

Obituary: Nakdimon Doniach

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Nakdimon Shabbethay Doniach, Judaic and Semitic scholar, lexicographer, linguist, civil servant: born London 8 May 1907; OBE 1967; married 1932 Thea Pilichowski (died 1986; two daughters); died Oxford 16 April 1994.

NAKDIMON DONIACH was a distinguished scholar of Judaic and Semitic languages, lexicographer, linguist and civil servant, and a central figure in the renaissance of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Oxford University in the 1970s. At the time of his death he was looking forward to the publication of a Hebrew dictionary of current usage for the Oxford University Press.

Nakdimon Doniach was born in London in 1907, the son of two Russian Jews who had sought refuge in Britain. His father, Aaron Selig Doniach, had been arrested and imprisoned a couple of years before Naki's birth by the Russian secret police while on the way to a memorial service for Theodor Herzl - the founder of Political Zionism. Aaron Selig was a colourful and unusual man. He did much to establish a Jewish school system for girls in the East End of London. In addition he was a gifted student of Arabic, taking a degree at Oxford University before taking up a position at the School of Oriental Studies at London University. Naki's mother, Rahel Chaikin, was a woman of marked intelligence who participated in the intellectual life of Jewish London at the time and whose circle of acquaintances included Chaim Nahman Bialik, the greatest Hebrew poet since the Middle Ages, and the great Zionist philosopher Ahad Ha-Am who for a while lived in Swiss Cottage before moving to Palestine. Rahel played an important part in the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO).

Nakdimon was brought up in somewhat difficult financial circumstances. From an early age it was clear he would be an exceptionally able student. He started his studies at King's College London in 1923. At King's he studied Hebrew, Greek and Latin. At the same time he embarked upon Rabbinic Hebrew at Jews' College, London University, and Arabic at the School of Oriental Studies. After two years at London he won the Hody Scholarship to Wadham College, Oxford.

This was the first of a number of scholarships and prizes which helped him to continue with his studies. He secured the prizes in Aramaic and Syriac and the prestigious Boden Scholarship in Sanskrit which enabled him to go to Palestine to visit his mother who, from 1925 to 1929, was the organising secretary of WIZO.

After taking a degree in Hebrew and Arabic at Oxford Doniach took up the life of a private scholar, bibliophile and bookseller. His varied interests, particularly in the Judaic area, were published chiefly in the Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly and the *Revue des Etudes Juives*. In 1933 he wrote a monograph on the Feast of Esther. A career as a bookseller was brought to a sharp conclusion after the beginning of the Second World War when his entire stock of Judaica and Orientalia was destroyed in a bombing raid.

During the war he served in the RAF, rising to the rank of Squadron Leader. His utterly remarkable linguistic skills and fine mind equipped him well for the role he played in war-time intelligence. After serving in the RAF for 11 years he moved to the Foreign Office department at GCHQ Cheltenham, where he became Director of the Technical Language Section. Having taught himself Russian, with his mother's assistance, he became responsible, at the height of the Cold War, for teaching Foreign Office and other individuals Russian. His section was responsible, among other things, for the creation of technical dictionaries which were vital for intelligence work. He edited a number of important technical works such as the English-

Russian Russian-English Military Dictionary which was published (for official use only) in 1968.

After his retirement from the Civil Service he moved to Oxford where his lexicographical experience was to lead him into a new kind of career. As well as teaching undergraduates at the Oriental Institute of the university he started editing dictionaries for the Oxford University Press.

His Oxford English Arabic Dictionary of Current Usage was published in 1972, followed by a concise version 10 years later. At the same time he started the gargantuan task of producing a Hebrew dictionary of current usage for the Press - and this at an age when most people are happily retired.

At Oxford, Doniach surrounded himself with small teams of native speakers, including some very distinguished writers, from the Arab world and Israel, whom he harried with humour but without mercy until they came up with answers to the difficult questions of usage and register he loved to tease them with. During years which were marked by a number of Middle East wars when passions were roused even at Oxford it is noteworthy that Doniach was as loved and respected by his Arab co-workers as by his Israeli colleagues.

I first met Doniach when I was a student at Oxford. I was constantly failing to find words in the Arabic dictionaries in the Oriental Institute Library. But on one occasion I remembered that up on the second floor there was a door marked "Arabic Dictionary": thinking there must be a massive 20-odd volume dictionary up there that could be of help I went up, knocked on the door and went in. There was Doniach working at a desk. I said I was looking for the Arabic Dictionary to which he replied, "I am the Arabic Dictionary." With entirely characteristic kindness he invited me back to his lovely home and, having assured himself that I knew more or less the Hebrew and Arabic equivalents for the precious object he took down from a cupboard, proceeded to cook me a splendid omelette aux truffes which was helped down by a bottle of Morgon. Thereafter Doniach became an indispensable part of my life, as he was of the lives of many of those who were involved in Hebrew, Arabic and Jewish studies at Oxford.

A new Centre of Hebrew Studies was set up at Yarnton Manor, just outside Oxford, in 1973, under the inspiring leadership of David Patterson. From the outset Doniach's role in this new and vibrant organisation was vital. The warmth of his personality helped to forge the particular institutional character of the new venture.

In 1932 Naki married Thea, the daughter of the well-known Polish Jewish painter Leopold Pilichowski. Until her death in 1986 the Doniachs' home in Oxford was a famous centre of unpretentious and civilised hospitality.

Everyone was welcome, from the great figures of the university to the humblest of the students he taught at the Oriental Institute. And in his picture-hung house, which contrived even on the gloomiest of Oxford days to look as if it were in Provence, he would entertain us all with his stories and his cooking.

Naki usually wore a brown, somewhat mottled, corduroy jacket and had the look of a particularly lovable and slightly overweight thrush. I shall remember him like this: walking down St Giles, a book under his arm, already an old man, his head on one side, his eyes bright, full of extraordinary happiness. Talking of his beloved Hebrew Dictionary he said: "Guess what! We've finished F!"