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An Interview at Schoenhof's Foreign Books -- ATG Interviews Judy Townley, Dan Cianfarini, David Leyenson, and Staff

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An Interview at Schoenhof's Foreign Books

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Every week scholars, students, tourists, and wanderers visit Harvard Square by the thousands. Most reach Cambridge on the MBTA subway system and emerge from what all of Boston calls the T to walk in Harvard Yard, shop at the Harvard Coop, see a museum, hear a show at Club Passim or the House of Blues, or just immerse themselves in the street life bred by America's most celebrated university.

For a few pilgrims, the very first aim is just around the corner from the T station, a modest store at 76A Mount Auburn Street, where two small window displays recently held selections of Chinese poetry and children's books in Spanish. Inside, in addition to shelves of books in these two languages, are language-learning materials in some 700 other languages and dialects, as well as fiction and academic non-fiction from 50 countries. Schoenhof's Foreign Books, with a clientele equal to the worldly nature of its stock, is a destination within a destination.

Many librarians have visited the store, and many more have sent orders to Schoenhof's on behalf of their libraries. What they and other customers seldom know is that the store on Mount Auburn isn't the only Schoenhof's location. In a quieter, residential precinct of Cambridge, about a ten-minute walk from the Square, is a nondescript building on Green Street housing the Schoenhof's warehouse and offices. It's from here that the business, which was founded in downtown Boston in 1856 by Carl Schoenhof, who sold books to the city's German immigrant community in their native language, is run today.

Schoenhof's was a mom-and-pop operation until the French academic and literary publisher Editions Gallimard acquired the business in 1981. By then the store had long since shifted focus away from Boston's immigrants and toward the city's academic community. That change had begun late in the prior century, when Schoenhof's made French a specialty, stocking the works of Zola, Flaubert, Rimbaud, and other gants of the era, on the way to becoming a pan-lingual Harvard Square institution after moving to Cambridge in the early 1940s.

French literature, however, after a hundred years plus, remains the store's backbone. Schoenhof's stock holds more volumes in French literature than in the entire language-learning inventory of dictionaries, phrasebooks, textbooks, and other course materials from every corner of the world.

Carl Schoenhof's present successor, Judy Townley, is a diminutive, soft-spoken woman who...
who moved to Cambridge in 1968 from her native San Antonio, Texas. She enrolled at Harvard and was one of the first women to earn a Ph.D. in computer science, or as the field was known then, “applied mathematics.” Townley taught and conducted research at Harvard before leaving the university in 1980 to start her own software company, which she had for sixteen years. Then, by fortunate coincidence, just as Townley was looking for another career change, Schoenhof’s, which she knew of through an acquaintance, was looking for someone to run the business. A match was made and she has been president of Schoenhof’s for the past five years.

Townley smiles and looks up from a set of precise handwritten notes. “This is such an unusual business.” The store counts among its customers John Updike, who when reviewing novels from Latin America likes to read both the translation and the original, which he picks up on Mount Auburn Street. Günter Grass, Carlos Fuentes, Umberto Eco, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Margaret Yourcenar all have been Schoenhof’s customers, as any overseas writer or scholar visiting Harvard is liable to be. “Vladimir Nabokov,” notes Townley, “was a mail order customer.”

Since the retail store accounts for only about a third of sales, that put the author of Lolita into the larger of Schoenhof’s two business segments. Outside orders account for the remaining two-thirds, with bookstores making up about a quarter of Schoenhof’s sales. About 15 percent comes from individuals, who today—unlike Nabokov and his mail orders—usually buy their books on the Schoenhof’s Website. Library orders account for another 15 percent. Most come from colleges and universities, neighboring Harvard, of course, and others such as Calvin College, Connecticut College, Dickinson, Kalamazoo, Northeastern, Rice, and William & Mary. Salt Lake City Public Library, thanks to the missionary needs of the Mormon Church, is another busy customer.

The Department of Defense and other federal agencies make up a “small but interesting” component of Schoenhof’s business, one that correlates with the nightly news to near perfection. Arabic and the various languages of central and south Asia are in regular federal demand today, as is Korean, as several years ago were Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, and the other languages of the Balkan peninsula.

