

“Looking Back Will Still Keep Us Looking Forward”: A Letter from Arthur Corbin to Soia Mentschikoff upon the Death of Karl Llewellyn

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Arthur Linton Corbin (1874-1967), Karl N. Llewellyn (1893-1962), and Soia Mentschikoff (Llewellyn’s third wife, 1913-1984)¹ are three important figures in the history of law in the United States in the twentieth century. They are striking not only for their contributions to contracts, commercial law, and jurisprudence, but also as distinctive personalities. Here, published for the first time, is a letter that poignantly and vividly throws light on their personal and professional relationships.

Karl Llewellyn died unexpectedly on February 13, 1962. The document that is reproduced and transcribed below, dated the day after Llewellyn’s death, is a letter of condolence from Corbin to Mentschikoff, written immediately on hearing the news. It was discovered in April 2012 among Mentschikoff’s papers, when the bulk of her papers were being prepared for transfer from the University of Miami to the Special Collections at the University of Chicago, where they joined the Karl Llewellyn Papers and an earlier collection of Mentschikoff Papers.²

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I am grateful to Barbara Black, Dean Robert Post and the Editors of this Journal for invaluable assistance with this Introduction.

1. Professor (later Dean) Mentschikoff retained her birth name in her professional life, but preferred to be called Mrs. Llewellyn, or just Soia, in her social and personal relations. In the more personal parts of this Introduction, I shall refer to Karl and Soia.

2. Some letters from Corbin to Llewellyn are in the Karl Llewellyn Papers in Chicago, including two long handwritten discussions of Llewellyn’s *THE COMMON LAW TRADITION* (1960) (on file with author). In a very informative article, Professor Joseph Perillo published some letters from Corbin to Professor Robert Braucher from the Braucher Papers at Harvard. Joseph M. Perillo, *Twelve Letters from Arthur L. Corbin to Robert Braucher*, 50 WASH. & LEE L. REV. 755 (1995). The article refers to some other extant letters from Corbin. Unfortunately most of Llewellyn’s letters to Corbin were destroyed in a fire at Corbin’s home in Hamden, Connecticut in January 1959. See Arthur L. Corbin, *An Account by Arthur L. Corbin of His Association with Karl N. Llewellyn* (unpublished typescript) (Sept. 26, 1965) (on file with author). I have not been able to trace any significant repository of Corbin’s professional papers.

Information about the life and work of each of these three figures is readily accessible from many sources.³ However, it may be helpful to provide a brief introduction to each of them in order to set this letter and their relations in context.

Arthur Linton Corbin grew up in Kansas. After graduating from the University of Kansas in 1896, he spent several months reading all of “the hornbooks” prescribed for the first year at University of Kansas Law School. In 1897 he entered the Yale Law School, where instruction was still by the lecture and blackletter textbook method. Later, looking back on the prevailing ideas of law and legal education that he encountered as a student, Corbin would write, “my reading of those ‘Hornbooks’ was a total waste of time,” for even then he “doubt[ed] many of the dogmatic ‘rules’ and generalizations of ignorance.”⁴ Corbin graduated from the Yale Law School in 1899 after two “not too arduous” years.⁵ He then practiced in Kansas for four years. He joined the Yale faculty in 1902 or 1903 and was an important part of the institution until his death in 1967. Corbin first expressed his ideas on law and legal change in print early on in his academic career. In 1913, in *The Law and the Judges*,⁶ he wrote:

[T]he growth of the law is an evolutionary process. Its principles consist of such generalizations as may tentatively be made from a vast number of individual instances. The instances change as man and society change, with the climate, the growth of population, with the process of invention, with social selection. And as the instances change, so must the generalizations change. So must our idea of justice change. It is the function of the judge to *decide* in these individual instances, and constantly to construct the generalizations in order that he may classify and decide the instance before him.⁷

3. All three figures are discussed in WILLIAM TWINING, *KARL LLEWELLYN AND THE REALIST MOVEMENT* (2d ed. 2012). See *id. passim* (discussing Llewellyn); *id.* at 27-34, 395-97 (discussing Corbin); *id.* at 394-99 (discussing Mentschikoff). Extensive further references are given in the endnotes and footnotes. See also NATALIE HULL, *ROSCOE POUND AND KARL LLEWELLYN: SEARCHING FOR AN AMERICAN JURISPRUDENCE* (1997). It is regrettable that there is no full-length biography of either Corbin or Mentschikoff. On Corbin, see Friedrich Kessler, *Arthur Linton Corbin*, 78 *Yale L.J.* 517 (1969). On Mentschikoff, see especially Zipporah Wiseman, *Soia Mentschikoff*, in *WOMEN IN LAW* 171 (Rebecca Mae Salokar & Mary L. Volcansek eds., 1996), and Zipporah Wiseman, *Soia Mentschikoff*, in *AMERICAN NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY ONLINE* (Feb. 2000), <http://www.anb.org/articles/11/11-01146.html>; see also *Symposium in Honor of Soia Mentschikoff Llewellyn*, 37 *U. MIAMI L. REV.* 351 (1983).

