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Obituary: Dov Noy (1920-2013)

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Abstract

Dov Noy was my teacher, but not mine alone. He introduced folklore into Jewish Studies, and Jewish folklore into the discipline of folklore. Stith Thompson (1885-1976) integrated Dov Noy's dissertation (as Dov Neuman) "Motif-Index of Talmudic-Midrashic Literature" (1954) into the second edition of the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* and established its subject, and Dov Noy himself, firmly in the international community of folklore scholars. Upon the completion of his studies at Indiana University, Noy joined the faculty of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1955 and began offering courses in folklore in the Hebrew Literature and the Yiddish departments. He was an inspirational teacher who attracted students and motivated them to continue the systematic research and teaching of Jewish folklore, and they have done so at the Hebrew University and in other Israeli universities. He himself taught Jewish folklore in American and Canadian universities, and inspired scholars, writers, and storytellers to explore and revive the art of storytelling in Jewish societies.

Disciplines

Folklore | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

Obituary

Dov Noy (1920–2013)

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Dov Noy was born on October 20, 1920, in Kolomyja, Poland, and in 1938, left for then Palestine, enrolling at the Hebrew University, first in the Mathematics Department, and then switching to Jewish studies, focusing on the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and Jewish history. His studies were interrupted by the World War II, and he volunteered to serve in the British Army (1941–1945). At the end of the war, he resumed his studies and received his MA degree in 1946. The postwar years was a period of political unrest, with Jewish undergrounds combating the British colonial government, the Jewish leaders seeking to achieve political independence by exerting international pressure on England.

Hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors reached the shores of then Palestine in old ships, only to be blocked by the British Coast Guard and incarcerated in refugee camps on the nearby island of Cyprus. Dov, himself only a few years out of Poland, headed the educational and cultural activities in these camps, listening firsthand to war horror stories from survivors of the Holocaust, an ordeal that the rest of his family, save his brother Meir, whom he met at the Cyprus camps, did not survive. After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and the closure of the refugee camps, Noy returned to Israel, and from 1949 until 1952, he was a co-editor of a popular children's weekly magazine, *Davar le-yeladim*. He left this post to pursue his doctoral studies in folklore in the United States.

Noy first enrolled at Yale University intending to study with the then doyen of comparative literature, Professor René Wellek (1903–1995), but on the advice of his potential mentor, he moved to Indiana University to study with Professor Stith Thompson. In his memoir, *A Folklorist's Progress* (1996), Thompson wrote: "I think my other students will not object when I say that Dov was one of the most brilliant disciples I have ever had" (301). His accomplishments upon completing his studies were equally illustrious.

Noy returned to Israel and joined the faculty of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1955, teaching *aggadah*, the non-regulatory part of Jewish oral tradition of the late antiquities, emphasizing its folkloristic dimension. But his primary activity in those years took place outside the university halls. Israel of the 1950s was bustling with immigrants mostly from Arab lands. Dov was intellectually intoxicated by his contact with them. Their stories and their songs, their customs and their costumes, and their traditional arts and rituals were for him a folklorist's dream comes true. Repeatedly he asserted, in lectures and in writings, that at that

time in Israel, one had only to cross the street or to move from one ward to another, in order to visit Jewish communities that are as far apart from each other as Warsaw, Poland, from Sanaa, Yemen.

