

# Personalities in Publishing: Hans H. Wellisch

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The career of Hans Wellisch shows grim drama and academic irony. Born in Vienna in 1920, the son of a newspaperman, he attained a certificate of matriculation at the *Gymnasium* (high school), which would have allowed him to enter the university of Vienna. However, being Jewish, he was arrested on the street at the age of 18 after the German *Kristallnacht* of November 1938, and sent instead to what he refers to as 'the infamous college of Dachau'.<sup>1</sup>

As Wellisch writes, 'I was there only for a relatively short time, about two and a half months, because when they grabbed me on the street I happened to have already a visa to Sweden. I was supposed to emigrate there to be trained in agriculture. That helped somewhat to free me from the camp because at that time the Nazis were more interested in getting rid of Jews than in killing them, although they did that on a large scale in the camp; but whoever they could get rid of quickly, they let go'. Thus Wellisch spent the years of World War II in Sweden, first working on a farm, then briefly in the library of the Swedish Cooperative Federation. This gave him his only training in librarianship.

In 1949, involved in the Zionist movement, he emigrated to the new State of Israel and became the librarian of the Signal Corps of the Israel Defense Forces; then in 1956 the Head of the Information Center of TAHAL (the library room being converted from a British Army brothel); a civil engineering company specializing in water resources development. He taught (untaught) indexing and cataloguing, and founded the first centralized cataloguing service for public libraries. He was a founding member and secretary of the Israel Society of Special Libraries and Information Centers; wrote the first Hebrew textbook on the management of special libraries; compiled the first Hebrew filing code for libraries; and initiated the compilation of the Hebrew-English-French-German *Dictionary of library terms* by a committee of the Academy of the Hebrew Language.

In 1967 the United Nations sponsored him for a study tour through the United States to study computerized information systems for libraries. His published papers in information and library journals led to an invitation to the University of Maryland's College of Library and Information Services as a visiting lecturer. There for the first time, in September 1969, he attended a university lecture — one that he himself delivered. He received a Ph.D. there (based on a thesis on script conversion — transliteration and transcription) in 1975, was promoted to Professor in 1981, and on his retirement in 1987 was honoured as Professor emeritus.

His research interests have included linguistic aspects of information science; the theory and practice of classification and the subject analysis of texts; the problems of script conversion (e.g. Romanization) as it affects the retrieval of information; the history of books and indexes; and the standardization of information work — as well as the physical planning and architecture of libraries.

Since 1957 Wellisch has been active in the work of the International Federation for Documentation (FID) as a contributor to the Universal Decimal Classification. He oversaw the committee translating the abridgement of the UDC into Hebrew, and compiled the index to the system. This stringent introduction to indexing led on to a most distinguished career in that field. He joined the newly founded American Society of Indexers (ASI) in 1970, and for many years was ASI's representative to the National Information Standards Organisation, and a member of the committee developing the revision of the American National Standard for

thesaurus construction. He organized, and edited the Proceedings of the International PRECIS Workshop held at the University of Maryland in 1976. From 1984-85 he served as president of ASI. He was the first recipient of the H.W. Wilson Company/ASI Indexing Award, for the index to his own book, *The conversion of scripts: its nature, history and utilization* (John Wiley & Sons, 1978). In 1996 he received the other major award presented in the US to indexers, the Hines Award that 'Recognizes individuals who have shown continuous dedicated and exceptional service to the membership of the American Society of Indexers'.

At the first International conference of the UK Society of Indexers, in 1978, he delivered a substantial paper, 'Early multilingual and multiscript indexes in herbals', that proved but the first of a series of outstanding contributions he was to make to that Society's professional journal, *The Indexer*. These included: 'The alphabetization of prepositions in indexes', 'Indexes' and "indexing" in encyclopedias', 'From the 17th century: a German instruction in indexing', 'More on indexes in encyclopedias', 'Index': the word, its history, meanings and usages', and 'Incunabula indexes'. In 1980 appeared his *Indexing and abstracting: an international bibliography* (published by ABC-Clio in co-operation with the American Society of Indexers and the Society of Indexers; 328 pages), reviewed in *The Indexer* as 'A comprehensive survey of literature on indexing and abstracting', and followed in 1984 by *Indexing and abstracting 1977-1981: an international bibliography*. From 1986 to 1988 this current-awareness bibliography was resumed in the form of regular instalments he supplied for *The Indexer*.

Wellisch has written several dozens of articles on various topics in library and information work. As *The Indexer* noted in 1984, 'Through the issues of the ASI newsletters runs the exuberant rhetoric of Hans Wellisch's castigations of a certain kind of computer-generated index. His targets include the uncontrolled reproduction of variant spellings and printers' literals from original sources, undifferentiated references, space (and purchaser's money) wasted on reproducing the unused parts of catalogue cards, pre-co-ordinated subject-heading lists "applying the rules of the 19th century to late-20th-century information-retrieval", the so-called specialist dictionaries whose entries lead not to definitions but to the (often inadequately selected) reference-books from which the term has been extracted with no discrimination, the total omission of diacritical marks on foreign names ... Among other deeply-felt sentiments we may find the following expressed: "How this can be useful to man or beast escapes me ... a frightful example of how the computer will run amok if left to produce an index without any human control ... computerized indexing gone haywire, all in the interests of making a fast buck by producing a pseudo-reference book the quick and dirty way ...". If anyone is so foolhardy as to challenge Dr Wellisch's views, I feel sure the entire membership of all four of our societies will stand forth in his defence'.<sup>[2]</sup>

The selected bibliography of Wellisch's works now lists 18 books and 60 articles. Most recent are *Abstracting, indexing, classification, thesaurus construction: a glossary* (American Society of Indexers, 1996), and *Indexing from A to Z* (2nd edition, 569 pages, 1996). The latter consists of 98 essays, hailed by reviewers as 'probably the most useful resource available for the person who must compile a print index';<sup>[3]</sup> 'an encyclopaedic reference source, and the distilled personal testimony of a master teacher and indexer who cares deeply about correct and elegant indexing'.<sup>[4]</sup>

A paradoxical career: a Professor emeritus who has attained both of the highest awards made to indexers in the United States after starting without benefit of university education or of training in librarianship or in indexing; like Nabokov, the author of many scholarly and subtle works in a language not his own; and a historian of bibliography who regards publishing today as 'among the most conservative enterprises in modern society'.<sup>5</sup>

#### References

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5. Wellisch, Hans H. *Indexing from A to Z* 2nd edition. H. W. Wilson 1996, xxvi.

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