

Michael C. Astour: A Biographical Essay

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INTRODUCTION

Between the years 1965 and 2004, the Department of Historical Studies at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, had a remarkable member, the like of whom it will not see again. I first encountered him in the spring of 1969 when I was invited to SIUE for a job interview and again, following my acceptance of a position, when arranging to rent his home while he served as a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the fall of 1969. We never became close friends, but he became for me a model of scholarly commitment and dignified comportment. While I fell short of matching him in either sphere, I like to think that I absorbed a bit of his devotion to the life of scholarship while sitting in his book-lined study preparing my first lectures and conference presentations at SIUE.

Michael Astour was a slightly built man of medium height with a bespectacled, mustached, rather owlsh face who walked with a purposeful, if somewhat splay-footed stride. If you encountered him on campus, he would greet you with the barest hint of a smile and a courtly downward inclination of the head that was almost, but not quite, a bow. His punctilious reserve is illustrated by a story told to me by a secretary of SIUE's Department of Historical Studies, who had assumed her position near the end of Michael's career. When speaking to her, he would insist on standing in the hall outside her office door. Only after she extended an invitation to enter her office was he willing to approach her desk.¹

It never occurred to me to address him as "Mike." It just didn't fit.² One American to whom it did occur was an automobile salesman who greeted him on the phone with a cheery "Hi, Mike!" to which he replied with an icy "Do I know you?"³ When he spoke, which he did sparingly, it was evident that English was not his native language. Most of his research notes are in Russian, which was also the language in which he and Miriam, his Russian-born wife, normally communicated when alone or in company when they wanted not to be

¹ Conversation with Sharon Wickham, April 1, 2015.

² I did find one letter in Yiddish from an old associate from Michael's Vilna days who did address him as *Liber Friend Mike*. Reizin to Astour, May 28, 1987, Box 10.

³ Personal conversation.

understood by others. He had been born in Russia, too, but his family had moved to Poland while he was still a small child. He grew up in Vilna, speaking Polish, Russian, and Yiddish, the latter, the language of the large Ashkenazic Jewish community of which he was a part. Linguistic breadth was one of Michael's distinguishing characteristics. In addition to those three languages, he was to develop fluency in French, German and English, and had a less than fluent but still respectable command of Italian and Hebrew. And then, of course, there were the multiple ancient languages of his scholarship. Michael could always be depended upon for an exhaustive etymological analysis of a word or name. Little of what he said on most topics failed to reflect astounding erudition. He was by far the most learned person I've ever known.

His scholarly productivity was prodigious and was recognized and respected by the international community of historians of the ancient Near East. His accomplishments would have been impressive in anyone, but were especially so given the tumultuous and tragic events of his personal life, which were part and parcel of the tragic and tumultuous century in which he lived. The Festschrift that grew out of a celebratory conference in his honor begins with a paraphrase of an ancient Sumerian proverb: "A scribe who does not know Sumerian, what kind of a scribe is he?" It reads, "Scholars of Mediterranean, Biblical and Near Eastern Studies who do not know the work of Michael Astour, what kind of scholars are they?"⁴ Obviously, that's a rhetorical and somewhat hyperbolic question, and I lack the knowledge to pass judgment with any confidence on his work. Ignorance is easily impressed. Nevertheless, the story of Michael Astour's life deserves to be told, if only by someone who is definitely not a scholar of the ancient Near East, but who knew him as a colleague. Many of his friends and colleagues urged him over the years to write a memoir, something he adamantly refused to do. This may have been due in part to the pain that such an effort would have caused him, although he argued that others had told similar stories better than he could. But, finally, he may have regarded such an undertaking simply as an unwelcome

⁴ Gordon Young, Mark Chavalas, Richard Averbeck, eds., *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday* [Bethesda, MD., 1997], xi.

distraction from the scholarship that he loved and that he pursued almost to his dying day.⁵

This essay is based largely on Astour's voluminous correspondence spanning a half- century. He meticulously saved letters he received, as well as copies of those he sent. His papers fill dozens of boxes in SIUE's archives. Many of his letters are multi-paged and are uniformly thoughtful and frequently witty. They stand in stark contrast to the brief and often superficial electronic communications that pass for inter-personal correspondence today which is, in most cases and, perhaps appropriately, transitory. They exemplify a category of historical source material that, sadly, is no longer being generated.

- Author's note: Astour's linguistic range is reflected in his multi-lingual papers. Letters in Western languages were accessible to the author. Those in Yiddish, Polish and Russian were another matter. The following biographical sketch, therefore, must be regarded as incomplete, although reflective of the major events and facets of the subject's life.
- Michael Astour was not always Michael Astour. "Astour" was a pen name that he adopted in adolescence while residing in pre-World War II Poland and which became his legal name after he immigrated to the United States. To avoid possible confusion, he will be referred to as "Michael" in the body of the text.

⁵ Astour to Chavalas, March 2, 1992, Box 25.

CHAPTER I

MICHAEL WHO?

Michael Czernichow, later to be known as Michael Astour, was born in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov (now Kharkiv) on December 17, 1916.⁶ Whether he dated his birth according to the Julian calendar then still in use in Czarist Russia or by the more modern Gregorian calendar is not clear. If the former, he was born on the same day on which the sinister Grigory Rasputin fell victim to aristocratic assassins, who were convinced that the Siberian monk's malign influence on the ruling Romanovs was leading Russia to destruction during the Great War. In fact, the Russian monarchy survived the murder by little more than two months.

Michael was the only child of Rachel (née Hoffmann) and Joseph Czernichow. His written recollections of his mother are sparse. He identifies her as an historian, but says little about her interests or work or, indeed, her personality or his relationship with her, at least in the languages the author was able to read. On the other hand, he clearly idolized his father. He remembered him as a "renowned lawyer, essayist [sometimes under the pen name 'Danieli'], speaker and public worker," and regarded him as "my father, teacher and comrade," to whom he recalled owing "very much in my views, attitudes, and often in my very behavior."⁷ Both of Michael's parents were Jewish but religiously non-observant, his father militantly so. When elected chair of the *kehilla* of Vilna in 1937, he adamantly refused to appear in the city's synagogues, although urged to do so.⁸ In this as in much else, Michael followed his father's example.

Joseph Czernichow seems to have been a man of great courage. During the civil war that followed the Bolshevik revolution, he defended persons accused of counter-revolutionary crimes before the Revolutionary Tribunals of Kharkov. These tribunals, according to the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, "were not bound by any restrictions in their choice of methods to combat counter revolution."⁹ His

⁶ "Brief Curriculum Vitae," Box 25.

⁷ Astour to Praeger, May 7, 1963, Box 20; Astour to Sasson, January 7, 1980, Box 25.

⁸ Recorded interview of Michael Astour, July 17, 2004, disc 5, band 6. Courtesy of Jack Sasson.

⁹ *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Revolutionary+Tribunals.

son recalled that his father succeeded in saving many defendants from death at the hands of the dreaded Cheka, contributing, he believed, to his arrest in 1939 by Soviet authorities and his murder at their hands in 1941.¹⁰

The Revolutionary Tribunals were closed with the end of the civil war in 1921. Perhaps fearing retribution for what might have been considered his own counter-revolutionary activity, Joseph moved the Czernichow family north and west, first to Kaunas (Kovno in Russian) in the newly independent state of Lithuania, then to Poland, recently reestablished as an independent state after more than a century. They settled in Vilna (now Lithuanian Vilnius), a thriving center of Jewish culture, sometimes called “the Jerusalem of the North.”¹¹ The Czernichows lived comfortable bourgeois lives. Joseph enjoyed a successful law practice, as well as a position of leadership in the Jewish community. He was one of the founders of YIVO, the *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* (Jewish Research Institute), devoted to the study of the rich Jewish culture of Eastern Europe and now based in New York City.¹² Surviving family photographs show sober, well-dressed and obviously prosperous people who enjoyed a sense of material well-being. Idyllic summers were spent in the family’s summer cottage at Wolokumpia, where Michael, known as “Miki” to some of his friends, often paddled their kayak on the Vilia River and romped with Szelma, a mongrel dog belonging to the man who watched over the cottages of the Czernichows and a neighbor. The summer of 1932 was spent in the company of fellow Vilner Abraham Sutzkever, later noted Yiddish poet and anti-Nazi resistance fighter. Mornings were spent hiking and swimming while, in the afternoons, the two teenagers read and discussed Russian and Polish literature.¹³

Michael received a Yiddish education, graduating from the Vilna Yiddish high school in 1933.¹⁴ In June of that year, he published an article entitled “A Voice of the Youth” which, he later told an Australian academic, “led to the

¹⁰ Astour to Praeger, May 7, 1963, Box 20.

¹¹ Astour to David [Owen], October 7, 1998, Box 25.

¹² Interview with Michael Astour, July 17, 2004, disc 2, band 3. Courtesy of Jack Sasson.

¹³ Astour to Shulamit, November 11, 1990, Box 25; Justin Daniel Cammy, “Abraham Sutzkever,” *Writers in Yiddish*, ed. Joseph Sherman [Farmington Hills, MI, 2007], 305.

¹⁴ “Biographical Data,” Box 20.

formation of the first territorialist youth groups in Vilna and gave an impulse to an open discussion of territorialism in [the] Jewish press.”¹⁵ Two years later the Polish group was absorbed by the newly established *Frayland-lige far Yidisher Teritoryalistisher Kolonizatsye*. The Freeland League represented the refounding of an earlier moribund movement that was distinct from Zionism and often hostile to it.¹⁶ Michael’s antipathy—“hatred” might not be too strong a term—for Zionism and for the modern state of Israel, which realized the Zionist dream in 1948, remained strong until the end of his life. Like Zionism, the “territorialism” espoused by the Freeland League, reacting to the increasingly precarious state of European Jews and their culture in a Europe of growing militant anti-Semitism, sought to establish a homeland for Jews outside Europe. Unlike Zionists, who insisted on the necessity of a sovereign state in *Eretz Israel*, territorialists, recognizing the difficulty that would arise from appropriating land already populated by Arabs, worked towards securing a Yiddish-speaking, agrarian socialist, but not politically independent area of settlement for Eastern European Jews in some thinly populated part of the world, where Jews would co-exist with non-Jews willing to accept them.¹⁷ When not yet 16 years of age, Michael was elected a member of the organizing committee of the local territorialist youth groups, dubbed “Hawks” (*Shparber* in Yiddish), and assumed progressively greater responsibilities as the decade of the thirties unfolded. His brand of leadership seems to have been a physically demanding one.¹⁸ Late in life, he recalled having led his boys on two-day forty-mile hikes.

His writing in support of the movement might be said to have given birth to Michael Astour. Extending the ornithological totemism of the territorialist youth movement in order to distinguish himself from his well-known father, the sixteen year-old signed his work “Astour,” a gallicized modification of *astur*, a Latin term for a species of hawk.¹⁹ It is a testament to his continued devotion to the Jewish

¹⁵ Astour to Jacobs, May 8, 1989, Box 20.

¹⁶ “Frayland-lige,” *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Frayland-Lige.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “My Activities in the Hawks Association and the Freeland League between 1932 and 1939,” Box 13.

¹⁹ Astour to Sasson, December 30, 1999, Box 26.

territorial cause that he adopted “Astour” as his legal surname in 1960 and retained it for the rest of his life.

He also developed a teen-age fascination with the ancient Near East, which he attributed to having read about the discovery in 1929 of the Ugaritic city of Ras Shamra in what is now northwest Syria. He recalled many years later that as a “kid” he had tried to write a long epic poem about the Leleges (an Aegean aboriginal people) who, in Michael’s imagination, after having participated in a raid on Egypt by the “Sea Peoples,” sailed to Central America. His interests were further stimulated by a family visit to Paris in 1931 that introduced him to the ancient treasures of the Louvre. His academic interests were supported by his parents, and it was decided that he would pursue them as a student at the Sorbonne.²⁰

In October 1934, Michael departed Vilna for Paris, taking up residence, somewhat incongruously, in the *Maison des Étudiants Belges* at 9, Boulevard Jourdan. He found a mentor in the person of Charles Virolleaud, a prominent scholar- archaeologist and one of the decipherers of the newly discovered Ugaritic texts. Virolleaud would help to launch Michael on his teaching position in the United States and would remain for him “*cher maître*” until the French scholar’s death in 1968. Michael’s understanding of the ancient world was broadened by courses taken with other Sorbonne scholars, including Egyptology with Raymond Weill, Adolphe Lods in Hebrew and Biblical Studies, André Pigagnol in Roman history, and Charles Picard in Greek archaeology.²¹

Michael was awarded his *licencié es-lettres*, roughly equivalent to a Bachelor of Arts degree, in 1937. He had majored in history and the civilizations of the ancient Near East, with a minor in Russian literature and now began work on a doctorate at the *École des Hautes Études* of the University of Paris.²² But even while in Paris, his work for Jewish territorialism continued. In February 1935, he co-founded the Paris Workers’ Group of the Freeland League and served as its

²⁰ Astour to McCracken, April 15, 1966, Box 20; “An Interview with Michael Astour, February 1996, *Crossing Boundaries*, 2.

²¹ Ibid., 3-6.

²² *Curriculum Vitae*, Box 20.

first secretary.²³ In a screed that he penned in that role and signed “Astour,” the seventeen-year-old activist, perhaps reveling in his newly conferred authority, directed awkward multi-lingual barbs, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, at unknown members of the movement. Most of it is written in Yiddish, but it closes with:

Amitié! Friendship! Be Prepared! You, foolish leader of a Monkey’s Patrol, you, poor little dog, frog, or hog! All the Hawks may go to Hell, it is the best place for they (sic). *Il faut que vous, mes pauvres petits pseudo-scouts, allez chez le diable! Mais, cependant, je suis avec vous dans notre lutte commune pour nos idéals.*²⁴

He participated in youth activities during vacations in Vilna and, in July 1936, was “commander” of the first summer camp of the Freeland youth in nearby Turniszki.²⁵ In October 1937 he visited Tel Aviv, a relatively new city founded by Jewish settlers in 1909 and now experiencing explosive growth as Jews fled persecution in Europe. In 1990, Michael recalled discussions, no doubt heated, of Zionism and territorialism with the Bareli family, with whom the Czernichows had been friends in Poland and who had evidently not embraced territorialism.²⁶ The trip did not result in Michael’s conversion to Zionism either, and the alternative territorialist dream may have taken precedence over his studies of the ancient Middle East by the fall of 1938. In October he returned to France, but not to the University of Paris. He enrolled instead in the *École Nationale Supérieure d’Agronomie de Grignon*, an advanced and highly technical school of agricultural science, where he was exposed to much more than simple plant cultivation, including physics, chemistry, and mechanical engineering.²⁷ But he had not abandoned his ambitions to establish himself as a scholar of the ancient Near East. While at Grignon, he attempted to interest one of his teachers in Paris, probably Virolleaud, in supporting the publication of two essays he had

²³ “My Activities in the Hawks’ Association and the Freeland League between 1932 and 1939,” Box 13.

²⁴ Untitled manuscript, February 25, 1935, Box 13. In translation, the French reads, “You, my poor little pseudo-scouts, must go to the devil! But, nevertheless, I am with you in our common struggle for our ideals.”

²⁵ “My Activities,” Box 13.

²⁶ Bareli to Astour, September 10, 1986, Box 10.

²⁷ Ibid.

recently completed.²⁸ But this partial refocusing of Michael's academic attention may have been due, as a close friend has suggested, to a desire to escape the scene of a failed love affair.²⁹ Perhaps the pangs of a broken heart were combined with the interest then being shown by the Freeland League in possible areas of settlement, including Madagascar, the Guianas, and Australia. As the outbreak of war loomed, the most promising of the Freeland League's settlement schemes was one envisioning the establishment of an initial population of 75,000 Jews on 7 million acres in the sparsely populated Kimberley region of northwestern Australia, where technical know-how presumably would be invaluable.³⁰ It is probably no coincidence that he published in March 1939 a translation into Yiddish of Walt Whitman's poem, "Pioneers, O Pioneers." Lines such as "We the surface broad surveying, We the virgin soil upheaving," undoubtedly resonated with the young territorialist. His agronomic studies during the 1938-39 academic year would fail to find application, however, as his life was about to undergo a catastrophic transformation. As war loomed and against his parents' advice, he departed France for Poland in July 1939. Precisely why he took that fateful step is not clear. Almost forty years later, he explained that he had doubted that his chances of survival at the front, in captivity or under German occupation, would be better in France than under "Soviet oppression" in Poland.³¹ This is not persuasive, as it presupposes foreknowledge of events that had not yet transpired. More plausible is a desire to confront what was clearly an impending crisis at home with family and the community he knew and loved. Yet, since he chose not to offer that explanation, his motive must remain a matter for speculation.

²⁸ Astour to *Cher Maître*, December 8 and 15, 1938, Box 27

²⁹ Communication from Jack Sasson to author, January 19, 2015.

³⁰ Astour to Lapidès, August 2, 1963, Box 20.

³¹ Astour to Ilya, March 16, 1977, Box 25.

CHAPTER 2

BLOODLANDS

In 2010, Yale's Timothy Snyder published a book entitled *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. The book's geographical focus is the area from central Poland to western Russia, including Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic states. Within that territorial expanse between 1933 and 1945, Snyder estimates, the tyrannies of Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin murdered some 14 million human beings over and above those killed by military operations during World War II.³² Michael's father and mother would be among them. Michael would survive, but suffer grievously.

Unlike his friend, the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever, Michael escaped or avoided service in the Polish army.³³ Nevertheless, he was profoundly affected by the war that engulfed Poland on September 1, 1939. According to the secret protocol attached to the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of August 23, which preceded the German attack of September 1, Poland was to be divided between the two dictatorships, with the eastern part of the country falling under Soviet control. On September 19, Soviet forces entered Vilna. Prior to their arrival, the Czernichows had considered fleeing to Lithuania, the border with which was about 20 miles away and from where it would have been possible to cross to neutral Sweden, but Rachel refused to leave her elderly and paralyzed mother. On October 1, both Michael and his father were arrested by the NKVD. Michael believed that his father's role as defense attorney before the Revolutionary Tribunals had had something to do with Joseph's arrest. He had written a book on his experiences, parts of which had been published in a Warsaw newspaper, before publication in its entirety in Yiddish as *In Revtribunal* in 1932. This book was undoubtedly well-known to the NKVD, although his presidency of the Polish Freeland League and chairmanship of the *kehilla* of Vilna probably would have been sufficient grounds for his arrest, as was Michael's leadership role in the

³² Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin* [New York, 2010], vii-viii.

³³ Cammy, "Sutzkever," 307.

Shparber. On October 1, shortly after the Red Army's entry into Vilna, he was arrested, along with his father and 1800 other residents of the city. Michael was sentenced without trial to five years in labor camps as "leader of the Jewish counter-revolutionary nationalist youth organization 'Hawk.'" Ironically, his maternal grandmother died a week after his arrest.³⁴

With Michael's arrest began an ordeal which was to last 17 years and parts of which read like a Hollywood movie script. From Vilna, he and his father were transported to prison in nearby Wilejka. Joseph remained there, while his son was swallowed up by "the Gulag archipelago," the vast system of Soviet forced labor camps through which, according to Anne Applebaum, 18 million persons passed and of whom, it has been estimated, close to 3 million may have died.³⁵ His introduction to the Gulag came at the end of an agonizing four-week journey by railroad cattle car, river barge, truck and foot march which terminated at the huge Ukhto-Izhemskiy camp complex in the Republic of Komi just south of the Arctic Circle. He was assigned to a section at Vodnyi called the "Water Works," apparently because radium was extracted from radioactive water wells. How Michael fared in this inhospitable environment is not clear, although it's safe to assume that survival was a desperate struggle. He would later recall, referring to the whole of his incarceration, that he was near death on three occasions, and survived with the assistance of fellow *zeks* (Russian slang for labor camp prisoners), as well as camp guards, both of whom valued his ability to recite from memory poetry and tales in multiple languages. A cousin with whom Michael shared his camp experiences has observed that, "Like Scheherazade in The Arabian Nights, he was fed and kept alive as a good entertainer."³⁶

Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, launched on June 22, 1941, directly impacted the Czernichow family. For his parents, the consequences would be fatal. Rachel, Michael's mother, had remained behind in

³⁴ Astour to Ilya, March 16, 1977, Box 25; Astour to Sasson, December 3, 1969, Box 25; Kalman Weiser, "The Jewel in the Yiddish Crown. Who Will Occupy the Chair in Yiddish at the University of Vilnius?" *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, eds. Israel Bartal, Antony Polonsky, and Scott Ury [Portland, Ore., 20012], 250.

³⁵ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag. A History* [New York, 2003], 583.

³⁶ Astour to Owen, October 21, 1992, Box 25; Leon-François Hoffmann, *My Life* (unpublished manuscript), chapter 2, screen 16, email of April 16, 2015.

Vilna when her husband and son had been arrested. Vilna had passed to Lithuanian control in October 1939 but was absorbed, along with all three of the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia), into the Soviet Union in August 1940. German Blitzkrieg engulfed Vilna ten months later, on June 24, 1941. The Germans established two ghettos for the city's large Jewish population. In one were placed Jews who were deemed capable of work and thus to be temporarily spared; in the second, those chosen for prompt extermination. Rachel was among the latter.³⁷

The killing process occurred in two stages. The victims were first assembled in Vilna's Lukiszki prison, then taken to the Ponary Forest 8 miles southwest of the city. There, SS personnel of *Einsatzkommando 3* of *Einsatzgruppe A*, one of the mobile killing formations that followed the German army into Russia, assisted by Lithuanian auxiliaries, shot their victims, whose bodies were buried in mass graves. By the end of 1941, approximately 40,000 Vilna Jews had been killed.³⁸ Ironically, Michael's arrest and imprisonment may have spared him a similar fate. But it had no such outcome for his father. Evacuated from Wilejka as the Germans approached, the prisoners were marched eastward on the road to Bobruisk. Unable to keep pace with the marching column, Joseph Czernichow was shot by one of his Soviet guards. He was one of thousands of Polish prisoners murdered by the NKVD rather than be allowed to fall into German hands, ironic given Czernichow's likely fate as a Jew in that eventuality. Forty years later, Michael was to remark to a friend whose father had recently died after a prolonged illness:

I feel very deeply your double sorrow—the loss and the long ordeal. I saw my parents for the last time when I was about twenty-three, lost both of them at twenty-four. The physical end was short for both—a Soviet bullet for my father, a German one, soon after, for my mother—but the circumstances were horrible beyond description, and both had experienced long sufferings of a different kind before being killed.³⁹

³⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Historical Atlas of the Holocaust* [New York, 1996], 60; Astour to Sasson, December 3, 1969, Box 25.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Astour to Owen, February 19, 1981, Box 25.

