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FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

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OBITUARIES

Ra'anana Meridor

1923–2023

In 1993, thirty-one years ago, Jonathan Price, the late Lisa Ullmann and myself, serving then as the *Scripta Classics Israelica* editors, published the Ra'anana Meridor Volume (*SCI* XII – 1993). Classicists from here as well as from abroad contributed to it, and it spilled into *SCI* XIII. It opens with a beautiful picture of the young Ra'anana, standing between her bookcase and her work desk. Looking at it now, I am filled with a feeling hard to express, and just as difficult to suppress. I am writing the epilogue.

Ten years later, her autobiographical 'Classics in a Hot Climate', explaining how she had become a classicist, appeared in *SCI* XXXII, 2003. One can do no better than to try and summarize her account here. She was born in Vienna, to parents who were, in her words 'ardent Zionists' who already in the 1920s, long before the *Anschluss*, aspired to move to "the promised land" but were only able to carry out their wish in early 1935. Unlike many other central Europeans who were carried by the tides and tumult of twentieth century history to mandate Palestine, she never felt an exile from her birthplace, and had no nostalgia for it. Rather the reverse, it was in Vienna that she was in exile: in Jerusalem she had reached her home. She never returned, nor would she visit Germany. Yet when I first went to Munich in 1980 she didn't fail to urge me to visit the incomparable collection of Hellenistic sculpture in the Glyptothek there—which she herself would never see. Her conflicted love for German poetry remained. A book of her unpublished poems, put together by her family towards her 100th birthday contains several in German, and, in her last years, on my weekly visits (of which more, below), when she was already very frail, her face lit up when I read Heine to her in German.

In Vienna she had studied Hebrew, but not Latin or Greek, nor were these languages taught in the Gymnasia of Jerusalem. She came to them as I did, unintentionally, in order to study ancient history. Her original intention was to study medicine, but since that option was not available in mandate Palestine, she opted for the "heroic period" (her words) of Jewish second-temple history, for which two year's preparation in Latin and Greek were then required. What began as a means to an end, became an end in itself. She learned to master Greek through personal tutorials from

Professor Moshe Schwabe (1889–1956),[1] who quite soon realised that he had an extraordinary student in her. He devoted the vacation of the summer of 1943 to giving her and another student the full second year preparatory course ('the two of us worked hard', she says), the reward for which was to be allowed to participate in his seminar on Greek lyric poetry ('ever more demanding and no less gratifying')!

Her dedication to mastering Greek was closely entwined with her personal life. In 1943 she had married Eliyahu Meridor, her commander in Beitar and in the Etzel (אצ"ל a Military and National Organization), the right-wing underground group, and later a member of the Knesset for the Herut Party (חירות in Hebrew, i.e., freedom), which he helped to found. He was arrested by the British in 1944, and deported to Eritrea, where he was to remain until 1946. Schwabe wisely filled the distraught young bride's time with fortnightly tutorials in which she had to read and master Greek tragedies.

> Life was now full of meaning and time was flying. It was not only the great satisfaction of being able to do it: when I got married, I passed from the authority of loving parents to that of an admired commander. I had never been prepared to make decisions, and now, suddenly, I had to. In Greek tragedy people debate serious problems in order to make moral choices; as I read 'my' plays I watched the heroes doing just this, and, while studying the texts, I also learned to reason out my own problems. Thinking back now, my work on Greek tragedy at the time answered a need of mine of which I myself had not been conscious. (p.280)

Anyone who knew Ra'anana only as an adult would find it difficult to see in her a woman who passively moved from the authority of one man to another. She always struck us as one of the most independent and self-determined people we had ever encountered. And yet, she describes a life determined by the decisions of others and her duties. Her husband's return from exile suspends her studies: he is wounded in the War of Independence in 1948. She has to take care of him, and two small children, the younger of whom is ill. She turns down Prof. Schwabe's offer to complete her studies within a year, and take over the teaching of the Greek for Beginners course from him. He intercedes with her parents(!) and persuades them to help her manage the burdens of returning to the classroom. Thus, she begins to teach the preparatory course in Greek in 1951 and continues to do so for forty years. It was only in the 1970s that Prof. Abraham (Addi) Wasserstein persuades her that it is time to channel her immense knowledge and love of Greek language and literature into a doctorate. By then, as she says, she was already a grandmother.

Her biography shows the impact of the era. The absence of men during the Second World War freed her teachers to concentrate on her and advance her studies; their return had brought her studies to a halt.

Had she grown up in today's world of equal opportunity for both sexes, I am sure she would have gone as far as her inborn talents, intellectual intelligence, let alone her determination and strength of character would have taken her—provided she could reconcile her path with her duties to her *familia*, her *patria* and her moral principles.

