

Eulogy – by Eden Orion

I love my work at Haifa University for many reasons. One of the most important is the opportunity and the privilege of meeting fascinating people.

About 15 years ago, as I was just beginning to work for the University, Aharon Dolgopolsky suddenly showed up on my doorstep. He had all the hallmarks of the absent-minded professor. In all our encounters, he appeared carrying a shopping basket – sometimes two – containing thousands of pages from the dictionary on which he has been labouring for years. The fire blazing in his eyes left no room for doubt; this was a man with a mission, who would brook no resistance.

“Perhaps you can help me”, he said. “I need to bring this thing [the dictionary] to print”. And then, in order to provide the most precise mission statement possible, Aharon gave me a detailed presentation of this gargantuan project, which constituted his life’s work.

In his view, there was once, in the distant past, a single language – the wellspring of all languages spoken today. In his own words, he introduced himself as a scholar of “language migration”. The language called Nostratic was to be reconstructed by “Reverse Engineering” of current languages; he was now engaged in discovering the common ancient roots to various words.

I am no linguist, but I could comprehend the enormity of the task – at least from a technological point of view. I needed to present, on a single printed page, a large collection of languages, some very ancient, for which Aharon constructed his own fonts.

In order to help bring these findings to print, I collected computer components from an old school in Rishon LeZion and from a study film laboratory in Tel Aviv, and fashioned a machine capable of reading the files and converting them in a way that would allow the printing of the book.

No, not in Israel! But rather at Cambridge University in England. And thus the Dictionary’s first edition was published: four volumes, thousands of pages each, with entries for over 3,000 roots.

At first he would show up occasionally with baskets and boxes of floppy disks. Wow! Then we’d sit for hours on the conversion.

Later, I got to know his wife, the composer Tsippi Fleischer, and she invited me to their home, to do the back-ups there. Their apartment is located in a lovely residential building at Haifa's Bat Galim neighbourhood, near the seashore. Yet entering this building – and especially their apartment – was like entering the closet in Erich Kästner's "The 35th of May" or the rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland". Books, and more books; wherever you looked and wherever you tread, you saw books. Almost all of them were dictionaries, though there was quite an amount of scores. And at the heart of Aharon's room was a desk, on top of it an ancient computer with a tiny screen, and one man sits there and writes and writes and writes...

I was reminded of Devorah Omer's book telling the Story of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and the Modern Hebrew Language, and its depiction of Ben Yehuda's passionate dedication as he created his Hebrew dictionary. I envisioned Aharon as filled with a similar passion, which kept him at his desk until his death, writing feverishly even as his health declined.

Aharon was lucky to have at his side Tsippi, a talented composer with her own creative flame. Just a few days ago, we witnessed the premiere of her brilliant Sixth Symphony! Besides her own artistic spark, she gave Aharon all the support he required to allow him the completion of his life's work during his final years; in this he was truly blessed.

Eden Orion

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