It was one of the rare instances of Michael's writing about his parents' murders.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union had further consequences for Michael. Germany and the Soviet Union, since August 1939 quasi-allies, were now mortal enemies, fighting an ideologically-charged war of annihilation, which altered Moscow's perspective on the surviving Poles whom it controlled. On July 30, 1941, the Soviet government concluded a treaty with the Polish government-in-exile, according to which the two became allies in the war against Nazi Germany. Most relevant to Michael was a subsequent agreement granting amnesty to Polish citizens then imprisoned in the Soviet Union.⁴⁰

Michael was released on September 1. What followed is not entirely clear. The July 30th treaty had provided for the establishment of a Polish army on Russian soil, and thousands of former prisoners flocked to the southern Urals to join a force under the command of General Wladyslaw Anders. Many of them were physically unfit for service but, by the middle of October, some 25,000 had enlisted.⁴¹ Michael's papers record no interest in military service at this point but, rather, "a long odyssey to Soviet Central Asia," which included work on a collective farm and the teaching of Russian and English in a junior high school. His odyssey eventually took him to Turkmenistan, from which he intended to attempt an escape from the Soviet Union by surreptitiously crossing its southern border into Iran, to which the Anders Army eventually decamped. He later claimed that his intent had been to join the army there. In any event, the effort entailed the crossing of mountainous terrain, the steepest crest of which proved insurmountable. On his way back down, Michael was arrested and subjected to three days of interrogation. He succeeded in convincing his Soviet captors that his presence in the border area had been accidental. He was released, and wandered about, he tells us, looking for work. He claimed now to have attempted to enlist in the "Polish army", but, as he later somewhat cryptically recalled, "failed to be admitted." This may have been due to Soviet refusal to countenance the recruitment of Jews and other ethnic groups from the eastern Polish territories

⁴⁰ Jozef Garlinski, *Poland in the Second World War* [London, 1985], 109-14; Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* [Cambridge, Mass., 2012], 168-70.

⁴¹ Keith Sword, "Anders Army," *The Oxford Companion to World War II* [Oxford and New York, 1995], 36.

which the Soviet Union had occupied in 1939 and intended to reacquire. The chronology of all of this is unclear, and may reflect some confusion on Michael's part fifty years later.⁴²

By the beginning of 1943, with the impending destruction of the German 6th Army now surrounded at Stalingrad, the tide of battle on the Eastern Front had clearly turned. This, too, profoundly impacted Michael's life. Stalin no longer felt a need to cooperate with the anti-communist Polish government-in-exile. On January 16th, it was announced that all Poles who had been on Soviet soil as of November 1939 would henceforth be considered Soviet citizens.⁴³ This prompted Michael to make a second attempt to escape across the border to Iran, this time by a longer route that avoided the mountains. The results were disastrous. Not far from the border but, as he later recalled, "half-dead of thirst," he was arrested. Now in the eyes of his captors a disloyal citizen of the Soviet Union, he was sentenced to seven years in Gulag for "intention to commit treason to the fatherland." On September 1, 1943, he resumed the life of a *zek*, essentially that of a slave laborer.⁴⁴

Two years were spent in camps in Turkmenistan. He was then shipped to Karlag, one of the largest camp complexes in the "archipelago," in Kazakhstan near the capital city of Karaganda, which gave the camp complex its name. Prisoners labored as farmers, factory workers, even fishermen.⁴⁵ Michael arrived there, he later noted, "after a long and atrocious journey," on December 17, 1945, his 29th birthday, and was assigned to agricultural labor. The camp was overcrowded, sanitation poor, and the death rate very high. He survived, but suffered "hardships and diseases." Surprisingly, he was able to occasionally receive packages from friends and relatives on the outside containing food, medicine, clothing, and even books and journals, suggesting that he maintained some semblance of an intellectual life even under the most adverse

⁴² Astour to Owen, October 21, 1992, Box 25; Dov Levin, "Escape Attempts of Jewish Refugees in the USSR," *Crossroads. A Quarterly Journal of International Dynamics and Social Change* [Winter-Spring, 1982], 229-30, n. 14; Sword, "Anders Army," 36.

⁴³ Garlinski, 193-94.

⁴⁴ Astour to Owen, October 21, 1992, Box 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; Applebaum, 91.

circumstances. He wrote in “almost microscopic characters” in a small notebook he hung around his neck, using a long-lived #3 ½ pencil.⁴⁶

Michael’s life in Karlag improved dramatically in the fall of 1947, perhaps as a result of his academic interests having been noticed by the camp administration. He had previously been forced to perform only menial labor, but now was assigned to one of the camp administrative offices as a clerk. He occupied a responsible position in the camp administration, working in planning and control and, in the process, learning the fundamentals of the byzantine Soviet bureaucracy. This would later prove useful.⁴⁷

Michael’s status as a *zek* ended on September 3, 1950, almost eleven years after his deportation from his beloved Vilna. Release from Gulag did not always mean freedom and relative comfort, even in the very restricted sense in which those terms could be applied to the Stalinist Soviet Union. Former prisoners were often exiled to remote Siberian villages, where conditions could be worse than in the camps. The 34-year-old was not banished to Siberia but was saddled with identity papers that recorded his years in Gulag as a political prisoner, something that made his finding employment difficult. After a failed attempt elsewhere, he settled in Karaganda, where he found low-paying employment in the municipal construction bureau as manager of the carpentry shop which, at least, provided him with a room. Life in Karaganda also provided him with a wife, Beta Miriam Ostrowska, whom he married on February 16, 1952.⁴⁸ She had been born into a Jewish family in Zlatopol in the Soviet Ukraine on May 10, 1924, graduating from high school in Zaporozhye in June 1941. She and her family were evacuated eastward to Karaganda and escaped the genocidal German onslaught, in which vast numbers of Ukrainian Jews were murdered by *Einsatzgruppen* C and D. In the notorious massacre at Babi Yar outside Kiev on September 29th and 30th, 1941 alone, 33,771 perished. Miriam, as she would be known to Michael’s colleagues, served as an accountant in a military hospital during the war and was working as a technician in the chemical laboratory of the local state coal-mining enterprise

⁴⁶ Astour to Owen, October 21, 1992, Box 25; Leon-François Hoffmann, *My Life*, chapter 2, screen 17.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

when Michael arrived in Karaganda.⁴⁹ She and her new husband embarked on a marriage that would last until her death more than 48 years later. All who knew them would probably agree that they formed a fascinating couple, rich in their contrasting and sometimes clashing personalities.

Following Stalin's death in March 1953, the earlier discrimination against former political prisoners eased, and Michael was appointed to a job in the construction office of the coal enterprise as an "administrative engineer." When he pointed out that "he didn't know coal from rice pudding," he was told that he would receive appropriate training.⁵⁰ He attended night school, where his pre-war studies at the highly technical French school of agronomy at Grignon may have stood him in good stead. This was accompanied by a significant improvement in his and Miriam's living conditions, as they were able to move into an apartment with two rooms and kitchen with indoor plumbing and central heating, a rare luxury for citizens of the postwar Soviet Union. But escape from the country where he had been so long a prisoner was far more attractive. This time, the effort would not take the form of desperate marches through desolate landscapes but an application to the Polish consulate in Moscow for repatriation to Poland as a former Polish citizen, an opportunity that had opened up at the end of the war but which Michael had missed while in Gulag. He was politely informed that the door had closed in 1947, three years before his release. He resigned himself to remaining in the Soviet Union for the remainder of his life. His scholarly ambitions had not been stifled by nine years in labor camps and years more of work far removed from the history and languages of the ancient Near East. While in Karaganda, he was able to borrow books and journals in French and English through interlibrary loan from the Lenin Library in Moscow, from which he took extensive notes and composed essays based on them although, at that time, he had no hope of ever seeing them published. But, he noted, "I could not act differently." Scholarship was for him simply a necessity of life. In fact, his work at

⁴⁹ Miriam C. Astour, "Curriculum Vitae," Box 25.

⁵⁰ Leon-François Hoffmann, *My Life*, chapter 2, screen 17.

this time would form the basis for his later doctoral dissertation and book, *Hellenosemitica*, demonstrating Semitic influences on early Greek civilization.⁵¹

Early in 1956, chance contact with a resident of Vilna, from which he had been forcibly removed in 1939, changed everything. He learned that an “unofficial” repatriation program for the pitifully few Polish Jews who had survived the war had been adopted, and that all that was necessary for repatriation was a certificate attesting to original Polish citizenship from the archives of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, within whose borders Vilna, as Vilnius, its capital, now lay. Michael immediately sent off a request and, within a few weeks, received the precious document. After months of struggling with Soviet bureaucratic red tape, he and Miriam arrived in Warsaw at the end of November, 1956.⁵²

⁵¹ Astour to Owen, October 21, 1992, Box 25.

⁵² Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

REBIRTH

Michael Czernichow, as he still identified himself, and Miriam passed sixteen months in a city recovering from the almost total devastation of World War II. So ubiquitous was the rubble from destroyed buildings that it became a convenient weapon in the hands of Warsaw street criminals. Muggers would approach their intended victims with brick in hand and ask menacingly, “Do you want to buy a brick?”⁵³ In spite of the bitter reminders of war and the absence of most of the vibrant Jewish culture that had thrived in pre-Holocaust Warsaw, Michael remembered those months as a “wonderful time, a kind of decompression chamber after seventeen years of isolation in the USSR.” And he found congenial employment. Prior to emigrating from the Soviet Union, he had written to Professor Bernard Mark, head of Warsaw’s Jewish Historical Institute, and was invited to join its research staff. With Mark’s assistance, his unpublished scholarly writings, which must have been substantial in bulk, were transferred via the Polish embassy in Moscow to the Institute. He managed to publish several studies in Yiddish and Polish and re-established contact with the pitiful remnants of the rich Jewish culture of prewar Vilna and was elected vice-president of the Union of Vilners in Poland.⁵⁴ His return from the Soviet Union became known to surviving members of the Freeland League in New York and Paris and correspondence was re-established with that movement, which had been so central to his pre-war life. But he longed for an academic career and concluded that his prospects in postwar Poland were bleak. His and Miriam’s names were entered on a list compiled by the Jewish Labor Committee of 150 Jewish socialist families who wanted neither to remain in Poland nor to immigrate to Israel. French Prime Minister Guy Mollet agreed to grant those on the list permanent visas for emigration to France, and Miriam and Michael seized the opportunity.

⁵³ Michael once described this practice to me with a nostalgic chuckle.

⁵⁴ See, for example, his *Religia Izraela I Zydostwa* [Warsaw, 1957], Box 27.

The fact that Miriam retained her Soviet citizenship complicated the process but, on March 19, 1958, the Czernichows arrived in Paris.⁵⁵

Unlike Warsaw, which Michael found unrecognizable, Paris had escaped the war largely unscathed. It was the Paris of youthful memories which he had treasured throughout his 18 year ordeal. “It felt like home to be back,” he later remembered. He was offered employment as a librarian and archivist at the *Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine*, an archive originally established clandestinely in 1943 which had moved to Paris after the liberation and whose primary purpose was (and is) to document the *Shoah*.⁵⁶ His qualifications were impeccable. He had mastery of all of the relevant languages and, moreover, was himself a victim of the Holocaust through his mother, murdered in the forest of Ponary, and through the largely extinguished Jewish culture of Vilna, of which he had been a part. Life in Paris and the youthful associations that it evoked may have provided some solace for the agonizing emotions that each day’s work must have produced. Miriam entered a program for training as a *couturière*, which included a small monthly stipend. That, combined with Michael’s meager salary (60,000 badly inflated francs per month, the equivalent of about \$120) supplemented by 2,000 francs apiece for “more or less stupid” (*plus ou moins idiot*) weekly articles for a Yiddish “rag” and private lessons in Russian financed a modest existence first at 72 Rue Charlot and later a more comfortable apartment at 17 Parc du Moulin in the Paris suburb of Stains.⁵⁷

A career of scholarship on the ancient Near East remained his passionate ambition. He had re-established his links to Professor Charles Vroelaud, his pre-war mentor, who had facilitated his and Miriam’s immigration, and was able to take courses in Akkadian and Aramaic at the *École des Hautes Études* in his time free from responsibilities at the *Centre*. Among his papers are identity cards allowing him to work in the *Salle du Cabinet d’Assyriologie* and to access the resources of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* for the purpose of preparing a thesis. But Michael’s prospects of earning a doctorate and securing a university-level

⁵⁵ Astour to Owen, October 21, 1992, Box 25.

⁵⁶ *Curriculum Vitae*, 1963, Box 20; *Contrat de Travail No. 19, 292 pour Travailleur Etranger Réfugié*, Box 13.

⁵⁷ *Certificat Provisoire de F.P.AI*, Box 3; Schneersohn to Czernichow, April 4th, 1958, Box 13.

teaching and research position in France did not appear promising. His work at the *Centre* and writing essays in Yiddish to pad his income left scant time for study and research, although he did manage some scholarly publication. As a foreigner, his access to government grants to support his studies was limited. His application to the National Center for Scientific Research for a grant for research on non-classical civilizations was turned down.⁵⁸ Even with a doctorate, he judged his chances of securing an academic appointment at a French university to be non-existent. Moreover, the political climate in France made him uneasy. He thought that “the dictatorship of De Gaulle,” who had assumed emergency powers as Premier on June 1, 1958, had resolved nothing and, more ominously, as he wrote to his uncle Jean Hoffmann in the United States, “*je n’aime pas beaucoup les slogans comme ‘Les Juifs au crématoire,’*” which he had heard chanted by youthful demonstrators on the Champs-Élysées on June 18th.⁵⁹ In any event, he was now 42 years old and time was running short. Depression and anxiety were evident in his response to his uncle’s birthday greetings in December.

...a big thank you for your congratulations on the occasion of my birthday (although it’s not much cause for congratulations when one is 42 years old and has to remake and recommence the rest of his life....⁶⁰

He began to consider trans-Atlantic alternatives.

The United States was the only trans-Atlantic destination that Michael seriously considered, although not without considerable reservation. He had written to his Uncle Jean in November of his feelings of “revulsion towards American Jewry and strong reservations concerning the spiritual life of that country in general.”⁶¹ An unexpected opportunity arrived in December. He was offered a position teaching the history of Jewish social movements at the *Cours Juifs Supérieurs* in Buenos-Aires, the directorship of which would accompany it.

⁵⁸ Le Directeur Général du Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique to Czernichow, July 11, 1958, Box 13.

⁵⁹ Astour to Hoffmann, June 30, 1958, box number not recorded.

⁶⁰ Astour to Hoffmann, November 19th, 1958, box number not recorded. “I didn’t like very much the slogans such as ‘Jews to the crematory.’”

⁶¹ Astour to Hoffmann, November 9, 1958, box number not recorded.

Someone, presumably, had recommended him. Who it might have been is unknown, nor did Michael speculate. Clearly, however, there were persons of influence willing to support him. The offer was tempting. The salary seemed generous and there would be time for independent research. Moving expenses and an apartment would be included. But he had serious reservations. In spite of his gift for languages, he had no desire to adapt himself to another “linguistic milieu,” and he doubted that the libraries of the Argentine capital were adequate for his research. He had doubts, too, as to the future of the institution and, oddly, he feared that leaving Paris for anywhere other than the United States would be a betrayal of his comrades in the Freeland League.⁶² What he meant by that can only be guessed at, but it reflects the continued hold that the territorialist movement had on him, in spite of the fact that the state of Israel, which spelled the doom of Jewish territorialism, was by now over 10 years old. That attachment manifested itself in other ways. His uncle had seemingly made reference to Princeton University, possibly as a place where he might teach and/or continue his education. Michael expressed enthusiasm, in part due to Princeton’s proximity to a site where The Society for Jewish Settlements in America was supposedly in the process of constructing *une petite cité Juive*.⁶³

He discussed his prospects in the United States with a representative of the American Jewish Committee in Europe, who suggested presciently and more realistically that he might find a teaching position in the history of the ancient Near East at a “provincial” university in the U.S. Middle- or Far West, possibly assuming that academic standards were lower there than in the East and that a candidate lacking a doctorate was more readily employable.⁶⁴ From his cousin, Leon, preparing for an academic career of his own in the United States, came another suggestion. In his response to a letter probably written at the start of 1959, Michael thanked him for his *renseignements concrets et pratiques*, which he found very reassuring. Although his cousin’s letter does not survive, he

⁶² Astour to Hoffmann, December 19, 1958, box number not recorded

⁶³ Astour to Hoffmann, August 18, 1958, no box number recorded. “A little Jewish city.” There appears to be a substantial literature on such settlements. See, for example, Ellen Eisenberg, *Jewish Agricultural Colonies in New Jersey* [New York, 1995].

⁶⁴ Astour to Hoffmann, November 11, 1958, box number not recorded.

apparently advised Michael to seek a position in the United States as a teacher of Russian.⁶⁵ It was, after all, only a little more than a year after the launching of Sputnik, and instruction in all things Russian was at a premium. He was of course aware of scholars in the field of ancient Near Eastern history in the United States, such as William F. Albright, about to retire from Johns Hopkins, A. Leo Oppenheim at the University of Chicago, and Cyrus H. Gordon at the recently established Brandeis University, and he may have made contact with these and perhaps others but, with nothing certain, he and Miriam applied to the U.S. consulate for visas. By the summer of 1959, although emigration to the United States seemed increasingly likely, he had not entirely abandoned hope of winning a subvention from the French National Center for Scientific Research. He and Miriam had bought a small refrigerator and a Lambretta motor scooter, suggesting that their imminent departure from France was not a certainty, and planned a tour of the Loire valley chateaux after his return from a plum assignment as a French-Yiddish translator for The Jewish World Congress meeting in Stockholm.⁶⁶ But he was clearly leaning towards the United States, an inclination probably increased by what appears to have been a rejection of his application for academic assistance in France. By October, he and Miriam had decided.⁶⁷ They would go. How they traveled is not clear, but they arrived in New York City with emigrant visas on December 22, 1959. They would receive their U.S. citizenship five years later.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Astour to Leon Hoffmann, January 23, 1959, no box number recorded. Michael thanked him for the “concrete and practical information.”

⁶⁶ Astour to Hoffmann, July 25, 1959, no box number recorded.

⁶⁷ Astour to Salomon, October 28, 1959, no box number recorded.

⁶⁸ Astour to Durnall, February 24, 1965, Box 20.

CHAPTER 4

THE BRANDEIS YEARS

Michael and Miriam took up residence on Manhattan's upper west side at 251 W. 95th Street, apt. 4W, a building in which co-op apartments now sell for prices in the seven figures. We can assume that their circumstances were more modest. How much money they were able to bring with them and to what degree they were aided by the Hoffmann family or possibly by others is unknown, but among Michael's papers is a membership card for the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, Local 155, issued to "Beta" Czernichow, permitting her to work as a dress maker.⁶⁹ At night, she attended "evening elementary school" classes, presumably to learn English, although she once told me that she learned much more watching soap operas on TV.⁷⁰ That they were not living in abject poverty is suggested by a guarantee in Miriam's name for a Benrus watch dated February 23, 1960, possibly a gift from Michael on their 8th wedding anniversary.⁷¹

If Michael was gainfully employed during this period, there is no record of it. What his papers do reflect is an effort to find academic employment that might be combined with an opportunity to secure his Ph.D. It didn't take long. The U.S. proved to be for him "the land of opportunity." An early effort appears to have been directed towards Yale. On February 4th, 1960, he wrote in somewhat stilted and awkward English to William S. Cornyn, chair of the department of Slavic languages and, remarkably, expert in both Russian and Burmese, applying for the position of "drill instructor" in Russian, stressing his Russian birth, the fact that Russian was spoken by his family even after moving to Vilna and, of course his enforced 17-year sojourn in the Soviet Union, "which helped me to improve still more my knowledge of the real colloquial Russian as it is spoken now in different

⁶⁹ Official Dues Card, International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Local 155, Box 3.

⁷⁰ ID card, Board of Education, City of New York, February 2, 1960, Box 3.

⁷¹ Watch guarantee, validated February 23, 1960, Box 3.

social circles of Soviet Russia.”⁷² It was an impressive effort to make lemonade out of lemons.

More promising was the fact that his teachers at the Sorbonne, particularly Charles Virolleaud, but also André Dupont-Sommer, an authority on the Dead Sea Scrolls, were writing on Michael’s behalf to colleagues in the United States. He encouraged Virolleaud to lay it on thick, noting that *On m’a prévenu que les Américains aiment la publicité...*⁷³ He secured an appointment for mid- January with Albrecht Goetze, a specialist in Hittite and Semitic linguistics at Yale and, like Michael, a refugee from a murderous dictatorship, having fled Nazi Germany in 1934, but failed to keep it due to “an annoying illness.”⁷⁴ The meeting was rescheduled, and Goetze assisted Michael in navigating the complex application procedures. Moreover, Michael learned, an instructorship in the Russian language was available to provide the income necessary to support him and Miriam.⁷⁵

But pay dirt was struck with Cyrus Gordon, chair of the Department of Mediterranean and Classical Studies at the young Brandeis University, whose work he had come to know while still in Warsaw. In a somewhat unctuous letter of January 25th, whose awkwardness was enhanced by his as yet imperfect command of English, he introduced himself to Gordon as a disciple of Virolleaud, who had recommended Gordon to him. He continued:

But even without his advice you would have been the first American scholar I would wish to meet on the American soil. Are you not the first to have put order in the Ugaritic philology and to establish it as an exact science with your books which are the basic and invaluable aid to each student of the Ras Shamra texts, and the author of comparative studies of especial interest for me, who am studying, between other topics, also the problem of ancient Semito-Aegean connections?⁷⁶

⁷² Astour to Cornyn, February 4, 1960, Box 20.

⁷³ Astour to Virolleaud, January 28, 1960, Box 20. “I’ve been told that Americans love publicity.”

⁷⁴ Astour to Clairmont, January 25, 1960, Box 20.

⁷⁵ Astour to Dupont-Sommer, February 4, 1960, Box 20.

⁷⁶ Astour to Gordon, January 25, 1960, Box 20.

Indeed he was. Like Virolleaud, Gordon had made ground-breaking contributions to an understanding of Ugaritic, having published an Ugaritic grammar in 1940, and the two scholars were familiar with each other's work. Michael, moreover, while still in the Soviet Union, had begun to pursue a topic of great interest to Gordon—Semitic influences on early Greek civilization. Michael expressed a desire for a meeting, and Gordon responded with an invitation for a visit to Brandeis on February 2.⁷⁷ Michael must have impressed him and others whom he met. By mid-February, he had an offer in hand: a two-year appointment at a starting salary of \$7200 with two-thirds time devoted to the teaching of Yiddish and one-third to Russian. He was to hold the rank of assistant professor and was named the first occupant of the Jacob Berg chair of Yiddish culture. The teaching appointment was accompanied by the opportunity to work towards his doctorate in ancient Middle Eastern history under Gordon. On receiving his Ph.D. he would be promoted, so he believed he had been assured, to associate professor (presumably tenured) with a substantial raise. As far as the latter is concerned, he may have misunderstood what had been mentioned as a possibility as a commitment. His English was still a bit shaky. In any event, he was exultant. He wrote triumphantly to Virolleaud that *C'est justement l'optimum de ce que j'osais désirer dans mes rêves les plus audacieux quand je me dirigeais vers les rives de l'Amérique*.⁷⁸

By mid-March, he had received his teaching contract and a notice that he had been accepted as a graduate student in the Department of Mediterranean Studies with a tuition scholarship.⁷⁹ It is at about this time that Michael Czernichow formally became Michael Astour. His appointment documents had been sent to him in that name although he had not given prior approval for its use. But in fact, he had been signing letters "Michael Czernichow Astour" or, simply "Michael Astour" since his arrival in the United States and had used it as his pen name ever since his departure from the Soviet Union. He gave the change

⁷⁷ Gordon to "M. Czernichow-Astour, January 28, 1960, Box 20.