4. Arthur L. Corbin, *Sixty-Eight Years at Law*, 13 *U. KAN. L. REV.* 183 (1964).

5. *Id.* at 184 (internal quotation marks omitted).

6. Arthur L. Corbin, *The Law and the Judges*, 3 *Yale Rev.* 234 (1914). The paper provoked one outraged reader to urge his dismissal for suggesting that judges make law interstitially. See TWINING, *supra* note 3, at 27-34. Corbin interpreted “Legal Realism” to involve denial of the reality or utility of rules, although he rejected the label “Realist”: “Pared-down principles there must of course be—the law; but it seldom struck me that the ones I found in print were *the ones*.” Letter from Arthur L. Corbin to Karl Llewellyn (Dec. 1, 1960) (on file with author).

7. Corbin, *supra* note 6, at 234; see also TWINING, *supra* note 3, at 30-34. Such views were repeated in simple, sometimes simplistic terms, in many writings until Corbin’s death in 1967.

Corbin believed that every new decision tested doctrine as it had been previously formulated and that all such formulations were, at best, “tentative working rules.”⁸ This is the key to differentiating Samuel Williston and Corbin, the authors of the two great contract treatises of the twentieth century.⁹ Perillo expresses this well:

Williston believed law had evolved and was now explicable on the basis of rather static general principles, while Corbin believed that society constantly changes and that legal rules are tentative generalizations deduced [sic] from the vast outpouring of cases. The fact of these two different perspectives explains one major difference between their two treatises. Williston states rules and principles in the text and supports them with string citations. Corbin’s descriptions [of the facts of] and quotations from cases in the footnotes and texts forms [sic] the bulk of his treatise.¹⁰

Thus Corbin, influenced by Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, and William Graham Sumner, developed a simple view of law and legal development on which he based an inductivist,¹¹ evolutionist, working method that he would apply to reported cases with amazing consistency throughout his career.

When Corbin was a student and after he joined the faculty in 1903, the Yale Law School was not highly regarded. Corbin was very influential in its internal transformation from quite early days on the faculty until the 1930s. He is credited with introducing a variant of case-method teaching to Yale, with recruiting outstanding faculty members, and generally with greatly strengthening the Yale Law School.¹² Today he is best known for

8. This was a favorite phrase of Corbin’s. *See, e.g., Corbin, supra* note 2, at 26.

9. A fourth character, almost a ghost, lurks in the background of the Corbin-Llewellyn-Mentschikoff triangle: Samuel Williston (1861-1963) was Dane Professor of Law at Harvard and author of the most important major treatise on contracts before Corbin’s. Contrasts between their views on contract, case law and common law method are widely taken to be symbolic of the differences between “Realists” and “formalists” in regard to legal doctrine and, to a lesser extent, between Harvard’s and Yale’s approaches to law. Generalizations about realism and formalism, and about Harvard and Yale, need to be treated with caution, but Williston’s perspective and approach stand in sharp contrast to those very largely shared by Corbin, Llewellyn, and Mentschikoff. *See* TWINING, *supra* note 3, at 453 n.31 (citing an Oct. 1965 letter from Corbin to Twining). The “case method” teaching that Corbin introduced at Yale was quite different from the Langdellian case method that Williston espoused. Significantly, by the time they worked together on the Restatement, Corbin reports that Williston had virtually ceased to read recent cases. *See* Interview with Arthur L. Corbin (Oct. 12, 1965) (interview notes on file with author). “Williston’s limitations grew out of the fact that he was the product of the leading Harvard Faculty of 1870-1895, a faculty that convinced its students that it had arrived at final principles.” Arthur L. Corbin, *Answers to Questions 7* (Oct. 1965) (unpublished typescript) (on file with author).

10. Perillo, *supra* note 2, at 757 n.14 (citing Daniel Klau, Note, *What Price Certainty? Corbin, Williston and the Restatement of Contracts*, 70 B.U. L. REV. 511 (1990)).