“Whatever is happening out there today is reflected in our orders,” says Townley. “We’re still small enough to respond quickly.” When interest in Afghanistan began to increase, for example, requests reached Schoenhof’s for material about Pashto, one of that country’s principal languages. But the best textbook in English was out-of-print. Schoenhof’s obtained the rights from the American Council of Learned Societies and re-published the book.

Today it’s one of two books carrying the Schoenhof’s imprint. The other, “a perennial classroom favorite,” is a compilation of verbs in classical Greek.

Word-of-mouth—in who knows how many languages—is a powerful marketing channel for Schoenhof’s. But it is not the only one. Dan Cianfarini, who directs the company’s marketing, is in his second turn at Schoenhof’s. Cianfarini, who is from western Massachusetts, began his first in 1982, when he encountered a lean academic job market after studying French and Comparative Literature at Yale. Prior to the Gallimard purchase, marketing at Schoenhof’s had been minimal. Cianfarini spent thirteen years building up a more substantial operation in “promotion, as the French call it,” before leaving to try something new in 1994, when he began three years at the New England Mobile Book Fair. He rejoined Schoenhof’s in 1998.

Five years ago Schoenhof’s was among the earliest booksellers to invite customers to place orders online. Schoenhof’s also has two regular publications. “New Arrivals” is a handsome booklet brought out four times per year. Typography, design, and paper—sharp black characters with a few red highlights printed on two columns on thick, cream-colored stock—combine to make it a sensory pleasure to examine this list of recently-received titles. The current issue, Fall 2002, has citations for over 300 books, classic and contemporary fiction as well as reference works, history, art, music, film, biography, literary criticism, philosophy, women’s studies, and other academic fields. The staple languages of French, German, Spanish, and Italian predominate; but there are reference works on Nandi, Oromo, Swahili, and other African languages; also, works about Albanian, Basque, Icelandic, Sanskrit, Latin, Norwegian, Occitan, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Welsh, Yiddish, Tetum—a language of the Pacific islands—and other languages beyond even these.

“No. 70,” the other Schoenhof’s vehicle in promotion, is another quarterly, a series of tri-fold brochures, each a topical list of about seventy selected titles. Thus the name. Recent issues have included selections in several languages for young readers. Children’s books, in fact, are a Schoenhof’s specialty, and the one area where translations from English are stocked. “No. 70” lists have included, for example, Dr. Seuss in French and A.A. Milne in Russian, in addition to many titles in their original language. Another “No. 70” featured books on which films had been based. Reader-filmoers could choose, for example, among the Danish original of Karen Blixen’s Out of Africa; the French original of Dominique Lapierre’s City of Joy; Elfriede Jelinek’s The Piano Teacher, in German; in Italian, The Name of the Rose, by Umberto Eco; in Spanish, Manuel Puig’s Kiss of the Spider Woman; and many others.

Schoenhof’s also markets to professional groups through mailings and conferences. The Modern Language Association is the largest example, but Schoenhof’s also attends meetings of foreign language teachers and other groups, such as medical technicians. For this audience, Schoenhof’s prepared a list of specialized medical dictionaries. Its language pairings started with entries for Arabic-English/English-Arabic and went on to include bilingual dictionaries for Bulgarian, Chinese, Creole, Czech, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Swedish, Thai, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese. For Spanish a’one, Schoenhof’s listed twenty-two different dictionaries and other reference works on medical terms. The French list included separate dictionaries on the digestive, nervous, and biomechanical systems, as well as one for ophthalmologists, with another for paramedics.

Since Bulgarian medical dictionaries do not come from nowhere, Schoenhof’s buys in some fifty countries, from a network of suppliers made up of bookstores, publishers, distributors, and agents. “We’re always looking for new sources,” says Townley. Some supplier relationships are sturdy; others come and go. When the collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted the Russian book trade and there were no dependable suppliers, Schoenhof’s relied upon an agent in Russia, a friend of Townley’s predecessor, who hand-picked books for shipment to Cambridge. The store’s Arabic section had been dormant for years before Cianfarini located a supplier while attending a bookselling conference in Paris. He struck up an acquaintance with one of the panelists, who operated a Beirut French-English bookstore. Cianfarini asked about a supplier for Arabic. “My brother Tony does that stuff,” he answered, and the Arabic shelves were on their way to revival.

