Urban T. Holmes

Alexander Herman Schutz

My association with Alex Schutz has been so close over the past forty years that it would be difficult for me to write about him in an impersonal way. Those who have observed our attachment to each other during the years will understand this very well.

Alexander Herman Schutz was born in Chicago on March 27, 1894. His father, a merchant, had migrated to this country from East Prussia; and although he always remained a small businessman, he had a fine mind and spoke many languages. For years he wrote his son a weekly card in Hebrew, which he used well and wittily; and I can remember many a passage which Alex read to me. His mother, a native of Rumania, was a charming person who spoke French to her son almost constantly. It is not difficult to understand that their son chose to become a philologist. Another talent of his which was thoroughly developed was music. During his early teaching career, Alex continued to be a very good violinist.

Alex's principal education was in the Chicago public schools. He obtained his Ph.B. degree from the University of Chicago in 1915, and after this he was obliged to seek a teaching position. He went to the University of Mississippi for
two years as an instructor in French. At the outbreak of World War I, however, he was drafted and served in France with the Army Engineer Corps (Railroad Division).

Those were trying times for almost everyone; but Alex has a droll sense of humor and his stories of those war years have always been most entertaining. Since he spoke French beautifully, he was in constant employment as an interpreter, meeting people of all kinds. Some of these individuals appear in a French reading book which he wrote many years later. His division was not assigned to active combat, but he came very close to it on one occasion when German shock troops broke through the American front lines. With the war over, he was given a year of graduate study at the University of Montpellier where his chief mentor and frequent companion was Professor Millardet. It was this association which influenced him greatly in the direction of Provençal.

Back in America, he received his master’s degree from the University of Chicago in 1920, where his principal teacher was Professor T. A. Jenkins. He remained in the graduate school without interruption until he was granted the Ph.D. in August, 1922. Another influence from the war years, which he had spent among people in the French provinces, may be seen in his choice of a dissertation topic. It was rather unusual for that time: “The Peasant Vocabulary of George Sand.” He had acquired an interest in the later development of the French language.

In those days most of the students who were working toward the doctorate in romance languages at the University of Chicago had a study room in the library building which was officially designated as W32. Each occupant had a small writing space with a drawer for papers and a shelf for books.
There was a flat roof just outside the window which seemed to them admirably suited for an "open air café." For years Alex remained a loyal alumnus of that room, and the stories which centered around W32 warmed the hearts of those of us who had never studied there. I knew the room only from several visits in later years.

Professor Karl Pietsch of the University of Chicago faculty has a special place in the memory of his students. His devotion to Old Spanish syntax and the inimitable accent with which he dictated titles of books and articles in his course in Romance bibliography made a deep impression on those who took his course. I have said that the Pietsch accent was inimitable, but Alex Schutz could reproduce it beautifully, always in respectful admiration.

Alex's closest friends among his fellow students at Chicago were Louis H. Allen, of Toronto, and William S. Hendrix, who was on leave from the Ohio State University. These three "pundits" received their doctorates at the same commencement. Their picture was taken formally together, in cap and gown. Fellow students referred to the photograph as the "Three Wise Men." Robert Valentine Merrill was another warm friend who continued to play a part in Alex's life.

His first job after receiving the doctorate was at the Iowa State Teachers' College at Cedar Falls, where the head of department was George A. Underwood, who became a warm admirer. He recognized the younger man's great potentialities and advised him to take a post at a large university as soon as he could. It was then that Alex went to the University of Missouri in the fall of 1923, and it was there that we met and our friendship began. I had been fortunate enough to acquire the rank of assistant professor. Schutz has never had a trace of
jealousy in his makeup during his whole life; but he did want a promotion very much. I can hear him now saying: “Holmes, I am not in the profession until I am an assistant professor.” We made great plans together. We organized all sorts of philological courses, which, very obligingly, the department at the University of Missouri allowed us to introduce. We dreamed of a journal (which, just as we wished it, came into existence some thirty-seven years later as Romance Notes, at the University of North Carolina).

My association with him, in those early years, meant much for my professional competency; I only hope that I benefited Alex Schutz as much as he did me. We came from different environments, from the University of Chicago and from Harvard University, but each had something to give the other. During the summer of 1925, we were together in Chicago when I received my call to the University of North Carolina. My acceptance broke forever our daily association, but it was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship by correspondence. Alex returned that September to Columbia, Missouri; he was promoted and took over all the philological courses in the department, including Old French. During the next two years, his warmest friends were Professor Hermann B. Almstedt, head of the German Department, and Professor W. J. Burner, who taught Spanish. Both men were considerably older than Alex. Burner was a homespun wit whose nasal drawl still rings in my ears: “Well, boys, it’ll all be the same a hundred years from now.” Burner’s attachment to Alex can be seen in the fact that he followed him to Ohio State, where Burner received his doctorate in 1930 when he was fifty-two years old.

Louis Allen, who died in the early 1930's, taught at Ohio
State in the summer of 1926. He agreed with Professor Hendrix that the post in French philology at that institution could be very well filled by their old friend Alex Schutz. Alex went there in September, 1927. He married Deborah Libauer, of Baltimore, in 1929—a marriage which has been most happy during these thirty-five years. I saw Schutz and his bride in Paris during the summer of 1930. Some of his best stories date from that time, particularly those that concern visits the three of us made to the Flea Market. Alex often describes me getting on the Metro with a medieval battle axe which I had bought at the Flea Market resting on my shoulder.

