DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR WOLFGANG F. MICHAEL

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Wolfgang F. Michael, professor, Germanic studies, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
WOLFGANG F. MICHAEL

Wolfgang Friedrich Michael was born on February 23, 1909, in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. He died on July 9, 1994, in Austin.

Professor Michael was the son of Wolfgang Michael, a professor of English history, and Else Michael, née Wehrenpfennig, a schoolteacher. He pursued Germanistic and Anglistic studies and history at the Universities of Freiburg, Berlin, Marburg, and Munich, receiving a doctorate in theatre history at the University of Munich under the direction of Hans Heinrich Borcherd in 1934. His studies were undertaken primarily to meet his family’s expectations. (Two brothers also became professors, Franz H. Michael in Far Eastern studies at Georgetown University and Walther P. Michael in economics at Ohio State University.) His first love, theatre (both acting and directing), pursued first in family productions, then when in school and at university, led him to enroll in the Max Reinhardt program at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, where he primarily studied with Richard Gerner and passed the state examination qualifying him as an actor and director in 1936. Since his father was Jewish, he was not allowed to practice his chosen profession and emigrated to England, where he taught German for two years.

On a vacation in Switzerland he met Hadassah Posey from Philadelphia. They married in 1938 and moved to the United States. They had three children, Hadassah, Dorothea, and Felton. The marriage ended in divorce in 1951. He taught German at Chestnut Hill College and some classes at Bryn Mawr. Toward the end of World War II he translated captured documents about jet engines (which was, as he said, like “translating from one foreign language to another” for him) and tutored army counterintelligence agents in German. For a decade he had regarded his teaching as a stop-gap measure preparatory to a return to Germany to pursue his true calling in the theatre. Eventually, however, it became clear to him that he should pursue an academic career. Articles on Goethe, Thomas Mann, and medieval religious drama published between 1944 and 1946 witness to this change of goals. During the summer of 1946, when he was teaching at Johns Hopkins University, a colleague, Arno Schirokauer, recommended him to The University of Texas.

The move to Texas marked a new beginning in a career of teaching, scholarship, and service that continued for 48 years. Upon arriving at The University of Texas, he began to concentrate on late medieval and early modern German literature, especially the history of the theatre. However, he never gave up his enthusiasm for Thomas Mann, whom he had met and with whom he corresponded, as the author was researching his novella “Der Erwählte” (based on the Gregorius legend narrated by Hartmann von Aue). He published seven monographs, seven editions (the last one of which appeared in three volumes, posthumously), a textbook, some 40 articles, and some 75 reviews.

Most of the editions and the textbook were done with colleagues. Collaboration was a typical mode of work for

1 Title header corrected on June 5, 2001.
“Mike,” as he came to be known by most of his friends in Texas. In his teaching he also stressed cooperative work, both in his undergraduate conversation and composition courses and in his graduate courses on medieval and renaissance drama, Lessing, and the German novel. His work with students was not restricted to the classroom. During his long tenure as undergraduate adviser, and on his own, he was a frequent champion of students in their battles with the administration. Since he could be found in his office, which almost always had an open door, for long hours seven days a week (and since his home was open to them at other times), students and colleagues often dropped by to chat. He was unfailingly eager to discuss their concerns with them, dropping whatever task had been occupying him and picking it up afterwards without skipping a beat. Every Wednesday evening found him leading a Kaffeeklatsch for students and others interested in practicing spoken German (the so-called Deutschübende Gesellschaft). His devotion to this gathering was so great that on one occasion he showed up directly after returning from Houston, where he had been operated on for a malignant growth on his back. Every day at noon he met with whoever came for German conversation over lunch at the Stammtisch (which was first developed by his colleague Stanley N. Werbow in the summer of 1956, but which Mike kept going for the next four decades). In a very real sense it can be said that he did his best teaching and certainly his main mentoring outside the classroom. One reflection of his intense concern with students is the relatively large number of MA theses and PhD dissertations he supervised (thirty-one of the former; fourteen of the latter). He continued teaching until his death.

