

Professor Siegbert Prawer

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

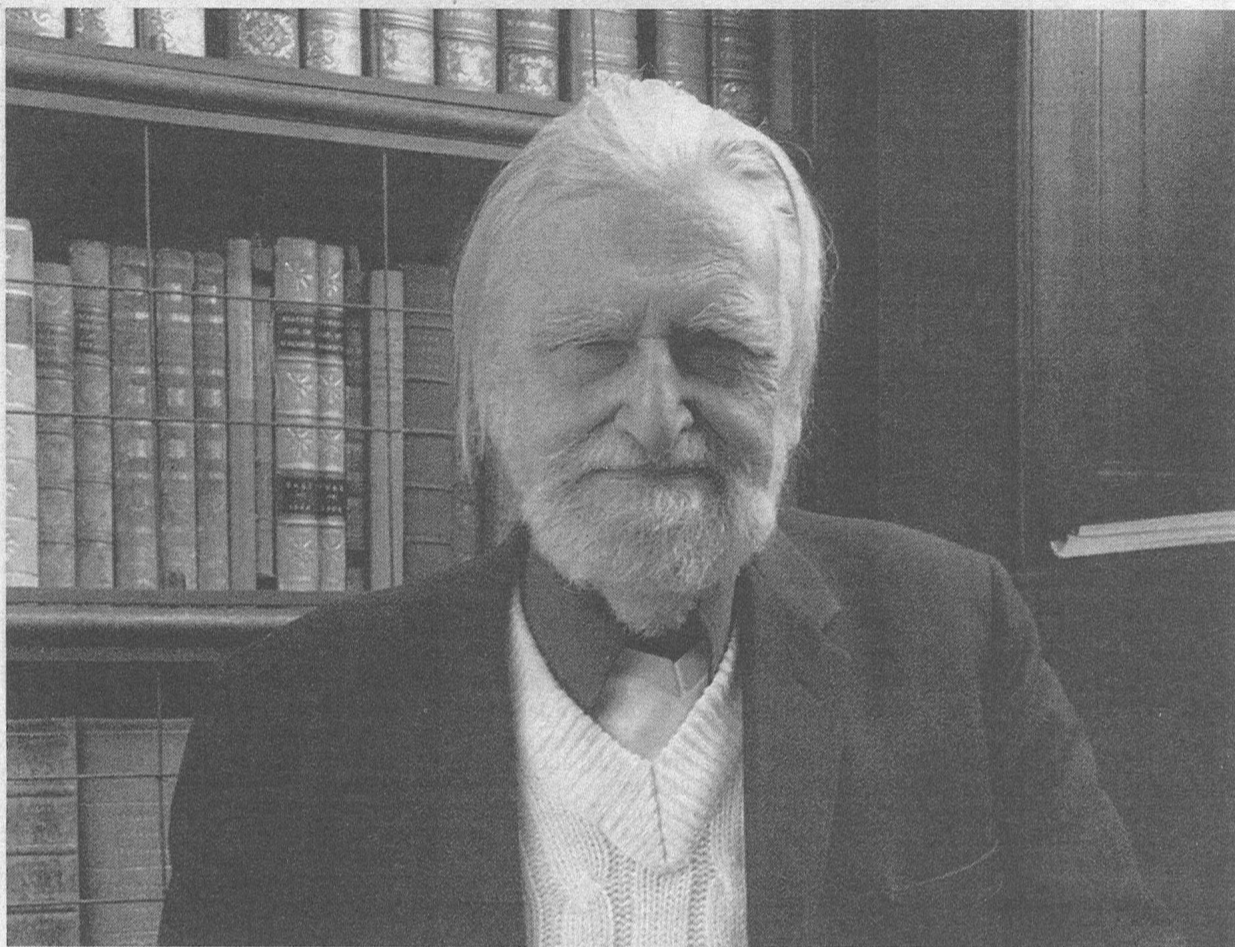
Siegbert Prawer was Taylor Professor Emeritus of German Language and Literature at Oxford and a Fellow of The Queen's College. Few scholars in his subject covered so wide a range, from German poetry to comparative literature to film; none was more internationally recognised, from America via Europe to Australasia. He held visiting professorships at New York, Chicago, Harvard, Pittsburgh, Brandeis, Hamburg, Canberra and Dunedin. He was more than once invited to stay on in the United States, but never succumbed. There were accolades and offices to match, 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 (1981) and a member of the German Academy of Language and Literature (1989).

