



(Courtesy: University of Maryland)

AUGUSTUS J. PRAHL

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(1901-1970)

Dr. Augustus J. Prah, Professor Emeritus of German at the University of Maryland, died on October 29, 1970. At his funeral service hundreds of colleagues and friends filled the large university chapel to bear witness to their deep respect and affection for this German-born American who had lived in Maryland and been associated with its universities for forty years. For the Society for the History of Germans in Maryland his death was the loss of the active and devoted associate of many years.

Augustus Johannes Prah was born in Lingenau, East Prussia, on October 18, 1901. His father was both schoolmaster and farmer, and young Augustus experienced the boyhood work and pleasures of country life near the Baltic Sea. His early home provided security and affection and the liveliness of growing up in a large family with one brother and six sisters. The devoutly Catholic religious traditions of the family were important and remained to the end a deeply sustaining part of his life.

Many of his years of education at the Braunsberg Gymnasium came during the First World War and its turbulent aftermath. Still looking to a career in his native land he entered the University of Königsberg as a student of law in 1923. By 1925, with the severe economic depression in Germany, he could not foresee a livelihood in the profession of law, and at the age of twenty-three made the difficult decision to emigrate to America.

After a short stay in New Jersey with a family friend he moved on to St. Louis. At first knowing relatively little English, which he had not studied in school, the young immigrant had to make a living with the jobs available—as an attendant in a hospital, as a kitchen worker and then a waiter in a large hotel in St. Louis. Within a year he was in charge of one of the large services of the hotel, where his employer wanted him to stay and make his career. In the course of his duties, however, he met Dean Otto Heller of Washington University, who saw other potentialities and persuaded and helped him to enter the Graduate School there.

Once launched on his American academic career Gus Prah (as his friends at the University of Maryland have always known him) moved rapidly. Having received his M. A. degree from Washington University in 1928, he became an instructor of German at Indiana University. There he taught for two years and saved money towards further gradu-

ate work. Ready to begin his doctoral studies in 1930 he came to one of the great graduate schools and centers of Germanic studies, The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. From his first year at The Hopkins he helped to support himself by teaching a class in German for the University of Maryland Pharmacy School in Baltimore, and in this modest role began his long association with the state university.

Specializing in German literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the direction of the eminent Professor Ernst Feise, Gus wrote his dissertation on the works of Friedrich Gerstäcker. It is not known how he came to choose this subject, but it may be supposed he felt a special sympathy with that German writer who, in the middle of the last century, travelled widely in the United States, wrote about the Mississippi River, and admired the political institutions of this country. As an emigrant from Germany who had become naturalized as an American citizen in 1932, Gus Prahl must have felt the even greater applicability to himself when he cited the ancient phrase "ubi bene, ibi patria" as Gerstäcker's *Leitmotiv*. When Gus Prahl received his Ph.D. degree in the depression year of 1933 academic positions were hard to find. Recognizing the quality of their new doctor, The Johns Hopkins German Department kept him on as an instructor from 1933 to 1936, and for many years thereafter invited him back to teach summer classes.

In 1936 he became an assistant professor of German at the University of Maryland in College Park. A new president had embarked upon an expansion of liberal arts departments, and Gus was one of several young scholars who came to the university as assistant professors in the late 1930's, saw it through various crises in the 1940's, and remained to serve and guide its programs in the much greater expansion of the two decades to follow. The year 1939 brought Gus' promotion to associate professor and also the event of greatest importance for his personal life, his marriage to the charming Vienna-born Hermine Eleanor Rickl. Welcomed by Gus' many friends at Maryland, Hermine Prahl helped make their home, both in College Park and in several temporary residences abroad, a place of delightful hospitality for thirty years to come.

