



**Maria Schmidt-Ihms**

*(Photograph: Natal University Archives)*

## *Maria Katharina Schmidt-Ihms (1914–1995)*

In its Winter 1995 edition, the University of Natal's publication *Focus* mentions the passing of Professor M. Schmidt-Ihms:

Maria Katharina Schmidt-Ihms, Emeritus Professor and long-time head of the Department of German in Pietermaritzburg, died in Canada on 18 January, age 81. She was associated with the University of Natal for 36 years. She built up the department from a handful of students to two fully-fledged departments on both campuses and was the first incumbent of the Pietermaritzburg Chair in 1958.

Best known to so many of her ex-students simply as Frau Doktor – or to those of post-1958 vintage as Frau Professor – she will have left a distinct mark on the academic development of many a student who had the privilege of reading for a degree under her guidance.

In her early years at the university in Pietermaritzburg – especially when 'her' department consisted of the cited 'handful of students' – she time and again demonstrated her adaptability, eager spirit of scholarship and deep fount of knowledge, guiding her students equally well through all aspects of the degree syllabus, from Old-High and Middle-High German and all facets of

linguistics, to modern High-German; from literary history and phonetics, to the study of all genres of literature. From the voluminous epics of the German classics through all the distinct literary eras to the terse and often cryptic moderns, she was as well-versed as versatile.

Though outspoken about her preferences, she was receptive and quick to adjust to new ways and forms of literary expression, sensitively detecting in them the simultaneous agencies of message, texture, imagery and sound which uniquely manifest the interaction of era, biography and *Weltbild* in the author's work. A keen appreciator of art, she revealed a truly unfettered mind, both in appreciating the bygone eras and forever delighting in the experience of novel forms and expressions of truth.

Her lectures were an invitation to her students to share the journey of her agile mind and emotional perception. Her leadership in the department was not only directed at fellow academics: it was equally characterised by an interest in and empathy with her students.

Professor Schmidt-Ihms had a profound influence on the teaching of German as a foreign language. Herself a linguist of note, she developed a well-researched introductory course known as 'Special German', breaking new ground, working independently and in the forefront of an approach which was to be adopted and perfected by members of the Goethe-Institut.

Laying a broad, solid foundation in the knowledge of literature, literary history and linguistics, she provided a valuable preparation for many a BA student who would proceed with the Higher Diploma in Education to become a member of the German-speaking section of the teaching fraternity, both in Natal and far beyond its borders.