Obituary

Professor Hans H. Wellisch 1920–2004

Hans (Hanan) Wellisch, a distinguished library scholar and internationally recognized authority on indexing, and past president of the American Society of Indexers, died aged 83 in Washington on 6 February 2004.

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 called 'the infamous college of Dachau'.

As Wellisch wrote, '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.' (Thomas, 1995) Thus Wellisch spent the years of World War II in Sweden, first working on a farm, then briefly in the special library of the Swedish Cooperative Federation. This gave him his only training in librarianship.

In 1949, involved in the Zionist movement, Wellisch emigrated with his wife Shulamith to the new state of Israel and became the librarian of the Signal Corps of the Israel Defence Forces (the library room had been converted from a British army brothel); then in 1956 he became the Head of the Information Center of TAHAL, a civil engineering company specializing in water resources development. Himself untaught, he taught 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 information and library journals led to an invitation to the committee of the Academy of the Hebrew Language.

In 1957 Wellisch was 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 to a most distinguished career in that field. He joined the newly founded American Society of Indexers 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.

Wellisch organized and edited the Proceedings of the International PRECIS Workshop held at the University of Maryland in 1976. From 1984 to 1985 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 (1978). In 1996 he received the other major US award presented to indexers, the Hines Award, which '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, Wellisch delivered a substantial paper, 'Early Multilingual and Multiscript Indexes in Herbals' (October 1978), which proved but the first of a series of outstanding contributions he was to make to The Indexer. These included 'The Alphabetization of Prepositions in Indexes' (October 1980), 'Indexes' and 'Indexing' in Encyclopedias' (April 1981), 'From the 17th Century: A German Instruction in Indexing' (October 1981), 'More on Indexes in Encyclopedias' (April 1982), 'Index': The Word, Its History, Meanings and Usages (April 1983), and 'Incunabula Indexes' (April 1984). His Indexing and abstracting: an international bibliography (published by ABC-Clio in co-operation with ASI and SI) appeared in 1980, to be 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 the regular instalments Wellisch supplied to The Indexer.
Wellisch wrote 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. (Batchelor, 1984)

Wellisch was the author of some 20 books and 78 articles, among the most recent being Abstracting, indexing, classification, thesaurus construction: a glossary (1996a) and the authoritative textbook Indexing from A to Z (1996b). This consists of 98 essays and was hailed by reviewers as 'probably the most useful resource available for the person who must compile a print index' (Milstead, 1992), 'an encyclopaedic reference source, and the distilled personal testimony of a master teacher and indexer who cares deeply about correct and elegant indexing.' (Bell, 1997)

A paradoxical career: a professor emeritus who attained the author of some 20 books and 78 articles, among the most recent being Abstracting, indexing, classification, thesaurus construction: a glossary (1996a) and the authoritative textbook Indexing from A to Z (1996b). This consists of 98 essays and was hailed by reviewers as 'probably the most useful resource available for the person who must compile a print index' (Milstead, 1992), 'an encyclopaedic reference source, and the distilled personal testimony of a master teacher and indexer who cares deeply about correct and elegant indexing.' (Bell, 1997)

A paradoxical career: a professor emeritus who attained the author of some 20 books and 78 articles, among the most recent being Abstracting, indexing, classification, thesaurus construction: a glossary (1996a) and the authoritative textbook Indexing from A to Z (1996b). This consists of 98 essays and was hailed by reviewers as 'probably the most useful resource available for the person who must compile a print index' (Milstead, 1992), 'an encyclopaedic reference source, and the distilled personal testimony of a master teacher and indexer who cares deeply about correct and elegant indexing.' (Bell, 1997)

Addendum

After my article The index of a sixteenth-century architecture book (Vol, 23, No. 3, April 2003) was typeset, I attended an information architecture salon on April 1 2003, at which one of the attendees, Rosalie Ehrlich, called to the attention of the participants a PDF file on interaction design history. It includes a quotation about Vitruvius from the Software Design Manifesto of Mitch Kapor, created in 1990:

The Roman architecture critic Vitruvius [sic] advanced the notion that well-designed buildings were those which exhibited firmness, commodity and delight. The same might be said of good software. Firmness: a program should not have any bugs which inhibit its function. Commodity: a program should be suitable for the purposes for which it was intended. Delight: the experience of using the program should be a pleasurable one. Here we have the beginnings of a theory of design for software.

The Software Design Manifesto can be viewed at http://www.kapor.com/homepages/mkap/orf/Software_Design_Manifesto.html

and is cited at

http://www.marcrettig.com/rrettig/interactionDesignHistory.2.03.pdf

Thus, Vitruvius is of interest to indexers not only because his books have interesting indexes, but because his writings are germane to the cognate field of information architecture.

Bella Hass Weinberg

References


This obituary is based on an article by Hazel K. Bell in the Journal of Scholarly Publishing, Vol 29, No. 4, July 1998. We are grateful to the author and publisher for permission to publish it. The original article, in the series 'Personalities in Publishing', is on http://www.utpjournals.com

The Indexer Vol. 24 No. 1 April 2004 41