In her memoir she makes clear that these are three intertwined strands in her life—her patriotism and ideological roots, her intellectual ambitions, and her devotion to her family. Not long after their arrival in Israel in 1935, the Tenenblatt family moved to a small apartment building on Ben Maimon St, in the Rehavia neighbourhood. It was in this building that her four children, Dan, Haggit, Avital and Salai, were raised. Family members continue to occupy flats in the building to this very day.

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[1] For his role in pioneering the teaching of Classics at the Hebrew University see: Joseph Geiger and Ra'anana Meridor, 'The Beginnings of Classics in Israel: Two Documents', *Scripta Classica Israelica XVIII* (1999): 159–173.

It was there that she would die, nearly 90 years later. However, her residence there was not continuous: for several years, once her children had grown up, she lived in a small apartment in the Jewish quarter of the old city of Jerusalem, in order to fulfil her husband's dream of returning there (he died in 1966, before the city was reunited in 1967). She only returned to Rehavia when her children persuaded her after a hip replacement that she could no longer live alone, let alone access the steep lanes leading to her apartment there. And yet she insisted on continuing to walk to the old city and the Western Wall every week, as long as she could.

Ra'anana was a proud member of the historic right wing of the Zionist movement, which she had experienced as a near-persecuted minority in the 1940s and 1950s. However, this nationalism did not at all diminish her innate liberalism, as reflected in a letter she wrote to James Snyder, the director of the Israel Museum in March 2011, a copy of which she sent to me:

> On the wall of the upper hall there is an inscription with your signature which explains the importance of this hall in the planning of the Museum as a whole, as it helps to preserve the modern Mediterranean vision of [its] original plan … **Already in 1966, after the festive opening of the Israel Museum, I complained about the absence of the Arabic language from the explanations of the exhibits**. At the time the reply was that there are not sufficient technical terms in Arabic … I assume that in the meantime the technical terms necessary for the translation have been created, and I expect to see the exhibits in the Israel Museum accompanied by explanations in the 3 languages, and not in Hebrew and English only. However, since thousands of labels are involved, undoubtedly a long time will pass until the work is completed … that (it would take a long time) is not true of the words addressing the visitors of the museum, a single text, but a highly meaningful one. Translating it [to Arabic] would correct this distortion and fill in the lacuna in the nearest future. I would ask that you acknowledge receipt of this letter and inform me what you intend to do about the matter, and when. Thank you!

It is hard today to imagine the immense influence her teaching of Greek had. For decades, there was only one University in Israel. Several generations of Israeli classicists, students of classical and Jewish history, archaeologists, linguists, philosophers, students of literature, translators, all owed their knowledge and their love for the ancient Greek language and its literature to one woman—and to her demands on herself and on them. They have all remained in her debt. With her as a teacher, intellectual enthusiasm could not be separated from precision and hard work.

What she had experienced with Schwabe she tried to transmit to us: mastery required effort but was immensely rewarding. And we, her students, responded to it, belying thereby the recent academic fashion which believes that only by lowering demands, could a sufficiently great number of students be attracted.

Her PhD thesis, completed in 1978, was a commentary on Euripides' *Troades*. The relatively small number of her scholarly publications are listed in her memorial volume of this journal. Most are devoted to Euripides, and many are focussed on emendations or close and novel readings of the meaning and literary significance of words or passages, or on emendations and alternative readings to those provided by standard editions of classical texts. These must have derived from her years of teaching Greek tragedy and poetry. They are all based on extensive knowledge of Greek literature and aimed at helping us to understand the function of scenes and passages, namely, how they contribute to the author's aims, and how they would have been understood by his contemporaries. She lived in a period where publication was not driven by the need for academic survival and promotion. All her colleagues and students knew the depth and breadth of her knowledge of Greek literature, but it was *not* accompanied by any desire to display it in print. She published only when she was sure she could correct, illuminate, or enlighten.

So far as she was concerned, her true Magnum Opus was her textbook (Greek for Beginners יוונית למתחילים, Academon, Jerusalem, 2004) which has gone through six editions. It began its life as

a revision of Schwabe's stencilled text which she had inherited; thus her teaching of Greek can be traced back to her teacher's teachers, Wilamowitz and Norden in Berlin.

However, unlike them, as she states in her introduction, her textbook is addressed specifically to Israelis: 'For those whose language is Hebrew … with consideration to their habits of thought. The explanations at the end of every chapter detail *phenomena* that are foreign or unconscious to those who think in Hebrew.' She makes her purpose clear: 'to turn the teaching of grammar and language into an encounter with Greek culture'.

