



IN MEMORIAM

Henrik Birnbaum

Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature, Emeritus

Los Angeles

1925–2002

Professor Henrik Birnbaum was an internationally renowned scholar in the field of comparative Slavic linguistics, which he taught at UCLA for 40 years. His interests and expertise were wide-ranging; his erudition and depth of knowledge in medieval literature, European cultural history, and several schools of linguistics - to name but a few of the fields in which he published - were fabled. Roman Jakobson, the foremost Slavist of the past century, wrote of him: "Professor Birnbaum combines meticulous philological research with a vivid interest in the problems and methods of general linguistics." A former student, upon hearing of his death, remarked what a privilege it had been to study with one of the last great European humanists.

Born in Breslau, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland) in 1925, he moved with his family to Sweden in 1939 to escape Nazi persecution. He earned his doctorate in 1958 at Stockholm University, where he taught for two years before coming to this country as a visiting lecturer at Harvard. He was soon recruited by UCLA, where during his long and fruitful career he served twice as the chair of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and for ten years as the director of the Center for Russian and East European Studies.

He began publishing in the late forties, when still a student; by the time he had retired, his bibliography ran to nearly 400 items, including some 20 major books and book-length monographs. He received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Council of Learned Societies, and was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

His achievements were equally recognized abroad. He taught at the University of Munich and was a guiding force behind the establishment of both the Inter-University Centre for Postgraduate Studies in Dubrovnik and the Central European University in Budapest. He was a corresponding member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, the Polish Academy of Sciences, and the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Days before his death he learned that the Croatian Academy had awarded him the coveted Jagic Prize.

Professor Birnbaum will be mourned by his wife of 37 years, Marianna, his children, Eva and Staffan, his five grandchildren, and his brothers Karl and Michael. He will also be sorely missed by his students and colleagues throughout the world.

Henrik Birnbaum: A Stream of Memories

My friendship with Henrik lasted for more than 40 years. We first met in August of 1957 at the Eighth International Congress of Linguists in Oslo. Things in the USSR had begun to change, and I was allowed to go abroad for the first time. (I was not allowed to return to the West for the next 30 years.) We were both young and full of projects and common interests. By the time of the Congress Henrik had completed his studies at the University of Stockholm under the supervision of Peeter Arumaa, who also came to Oslo. Later Henrik told me I had produced a favorable impression on Professor Arumaa, to whom I had described my experiences in a Lithuanian village in Byelorussia, and it was probably Arumaa's remarks that prompted

Henrik's initial interest in my linguistic studies. The Congress was exceptional in that it enabled us to discuss our ideas with the greatest scholars of the previous generation: Benveniste, Hjelmslev, and Kurylowicz were all present. But for both Henrik and me the most stimulating talks were with Roman Jakobson, whom we continued to regard as a teacher, a close friend, and an exemplary scholar. In *Sketches of Slavic Scholars*, Henrik dedicated a series of articles to Jakobson, one of which deals with his much acclaimed paper at the International Congress of Slavists in Moscow the following year (1958).

At that time Henrik came to the USSR not only for scholarly conferences but also as an interpreter for Swedish student groups. He told me that interpreting helped him to master Russian, and indeed his knowledge of Russian soon approached the high level of his knowledge of many languages, which reflected his difficult life journey through Europe and America. Whenever he visited Moscow, he found time to talk over Slavic and linguistic matters with me, but he was also deeply involved in the changing cultural situation of the country. I remember the day in the summer of 1959 when he came to our dacha at the Village of Writers in Peredelkino just after visiting our neighbor Boris Pasternak. Because I was a close friend of the great poet, I had been dismissed from the faculty of the University of Moscow when he received the Nobel Prize, and he and Henrik spoke about my situation. Henrik returned to their conversation and to Doctor Zhivago in some of his later publications. Unofficial Russian literature was the main topic of conversation when Henrik brought his wife Marianna to our Peredelkino dacha for the first time. They had just read the memoirs of another Peredelkino resident, Nadezhda Mandelstam, the widow of the great poet, who had perished in a camp in the Far East during the Terror. The atmosphere of the creative new unofficial Russian culture produced a strong impression on them, and they eagerly inquired after the most minor details of our everyday life. Over a good dinner I had procured from the House of Writers situated in the Village, they talked (in French) to my mother Tamara Vladimirovna about Babel and other remarkable writers and artists whom she had known well.

