REVIEW

LUDEK VACÍN:

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

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

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

Already as a schoolboy, Landsberger was aware of the famous Babel-Bibel controversy in Germany and beyond, in which the authority of the Bible was being challenged by the wealth of new discoveries from Mesopotamia. Vacín supplies detailed and convincing (even if somewhat indirect) evidence of Landsberger’s personal interest in this public debate, even to the extent of motivating him to study Assyriology in Leipzig. Vacín explains how Landsberger closely associated himself with Jewish culture but was not religious, which was not unusual for Jewish intellectuals 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
Landsberger’s experience in Leipzig eventually culminated in his famous article on the Eigenbegrifflichkeit of Mesopotamian society, establishing its own cultural identity rather than how it reflects upon the Bible. This painstaking archival research within the Landsberger Nachlass provides an illuminating background for Landsberger’s motivation to study Mesopotamia.

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

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

There are many engaging stories about Benno Landsberger which have been circulating over the past 50 years, as part of the oral tradition about this eminent scholar. Two stories told to the present reviewer by Thorkild Jacobsen are revealing about Landsberger’s character. One is that Jacobsen and Landsberger used to meet weekly on the third floor of the Oriental Institute to read texts together; the image of these two seasoned scholars meeting just to read texts is inspiring in itself. At that time, deeply emotive disputes between members of the Oriental Institute were taking place regarding the publication of the first volume of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary. According to Jacobsen, whenever Landsberger asked him to look up a word in the Dictionary, he would preface his request by saying, “my doctor doesn’t want me to get agitated”. The moral of the story is that philology has to be taken seriously and demands rigorous standards of accuracy. An anecdote from an earlier period in Landsberger’s life is equally instructive although more personal.

He once confided to Jacobsen that he was very depressed while living in Turkey, which is a theme Vacín explains very effectively and with great sensitivity in this book. Landsberger explained that he intended to go for a swim and not return, but while swimming, he suddenly thought of a possible restoration of an Akkadian line, which meant that he had to return and check the text. For Landsberger, the moral of the story was simple: philology can save one’s life.

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