

IN MEMORIAM

Eleazar Birnbaum (1929–2019)



Photo dated 2006, from his daughter, Sarah Malka Eisen.

We have lost another one of our Ottoman-Turcologist elders in Professor Eleazar Birnbaum, my teacher and mentor as an MA and PhD student in Ottoman and Turkish history at Toronto University from 1982 until 1991. After my appointment as Assistant Professor in the Department of History at McMaster University just down the road in Hamilton, Elie and I stayed in touch, so what follows is an attempt to capture the man and the field he helped to shape in innumerable unsung ways, in tribute to the “silsila” (chain) of knowledge which binds us all together.¹

¹ What follows is partially abstracted from the *Near and Middle East Civilizations Newsletter* Nov. 2019. <https://mailchi.mp/b21d3f2d7971/winter-in-nmc>.

Eleazar Birnbaum was born in Hamburg, Germany, on November 29, 1929, son of Solomon Asher Birnbaum, a distinguished professor, linguist, and paleographer whose specialties included Semitic, Slavonic, and Germanic languages. With the rise of the Nazis, Solomon Birnbaum and his wife and family emigrated from Germany to the UK to work at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. In September 1939, just before the war began, children in London were evacuated to villages to escape the anticipated German bombings, and Birnbaum was among them. His father was then recruited to work in the Uncommon Languages Department of the British Postal Censorship Office in Liverpool. Elie and his siblings left the villages to join their parents in Liverpool, and stayed there until 1945, when they returned to London.

As a graduate student at SOAS (1951–53), Elie attended the Ottoman seminar of Professor Paul Wittek. He recounted stories about that adventure in the 2005 *Festschrift* prepared for his 75th birthday.² Professor Rudi Lindner, University of Michigan, and Professor Victor Ostapchuk, University of Toronto, have recently shared further stories they heard about Wittek from Birnbaum. As the youngest of his students (aged 20–23), “I [Elie] was the prime target of W’s ‘wit’/ scorn and of his brilliance. I remember that once we read in class a passage of Pecevi, referring to some massive retribution which the Ottoman army inflicted on the Imperial forces, in which Pecevi used the descriptive Persian phrase ‘BOOM-I DEHSHET’ [the OWL OF DOOM]. From then on, when we were waiting outside his office at SOAS for him to arrive (usually late!) for his 3 pm seminar, and heard him shuffling along the corridor, we would together intone: ‘Boom-i Dehshet!’”³

On another occasion, “I was studying with Wittek in his office at SOAS, probably about 1952, when there was a knock on the door. A middle-aged gentleman walked in and Wittek greeted him effusively in Turkish, as ‘Fuad Bey.’ As W. was not a warm fuzzy type, I was surprised at the warmth of his welcome. After a few minutes’ chat, W. pointed at me and said: ‘Fuad Bey, this is my student Birnbaum. He has composed a Kaside in praise/honor of you!’ I was shocked and remained silent. After a very long minute or two, Wittek laughed heartily. As for me I did not think his joke was very funny! Only afterwards did I know that the visitor was in fact

² His memory of his childhood and the brief bucolic adventure during WWII are vividly described in my interview with him in: “Festschrift in Honor of Eleazar Birnbaum,” guest editor, Virginia Aksan, *Journal of Turkish Studies; Türklük Bilgisi Araştırmaları* 29 (2005).

³ Email E. Birnbaum to V. Ostapchuk August 12, 2018, 5:05 pm. Among other students of Wittek at different times were Bernard Lewis, Victor Ménage, John Walsh, and Vernon Parry.

someone whose works I had consulted: the famous scholar Fuad Köprülü, who was Wittek's long-time 'frenemy' and rival."⁴

Birnbaum had anticipated finding an academic job following the conclusions of the Scarborough Royal Commission (1944–47) concerning the need for the further development of new centers for teaching Oriental languages along with teaching positions at universities which included Durham, Manchester and St. Andrews. A new government in the 1950s abandoned the program, so Birnbaum joined the University of Durham as a library clerk in the Oriental Section instead. His expertise in Oriental languages rapidly gained him standing as a cataloguer and bibliographer, and he proceeded to build a research collection at Durham, followed by four years (1961–64) as the Near East Bibliographer at the University of Michigan where he also contributed to building one of the major collections in the United States. In 1964 he joined the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto as an associate professor (the department was later renamed the Department of Middle East and Islamic Studies and in 1996 became the current Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations). Awarded a full professorship in 1970, Birnbaum retired in 1995 but remained active in research and publication until his recent death.