During the 1930's and 1940's, before he became deeply involved in administrative duties, Gus was active in the publication of scholarly articles in professional journals such as *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, and *Monatshefte*, as well as articles for a wider public in the *American-German Review*. Some of the early writings are related to the dissertation, which came to be a book, *Gerstäcker und die Probleme seiner Zeit*, published in Weithem am Main in 1938. Articles on Hauptmann and others appear to be related to courses he was teaching, and one on "The Hagerstown Almanack" shows his interest in a part of Maryland heavily settled by farmers of German origin. Four articles grew out of a keen new interest in the nineteenth-century American Bayard Taylor, minister to Germany and translator of Goethe's *Faust*. Again, as in the studies on Gerstäcker, Gus was drawn to a writer who made a link between German and American cultures. His own desire to promote understanding

between Europe and America may be illustrated by two publications, one in the Basel *National-Zeitung* on "Die älteste Goethe-Gesellschaft der Welt in Amerika," and one in the *Arkansas Historical Magazine* on "Gerstäcker, the Frontier Novelist."

Another group of articles anticipate the long study of "The Turner" published in 1950 in *The Forty-Eighters*, a collection of essays edited by the late A. E. Zucker. The ideals of the Turner movement appealed especially to Gus Prahls, and his thorough survey of the *Turnvereine* in the United States recalled the dedication of German-Americans to the democratic political traditions of their new country, their active role in anti-slavery and other liberal movements, their patriotic service in the Civil War, and their courageous resistance to the hostility often encountered by German immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century.

Gus made his last visit to his old home in 1938, the year of his father's death. He found political developments in the Germany of the late thirties painful and distressing, and the war years brought grave concern for the families in East Prussia and Austria with whom communication was impossible. At the university there were heavier teaching loads and administrative duties as acting head of his department in 1945-46, the year of his promotion to the rank of professor.

Some wartime translation services had made Gus known to U. S. Navy officials in Washington, and in 1947 the Navy asked him to undertake a special mission as Head of the Naval Documents Section in Bremen. With a year's leave of absence from the university he accepted the mission with pride that he could be of service to his country in that aftermath of war.

Upon his return to College Park Gus was again called on for administrative duties as acting department head in 1948-49, a time of special problems with the flood of "G. I. Bill" students. As it turned out, the Naval mission had been only a prelude to a career in administrative work that was to require his primary energies in the two decades to follow.

Gus' appointment as Resident Dean in charge of a University of Maryland "Graduate Year Abroad" took the Prahls to Zurich in 1949-50. Still further administrative duties awaited him on his return to Maryland, where from 1950 to 1952 he again served as acting head of the Department of Foreign Languages.

Maryland's "Graduate Year Abroad" was succeeded by a much larger Overseas Program which still flourishes. Noting the great interest in Maryland's off-campus night classes in military bases near Washington, Pentagon officials saw how advantageous it would be to have similar classes available to military personnel stationed in overseas areas for long periods. The University of Maryland accepted the invitation to set up a "European Program" under its college for off-campus and adult instruction (later to be called University College). Its office in Heidelberg was the administrative center of what was to become a very large complex of university courses offered in American military bases throughout Western Europe, North Africa, and the Near and Middle East.

Gus Prahls's abilities were well known, and in 1952 he went to

Heidelberg as Associate Director of Maryland's European Program, which was then entering a period of rapid expansion. With the illness and death of the Director in that year, Gus took on the full load of the office, and in 1953 he was named Director.

The account of his service in Heidelberg would be the story, too long to be told here, of Maryland's European Program in those years. His correspondence with College Park reveals the extraordinary variety of daily problems that crossed the Director's desk—from the size of textbook packages the Air Force could transport to the establishment or closing out of university centers as diplomatic or military changes required. It was fortunate that in that period of rapid development the Program had a Director who was known, liked, and trusted by department heads in College Park, and whose reasonableness and quiet dignity could impress the non-academic officials with whom he had to work. That the Director so well knew the language and customs of Germany was an added advantage in view of the large number of German nationals who taught in or worked for the Program. His status as a professor helped in promoting a good relationship with the ancient University of Heidelberg.