That was half the Arabic equation. The other half was a staff member knowing Arabic. Ten members of the Schoenhof’s staff, which altogether numbers about twenty-five, are “booksellers,” and one member of this remarkable group could indeed work in Arabic. Five booksellers work in the store, serving walk-in customers. The other five work in the distribution center, handling inquiries via e-mail, fax, telephone, and U.S. mail. Both the store and the
distribution center are staffed with booksellers fluent in the core languages of German, French, and Spanish, and together the Schoenhof's staff commands some thirty-five languages. Townley reports proudly that "we even have a Cornish bard," a bookseller-poet in the store who speaks Cornish, Breton, and other Celtic languages, and who Townley recently spotted reading Teaching Yourself Arabic while enjoying a slow moment at the cash register. Which bookseller at Schoenhof's speaks the most languages? "That would be Paul," answers Townley. "He may need to make a list."

Paul Laplante does not make a list and in fact makes light of the question. When a working knowledge of ten or twelve languages draws no special notice, because that's the norm, who's counting anyway? Laplante grew up in a bilingual Franco-American household in Providence, Rhode Island. "I didn't really learn a foreign language until I was in college," he adds, adding that he believes children raised bilingually usually will grasp new languages with more ease than those raised in one language. When Laplante learned German in college and "took it to," he had gained not only his first new language, but also a livelihood and lifelong avocation. Today he can make his way in languages ranging from Armenian to Swahili. A member of the Schoenhof's staff since 1987, he has also taught for thirty years in the language department at Northeastern University.

Laplante and the other booksellers at the distribution center work closely with their counterparts in the store, which displays one copy of every title in the Schoenhof's inventory of some 65,000 titles. When a sale is made at the store, a replacement copy is pulled from the warehouse shelves at the distribution center. Twice daily, runners carry the new stock to Mount Auburn. When customers call or e-mail, Laplante describes exchanges that run like a game of 20 questions. Say you're looking for a Portuguese dictionary. "Portuguese in Portugal, or Brizol Portuguese?" he asks in rapid staccato. "A general dictionary, or a specialized dictionary?" Course materials in Albanian? "Is that northern or southern? For a class or a trip? With tapes or without?" Those are the routine transactions. The next inquiry, however, might be for a language unknown even to Schoenhof's. "We'll go out and see if we can find something," says Laplante. And, usually on the Web, Schoenhof's will indeed locate material, perhaps "one of the thirty-five languages of Sudan." We'll try, but will have to tell them actually getting something from a small publisher in Sudan is next to impossible."

Laplante and his fellow booksellers inhabit a shared space in the middle of the distribution center's offices, a rectangular area defined by dividers. Across from Laplante works Inna Johnson, who returns to her desk from a trip to the warehouse section of the distribution center, which is separated from the offices by a wall and a short walk. She has in hand an Arabic computer dictionary, an item in Schoenhof's stock that's the answer to a straightforward inquiry. At the same time she is working on one not so simple concerning a Chinese-Spanish dictionary. Johnson, through her own series of inquiries, has managed to locate two, one published in China, another in Spain. "One is $248," she reports. "The other, I don't know yet." Once all facts are in, she will report to the customer.

Johnson's duties at Schoenhof's once included selecting books in Russian. The work today is much different from Soviet days, when the state-issued, heavily-censored catalogs, recall Johnson, "sometimes put the interesting books under weird headings. Lenin and Marx you could find, but Akhmatova? They might have literature under 'Agriculture.' You had to know where to look."

Johnson, who is originally from Poland, has worked at Schoenhof's for twenty-three years. While living in Philadelphia, where she worked in the library cataloging department at Temple University, Johnson encountered Schoenhof's while on a trip to Cambridge and was amazed at what she saw on the store's shelves as she stopped for a set of Pushkin. "I knew Ukrainian bookstores, Polish bookstores, but nothing like this." Years later, when Johnson moved from Philadelphia, she returned to Schoenhof's, this time to ask for a job.