11. On Corbin’s “inductivism,” see TWINING, *supra* note 3, at 451-52 n.17.

12. See Kessler, *supra* note 3. Llewellyn, who was given to effusive eulogies, once wrote:

Corbin and Corbin’s work, you will also find, have become so solid, so pervasive, so obvious, and so unnoticed a foundation of the Yale Law school and of Yale law training that for a quarter of a century people have been seeing chiefly the superstructure built on him and with him. The displacement of text-and-lecture teaching by case-and-problem teaching—that was Corbin almost unassisted. So with the scrapping of admission from high school (cutting

his publications on contract law, especially his monumental treatise, *A Comprehensive Treatise on the [Working] Rules of Contract* (1950-51),¹³ many influential articles on the same subject, and his contribution to the *Restatement of Contracts*. In his work on contracts, Corbin worked closely with Samuel Williston, despite the fact that the two held significantly divergent views on the subject, collaborating on the *(First) Restatement of the Law of Contracts* from 1922 to 1932 and maintaining friendly relations thereafter. Corbin did not consider himself to be a theorist, and admitted to not having read much jurisprudence,¹⁴ but all of his scholarship was based on the relentless application of a simple method premised on the working theory outlined in *The Law and the Judges*.

In 1915 an unusual student entered the Yale Law School. Karl Llewellyn was brilliant, brash, ambitious, volatile, and romantic. He was from a modest background in Brooklyn, but he had studied for two years at a high school in Germany, joined the German Army on the outbreak of World War I, and, after being wounded and becoming the first American citizen to receive the German military award, the Iron Cross (second class), Llewellyn returned to Yale College as “a big man on campus.”¹⁵ Llewellyn did not take Corbin’s course on Contracts, as he had already taken a very different course on the subject while in summer school at the University of Michigan Law School in 1915. The Yale Law School became a small and intimate institution after the United States entered World War I, due to the number of students and faculty in service. (Despite numerous attempts, Llewellyn was not allowed to enlist.) In this small community, Llewellyn worked very closely with Corbin, especially on the *Yale Law Journal* where Llewellyn became Editor-in-Chief for the 1918-1919 school year. Corbin recognized that Llewellyn’s admiration for Sumner and Keller helped him to assimilate Corbin’s own perspective and approach. The two formed a very close bond, Llewellyn as enthusiastic

the student body, was it by a quarter?). Corbin sparked the first sustained campaign for a complete faculty of the utter best; Corbin pushed the call of man after man at a salary far beyond his own, each man then joining in the forward drive: Hohfeld, Swan, Clark, Hutchins, were Corbin-chosen, Corbin-sold. Corbin again sparked the first restricted-admission system among law schools. Corbin’s weight and support, made possible Yale’s first great “modernistic” expansion of personnel and program.

Karl Llewellyn, *Corbin*, in *THE KARL LLEWELLYN PAPERS* 111 (William Twining ed. 1968) (undated, probably early 1930s). Most of these claims are corroborated by Kessler, *supra* note 3. In 1928 at a dinner in honor of Thomas Swan, Dean of the Yale Law School from 1916 to 1926, the toastmaster called Swan “the man who had built up Yale Law School:” “Quite spontaneously and without the slightest affectation, Swan interrupted: ‘That’s not true! Arthur Corbin’s the man who deserves credit for what we’ve done.’” LAURA KELMAN, *LEGAL REALISM AT YALE 1927-1960*, at 100 (1986) (citing the papers of T.R. Powell at Harvard).

13. 1-8 ARTHUR L. CORBIN, *CORBIN ON CONTRACTS* (1st ed., 1952). On the publisher’s insistence the word “working” was deleted from the title.

14. “Karl started with Sumner; Hohfeld started with Austin; Corbin started with neither.” Corbin, *supra* note 9, at 4.

15. See Twining, *supra* note 3, at 535-43 (Appendix A: The War Adventure).

disciple, Corbin as long-term mentor and admirer.¹⁶

Llewellyn's subsequent career is well known. After two years in practice, he became a full-time academic, briefly at Yale, then at Columbia from 1924-51, and finally at the University of Chicago from 1951 until his death. He is best known as a leading American legal realist, an outstanding scholar of contract law (especially sales) and commercial law, the Chief Reporter of the Uniform Commercial Code (1942-1952), a controversial legal theorist, and a prolific writer on many topics. His prose style and his flamboyant public persona often hid the fact that he was a brilliant and innovative technical lawyer and, in many respects, a loyal disciple of Corbin, the quiet, unflagging craftsman.

