

REVIEW

1
2
3 LUDEK VACÍN:

4 *The Unknown Benno Landsberger, A Biographical Sketch of an*
5 *Assyriological Altmeister's Development, Exile, and Personal Life.*

6 (Leipziger Altorientalistische Studien.) xvi, 132 pp. Wiesbaden:

7 Harrassowitz, 2019.

8 doi:10.1017/S0041977X21000136
9
10

11 The present reviewer is not accustomed to spending his free time reading about
12 *Fachgeschichte*. Yet Ludek Vacín's enchanting thin volume holds many surprises,
13 especially for everyone who reads Benno Landsberger without thinking about the
14 world in which his treasures of scholarship were composed and transmitted. His
15 seminal contributions to the field of Assyriology have remained at the cornerstone
16 of our current understanding of Mesopotamian languages and culture. This biog-
17 raphy of a great scholar brings the scholarly works into a sharper focus, once we
18 appreciate the circumstances and context of the research, and how Landsberger's
19 thinking developed in the way it did. Vacín's insights are novel and invaluable.

20 This biography delves into Landsberger's personal history before he took up his
21 post-war professorship at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Vacín
22 delves into his family background, education, family ties, and intellectual environ-
23 ment, as well as tragic episodes in his life as a consequence of war and exile. This
24 engrossing narrative shows that even research into antiquity is subject to the whims
25 of fateful circumstances and events, which have a way of colouring the research in
26 subtle ways which are often undetected, and Landsberger's *oeuvres* take on a
27 slightly different and more meaningful character. Before this book was written,
28 however, little was generally known about Landsberger's early upbringing and
29 the influences on his life which would determine the direction and course of his
30 later intellectual career.

31 The narrative opens with the nineteenth-century history of Landsberger's Jewish
32 ancestors in Bohemia, where he grew up speaking German as his mother tongue (as
33 was common in that region) while still maintaining knowledge of Czech, which he
34 learned in school, in addition to Hebrew. The linguistic environment of his youth
35 would prepare Landsberger for his later research into the Sumerian–Akkadian–
36 Aramaic *Sprachbund* of Mesopotamia, where language hierarchies governed the
37 local multilingualism. Although there is no overt reliance upon his early Hebrew
38 training, Landsberger's work does not betray any conspicuous interest in the
39 Bible or traditional Jewish sources, there are subtle indications of influences from
40 his youth, such as his crucial contributions to etymological data in the *Chicago*
41 *Assyrian Dictionary*, which were well known to his colleagues.

42 Already as a schoolboy, Landsberger was aware of the famous Babel-Bibel contro-
43 versy in Germany and beyond, in which the authority of the Bible was being chal-
44 lenged by the wealth of new discoveries from Mesopotamia. Vacín supplies detailed
45 and convincing (even if somewhat indirect) evidence of Landsberger's personal
46 interest in this public debate, even to the extent of motivating him to study
47 Assyriology in Leipzig. Vacín explains how Landsberger closely associated himself
48 with Jewish culture but was not religious, which was not unusual for Jewish intel-
lectuals from well-off families from pre-war Middle Europe. The significance of this
information is that his attitude towards Babel-Bibel guided Landsberger's choice to
study with Heinrich Zimmern rather than with Friedrich Delitsch, and that

49 Landsberger's experience in Leipzig eventually culminated in his famous article on
50 the *Eigenbegrifflichkeit* of Mesopotamian society, establishing its own cultural identity
51 rather than how it reflects upon the Bible. This painstaking archival research
52 within the Landsberger *Nachlass* provides an illuminating background for
53 Landsberger's motivation to study Mesopotamia.

54 Once Landsberger had become an established scholar in Leipzig, Vacín explains
55 how he established his own scholarly circle, for a few pre-war years becoming the
56 premier centre for Assyriology in Europe. As he points out, Landsberger's teaching
57 "covered an astonishingly rich and diverse range of topics" (p. 61). What comes
58 through is how Landsberger influenced the field of study, not necessarily through
59 his writing but through his teaching. His fundamental contributions to Akkadian
60 grammar, for instance, were published by his student W. von Soden in his ground-
61 breaking *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik*, and the same is true of major contri-
62 butions to Assyriology via Landsberger's other disciples. It is clear that Landsberger's
63 forced exile from Germany brought to an end a flowering and creative centre of
64 scholarship in Leipzig.

65 This insightful and sensitive research into Landsberger's personal life uncovers
66 many aspects of the man which have remained unknown or hidden, even to close
67 colleagues, about relationships with other members of the Landsberger family and
68 even regarding Landsberger's career ambitions. All of these factors reflect in
69 some way or another on his scholarship, which was never insulated from the
70 world suffering from two cataclysmic wars and untold destruction.

71 There are many engaging stories about Benno Landsberger which have been cir-
72 culating over the past 50 years, as part of the oral tradition about this eminent schol-
73 ar. Two stories told to the present reviewer by Thorkild Jacobsen are revealing
74 about Landsberger's character. One is that Jacobsen and Landsberger used to
75 meet weekly on the third floor of the Oriental Institute to read texts together; the
76 image of these two seasoned scholars meeting just to read texts is inspiring in itself.
77 At that time, deeply emotive disputes between members of the Oriental Institute
78 were taking place regarding the publication of the first volume of the *Chicago*
79 *Assyrian Dictionary*. According to Jacobsen, whenever Landsberger asked him to
80 look up a word in the *Dictionary*, he would preface his request by saying, "my doc-
81 tor doesn't want me to get agitated". The moral of the story is that philology has to
82 be taken seriously and demands rigorous standards of accuracy. An anecdote from
83 an earlier period in Landsberger's life is equally instructive although more personal.
84 He once confided to Jacobsen that he was very depressed while living in Turkey,
85 which is a theme Vacín explains very effectively and with great sensitivity in this
86 book. Landsberger explained that he intended to go for a swim and not return,
87 but while swimming, he suddenly thought of a possible restoration of an
88 Akkadian line, which meant that he had to return and check the text. For
89 Landsberger, the moral of the story was simple: philology can save one's life.

90
91
92
93
94
95
96
M.J. Geller

University College London, UK