⁷⁸ Astour to Virolleaud, February 18, 1960, Box 20. "It is the most that I dared desire in my most audacious dreams when I headed for the shores of America."

⁷⁹ Feinberg to Astour, March 15, 1960, box number not recorded; Levy to Astour, March 16, 1960, box number not recorded.

legal validity in the fall of 1960. It was a new but not new name for a new life in a new country, one, moreover, that was easier for Americans to manage than Czernichow.⁸⁰

His career both as teacher and student would not begin until September. As the euphoria of his acceptance at Brandeis began to fade, he wrote to Virolleaud that “...ni moi, ni ma femme ne pouvons nous consoler d’avoir quitté Paris, l’unique cité du monde...”⁸¹ But he had much to distract him from his longing for Paris. Preparation for a dual career as faculty member and doctoral student undoubtedly occupied much of his time. The dean of Brandeis’s graduate school expressed concern about Michael’s ability to manage both roles. Michael replied breezily that he had confronted a similar situation earlier in his life when, in Karaganda, he had worked as an “administrative engineer” by day and attended technical school at night. He had dealt successfully with both, he assured the dean, even though they, unlike his impending career at Brandeis, were “nothing to my heart and brain.”⁸² And there was the American love for publicity to contend with. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, a Jewish-oriented news agency serving Jewish newspapers to which Brandeis had sent information on their new hire, revealed to its subscribers that:

Dr. Michael Astour, a leading Yiddish writer and historian, has been named first incumbent of the newly created Jacob D. Berg Chair in Yiddish culture at Brandeis University. The distinguished scholar and author of numerous books and articles on social, scientific and literary topics, will join the Brandeis faculty in the fall of 1960.⁸³

The press release was premature in identifying Michael as “Dr.”, and generous in crediting him with “numerous books and articles.” The list of publications he had submitted to Brandeis included one work that might, with some stretching, be considered a book—a 100 page survey of Jews in antiquity

⁸⁰ Astour to Sasson, December 30, 1999, Box 26.

⁸¹ Astour to Virolleaud, March 13, 1960, Box 20. “Neither my wife nor I can console ourselves for having left Paris, the unique city of the world.”

⁸² Astour to Levy, April 6, 1960, Box 20.

⁸³ “Dr. Michael Astour Named Professor of Yiddish Culture at Brandeis University,” *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, April 21, 1960, www.jta.org/1960/04/21.

written in Yiddish, which he had completed while in Warsaw. In addition, he had published nine articles, some of only a few pages, which appear to be scholarly and one of which went back to his pre-war student days in Paris. The “many” could be appropriately applied to the “articles, essays and reviews” that he had written for popular Yiddish periodicals, some of which he had earlier characterized as “more or less stupid” work done for a “Jewish rag.”⁸⁴ Whether the attribution to Michael of a doctorate he did not have was an error on the part of the news agency or a slip on the part of someone at Brandeis or, perhaps, conscious obfuscation on the university’s part is unknown. Conceivably, it may reflect discomfort or confusion over his highly anomalous position as someone lacking the terminal degree in his field who was a student as well as a faculty member appointed to an endowed professorship.

The months between his appointment and the opening of the new academic year were given over to becoming better acquainted with Brandeis (and it with him), preparing to move from New York to the Boston area, polishing his English and completing writing projects, including an article on Vilna for *Jewish Heritage*.⁸⁵ Towards the end of April, he and Miriam were guests of the University for a two-day visit that involved observing classes, meeting future colleagues, and attending a reception in his honor given by Hillel, the Jewish student organization, at which he spoke on the poet Abraham Sutzkever, whom he had known in his Vilna days.⁸⁶ He and Cyrus Gordon began to establish a relationship which was as much colleague-to-colleague as it was teacher- to- student. Michael was able to assist Gordon in clarifying some of Virolleaud’s recent work on the Ugaritic language.⁸⁷ An apartment-hunting expedition by Miriam and Michael to the Boston area after the July 4th holiday was, with the assistance of the Brandeis Newcomers’ Committee, crowned with success. The Astours would take up residence on August 15th in a pleasant apartment at 44 Grant Avenue in Watertown, situated between Waltham and Cambridge about 5 miles from the Brandeis campus with Harvard’s Widener Library within easy reach. They found

⁸⁴ “List of Publications,” Box 20.

⁸⁵ Astour to Edelman, April 4, 1960, Box 20.

⁸⁶ Howe to Astour, March 21, 1960, Box 20; Astour to Howe, March 26, 1960, box number not recorded..

⁸⁷ Astour to Gordon, March 14, 1960, Box 20; Gordon to Astour, April 22, 1960, box number not recorded.

other tenants in the multi-building complex, young faculty and married students, congenial. Rent was \$108 per month.⁸⁸ He and Miriam felt prosperous enough to purchase (on credit) their first automobile, a new 1960 Renault Dauphine. Michael's Francophilism would be reflected over the years in a distinct preference for French cars, in the operation of which mishaps would be frequent. The following year would see him involved in three accidents in the space of seven months. One of these threatened to result in a lawsuit against Michael and his insurance company for alleged injuries sustained by the other party. This assertion, he assured his insurance agent, was "an impudent lie."⁸⁹ Yet, in spite of frequent accidents and many more close-calls, Michael enjoyed driving. He and Miriam frequently took long motoring trips. In the summer of 1971, for example, they drove almost four thousand miles through the western United States in the space of eleven days.⁹⁰ One trembles to think of it. He had learned to drive too late in life to be fully competent behind the wheel, although he became less a threat to himself and others with the passage of time. Miriam would do no better when she secured her driver's license much later.

He was assigned an office in Room 117, Schiffman Hall.⁹¹ He appears to have initially taught two courses, one in introductory Yiddish, the other focusing on "masterpieces" of Yiddish literature, and may have taught a course in Russian literature as well.⁹² He had requested that Tuesdays and Thursdays be left free from teaching duties to permit him to attend Gordon's classes.⁹³ His performance in the courses in which he was enrolled during his first year seems to have been less than stellar, although one should remember that this was prior to the grade inflation that has been so evident in higher education in recent decades, that his English still required improvement, and that he was spending much of his time preparing for and teaching courses unrelated to his studies. In "Ethical Ideals in

⁸⁸ Astour to Blank, July 12, 1960, box number not recorded; Astour to Perry, August 8, 1960, box number not recorded.

⁸⁹ Astour to McDonald, May 23, 1961, Box 20; Astour to Mooney, December, December 8, 1961; Astour to Riley, July 23, 1961, Box 20.

⁹⁰ Astour to Sasson, September 16, 1971, Box 25.

⁹¹ "Office Directory – Instructional Staff, 1960-61," box number not recorded.

⁹² "For 1960-61 Catalogue, Box 20; Astour to Sachs, n.d. 1963, Box 20.

⁹³ Astour to Duffy, May 8, 1960, box number not recorded

the Greco-Roman World,” “Late Assyrian Civilization,” and “Assyrian Royal Inscriptions,” he received B’s, but A’s in “Research in Mediterranean Studies,” presumably involving work on his dissertation. Needless to say, he had no difficulty in passing proficiency examinations in French and German.⁹⁴

Progress towards his doctorate progressed rapidly. In his development as a scholar he was, after all, far beyond the typical graduate student and had already done much research on the topic that would be the focus of his dissertation. On January 15, 1961, he wrote to Dean Lawrence H. Fuchs that he was working on an “extensive study on Western Semitic ethnic and cultural influence upon Mycenaean Greece,” which he intended to submit as his Ph.D. thesis after passing his preliminary examination in the spring.⁹⁵ In April, he informed his Uncle Jean that he was desperately attempting to complete the first 65 pages to present to Gordon in order to influence his mentor in his favor prior to “prelims,” but lamented, *Hélas, ces premières pages ne représentent que la moitié du premier chapitre....*⁹⁶ Whether or not the ploy was successful, he must have passed his examination and picked up the pace of his writing. He defended his 575 page dissertation, *Hellenosemitica: An Ethnic and Cultural Study in West Semitic Impact on Mycenaean Greece*, in May of the following year. In June, 1962, he officially became Dr. Michael C. Astour.⁹⁷

Although his degree was in Ancient History, his official function at Brandeis continued as Assistant Professor of Yiddish Literature with an annual salary that peaked at \$8500.⁹⁸ In 1962, his initial appointment for two years was renewed for an additional three, with the proviso that, at the end of that period, a decision would have to be made on promotion or termination.⁹⁹ He taught courses in Russian literature and, in the spring of 1962, delivered a paper at the University of Kentucky’s Foreign Language Conference on the abstruse topic, “The Political Tragedy of Vl. Mayakovski on the Basis of the Cryptoanalysis [sic] of His Poems.”

⁹⁴“Brandeis University – Graduate School of Arts and Sciences,” n.d., box number not recorded.

⁹⁵ Astour to Fuchs, January 15, 1961, Box 20.

⁹⁶ Astour to Hoffmann, April 17, 1961, Box 20. “Unfortunately, these first pages represent only half of the first chapter.”

⁹⁷ *Curriculum Vitae*, Box 20.

⁹⁸ Rabb to Astour, March 23, 1964, box number not recorded.

⁹⁹ Duffy to Astour, November 10, 1961, box number not recorded.

At the invitation of Gordon and crucial to his later life and career, he added graduate course in ancient Near Eastern history to his teaching repertoire.¹⁰⁰ Michael blossomed as a scholar, preparing *Hellenosemitica* for publication and placing it with E.J. Brill, the Dutch academic publisher, which added it to its catalog in 1964.¹⁰¹ He had pressed Brill for early publication, hoping this would strengthen his case for tenure at Brandeis but, as he complained to Jack Sasson, “the damned Dutch are in no hurry with putting it out.”¹⁰² The actual publication proved to be a substantial burden for Michael, as it was contingent upon payment of a \$2,729 subvention to Brill, only a thousand dollars of which was provided by Brandeis, although additional assistance may have been secured from the American Council of Learned Societies.¹⁰³ The unexpected financial challenge resulted in Michael’s acceptance of a contract to prepare an English-Russian dictionary of nutritional terms for the U.S. Army’s Natick Laboratories in nearby Natick, Massachusetts.¹⁰⁴

Over the period from 1963 to 1965, he published approximately a dozen scholarly articles in journals such as the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, and the *American Journal of Archaeology*. He once remarked to me breezily that he was able to turn out a scholarly article in a month. His international reputation as a scholar of impressive depth and breadth developed rapidly. His response to a letter from Professor Piero Meriggi of the University of Pavia requesting assistance on a problem related to Egyptian hieroglyphics and their possible relationship to Minoan Linear A and B is a remarkable demonstration of the breadth of his knowledge. After warning Meriggi that he was not an Egyptologist, he proceeded to deliver a detailed and highly technical explanation of the Egyptian manner of rendering foreign names and its evolution over the millennium spanning the period from the Middle Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom. He concluded by observing:

¹⁰⁰ Astour to Gordon, February 12, 1963, Box 20; Astour to Sachar, June 29, 1963, Box 20;

¹⁰¹ Astour to Levy, September 2, 1964, Box 20

¹⁰² Astour to Sasson, August 22, 1964, Box 20.

¹⁰³ Astour to Wieder, April 16, 1963, Box 20; Astour to Medina, May 31, 1963, Box 20; Astour to Schottland, June 15, 1963, Box 20.

¹⁰⁴ Astour to Hoffmann, October 20, 1963, Box 20; Astour to Rouhow, February 14, 1964, Box 20.

I would venture an opinion that the Linear A and B scripts do not descend from the Egyptian writing alone. It is true that the Minoan hieroglyphic writing imitates several Egyptian signs and objects in the shape of its signs, and that Linear A (and B) probably evolved from these hieroglyphs. But the two Aegean systems were syllabic since the[ir] inception, while the Egyptian writing is consonantal, and syllabic writing was used only for exotic names. It would seem that the inventors of the Linear scripts were under the simultaneous influence of both the Egyptian and the syllabic cuneiform systems, and tried to imitate (or to combine) both. Something comparable seems to have happened with the Hittite hieroglyphic writing: the idea of using pictures for signs was probably adopted from the Egyptian system, but the syllabic values, the use of ideograms, etc., betrays the influence of the cuneiform writing. As to the Linear system of 5 vowels ...it has its closest counterpart in the Hurrian cuneiform orthography, but it would be premature to presume that the Cretans borrowed this system from North Syria.¹⁰⁵

Several years later, while working on the toponyms carved on the mortuary temple of Rameses III at Medinet Habu, he wrote to Keith Seele, Egyptologist at the University of Chicago's prestigious Oriental Institute, that

...hieroglyphic writing, unlike cuneiform, must be seen—no transliteration can replace it, for there is no system of differentiating homophones.... Reluctantly, I was compelled to device [sic] my own system of transliterating....¹⁰⁶

Michael seldom failed to impress.

He would attract the attention of crackpots, too. Immanuel Velikovsky, Russian-born psychiatrist, created an uproar in the academic community and widespread enthusiasm among the general public with his imaginative and dramatic “catastrophist” interpretations of human history, which he published in

¹⁰⁵ Astour to Meriggi, October 23, 1964, Box 20.

¹⁰⁶ Astour to Seele, March 6, 1968, Box 20.

books such as *Worlds in Collision*, *Ages in Chaos*, and *Earth in Upheaval*. In these and other publications, he postulated that Earth had been subjected to catastrophic events as the result of close encounters with other planets, some of which, including Earth, had shifted orbits by means of mysterious electro-magnetic forces, and that these cataclysmic events were reflected in the mythologies of multiple cultures. But the plausibility of the historical aspects of this argument required demonstrating the global synchronicity of the mythological reflections of these catastrophes. This led Velikovsky to declare the accepted chronologies of the ancient world to be incorrect and to revise them to support his theories.¹⁰⁷ In the spring of 1966, after Michael had left Brandeis, Velikovsky sought his cooperation, sending him a copy of *Ages in Chaos* and an invitation to read the manuscript of a new book, which he would later publish as *The Peoples of the Sea*, along with the book's Introduction. Michael thanked him, sending Velikovsky offprints of some of his articles that seemed relevant. As to Velikovsky's theories, he commented that

I regret to say that, despite my respect for new ideas and my own rather unconventional approach to many problems of ancient history, I am unable to agree with your basic thesis, your methods, and your conclusion.

In responding to Velikovsky's invitation to read his new manuscript, Michael observed that its apparent equation of the Sea Peoples of ca. 1200 B.C.E. with Athenian and Spartan warriors of the classical period "is impossible from any point of view." Many of Velikovsky's identifications were "incompatible with the most elementary knowledge of Semitic scripts and languages." Consequently, Michael "respectfully decline[d] the honor" of reading the manuscript.¹⁰⁸

Michael could also apply his encyclopedic knowledge to the field of popular entertainment. In the summer of 1963, he found in the pages of *Time* magazine a review of the movie, *Jason and the Argonauts*. The reviewer had ridiculed the producers for having "dreamed up monsters Jason never saw," including one "built of bronze, with a drain plug in his heel." Michael corrected the benighted

¹⁰⁷ "Immanuel Velikovsky," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 28, 1914.

¹⁰⁸ Astour to Velikovsky, April 15, 1966, Box 20.

reviewer with a quotation from Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, citing Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* IV, 1639-93, to the effect that the Argonauts had encountered such a creature on Crete and had dispatched it by removing a plug in its heel, which allowed its life-giving fluid, a colorless liquid, to escape, thus killing it. Had Michael seen the movie, though, he would have been annoyed to observe that what was seen to flow from the mortally wounded monster appears to have been sand.¹⁰⁹

While at Brandeis, Michael attracted a following of talented students who would go on to establish distinguished careers in the history of the ancient Near East. He scored a coup in Yiddish scholarship by aiding in the discovery of the manuscript of the final volume of Israel Zinberg's monumental *A History of Jewish Literature*. A Russian Jew and chemist by training, Zinberg had compiled his exhaustive study in Yiddish over a twenty-year period, eight volumes of which had been sent to Vilna for publication. A ninth volume had been completed in manuscript when he was arrested in 1938 for "counter-revolutionary activity." He died in prison a year later, and the ninth volume was presumed lost. In late 1962 or early 1963. Michael was informed that Zinberg's papers survived in the Leningrad Public Library and that the manuscript of the "lost" volume might be among them. He approached the director of the Brandeis library and with his cooperation microfilmed copies of the papers were secured. To Michael's delight, volume nine was included. At the direction of Abram L. Sachar, Brandeis's president, he painstakingly edited the manuscript in preparation for its publication, receiving rave reviews for his efforts.¹¹⁰

But clouds had begun to gather by mid-1963. Jacob D. Berg, who had funded Michael's chair, died of cancer on June 18. Michael had visited him the day before his death and, at the request of one of Berg's sons, relayed the news to President Sachar.¹¹¹ Had the Berg chair been an endowed chair in the commonly understood sense of that term, that is, one supported by the income

¹⁰⁹ Astour to the editors of *Time*, July 17, 1963, Box 20.

¹¹⁰ Galina Eliasberg, "Tsinberg, Yisroel," *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/tsinberg>yisroel ; Astour to Schreiber, January 22, 1964, Box 20; "Draft of Press Release," n.d., Box 20.

¹¹¹ Astour to Sachar, June 20, 1963, Box 20.

of a sizeable gift given to Brandeis for that purpose, Jacob Berg's death should not have affected it. But apparently it was not or, at least, so Michael was told. President Sachar informed him on June 26th that his position was secure only for the next academic year.¹¹² Facing the prospect of another job search, Michael was alarmed. He had been primarily a teacher of Yiddish, for which demand was very limited. Finding another position in that field might be difficult. President Sachar told him that he was working to persuade Berg's sons to continue funding the Berg chair and, a month later, Michael was apparently informed by President Sachar that the future of the chair was secure.¹¹³ Michael's prospects at Brandeis seemed to have improved dramatically. In a cover letter to Brandeis Dean of the Faculty, Leonard Levy, dated September 17, 1964, Michael made a strong case for his retention as a specialist in ancient Near Eastern history, submitting proof pages of *Hellenosemitica*, as well as the galleys of a new article and letters of acceptance of three more, to which he added testimonials from American and European scholars attesting to the quality of his work.¹¹⁴ His appointment was renewed for the 1964-65 academic year at a salary of \$8500, but his future at Brandeis remained uncertain enough to prompt him to begin looking for another job by the following year. In a letter dated October 28, 1964 to Jacob Finkelstein of UC Berkeley, the associate editor of the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, regarding an article of his that the journal was about to publish, Michael took the opportunity to query Finkelstein on the availability of teaching positions in ancient history in the University of California system. He emphasized his desire to devote full time to teaching and research in ancient history, avoiding the awkward fact that he, a 47-year-old untenured scholar, was in danger of losing his position at Brandeis.¹¹⁵ Subsequent feelers went out to Dartmouth and UC San Diego, as well as to Yale in regard to a possible position in Yiddish.¹¹⁶

Michael attended the convention of the American Historical Association in late December 1964, which met in Washington, D.C. He availed himself of what

¹¹² Sachar to Astour, June 26, 1963, Box 20.

¹¹³ Astour to Sachar, July 31, 1963, Box 20.

¹¹⁴ Astour to Levy, September 17, 1964, Box 20.

¹¹⁵ Astour to Finkelstein, October 28, 1964, Box 20.

¹¹⁶ Astour to Feldmesser, October 31, 1964, Box 20; Astour to Galbreath, December 17, 1964, Box 20; Astour to Macht, December 31, 1964, Box 20.

was often indelicately referred to as “the slave market,” which gives job seekers the opportunity to be interviewed by representatives of institutions intent on hiring staff in their fields. He met with several chairs of history departments, two of whom requested credentials and letters of recommendation - Robert Twyman of Bowling Green State University and Allan McCurry of Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. At least one other chair had apparently concluded that Michael was too exotic for “average American high school graduates” and would not “fit in.”¹¹⁷ Others less candid than he might have thought the same. In a letter to Cyrus Gordon, Michael described his more promising contacts and requested a letter of recommendation. The request included an intriguing caveat, suggesting that there was more to the precariousness of his position at Brandeis than the uncertainty of the Berg chair’s support.

I suppose these gentlemen will want to know why I am interested in leaving Brandeis. They probably will not understand the delicate problems of Jewish politics that underly [sic] my case, according to what you told me. The official explanation—that there are at present no tenure openings in your department ...is close enough to the truth and will satisfy them.¹¹⁸

What were these “delicate problems of Jewish politics” that he thought underlay his case? They may have been rooted in the vehement anti-Zionism that accompanied Michael’s adherence to the territorialist cause.¹¹⁹ This manifested itself in his strong antipathy towards the modern state of Israel. His perspective could not have endeared him to the administration of a university named after a man, Louis D. Brandeis, who was instrumental in mobilizing American Jews in support of Zionism, and whose president, Abram L. Sachar, was himself an ardent Zionist. Gordon worked to retain Michael at Brandeis, “taking steps to get a concrete specific offer from the administration,” but warning that “For reasons that are familiar to you it is necessary for me to get the President’s cooperation.” For his part, Michael continued his search for a position, plumbing the lower ranks

¹¹⁷ Astour to Peterson, March 17, 1965, Box 20.

¹¹⁸ Astour to Gordon, dated January 4, 1964, but almost certainly from 1965, Box 20.

¹¹⁹ Leon-François Hoffmann, *My Life*, chapter 2, screen 18.

of Institutions of higher learning in a flirtation with Nasson College, a down-at-the-heel liberal arts college (now defunct) in Springvale, Maine. He wrote to the Dean of the College on February 24 that no determination had been made on his future at Brandeis and might not be made until April or May.¹²⁰ By that time, most hiring decisions at other institutions would have been made.

