
ERICA REINER



UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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EERICA REINER was born 4 August 1924, in Budapest, to Imre, a young lawyer, and Clara (née Ehrenfeld), both from well-to-do modern Orthodox Jewish families. Erica and my mother, Anna Reiner, close first cousins, spent school vacations together either in the country at my mother's or in the city at Erica's. My mother talked about the elegance of Erica's Budapest home—the Fräulein teaching French and German to Erica and her sister, Eva; shopping at the best stores; always the best schools. At university in Budapest, Erica studied French literature and Semitics. Her father was by then a prominent lawyer, and later a member of the Judenrat in the ghetto. Even during the darkest days of 1944–45, when Jews were restricted and then prohibited from public life, Erica refused to stop attending classes; she simply removed her yellow star and went to lectures. Although many members of the Reiner family, particularly of the older generation, shared the fate of most Hungarian Jewry, many of Imre's immediate and extended family whom he had brought into the shrinking Budapest ghetto (including my mother), survived long enough to see liberation.

In 1948 Erica received her *licence* from Péter University in Budapest, and went off to Paris to continue her studies in French literature. There she lived with her mother's brother, Michel Gyarmaty, who was the artistic director of the Folies Bergères. Michel's apartment, like his stage sets, was elaborate, gilded, and baroque, and he introduced Erica to a new and exciting life in postwar Paris. In addition to giving her the decorating and entertaining style for which Erica became famous at the University of Chicago in Hyde Park, two important events in those years shaped her life. First, when Erica realized that she and later her family would not return to Hungary and that a career in French literature would elude her in Paris, she switched her studies to Semitic languages and linguistics, and began studying with Professor Jean Nougayrol. Second, the twenty-four-year-old Hungarian beauty had a tragic love affair. Her Spanish lover, an engineering student, eventually returned to Spain; but he left her with a deep commitment to his Catholic faith, which Erica made her own. As devout a Jew as she had been before, in Paris she turned her passion to Catholicism and remained a devout Catholic for the rest of her life.

By 1951 Erica and her family were attempting to emigrate to North America. In February 1951, Erica wrote a letter to her teacher Jean-Robert Kupper asking him to help her get an invitation to Chicago's Oriental Institute, which Kupper forwarded to I. J. Gelb, then the editor in charge of the Assyrian Dictionary. There followed a year of correspondence between Chicago and Paris while Erica tried to obtain a visa, and by 14 April 1952, the Reiner family arrived in Montreal. From there, Erica needed an employment contract—with salary specified—to

enter the U.S. Finally in May 1952 she was sent a letter offering her a one-year contract at the annual salary of \$1,000.

The next eight or nine years were busy and exciting years for Erica and for the Assyrian Dictionary, by then under the leadership of A. Leo Oppenheim. Erica was promoted every couple of years—from research assistant to research associate, with parenthetical ranks of assistant professor and then associate professor by 1959. By 1956 she was firmly installed in Ridgewood Court, in the first of three addresses on that block where she lived for the next fifty years (at numbers 5405, 5437, and 5447). She completed her Ph.D. at Chicago in 1955, and the next year the first volume of the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* appeared.

In 1959, still a research associate, Erica received an offer from Harvard. On 26 March 1959, Carl Kraeling, director of the Oriental Institute, wrote to Dean of the Faculties R. W. (Pat) Harrison, “The Dictionary situation continues to be explosive and difficult. Leo Oppenheim has turned down the Johns Hopkins offer. Miss Reiner is his closest associate in the production of the volumes. If the Harvard offer [to Reiner] had come two weeks earlier both would have left and we would have been sunk completely. I am working hard to keep the ship afloat.” Erica wrote a sort of history of these years (in *An Adventure of Great Dimension*) but she was never able to articulate fully the drama and pain of those times. The protagonists were Leo Oppenheim and Erica Reiner on one side and Thorkild Jacobsen on the other, with Benno Landsberger and I. J. Gelb trying to mediate. No one has been able to give a satisfactory explanation for Jacobsen’s animosity, but his personal attacks—pages of written accusations—against Leo Oppenheim and Erica were relentless. A week after Kraeling’s memo, on 1 April 1959, the OI faculty voted to make Erica a tenured associate professor. On 2 April Thorkild Jacobsen resigned from the Assyrian Dictionary Project.

The Dictionary continued to produce volumes at the rate of one every two or three years. In March 1962 Harvard again approached Erica, this time with the offer of a full professorship. In May, Erica again declined the offer, persuaded by Leo Oppenheim that her future was at the University of Chicago, by his side, working on the Dictionary. Jacobsen, in response, himself went to Harvard as a visiting professor that autumn, and remained there until his death thirty years later. During all those years, each time Thorkild Jacobsen came to Chicago, Erica would simply get in her car and leave town for a few days.

