



IN MEMORIAM

Wolf Leslau
Professor of Near Eastern Languages, Emeritus
UC Los Angeles
1906 - 2006

Our colleague Wolf Leslau was born on November 14, 1906, in Krzepice, 20 miles northwest of the famed city of Czestochowa. He was orphaned at a young age, but an older brother kept the family functioning, and at eighteen, he graduated from a Polish high school that devoted a considerable part of its curriculum to Hebrew and Jewish subjects; such schools were common in the reconstituted Polish state after World War I. In his teen years, he joined the left-wing Zionist movement Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsa'ir and after high school, prepared himself for moving to Israel and life in a kibbutz. The British, however, refused him an entry permit to Palestine, apparently because he showed signs of having had tuberculosis. His mother, who died from the disease, would seat him on her lap and share her food with him when he was a child, and Wolf was sure that he contracted the disease from her. Instead of tilling the soil of Palestine, he was destined to break ground of a different sort.

A series of peregrinations ensued, which reached their happy culmination two decades later in Los Angeles. The first step, in 1926, was a move to Vienna, where he enrolled in the Hebrew Pedagogium. The Pedagogium boasted faculty of university caliber, but Wolf was more interested in a working agreement between the school and the University of Vienna, which allowed students in the former to enroll in the latter. At the University, he studied Akkadian, Arabic, and a subject far off the beaten path that he found especially intriguing-- the South Arabic family of languages. Not least of all, soon after arriving in Vienna, he met Charlotte Halpern, who would be his affectionate and supportive partner for more than seventy years.

In 1931, Wolf moved with Charlotte to Paris in order to study with Marcel Cohen, an expert on the languages of Ethiopia. He received diplomas in South Arabic and the Ethiopian languages, a language family related to South Arabic; as a dissertation, he wrote an etymological dictionary of Sokotri, one of the South Arabic dialects; and he began teaching South Arabic and Ethiopian languages. After the French capitulated in 1940, he and Charlotte fled to the South. He was interned by the Vichy authorities, managed to get released, and with the help of a relief agency, escaped to New York in 1942, together with Charlotte and their infant daughter. He held part time positions at an École des hautes études that had been created in New York for refugee scholars, at the Asia Institute, and at the New School for Social Research. In 1951, he received an appointment at Brandeis, was still an associate professor in 1955, and was not especially happy with the atmosphere at Brandeis, which was in its infancy. Then he and Paul Dodd, dean of Letters and Science at UCLA, were introduced.

UCLA had begun a program in Hebrew with the help of funds contributed by members of the Jewish community and it committed itself to funding a permanent position should the experiment succeed. The university was now ready to fulfill its commitment, but Dodd envisaged something grander-- a Department of Near Eastern Languages and a Center for Near Eastern Studies. The meeting with Wolf was a meeting of kindred spirits. After Dodd made short work of having the appropriate faculty committee affix its stamp of approval, Wolf was hired in 1955 as Professor of Hebrew. He was housed in the Department of Classics, and a Professor of Arabic, Irfan Kavar (Shahid), was appointed and housed in Oriental Languages. Wolf was added to the Committee on Near Eastern Studies, became chairman of the Committee in the following year,

and then made one of his many contributions to the university by recommending, and pushing for, the appointment of Gustave Von Grunebaum as the first Director of a Center for Near Eastern Studies. Both men had the ear of the Administration, each gave the other unstinting cooperation, and the days were happy ones when funding was plentiful. Further appointments in Near Eastern languages and in the social sciences followed.

In 1959, the university established a department of Near Eastern Languages; for a time it was a department of Near Eastern and African Languages and eventually chose for itself its current name, the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. The initial faculty consisted of professors of Hebrew, Semitic, Arabic, and Persian-Turkish, who had hitherto been housed in the Departments of Classics and Oriental Languages. Wolf was chairman, a capacity in which he served until 1965. Despite having had no previous administrative experience, he was strikingly adept at the job, establishing a warm rapport with the university administration and proving himself an efficient and visionary departmental administrator. In those days, the chancellor had a yearly reception for faculty. A few remaining souls — their hair long since gone white — may recall how Wolf would gather new faculty before the reception and, like a proud mother hen escorting her chicks, present them to the chancellor and deans so that they could see how well university resources were being utilized. More likely than not, he would knock on the administration's door a short time later to request funding for an additional appointment. The Leslau-Von Grunebaum "master plan" gave the Department form and direction as it grew, although not every element was implemented. The university deemed other demands more pressing, for example, than professorships in the languages and literatures of all the Eastern Churches--Armenian, Geez, Syriac, and even Georgian. The Department today has a healthy Armenian program and offers courses in the Syriac language, but the other components of the Eastern Church concept fell by the wayside. Wolf nonetheless sowed the seeds that developed into the breadth and strengths of today's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures.

For his dictionary of Sokotri, he relied on materials collected by Austrian researchers who, early in the nineteenth century, visited the areas where the language was spoken. He was eager, however, to do his own field work, and after the war, from 1946 into the 70's, made repeated trips to Ethiopia in order to record languages and dialects that were spoken in outlying pockets but had no writing system. He wrote down what he heard on index cards and when tape recorders became available — and he was able to convince customs officers, with a helpful word from Emperor Haile Selassie himself, to allow the mysterious machine into the country without the payment of a king's ransom in fees — he employed that device as well. One of the deans would ask him when he returned from field trips: "Well, Wolf, how many new languages did you discover this time?"

On returning to the United States, and then when the Emperor was deposed and travel to Ethiopia was no longer feasible, he resorted to informants from Ethiopia who happened to be here. An ingenious tactic of his was to have a speaker of one of the village dialects who was also literate in Amharic write down, in his native tongue and in Amharic characters, his recollections of village life. A number of volumes in this vein, representing various languages and dialects, were later published, in transliteration and translation, under the title *Ethiopians Speak*. They still serve linguists and anthropologists.

Wolf molded the materials he gathered into a prodigious number of publications, and his full bibliography, which includes an invaluable reference grammar and dictionary of Amharic, as well as studies in Hebrew, Arabic, and general Semitics, exceeds 300 entries. His approach, once he had recorded materials, was more along the lines of traditional philology than of modern linguistics.

His final book, published in 2004, *The Verb in Masqan as Compared with Other Gurage Dialects*, was based on material gathered decades earlier. Anyone reading the introduction would visualize an author at the height of his scholarly powers; it is hard to comprehend how the book could have come from the hands of a frail ninety-seven year old with failing eye sight. Upon completing the Masqan book, Wolf, as a matter of course, turned to a study of yet another of the Gurage dialects, Gogot. But age had finally taken its toll, and he was unable to bring that project to completion.

He was recognized as the world authority on Ethiopian languages. Grover Hudson of Michigan State University describes him in an obituary as "the greatest Semiticist linguist of the post-war generation." Among the many honors that he received, he especially cherished the Haile Selassie Prize for Ethiopian Studies-- he was the second recipient, Marcel Cohen having been the first-- and an honorary degree from the Hebrew University.

Charlotte Leslau died in 1998, and Wolf, full of days, on November 18, 2006. He was survived by his daughters Eliane Silverman and Sylvia Grotz, four granddaughters, and six great- grandchildren.

Herbert Davidson