When Llewellyn returned as an instructor after two years of practice in New York, he and Corbin continued to work closely together and Llewellyn took over Corbin's Keller-inspired course in the college on "Introduction to Law," which he re-named "Law in Society." After that they lived in different places and had mainly social contact. However, in the early 1940s, Llewellyn invited Corbin to join him on a committee preparing the Revised Uniform Sales Act, which led in due course to the project for a Uniform Commercial Code. Corbin and Llewellyn worked closely together on this, but in 1945 Corbin withdrew in order to work on his treatise. Corbin continued to concentrate on Contracts, but Llewellyn, while still a contract lawyer, branched out into Jurisprudence, Sociology of Law, other aspects of commercial law, and a variety of other fields. Nevertheless the early years at Yale—including their shared admiration for Sumner and Keller—had a profound impact on all of Llewellyn's subsequent work.

Soia Mentschikoff was born in Moscow in 1915 and immigrated with her parents to New York in 1918. After obtaining an AB at Hunter College in New York City, she graduated from Columbia Law School in 1937, having been taught by Llewellyn. She practiced in New York for ten years, and starting in about 1940, worked closely with Llewellyn, first as a research assistant on the Revised Uniform Sales Act and later as Assistant Chief Reporter on the Uniform Commercial Code. In 1946, Soia and Karl married. She was appointed Visiting Professor at Harvard Law School in 1947, where Karl joined her for the 1948-49 academic year. The two moved to the University of Chicago together in 1951 at the invitation of Dean Edward Levi. Soia stayed on in Chicago after Karl's death in 1962

16. Corbin wrote of their work on the *Yale Law Journal*:

That year, he and I worked steadily together. I think that between us we wrote at least half of the comments and case notes. It was a constant joy, both personally and intellectually, to work with him. I was aware that he had highly poetic and emotional tendencies; and I sometimes advised keeping one's "feet on the ground;" but whenever Karl's mind was concentrated on a juristic problem, I have never known anyone who did clearer thinking or reached sounder results.

Corbin, *supra* note 2, at 4.

and later became Dean of the University of Miami School of Law from 1974 to 1982. She died in Coral Gables, Florida in June 1984.

It is unfortunate that a full biography of this remarkable person has not been completed. For not only did Soia Mentschikoff become well-known as a personality, but she had an extraordinarily distinguished career¹⁷: she was the first woman to teach at Harvard Law School, the first female partner of a major U.S. law firm,¹⁸ the first female President of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), and the first woman to be considered as a possible Supreme Court nominee.¹⁹ While Dean of the University of Miami School of Law, where she was appropriately known as “The Tzarina,” she gained a reputation as one of the most notable negotiators and fixers on the legal stage. Formidable as was her public persona, Soia was deeply in love with Karl, and on matters of legal theory and doctrine, she remained a loyal and devoted disciple after his death. As we shall see, Karl called Corbin “Dad”²⁰—and since Corbin taught Karl, and Karl in turn taught Soia, perhaps she should have called him “Granddad.”

As noted above, in the early 1940s, Karl invited Corbin to join a committee on revising the Uniform Sales Act, which eventually led to the project on the Uniform Commercial Code. By then, Soia was Karl’s assistant and the three worked closely together until 1945 when Corbin decided to devote himself to completing his treatise. Corbin admired Soia’s ability and, as Karl’s “Dad,” clearly approved of her. In a letter to law professor (and later Massachusetts Supreme Court Justice) Robert Braucher, Corbin wrote: “Soia M., Karl’s wife, is a fine supplement to Karl, very clear mind, sound masculine legal judgment, keeps Karl’s feet on the ground. They both call me ‘Dad.’ Not surprising that I like ‘em.”²¹ In October 1965, I was privileged to interview Corbin about Llewellyn at his home in Hamden. This is how I tried to report the interview not long afterwards:

By then Corbin was [over] 90; his hearing was impaired and he could only read with considerable effort. He had just completed work on a supplement to his monumental treatise on contracts. Beside his chair was a box of manila cards on which each new decision affecting contracts was noted with care in longhand as the advance sheets came in. In the previous six months, Corbin said,

17. See *supra* note 3 (listing works on her life).

18. She was made a partner at Spence, Windels, Waller, Hotschkiss & Angell in 1944.

19. Connie Bruck, *Soia Mentschikoff: The First Woman Everything*, AM. LAWYER, Oct. 1982, at 36. Such claims are documented in the literature, but have to be treated with caution by careful historians.

20. See *infra* text accompanying note 21. Some people have mistakenly thought that Corbin was Karl’s father-in-law rather than father-in-the-law, a legal form of kinship.

