

IN MEMORIAM  
NORMAN GOLB  
(15.I.1928–29.XII.2020)\*

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Norman Golb, who began his life in a densely-packed immigrant neighborhood in Chicago and rose to become one of the world's leading Hebrew manuscript and Semitics scholars, has passed away. Golb was born in Albany Park in 1928. His parents, from the Ukraine, met after their families had settled in that northwest Chicago neighborhood along with thousands of other Jewish immigrants. A part-time actor in the Yiddish theater, Golb's father Joseph sustained his family during the Depression by working as a barber, and later for the City of Chicago's water department. Golb's mother Rose, née Bilow, was a homemaker and part-time sales clerk at the old Fair department store.

Not born into prosperous circumstances, Golb did not attend an elite university away from home. He first studied at Wright Junior College, now (Wilbur) Wright College, and thereafter at Roosevelt College (now University), receiving his B.A. in English literature. Golb received his first advanced training in Hebrew, Aramaic, and

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\* This memorial essay consists primarily of edited excerpts drawn from the obituary of Norman Golb published on the Chicago Jewish Funerals website (<<https://chicagojewishfunerals.com/funeral-detail-page/?case=64BBCEC4-A495-4F41-B718-A9D475B3174C>>) and the biographical article by JOEL L. KRAEMER, « Portrait of the Scholar », in JOEL L. KRAEMER, MICHAEL G. WECHSLER (eds.), *Pesher Naḥum: Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature from Antiquity through the Middles Ages Presented to Norman (Naḥum) Golb*, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Chicago 2012 (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, 66), p. 1–9.

Arabic texts, as well as Latin and Greek, in the Graduate-Student-at-Large program at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute (1948–1950). While there, he studied with some of the greatest scholars in their fields, including Ralph Marcus (Professor of Hellenistic Culture), Ignace Jay Gelb (Assyriology), William Andrew Irwin (Biblical Literature), Raymond Bowman (Aramaic inscriptions), and Samuel Isaac Feigin (Bible). Golb did two years of steady work under Gustave E. von Grunebaum in Arabic language and literature. After one year of basic grammar and related content, he worked with von Grunebaum on Arabic geographical texts, Qur'ān commentaries, and Ibn Rushd.

Also during this time, in 1949, Golb married Ruth Magid, who worked for many years as a special education teacher in private practice and Chicago's public schools. They had three children – two sons (Joel and Raphael) and a daughter (Judith). Ruth always gave Norman the support he needed in his academic endeavors as a patient listener and wise counselor.

He went on to study archaeology, the history of ancient Palestine, and several of the newly-found Dead Sea Scroll texts at Johns Hopkins University under the great archeologist and Bible scholar William Foxwell Albright. Golb began studying Judaeo-Arabic with Samuel Rosenblatt, with whom he also read Tannaitic texts (Tannaitic Hebrew was a passion of Golb's and one of his regular course offerings throughout his teaching career). He also studied Hebrew and Semitic linguistics with Frank R. Blake. In 1954, at the age of twenty six, he received his Ph.D. degree in Judaic and Semitic Studies with a dissertation on *The Cairo Damascus Covenant and Karaite Literature*.

Dr. Golb went on to Philadelphia for two years (1952–1954) on a Cyrus Adler Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship at Dropsie College. He studied there with Solomon Leon Skoss, with whom he concentrated especially on David ben Abraham al-Fāsi (whose Hebrew-Arabic dictionary, *Kitāb Jāmi' al-alfāz*, Skoss had edited). In addition, he studied Arabic poetry with Meir M. Bravmann, and took a course in elementary Persian with Moshe Perlmann. He audited a few courses with Abraham Newman (Historical Responsa of Sephardim) and Solomon Zeitlin (Talmudic Text-Analysis). At that time Dr. Golb taught elementary Arabic at Dropsie and was an instructor at the Akiba Hebrew Academy (now the Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy) in the Hebrew and English departments (1952–1954).

