

PROFILES: *Father Oliver Kapsner, OSB (1902-1991)—A Life in Libraries*

“I gave forty-one years of my monastic career to library work, the bulk of which was devoted to doing a cataloging job which begged to be done. The career began one month after completing the novitiate in July 1923 when Abbot Alcuin Deutsch, like myself, out for a morning stroll after breakfast, called me: ‘Father Oliver, come here. I want you to work in the library.’ And thereon hangs the tale.”¹

In 1964, when Father Oliver Kapsner, OSB, arrived in Italy to pursue the dream of a renewed Benedictine mission to preserve culture through the copying of manuscripts (with microfilm, not pen), he was already approaching an age when most librarians consider retirement. Born Leonard Kapsner in 1902 at Buckman, Minnesota, he came to Saint John’s Abbey and University in 1916 to attend Saint John’s Prep School and later the University. In 1922, he entered the novitiate and a year later professed religious vows as a Benedictine monk. Over the next ten years he studied philosophy, theology, and library science at various institutions, including Saint Vincent College, the University of Notre Dame, Catholic University of America, the University of Chicago, and the Benedictine Pontifical College (Rome). In this decade he also was ordained a priest (1928).

From 1932 to 1950, Father Oliver taught philosophy and served either as assistant or chief librarian at Saint John’s—with the exception of three years (1943-1946) as a U.S. Army chaplain in Europe, where he was awarded the Belgian *fourragère* and attended part of the Nuremberg war-crime trials.² In 1951 he became a research cataloger at Catholic University of America, and in 1958 he moved to Saint Vincent Archabbey and College in the same capacity. He remained at Saint Vincent until 1964, when Saint John’s Abbey sent him to Europe to initiate the microfilming project that came to dominate the remaining years of his service.

As the first field director for what would later become the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML; www.hmml.org), Father Oliver served in Austria from 1964 to 1971, during which time his team microfilmed between 27,000 and 28,000 manuscripts written before 1600. More about his role in this unique preservation mission appears below. Later in his life he served as a cataloger for HMML (1976-1988). He passed away on August 8, 1991, after serving as a Benedictine monk for sixty-eight years.

Of his numerous publications, I can cite only a few here:

Benedictine Bibliography (Collegeville, MN, 1962 and 1982)

Benedictine Subject Headings and Classification Schedule (1949, 2nd ed. 1964)

Catalog of the Foster Stearns Collection on the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (Washington, 1955)

Catholic Religious Orders (1948, 2nd ed. 1957)

Catholic Subject Headings (1st-5th ed., 1942-1963)

A Catalog of Bible Texts and Bible Commentaries in HMML (Collegeville, MN, 1984)

¹ Father Oliver first provided an account of his work in Austria, Switzerland, and Italy in “History of the Manuscript Microfilm Project,” in *The Scriptorium* 25 (Christmas 1986): 71-90. This was later adapted for inclusion in *A Sense of Place II: The Benedictines of Collegeville*, ed. Colman J. Barry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 95-110. This then was again adapted for presentation (with pictures) on the website of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library at http://www.hmml.org/Early_HMML/kapsner1.htm. All quotations are taken from the version of the account in *A Sense of Place II*.

² See: *Translatio Studii, Manuscript and Library Studies honoring Oliver Kapsner, O.S.B.*, ed. by Julian Plante. (Collegeville, MN: St. John’s University Press, 1973), 270-271; and *The Abbey Banner* 3/2 (2003: Fall): 11; available online at: <http://www.saintjohnsabbey.org/banner/0302fall.pdf>.

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As this list demonstrates, Father Oliver's passion for service placed him at the intersection of scholarly need and librarian service. He not only sought ways to preserve knowledge for the future but also to provide ready access for scholars in the present. This model of service was reflected as well in his participation in the Catholic Library Association and the Library Section of the American Benedictine Academy.