Michael's future at Brandeis was at last clarified. He had none. He concluded that the attitude of his dean was "openly hostile" and, more to the point, was told personally by President Sachar that "there will be no tenure." He could have remained at Brandeis for another year at \$8800, but it was clearly time to move, and he was given the opportunity. On March 15th, following a campus visit, he received an offer of an associate professorship in ancient history at \$9900 with a decision on tenure in two years from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. He immediately accepted. He explained to his Uncle Jean that it was a new and somewhat chaotic state institution, *très démocratique, même prolétaire*, and that its environs were, in contrast to New England, *assez accablantes*. He had, nevertheless, seized the offer because he had received no others and *je ne veux pas perdre ma dernière chance*.¹²¹ The negative observations about the destination that he regarded as his "last chance" were omitted in the curt letter of resignation he submitted to Brandeis's dean of the faculty on March 31, while pointedly noting his new rank and salary.¹²² By May, he was making "sour grapes" comparisons between Brandeis and his destination. *Moins de pretensions et faux chic, plus de travail honnête et démocratique –je préfère cela*.¹²³ He and Miriam were in Edwardsville apartment hunting in June, then toured Europe, with a side trip to Israel during the Fourth Congress of Jewish Studies, returning to the United States with a new Peugeot. They were back in Illinois in early September, in time for the opening of the Fall Quarter at SIUE.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Astour to Durnall, February 24, 1965, Box 20.

¹²¹ Astour to Hoffmann, March 16, 1965, Box 20. He found SIUE "very democratic, even proletarian," but "rather depressing." Nevertheless, he accepted the offer because he "didn't want to lose his last chance."

¹²² Astour to Levy, March 31, 1965, Box 20.

¹²³ Astour to François Hoffmann, May 3, 1965, Box 20. "Fewer pretensions and false style, more honest work and democratic - I prefer that."

¹²⁴ Astour to McCurry, September 9, 1965, Box 20; Astour to Hoffmann, September 30, 1965, Box 20;

CHAPTER 5

WE WILL NOT WANDER MORE

In Box 3 of Michael's papers is a small and dilapidated notebook containing notes in Russian (his research notes were usually taken in that language), but also parts of two poems by Tennyson, which he had carefully copied out in a tiny and very neat hand. This may be a notebook that he carried with him in Gulag. One of these is "The Voyage of Maeldune." Based on an 8th century Irish legend, it tells the story of a chieftain who embarks on an odyssey to avenge the murder of his father by a rival. In the course of his journey, he encounters a holy man who succeeds in deflecting him from his bloody purpose, urging him to "suffer the past to be past." He returns home, lamenting, "O weary was I of the travel, the trouble the strife and the sin." The other poem is "The Lotos-Eaters," the last five lines of which read:

Suffer endless anguish, others in Elysian valleys dwell,
Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel.
Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
Than labor in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar.
O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

It is difficult to resist the temptation to see in these verses an autobiographical commentary and, perhaps, a wish for the future. At any rate, although he and Miriam were enthusiastic recreational travelers, SIUE and its' environs would remain Michael's home for the rest of his life. His mentor, Cyrus Gordon, informed him in December of his continuing desire to find a place for him in Brandeis's Department of Mediterranean Studies, which he chaired. Might he be interested in returning to Brandeis as a tenured associate professor? Michael regretted having had to leave Brandeis, but his response was less than enthusiastic. "...I cannot commit myself in advance. Taking into account my experience at Brandeis last year, I consider that the initiative is to come from the

administration.”¹²⁵ Although Gordon responded that he was “taking steps to get a concrete, specific offer,” it was not forthcoming. Gordon informed Michael in January 1966 that President Sachar was opposed to Michael’s reappointment.¹²⁶ He does not seem to have been greatly distressed. In this latter phase of his earlier stormy life (he was now 49) he seems to have come to value security and stability over prestige. Little in his correspondence after 1965 suggests a desire to relocate, with the possible exception of an expression of mild interest in a movement in the mid-seventies among a few members of the faculty at the more prestigious Washington University in St. Louis to acquire him. This never developed into an actual offer.¹²⁷

Michael’s initial reactions to his new environment were revealed in correspondence written in the fall of 1965. To his Uncle Jean, he wrote that it was only here that he felt fully American—no more Yiddish or Russian, or New York with its *vie juive*.¹²⁸ His separation from Jewish life was noted in a letter to David Owen, one of his graduate students at Brandeis, who would complete his Ph.D. in 1969 and go on to an endowed chair at Cornell. “There is not one Jew in my classes. Jewish population in SW Illinois is not large, and its college youth probably attends Washington University, where reportedly 30% of the student body are Jewish [sic].” As far as the students that he did have were concerned, they couldn’t be compared fairly with the history students, all graduate, that he had had Brandeis. Nevertheless, while “some freshmen are absolutely dumb, ... many others make it quite well.” His advanced course in Greek History, with 13 students, was going “very nicely.” Teaching African-American students was a new experience. “I have a few Negroes in my classes, and they are not among the worst,” he noted. He was teaching three courses in the fall quarter, but would have only two during the winter. Library resources at the new campus left much to be desired and were still disorganized and “insignificant,” as far as Michael’s research area was concerned. Washington University had “a fine classical library,” but little Near Eastern literature. Michael hoped to visit the University of Illinois

¹²⁵ Astour to Gordon, December 21, 1965.

¹²⁶ Gordon to Astour, January 5, 1966, Box 20; Astour to Gordon, January 10, 1966, Box 20.

¹²⁷ Haimo to Schwarzschild, April 13, 1976, Box 8; Astour to Haimo, April 19, 1976. Box 25.

¹²⁸ Astour to Hoffmann, September 30, 1965, Box 20.

library and the Oriental Institute in Chicago, the latter a magnificent resource that he would visit often in the years to come, but these visits would involve long drives that were difficult to fit into his teaching schedule. Consequently, requests to his former students at Brandeis for Xerox copies of scholarly articles were frequent.

Michael's reaction to the physical reality of SIUE's new campus and its starkly ultra-modern buildings, designed by Gyo Obata, suggests initial feelings of alienation. His office and classes were in a building that he described as "an enormous construction of glass and concrete." The overall impression was "strange and very unlike any other campus. Everything is on a big scale, stripped of any aesthetic pretensions, purely utilitarian and functional....so unlike Brandeis...", although landscaping was "making the total more acceptable." And he found his colleagues to be "nice people," concluding with something less than wild enthusiasm that, "from the point of view of personal interest, I am not worse off than at Brandeis."

With the assistance of his department chair, he and Miriam had found a comfortable apartment, air-conditioned, with wall-to-wall carpeting, in Collinsville, a town approximately 10 miles south of Edwardsville. It was similar to their apartment in Watertown, although, as he wrote Uncle Jean, *plus moderne*. It was located a few steps from a shopping center *avec absolument tout ce qu'il faut*, and close to a bus stop and highway linking them to St. Louis, a mere 13 miles away. On the other hand, their building was "rather isolated," and lacked the sense of community they had known in Massachusetts. As a consequence, Miriam had no neighbors with whom to chat and, Michael noted, *elle s'ennuie un peu*. St. Louis was a 20 minute drive away, easily accessible by car or the bus that stopped virtually on their doorstep, but it was not Boston, which they both missed.¹²⁹

By early 1966, he and Miriam were beginning to settle in, which was reflected in a distinctly more positive tone in his correspondence. "SIU is very

¹²⁹ Astour to Hoffmann, September 30, 1965, Box 20. Their apartment was "more modern" than the one they had had in Watertown, and the shopping center offered "everything necessary." But Miriam felt isolated and was "a little bit bored."

different from Brandeis, but not necessarily on the bad side. I rather like its democratic atmosphere, absence of snobbism, mass character and general style. Our campus has already a fine library that is rapidly growing and large funds [sic] toward purchasing new books," he wrote to Boston friends. He appreciated the collegial relations among his colleagues, and observed, with Brandeis presumably in mind, that they seemed "free from intrigues and other minor plagues that make life unpleasant." As for the scenic appeal of the local landscape, it was "not as flat and dreary as I feared." The Ozarks, which begin west of St. Louis, were beautiful in the fall, although not as scenic as the Green Mountains of Vermont. And St. Louis itself was "a big fine city—not Boston, of course, but quite a good place to be near." Miriam was now flourishing in her new milieu, finding challenging companionship in a faculty women's reading club and the Collinsville chapter of The League of Women Voters. Edwardsville/St. Louis would never match Boston, much less Paris, but it was becoming home. It became much more so in April 1967, when Michael and Miriam moved into a pleasant three-bedroom two-story condominium they had purchased in Collinsville. It was situated on the bluffs overlooking the flood plain of the Mississippi with a view of the St. Louis skyline and its recently completed 630- foot tall stainless steel "Gateway Arch," which glittered in the setting sun. Michael wrote proudly to David Owen that "we now have quite a spacious and nice house, to which we can add one more beautiful room by finishing our walk-out basement."¹³⁰ Although in fact quite modest, it was ideal for the childless couple and large enough to accommodate their frequent guests.

By the fall of 1967, his enthusiasm for SIUE had cooled to some degree. "I am not in a very brilliant place," he wrote to David Owen, "but I have tenure, they pay me fairly well, value me, are nice and kind...so I consider myself not bad off at all."¹³¹ He complained that the grading of tests and papers for his classes in Western Civilization, which were much larger than any classes he had taught at Brandeis and which he characterized in a letter to a francophone correspondent as *un boulot complètement futile*, left him with less time for research and writing

¹³⁰ Astour to Owen, April 27, 1967, Box 20.

¹³¹ Astour to Owen, November 6, 1967, Box 20.

than he had had in Waltham.¹³² Nevertheless, Michael completed and/or published approximately a dozen scholarly articles on the ancient Middle East during his first few years at SIUE, in addition to an over 900-page, two-volume history in Yiddish of his beloved Freeland League. *Hellenosemitica*, his doctoral dissertation, had been published by Brill shortly before his arrival in Edwardsville, and he anxiously awaited reviews of this unorthodox interpretation of the cultural roots of Greek civilization.¹³³

¹³² Astour to François Hoffmann, March 5, 1968, Box 20. Teaching Western Civilization was “a completely futile job.”

¹³³ *Curriculum Vitae*, n.d., Box 48.

CHAPTER 6

HELLENOSEMITICA, MARTIN BERNAL, AND BLACK ATHENA

Hellenosemitica is, as its sub-title proclaims, “an ethnic and cultural study in West Semitic Impact on Mycenaean Greece.”¹³⁴ In it, Michael argued that racist perspectives that had emerged in European and, in particular, in German scholarship in the late 19th century, had rejected the possibility of significant Semitic influences on pre-classical Greek civilization in favor of putative Nordic roots. He had experienced the effects of this as a student at the Sorbonne during the 1930s, when the work of Victor Bérard, who had claimed to have found evidence of Phoenician and other Semitic elements in Greek mythology and place names, was contemptuously dismissed as unworthy of discussion by one of his teachers. But Michael’s association with Charles Virolleaud, to whom he dedicated *Hellenosemitica*, had opened his eyes to the possibility that Bérard had been on the right track, if wrong on some particulars. Virolleaud’s work in the deciphering of the Ugaritic tablets discovered at Ras Shamra in northwest Syria had revealed parallels between Ugaritic and Greek mythology, to which the French scholar drew Michael’s attention. With that as inspiration, Michael found other similarities between the mythological and religious traditions of the two cultures. There matters rested as he struggled for survival in Stalin’s camps. He was able to resume sporadic work on the problem following his release in 1950, accumulating several notebooks of preliminary drafts and notes, which he was able to take with him on his departure from the Soviet Union in 1956. He found a somewhat more welcoming academic atmosphere for his thesis than had existed prior to the war. The decipherment by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick in 1953 of the Cretan Linear B script, which was also used by the Mycenaean Greeks, suggested the existence of “a marked Oriental influence on Mycenaean

¹³⁴ Michael C. Astour, *Hellenosemitica: An Ethnic and Cultural Study in West Semitic Impact on Mycenaean Greece* [Leiden, 1965].

civilization.” This was followed by Cyrus Gordon’s work on Cretan Linear A which, he argued, had been the vehicle for a Semitic language.¹³⁵

Concerted work on what became *Hellenosemitica* followed Michael’s arrival at Brandeis in the fall of 1960 in his dual role as student and faculty member and evolved quickly under Gordon’s supervision. What was accepted as his doctoral dissertation less than two years later was not intended as his final word on the subject. A second volume was to follow, but was never completed. The published volume, however, received considerable attention from the international community of scholars and was widely reviewed in domestic and international journals. For a somewhat ponderous work of scholarship, it sold well and went into a second printing.¹³⁶

Austrian scholar Ambros Josef Pfiffig, writing for the *Anzeiger für die Altertumswissenschaft*, proclaimed it a work that had to be taken “very seriously,” and that the unbiased reader, while he might not agree with all of its conclusions, would have to recognize its scholarly depth and would find it stimulating.¹³⁷ But Oxford’s John Boardman began his review with an ominously ambiguous “It is not very easy to tell whether this is an important book or not.” He went on to accuse Michael of flogging a dead horse, arguing that the exclusively Eurocentric perspective against which *Hellenosemitica* was directed had been largely abandoned, rendering parts of the book “sadly outdated,” and criticized his dependence on philological similarities to the exclusion of archaeological evidence, except when it supported his thesis. Boardman’s grudging concession that a particular Greco-Semitic “equation” was “impressive” and that “clearly there is something to all of this” did little to neutralize a generally unenthusiastic review.¹³⁸

Richard D. Barnett, curator of Western Asiatic antiquities at the British Museum, was more gracious, conceding that Michael had made “many valuable points.” Yet, the overall tenor of his review was condescendingly skeptical.

¹³⁵ Ibid., xii-xv.

¹³⁶ Verschaer to Astour, May 2, 1968, box number not recorded.

¹³⁷ *Anzeiger für die Altertumswissenschaft*, XXI, 1968, 41-49.

¹³⁸ *Classical Review* 16 [01, 1966], 86-88.

Obviously unaware that Michael was now close to 50, he judged him “a slightly angry young man with a thesis,” one that Barnett found overstated. Similarities between Western Semitic and Greek mythology were not sufficient to prove actual Semitic colonization of Bronze Age Greece, as Michael had alleged. *Hellenosemitica* was, he concluded, “an all too single-minded and somewhat perversely obsessional work...,” a verdict that may have been provoked by pronouncements such as the one with which the book concluded: “...Semitism was the prologue of Greek civilization.”¹³⁹ T. T. Duke of the University of Akron thought the book “of considerable interest,” however replete with “ingenious but doubtful etymologies.”¹⁴⁰ H. Geiss, writing for the *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, concluded more generously that, while Michael had too often interpreted his evidence in a “one sided” manner, he was nevertheless due thanks for having “vigorously” pointed out the *intensiven Wechselbeziehungen zwischen semitischer und griechischer Kultur*.¹⁴¹ Malcolm F. McGregor’s analysis in *The American Historical Review* found Michael “thorough,” but lacking in “respect for those who do not share his views.” But McGregor was primarily an historian of classical Greece, and his critique was partly vitiated by his admission that he was incompetent to judge the Semitic linguistic evidence on which *Hellenosemitica* was largely based.¹⁴² In a personal letter, A.S. Tritton of the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies ridiculed Michael’s sometimes ponderous and prolix language, claiming to have been “shocked by the extra-ordinary English and disgusted by having to pay for 360 pages when all you have to say could have been said in 240.”¹⁴³

Most painful was the review by James D. Muhly that appeared in the important *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Muhly would achieve prominence in ancient history and archaeology and a chair at the University of Pennsylvania but, at the time of the review, was still a graduate student at Yale, whose faculty included eminent historians of the ancient Near East Albrecht

¹³⁹ *Journal of Semitic Studies* XIII [2, Autumn 1968], 256-58.

¹⁴⁰ *The Classical Journal* [December, 1965], 131-36.

¹⁴¹ *Orientalischer Literaturzeitung* 64 [5/6, 1969], 258-61. Geiss thanked Michael for having pointed out “the close interrelations between Semitic and Greek culture.”

¹⁴² *American Historical Review* 71 [January 1966], 521.

¹⁴³ Tritton to Astour, July 3, 1966, Box 20.

Goetze and William Hallo. That an assessment of *Hellenosemitica* should have been assigned to a mere graduate student, no matter how prestigious his university and its faculty, may have wounded Michael as much as the reviewer's comments, which were brutal. Muhly began by labeling the book "disappointing," which was one of his more charitable observations. He characterized it as a *rechauffage* of the much-derided work of Victor Bérard, replete with factual errors and unreliable citations of sources, and he ridiculed *Hellenosemitica's* reliance on apparent but, in his view, largely imaginary similarities between Semitic and Greek mythologies.¹⁴⁴

Michael was understandably depressed by reviews that were at best, unenthusiastic and, at worst, derisory. He tried to console himself with the bleak observation that a negative reception was preferable to being ignored. In a wistful letter to Jack Sasson, one of his graduate students at Brandeis, he recalled the proverb of the old lady who, when a neighbor complained about the weather, responded, "Better bad weather than no weather at all!"¹⁴⁵

But Muhly's review did more than depress him. He was infuriated. His fury produced a fiery 10 page "rejoinder" to the review, in which he characterized Muhly's comments as "a case of character assassination rather than of legitimate criticism" and claimed to have found "ample evidence of the reviewer's ignorance of the basic problems he is trying to cope with," which rendered the review "unworthy of the distinguished journal that harbored it." A condemnation of that "distinguished journal" for the "imprudence" of assigning reviews "to immature persons without any record of research and publication, who have not even fulfilled the academic requirements that formally put one on a par with one's critical ambitions," was wisely deleted from the final draft.¹⁴⁶ On receiving his toned-down counterattack, the editors of JAOS counseled caution, noting that the rejoinder might lend to the review more prominence than it deserved and would provide Muhly with another opportunity to disparage the book in the option to

¹⁴⁴ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85 [1965, No.4], 585-88.

¹⁴⁵ Astour to Sasson, May 29, 1966, Box 20.

¹⁴⁶ "Rejoinder to James D. Muhly's Review of *Hellenosemitica*," n.d., Box 47.

respond which he would be offered.¹⁴⁷ Michael withdrew the rejoinder.¹⁴⁸ He was later told by someone allegedly “in the know” that Muhly’s target was less his book than Cyrus Gordon, his mentor at Brandeis, with whom Muhly’s undergraduate patron at the University of Minnesota, Tom Jones, was on bad terms.¹⁴⁹ Michael was subsequently invited by Jones to participate in a session of the 1971 American Historical Association convention that included Muhly, by now on Penn’s faculty.¹⁵⁰ Muhly’s review clearly still rankled five years later. A week prior to the AHA convention at which Michael would encounter Muhly, he responded to Johannes Renger, an Associate Editor of the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, who had found his language in a review unnecessarily harsh. Perhaps not coincidentally, the book’s author was the same Richard Barnett who had roughly handled *Hellenosemitica* several years before in the *Journal of Semitic Studies*. Michael wrote with ill-concealed bitterness that

I am sure that you can easily find, in the [sic] recent years, dozens of scholarly reviews written in a much sharper and more offensive tone than mine. I did not use such expressions as ‘a style that at times borders on the illiterate,’ ‘absurd,’ ‘strange and bizarre,’ etc.one may just give a look at the review of one of my books by a graduate student, which was printed in the JAOS for 1965. Somehow the editors took no issue with the vulgar tone and slanted presentation of that attack. I wonder why the feelings of Mr. Barnett should be protected to a greater extent than those of any other author.¹⁵¹

His meeting with Muhly may have been awkward.

In spite of disappointing reviews, *Hellenosemitica* sold well for a densely-argued and somewhat ponderous academic treatise, and it quickly went into a second printing.¹⁵² And encouraging letters provided additional consolation. One of these came from Saul Levin, a scholar of Indo-European and Semitic languages

¹⁴⁷ Hallo to Astour, September 21, 1966, Box 20.

¹⁴⁸ Astour to Hallo, September 30, 1966, Box 20.

¹⁴⁹ Astour to Bernal, March 5, 1987, Box 27.

¹⁵⁰ Jones to Astour, April 14 and October 22, 1971, no box number recorded.

¹⁵¹ Astour to Renger, December 21, 1971, Box 25.

¹⁵² Astour to Wieder, March 4, 1966, Box 20; Astour to Irwin and Vivian, May 4, 1966, Box 20.

at Harpur College (now the University of Binghamton) and probably better qualified to judge Michael's book than some of the journal reviewers, who praised *Hellenosemitica* for its "brilliant analysis and synthesis" and invited him to address a faculty seminar at Harpur.¹⁵³ George McCracken, professor of classics at Drake University, commented that "you have abundantly demonstrated your thesis and I am only surprised that you found so many classical scholars taking the opposite view."¹⁵⁴ Michael's research interests turned in other directions, perhaps due, at least in part, to his book's rough reception. The planned second volume of *Hellenosemitica* was never to appear, although he subsequently published several related articles. His energies were re-focused largely on the less sensitive problem of the topography and toponymy of northern Syria, where they would remain for the rest of his life. But *Hellenosemitica* briefly re-engaged him 20 years later through the intervention of a professor of government at Cornell.

When hired by Cornell in 1972, British-born Martin Bernal's primary academic focus was China, and he had earned his Ph.D. at Cambridge with a dissertation on Chinese socialism. In the mid-seventies, Bernal's interests underwent a dramatic shift. He tells us that he began to reflect on his own ancestry, which was partly Jewish. That led to the study of Hebrew, in the course of which he noticed what seemed to him to be similarities to Greek. And that led him to *Hellenosemitica*.¹⁵⁵ He wrote to Michael in October 1984 that the book "is going to remain a central signpost pointing in the 'right' or heuristically most fruitful direction. Among other things, it has caused me to change fields from Chinese intellectual history to the history and historiography of the formation of Greece."¹⁵⁶

In 1987, Bernal published the first volume of his controversial *Black Athena; Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, in which he expanded Michael's work on the extra-European roots of Greek civilization to include Africa and, more specifically, Egypt. That, he noted, was encouraged by his own youthful interest in

¹⁵³ Levin to Astour, March 2, 1966, Box 20.

¹⁵⁴ McCracken to Astour, March 28, 1966, Box 20.

¹⁵⁵ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* [New Brunswick, N.J., 1987], I, xii-xiii.

¹⁵⁶ Bernal to Astour, October 17, 1984, Box 25.

ancient Egypt, which had been inspired by his maternal grandfather, Sir Alan Gardiner, an Egyptologist who had assisted Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon in the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb.¹⁵⁷ He regarded Michael as a pioneer who had opened the way for his own work, which he shared with him in rough draft. He did that, he wrote to him, "with great trepidation in view of your vastly greater linguistic and historical knowledge. I also feel like an *epigone* who strolls though breaches in conventional wisdom made by a real hero."¹⁵⁸ Such flattery probably both embarrassed and pleased Michael, and must have been a tonic following the cuts and bruises he had suffered twenty years earlier.

Michael expressed some reservations about Bernal's emphasis on the importance of Egyptian influence on Greece, the evidence for which he considered weak, but their relationship appears to have been cordial.¹⁵⁹ Michael was invited to evaluate his scholarship as Bernal was being considered for promotion to full professor at Cornell. The first volume of *Black Athena* had just appeared, and he praised it as a "fully documented and beautifully written historical exposition of the centuries-long controversy about the origins and affinities of the early Greek civilization," while offering no opinion on the alleged Egyptian connection. The primary strength of the book, he thought, was its analysis of the racist character of opposition to the idea of significant extra-Indo-European influences. It would have been difficult for him to have been less than positive in his appraisal. Michael and *Hellenosemitica* figured prominently in Bernal's book, the author having explained that he had been introduced to Michael's work by David I. Owen, a Cornell colleague, who had been one of Michael's students at Brandeis. But when invited to review the first volume of *Black Athena* for the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Michael declined, pleading excessive work and fading energy (he was by now in his early 70s).¹⁶⁰

Black Athena excited enthusiasm among African-American scholars, and Bernal's effusive praise for *Hellenosemitica* brought Michael to their attention. He

¹⁵⁷ *Black Athena*, I, xiv; "A.H. Gardiner's Account of the Opening of the Burial Chamber of Tutankhamun on February 16, 1923," www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/4garope.html.

