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Arnold Meier

Nazi refugee whose teaching skills fostered peace with old enemies

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Arnold Meier, who has died aged 95, was a great schoolmaster and an outstanding philologist. He was also a Jewish fugitive from Nazi Germany who, as soon as possible after the war, invited young Germans to stay in the homes of his English pupils and play them at football, to begin a sequence of annual matches that has continued without interruption for almost half a century.

Meier taught French and German brilliantly to the boys of Bury grammar school; as much as anything, however, he taught morality by example and admonition. He was the only master in the 1940s who never once used the cane or the slipper.

Instead, and typically, Arnold used words to obtain the desired effect. He would trade jokes with his boys (his were always delivered with a foxy grin and a muted cough, to signal that we were allowed to laugh with or at him for a moment or two). Other masters were invariably identified by their nicknames but no one ever referred to Meier as anything but "Doc".

Meier was born near Troisdorf, south of Cologne, where one of his earliest memories was of the village schoolmaster, with tears in his eyes, telling his pupils that Germany had lost the first world war. In spite of the fact that the French were partly responsible for post-war hardship during their occupation of the Rhineland, Arnold became a Francophile and, after taking his first degree at Cologne University, continued his studies at the Sorbonne.

Back in Germany as a young teacher, he read Mein Kampf and realised what was likely to follow. In 1933, he decided to leave for England and advised the rest of his family to do likewise; some did, though others stayed and mostly perished. His sister Erna was one of these, having been turned back by the British when she attempted to join Arnold, who was awaiting her arrival at Dover.

He had obtained a post in Brighton, where he taught and cared for German refugee children. He also continued to work for his PhD by long-distance correspondence with his old professor. His thesis suggested itself one day in a Sussex graveyard, when he noticed the number of Ruths, Rebeccas, Samuels and Davids buried there, Old Testament names which had been retained by English Christians, unlike their German co-religionists.

When war broke out Arnold was interned on the Isle of Man; his wife Irma Ranzenberg, whom he had married in 1937, was left to fend for herself and their child. He arrived at Bury in 1941, where he was delighted to discover that Lancashire boys could manage a very decent French accent when exposed to his (then revolutionary in England) oral method of teaching.

His most remarkable extra-curricular contribution came when the war was over. On the first day it was possible to telephone Germany again, Arnold rang his old school and, finding that the Nazi headmaster had been sacked, made an offer to the man's successor. "Now we must build bridges," he said, "and we have a rather good football team here. I suggest you come over and play us as soon as possible." So began the sequence of games between the Neusprachliches Gymnasium Koeln-Deutz and Bury grammar school, which are played alternately in each country, and before which every visitor spends a week living in the home of his opposite number.

Meier never emotionally abandoned his native land. There were German POWs in a camp beside the river Irwell, and, one foggy day as he walked along the towpath opposite, he heard them talking. Recognising Cologne accents, Arnold began a conversation through the gloom in the same dialect. He was always an ardent European and was later indignant at Mrs Thatcher's attitude to the continentals.

After retiring as senior languages master at Bury in 1969, Arnold devoted himself to his abiding passion, what he called "linguistic archaeology", producing learned papers which traced, for example, the evolution of the Hebrew word sha'ar - a gate in a city wall where disputes were settled and animals counted as they entered and left - through Sanskrit and Latin to the modern French *cour* and the English "score". In his 90s, frustrated historians asked him to decipher some newly discovered notes written up by German battlefield surgeons in the first world war.

Arnold enjoyed two extremely happy marriages. With Irma he had a son, David, now a circuit judge. After she died in 1952 he married another refugee, Trude Moritz, with whom he had Jonathan, now head of languages at the Verulam school, St Albans. In retirement, the Meiers continued to live at Whitefield, a couple of miles from the school whose pupils across two generations owed Arnold Meier a very considerable debt. Trude and his two sons survive him.

Arnold Meier, teacher and philologist, born December 21 1904; died February 19 2000

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