Four years after the Harvard offer, Erica was awarded her full professorship.

Erica’s elegant dinner parties were legendary: cheap wine, undercooked shad, salad, boiled potatoes, and—worth waiting for—her

amazing *dobros torte* (chocolate cake). Erica formed quick and lasting conclusions about colleagues and students, and any stumble was nearly impossible to overcome, especially for women. She set high standards for herself, impossibly high standards for those around her. I am aware of how staunchly she supported me over the years; I know too, though, that her support of me and of my career was to a very great extent part of her unflagging battle for the Assyrian Dictionary, which she never felt was fully secure since the assaults by Jacobsen.

When I first came to Chicago in October 1979, my office in the Oriental Institute was directly across the hall from hers. Later I moved to the office next to hers, with an always-open adjoining door. Only after she retired and I took over as head of the Dictionary project did I move my office a few yards down the hall to the east. Later she moved her own office a few yards to the west. Over all those years, we worked together eight or ten hours a day, every day, all year long. I suppose that only a bench scientist works that closely with a colleague. Certainly it is almost unheard of for humanists, accustomed to Tuesday–Thursday teaching schedules and isolated in their library studies doing solitary research.

In 1991, Erica complained one day about not feeling well, and I took her to the old Doctor's Hospital on Stony Island. She had had a heart attack. But she was furious that I had told anyone—her health, like her age or her religious observances, was private and not to be broadcast. In fact, she later denied having had a heart attack, and accused more than one person of being mistaken when they said otherwise. She was, to be sure, terrified of being a “cardiac cripple”; her father had suffered his first heart attack after providing a deposition for Adolph Eichmann's trial in 1961, and she had seen others of that generation sitting around waiting for the next big one.

We were then working on a crucial stage of one of the Dictionary volumes, and our colleague Robert Biggs and I took it upon ourselves to continue the galley corrections that Erica and I had been in the midst of. When Erica came back to work, however, she simply redid everything that Bob and I had accomplished—we were not to be trusted (yet) with the production of the Assyrian Dictionary.

But that event marked a turning point for Erica, and she did, ever so slightly, begin to relinquish total control over the Dictionary. She made plans to “retire” and to turn the reins over to me. To be sure, she never completely let go of the Dictionary. She continued to come to the OI every day, to work on the volumes in process, and to read and correct galleys. Erica's mother lived to 101, and I fully expected Erica to be here, looking over my shoulder, until long after I, too, retired.

Erica Reiner, more than most of us, was a study in contradictions—

frugality and extravagance, private and public. She would drive miles out of the way (using time and gas) to find strawberries or peaches a few cents cheaper than at the local market, cut off the rotten parts, and then serve them at an elegant dinner party, with bone china and silver, where Nobel laureates and newly arrived assistant professors shared cheap wine with visiting European Assyriologists. (I'll never forget the dinner party at which Dietz Edzard, well into dessert, turned to Saul Bellow and said, "So sorry, but which department are you in?") She wore cotton schmattes and shoes purchased at the Woolworth's on Fifty-third Street to work at the OI, then changed into a hand-made silk dress to go to a lecture or a reception at the president's house. Her favorite restaurant was the neighborhood cafeteria Valois; but she generously invited everyone to her home for her garden and dinner parties, and she always had two-ticket subscriptions to the Mandel Hall or Chicago Symphony concert series so that she could invite any strays or new arrivals. The upstairs, private rooms of her house were cramped and dowdy, but the living and dining rooms were ornate, gilded, mirrored, elegant, and opulent.

Only in her scholarly life was there no conflict. Whether by her own instincts or forged in the fire of the battles with Jacobsen in the early days of the Dictionary, she allowed no ambivalence or ambiguity in Assyriology—all her scholarly endeavors were uncompromisingly exact.

Erica Reiner lived her life on her own terms, constructing and controlling her public persona, and she insisted on dying that way too, with dignity. When she was diagnosed with cancer in late October 2005, she demanded that no one be told more than that she was "in for tests." She refused chemotherapy and radiation therapy, and chose hospice care in her own beloved home, surrounded by the things she held dear, where she died quietly on 31 December 2005.

Erica Reiner was enormously grateful and loyal to the Oriental Institute and to the University of Chicago, which took her in as a stateless twenty-eight-year-old and gave her a safe intellectual and emotional home for fifty-three years.

Elected 1982; Committees: Moe Prize 1988–96; Planned Giving 2003

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