

Dov Noy (1920–2013)

The founder of academic folklore studies in Israel, Dov Noy, passed away on September 29, 2013, a few weeks before his ninety-third birthday. Noy was born on October 20, 1920 in the Ukrainian town of Kolomyja (then Kolomea in Polish Galizia) on the river Prut, as a son of the local family Neumann. He always attributed his interest in folk literary creativity to the memories from his childhood's traditions in Yiddish that he heard recited and sung especially by his grandmother who lived with the family. His traditional Jewish and Hebrew education was largely bestowed upon him in his family enhanced by the presence of a private tutor, the poet Shimshon Meltzer. Meltzer had a special interest in the local Hasidic milieu and he thus also inspired Noy's folkloristic sensibility, who in parallel acquired a Polish civil education at the local gymnasium. His early trilingual proficiency was enhanced by German while he was still in the gymnasium and English that was perfected some years later. In 1938 Dov Neumann was lucky to obtain one of the coveted certificates for immigration to the British Mandate of Palestine to which Jewish immigration was strictly limited in numbers, having enrolled and been accepted as a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He thus escaped the cruel fate of his family members who all perished in the Shoah, except for his brother Meir Noy (1922–98) who survived its great hardships in Europe and became a composer and an ethnomusicologist, and whose Hebrew Song Collection is today at the National Library of Israel. The two brothers were to cooperate often in the future, e.g. the edition of the Yiddish folk songs from Shmuel Zaynvel Pipe's Collection published by the two as volume 2 of the *Studies of the Folklore Research Center* at the Hebrew University, in 1972.

As a student at the Hebrew University Dov Noy embarked on the study of ancient Hebrew literature with special emphasis on the Talmud and the Midrash, the great works of the Rabbis of late Antiquity in Palestine and Mesopotamia. He especially cherished what he learned from two of his teachers, Rabbis and Professors Simha Assaph and Avigdor (Victor) Aptowitz. His student's career was however cut short by the outbreak of World War II during which he volunteered for the British Army Royal Engineers, from where he returned to complete his MA at the Hebrew University, in Talmud, Jewish History and Bible studies in 1946. He then volunteered again, this time to direct educational and cultural activities in the Cyprus detention camps of Jewish refugees from Europe. On Cyprus Dov Noy met his brother Meir and heard from him about the tragic end of all the other family members. After the establishment of the state of Israel and his return from Cyprus, Noy became the editor of a popular children's weekly magazine. Having already expressed his interest in studying Rabbinic literature

from a folk literary perspective, he was encouraged by teachers and colleagues from the Hebrew University to go to the United States. Noy applied to Yale University where Professor René Wellek taught comparative literature, and arrived there in 1951. Wellek soon recommended Noy to transfer to Indiana University in Bloomington where he became a favourite disciple of Stith Thompson, under whose guidance he accomplished his doctoral dissertation *Motif Index of Talmudic-Midrashic Literature* in 1954. Thompson's written memoirs reveal an unbounded admiration for his student's erudition, language skills and analytical capabilities. The association with Thompson wedded Noy with the geographic-historical (Finnish) school of folk narrative research for his whole lifetime. In a humorous tone he used to tell about an encounter with a local Native American story-teller and shaman who fainted when Dov whispered in his ear the meaning of his Hebrew name Dov – a bear. The bear happened to be the man's very secret and sacred shamanic taboo name.

The return of Dov Noy to Israel and the Hebrew University set off radical changes in the study of folklore in Israel. In 1955 he founded the Israeli Folktale Archives (IFA) under the auspices of the mayor of Haifa, Abba Hushi, in the Haifa Museum of Ethnology and Folklore. Motivated on one hand by the demise of East and Central European Jewish life and culture and the need to collect its remnants from the survivors, and on the other hand by the mass immigration of the Jews from Arab lands as a result of the establishment of the state of Israel and the rise of anti-Zionist sentiment in their countries, Noy devised a project to collect the folk narratives of both constituencies. The narratives of other groups, such as the indigenous Palestinians and the pre-WW II settlement of Jews in Palestine – the Yishuv – were also brought to the young archives by IFA collectors. Noy's charisma and academic authority drew many volunteers both old and young to the unique project, and soon the IFA "family of narrators and collectors" was formed, led by its self-evident father – Dov Noy. IFA, and his publications carefully annotated with geographical-historical comparative notes, became Noy's major legacy for folklore scholars in Israel and the world. At his academic home, the Hebrew University, Noy introduced folk literature as a stable component of the curriculum of the Department of Hebrew Literature. In order to foster folklore studies in other than verbal modes of creativity, the Folklore Section was formed in the early 1970s, to be replaced by the Jewish and Comparative Folklore Program in the early 1990s, and by the Graduate Program of Folklore and Folk Culture at the Hebrew University in the 2010s. Noy became the first scholar in the world to be appointed to an endowed folklore chair, the Max and Margarethe Grunwald Chair of Folklore, from 1972. He also held the position of Professor of Yiddish Folklore at Bar-Ilan University 1985–92. Noy was a beloved teacher and a devoted friend of his disciples, who together with their

students fill all the folklore positions in the five Israeli research universities where the field is taught at varying levels and volume (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Haifa University, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Tel-Aviv University and Bar-Ilan University) as well as in numerous academic, teachers' and community colleges, both in the Arabic and the Jewish sectors of Israeli public education.

On a less official level Dov's home was an institution in itself, full of warmth and open for everyone with a good story or just a nice smile; the famous open Monday evenings with 'roszinkes mit mandeln' (Yiddish for raisins and almonds, a famous line from a folk song) very often evolved into lively narrative events with representatives from all corners of the Earth.

Dov Noy always emphasized the universal and international contents and values of folklore studies. It was thus natural for him as a young scholar in the early nineteen-fifties to join senior European scholars in the establishing of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR), an honorary member of which he was appointed in 2001 at the society's 13th Congress in Melbourne. In Israel he was honoured for his great scholarly achievements when Haifa University awarded him an Honorary Doctorate in 1999; the Israel Folktale Archives at the same university were named after him; he further received the prestigious Bialik Prize in Jewish Studies in 2001. In 2004 he was awarded the highest honour that the state bestows on artists, scientists and other remarkable individuals, the Israel Prize for Hebrew and Comparative Literature.

He was an avid traveler; indeed the famous joke about two airplanes meeting in the air and X being on both is true about him ... On a more serious note: Dov Noy was a beloved speaker around the world, and around the world he went to share his vast knowledge with great intellectual generosity. He is missed by family, disciples and many, many friends. His work stays with us and enlightens our own work.

Select bibliography

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