Later other members of our family, my wife Svetlana and our son Lyonya, became the Birnbaums' close friends. Henrik listened raptly to my discussions with Lyonya (who was 14 at the time) about the formal description and deciphering of the enigmatic inscription of the disc of Phaistos, and years later he returned to the topic. He was particularly interested in the typological investigation of Slavic languages and the Balkan linguistic zone developed at the Section of the Institute of Slavic and Baltic Studies of which I was Chair. One of his books of the period treats the first results of our work, and he continued to follow it; indeed, he was instrumental in disseminating knowledge of our progress to the world scholarly community. He also sent me all his publications: he was extremely correct about this essential part of our standing scholarly cooperation. He knew I had difficulty gaining access to the latest Western scholarly literature and offered his help. Very soon I received Benveniste's two-volume dictionary of Indo-European institutions and the proceedings of the 1963 UCLA conference on Indo-European dialects that he edited together with his UCLA colleague Jaan Puhvel. He was also instrumental in making me a member of the advisory board of *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*.

During my first visit to the United States - I came for a conference at the end of 1988 - I spent several days with Henrik and Marianna in Los Angeles. We spoke about everything under the sun - science, politics, the arts and literature, our relatives and common friends - and picked up where we left off in the spring of the next year when I lectured at UCLA. I had been elected a People's Deputy of the Soviet Parliament, and Henrik asked me to share my views on the rapidly changing Russian situation with a group of leading UCLA professors, including such colleagues as Carlo Ginzburg. He also arranged for me to meet with the editorial board of the *Los Angeles Times*.

I spent my first three years in America teaching at Stanford, where Marianna and Henrik often visited us, but they eventually felt that I would find the UCLA Slavic Department, of which Henrik was chair at the time, more interesting, and in 1992 Dean Herbert Morris invited me to join the faculty here. Henrik paid serious attention to the topics of my first courses. He was particularly enthusiastic about the course on Russian literature and cinema and personally edited the description of it published in the *Daily Bruin*. He also actively participated in several new ventures I initiated with his help. For example, he supported my idea of founding a Los Angeles Circle of Cultural Semiotics and used the forum to rethink some of the fundamental ideas of the Tartu-Moscow school and present his views on Karl Popper. Our semiotic discussions continued in *Elementa*, *Journal of Slavic Studies and Comparative Cultural Semiotics* that appeared from 1993 to 2000. I served as editor-in-chief; Henrik contributed several articles and helped me to edit texts of authors whose English was not native. Both of us participated in the International Congress of Semiotics in Berkeley in 1994. Among my own semiotic works Henrik was particularly interested in "The Slavic Monastic Mind," a title suggested by him. He invited me to deliver a paper on the subject at a conference he organized on medieval Slavic culture, where I was particularly impressed by the autobiographical survey he gave of his studies in the field.

Some aspects of medieval Russian culture - such as the Old Novgorod birch- bark texts - were particularly close to both of us, and although we did not agree on all problems of interpretation it was always a pleasure to talk to Henrik about them. Among my studies that were almost unknown in America Henrik was particularly interested in Nostratic comparison, and he arranged an interview with both of us on the subject that was published at UCLA. We never stopped discussing Proto- Indo- European and Proto- Slavic phonology and morphophonology, and after a talk I gave on the fate of the final phoneme -r in Slavic Henrik reminded me of a similar suggestion he had made years before in an article on heteroclitic nouns. In an article written for my Festschrift just before his sudden fatal illness Henrik speaks of some issues we viewed differently. An article on Tocharian, Slavic and Altaic, which he was writing at the time and which he dedicated to me, will only now be published, both in English and - in Voprosy iazykoznaniiia - in Russian translation.

I often met Henrik at lectures that seemed to be beyond even his broad sphere of interests. He was on friendly terms with several great linguists of the old generation such as Wolf Leslau and introduced me to them. Literature was always a favorite with him. At the Birnbaums' - and later at the Goethe- Institut - I met Christa Wolf during her stay in Los Angeles. Birnbaum had arranged a visit of Lev Kopelev (Svetlana's father, with whom Henrik and I had spent an evening at the Moscow Writers' Club) and very much regretted that it could not come to fruition.

I was touched when Henrik told me the name of the poet he and Marianna considered "their poet" in modern literature: their choice - Paul Celan, who had committed suicide in Paris not long before we spoke of him - happened to be mine as well. We belonged not only to the same generation but also to the same narrow circle of European cosmopolitan intellectuals. We shared scholarly interests, literary and artistic tastes, and a general world view; we had so much in common that talking about him is tantamount to surveying my own life.

Vyacheslav Ivanov