

Vera Bolgar 1913-2003

In the One-World dawn that followed the peace of 1945, legal scholars in a dozen-odd American law schools agreed that the time had come to turn the eyes of American jurists beyond the English common law and its derivatives to others of the world's systems of justice. They determined to establish a journal that would illuminate the differences, and the similarities under different designations, between English law's derivatives and other legal systems of the world. The idea was compelling, but finding a scholar who could carry the burden of collecting and editing manuscripts that would reflect the world's juridical diversities remained elusive.

In 1949 there emerged from behind the iron curtain a scholar uniquely qualified for the task. She was born and bred in the Austro-Hungarian empire, where merely learning to speak meant learning two widely differing tongues. After absorbing both the Hungarian and the German languages, and the Latin that underlay all European scholarship, Vera gained command of English, and, thanks to vacations in France, fluency in French, and acquired working competencies in Italian and Spanish. After completing her university studies and marrying a young lawyer, she may have contemplated the life of a gracious Hausfrau, but any such aspiration was crushed by the march of Hitler's National Socialism, which sowed ruin throughout Europe, and condemned her husband to death in the extermination camp of Buchenwald.

Facing alone the aftermath of World War II, Vera prepared herself for a career by earning *cum laude* a joint degree in law and political science at the University of Budapest, and was appointed to a lectureship at the University of Szeged. Since Hungary was now in the grip of Stalin's Russia, Vera determined to escape to the West. She crept through the tangles of barbed wire on the Hungarian border into Austria, and arrived bleeding and penniless at a refugee center in Vienna. Calling on friends of friends, she made contact with Max Rheinstein of the University of Chicago, who saw that Vera was the answer to the prayers of sponsors of a projected periodical for a jurist who could translate and refine contributions from diverse European sources. Max passed the word to Michigan's Hessel Yntema, who brought Vera to Ann Arbor to assist him in founding the American Journal of Comparative Law.

For the next two decades, Vera became the Journal's mainspring and its hands, behind the general editorship of Hessel Yntema and more

briefly of his successors James George and Alfred Conard. As associate editor, she invited and selected contributions from scholars steeped in legal orders derived from Rome, and adapted them to conform them to an Anglo-American idiom. How do you say *jurisprudence constante* in English? How do you translate to American readers the “D.” which might mean *Dalloz* in a French context or *Digestum* in a Latin setting?

While engaged in the full-time job of editing the Journal, Vera found days in which to commute to Ithaca, New York, to collaborate with a project of Rudolf Schlesinger, and to Athens, Georgia, to assist in organizing foreign and international collections in the library of the University of Georgia. She contributed to the Journal significant work of her own on the law of torts and of trusts and on the conception of the “public welfare” in the Civil Law systems of Europe. She prepared reports for several of the quadrennial congresses of the International Academy of Comparative Law on provocative subjects such as “The Present Status of the Maxim *Ignorantia Juris Neminem Excusat*.” A Festschrift for Hessel Yntema in 1961 inspired an essay on “The Magic of Freedom,” which reflected implicitly her own odyssey from a land of communist tyranny to one of democratic liberty.

The migration of the Journal in 1971 from Ann Arbor to Berkeley freed Vera’s hands for more exotic scholarship, as in “The Fiction of the Corporate Fiction—From Pope Innocent IV to the Pinto Case,” prepared for a Paris festschrift in honor of her Hungarian compatriot Imre Zajtay. She was repeatedly called on for mature reflections on subjects such as “The Interrelation between Comparative Law and Private International Law,” including an essay in the German language on the influence of German immigrants on the law of the United States. The liberation of Hungary in 1989 provided the occasion for her to make two reports to the Michigan Academy of Science on post-liberation law reform in the land that she had left forty years earlier. In 2000, as the twentieth century drew to a close, Vera capped her publications with an essay on “Law and Codification,” in the newborn *Encyclopedia of Eastern Europe from the Congress of Vienna to the Fall of Communism*.

While Vera shared the burden of editing the Journal, and simultaneously produced bursts of original scholarship, she was never too busy to brighten the lives of colleagues and students. Her modest home was the scene of countless parties for foreign students and visitors, as well as members of the law school faculty. At festivities in the Lawyers Club, she entertained with costumed impersonations of a gypsy or a Mata Hari.

For half a century, Vera was a vital component of the Michigan law school's scholarly and social ambiance. As a personification of the school's multinational mission, she joins the array of the school's inextinguishable icons.

Alfred F. Conard
Kennett Square, Pennsylvania
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* Much of the data on Vera's life and work was supplied by United States Magistrate Judge Steven D. Pepe, one of Vera's neighbors and former colleagues, who had collected it for a memorial service in her honor.

