

OBITUARY

David Sohlberg

(1924-2012)

I have written elsewhere that he was a pioneer.¹ Born in Basel, the son of two lovers of Zion — one by one, each of their seven children settled in Israel — he was active in his youth in ‘Aliyah Bet’, the smuggling of Jews into mandatory Palestine.² When the State of Israel finally came into being, others of similar background and connections became its political leaders, but David Sohlberg made a conscious choice to avoid a political career. After passing his *examen rigorosum* and presenting his doctoral thesis (on Aelius Aristides) to the University of Basel, he proceeded directly, in 1955, to settle in Israel.

The image of the pioneer that dominated Zionism at the time was that of a farmer or a soldier, but David Sohlberg never followed other people’s typecasting. By temperament an intellectual pioneer, he joined the faculty of the yeshiva at K’far HaRoeh under Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neriyah and Horeb High School in Jerusalem, teaching — strikingly for a new immigrant — Hebrew. Hearing from a friend that Professor Pinchas Churgin was looking for a candidate to teach a course at the newly-opened religious university named for Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan, he applied, was interviewed,³ and on February 28, 1957 — the second year of the university’s existence⁴ — began his professorial career, condensing all the history of Greece and Rome into a single-semester course.

At Prof. Churgin’s request, he composed a full program of classical studies: the 1957-8 catalogue offered fifteen courses in Greek and fourteen in Latin, all of which, had there been students to take them, would have had to be taught by David Sohlberg. He did not yet have the students, but he had a vision. In 1964 he was recognized as “Director” (*m’muneh*) of classical languages, and in 1968 he presented to the Dean of Humanities a plan to establish a Department of Classical Studies, moving from the existing situation, where only language courses were taught, working up to a minor and a major: within four years he had achieved all of those goals.⁵ He sought out orthodox Jewish classicists and found them, importing them from America, picking them up in Israel, advising one through the doctorate. On one occasion he told me that there could not be a religious Jewish university unless it was chiefly made up of religious Jews; on other he told me that the watchword for hiring faculty had to be excellence. A persuader rather than an infighter, he offended nobody while compromising on neither principles nor standards.

He chaired the department for as long as he wished to, and was Dean of Humanities for eight years, longer than anyone else has ever been dean at Bar-Ilan.⁶ He was president of the Israel

¹ ‘Professor David Sohlberg: An Unassuming Pioneer’, *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg*, Bar Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan, 1996, pp. vii-ix. I have tried not to repeat here too much of what is already available there.

² I was unaware of this when I wrote ‘An Unassuming Pioneer’, and would still be unaware of it had his late wife Chava not told me about it. Of her own underground service with the Haganah, Chava of course told me nothing.

³ By Prof. Samuel Bialoblocki, acting President, and Menachem Bloch, Academic Secretary; Prof. Churgin was abroad at the time.

⁴ At the beginning of the second semester of 2007, he offered his students a bit of liqueur to celebrate fifty years of teaching at Bar-Ilan. Typically, he did not let the day go unnoticed; no less typically, he said nothing to anyone who might have made a larger ceremony.

⁵ For a more detailed description of the department’s development see David Schaps, ‘The Department of Classical Studies: Ancient Wisdom Facing Current Challenges’, in Dov Schwartz, ed., *Bar-Ilan: from Concept to Enterprise*, vol. I, Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan 2006, 363-371 (in Hebrew).

⁶ Or, barring changes, ever will be: regulations since adopted restrict a dean to two two-year terms.

Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies, and one of the few people to be made an honorary member for life. Retirement was for him a relative matter: he was still teaching Greek and serving on the Faculty Association Council up to a few days before his passing. ‘Don’t tell them’, he once told me when the university was being particularly tight-fisted about financing a course, ‘but I would pay them to teach’. If I remember his formulation correctly, he said of academics: ‘We do research because it interests us, we teach because we love to, and the salary we accept is only for sitting on academic committees.’ ‘For which’, he added, ‘it is insufficient compensation’.

He wore his erudition lightly but unmistakably. He did not publish; his academic training dated from a time when ‘publish or perish’ was a sardonic witticism rather than a hallowed precept. But he read constantly in the classics and taught students with a combination of fatherly concern and Germanic precision. The Latin and Greek compositions with which our graduates are honored were always shown to him first, and he usually had some corrections to offer. His everyday speech was invariably urbane, when announcing the retirement of the ISPCS’s treasurer ‘for demographic reasons’,⁷ when reacting to my unrequired presence in the office by accusing me with a smile of ‘desecrating the Sabbatical in public’, or when, having seen my bicycle outside the departmental office when I was supposed to be elsewhere, telling me *r’ohofanekha lo pillalti!*, a *paronomasia* that for twenty years I have tried vainly to translate, and that I record here for those who will appreciate it, lest it be lost forever.

Torah im derech erez, the ideal of German orthodoxy, did not mean to him being ‘not so religious’: he maintained a regular schedule of Talmud study, both in tandem and in classes, throughout his life. He was not too busy to study Torah when he was young, nor too tired to study Torah when he was old. He taught his children as he taught his students, by example more than by precept. When one of them considered going to a place of which he disapproved, he was ready with an answer. ‘Fine’, he said. ‘I’ll go with you’. And that, of course, was the end of that.

His mother Miriam died at the age of 101, after forty-one years of widowhood; she told her children more than once, ‘Don’t mourn too much for me. I’m not a tragic case’. His wife Chava, whom he had courted for three years and from whom he was inseparable, died of cancer, which she bore so gently that he was able to say, ‘She never really suffered’. He himself faced death with the same honesty and fearlessness. Together with his identity card, his children found two notes. One was a text for his tombstone, giving his own name, those of his father and grandfather, and his day of birth;⁸ he wanted no more memorial than that. The second note read as follows:

P”T – Segulah!⁹

Do not prolong my life when it has no service of G-d.

Do not impose upon the public for me in any way.

In my heart I will build a sanctuary for His glorious honor,

And in my sanctuary I will put an altar for the rays of His splendor,

And for an eternal light I will take to myself the fire of the *Akeidah*¹⁰

And for a sacrifice I will offer to Him my only soul.

David M. Schaps

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⁷ She was pregnant.

⁸ With date of death, of course, to be supplied.

⁹ P”T is PetachTikva, his city, and Segulah its cemetery; either he was instructing his children not to seek a more “prestigious” resting place, or simply requesting to be buried, as he was, next to his wife.

¹⁰ The Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19), the archetype of self-sacrifice demanded of a Jew.