In 1954–1955, Dr. Golb studied under the great Shelomo Dov Goitein (who was visiting Dropsie on a sabbatical before taking up a regular appointment at the University of Pennsylvania in 1957), and Goitein delighted in finding a promising young scholar whom he could train in Genizah documents and Judaeo-Arabic. Goitein made it possible for Dr. Golb to spend two years (1955–1957) in Israel on a Warburg Fellowship for Research in Judaic and Semitic Studies at the Hebrew University in

Jerusalem. He even found a convenient place for the Golbs to live in Rehavia, where many of the university's faculty resides.

Dr. Golb took private lessons with Goitein, sitting by his side, poring over Genizah manuscripts. He also attended Arabic courses given by the outstanding Arabist David Hartwig Baneth, along with Hava Lazarus-Yafeh and Shmuel Moreh, and he studied Near Eastern history with the erudite Eli Strauss-Ashtor, who made use of Genizah documents in his research. Dr. Golb also attended a course on the Zohar given by Gershom Scholem, the foremost expert on Jewish mysticism and a powerful presence at the university with a worldwide reputation. On walks in Jerusalem, Dr. Golb discussed Jewish studies with the illustrious scholar, occasionally criticizing the lack of interest in Karaite studies at the Hebrew University and elsewhere.

In 1956–1957, Dr. Golb served as secretary of the Institute of Jewish Studies at the University. His studies while on the Warburg Research Fellowship during the academic years 1955–1957 led to Golb's early publications in Genizah studies, such as his extensive and meticulous article on legal documents from the Genizah. The documents, all from a single manuscript (T-S 18 J 1), were from various towns, a circumstance that naturally brought Golb to explore Egyptian topography, culminating in a valuable two-part study. The legal documents required a discussion of the economic life of the people involved in the legal transactions in Egypt and surrounding countries, and it included a fascinating section on the role of women in economic life.

In 1963, aged thirty-five, Dr. Golb was appointed to a position at the University of Chicago, where he became Professor of Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic Studies in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and in the Oriental Institute. In 1988, he was made Ludwig Rosenberger Professor in Jewish History and Civilization. The Institute he first visited as a youth of twenty, thrilled to study at the feet of preeminent scholars, became fifteen years later his home, where he expounded his own ideas for the next half century and more.

Dr. Golb's pathbreaking socio-historical and linguistic-literary research was focused on three main areas: the Dead Sea Scrolls and Judaism in late antiquity, the Jews in the Arab world during the Middle Ages (to which field he gave a great boost by initiating the creation of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies, whose inaugural conference he hosted at the University of Chicago in 1984), and medieval European history.

His linguistic and paleographical expertise, as well as his versatility in Jewish history were exceptional, indeed unique. He made numerous discoveries, including

the first documentary proof that Khazars converted to Judaism, and the presence of a major Jewish community in medieval Rouen (France).

In 1985, Golb was awarded the Grand Medal of the City of Rouen. In 1987, he was granted an honorary doctorate by the University of Rouen, and was awarded the Medal of the Region of Haute Normandie. In 2006, he was also granted honorary citizenship by the commune of Oppido Lucano (Basilicata, Italy) for his research on Obadiah the Proselyte and related topics. Golb's discoveries also became the basis for the international best-selling novel *The Convert*, by the award-winning Flemish author Stefan Hertmans.

Golb received many research awards, including two Guggenheim Fellowships. He spent long research stays working on the famous Cairo Genizah documents in St. Petersburg and the Cambridge University Library; he was made a life member of Cambridge University's Clare Hall. His scholarship on the Dead Sea Scrolls was pioneering and highly publicized. Golb was one of the last surviving figures in a generation of American Jewish intellectuals who came from working-class roots and ended up enriching world knowledge and academic debate to an extraordinary degree. He and his wife Ruth were also active in city and local Hyde Park affairs for well over a half-century, while maintaining close ties to friends and colleagues in England, France, and Israel.

Dr. Golb is well remembered by his colleagues and students not only for his meticulous and pathbreaking research, but also for his compassion, kindness, and pedagogical enthusiasm. Upon his students in particular he made an indelible impression, not just by his meticulous and exemplary acumen, but also by the sincere care and empathy that he consistently expressed for them. He will ever be an example *par excellence* of both a scholar and a gentleman; an exemplary and rare fusion of friend, colleague, mentor, professor, freethinking scholar, and Doktorvater.

יהי זכרו ברוך