21. Letter from Arthur L. Corbin to Robert Braucher (Nov. 2, 1959), in Perillo, *supra* note 2, at 755. Perillo comments: “To Corbin, whose social formation was in the nineteenth century, the description ‘masculine’ was highly complimentary.” *Id.* at 764 n.28.

he had noted approximately two thousand cases in this fashion. Long after most scholars would have handed over such “mechanical” work (Corbin would have rejected this description of it) to younger men, he had ploughed on relentlessly and had only stopped when it became a physical impossibility to continue.²²

The letter below corroborates almost everything stated in these introductory remarks and shows why Llewellyn treated Corbin as a role model, despite their differences in style and temperament. The letter tells how Karl came to call Corbin “Dad”²³ and confirms the closeness of their relationship, while also affirming the bond that Corbin and Soia shared. Furthermore, the document can be read as an example of a style of communication that has all but vanished today—a two-page personal letter written in longhand. Above all, it tells us about Arthur Corbin, Karl’s model of “the craftsman,” who in addition to transforming the Yale Law School, “went . . . on piling up clean work, passionately honest, infinitely careful work, avoiding fad, following the facts as they emerged. . . . And never did personal interest or personal feeling obscure the job.”²⁴ Yet, as this letter shows, perhaps the only thing that Arthur Corbin loved as much as his work was his extended “family.”

22. TWINING, *supra* note 3, at 451 n.12. Corbin not only allowed me to record the interview, but also sent me two handwritten documents, which survive in typescript in my possession: (i) some answers to questions I had sent him in advance (12 pages, Oct. 1965); and (ii) “An Account by Arthur L. Corbin of His Association with Karl N. Llewellyn” (16 pages, Sept. 26, 1965). These proved invaluable for my research as well as being an example of Corbin’s generous encouragement of the young.

23. A longer version reads as follows:

On his becoming an instructor, Karl came to my desk at the end of a class and said that he wished to ask me a favor. He said: “All the others call you Arthur. I am too young to do that; but I won’t call you ‘Professor’. May I call you ‘Dad?’” From that day until his death some 40 years later, the only name by which he addressed me, orally or in writing, was ‘Dad.’

Corbin, *supra* note 2, at 5.

24. Llewellyn, *supra* note 12.

21 Robinwood Road
Hamden 17 Conn.
Feb 14, 1962.

Dear Sonia:

It is like losing a son - it is losing my son. I have had many fine students, but Karl was my best. In spite of many intervals, I had more contacts with Karl than with any other. How glad I have been that he found you! With your help he could finish the Code - and then the Common Law Tradition. What a satisfaction to recall our last letters! I hope that he did not have an illness. My son Arthur's wife died in the night of a brain hemorrhage; but my wife, now gone 30 years, struggled against sarcoma for 7 months (they were not unhappy months). Sometimes - not often - I think that I am living too long. Not a boyhood friend alive. Not even one friend of my own age alive, except good old Tom Swan - the best. Williston, at 100, is not alive - not a word from him for over 5 years. But, mostly, I know that I am a fortunate old man. At 87, nearly deaf and half blind, I can still read the reports and write critical notes and enjoy the "nuggets" (Hobfild's word) that the judges now and then turn out. No human race does not stand high in my judgment; and yet I can look back and recall many who have made life worth while. No one is never wholly lost. You will find it so with Karl, as I did with Bernice. You will have your work, as I still have mine. It is work that fills up the gaps and satisfies the mind. What an ardent worker Karl has always been! I have been a steady one; my Vol. 6 has just been revised and expanded into 2 volumes. And when Judge Goodrich

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asked me to go over the Restatement Contracts, and indicate the places in need of revision (for Braucher's use), I could not merely say "Every page." In 18 months I made a "one man" revision of the whole. Lately, I have exchanged five letters with Judge Friendly (2d Cir.).

A half dozen Law Seniors have lately had fine sessions with me at home. The young ones still come on and hold their own with the past. I cannot go to the Law School any more; but I am fond of Gene Rostow and Fritz Kessler. Tom Swan comes to see me. My 3 sons, their 2 remaining wives, and my 6 grandchildren rejoice my heart. Arthur Jr (nearing 60) comes to see me every week. I have two great-grand daughters, now in Istanbul. Margaret Boll - my nurse and manager - who has been in my household for 27 years, cares for me like a baby. I have felt sufficiently assured to send for my summer garden seeds. David writes that he will drive me to Maine about June 1. Looking back will still keep us looking forward. You have such a firm and steady mind that I have no fears for you. You have made yourself my daughter, as Karl made himself my son. A way back in time, he came to my desk and said: "I can't call you 'Arthur' (as the older men do); and I won't call you 'Professor'; may I call you 'Dad'?" Even as he grew old enough to call me "Arthur", I rejoiced in remaining "Dad." What an expressive keen-minded and affectionate son! Just as did Karl, so too does Sora have an understanding and loving Dad.

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