In addition to teaching Turkish and Ottoman languages and literatures, Birnbaum served as an advisor to the University of Toronto Library, in effect as its Ottoman and Turkish bibliographer. It is thanks to his great expertise and efforts that the university library's collection in Turkish and Ottoman studies is currently one of the strongest in North America and the best in Canada. He also produced and advocated for both a Persian and an Ottoman Turkish transliteration system for the Library of Congress. The Ottoman scheme remains in effect today.

I arrived at the University of Toronto after more than ten years as a librarian – largely cataloguing Middle Eastern materials – first at Stanford University's Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, then at Princeton University, and finally at the University of Toronto until I finished my PhD in 1991. I felt at times that Elie and I were co-conspirators in the celebration of the cultural surprises that await any investigator of unique or uncatalogued manuscript collections.⁵ Elie's

⁴ Email E. Birnbaum to R. Lindner, August 13, 2018, 9:47 pm. Further information about Wittek can be found in Colin Heywood's edited reproduction of Paul Wittek, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire: Thirteenth through Fifteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁵ Transliteration is only one of the many long-debated questions among Ottomanists that has to some degree impeded the compilation of updated linguistic tools such as an etymological dictionary. It is

particular specialty and passion were the Turkish, Arabic, and Persian manuscripts in his personal collection of 206 manuscripts. I was infected with his enthusiasm and joyful appreciation of the puzzles each new one represented for the uninitiated. They were vivid teaching tools for me to touch and translate in his Toronto office. He had also acquired a number of early printed works by Ibrahim Müteferrika, active from 1729–42 and printer of seventeen works in twenty-two volumes that are generally acknowledged as the Turkish incunabula.⁶ More than half of those titles – from Birnbaum’s collection – were included in an exhibit called “From Manuscript to Printed Book in the Islamic World,” prepared by Elie and three graduate students: myself, Noha Sadek, art historian of Yemen, and Michael McCaffrey, librarian and part-time instructor at Western University.

Birnbaum’s own collection is described by him in two publications – *Ottoman Turkish and Çagatay Mss in Canada: A Union Catalogue of the Four Collections* (2015) including Toronto’s Fischer Rare Books Library, McGill University, the Birnbaum Collection and the Royal Ontario Museum, and *Arabic and Persian Manuscripts in the Birnbaum Collection* (2019).⁷ But decades before these publications, Birnbaum embarked on a world-wide annotated catalog of Turkish manuscript collections, which were published serially in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* and *Journal asiatique*. Part 1 began as a review of the immense project of the Berlin *Türkische Handschrift*, but Parts 2 through 6 represented trips to collections all over the world.⁸ It stands as a remarkable history of an international collaboration to preserve and catalog the scholarly production of Turkic languages across the globe. Of his other publications, particularly notable is his edition of the earliest Turkish translation of a fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Qābūs-nāme* (Mirror for Princes) in his own collection.⁹

Quite apart from his vast linguistic reach, and dedication to the preservation of cultural treasures, all remember Eleazar Birnbaum for his unflinching good humor and perpetual curiosity about the world. Posted on

equally arguable that the Internet has made such disputes utterly irrelevant. See my reflections in “MESA Presidential Address 2009: How Do We ‘Know’ the Middle East?” *Review of Middle East Studies* 44:1 (Summer 2010):3–12.

⁶ Yasemin Gençer, “İbrahim Müteferrika and the Age of the Printed Manuscript,” in *The Islamic Manuscript Tradition: Ten Centuries of Book Arts in Indiana University Library Collections*, Christine Gruber, ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5–23.

⁷ Gottfried Hagen reviewed the first of the catalogs in *Der Islam* 93 (2016), 581–83. DOI: <https://doi-org.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/10.1515/islam-2016-0041>.

⁸ Parts 1 to 5 were published in *JAOS* 1983–84, part 6 [Morocco] in *Journal asiatique* in 1999.

⁹ Eleazar Birnbaum, *The Book of Advice by King Kay-Kā’ūs ibn Iskandar: The Earliest Old Ottoman Turkish Version of his Kābūs-nāme* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1981).

his office door, the following quote by Judah ibn Tibbon (1120–1190), seems a fitting epitaph:

Make books your companions and make your bookcases and shelves your orchards and pleasure-gardens. Graze in their beds and cull their flowers. . .and if your soul grows weary and exhausted, move from garden to garden and from flower bed to flower bed . . .For then your will shall be restored and your spirit will become beautiful. ✂

DOI:[10.1017/rms.2020.21](https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2020.21)

Virginia Aksan, Professor Emerita
McMaster University