Gus Prahl did not seek administrative offices and titles, but the University kept turning to him for such service. Those who have known him as an administrator have stressed his qualities of kindness, patience, warmth, and helpfulness. His courtesy and consideration were perhaps especially known to his staff assistants. They were devoted to him, and some of the most moving testimonials have come from secretaries or others who worked under his direction. When he encountered weakness or folly it was his disposition to be charitable: a letter from Heidelberg regarding a staff member's serious indiscretion ends with a characteristic, " I recommend that we give him another chance." Nevertheless, he would not have been the effective administrator he was if he had not had strength and forcefulness when they were required.

University College wanted Gus to stay on in Heidelberg as Director. That, however, would have committed him to indefinite residence abroad; and, much as he loved Heidelberg, he wanted to live in the United States, which he had chosen as his home many years before, and to return to the teaching which had been interrupted so often and so long. Back in College Park, his primary work during the years 1954 to 1956 was that of a teaching professor in his department.

When Gus entered graduate school in 1927, he had chosen a career in teaching, and it was as a teacher that he found his greatest professional and personal satisfaction. Even in later years of full-time responsibilities in the Graduate School office he chose to continue teaching at least one class every semester. His favorite courses were those in the works of Goethe for which he had a deeply personal feeling. Among his other courses in German literature, which range from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, he most often taught Schiller and German Romanticism. He directed many M. A. theses, and also willingly carried his share and more of the introductory courses, for he felt that these classes, often the only ones in German the students

could take, ought as far as possible to have experienced and knowledgeable teachers. His deep interest in the interaction of two literary cultures drew him to the interdepartmental program in Comparative Literature, and he developed a popular course in German and English classics of the Faust legend for larger classes of students who did not read German.

Teaching and residence in College Park were, however, to be interrupted again. In 1956 Pentagon officials invited Maryland to set up in the Far East an overseas academic program like the one in Europe. Vigorous administration was needed to overcome special difficulties not encountered in Europe and to get a strong program established. Gus was persuaded to go to Tokyo as the first Director of Maryland in the Far East.

The year in Japan turned out to be a pleasant one for the Prahl. It was most helpful for the University's interest that Gus established a cordial relationship with General L. L. Lemnitzer, then Commander-in-Chief in the Far East, who liked and respected the Director and gave strong support to the program. Gus's duties brought visits to other parts of Japan and to the other East Asian countries where American forces were stationed. He responded with enthusiasm to these areas and cultures far from both Europe and America and doubtless recalled that he had written years earlier of the great interest of both Goethe and Bayard Taylor in the Orient.

It would have been pleasant and financially advantageous to stay on in Tokyo at least another year. Before he had left College Park, however, Gus had made an agreement with the Dean of the Graduate School that he would enter that office the next year in the newly created position of Associate Dean, and the agreement was kept. The Graduate School appointment came at a critical and difficult time. In the late 1950's it was clear that graduate work in state universities was about to expand rapidly, and that at Maryland much of the new growth would come in the humanities and social sciences, the fields which were to be the special responsibility of the Associate Dean.

Over the next nine years department heads and faculty came to Gus' office with their requests and problems. There were also innumerable graduate students with academic or personal difficulties. They all found a remarkably relaxed atmosphere, patient understanding, and, whenever it was at all possible, action that solved problems. In his role as Secretary of the General Research Board Gus was especially helpful in finding financial assistance for his scholarly colleagues in the humanities, who he knew had few resources available outside the university. Many authors of books and articles of those years which acknowledge the assistance of the Research Board owe a very particular debt to Dean Prahl.

Outside the university itself his interests as professor and dean took him regularly to meetings of the Modern Language Association and graduate school organizations. He kept a close association with the German Embassy, whose cultural office was helpful in many ways to his students and colleagues. In 1960 he was invited with a few other

American professors of German to visit major universities in Germany as guests of the government at Bonn.