Anna Shiplova, the current Russian buyer, is one of the newest Schoenhof's booksellers. Shiplova emigrated to the United States about seven years ago. With a graduate degree in Spanish from Saint Petersburg University, she taught Russian and Spanish at Virginia Tech for five years before moving to Boston in 2001, when she joined the staff. "I try to select books keeping an eye on reviews in press," she explains, "prize-winning books, most-cited works in literary criticism. Unlike many other bookstores, we have the luxury to be very selective about our titles, because here, precisely the good literature titles are the ones that sell best." Telephone customers frequently ask for recommendations on course books. "You can say, well, Harvard uses this and that book to teach, say, Danish, but some schools prefer the other one. Being in the middle of a scholarly community gives you confidence in your recommendations. You can't have a first-hand opinion on everything."

Whenever Laplante, Johnson, Shiplova, and the other booksellers locate a book to buy, they pass information on their find to David Leyenson, Schoenhof's vice president, general manager, chief buyer, and according to Johnson, "genius" behind the entire operation. Anyone encountered the very busy Leyenson on the sidewalk by Schoenhof's might figure he was there to unload a truck. He has a rough beard, rolls up the sleeves of his flannel shirt, and exudes physical energy and a brusque intensity. Leyenson's job isn't to lift boxes of books, however. He moves bibliographic citations, many thousands of them every day.

That Chinese-Spanish dictionary? It will be Leyenson who enters the bibliographic information into the Schoenhof's database, assigning the order to the correct vendor as he does so, and deciding whether or not to stock, catalog, and list in "New Arrivals." He'll take care of all this in a matter of seconds, probably in the course of doing a few other things too. At this moment he is on the telephone, which he holds to his ear with his shoulder while working a cup of takeout coffee as he turns the pages of Livres Hebdo, a French trade journal equal in prominence to our Publishers Weekly, scanning the entries for the entire fall publishing season, deciding which titles to buy and in what quantity, recording decisions as he makes them by attacking his keyboard like an old-time reporter on deadline.

Leyenson's workspace fills one end of the booksellers' rectangle. "Space" isn't quite the right word, though, since there's not much of that remaining. The shelf above his desk is filled by a couple of dozen books by or about James Joyce, in languages from English to Russian to Romanian, all bound for shipment to a scholar who has given Schoenhof's carte blanche to send any scrap of Joyce material from anywhere in the world. The books are piled in two crooked towers, paperwork sticking out from each one. Other books rest here and there, over, beneath, and on either side of Leyenson's desk, competing for room with bibliographic notices of every kind, from every part of the world.

Within sight are bibliographies and other reference works for the major publishing nations. Sacked immediately behind him are three black plastic milk crates, full of mail from the past few days. He'll rip through them to scan the catalogs from Argentina, the lists from Czech Republic, the announcements from India, the reviews in Le Monde, Times Literary Supplement, and elsewhere. As he does with Livres Hebdo, Leyenson will scan the publishing world's trade journals, Bulletin Critique du Livre en Francais, a second source for France; Livres 4 let, for French Canada; Börsenblatt für den Deutschen Buchhandel, from Germany; Italy's Giorrnale della Libreria; the Spanish Bulletin Bibliografico, not to mention other bibliographic sources.

Leyenson, according to Johnson, astonishes even his Schoenhof's colleagues with an ability to remember that a book is out-of-print, to recall that another has to be ordered from a certain shop in some corner of the world, or to solve bibliographic puzzles in any of the dozen or more languages he works in, and in those he does not work in. If Leyenson surprises his fellow booksellers, the customers, even after over twenty years at Schoenhof's, where Leyenson came after studying English at Rutgers University, still surprise him. He has a story about a man who collects language dictionaries. Leyenson called to say he'd located in the Netherlands a dictionary of West Greenlandic, the first he'd ever seen. Schoenhof's could order him a copy. Yes, please go ahead. "But of course the really interesting one," as Leyenson recalls the man's comment, "would have been East Greenlandic."

Exchanges like this one, centered upon any of the languages of the world, fill Leyenson's days. What does he read for pleasure, if the evening? "Let's see," he pauses. "Right now, Trollope."

