

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

KARL GUSTAV RENDTORFF (1864 – 1945)

Karl Gustav Rendtorff was born June 28, 1864, as the tenth and youngest child of the Lutheran pastor in the village of Preetz near Kiel, which at that time belonged to Denmark. (Later he was wont to say that he was "annexed at the age of six weeks.") Being the "baby" in his family was not altogether to his advantage, and a certain feeling of inferiority, however lacking in justification, went with him throughout his life.

Responding to his father's wish that two of the five sons should study for the ministry, Karl devoted two years to theological study at Giessen. By this time, however, he had come to the conclusion that he could not spend his life as a Lutheran minister, and for the time being he gave up university study, and became Private secretary to the famous surgeon, Johannes Friedrich von Esmarch. Through Esmarch, who was the first president of the German "Friedens-Gesellschaft," Karl became an ardent pacifist - an unpopular trend in the Germany of those days. He also catalogued Esmarch's library and took up some work in library science, which was to serve as his entrance ticket to Stanford University.

Study at Kiel and Berlin had broadened his outlook and enriched his mind, but had provided no solution of his vocational problem. Like so many restless young Germans in the 19th century, he turned his eyes to North America, and reached New York in 1893, less than two years after the founding of this University. Thinking that the new school might have need of an assistant librarian, he wired the University, received an encouraging response, and proceeded westward. Arriving in San Francisco, he was met by the news that Senator Stanford had just died. The resultant "freezing" of the University's funds made it impossible for Rendtorff to be added to the library staff. However, the then head of the German Department, Julius Goebel, took him on as assistant, helped him to get tutoring to eke out his income, and encouraged him to train himself as a Germanist. Accordingly, Karl now applied himself to Germanics, taking the degree of Master of Arts at Stanford in 1894 and the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1896.

From that time on, Karl Rendtorff served in the German Department with unflagging zeal and single-minded devotion. Early in his career, he laid the foundations of the extensive picture-collection which was to absorb so much of his interest and affection during the remainder of his life. From items in this collection he caused some 2000 lantern slides to be made as illustrative material for his courses in the history of German civilization and these slides became the nucleus of the very large slide-collection owned by the German Department today.

Mistakenly or not, Professor Rendtorff thought himself not well qualified to publish in English, and so he gave all his energies to his teaching, with results such as are indicated in the tribute quoted below. He became the finest type of college teacher, profoundly learned, sensitive to all the finer things of the spirit, tolerant, gentle, modest, and unassuming, with a genuine gift of quiet humor, and an unflinching devotion to his courses and his students. His teaching covered a wide range of subjects, from Middle High German language and literature to the latest trends in

German letters. Greatest popularity was achieved by his illustrated courses on the history of German civilization.

Upon his retirement from active service in 1929, Professor Rendtorff moved to Carmel, where he had built a summer home, and continued to live the scholar's life in that community, cultivating the garden which had always been his delight, and pursuing the historical studies out of which his university courses had grown. He had accumulated extensive notes for two important publications in this field: a short history of German civilization,, and a study of the role of religion in German life. Failing health interrupted this work, and neither study was completed. He died after a lingering illness on May 5, 1945.

Professor Rendtorff leaves a widow, Emma Meyer Rendtorff, Stanford 1898, and a daughter Gertrude, Stanford 1928.

The life of the self-effacing scholar and teacher does not lend itself to boldface type or italics. The professional life of Karl Rendtorff can perhaps best be characterized and evaluated in the following tribute by a member of this faculty, written to his widow upon the news of his death:

"...what I most admired in him was his uncompromising intellectual and moral integrity, what I most loved was the infinite kindness and gentleness of his nature. I regard it as a great privilege to have had him for a teacher, and as a still greater privilege to have had him for a friend."

A. M. Espinosa
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