¹⁵⁸ Bernal to Astour, n.d., Box 27.

¹⁵⁹ Astour to Bernal, December 26, 1987, Box 25.

¹⁶⁰ Astour to Kaufman, November 16, 1991, Box 25.

was invited by Harvard's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research to present a lecture in February 1990 and to take part in a conference entitled "Challenging Tradition: Cultural Interaction in Antiquity and Bernal's Black Athena," organized by the departments of Classics and African-American Studies at Philadelphia's Temple University and held in October of the same year.¹⁶¹ Michael was brought together with Bernal and once again with his old nemesis, James Muhly, now professor and chair of the Department of Ancient History at the University of Pennsylvania, who spoke on the topic of archaeological evidence for Bernal's thesis. Michael skirted the central issue of African elements in Greek civilization by sticking to the Near Eastern connections with which he was comfortable.¹⁶² He later wrote to a friend that the conference had been constructive until the "fanatics" had taken over, and he mocked the "fantasy" of the "Kemeticists."¹⁶³ Five years later, he was contacted by Richard Poe with a request for an interview, as the latter was working on a book that would be published the following year as *Black Spark, White Fire: Did African Explorers Civilize Ancient Europe?* Michael refused the request, noting that he was not an Africanist.¹⁶⁴ But *Hellenosemitica* had also earned the admiration of scholars with whom Michael felt more comfortable. As late as 2004, the year of his death, he received an off-print of an article by Scott Noegel, professor of Biblical and Near Eastern studies at the University of Washington, on the connections between the 3rd century B.C.E. Hellenistic epic poem about Jason and the Argonauts and Egyptian solar mythology. Although the theme was more Bernal than Astour, Noegel credited Michael as having been the crucial pioneer, writing on the first page of the offprint, "For Dr. Astour. Building on your foundation, without which this piece could not have been written!"¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Herron to Astour, December 21, 1989, Box 10; Astour to Davis, March 1, Box 25.

¹⁶² Conference Program, Box 48.

¹⁶³ Astour to Jack and Diane Sasson, Box 25.

¹⁶⁴ Astour to Poe, October 4, 1996, Box 25.

¹⁶⁵ Noegel to Astour, April 2, 2004, Box 15.

CHAPTER 7

ZIONISM, ISRAEL, AND JEWISHNESS

I recall a cocktail party not too long after I joined SIUE's faculty at which Michael was one of the guests. Conversation turned to the modern state of Israel. In my goyish ignorance, I assumed that any Jew, as I knew Michael to be, would have at least a tolerant if not positive attitude towards the Jewish state. Had I been aware of it, I would have agreed with Meir Barelli's statement in a letter to Michael that "I cannot understand how you, with your background, do not see that the free land for Jews is Israel."¹⁶⁶ I was shocked when Michael launched into an anti-Israel diatribe that would have been worthy of Yasser Arafat, including a characterization of a prominent Israeli leader—I think it was Shimon Peres—as someone who reminded him of a notorious Warsaw pimp.

Michael's attitude towards the modern state of Israel was unreservedly negative. This antipathy appears to have had two roots. One of these and, I believe, the deeper of the two was what he saw as the war that had been waged by Zionism against his beloved territorial movement, which included a rejection of Yiddish in favor of a modernized Hebrew as the national language. Territorialism had survived the war and the Holocaust and had turned its attention to Surinam as a place for Jewish settlement, although that project soon collapsed under Zionist pressure. It had an eloquent spokesman in Isaac Nachman Steinberg, one of the founders of the Freeland League and a mentor to Michael in his youth, who had found refuge in New York. In a 1948 article entitled "The Place of 'Freeland' in Jewish Life," Steinberg argued that not only the Holocaust, but also the danger of Jews losing their identity as Jews through assimilation ("the emptying of the Jewish soul and spirit"), especially in the United States, had made clear the necessity of "a free, Jewish territory which can guarantee our ongoing survival." But the newly established state of Israel was not the solution. Steinberg prophesied presciently that

¹⁶⁶ Barelli to Astour, March 29, 1987, no box number recorded.

The country will come of age in a militaristic atmosphere, in a continual state of readiness to battle its permanent opponents: the Arabs. A significant portion of the education of its youth will have to be devoted to military-strategic requirements; and at the same time spiritual, moral and cooperative values will lose priority.¹⁶⁷

While rejecting Zionism as a satisfactory solution to the existential plight of Jews, Steinberg urged “love for those Jews who are building Israel.” That, Michael could not manage. Zionist exclusivity had had profound negative implications for the Jewish people, he believed. Had pre-World War II territorial schemes succeeded, as he believed they might have had it not been for Zionist opposition, vast numbers of European Jews might have found a place of refuge prior to the onset of the *Shoah*. He had described in his exhaustive *History of the Freeland League*

the unbelievable acts of betrayal against the interests of the Jewish people committed by the rich Jewish relief organizations and by the powerful Zionist apparatus, whose official and unofficial representatives did their best, by intervening with the governments in question, to wreck the salvation efforts of the Freeland League.¹⁶⁸

The other source of his loathing was what he saw as Israeli oppression of Palestinian Arabs, including their despoliation by the Jewish state, which he seems to have regarded as another manifestation of the amoral ruthlessness that Zionists had displayed in their rivalry with territorialism. Beginning in 1967, he contributed regularly to American Near East Refugee Aid, an organization providing assistance to Palestinian refugees, and wrote frequent letters to politicians condemning the pro-Israel foreign policy of the United States, which he saw as the product of Zionist manipulation. This, he feared, might expose Jews in “the free world” to the suspicion of serving as a “fifth column,” putting the interests of Israel above those of the states of which they were citizens.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ *Afn Shvl*/ Special English Anniversary Edition/Summer 2011, p. 6.2.

¹⁶⁸ “History of the Freeland League in Print,” Box 20.

¹⁶⁹ Astour to Senator John Glenn, November 30, 1983, Box 25.

Michael's aversion to Israel and Zionism might have been sharpened as a result of his rejection by the administration of Brandeis University and, in particular, by its intensely Zionist president, Abram Sachar. Who knows? But there is no doubt that he saw himself as the victim of treachery at its hands. As he was about to depart Brandeis, he wrote to his cousin François Hoffmann of *le comble de malhonnêteté et d'injustice* to which he had been subjected.¹⁷⁰

He had no patience with American Jews who, as he saw it, had swallowed the Zionist line. He wrote a ferocious letter to the son of one of the founders of the Freeland League, who had expressed the belief that his father, if still alive, would be an ardent Zionist. Michael had known his father, Avrom Rozin, who had used the pseudonym "Ben-Adir," and unleashed on his son the full fury of his contempt for the Jewish state.¹⁷¹

How can one imagine Ben- Adir, who hated chauvinism and clericalism, on the Zionist bandwagon?Ben-Adir wrote: 'In general, one must have the courage to admit that it is the Arab position which is the strongest....The Jewish claim of historical rights to Palestine is, objectively, absolutely invalid.... It is only an internal psychological emotion, a subjective state of mind of the Jewish people, which cannot create, externally, any objectively obliging [sic] rights; it cannot compel the Arab population, which has lived in the country for hundreds and hundreds of years, not to recognize Palestine as its own home.' You claim that 'under the present circumstances, I am pretty sure that my father would consider any active opposition to Israel as un-Jewish.' Now, this very expression has a strong McCarthyish sound. Who is entitled to judge what is "Jewish" and "un-Jewish"? Incidentally, some of the finest Jewish minds... were of the opinion that it is precisely the present-day Israel, with its cult of violence, disdain for justice, disregard of truth, and unabashed imperialism that has betrayed the ages-old Jewish ideals.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Astour to François Hoffmann, May 3, 1965, Box 20. "The height of dishonesty and injustice."

¹⁷¹ "Ben Adir," *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Eastern Europe*, www.Yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ben-Adir.

¹⁷² Astour to Rosin, January 5, 1972, Box 25.

As time passed, these feelings intensified. Early in 1975, he wrote a pungently revealing letter to Illinois Republican senator Charles Percy, then under attack for suggesting that Israel should “take some risks for peace” by entering into negotiations with Yasser Arafat and withdrawing to its 1967 borders.

I wish to express my full support of your stand on the Middle East which caused such an uproar among the Chicago Zionists. I am a naturalized American and a Jew. I am not typical for [sic] the bulk of the organized American Jewry which is rigidly regimented by the Zionist apparatus and takes its orders from Jerusalem; but I think that there are many individual Jews like me who are guided by their own reason and conscience and refuse to be enrolled in the arrogant Zionist pressure group. What you said is just, equitable, and true. I am outraged by the insolent behavior of the Zionist bureaucrats who dare to insult a United States senator and to call him to account as though he had been elected by the people of Tel-Aviv and not of Illinois.¹⁷³

Opposition by a Republican to what he regarded as a malevolent Zionist conspiracy was the single issue capable of eliciting expressions of support from Michael, a liberal Democrat. He also thought well of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had taken a stance in opposition to Israel during the 1956 Suez war. A statement of support for Israel in its 1982 invasion of Lebanon, on the other hand, issued by the Democratic national convention meeting in Philadelphia, elicited an outraged response to the Democratic National Committee:

You could have, at the very least, in the name of simple human decency, avoided altogether taking a stand on the tragedy of Lebanon and the Palestinian victims of Israel. But no, the party is so subservient to the Israeli lobby and the Jewish-American plutocracy that it had to do that disgraceful thing....Until now, I always voted for the Democratic Party...but no longer.

¹⁷³ Astour to Percy, February 2, 1975, Box 25.

Please instruct your staff to cross out my name from your mailing list, or I will send back your requests for money as “refused.”¹⁷⁴

Although his alienation from the Democratic Party proved temporary, on at least one occasion Michael suggested that the fictional “Elders of Zion” had achieved reality in the form of the Zionist lobby.¹⁷⁵

Michael was at his most extreme when he likened Israeli treatment of Palestinians to the Nazi persecution of Jews. Thus, in a letter to President Carter written in January 1978, he denounced “Begin’s [Israeli Prime minister Menachem Begin] alleged ‘self-rule’ for Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza under the control of the Israeli army and police” as “a cruel farce, reminiscent of the *Judenräten* which the Nazis established for the European Jews.”¹⁷⁶ To U.S. Representative Clement Zablocki following the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in June 1982, he quoted approvingly the statement of former senator James G. Abourezk that “it is the pogrom of the Warsaw Ghetto being recast” Michael continued,

Only now the Palestinian[s] and Lebanese are in the role of the Jews...and the Israelis—in the words of a Hebrew University in Jerusalem professor—are the ‘Judeo-Nazis.’ But at least the German Nazis used their own weapons, designed, produced, and paid for by themselves, while Begin’s army uses American planes, cluster bombs, and other weapons of American manufacture, paid for by American taxpayers.¹⁷⁷

It does Michael no credit that he allowed his passionate anti-Zionism to so egregiously distort his historical judgment. If he ever felt regret for his intemperance, his correspondence gives no evidence of it.

Moreover, he believed that Zionism was partly to blame for the six million victims of the Holocaust in a way more direct than simple opposition to territorialism. In a fiery missive written to Meir Bareli, an Israeli journalist and

¹⁷⁴ Astour to Manatt, June 28, 1982, Box 25.

¹⁷⁵ Astour to “Dear Baruch,” March 3, 1970, Box 25.

¹⁷⁶ Astour to Carter, January 20, 1978, Box 25.

¹⁷⁷ Astour to Zablocki, July 1, 1982, Box 25.

friend from his youth with whom he conducted a tense and sometimes angry correspondence, he lashed out at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of David Ben-Gurion, father of the modern state of Israel and its first prime minister.

So you are celebrating the hundredth anniversary of Ben-Gurion's birth, and you personally are convinced that he was always right.... Was Ben-Gurion also right when he wrote to the Zionist executive on December 17, 1938, more than a month after the Crystal Night, that 'millions of Jews face annihilation,' but that their rescue 'endangers Zionism,' because 'if Jews will have to choose between the refugees, saving Jews from concentration camps, and assisting a national museum in Palestine, mercy will have the upper hand and the whole energy of the people will be channeled into saving Jews...; hence one must oppose such action'? ¹⁷⁸

His loathing for Israel and Zionism produced a useful dividend. Michael's Jewishness threatened to complicate if not prevent his access to Syria, the focus of his post-*Hellenosemitica* scholarship. In his correspondence with Syrian scholars and officials, he was at pains to emphasize his sympathy for the Palestinian cause. This undoubtedly facilitated, if it was not a necessary condition for, two brief trips to Syria, the first in 1972. Since the United States and Syria had broken off diplomatic relations in the wake of the Six Day War of 1967 and would not resume them until 1974, Michael was forced to apply for a visa through the Italian embassy in Damascus, which was then representing American interests in Syria. In his application he stressed that, although a Jew, he was "a friend of the Arab people" who should "not be penalized for the abuses of the State of Israel and the international Zionist apparatus" to which he had been opposed all of his life. ¹⁷⁹ He received the visa and enjoyed a brief trip to archaeological sites in Syria, in the course of which he was treated with the utmost courtesy. The second trip was made nine years later, following an invitation to participate in "The First International Symposium on Palestinian Antiquities" held in Aleppo in

¹⁷⁸ Astour to Bareli, February 28, 1987, Box 25.

¹⁷⁹ Astour to Maiolini, May 31, 1972, Box 25.

September 1981, where he presented a paper entitled “The Origin of the Samaritans: A Critical Examination of the Evidence”, and visited Tell Mardikh, site of the enormously important Ebla archive of cuneiform tablets, where he was photographed with its discoverer, Paolo Matthiae.¹⁸⁰ Although he found this, too, a positive experience, he should have had ambivalent feelings about the welcoming address of Dr. Muhyi-Eddin Saber, Director General of the Arab Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization,” in which encomiums to “The Struggling Leader, President Hafez Assad and his Wise Government” were combined with blasts against “the Zionist enemy.”¹⁸¹ The language bore an uncomfortable similarity to the stilted and sycophantic public pronouncements mandatory in the Stalinist Soviet Union. But Michael was more inclined to draw parallels between Israel and the land of his earlier captivity. In a letter of September 1983 to Jack Sasson, now professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, who had just returned from a year in Israel, he wrote

I wonder what caused you to go to Jerusalem for a full year. For a normal human being, it is a nice place to visit but not to live for any length of time. Of course, I am quite knowledgeable about Zionism and Israel, and I had spent almost three months in old mandate Palestine immersed in local life, especially in the *kibbutzim*, but my brief visit there in 1965 was quite sufficient to deprive me of any desire to return there again. The atmosphere was too reminiscent of the Soviet Union. And it was one of the better years in Israel’s history....¹⁸²

The invasion of southern Lebanon by Israeli forces in 1982, with the mass murders of refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps by Christian militiamen allied to Israel, raised the temperature of his antipathy towards the Zionist state to a white heat, and it remained at that level throughout the remainder of his life. He joined the National Association of Arab-Americans, whose membership card, he assured its president, he would “carry with pride.,” although he had expressed

¹⁸⁰ Photo album, box 7.

¹⁸¹ “The Speech of Prof. Dr. Muhyi-Eddin Saber,” Box 40.

¹⁸² Astour to Sasson, September 23, 1983, Box 25.

dismay at the organization's appeals to an exclusively Arab-American population, observing that his support was based on the imperative of justice, not ethnic affinity, and noting that "the Israeli lobby does not limit its insidious propaganda to Jews alone."¹⁸³ In a letter to President Reagan, he declared that allowing Israel to get away with its recent "crimes and outrages" would demonstrate that The United States had been reduced to the status of "vassal and tributary to the state of Israel."¹⁸⁴

The first Palestinian Intifada of 1987 -1991 propelled Michael (by now emeritus at SIUE) into the public arena on the volatile issues of Israel's treatment of Palestinians and its relationship with the United States. A subscriber for many years to *The Christian Science Monitor*, he saw in a March 1988 issue of that newspaper an advertisement in the form of an open letter entitled "Time to Dissociate from Israel," placed by "The Jewish Committee on the Middle East" (JCOME), an organization of Jewish academics and professionals who, like Michael, found Israel's policies in dealing with the Palestinians repugnant. One of its signatories was Steven S. Schwarzschild, German-born rabbi and Professor of Philosophy and Judaic Studies at Washington University, whom Michael had come to know and who had attempted, unsuccessfully, to generate interest on his campus for hiring him away from SIUE. The advertisement conveyed a perspective similar in many respects to Michael's, if stated in more moderate terms. Michael wrote to Schwarzschild expressing his support, for which Schwarzschild thanked him, adding that "a name like yours and the status that goes with it...is of immense support to me and to my colleagues."¹⁸⁵ There followed an invitation to join JCOME's advisory committee, which Michael accepted "with pride."¹⁸⁶ To his disappointment, service on the committee proved to be purely nominal but, thereafter, his name appeared on the masthead of the committee's publications along with those of Noam Chomsky of M.I.T., Joel Beinin of Stanford, and Richard Falk of Princeton, although the publishers seemed incapable of an accurate

¹⁸³ Astour to Sadd, October 15, 1981 and September 18, 1982, Box 25.

¹⁸⁴ Astour to Reagan, September 18, 1982, Box 25.

¹⁸⁵ Astour to Schwarzschild, March 5, 1988, Box 25; Schwarzschild to Astour, March 9, 1988, Box 25.

¹⁸⁶ Astour to Bruzonsky, November 28, 1988, Box 25.

rendering of Michael's institutional affiliation, stating it variously as "Univ. Southern Ill" or "University of Illinois, Collinsville."¹⁸⁷

JCOME's history proved to be short, and its accomplishments seem to have been limited largely to the placing of advertisements in a few liberal publications. In most cases, these were rather prosaic calls upon the U.S. government to alter its relationship with Israel by suspending assistance to the Jewish state until it ended its occupation of the West Bank, ceased constructing settlements in the occupied territories, and ended its "brutally repressive policies against the Palestinians."¹⁸⁸ More imaginative was a fictional "memorandum" dated August 12, 1991, by the imaginary "American Israel Political Control Association" (AIPCA), a name chosen in obvious mockery of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a powerful pro-Israel lobbying organization. AIPCA's motto was alleged to be "We know where you are, you don't need to know where we are." A fabrication by JCOME, the "memorandum" boasted that AIPCA had "outdone" itself "tossing out hoops for Congress to jump through" in securing a ten billion dollar "loan" which Israel had no intention of repaying.

Then, we convince them [Israel's American friends] that this is purely 'humanitarian aid' with no relation whatever to the 40,000 new settlement units Israel announced last month. Finally, we hoodwink our friends into believing that Israel will still come to the peace talks in October after Congress gives it the \$10 billion in September. This might seem a bit much to expect – but then what are 'friends' for?

The "memorandum," ended with an announcement that, in light of AIPCA's success in milking the U.S. treasury, it was now offering a weekend course at the Capital Hilton for nations that would like to learn its "highly-proven techniques."¹⁸⁹ If Michael had had not a hand in composing this savage parody, over whose name it appeared, his spirit was certainly in it. It came close to expressing his notion of the existence of a latter-day Elders of Zion. He informed JCOME's chairperson, Mark Bruzonsky, that he agreed with "every word" of the

¹⁸⁷ JCOME ads, Box 10.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ "AIPCA Memorandum," August 12, 1991, Box 10.

“excellent” memorandum, adding that both houses of Congress were under the control of the pro-Israel lobby.¹⁹⁰

Not surprisingly, these advertisements generated hostile reactions. An outraged Bernard Brodsky of Brooklyn, NY , reacting to one of JCOME’s screeds that had appeared in *The Nation*, fulminated in a letter to Michael that

It’s no wonder to me that the US is fast sliding into obscurity when I witness the quality of so-called ‘professors’ in US universities. What can you possibly be teaching our youngsters? Your perversions of truth? Whether Jewish or not, you’re a disgrace to civilized values.¹⁹¹

But his stance brought letters of support, too. Avian Monti of Evanston, Illinois, wrote that one of the JCOME manifestos that had appeared over Michael’s name had motivated her to make a contribution to the organization. A gentile, she feared being branded anti-Semitic and normally kept silent on matters concerning Israel. She could “...only guess at pressures felt by Jewish-Americans.” She concluded with “I respect your courage.”¹⁹²

Michael’s evident alienation from a large fraction of the Jewish community raises the question of his own sense of identity as a Jew. He addressed that question in a poignant letter of 1967 to David Owen:

It is difficult to identify oneself with the Israeli brand of Jewishness. My personal tragedy, however, is that neither can I feel differently with regard to American Jewishness. My kind of Jewish people has [sic] been exterminated, and there is no substitute for it.¹⁹³

He once wrote with bitter humor to another colleague who had complained of vicious rivalries among Jewish faculty at his institution that he was happy to be living and working among the *goyim* in the cornfields of Illinois.

¹⁹⁰ Astour to Bruzonsky, September 4, 1991, Box 25.

¹⁹¹ Brodsky to Astour, n.d., Box 25.

¹⁹² Monti to Astour, April 1, 1991, Box 10.

¹⁹³ Astour to Owen, n.d., 1967, Box 20.

Although he rarely mentioned the Holocaust in his correspondence, his translation into Yiddish of Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko's shattering poem "Babi Yar" on the murder of over 33,000 Jews outside Kiev in September 1941, which he published in *Afn Shvel*, may have been an effort to express his emotions. In English translation, the poem reads in part:

The wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar.

The trees look ominous,

like judges.

Here, all things scream silently,

and, baring my head,

slowly I feel myself turning grey.

And I myself

am one massive, soundless scream

above the thousand thousand buried here.¹⁹⁴

To Meir Bareli, he wrote in 1986:

I have never reconciled myself to the post-Holocaust world and I keep myself completely aloof from the contemporary so-called Jewish public life, except for very rare appearances of the pages of *Afn Shvel*, which is now the organ of the League for Yiddish....¹⁹⁵

Judaism was for him an historical artifact. He professed no religious affiliation and, as far as his correspondence reveals, did not make even perfunctory visits to a synagogue on high holy days, nor do I recall his ever mentioning such activity. His own identity as an Ashkenazic Jew was rooted in

¹⁹⁴ N.d., 1986, Box 25.