FATHER OLIVER IN AUSTRIA (1964-1971)

While Father Oliver's successes on several library fronts (Saint John's, Saint Vincent, and Catholic University) would alone make his career noteworthy, it is his second career as field director for HMML that proves the capstone of his vocation as a librarian and a Benedictine. After meeting initial resistance in Italy and Switzerland, he found his way to the small, neutral country of Austria—sandwiched between NATO and the Warsaw Pact—in April 1965. There he found some sympathy for his plan, but little enthusiasm, until he reached Kremsmünster Abbey:

When I arrived, the porter immediately told me that the abbot wanted to speak to me on the phone, whereupon I was set for the next treat of bad news. But his first words on the phone were: *Willkommen in Kremsmünster. Sie werden in Kremsmünster anfangen* (“Welcome to Kremsmünster. You will begin your work here”). Brother, what a day that was for me, to hear such good news with my own ears. (*A Sense of Place II*, 102)

Abbot Albert Bruckmayr not only embraced the proposal to microfilm the medieval manuscripts at Kremsmünster, he heartily encouraged Father Oliver to expand his base for manuscript preservation, which had at first been directed only toward Benedictine houses. Indeed, before long an avalanche of cooperation swept through the Alpine nation:

The sky was beginning to clear before me. Three monasteries had signed the agreement. Now negotiations were considerably easier. First, Michaelbeuern signed, then Seitenstetten, then Melk, then Göttweig (the abbot of Göttweig was also the new administrator of Lambach, so he signed for Lambach). From Göttweig the Cistercian abbey of Zwettl lay to the north, and another Cistercian abbey, Lilienfeld, to the south, both of which signed... Then I was off to Schottenstift in Vienna, which signed the agreement. There too the librarian was most gracious to me. One day he accompanied me to Klosterneuburg of Augustinian canons ten miles north of Vienna, which signed the agreement. (*A Sense of Place II*, 103)

Of course, the work was not without challenges—both personal and physical. Among the physical obstacles were the locations of the libraries themselves and their access to ready electrical power to operate the microfilm cameras:

A temporary drawback there [i.e., in Kremsmünster] which usually occurred whenever we moved to another abbey was to get hooked up with sufficient electric current. Our two cameras each operated with four 300-watt lamps. In other words, we needed *Stark Strom* (high voltage). In order to get this, we had to lead a 100-foot cable from the kitchen and through the windows to our level. To obtain the properly adjusted operating electric current, we had to transport a heavy transformer, which took two men to lift. In addition, two men were needed to move the eight-foot metal mast on which the mounted cameras were raised and lowered for proper focusing. (*A Sense of Place II*, 105)

True to his librarian calling, Father Oliver organized the collection as the team proceeded, sometimes under difficult conditions:

I personally typed all the inventory cards for about four hours each day, usually with cold hands and under poor light, selected the illuminated pages which were to be photographed separately at the end as color films, and supervised the work in general, keeping an eye on the cameramen so that they did their work and did not damage any precious manuscripts. (*A Sense of Place II*, 105-106)

By the time Father Oliver returned to Minnesota in 1971, his team had worked at over forty libraries, including monastic, diocesan, university, municipal, and provincial libraries, as well as the Austrian National Library. About a decade after Father Oliver's death, the data from his inventory cards were input into an online database—nicknamed OLIVER (http://www.hmml.org/research2010/catalog/search_home.asp)—where his work still helps scholars who search for manuscripts at the libraries with information garnered from the cards. Today the Library is home to more than 90,000 manuscripts on microfilm from Austria, Germany, Malta, Ethiopia, Spain, Portugal, England, Switzerland, Sweden, and elsewhere. In addition, the Library has digitally photographed over 25,000 manuscripts in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, India, and Ukraine.

Summing up his impressions of Father Oliver, A. A. Heckman (president of the Louis W. and Maud Hill Family Foundation) pointed to “his personal charm, his patience, and his keen sense of humor.” Heckman continued: “His kindness and sincerity in his dealings with everyone make it a special joy to know him both as a scholar and as a friend.”³ Or even as a librarian.



³ *Translatio Studii*, 3.