Anthony Trollope's novels might be the perfect balance for the work performed by
Leyenson and his colleagues at Schoenhof's. The inventory they create is housed in tall rows of metal shelving that fill about half the space in the distribution center. The languages are arranged alphabetically. Walk up and down the aisles to feel like a piece of a geography board game... Chinese, Dutch, Egyptian... Greek Proverbs... Indonesian Readings. In the "P" section, there's 1001 Persian Proverbs, followed by Beginner's Persian, Colloquial Persian, A Grammar of Contemporary Persian, Modern Persian: Intermediate Level, Concise English-Persian Dictionary, Shorter Persian-English Dictionary, and more Persian after that, followed after awhile by A Grammar of the Phoenician Language, and a few rows down, by 301 Polish Verbs.

Leyenson doesn't know of any other work that would give him the freedom to create and maintain such an "extraordinary ensemble" of books. Shiplova enjoys the regular customers, for whom the Schoenhof's books are "objects of lust. There is no question of selling something to somebody. It's purely giving water to the thirsty." Johnson likes the academic atmosphere of the store and the cosmopolitan nature of the clientele. Gianfarrini thinks of the store as a Cambridge cultural institution in its own right, not as just another business. In fact if there's a comparable store in the United States—or anywhere in the world—no one at Schoenhof's can think of it.

Quarterly Schoenhof's "New Arrivals" lists are now posted on the YBP Library Services Website (www.ybp.com). Titles Schoenhof's booksellers believe are particularly notable are marked with an "S." Each entry links through the title line to a full description on the Schoenhof's Website (www.schoenhof.com), and through the ISBN to YBP's GOBI. Library orders for Schoenhof's titles placed with YBP will be billed and shipped by YBP, consolidated with other YBP orders the library has placed.

From the Reference Desk

by Tom Gilson (Head, Reference Services, Robert Scott Small Library, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC 29424; Phone: 843-953-8014; Fax: 843-953-8019) <gilsont@cofc.edu>

The Enlightenment, arguably the most vibrant era of Western thought and social change, has long deserved a top-notch encyclopedia of its own. Now it has one. Advertised as a major publishing event, Oxford's Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment (2003, 0195104307, $ 495) proves worthy of the hype with over 700 thoroughly researched articles on a broad array of topics.

As defined by this encyclopedia, the Enlightenment covers 1670 through the early 1800s and is presented as a diverse and multidimensional era. The articles in this reference point to the Enlightenment as a time of incredible change that challenged authority in all of its guises, and forever altered the social, moral, scientific and political landscape. However, the Enlightenment is also placed in context. It is portrayed as an outgrowth of ideas generated in the preceding century, not an abrupt break with the past.

A substantial number of entries are biographies and include the famous like Burke, Jefferson and Voltaire, as well as the lesser known like Josiah Wedgwood and Pablo de Olavide. These sketch also range from influential 20th century scholars like Michel Foucault to the 18th century encyclopedist, Denis Diderot. There are articles on broad themes like economic thought, human nature, science and the arts, as well as on more specific topics like mercantilism, free will, optics and the theater. There are also geographic entries for major cities like Paris and London, as well as secondary ones like Philadelphia and Berlin. In addition, there are articles describing the Enlightenment as it influenced individual nations, as well as entries that discuss other regions of the world like Asia and North Africa, in light of Western contact and perception.

For the most part, published scholars are responsible for writing the essays and a selective bibliography is included with each article. All of the articles are cross-referenced to related entries and there is a very useful topical outline. For example, researchers interested in the development of publishing during the Enlightenment can find a wealth of articles under headings like the Book, Authors and Copyright, Reading Publics, and Journals, Subscriptions, Re-editions and Translations. For specific references there is a comprehensive and thorough general index.

The Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment is a natural purchase for academic libraries. Editor Alan Charles Kors and his contributors have produced an encyclopedia that does justice to the Age of Enlightenment and all its complexities. It is far more thorough than Facts on File's one volume encyclopedia of the same title published in 1996 (OP), and it offers a different approach from the Fitchflor Dearborn's translation of Michel Delon's Dictionnaire de l'encyclopedia, on des Lumières, which contains no biographical sketches. (English title: Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment, 2001, 157958246X, $285)

If your library is like ours, you can always use another historical atlas. Although there are already a number of good ones to choose from, another title you can add to an atlas is the recent Atlas of World History (2002, 019521921X, continued on page 60

Ethics and Electronic Information

A Festschrift for Stephen Almagno

Libraries, Community, and Technology


Encyclopedia of Abortion in the United States

Encyclopedia of Alzheimer's Disease