

Professor STORIES

by *Burton Blatt, EdD*

THE IMMIGRANT

Meyer Wolf had achieved, had arrived, and had a problem. Here he was, a distinguished professor of political science, revered by students, admired by colleagues, and feared by his academic enemies. But where was he? Better, what was he? And as those troubling questions invaded his mind while he should have been preparing himself mentally for the explicit work ahead, he grew more uncomfortable with the state of his life. Almost instantaneously, while an hour ago everything seemed to be solid and stable, everything now seemed to be crumbling around him. And it also seemed that everything would soon crumble within him.

As he opened the side door to Henderson Chapel, Meyer knew that he must drive all destructive thoughts from his mind. The throng waited, and Meyer knew that he must not disappoint these colleagues and students who chose him to receive the Chancellor's Citation for Outstanding Academic Achievement, an award given to the single professor on campus each year whose scholarship and teaching exemplify the greatness and the concept of "university." So why, as the celebrants awaited the hero, was he approaching his reward as one approaches death itself? Because death was all that Meyer

Wolf could think about, even at this time which demanded celebration. Meyer Wolf's mind went back to the year 1938, and to his last day in Germany.

"Meyer, hurry, we'll be late for the train," Frau Wolf admonished her son. Thank God they weren't late. That was the very last train for Jews out of Berlin. But while Meyer, his oldest sister, Anna, and his mother and father did get out, did get to Paris, and then to London, and then to the United States, everyone else he knew—his uncles, his aunts, their children, his friends, their parents—were never heard from again. And more and more of each day, more and more of each minute, Meyer Wolf could not stop thinking about his childhood in Berlin and those long-dead friends and relatives.

"Is there a conscience unique to a calling, a conscience more than that of the good man in general? Can one be a good man and fail at one's calling . . ." As he read those words which stirred his audience, he neither listened to their sounds, nor even thought about where he was, or what he was supposed to be doing. While the audience remained appreciative, the actor in Meyer, and the combination of the thousands of prior experiences and his instincts not to make a fool of himself, disguised his real life of that moment. Meyer

(Continued on page 290)

PROFESSOR STORIES

(From page 281)

himself was never so far away from Henderson Chapel as he was then. And as he spoke about the contemplative life, as did Aristotle—the highest expression of human nature—he thought about Aristotle's even more insistent attention to the idea of friendship. In his mind's vision, Meyer kept going back to the unforgettable fact that the scientists of the Third Reich also had a conscience of calling, even as they betrayed everything relating to human decency. He remembered that the scientists of the Third Reich devoted their lives to science and murder, to contemplation and betrayal. And while he spoke about the "natural arrogance of the young that education must dampen and ennoble into maturity," he also thought about the arrogance of tradition, the arrogance of teachers that threatens merely to dampen and extinguish the spirit of the young. And while he extolled his friends to once again take up their conscience, he thought about people he had known during his past who had too much conscience, and who should have better dusted off their common sense before they paraded their conscience. And while Meyer Wolf wove bril-

liant metaphors concerning science, he was thinking about human experiments which extended the metaphors of science to the limits of their applicability, past the limits of human comprehensibility.

And so while his friends and all the others who would have loved to have been his friend thanked God for Meyer Wolf, thanked God that here was a person who understood the university and its dedication to "preserving the universals of human experience and thought," and while the mob cheered and cheered in appreciation and praise for one of their own, all Meyer Wolf would let himself think about was the hope that the university is different from the Third Reich, that while the professor might volunteer to die for the truth, he should not kill for it.

After 40 years in America, Meyer Wolf still could not get over the idea that he was an immigrant, an alien in a strange land. Possibly, for that reason there was still the hope, more than the expectation that, in the end, American science will not disillusion him, that the American university will not betray humanity in pursuit of truth, that America will remain a friendly haven for strangers.