Like Ra'anana, I had not intended to study Classics but was led there by my desire to study History. Man (in this case a woman) proposes, and as we all know it is *moira* (fate) who disposes. When I began my BA in 1967, the unreasonable demand—long since abolished by the *illuminati*—from all students of what was then called "General History" was to learn Latin. Since I was interested in Ancient History, this led me to Greek and to Ra'anana's introductory course. Her reputation was formidable. Already in High School we had been sent home early by our Guide in the Scouts, a University student, who 'had to finish his homework in Greek *or* face the music'.

Soon, I too was not going to sleep before dawn without having done my homework in Greek, for fear of swift execution with one look of hers. Not that I have ever regretted this turn of events—I acquired the privilege not only of having Professor Ra'anana Meridor as my teacher of Ancient Greek but, later, as a much-appreciated colleague, and with time a lifelong, most beloved and admired, older friend. Like Ra'anana, who relates a similar experience in her memoir, I too came to love the subject and the department.

It would be remiss of me not to mention here that from the 1970s onwards there was another formidable teacher who shared the burden of teaching Introductory Greek in the department, Lisa Ullmann. She too was born in Vienna, in the same year as Ra'anana. Although they belonged to different political and social milieus, and outlook, they both shared the same demanding, fastidious and uncompromising approach to the challenge of learning, and the love of the Greek language.

I became a Roman historian and a teacher of Latin. However, Horace's famous line—*Graeca capta ferocem victorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latio,* namely, 'Captured (i.e., conquered) Greece [in its turn] has conquered its victor and introduced the arts (i.e., civilization) to primitive Latium'—is all but true. Not only did Greek culture, poetry, prose, architecture etc. form, inform and shape Roman culture since the beginning—it all but eclipsed Rome as time went on. Once the western part was overrun by the Barbarians, all that remained was a Greek Empire.

The Greek language of the papyri of Judaea that I have published is a far cry from the classical language I was taught by Ra'anana. Yet after her retirement, like many others, I relied on her sharp eye and intelligence to go over my publications and catch mistakes and obvious omissions. In this manner she helped me as well as the other editors of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae Palaestinae* (CIIP), a series which publishes all the inscriptions, in all languages, written in Israel from Alexander to Muhamad. On one occasion she used her enormous knowledge of the Greek language and its syntax to show that one of the editors, a senior Professor in a German University, was mistaken to think that the beginning of the inscription was missing: it was not, if one happens to be as familiar with Greek as she was, it was not! On the spot, as I recall, he accepted her opinion.

I would like to quote a letter she wrote me while going over the proofs for one of the CIIP volumes, in October 2012, characteristic in its self-effacement, demands, and practicality:

> I have finished reading the second lot and tomorrow will address the third. However: I have realised that I am no longer in command of Latin. I began to forget years ago (because I only taught Greek). That is why in my final meeting of the Department I recommended that the members teach both languages (this is relevant primarily to the teachers of Latin**: how can one teach a Latin epic without a Greek counterpart, a Latin play without a Greek one, and even Tacitus without Thucydides?)**. And since even when one reads and understands one forgets grammar—every few years every teacher should teach the Introduction for Beginners, preferably Latin and Greek in rotation. They accepted the

> principle of teaching the Introductory course (although, as far as I know, they do not keep it in practice) but they rejected the proposal that the Introductory course in Latin and Greek should be taught by the same teacher with a practical reason: if "they" ever discovered that the same teacher could teach both languages/literatures they would immediately decrease the number of positions even further.

In 2014 she was hit by a car while crossing the street and lay in a coma for two weeks. Miraculously for a woman of her age she recovered, but was never as sharp as she had been. When she was seeking damages for the accident, recalling the sharp and meticulous help she had given us with the CIIP, I was able to testify under oath in the Magistrate Court that her frailty was the result of her accident and not of old age!

I no longer can recall when I started visiting her every Friday. The day and time was fixed. True to her sense of order and responsibility, as she lay in the ambulance hit by a car and on the way to the hospital, before she slipped into coma, she made certain 'to tell Hannah not to come today'. Once she returned home from the hospital, my visits continued. We discussed things, I showed her my publications, I sometimes brought colleagues, and later, as her eyesight became worse, I read to her. Sometimes, as I have said, German poetry. My visits stopped about a month before her death, when I sensed that her *dignitas* required that I let her be.

Needless to say, I never dared to tell her how much I loved her: יהי זכרה ברוך!

Hannah M. Cotton[2]

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2 I thank Dr. Ari M. Paltiel (who happens to be my husband) for his help.