¹⁹⁵ Astour to Bareli, September 5, 1986, Box 25.

the rich Yiddish-speaking culture of Jewish Eastern Europe, where he had grown to young adulthood. The values that he cherished were primarily literary and ethical and of a vanished time and place. His occasional contributions to *Afn Shvel* ("On the Threshold"), the journal of the League for Yiddish, the pale successor to his beloved and now defunct pre-war Freeland League, of which by the early 1990s he was the last surviving member, kept alive a whisper of that earlier identity.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Astour to Riley, May 24, 1991, Box 25.

CHAPTER 8

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Michael referred to himself as a “social animal.” This might have seemed at variance with his usually unsmiling countenance and formal bearing, but it was a façade readily penetrated. Moreover, he had married a woman who, in many ways, complemented his superficially forbidding personality. Michael and Miriam (Misha and Masha to their Russian relatives and close friends) were a colorful pair who often struck sparks from one another.

Miriam’s first several years in the United States were difficult. In a note probably penned sometime in 1963, she wrote poignantly in her still problematic English that

I am watching television every evening my favorite programs are almost averything [sic] and I enjoy to watch it. My husband sais [sic] that I am stupid and have not sense of humor. Maybe he is write [sic]. It is three years I am in the USA and I think I like here but I am not sure. Maybe the reason is that I am very lonely here. I miss my family which is in Russia. I know that some days I will see them, at least I hope so.¹⁹⁷

But her outlook improved along with her English. In contrast to Michael’s reserved bearing, Miriam was outgoing and earthy, and, in spite of her lugubrious note, seemed not at all intimidated by her husband’s formidable learning. Although lacking his formal education, she was highly intelligent and multi-lingual. She claimed that watching soap operas on television had been of crucial importance in her mastering of English (Michael preferred Saturday morning cartoons). She remained devoted to the “boob tube.” A crisis occurred in the aftermath of their purchase in March 1968 of a Magnavox Astro-Sonic color set for the not inconsiderable sum at that time of \$850 plus tax. Within six months, the set ceased to operate. Repeated visits by repairmen resulted in fixes that

¹⁹⁷ Unaddressed handwritten note, Box 19.

were only temporary. Her frustration produced a dramatic letter in her improved English to Magnavox, which read in part:

Is the pleasure of seeing living colors [sic] worth all the wear of nerves and irritation, not to speak of money for service? For many years, I wanted a color TV, now I have only heartache.... Please do something about it. Take that set back and replace it with a sound one, or return the money, or send a competent man to inspect it and to make it work. Please answer me immediately.¹⁹⁸

Miriam's importunings were apparently successful. When my wife, 2-year-old daughter, and I lived in their condo the following fall while Michael was on leave from SIUE, the Magnavox worked fine.

Miriam had an ebullient personality and could make fun of her own foibles, some of which my wife and I vividly remember. For example, she related that late one evening, a little tipsy or sleepwalking, without a stitch of clothing on, she announced to Michael, "I want to go to Rusty's!" (a local restaurant and watering hole). Michael did not escape her humor. One story concerned his ineptness in after-dinner cleanups. "He only washes the insides of the pots and pans. The outsides he leaves greasy." A more serious of Michael's missteps occurred after she had sent a friend to bring him home from the airport after Miriam had been in an accident with their car. On hearing the news Michael, apparently unconcerned about his wife's condition, asked, "Is the car demolished?" Auto accidents were a common occurrence for both of them, as they were not the most skillful of drivers, having learned to drive late in life. But Michael loved his automobiles, especially his Peugeots, which replaced the earlier Renaults as the Astours became more prosperous. Miriam's frequent collisions resulted, on one occasion, in the cancellation of their automobile insurance.¹⁹⁹ Michael might roll his eyes in embarrassment at stories he considered inappropriate for social discourse. In my presence, she made a comment Michael found hopelessly ill-

¹⁹⁸ Miriam Astour to the Magnavox Company, November 22, 1968, Box 20.

¹⁹⁹ Astour to Director of Insurance of the State of Illinois, June 20, 1983, Box 25.

informed, eliciting a brusque, “Let your tongue click in your mouth three times before speaking.”

Yet, they were a devoted couple. They travelled extensively in North America and Europe. They sampled American popular culture, visiting and enjoying Missouri’s Silver Dollar City, Nashville’s Grand Old Opry, and stage extravaganzas such as Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “Cats.” Childless, they doted on their dog, Bobick, a part-Chesapeake Bay retriever acquired in 1971. To my wife, Jane, they told a poignant story about this important family member. The couple and Bobick were together when Miriam lamented, “Bobick, you will never how much we love you,” whereupon he gently licked her face. Michael added with a beatific smile, “Understood every word.” The dog developed lung cancer and early in 1984 was euthanized. Bobick’s death plunged them into mourning. “And after that,” Michael wrote, our home became empty, cold, and strange.” Miriam’s “instinct” was to adopt a new puppy, but this was not done.²⁰⁰

But their home was seldom empty and cold. Michael and Miriam were incredibly hospitable, frequently opening their small but comfortable condominium to foreign students and traveling colleagues, favoring them with Miriam’s impressive culinary skills. Miriam periodically visited family members in the Soviet Union, although Michael steadfastly refused to set foot in the country that had caused him so much suffering. The first of her trips, in June 1966, caused him great anxiety. He had begged her not to go, fearing that Soviet authorities would reclaim her as a citizen of the USSR and prevent her return to the United States. “You can never tell what these scoundrels can do just for the pleasure of doing harm to a ‘deserter’,” he wrote to friends.²⁰¹ But Miriam’s elderly parents had implored her to visit them before they died, and she missed them desperately. She had to go. Michael and Miriam had agreed that she would notify him by telegram immediately upon arrival in Moscow. When 24 hours passed without a reassuring message, Michael panicked. He drafted a frantic letter to the US State Department requesting that the US Embassy in Moscow undertake an inquiry into her whereabouts and voiced his intention of coming to Washington,

²⁰⁰ Astour to Sasson, January 19, 1984, Box 25; Sasson to Michael and Miriam, January 25, 1984, Box 10.

²⁰¹ Astour to Irwin and Vivian, May 4, 1966, Box 20.

presumably to press in person for investigative action.²⁰² The letter was never sent, suggesting that Michael received assurances from Miriam of her safety shortly after its writing. It was clearly an over-reaction by a man still traumatized by his years of suffering under Soviet tyranny. It was also a reflection of his emotional dependence on the woman who had assisted him in the transition from Gulag to freedom.

Miriam earned a bachelor's degree with a major in French at SIUE and, for a time, taught Russian at a private college preparatory school in nearby Belleville, Illinois. She assisted in the emigration of her brother, his wife, and two sons from Kazakhstan to the United States and aided them in adjusting to a new life, all at considerable expense and effort. She may have regretted this – Michael certainly did—as the relatives became increasingly demanding. As she approached the age of 70, she seemed to possess an inexhaustible store of energy. But her health began to deteriorate seriously in the mid-1990s due to diabetes and congestive heart failure. By the summer of 1997, she was a semi-invalid and dependent on supplemental oxygen. Michael had chair lifts installed in their condominium to ease the strain on her failing heart, while they became increasingly homebound, their excursions limited to the capacity of her oxygen tanks and her minimal fund of stamina. He was solicitous in his care of her and chose to miss the 1998 meeting of the American Oriental Society in New Orleans, where a special session had been planned in his honor, due to her precarious health. Miriam's decline continued and, on January 22, 2000, she died. Evincing a stronger identification with her Jewish heritage than did her husband with his, she had requested a Jewish burial and was interred in Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol cemetery in St. Louis in a moving ceremony presided over by a rabbi. "And that's that," Michael wrote bleakly to a friend and former student. "I am now alone, and there is little comfort in having, as you wrote, 'some family and many friends nearby.'" ²⁰³ Michael's emotional dependence on Miriam had been evident to colleagues. The Festschrift that was compiled in commemoration of his 80th birthday had been

²⁰² Astour to Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, June 11, 1966, Box 20.

²⁰³ Astour to Owen, April 7, 2000, Box 20.

dedicated to her, undoubtedly with Michaels's approval, if not his instigation. It reads:

To Miriam Astour

We who stand on the shoulders of Michael C. Astour

Salute you, Miriam.

You are the solid rock of Michael's foundation.

Thank you.

At her death, they had been married for three weeks short of 48 years.

Michael had few family ties of his own. His uncle Jean Hoffmann, with whom he had had a copious correspondence in the late fifties and early to mid-sixties, died in the mid-1970s.²⁰⁴ He remained in contact with his cousin Leon-François Hoffmann, who taught Romance languages and literature at Princeton, into at least the early 1990s, and occasionally visited him and his wife, Anne. But the heirs whom he designated at various times were either Miriam or her relatives.²⁰⁵

Michael and Miriam had many friends. Among the closest were several SIUE colleagues and their wives: Robert and Sally Erickson, James and Mary Jo Haas, and Ernest and Mary Sue Schusky. One of the last trips that Michael and Miriam took together before Miriam's health deteriorated to the point that travel was impossible was with the three couples to Bethany Beach, Delaware, in 1995.²⁰⁶ All had retired by the time of Miriam's death and maintained their friendship with the bereaved Michael. My last conversation with Michael prior to his death in December 2004 occurred in the course of a pool party at the Ericksons in the summer of that year.

²⁰⁴ Astour to Sasson, January 12, 1981, box number not recorded.

²⁰⁵ "Last Will and Testament of Michael C. Astour," March 12, 1990, Box 48; Astour to Coffey, April 5, 2001, Box 26.

²⁰⁶ Astour to "Dear Riki," n.d., Box 25.

The preservation of contacts with former students at Brandeis was important for Michael, both professionally and personally. Even though he had taught graduate courses on the ancient Near East at Brandeis for only two years, that clearly had been time enough for students to have been deeply impressed by his personality and erudition. For his part, the childless Michael may have come to regard his Brandeis students as surrogate children. Shortly after his move to SIUE, one suggested that they organize a *Société des Anciens d'Astour*.²⁰⁷ In practice, the Society emerged, surviving to the end of Michael's life and possibly beyond. Its core comprised three former students who, like Michael, wrote their doctoral dissertations under the direction of Cyrus Gordon but, unlike Michael, went on to establish distinguished careers at major universities – David Owen, first at Dropsie University (since absorbed by the University of Pennsylvania), then Cornell, Jack Sasson at North Carolina, followed by Vanderbilt, and Gordon Young at Purdue.

Of these, Young's commitment to the "society" seems to have been least intense, and Michael occasionally chided him for not writing more frequently. "Why don't you write me from time to time just so, not necessarily in connection with business?, he scolded in the fall of 1969.²⁰⁸ Thirty years later, not much had changed. He closed a letter to Young raising questions about a thirteen- year delay in publishing a collection of papers, including one contributed by Michael, of which Young was the editor, with "If you have time to add a few words about yourself, how you spent the summer, where did you travel, etc., I would be very pleased."²⁰⁹ "He writes me only when he needs a recommendation for getting a grant," he once complained to another former student.²¹⁰ Young's relationship with Michael did, in fact, produce the fewest letters of the three, although much later he would be one of the editors of the *Festschrift* produced in Michael's honor as he entered the ninth decade of his life, and traveled to Collinsville in order to present him with a copy of the work. A year later, he was to preside over a special session of the national meeting of the American Oriental Society in Michael's honor. Young also seems to have encouraged one of his students at

²⁰⁷ "Ned" [Rosenbaum] to Astour, January 25, 1966, box number not recorded.

²⁰⁸ Astour to Young, November 14, 1969, Box 25.

²⁰⁹ Astour to Young, September 10, 1999, Box 26.

²¹⁰ Astour to Sasson, October 29, 1973, Box 25.

Purdue, who went on to graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, to consider taking up Michael's challenge to complete and publish some of the elderly scholar's unfinished work, although nothing seems to have come of this.²¹¹ As the non-Jewish member of the core group, Young may have felt himself to be something of an outsider, although there is no evidence that Young's ethnicity influenced Michael's attitude towards him. Nevertheless, Michael had regarded Young as the least promising, as he was the least communicative, of his top-tier students. In one recommendation, for example, he wrote with notable restraint that Young had been "a competent, attentive, and highly motivated student in class," having produced "very good, well-documented term papers" and, ultimately, a doctoral dissertation that was "a little bit overloaded with material."²¹²

Michael's impressions of David Owen and Jack Sasson were distinctly more positive. In letters of recommendation, he consistently ranked them as his Brandeis stars. His relationship with them quickly began to morph into one among peers. Although Owen had not yet completed his Ph.D., he felt free to send Michael a list of errors that he had discovered in *Hellenosemitica*, some of them having to do with faulty translations on the part of his former mentor.²¹³ If Michael was annoyed, it had no lasting effect. He arranged a speaking engagement for Owen at SIUE for early 1971.²¹⁴ By 1972, by which time Owen was established at Cornell, Michael was turning to him for assistance in translating and interpreting difficult texts in Old Babylonian.²¹⁵ Five years later, Michael requested from Owen a letter of recommendation for a small research grant. Owen was delighted to comply.²¹⁶ The relational transformation seemed complete. Michael would depend heavily on Owen for keeping him apprised of cutting-edge developments. "Thank you for not forgetting me and keeping me informed about the latest news in our field," he wrote to Owen in December

²¹¹ Astour to Danti, January 29, 1998, Box 25.

²¹² Astour to Guggenheim Foundation and American Council of Learned Societies, November ?, 1972, Box 25.

²¹³ Owen to Astour, January 17, 1966, box number not recorded.

²¹⁴ Astour to Owen, October 7, 1970, Box 25.

²¹⁵ Astour to Owen, April 15, 1972, Box 25.

²¹⁶ Owen to Astour, February 6, 1977, Box 8.

1978.²¹⁷ Thanks to Owen, Michael was offered an opportunity to serve as lecturer on a European cruise in the summer of 1981, which provided him and Miriam with a delightful (and free) vacation.²¹⁸ For his part, Michael wrote glowing letters of recommendation for Owen, including one to the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan in support of his candidacy for a position there in Assyriology, stressing his publication of numerous tablets in Sumerian and Akkadian and his “keen eye for the epigraphy of the original clay tablets and the complete mastery of Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, Hebrew, Ugaritic, etc.,” as well as his archaeological field experience in Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, and Italy, including the underwater excavation of a 5th century B.C.E. ship off Sicily.²¹⁹ But sparks were struck between the two a decade later when Owen, founder and editor of the multi-volume series, *Studies on the Civilization and Culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians*, made comments on a submission of Michael’s which the latter found offensive. Owen responded firmly that he was surprised

...at your response to my comments on your article. I am particularly sorry that you construed my remarks as a kind of questioning of the very theoretical premises of your work. They were certainly not meant as such and I wonder why you even thought that I would question your work in such a way....we obviously differ on our concept of what an editor is for. I try and follow in the footsteps of editors like Edzard, Goetze, Sasson, and others who, along with their basic work on language, style, bibliography, also ask questions of the authors...and often question certain points....It allows the author a chance to rethink and reconsider....

I do not wish to quibble with you over the few points I have raised....I trust that this has cleared the air and that you understand what was meant by my earlier letter.²²⁰

Some degree of tension between authors and editors is probably inevitable, but Michael appears to have revealed a surprisingly thin skin, perhaps a residue of the

²¹⁷ Astour to Owen, December 19, 1978, Box 25.

²¹⁸ Owen to Astour, November 10, 1980, Box 8.

²¹⁹ Astour to McCarus, January 10, 1974, Box 25.

²²⁰ Owen to Astour, September 24, 1984, no box number recorded.

difficult experience with *Hellenosemitica*. Owen yielded. The article was published as submitted.

In spite of this contretemps, a warm correspondence continued for another two decades. Owen regaled Michael with a description of the conduct of their former mentor, Cyrus Gordon, relative to a symposium he had organized and at which Owen had been a speaker. One half of the honorarium each speaker had been promised had been withheld pending receipt of copies of their presentations, and hotel costs had been deducted. Gordon's increasingly bizarre notions in regard to the alleged ubiquity of Semitic influences in the ancient world had been much in evidence. In his keynote address, Gordon had claimed to have discovered evidence of Ugaritic in the script on ancient Chinese oracle bones. "I felt like sliding under the table," Owen remarked.²²¹

Michael looked forward to letters from Owen, and fretted if the intervals between missives became too long. "I am not yet dead, despite a rumor to the contrary, and I would appreciate a letter from you from time to time. I will not bother you with inquiries and requests for Xeroxes," he wrote petulantly to Owen in the fall of 1999.²²² In one of his final letters to Owen, Michael thanked his former student for having sent a copy of the program of the 2003 *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, the annual five-day conclave of scholars of the ancient Near East that had met that year in London. Michael had attended many of these and had often been a speaker. But not this year. His letter was a mournful reflection of a fading life of scholarship. He wished that he, too, could have been there, but

...at [sic] my present state such a long trip would have been too exhausting for me. I looked at the list of participants and I sadly felt how old and detached from the crowd I became. There was only a handful of people with whom I was acquainted. One of the novices, Allison Thomason, was

²²¹ Owen to Astour, December 5, 1991, Box 10.

²²² Astour to Owen, October 2, 1999, Box 26.

my replacement at SIUE. We met yesterday, but were both busy and could not talk about the *Rencontre*.²²³

His scholarly vitality was fading, but was far from extinguished. Owen had included with the program a copy of a list of eponyms recently published by Dutch Assyriologist Klaas Veenhof. The latter, Michael complained, “did not discuss the chronological implications of the note in the Mari Eponym List that Shamshi-Adad was born in the year preceding the year of a solar eclipse.”²²⁴

Somewhat more complex was Michael’s relationship with Jack Sasson. Sasson had been born into a Jewish family in Aleppo, Syria, in 1941 and had emigrated from Lebanon with his family to the United States in 1955 in the face of increasing hostility towards Jews. The common experience of having been Jewish immigrants in the United States may have contributed to their close relationship, as perhaps did the convergence of their scholarly interests. Michael claimed to have served as Sasson’s dissertation adviser before leaving Brandeis, although Sasson disputes this.²²⁵ In any event, he wrote a brief critique of the work in which he took issue with Sasson’s colorful rejection of scholars who “imagine the Arabian desert to have belched periodically a quantity of Semites.”²²⁶ Moreover, Michael’s and Sasson’s research focused on the 2nd millennium B.C.E., while Owen’s (and Gordon Young’s) primary interests lay with the earlier “Ur III,” the Sumerian Third Dynasty of Ur. As he did with Owen, Michael followed with pride the development of Sasson’s career. Sasson considered following his mentor to SIUE to teach Islamic civilization, something Michael did not discourage; on the contrary, he offered advice to his former student on how to proceed.²²⁷ But Sasson was to find a more favorable environment for his scholarly interests at Chapel Hill and, a few years later, was able to engineer a visiting professorship for Michael at UNC while he was on leave at the Institute for the Near East in Leiden. Michael found the teaching experience pleasant, the students much like those at

²²³ Astour to Owen, July 25, 2003, Box 26.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Astour’s unaddressed letter of recommendation for Sasson, 1965 binder, Box 20; email from Sasson to author, January 24, 2015.

²²⁶ Astour to Sasson, April 28, 1967, Box 20. The letter is marked “not mailed.”

²²⁷ Sasson to Astour, November 8, 1965, Box 20; Astour to Sasson, November 22, 1965, Box 20.

SIUE—"some are bright, some are dumb, some are in between." Evidence of the "counter culture" of the 1960s, of which there was little evidence in Edwardsville, was a different matter. He commented acidly to a colleague back home that:

...our students look different (fortunately). Here, one sees too many freaks, not only long-haired and bearded but even dressed in some kind of Hindu garb or in vestments that defy description.... But my students look semi-decent.²²⁸

He and Sasson maintained a close scholarly relationship throughout the balance of Michael's life and were prolific correspondents. Michael often chided Sasson for his sometimes illegible hand-written missives ("chicken scratchings," Sasson conceded), while the elder man rejected his former student's urging that they communicate by email, once that technology became available. He was too old for such gadgetry, Michael objected. They exchanged insights on problems of common interest, the meaning of words in the ancient Near Eastern languages with which they worked and commented on one another's publications and those of other scholars. Sasson frequently located scholarly literature for Michael in the superior libraries to which he had access, and complimented Michael on his scholarship. "Your merchant article was brilliant," he wrote in 1977, referring to his "The Merchant Class of Ugarit," a paper originally presented to the 1970 *Rencontre* and later published.²²⁹ When Sasson became associate editor of the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, he steered many book reviews Michael's way, not all of which were appreciated. Michael's reviews were exceedingly meticulous and time-consuming to compose, seriously impinging on his time for research. For his part, as he did for Owen, Michael wrote glowing recommendations for Sasson when he applied for grants and teaching positions at other universities. As had Owen, the two expressed alarm at the increasingly bizarre conduct, both personal and scholarly, of their mentor, Cyrus Gordon who, before having "discovered" it in China, professed to have found evidence of ancient Semitic influence in the Western Hemisphere and was a friend and supporter of John Philip Cohane, who claimed that all civilizations had Semitic

²²⁸ Astour to Erickson, October 4, 1969, Box 25.

²²⁹ Sasson to Astour, February 10, 1973, Box 8.

roots.²³⁰ Sasson shared with Michael gossip concerning Gordon's alleged derelictions at Brandeis. He was supposedly approving the granting of Ph.D.s to students who didn't deserve Master's, and had accepted a student's dissertation without having read it.²³¹

Sasson developed an interest in Russian literature, of which Michael had a profound understanding, and expressed a desire to learn the Russian language. Michael responded encouragingly that "For one who reads cuneiform and hieroglyphs, it is just a joke to master the Cyrillic alphabet." He urged Sasson to read the work of Russian poet Osip Mandelstam in the original Russian, for to depend on translations was to lose all but the barest literal meaning. To illustrate his point, he cited a whimsical story told by the great Yiddish writer, Sholem Aleichim, which described

...how a poor Jewish horse driver in Vilna saw a rich man eat an omelet and wanted his wife to make one, be it from [sic] available inferior material—egg white instead of whole egg, vegetable oil instead of butter, black rye meal instead of white flour, and so on. Then, when he tasted it, he spit it out and said, 'Phooey, in what rich people find pleasure!' ²³²

But there was more than common academic interests informing their relationship. The issue of Jewishness and what it means to be a Jew was a not infrequent topic, although Michael never revealed to Sasson the intensity of his antipathy towards Israel and Zionism. Sasson could also be highly critical of Zionism. In the midst of the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and fearful of the possibility of Israel's defeat, he wrote to Michael that "The Middle East war is horrifying...I blame all those red-hot Zionists who goaded Israel into believing that it was invincible and that the Arabs are cowards and mentally diseased."²³³ Not realizing the extremes to which he was willing to go in ingratiating himself with Syrian authorities, Sasson tried to discourage Michael from visiting Syria, on the grounds

²³⁰ "Phoenicia Linked to America," *New York Times*, May 16, 1968, Box 3.

²³¹ Sasson to Astour, August 24, 1969, Box 8.

²³² Astour to Sasson, February 11, 1974, no box number recorded.