Shortly after he came to UT Austin, his chairman, Cecil Pollard, perhaps knowing of his interest in theatre and that he had directed a performance of Lessing’s Minna von Barnhelm while in Philadelphia, suggested it would be nice if he directed a student play. From 1947 to 1986 he did so, and the productions, ambitious from the start (1947, Jedermann, by Hugo von Hofmannsthal; 1948, Faust I, by Wolfgang von Goethe), became ever more elaborate. He devoted enormous energy to coaching students’ pronunciation and rehearsing for months each spring. (See www.utexas.edu/depts/german/main.html for a list of his productions.) Some former actors have gone on to prominent positions in theatre and academia; all, however, have benefited from a truly intensive immersion in German and in public performance. Here, too, Mike worked with colleagues and students. George Schulz-Behrend, Robert Nowicki, Hubert Heinen, and David Price, successively, helped with reservations and ticket sales; numerous students and colleagues helped with coaching. For a play production in 1951, Professor Schulz-Behrend suggested that his student, Marian Pendergrass, help with costumes. She and Mike married in 1952, and she became his set and costume designer and creator, his research assistant, his constant companion, and a major force in supporting Stammtisch and Deutschübende Gesellschaft, which she continued to do for several years after his death.

Marian was there from the first in the creation and development of the Texas Association for German Students, the brainchild of Sister Joan of Arc of Our Lady of the Lake College, which was brought into fruition and sustained by Mike’s efforts, supported by Gilbert Jordan of SMU and Theodore Alexander of Texas Tech. This statewide organization for students of German (somewhat misleadingly titled to provide an acronym) originally provided a forum in which college students could perform and view each other’s performances of plays. However, after the Sputnik era saw the initiation of German instruction in high schools, across the state other contests and activities were developed to bring high school and middle school students in, and they eventually dominated the annual conventions. Mike and Marian not only helped organize and direct these conventions, they also served faithfully as contest judges. The organization’s paper, TAGS, came to have six issues each academic year. Its first editor, in 1953, was Marian’s sister, Ruth Pendergrass. After moving to SMU for several years, it returned to the sponsorship of The University of Texas in 1957. Soliciting and editing contributions from students and others was an additional chore Mike threw himself into with gusto, not hesitating to call in help from friends and colleagues. On one occasion, upon a visit by Konrad Adenauer to then Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson, Mike wangled a press pass for himself and several students. He in his crumpled suit and habitual sandals, and they in their jeans, stood in sharp contrast to the buttoned-down professional press corps. With TAGS, too, Marian, a trained journalist and longtime instructor in the Department of Journalism, assisted from the beginning. In time, she took much of the burden of working with editors and staff, initiating contributions, and overseeing production from Mike’s shoulders. The organization and the paper outlived Mike by several years, but eventually both were terminated.

Publications through 1989 are listed in the festschrift Word and Deed. German Studies in Honor of Wolfgang F. Michael. Edited by Thomas E. Ryan and Denes Monostory. Bern: Peter Lang, 1992, pp. 291-96. His articles treat for the most part Thomas Mann and medieval and Reformation drama, though a controversial article on
Tellheim in Lessing’s Minna von Barnhelm may have been his personal favorite. (A picture of him as Riccaut from the 1975 production of the play graces the cover of his festschrift.) For more information and encomia by friends, see the entries under “Annual German Play” and “Faculty Who’s Who” on the web site of the Department of Germanic Studies (www.utexas.edu/depts/german/main.html). Among the many accolades he received over the years, the Verdienstkreuz I. Klasse, awarded by the Federal Republic of Germany in 1972, and the Goethe-Medaille, presented by the Goethe Institute in 1973, stand out, as does the Pro Bene Meritis Award presented by The University of Texas at Austin in the academic year 1988-89. The ultimate accolade, Mike would have felt, remains the fondness so many hundreds of his former students and colleagues have for him and the gratitude they feel for his efforts.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Hubert Heinen (chair), Walter Wetzels, and Peter Hess.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on March 13, 2001. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.
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