of service that Mersky instilled in his staff. Each faculty member was given a library liaison, which, obviously, made legal research immeasurably easier. As Alschuler put it, "He and the staff he trained not only met every research need but had an uncanny ability to know what we library users needed before we did." And the spirit of service extended well beyond those who were lucky enough to be Mersky's colleagues at UT. As UT history professor Julie Hardwick put it, "always note to my students that the Law Library provides hands down the best service on campus," and it didn't matter whether the person seeking service was an undergraduate or a faculty member. Many people who sent messages to the UT law school's web site memorializing RMM, http://www.utexas.edu/law/news/2008/mersky/, were non-Texans who had met him at a conference, or during one of his trips abroad, or, indeed, had never actually met him but, nonetheless, gave witness to the genuine interest he took in them and their work, mentoring from afar as well as at home. "He was probably the most famous law librarian in the history of legal education," said Larry Sager, dean of The University of Texas School of Law. This, too, is no hyperbole.

Surely one reason for his fame was the role he played in training many people who went on to become directors of law libraries elsewhere. He was something of a missionary with regard to conveying his ideas about how modern law libraries should be organized and run, and many people at places far away from Texas benefit from the lessons that he taught his librarians.

RMM was very definitely a writer as well as the facilitator of others' writing. He was well known to generations of law students as the co-editor of Fundamentals of Legal Research, now in its 8th edition. But, hearkening back to his interest in legal history, he became a devotee of judicial biography; along with studies of many Supreme Court justices, he co-authored a 1993 book on the 26 unsuccessful nominees to that bench. He was working on Unknown Justices with William Bader at the time of his death. He always took great pleasure in meeting Justices and cherished a collection of photographs that covered the walls of his office.

As one might expect, RMM attained many honors and awards as his career flourished. He was named a "Mover and Shaker 2003," by the Library Journal, as one among the more than 50 of the most innovative librarians working today in libraries across the U.S. and Canada. Other honors include being inducted as a Life Member of the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation in 2002, receiving the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Marian Gould Gallagher Distinguished Service Award in 2005, the AALL's Presidential Certificate of Merit in 2006, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Library and Information Studies Alumni Association's Centennial Celebration Alumnus of the Year Award in 2006.

Mersky is survived by his wife, Rosemary Bunning-Mersky; and by three daughters: Lisa, Deborah, Ruth Mersky Pool, the children of his first marriage to Deena Mersky; and their granddaughters Sophia Burns and Grace and Rebekah Pool. He is also survived by a sister, Bernice Eisler.

Befitting his legendary status and manifold accomplishments, Mersky is buried in the Texas State Cemetery.
This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Sanford V. Levinson (chair), Guy Wellborn, and Robert Peroni.

Distributed to the dean of the School of Law, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on January 22, 2009. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, WMB 2.102, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.