For a start, Noy founded in 1955 the Israel Folktale Archives (IFA) within the Haifa Municipality Ethnological Museum and Folklore Archives, which was established at the same time. Following a well-tried folklore method, he edited a column “Mi-pi ha-‘am” (From the Folk’s Mouth) in the newspaper for immigrants, *Omer*, in which he publicized his folktale recording project, and published tales told by immigrant narrators from diverse Jewish ethnic groups. The folktale archive, which was transferred to the University of Haifa in 1983, and which was named in his honor in 2001, became the center of his scholarly activities. He founded the “Folktale Archives (IFA) Publication Series” and edited many of its 43 volumes (see Hasan-Rokem 1998, [1999] 2004). Several of his own books are narrative anthologies that draw upon texts deposited at the IFA, and are either a selection of a single narrator’s repertoire, such as *Jefet Schwili Erzählt* (1963b), or that of a whole Jewish community such as *Jewish-Iraqi Folktales* (1965), *Jewish Folktales from Tunisia* (1966a), *Moroccan Jewish Folktales* (1966b), *Jewish Folktales from Libya* (1967a), and *The Treasure of Our Fathers: Judeo-Spanish Tales* (Alexander and Noy 1989) with Tamar Alexander. One of the volumes that initiated Richard Dorson’s *Folktales of the World Series* was Dov Noy’s *Folktales of Israel* (1963a), which included a selection of tales only recently recorded in Israel from the oral traditions of diverse ethnic groups. In a foresight that was grounded in folklore scholarship and its geographic orientation, he named the archive after the country, Israel, rather than naming it “Jewish Folktales,” making it a depository for the narrative traditions of all the peoples that live in Israel—Muslim and Christian Arabs, Bedouins, Druzes, and Circassians. Yet, it has become primarily a depository for the narrative traditions of Jewish Diaspora communities. Although Dov Noy was primarily a scholar of Jewish folk literature, he sought to advance all aspects of folklore scholarship. In 1959, after the IFA was operational,

he attempted but failed to establish an open-air museum that would present the folkways traditions and material culture of Jewish ethnic groups.¹

To the best of my knowledge, Dov Noy did not write any theoretical or programmatic statement articulating his vision of the IFA and its role in the culture of modern Israel. His essays about the archive that was the centerpiece of his scholarship are factual and informative (Noy 1961, 1967b, 1980). He declared his intentions in actions rather than in words. Erudite to a fault, with profound knowledge of Jewish folklore, literature, and history, and constantly intellectually curious, he kept up with folklore scholarship in the languages that he commanded. His warm personality and contagious enthusiasm for folklore helped him in establishing it as an academic discipline and as a subject in the public life in Israel. This was not a mean feat. The preservation of Diaspora traditions countered the two principal ideological strands of Zionism in Israel, the negation of the Diaspora (*shlilat ha-galut*) and the integration of exiles (*mizug galuyot*). The basic tenets of Zionism advocated not only a geographic change for the Jewish people, but a total revamping of its culture, transforming the Jews from merchants to laborers and peasants in the Land of Israel, and leaving behind the Diaspora traditions. Once in their own land, all the Jewish communities should bond into a homogeneous free society, breaking down all the boundaries between and distinctive features of the respective Jewish communities in other lands. The documentation, preservation, and valuation of the Diaspora narrative traditions countered the ideology of national renewal and unity. By the sixties, American scholars conceded the failure of the melting pot ideal (Glazer and Moynihan 1963), but in Israel, this was still the national goal. Dov Noy was not a banner-bearer. He did not proclaim in public forms the futility of both of these ideological tenets. Rather, through persistent academic research, he insisted that even though no individual can stop the waves of cultural change in a country of immigration, the preservation and documentation of traditions and their methodological analysis were valuable in themselves.

Universities were first to recognize Noy's contribution to scholarship and society. In 1974, he was appointed to the Max Grünwald Chair of Folklore at the Hebrew University, and in 1999, the University of Haifa granted him an honorary doctorate degree. But public recognition in his life-work was late in coming. Only in 2002 was he awarded the important Bialik Prize for his "Life Achievement," and in 2004, he received the highest prize his country awards its citizens, the Israel Prize, for his literary research. Dov Noy died on September 29, 2013. In November 2013, the Council for Higher Education declared the Israel Folktale Archives to be part of the "National Research Infrastructure of Israel." Noy had an indelible impact upon his students, upon his own society, and upon the scholarly discipline he cherished.

Note

1. I would like to thank Dana Ernst for bringing to my attention Dov Noy's report and application to The Committee for Open-Air Museums and Museums of Ethnography and Folklore, Oslo, proposing to establish an open-air ethnographic museum for Jewish ethnic groups.

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