Son of a Polish father and a German mother, Siegbert Salomon Prawer was 14 when his family left Nazi Germany, perilously 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 guarantor, the Avner family, taking Siegbert in and he went to school at the city's King Henry VIII. After the bombing of Coventry (he remembered dumping an unexploded fire-bomb in a bucket of sand) the school was evacuated to Alcester, where he and a friend were billeted on the Devey family's fish-and-chip shop, a connection he maintained ever after.

From being the bad boy of the class at his Cologne Jewish school (one can sense it, looking at Ludwig Meidner's drawing of him aged 11) he became an outstanding pupil at Henry VIII, winning a Charles Oldham Shakespeare scholarship to Jesus College Cambridge, where he first read English with E. M. W. Tillyard. Tillyard thought it unlikely he would get an academic post in English with that foreign accent, (though he was naturalised British, nobody would ever have thought Siegbert English). So he read Modern Languages in Part II of the Tripos, tutored in German by Leonard Forster. Then luckily, Roy Pascal spotted him when external examining at Cambridge, and offered him a lectureship in his German department at Birmingham. Far more than just his head of department, Pascal became a friend and inspiration for whom he retained a lifelong admiration and affection.

Prawer spent 15 years at Birmingham in a powerful department that included Richard Hinton Thomas, Wilfried van der Will and Martin Swales, before moving to the chair of German at Westfield College in the University of London, 1964-69, then to Oxford in 1970, where he stayed for the rest of his career.

Already at Birmingham his lectures and his readings of literary texts to the German Society (dramatically in a darkened hall, between two candles) were spell-binding, and he was sorely missed when away on sabbatical leave. At Oxford he could pack the Taylorian hall at nine o'clock in the morning for lectures on Mörike's poetry. He was and always remained in the best sense



Prawer made his name as a scholar of poetry but his wide interests included Thackeray, Marx, Freud and the cinema

a performer, an aspect of the scholar's work too little esteemed in today's research-obsessed academe. 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 Philipp in Schiller's *Don Carlos* or — properly to balance the account — as the humane Nathan in Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*. He never played a Shakespearean 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 in 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 chapel.

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 "Frankenstein's Island" (England). Equally comprehensive was the study of Karl Marx's knowledge and use of world literature, 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 chapter 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 an enormous collection of films, and was as knowledgeable about the old as he was continually

eager to see the new. He also made a brief bijou appearance in one of the Merchant-Ivory films on which his sister the novelist Ruth Prawer Jhabvala collaborated: two lines as the questioner in an audience in *Howards End*. If film had been part of university syllabuses earlier, it might well have become his prime specialisation.

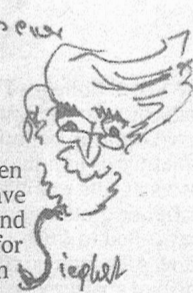
In retirement he wrote at least as many books as when in post, his productivity scarcely hampered by the long slow progress of cancer. Each new book was to be "his last", a declaration colleagues met with increasing scepticism. Almost as an aside, he wrote a whole trilogy on Thackeray, a not very fashionable subject to which he was attracted 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 items of governing body business. When failing eyesight made serious drawing impossible, he would still sign off letters and notes to friends with a lightning self-caricature.

He took lasting pleasure in the college community at Queen's. For several years in retirement he served as Dean of Degrees, always preceding the ceremony with a lunchtime 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 came in almost every week on Thursdays, talking to people over breakfast, coffee and lunch, always in

the picture about their families, 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 relationships 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 particularly tragic car accident aged 17. Throughout their marriage, Helga in best rabbinical tradition facilitated the life of the spirit, organising Siegbert's academic travels so that for him they were just the relocation of his study. She died in 2002.

In his last decade Siegbert formed a happy partnership with the former Queen's librarian, Helen Powell. She gave him mobility and love and cared for him with devotion to the end.



S.S. Prawer, scholar of literature and culture, was born on February 15, 1925. He died on April 5, 2012, aged 87