²³³ Sasson to Astour, October 10, 1973, Box 8.

that he might be accused of being a spy for Israel or the CIA.²³⁴ Sasson from time-to-time sought Michael's advice on personal problems, which the latter was happy to give. The two topics merged when Sasson revealed to Michael in the fall of 1968 his plans to marry a gentile. The matter was complicated by the fact that Sasson, unlike Michael, was religiously observant. His intended bride was willing to convert to Judaism, but Sasson was still anxious, due in part to the fact that his family was "adamantly, if not hysterically opposed."²³⁵ Michael's reaction reflected his own secularist views rooted in the bygone Yiddish civilization of Eastern Europe, as well as his own tolerant humanity.

Since you write me about your intimate problems, I may try to state my point of view. Two things prevented Jews of my generation from marrying Gentiles: a) the desire to preserve the national cultural legacy of the Jewish people; b) the feeling of a deep traditional abyss between Jews and Christians, with the beast of anti-Semitism lurking at the bottom. It was more warmth, security and normalcy [sic] in marrying within the Jewish milieu. Things have now changed for better or for worse, or for both at once, but change they did. There is hardly anything left of our national heritage. Language? Literature? Folklore? Customs? National aspirations? All this is gone. The question of inborn, visceral Jew-hate is now largely a thing of the past. Very little distinguishes a Jewish-American from a non-Jewish one.... Of course, one residual factor does remain: religion, for those who possess it. But since the person in question agrees to convert, the problem seems to be solved and no qualms should trouble you. Why should you have guilt feelings? I hope her father was not an SS man at Auschwitz. And even so, must father's sins be visited upon their children? My only cousin in the free world is married to a German girl from Berlin. ...So it goes! All depends on the individual girl....²³⁶

²³⁴ Sasson to Astour, September 17, 1969, Box 8.

²³⁵ Sasson to Astour, August 24, 1969, Box 8.

²³⁶ Astour to Sasson, October 28, 1968, Box 20.

For his part, Michael frequently corresponded with German scholars, although he rarely wrote in German, a fact that may indicate a degree of discomfort. True, English was becoming the *lingua franca* of international scholarly communication, but Michael's letters to colleagues in France, Poland, and Russia were always in their languages. He expressed uneasiness to Sasson about attending the 1970 *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* in Munich.

I am myself very unenthusiastic about going to Germany, but one must be fair: if I can buy German books, if I can correspond with German scholars, why should I stop myself from attending a business meeting in Germany? Half of the Jews I know drive Volkswagens.²³⁷

Sasson had already expressed his own discomfort with matters German in the course of his sojourn in the Netherlands. He had picked up a Volvo in Sweden, crossed to Denmark, then “drove like a maniac across Germany – hated it, probably for psychological reasons.”²³⁸ His perspective was to some degree altered by his exposure to a German couple in Cologne, a meeting with whom had been arranged by a colleague at UNC. They were “lovely people,” he enthused, “a nice baptism in German water.” The woman knew Hebrew and Arabic and speaks Yiddish. “Her father, a former SS man, must be going insane.”²³⁹ But the TV miniseries “Holocaust” raised grim apprehensions. Without reminding Gentiles of the horrific past, Sasson feared, “It will only make it easier for them to find precedents if and when they want to do it again.”²⁴⁰

Michael's own attitude was malleable. A letter to Dietz Otto Edzard of the University of Munich, thanking him for “the excellent organization” of the 1970 *Rencontre*, although in English, was cordial, and Michael expressed pleasure in having had the opportunity to visit the city.²⁴¹ In 1977, he requested information on securing tickets to the Wagner festival in Bayreuth, surprising given his otherwise lack of interest in classical music and Wagner's significance to Hitler

²³⁷ Astour to Sasson, February 20, 1970, Box 25.

²³⁸ Sasson to Michael and Miriam, July 13, 1969, Box 8.

²³⁹ Sasson to Astour, n.d., Box 8.

²⁴⁰ Sasson to Michael and Miriam, September 18, 1979, Box 8.

²⁴¹ Astour to Edzard, September 24, 1970, Box 25.

and the Nazis, not to mention the composer's own virulent anti-Semitism. There is no evidence, however, that he and Miriam actually attended a performance.²⁴² He reveled in the royal treatment he received while attending a conference as an invited speaker hosted by Heidelberg University in 1986, and purchased a Volkswagen Golf in the same year.²⁴³ On the other hand, he adamantly refused to visit the Soviet Union. "I am not going to the R.A.I. [*Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*] in Leningrad, though Miriam's family beg me to come there, so some of them could see me after so many years," he wrote to Sasson. "I have not the slightest desire to cross again the border of that country...."²⁴⁴ This aversion may have been due as much to a fear of being prevented from leaving the Soviet Union should he visit it as it was to old and bitter memories.

The births of children to Sasson and his wife brought congratulations and expressions of joy from Michael. News of the death of Sasson's father in late 1979, when Michael was 64, elicited sympathy but also morose reflections on his own mortality and the consequences of his and Miriam's childlessness. "Now I am an old man," Michael mused. "I have not many years left, and when they are out, nobody will miss me but my widow."²⁴⁵ Sasson tried hard to comfort the obviously depressed older man, 25 years his senior.

I really don't think that people are remembered only by their genetic offspring. Surely one's students and one's friends play a more major role in that category than even family do....you, of all people, loved and cared for by so many of your students and colleagues should not even waste a second on such lugubrious thoughts. I may overreact to the few lines of your letter, but they made me very sad to think that after so much has occurred between you and your students and friends, you come up with such an assessment, and such ridiculously premature gloomies.²⁴⁶

²⁴² Astour to German National Tourist Office, January 25, 1977, Box 25.

²⁴³ Astour to Illinois Secretary of State, April 9, 1986, Box 25.

²⁴⁴ Astour to Sasson, February 6, 1984, Box 25.

²⁴⁵ Astour to Sasson, January 7, 1980, Box 25.

²⁴⁶ Sasson to Astour, January 17, 1980, Box 8.

Michael's "gloomies" were indeed premature. He would live another 23 active years, although four of them without Miriam, but not without Jack, with whom he exchanged letters until shortly before his death.

Michael's life had been brightened as he entered his seventh decade of life by renewed contact with Hanna Syngalowska-Pirenne, a woman he had known in pre-war Paris. In February 1977, he penned a somewhat plaintive note to the woman, then living in Geneva.

Si mon nom vous dit quelque chose (vous le connaissiez entre 1935 et 1939), ayez l'extrême obligeance de m'écrire si vous vous souvenez qui j'étais et si vous me permettez de vous écrire un peu plus longuement pour expliquer cette letter si attardée.

He closed with a courtly "*Veillez agréer, chère Madame, les expressions de mes sentiments et souvenirs les meilleurs* and signed the letter with a somewhat pretentious "*Michael Astour, Professeur d'histoire ancienne.*"²⁴⁷

Who was this woman, and what had motivated him to seek her out so many years later and whom he clearly wanted to impress? The fact that, in 1977, SIUE was planning to establish a study center in Geneva may have stimulated old memories and Michael, along with many others at SIUE, was disappointed when the project was cancelled in June of that year.²⁴⁸ In any event, Hanna was the elder daughter of Aron Syngalowski, a prominent Jewish educator and territorialist who had been a friend of Michael's father and in whose household in Boulogne the young Michael had spent "many happy hours" during his years as a student in France. At that time Hanna, who had been born in 1921, was in her mid to late teens. He recalled that, during his years in Gulag, the memories of the time he had spent with her and her family had been "very precious."²⁴⁹ Shortly after his release from Soviet detention, Michael had "accidentally" learned (how, he did not explain) that Hanna had married and been divorced from a grandson of

²⁴⁷ Astour to Syngalowska-Pirenne, February 8, 1977, Box 25. "If my name says something to you (you knew it between 1935 and 1939), be kind enough to write me if you remember who I was and if you would permit me to write to you at greater length to explain this letter which is so long delayed."

²⁴⁸ *The Summer Alestle*, June 22, 1977.

²⁴⁹ Astour to Lya Syngalowska, March 1, 1977, Box 25.

Henri Pirenne, the famous Belgian medievalist and author of the “Pirenne thesis” on the end of the ancient world and the beginning of medieval European civilization. With the challenge of rebuilding his life before him, he had not pursued the matter further. Early in 1977, he read a biography of Henri Pirenne by Bryce D. Lyon, medievalist at Brown University, which contained a reference to the subject’s grandchildren. It may be that he consulted the biography for that purpose. In any event, Michael wrote to Lyon for more information, noting that “having reached the age of sixty, I am growing more nostalgic, and I am curious about that episode in the post-1939 life of the charming companion of my youth.” By the time Lyon’s reply arrived, Michael had already located Hanna’s address in a Geneva directory held by SIUE’s Lovejoy Library and had sent off his initial letter.²⁵⁰

Several weeks passed without a response. Michael was uneasy. Clearly, he did not regard re-establishing contact with Hanna as a trivial matter. He located Hanna’s younger sister Ilya in the same Geneva directory and dispatched an anxious query. Was Hanna ill and did he have the correct address for her? He and Miriam planned a trip to Europe that summer, in the course of which Michael was scheduled to present a paper at the *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* in Paris, and a visit to Geneva, perhaps not coincidentally, was part of the itinerary.²⁵¹

Hanna, as it happened, had been on a skiing holiday, but a letter from her soon arrived. She assured him that she remembered him well, and that she regarded the war as merely an interruption of much that had passed between them. Hanna and her family had survived the war and Holocaust, and she was now a professor of international law, mother of a 30 year-old son, and with *cheveux qui ne sont plus noirs*. She requested a long letter from Michael about his life since their last meeting, observing that he “belonged to a past of which there remained few witnesses.”²⁵² Although it would require an adjustment to

²⁵⁰ Astour to Lyon, February 15, 1977, Box 25.

²⁵¹ Astour to Syngalowska, March 1, 1977, Box 25.

²⁵² “Copie de la letter de Hanna pour la mieux comprendre,” March 3, 1977, Box 25.

Michael's and Miriam's travel schedule, a meeting in Geneva that summer was possible.

Michael's response was prompt and ingratiating, characterizing Hanna's letter as "charming and feminine in the best sense" and continuing in a vein suggesting that his youthful interest in Hanna, although in an age of greater carnal restraint, had not been entirely platonic. Hanna, he recalled, had not tolerated their walking arm-in-arm nor had she addressed him with the familiar "*tu*" until "that memorable day of July 8th, 1939, when I saw you for the last time."²⁵³ What had happened on "that memorable day" is unknown, but Hanna clearly represented something important to Michael as he struggled to make the transition from middle to old-age. Was it the naïve joy of youthful love? Or perhaps she simply embodied memories of a happy time prior to the catastrophe that was about to engulf him. He sent two photographs of himself and requested that Hanna send him two of her, adding that he was interested in learning what she remembered of him. He wanted her to be frank, and give no thought to his ego. "Already in the spring of 1939," he added, "I had no illusions."²⁵⁴

In any event, Michael and Hanna exchanged two visits and many letters over the following three years. Michael fretted over Hanna's *silences périodiques*. Whether or not Miriam saw the letters, she was certainly aware of Hanna's existence. The potential for awkwardness was present and Michael was conscious of it. Hanna was a highly educated professional woman and apparently attractive, while Miriam, while intelligent and outgoing, lacked Hanna's polish and, more importantly, an idealized image in Michael's distant memory. In their later correspondence, Michael and Hanna discussed Miriam, whom Hanna had met in the summer of 1977. Michael explained that she was similar to the young women with whom he had associated in his youth—young working-class, "passably attractive," with a sense of humor and a spirit of camaraderie. "You were an exception, and that is one of the reasons that nothing happened between us."²⁵⁵ Michael may have meant this as a compliment, although it is certainly subject to a

²⁵³ Astour to Syngalowska, March 24, 1977, Box 25.

²⁵⁴ Astour to Syngalowska, April 3, 1977, Box 25.

²⁵⁵ Astour to Syngalowska, December 14, 1977, Box 25.

variety of interpretation. Prior to Hanna's visit to the United States in the summer of 1980, Michael pleaded with her not to ignore Miriam.²⁵⁶ Hanna was to arrive in Boston, where she would be met by Michael and Miriam, and from which the three would embark on a tour of the eastern United States, which Michael had carefully planned. Alas, the visit seems to have fizzled. Hanna preferred to spend most of her time in the United States with her cousin, who lived near Washington, D.C.²⁵⁷ The relationship of Michael's youth, obviously more important to him than to Hanna, had flickered into life, then died. If there was more correspondence between the two, it does not survive.

Michael's contacts with Cyrus Gordon, his mentor at Brandeis, were intermittent and sometimes difficult. He never forgot the enormous debt he owed to Gordon and was flattered by his efforts to arrange for Michael's return to Waltham, but Gordon could be a problematic patron.²⁵⁸ On one occasion, he became enraged over Michael's review of one of his books that he considered insufficiently laudatory, although Michael thought the review quite positive. He expressed deep regret that Gordon had become "so neurotic and intolerant."²⁵⁹ Michael was invited to contribute an essay to a Festschrift in Gordon's honor near the end of his mentor's life, but failed to complete it by the deadline for submission. When it was later published in *Ugarit-Forschungen*, it was accompanied by a rather cool dedication that read, "To Cyrus H. Gordon, my first guide in a new country."²⁶⁰ Unlike Michael's relationship with Sasson and Owen, Gordon and Michael never became friends; to Michael, Gordon remained "Professor Gordon" until the end of his life in 2001 at the age of 92.

²⁵⁶ Astour to Syngalowska, June 4, 1980, Box 25.

²⁵⁷ Astour to Syngalowska, October 27, 1980, Box 25.

²⁵⁸ Astour to Gordon, November 3, 1994, Box 25; Astour to Gordon, January 29, 1966, Box 20.

²⁵⁹ Astour to Sasson, January 6, 1969, Box 25.

²⁶⁰ Astour to Gordon, January 27, 1998, Box 25.

CHAPTER 9

MICHAEL AT SIUE: A BIG FROG IN A SMALL POND?

Was a scholar of Michael's stature out of place at a relatively obscure regional state university like SIUE? Some of his colleagues at more prestigious institutions undoubtedly thought so. He might have returned to Brandeis or jumped across the Mississippi to Washington University had the possibilities that were occasionally suggested materialized, but they did not, and he did not actively seek positions at other institutions. The fact is that he was happy in Edwardsville. While serving as a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the fall of 1969, with the combined superior resources of its and nearby Duke University's libraries, he nevertheless missed SIUE. "I am glad that I shall soon be back to [sic] SIU," he wrote an Edwardsville colleague. "I am used to it, I like its ambiance, the togetherness of our faculty...the spirit of growth and development, and the proximity of a big and beautiful city like St. Louis."²⁶¹ In 1981, Jack Sasson presented him with opportunity for a full year's visiting professorship at North Carolina. He turned it down on the grounds of the financial sacrifices he would have to make as he neared retirement, as well as on a reluctance to be separated from friends in the Edwardsville-St. Louis area.²⁶²

He chided friends and former colleagues from the East who seemed to think that he had moved beyond the pale of civilization. "Why are you amazed that I consider Illinois my home,?" he asked a friend from Massachusetts. "You Easterners imagine that west of the Appalachians lies some big wasteland, not fit for cultured people. As a matter of fact, my colleagues...are more cosmopolitan than many Bostonians.... I teach in a good, honest university...."²⁶³ Many years later, as retirement neared, his attitude had not changed. "I look at my years at SIUE (the longest stretch of my life at the same place and work) with great satisfaction. The lack of all necessary research materials on the spot and the

²⁶¹ Astour to Erickson, October 4, 1969, Box 25.

²⁶² Astour to Sasson, May 28, 1981, Box 25.

²⁶³ Astour to "Sharon," February 20, 1970, Box 25.

impossibility to train specialists in the ancient Near East field were compensated by the excellent human relations at the campus and the friendly attitude of colleagues and administration.”²⁶⁴ And although SIUE was not a research university, its graduate school regularly supplied Michael with small grants that seem to have been adequate for his scholarly work, which was further facilitated by time released from teaching in recognition of his research productivity. He was granted tenure two years after being hired and was promoted to full professor two years after that. At a university at which research expectations for its faculty were not high, Michael stood out. During the academic year 1971-72, for example, he published three scholarly articles, had seven articles and reviews in press, and had contributed a 75 page chapter to *Ugaritic and Hebrew Parallels*, part of the series *Analecta Orientalia*, published by the Pontifical Biblical Institute.²⁶⁵

University governance and its committees, with their dreary and often trivial agendas, held no interest for him. In my recollection, while he faithfully attended departmental meetings, his mind was clearly elsewhere and he rarely contributed to discussions. When he did, it was often to reveal that he had paid no attention to what had gone before. When requested by an institutional data cruncher to fill out a lengthy questionnaire, he responded with unconcealed annoyance.

I am very sorry to disappoint you again, but I am really unable to complete your questionnaire. I have never been very interested in the question of participation in academic governance, and I simply have no definite attitude on most of your questions. I have my own research project which absorbs all of my attention, and I cannot allow myself to consider the vast field covered by your questionnaire and to seek answers to all problems. I am sure that many professors,

²⁶⁴ Astour to “Kathryn and Marion,” November 12, 1986, Box 25.

²⁶⁵ Astour to McCurry, April 17, 1972, Box 25.

more administratively minded than myself, will be glad to provide you with information.²⁶⁶

It was not true, of course, that his research absorbed all his attention, although it was clearly uppermost in his mind. He is remembered by his students as an excellent teacher, albeit in a rather old-fashioned didactic mode, which was reflected in his exams. A typical example is one he inflicted on his class on the history of the Roman Republic: "Here are the names of three major battles which have determined the fate of the Roman Republic: Pharsalus, Philippi, and Actium. Give the dates, the names of the chief commanding officers on both sides, and the outcome of each battle." The single required essay question read: "In 15 minutes, state in what respects was the gradual takeover of much of the Hellenistic world (a) detrimental to Hellenism (b) beneficial to Hellenism (c) beneficial to Rome."²⁶⁷ In another course, he admonished students to "answer briefly without unnecessary verbiage but with all essential data...."²⁶⁸ Students in his course on the ancient Near East were expected to "List all of the Semitic languages that you are aware of; if possible, group them into their main branches. Underline the names of the languages that are spoken in our time."²⁶⁹ He hated grading the papers that resulted ("grading papers kills me," he wrote to a friend), but thoroughly enjoyed the classroom experience. His academic stature was such that colleagues sometimes audited his courses on ancient history. One who did was Ed Jacobitti, who taught European intellectual history. In the spring of 1980, he wrote to Herbert Rosenthal, then chair of the History department:

I suppose it is to unveil the obvious that he is an outstanding teacher and lecturer but since I took two of his courses this year I thought it might be useful to comment on the stimulating and enjoyable atmosphere which characterizes his classes. The material he presents is well-organized, apparently effortlessly so, and eloquently presented. His knowledge is encyclopedic and he easily makes

²⁶⁶ Astour to Hicks, July 16, 1971, Box 25.

²⁶⁷ "History 306a, Final Test, Spring 1991", Box 4.

²⁶⁸ "History 333b, Final Test, Winter 1974", Box 4.

²⁶⁹ "History 408, First Test, Winter 1984, Box 4.

references to events and personalities in diverse cultures and eras in order to clarify events in an earlier and less familiar epoch. His lectures are constant stimuli to further reading and exploration of the ancient world. In short, his class is something to which I look forward every day.²⁷⁰

It seems that his only disappointment in teaching at SIUE was the absence of opportunities to teach doctoral students as he had done at Brandeis. When he was hired, it was envisioned that a full range of doctoral programs, including one in history, would be offered. He was led to hope that one or two additional historians of the ancient world would be hired, allowing him to concentrate on the Near East. Those dreams evaporated as SIUE moved from the generous state funding that characterized its early years in the 1960s to the fiscal stringency of the 1970s and 1980s. He would continue to teach courses on ancient Greece and Rome and was given the opportunity to teach a summer course at the site of the Greek settlement at Paestum, south of Naples in 1983, as part of a joint archaeological project involving SIUE students in cooperation with the University of Salerno. But he was not very enthusiastic. As he wrote to a former student, "I would have greatly preferred that, if at all, we rather dig in Syria, where I have a couple of mounds in sight...."²⁷¹ Even more remote from his area of prime academic interest were the freshman "Western Civ." courses, which he willingly taught. At the end of his career, he claimed to have enjoyed teaching the 20th century component of that sequence, thinking it appropriate that he should teach a course on a piece of history so much of which he had personally experienced (and, one might add, suffered). The versatility conferred by his erudition and linguistic skills resulted in his teaching, on at least one occasion, courses in ancient Middle Eastern art and French literature.²⁷²

The closest that Michael was able to come to the teaching of a doctoral student at SIUE was his mentoring of James K. Jackson, who completed an M.A. thesis under his direction in 1982 on the 14th century B.C.E. king of Mitanni,

²⁷⁰ Jacobitti to "Herb," May 21, 1980, Box 8.

²⁷¹ Astour to Young, September ?, 1983, Box 25.

²⁷² "Faculty Activities," March 20, 1983-March 20, 1984," Box 25.

Tushratta. Of him, Michael wrote that he had never had a student at SIUE “so strongly motivated by his scholarly interest and so committed to research and acquisition of knowledge.” Jackson had taken all of Michael’s courses in ancient history and had been tutored in Hebrew, Akkadian, and the complexities of the cuneiform writing system. Michael wrote in November 1982 to his former Brandeis student, David I. Owen, then chair of the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Cornell, in support of Jackson’s application for admission to its doctoral program in Near Eastern Studies, and Owen showed interest in the promising young scholar.²⁷³

Jackson’s situation was a tragic one. He was a veteran of the Vietnam War and had developed cancer of the jaw, which may have been due to exposure to Agent Orange. He had had to interrupt his studies for surgery and radiation therapy and, as Michael noted, “looked like a ghost” on his return to school.²⁷⁴ He seemed to recover and succeeded in completing his master’s thesis but, sadly, succumbed to the disease on August 19th, 1984, at the age of 33, before being able to begin his doctoral studies. Michael was deeply saddened. He had queried the editor of *Studia Pohl*, a scholarly series published by the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, about the possibility of publishing Jackson’s thesis, proclaiming it of quality equal to that of a good doctoral dissertation.²⁷⁵ He hoped to be able to inform his student as he lay dying that his work was at least under consideration for publication. Sadly, the invitation to submit the manuscript arrived too late. Michael hoped that the thesis might yet be published as a memorial to Jackson, the costs of publication defrayed by a small subvention from the Jackson family, and offered to undertake all necessary editorial work, but nothing seems to have come of his effort.²⁷⁶

Michael was required to retire in 1987 at the age of 70, something that he would have preferred not to do. In part, this was due to his love of teaching and the comradeship of his colleagues, in part, because he welcomed the money.

²⁷³ Astour to Owen, November 8, 1982, Box 25.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Astour to Editorial Board, *Studia Pohl*, June 13, 1984, Box 25.

²⁷⁶ Astour to Mayer, October 7, 1984, Box 25.