His career began to develop fully in Columbus. He was made an associate professor in 1933, a full professor in 1938. Recently, he served as director of graduate studies in his department. Immediately after his call to Columbus, he became very active in research. At first, he wanted to prepare an edition of the poems of the troubadour, the Dalfín d’Alvernhe. This was in 1928. The plan was blocked, however, when he learned that someone else had undertaken the same project, so he turned to Daude de Pradas, with results that can be seen in his bibliography. I collaborated with him on a history of the French language and on a source book on this same subject. It was not easy to get these into print, for we had an original approach that was not appreciated by everyone.

Alex continued in Provençal and the history of the French language, and he served two terms on the editorial committee of the Modern Language Association as adviser in these subjects. He has always enjoyed the Gargantua and the Pantagruel of Rabelais, for his own humor is based on a delight in the Rabelaisian incongruities. The fact that most of his teaching has been confined to the medieval period is the
only reason that he has not devoted much time to Renaissance research. After World War II, he had some thought of investigating the possible influence of the troubadour *chansonniers* on the poets of the Pléiade group, and he obtained a Fulbright research grant in 1952 for this investigation. The trail led to no tangible results, however; and on the suggestion of the late Professor Gustave Cohen, he studied instead the inventories of the sixteenth-century printers in Paris.

His association with the critical bibliographies of French literature, edited by D. C. Cabeen, has been noteworthy. This undertaking began with a section on Provençal literature, which comprised the first volume, on which he collaborated. Following the death of his old friend Robert Valentine Merrill, however, he took over the editorship of the volume on the sixteenth century (Volume II), and prepared the sections on the history of the French language for several others.

Alexander Schutz's reputation as a research scholar rests on very secure foundations. He has lectured at Cambridge University in England and has received honors from the Provençalists in France. He may be said to have succeeded the late Professor W. P. Shepard, of Hamilton College, as the leading Provençal in the United States. His mind has always been exceedingly active and fertile. There were times when he was discouraged by the lack of appreciation on the part of others. The road was sometimes hard for young medievalists in the 1930's. Perhaps this was a result of the Great Depression. To some in high positions, it looked as though medieval studies might be something that could be overlooked for a while.

Beginning in the 1930's, Alex's headquarters during vacation periods shifted to Baltimore, where my family and I visited him frequently. During World War II, when I was stationed
in Washington, D. C., he was a fairly frequent visitor to our
apartment. Just prior to the entry into the war of the United
States, he spent part of a summer in Chapel Hill at the Casa
Brasileira, which was maintained for rapid training of teachers
of Portuguese. From this date, he gave instruction in that
language at Ohio State, especially during the war period.

Robert, Alex's first child, was born in 1932; Leonard, his
second, in 1938. They are doing so well in their careers as
chemist and doctor that we must mention them at this point.
We wish only that their Grandfather Schutz could see them
now.

Alex Schutz has always been a marvelous teacher. He was at
his height as both teacher and scholar in the 1950's. It was my
privilege to visit with him and his family almost every year.
Those whom I met in his house were his students and his
colleagues, and they became my friends also. He and I no
longer dreamed as much as we used to. The older scholars
whom we tried so hard to please in the 1920's and 30's had
passed away. We ourselves were now the senior men.

In 1949, I tried to persuade Alex to drive with us to the
meeting of the Modern Language Association in Palo Alto,
California. He could not accompany us, however, for he had
been obliged to take some radium treatments. In 1957,
though, our two families were together again in France, at La
Motte en la Richardais (Brittany), and later in Paris. We
wanted to drive together to Lisbon, but our little brown
Austin could not hold five adults (Leonard was with his
parents at the time), so the Holmes's drove to Lisbon and the
Schutz's went there by train. It was the first trip to Portugal
that any of us had ever made, and it was marred only by the
theft of the Austin, for one day. Alex and I have always had a
peculiar way of walking together through city streets. I have tended to stride a bit ahead while he follows, both of us talking at a fast clip. The inhabitants of Lisbon must have wondered at us, especially on such occasions as the time I stood talking with a bare-headed Scots Highlander in kilts while Alex watched the puzzled faces of those who passed by.

In the fall of 1957, Alex returned to France for a Provençal congress at Aix-en-Provence. The hotel keeper with whom he stayed in Paris told me a year later that she thought he looked quite ill. This was the beginning of the trouble from which he has been suffering ever since. At Christmas, 1959, when the Modern Language Association met in Chicago, Alex and I stood together once more in the hotel lobby, greeting our old and new friends. He has not attended another meeting. The Modern Language Association has not been the same for me—even though I now follow the custom of describing everything to him by letter.

This story of Alex Schutz and our friendship must not end upon a sad note. Although his presence in the classroom will be missed by students, he is still working with his friends and colleagues. I am mindful of a distant cousin who addressed these words to Julia Ward Howe:

“To be seventy years young is sometimes far more cheerful and hopeful than to be forty years old.”—Oliver Wendell Holmes.