Drs. Georg and Wilma Iggers

Dr. Georg Iggers was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1926. As a German Jew, in October 1938 he fled Nazi Germany to avoid persecution and moved to the United States, where he studied at the University of Richmond, Virginia, and obtained his B.A. in French and Spanish. In Richmond, Georg organized one of the earliest interracial student organizations. He later earned an M.A. in German Literature from the University of Chicago. After spending a year at the New School of Social Research in New York City, where he studied philosophy and sociology, Dr. Iggers returned to the University of Chicago where in 1951 he obtained his Ph.D. in the History of Culture. While living in Chicago, Georg met his wife, Wilma Abeles, who was born in the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia in 1921. Also Jewish, she moved to Canada in 1938 to escape the Nazis after they occupied Czechoslovakia. After graduating with honors from McMaster University in Canada, Wilma studied at the University of Chicago where she earned first her A.M. and then, in 1952, her Ph.D. in Germanics. Wilma and Georg married in 1948.

After graduation, Drs. Georg and Wilma Iggers taught at several historically black colleges in the South, becoming very active in the civil rights movement. At Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas, Georg succeeded in gaining admission for black students to the then segregated Little Rock Public Library, which opened its doors to all readers in 1954. Thereupon the Little Rock branch of the NAACP invited him to join its board of directors and to assume the chairmanship of its education committee. From 1954-1956, Dr. Iggers prepared lawsuits, including the one against the Little Rock Board of Education to bring about the desegregation of the public schools in 1956. After teaching at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Dillard University, and at Tulane University in New Orleans, Georg and Wilma travelled to France and Germany, returning to the United States to teach at Roosevelt University and at Loyola University in Chicago.


Besides remaining an active member of the NAACP, Georg negotiated a cooperative agreement between SUNY/Buffalo and Philander Smith College and then continued to work closely with Dr. McKinley Newton within the framework of the Title III Program to promote education in historically black colleges and universities until the 1990s. Also, in Buffalo both Wilma and Georg were involved in peace activities during the Vietnam War, counseling hundreds of young persons on conscientious objection. Internationally, during the Cold War Georg organized exchanges between American and German scholars, not only from West but also from East Germany. Wilma established contacts with historians in her native Czechoslovakia, including dissidents against the
Communist regime. For this work, Wilma was made an honorary citizen of her hometown Horšovský Týn in 2002 and in 2004 received a special award from the Czech Foreign Ministry (the State prize “gratias agit”) for her activities on behalf of the Czech lands. In the 1980s, both Georg and Wilma developed more contacts across the Iron Curtain with exchanges and travel in Poland, Hungary, and China. In 1980, Georg became the founder of the International Commission on the History of Historiography, which includes historians from all over the world, serving as its president from 1995 to 2000. In 2007, Georg was awarded the Order of Merit by German President Horst Köhler for his work in civil rights and in establishing bridges between East and West German scholars during the Cold War.

After their retirement, Georg and Wilma Iggers divided their time between Buffalo and Göttingen, in Germany. Georg held several visiting appointments in Denmark, Australia, and the University of Vienna. Georg was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Richmond (2001), from Philander Smith College (2002), and the Technical University in Darmstadt, Germany (2006). Their autobiography, Zwei Seiten der Geschichte, was published by Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht in 2002; a Czech edition, Dré strany dějin by Lidové Noviny in 2005, an English edition, Two Lives in Uncertain Times: Facing the Challenges of the Twentieth Century as Scholars and Citizens by Berghahn Books in 2006. A Chinese edition appeared in 2008 and a Spanish one in 2011.