

Memorial: Joseph Levstik (1916–2001)

¶1 Joseph Levstik, foreign, comparative, and international law librarian at the University of Minnesota Law Library from 1964 to 1986, died in March 2001. He was a superb reference librarian and an equally outstanding collection development librarian.

¶2 Born in Yugoslavia in 1916, Joseph Levstik received a classical education, typical for students studying in the elite Eastern European institutions prior to World War II. A review of his transcript from the Classical Gymnasium at St. Vid and Ljubljano indicates that he consistently received marks of “Excellent” in a wide range of courses, including mathematics, history, religion, astronomy, Latin, Greek, French, German, Slovenian, and Serbo-Croatian. Upon completion of his studies at the Gymnasium in 1937, he entered the law school at the University of Ljubljana. He graduated with highest honors in 1943, and began his legal career as a lawyer with the Yugoslavian postal department. However, when the Communists took control of the government in 1945, he decided to move to Austria and eventually to Italy. In 1948, he immigrated to Canada where he worked initially in the agricultural industry and later in business. He came to the United States in 1962 to attend the graduate program in library science at Western Michigan University. Upon receiving his masters’ degree in 1963, he was hired as a cataloger at the Harvard Law Library.

¶3 In 1964, Joseph Levstik was recruited by Professor Bruno Greene for the position of foreign, comparative, and international librarian at the University of Minnesota Law Library. Although employed at Harvard for less than a year, he was encouraged by Earl Borgeson, Harvard’s law library director, to pursue this new professional opportunity. Borgeson, a 1949 graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School, had worked in the law library as a student and was cognizant of the depth and breadth of the library’s international collections. He also knew that Joseph Levstik’s legal training and excellent language skills would enable him to meet the challenge of serving a research-oriented faculty and student body. He joined the University of Minnesota Law Library staff on March 1, 1964.

¶4 During his twenty-two-year tenure at the law library, Joseph Levstik was the primary selector for international, foreign, and comparative law materials. He was particularly astute at identifying new areas of growth, and was responsible for building the library’s collections of primary and secondary sources from Africa, South America, and Asia. He also oversaw the library’s efforts to purchase statutory materials, case law, and treatises from all major jurisdictions throughout the world. According to Katherine Hedin, curator for rare books and special collections, “Just as Arthur Pulling should be given credit for developing the library’s rare book collection, Joseph Levstik should receive credit for developing our truly global collection of primary and secondary sources.”

¶5 Joseph Levstik's personnel file at the law library contains letters of appreciation from generations of faculty, students, and visiting scholars who benefitted from his reference skills and in-depth knowledge of both civil and common law. The letters are replete with comments about his language abilities and the ease with which he could translate materials written in a wide range of languages, including Italian, French, German, Russian, Greek, and Latin.

¶6 The law library staff members who had the privilege of working with and learning from Joseph Levstik speak of him with high praise and great fondness. He is remembered as a dedicated librarian who "knew the collection like the back of his hand" and "dropped everything to help every patron who came to his office." Several members of the staff describe him as a "walking encyclopedia" who could answer questions on law, world history, religion, philosophy, art history, poetry, and gardening with equal ease. He also is described as "a true gentleman" who exemplified "'old world' charm and courtesy."

¶7 Joseph Levstik is survived by his wife Giovanna. He will be remembered by the University of Minnesota Law School community with the greatest respect, fondness, and gratitude.

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