Over the years he was especially active in two local societies devoted to interests he shared. In the Goethe Society of Maryland and later the separate District of Columbia chapter he took an active role and frequently presented papers. Close ties with the Society for the History of Germans in Maryland began early in his residence in the State. In 1945 the 26th *Report* of the Society published his study of German Gymnastic Societies in Baltimore which was to be a part of the more comprehensive history of "The Turner" in 1950. He served on the Society's Executive Committee from 1951 to 1956, as Secretary from 1956 to 1962, as First Vice-President from 1962 to 1967, and then as President until his death. In his later years a number of his publications appeared in *The Report*—a history of the local Goethe Societies, an account of the distinguished scholars of German or Austrian birth who had been on the faculty of The Johns Hopkins, and several memorial tributes to members or friends of the Society.

For many close friends the warmest memories of Gus Prahls are those of his genial and affectionate place in the lives of their children. It had been a grief to the Prahls that they did not have children, but their warmth and generosity went out to an extraordinary number of godchildren and other youngsters. There had been generous and beautiful presents from Germany and Japan, and when the Prahls were "back home" there could be festive "dinners out" to celebrate birthdays and graduations. Although Gus liked most American ways, he was not happy that as the youngsters grew up the honored guest could not have a cheerful glass of beer or wine in a good restaurant with his godparents and parents. On vacations at Ocean City or Cape Cod Gus would join the youngsters' vigorous sport; and in some seasons he would lead the way with hardy vigor into forbiddingly cold ocean waters, putting to shame softer companions who had not been brought up in the Baltic north. Burdened as he was with university duties he found time to give tutorial lessons in German, to grown-ups who were going to Europe or to godchildren and other young friends. He taught the children elements of German suitable to their years and had them learn traditional songs and prayers. There was payment for these sessions: that is, Dean Prahls paid the youngsters with spending money as well as their favorite sweets for their faithfulness in coming to the lessons. Even if they have not kept up their German language in later years, they early came to know kindly German traditions of childhood and have the memory of the warmest and most generous teaching they will ever know.

Early in 1965 came a grim warning with his physician's diagnosis of a condition that could not be cured but might be temporarily checked by intervals of painful treatment. He accepted his new situation with calmness and courage, and except for the periods of treatment the Prahls continued their active and hospitable life. He did recognize that he would not be able to carry on the arduous duties of Associate Dean, and in 1966 he resigned from that office. Granted a sabbatical leave—his first, since he had not asked for one during the war decade

or when he had administrative responsibilities—he made his last visit to Germany in the spring of 1967.

For his last two years with the University he resumed a professor's full teaching load in German and Comparative Literature. Aware of failing strength in 1969, he submitted his request for retirement in June of that year. He had wished to go into retirement without ceremony, but he could not deny the desire of his colleagues for a testimonial occasion when they could present him with a thick folder of letters expressing the warm affection of those who had worked most closely with him. There were more formal citations from colleges and councils in recognition of his extraordinary services to the University of Maryland over thirty-three years, and a prompt and grateful action by the Board of Regents granting him the title of Professor Emeritus.

In his one year of retirement life he was able to fulfill an old desire and make a tour of the American West. There were stops along the way to visit old friends at Ohio State and Indiana, and in St. Louis, where he was able to show Hermine the hotel where he had worked as a waiter over forty years earlier. In the summer of 1970 he spent his last vacation in the Cape Cod cottage he loved and where the Prahls had offered summer hospitality to friends for many years. In late September his strength failed sharply and he entered the hospital from which he was not to return. He was unconscious much of the time in his last weeks, and death came on October 29.

To all his colleagues and friends the word of his death brought a sense of a very personal loss. His teaching and writing had been devoted to the interpretation of great German literature to Americans and to the ties between the two countries. To all of his fellow Americans who came to know this immigrant from Germany in his very active career, the personal qualities of his life and character brought a deep awareness of great German traditions that are part of their American heritage.

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