Having joined SIUE's faculty relatively late in life, he had not been vested in the state university retirement system long enough to have secured a very generous pension, although his colleagues had willingly subordinated their claims to summer teaching to his during his final years in order that he might increase the earnings base on which his pension would be determined. Michael's initial annuity was calculated to be \$18,682.68, although this was later revised modestly upwards.²⁷⁷ But he was given the opportunity to continue teaching his ancient history courses on a part-time basis, and this supplementary income, along with a Social Security annuity presumably earned while he was at Brandeis and perhaps while translating materials for the U.S. Army, as well as Miriam's teaching at a private secondary school, permitted a cautiously comfortable lifestyle including, for a time, the European travel that he and Miriam loved so much. In the spring of 2000, the couple's net assets were calculated to be \$213,458.²⁷⁸ Still, he looked for opportunities to economize. Earlier in his career when planning to attend conferences, he typically recruited colleagues to share hotel rooms with him for their company. Now, it was a matter of thrift. When preparing to attend a meeting of the American Oriental Society in Chicago shortly after his retirement, he wrote plaintively to Maynard Maidman of York University: "Will you come to that meeting, and if you will, would you be willing to share a room with me? The cost of a single room at the Sheraton Plaza is very high for a retired professor. Please write back."²⁷⁹

In 1993, when SIUE converted its academic calendar from quarters to semesters, he left the classroom permanently, explaining that he had come to regard teaching and especially the grading of papers, as "tiresome." Moreover, he and Miriam had found his pension and Social Security "sufficient."²⁸⁰ But separation from the classroom did not mean separation from SIUE. Michael carrying away stacks of interlibrary loan books from the circulation desk in Lovejoy Library remained a common sight.

²⁷⁷ Ramers to Astour, May 29, 1987, Box 25; State University Retirement System to Astour, August 15, 1989, Box 10.

²⁷⁸ "Asset Information Sheet," April 7, 2000, Box 24.

²⁷⁹ Astour to Maidman, October 1, 1987, Box 25.

²⁸⁰ Astour to Owen, November 1, 2001, Box 26.

CHAPTER 10

A SCHOLAR TO THE END

The final letter written by Michael, at least the last one extant in his papers, is to Jack Sasson. It was written about a month before he died and dealt primarily with his research which, in spite of failing health, he continued to pursue. He thanked Jack for having sent him Xerox copies of material from the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, although it had not contained the information that he needed—the route of conquest followed by the 12th century B.C.E. Elamite king Shilhak-Inshushinak. Only towards the end of the letter did he make reference to his “general miserable condition.” He was not far from his 88th birthday.²⁸¹

Miriam had died over four years earlier, and he found himself increasingly isolated. He was no longer able to drive and was dependent on public transportation or the good will of friends, now becoming increasingly scarce. He tired easily, due to a heart that beat at only half the normal rate, and was scheduled for the installation of a pacemaker. His ailments and certainly his advanced age were real, but he could be a bit of a hypochondriac, a trait now accentuated by his isolation. Two years earlier he had visited an otolaryngologist, motivated by a persistent, loud clicking in his ears. The problem persisted until he was visited by his brother-in-law, who also heard the annoying sound. An investigation revealed the source—a smoke alarm with a failing battery. He disconnected the battery and, as he wrote the physician, “my supposed affliction stopped.”²⁸²

The years since his arrival in the United States had been a period of intense scholarly activity, which continued almost literally until his dying day. His reputation in the field of ancient Near Eastern history was stellar. James Eisenbraun, head of Eisenbrauns publishing firm, a publisher specializing in works on the ancient Near East, reacted enthusiastically to a proposal by Jack Sasson

²⁸¹ Astour to Sasson, September 8, 2004, Box 26.

²⁸² Astour to Fierstein, July 29, 2002, Box 22.

that the firm publish a collection of Michael's articles. "I like, I like! The Astour book sounds very interesting. He's one of the few guys who can range over such a wide variety of material and not come up with pie [sic] in his face." Then, referring to a review of Michael's that Eisenbraun had edited when he had been on the editorial staff of the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, he enthused, "The review was a magnificent piece of writing, as well as a wonderful (and terrifying) review."²⁸³ What Eisenbraun meant by "terrifying" is not clear, but Michael's reviews were substantial articles in their own right, typically displaying a degree of erudition that might, indeed, be terrifying, particularly if one's own work were under review. A prime example of Michael's intimidating thoroughness is his review of three fascicles of the revised *Cambridge Ancient History*, which was published in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* in 1972. Heavily footnoted (56), it offered devastating critiques of three contributions to the prestigious multi-volume series dealing with the Near East of the Bronze Age. Michael simply overwhelmed the hapless authors with his learning and attention to detail, pointing out errors in toponymy, terminological misunderstandings in multiple ancient languages, and faulty interpretations of myth. He checked footnotes and identified inaccurate citations. He was in considerable demand as a reviewer, but came to regard it as an onerous burden, perhaps not surprisingly, given the thoroughness which his scholarly conscience demanded. A review, he complained, took as much of his time as a research article, "and did not add much to one's scholarly accomplishment."²⁸⁴ But they were much appreciated. Keith Seele, editor of the *The Journal of Near Eastern Studies* at The University of Chicago, enthused over one his reviews:

I have no words adequate to tell you with what pleasure I read your review. ...I can truly say that I have never read a more interesting review.... I wish very much that I could reserve more space for reviews. Perhaps the University of Chicago Press would give it to me if I could promise more of them in the masterly style of yours!²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Eisenbraun to Sasson, June 6, 1981, Box 42.

²⁸⁴ Astour to Sasson, November 10, 1977, Box 25.

²⁸⁵ Seele to Astour, November 17, 1970, Box 8.

His own articles were received with equal enthusiasm. Seele responded to one of his submissions, "I have just finished reading your article...and am delighted to have the privilege of publishing it in *JNES*. I always feel that a manuscript of yours will come as close to perfection as is humanly possible, and this one is true to form."²⁸⁶ The high regard in which he was held by his peers was reflected in his election in 1987 to the presidency of the Middle West Branch of the American Oriental Society, whose members included scholars from universities far more prestigious than SIUE, including the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, one of the world's leading centers for the study of the ancient Near East.²⁸⁷

Following the publication of *Hellenosemitica* and its uneven reception, Michael turned mainly, as he wrote in 1991, to "Near Eastern (especially ancient Syrian) history, geography, and literature." The geography of northern Syria in ancient times was of particular interest to him. Key to understanding it was its toponymy, the place names that appeared in ancient literature and documents and their actual locations. His dream was to write the definitive work on the subject and he strove mightily at the task, publishing a number of relevant articles. An impressive example is his "Mesopotamian and Transjordanian Place Names in the Medinet Habu Lists of Ramses III," which appeared in 1968 in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. In this article, Michael analyzed the hieroglyphic topographical lists carved on the front pylon of Ramses III's mortuary temple near Luxor, correlating them with toponyms in Mesopotamian cuneiform texts and, in the process, demonstrating what appears (to this ignorant observer, at least) to be a profound understanding of the intricacies of both writing systems. By the end of 1969, he believed that he was close to completing *Topography and Toponymy of Northern Syria*, which, in published form, he thought would comprise at least 500 large-format pages and twenty maps, which he had drawn himself. It would be "a detailed presentation and interpretation of the available source material on the states, cities, towns, mountains, rivers, and roads of Northern Syria from the oldest times to the end of the Assyrian conquest (709 B.C.)." Primary sources for the work were cuneiform tablets found in

²⁸⁶ Seele to Astour, March 7, 1971, Box 8.

²⁸⁷ University News Service, March 12, 1987, Box 25.

multiple Syrian sites, as well as relevant Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian records. His objective was not only to locate “the greatest possible number of ancient place names” and correlate them with modern sites, but to analyze each according to its linguistic affiliation, structure, and etymology. This would be a remarkable achievement in light of the fact that in the previous few years he had published, in addition to many scholarly articles, his “monumental” 900- page *History of the Freeland League* in Yiddish, although he tended to pass that off as tangential to his core interests. In the summer of 1972, he traveled to Syria to survey the area on which his study focused. His application for a sabbatical in the fall of 1976 indicated that he was still at work on his geographical *magnum opus*, which had now grown to 1000 pages. But the application indicated that a problem had arisen. The previous year, a team of Italian archaeologists had discovered a vast trove of cuneiform tablets dating from the late third millennium BCE in the ruins of a royal palace at Tell Mardikh in northwestern Syria, the site of the ancient city of Ebla. The cuneiform tablets bore texts in two languages—Sumerian and a language previously unknown to scholars, which came to be known as “Eblaite.” A preliminary survey of the archive, Michael explained, indicated that it contained treaties, tribute lists, and commercial records. While it opened an extremely important new window on the history of the Near East in the Bronze Age, it also unavoidably retarded for an indefinite period completion of Michael’s research. As he explained, the Ebla tablets contained “hundreds of place names and throw a completely new light on the political history of Syria and Mesopotamia.” (He was later to revise his estimate to two thousand). This was, in part, speculative, as the bulk of the tablets, about fifteen thousand, Michael thought, had yet to be published and some, after all, were in a language new to scholars. In any event, he foresaw the necessity of rewriting much of his study, but this could only be undertaken “when the basic texts or their summaries” were made available. Professor Giovanni Pettinato of the University of Rome, an epigraphist on the Italian team that had made the Ebla discovery, was scheduled to speak to the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical literature to be held in St. Louis in October, and Michael hoped to learn more about the prospects for publication of the tablets. In the meantime, he intended to temporarily redirect

his attention to a related topic unaffected by the Ebla discoveries—the cities and roads of Roman and northern Syria and adjacent areas.²⁸⁸

The original grand project would never be completed, but Michael adapted to the looming presence of the Ebla tablets, although he initially doubted that Tell Mardikh and Ebla were one in the same.²⁸⁹ He produced important articles on the toponymy and structure of the Eblean state as its cuneiform tablets were published and its largely Semitic language, closely related to Akkadian, better understood. His “Toponymy of Ebla and Ethnohistory of Northern Syria: A preliminary Survey,” published in 1988 in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, is a masterful philological analysis of place names appearing in Eblaite texts and the geographical extent of Eblean political control which they revealed. Michael also used the article to deliver a parting shot at the recently deceased Ignace J. Gelb of the Oriental Institute, whose contention that there had lived in northern Syria of the third millennium a pre-Semitic population he had challenged for decades. Michael refuted Gelb’s position with an analysis of the suffixes of toponyms appearing in the Ebla texts which, he argued, clearly demonstrated the Semitic character of the population. Stanley Insler of Yale’s Department of Linguistics heaped lavish praise on the article, writing to Michael that

I have just read with great interest your fascinating and convincing article on “Toponymy of Ebla...” published in the last issue of JAOS. Apart from being written in a beautiful and lucid style, the piece is a splendid example of clear thinking and elegant argumentation, not to speak of the comprehensive erudition upon which it is based. In short, it’s a real jewel.²⁹⁰

Published in the same year was a version of the paper that Michael had delivered at Heidelberg in 1986. Entitled “The Geographical and Political Structure of the Ebla Empire” and appearing in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft von Ebla. Heidelberger Studien zum Alten Orient, Band 2*, Michael concluded on the basis of the documentary evidence then available that Ebla had been an empire of

²⁸⁸ “Supplementary Note to the Application for Sabbatical Leave, “September 24, 1976, Box 25.

²⁸⁹ See his typescript, “Tell Mardikh and Ebla,” Box 27.

²⁹⁰ Insler to Astour, January 31, 1989, Box 25.

approximately 80,000 sq. km., “about equally divided between the Kingdom of Ebla and its client states” and situated in present-day northwestern Syria and southeastern Turkey. His “The Date of the Destruction of Palace G at Ebla,” published in 1992 in *Bibliotheca Mesopotamia*, addressed the question of when the palace in whose ruins the Ebla tablets had been found had been burned. Analyzing contemporary evidence, both inscriptional and archaeological, Michael concluded that the destruction of the palace had occurred in the vicinity of 2280 B.C.E. and quite likely not at the hands of foreign conquerors, but by accident.

By the time these articles had been published, Michael had already been invited by his Brandeis mentor, Cyrus Gordon, now at NYU as director of the Center for Ebla Research, to write a more general treatment, noting that, “As far as I am concerned you are the scholar to write on the history of Ebla.” Michael accepted and the result appeared in two widely-spaced installments in a four volume series edited by Gordon entitled *Eblaitica: Essays on the Ebla Archives and Eblaite Language*, published by Eisenbrauns. Ten years (1992 and 2002) separated the publication of the two components of a densely footnoted work totaling 218 pages, which appears to have summarized the state of Ebla scholarship up until that time, liberally seasoned with Michaels’s critical comments. A planned third installment did not appear due to the exhaustion of financial support for the project.²⁹¹

In the midst of his research and publication on Ebla, he produced a short book entitled *Hittite History and Absolute Chronology of the Bronze Age*. This closely argued and heavily end-noted work was written at the invitation of Paul Åström of the University of Gothenburg and publisher of books on ancient history. The monograph dealt with the intricate problem for the study of the Bronze Age Middle East of “dating reigns, wars, treaties, destructions, rebuildings and other events...in terms of Western time reckoning.” It was the chronological counterpart to Michael’s toponymic research and reflective of his positivist approach to the study of history. He noted near the end of his life that “There are two things that are vital for history: geography and chronology, because

²⁹¹ Astour to Owen, May 9, 2003, Box 26.

everything happens in space and time.” He was questioned on his attitude towards post-modern historical perspectives. His response was distinctly “modern.”

...this is part of a much broader philosophical question about the theory of knowledge. How can we know about the thing in itself, and not as it appears to us? Well, we have to work with our senses and with such abilities as we possess. We cannot have the absolute truth....For instance, take a look at the development of astronomy. It developed little by little with the improvement of our instruments and our mathematical abilities and so on....In other words, our historical knowledge improves all the time. It is not absolute, but it should be the best that we can reach.²⁹²

The apex of his career may have been reached in February 1996 with a conference in his honor organized by the Middle West Branch of the American Oriental Society and the Midwest Region of the Society of Biblical Literature and held in LaGrange, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. Close to 30 scholars read or contributed papers, which were later compiled in the form of a Festschrift of nearly 700 pages. Participants and contributors included North American and European scholars, many from prestigious institutions, including the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Cornell University, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina, Brandeis University, Purdue University, the University of Toronto, the University of Münster and the University of Illinois. The title chosen for the Festschrift that grew out of the conference – *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons* – reflected the wide-ranging impact of his scholarship over four decades. It was followed in 1998 by a special session of the 208th meeting of the American Oriental Society in New Orleans, devoted to Michael and his work and presided over by Gordon Young. Due to Miriam’s illness, Michael chose not to attend.²⁹³

²⁹² “An Interview with Michael Astour,” *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons*, p.22.

²⁹³ “Reminiscences and Presentations in Honor of Michael Astour.” Program of the Two Hundred and Eighth Meeting, Box 13.

Michael's physical health was failing, but not the keenness of his intellect. The intellectual rigor of which he was still capable is evidenced by his 1997 review article on a book dealing with Eblaitic toponyms by members of the Italian archaeological team that had discovered the archive. Although he was then into his eighties, his article showed a confident grasp of the relevant philological problems, while subjecting the book to a skeptical appraisal of its authors' use of computer-based analysis of the cuneiform texts. "...Analysis must still be done in the old-fashioned way," he insisted, while demonstrating his "old-fashioned" technique based on long experience of the ambiguities and nuances of ancient Semitic languages with a degree of erudition that Eisenbraun might well have deemed "terrifying."²⁹⁴ In July 2004, he was interviewed over a two-day period in his home by Jack Sasson and two of his Vanderbilt colleagues. Although then in his 88th year, he displayed an astounding recall of events long past and demonstrated that the ability to recite long passages from literature that had helped keep him alive in Stalin's camps over 60 years earlier had not left him.²⁹⁵ He was pursuing multiple projects, including the revising and updating of a collection of his articles, when he died on October 7, 2004, following emergency abdominal surgery. His goal of producing a comprehensive geography of Bronze Age northern Syria remained unrealized. He offered to make his extensive collection of notes available to a young scholar who might be interested in bringing the project to fruition but, as he admitted, the disorganized state of the notes and the fact that most of them were written in Russian would make this difficult.²⁹⁶ They remain in the archives of SIUE as fading evidence of a life devoted to scholarship.

²⁹⁴ "The Toponyms of Ebla," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* [117.2, 1997], 332-38.

²⁹⁵ Interview with Michael Astour, July 16-17, 2004. Courtesy of Jack Sasson.

²⁹⁶ "An Interview with Michael Astour," *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons*, 27-27.

EPILOGUE

There is a handwritten inscription inside the cover of the copy of the *Festschrift* prepared in Michael's honor that is in SIUE's archives. It reads,

Please accept this token of our appreciation for your lifetime of peerless scholarship and inspirational guidance. You have enabled us—and many others—to cross many boundaries and link many horizons. Thank you.

It is signed by the three scholars who edited the volume, one of whom had been a student of Michael's at Brandeis. Michael's scholarship and teaching cast a wide net that reflected the astounding breadth of his learning. Purdue's Gordon Young, one of those Brandeis students, referred to Michael as "one of the last polymaths in our fields."²⁹⁷ But Young told a delightful story that exemplified the fact that Michael was far more than a supremely knowledgeable scholar of the ancient Middle East.

Among my earliest memories of Michael is sitting in his class at Brandeis University as he was discussing the characteristics of epic poetry in its various manifestations when the topic of Minnehaha and Lake Gitcheegumee [from "The Song of Hiawatha"] came up. Fresh from Minnesota, I volunteered a local tradition that Lake Minnetonka (just outside of Minneapolis) and not Lake Superior was Longfellow's Lake Gitcheegumee. Wrong (as would become a habit with me!), and for the next several minutes our class was told why it was Lake Superior, and with no details omitted! I learned quickly that here was a scholar to be reckoned with. Where in the world did this man newly arrived from Poland and France, fresh from years of restricted life in the Soviet Union, who was perfecting his spoken English by watching children's cartoons on Saturday mornings, learn about Minnehaha

²⁹⁷ *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons*, xii.

and Lake Gitcheegumee? Well, we've all been reckoning with Michael for the past 40+ years.²⁹⁸

In fact, Young did not do Michael full justice. He was also a published scholar of Yiddish and Russian literature, as well as the world's leading authority on Jewish territorialism, a field with admittedly little competition.

But his multi-faceted and much-admired scholarship was only one aspect of his complex identity. When asked if there was an organic link between his work on Jewish territorialism and the ancient Near East, he replied, "No, absolutely not....my work is on two planes, two different planes. It has to do with me as a Jew from Vilna—a secular Jew of the twentieth century—and the rest is completely unconnected to it."²⁹⁹ While he identified himself as a Jew, that self-definition was of uncertain content. He might be described as an alienated Jew, one who considered himself a survivor of a rich civilization, the Yiddish-speaking society of Eastern Europe that had been destroyed by the Holocaust. Judaism held no attractions for him save as an historical artifact. He despised Zionism and its creation in the modern state of Israel, which had destroyed his beloved territorial movement. He felt no affinity with the American Jewish community, in part because it was largely Zionist, in part because, he believed, it had to a considerable degree abandoned its distinctively Jewish character. His alienation persisted after his death. He was cremated, which is forbidden by Judaic law, and not interred in the Jewish cemetery that had received Miriam's remains. Some of his ashes, were, however, sprinkled on his wife's grave, not according to his direction, but on the initiative of friends.³⁰⁰

Although he and Miriam spoke Russian with one another, he rejected the land of his birth, which had treated him so cruelly. He had grown to adulthood in Poland and occasionally corresponded in Polish with acquaintances there, but he evinced little affection for that country. His Poland had been the Poland of pre-war Yiddish-speaking Vilna, "the Jerusalem of the North," which had been destroyed. Michael's scholarly interests had matured in Paris and, next to Yiddish,

²⁹⁸ Ibid., xii-xiii.

²⁹⁹ "An Interview with Michael Astour," *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons*, 27.

³⁰⁰ Email from David Owen, April 2, 2015; Email from Jack Sasson, April 7, 2015.

French was the language of his heart. But after immigrating to the United States, visits to France were brief, and he mourned the deterioration of his fluency in French. He became a United States citizen within a few years of arriving in New York and conscientiously performed the duties of citizenship, voting, corresponding with congressmen and senators, and contributing to the Democratic Party. He and Miriam traveled widely in this country, taking in its natural beauty as well as its popular entertainment. When he died, he had lived for 44 years in the United States, half of his life, as long as in the countries in which he had resided (or been imprisoned) combined. Nevertheless, he felt academically and culturally isolated. After almost fifteen years in Illinois, he wrote to a friend that

I have absolutely nobody to talk to on any of my projects and interests.... Nobody around knows anything about Semitics, Near East, ancient history, not even about Russian poetry. Last fall, I finished a very long lyrico-narrative poem about one year of my youth, but there is no one to whom I could read it [it was in Yiddish] and ask his or her opinion, so I keep even its existence to myself.³⁰¹

Over thirty years before his death, he wrote that “my primary allegiance has been to the Yiddish language and culture.”³⁰² But it is as a transnational scholar of the ancient Middle East addressing an international audience that I believe Michael would prefer to be remembered. When I began this project, I was aware that Michael was highly regarded in his field. After all, how many of us have had (or will have) international conferences held to honor us and our work? But his true stature as a scholar became clear to me only after reading his correspondence over many years with important figures in his field in this country and in Europe. When this is measured against what he had endured and overcome as a young man, his achievement is all the more impressive. If this was not more evident to his colleagues at SIUE during his lifetime, it was due to his modesty and our ignorance. He was not a self-promoter. Although possibly the most significant scholar that SIUE and certainly its Department of Historical

³⁰¹ Astour to Sasson, September 21, 1979, Box 25.

³⁰² Astour to Wierer, December 12, 1973, Box 25.

Studies has ever had or is likely to have, he never won the university's research scholar award or was even nominated for it, nor would he have ever encouraged his own nomination, much less have nominated himself. I am ashamed that I never put him forward. This essay is offered as an effort, however inadequate, to do for him what he was unwilling to do for himself.

REFLECTIONS

It is difficult for us to encapsulate a half century relationship that began as students of one scholar and evolved into membership in an extended family of like-minded colleagues.

When in the fall of 1962 and fresh out of college we first met Michael Astour, he impressed us as a stern, very reserved and remote individual. He was always formal in those early days, and to us he seemed intense. It did not take long, however, to break through this façade; for Michael proved to be a warm and generous person, with ready laughter and an incredible storehouse of stories, anecdotes, proverbs, and, above all, poetry in a Babel of languages. Already then—the two of us, along with the late Gordon D. Young (of Purdue University) and the late Warren J. Blackstone (Trinity Valley School of Ft. Worth)—we began a cordial, albeit somewhat stilted relationship, no doubt based on a generational gap, but as likely by the cultural chasm that had separated us. He, a professor of Yiddish, was soon asked to teach classes on his favorite subject, the ancient world, and this is where we got to appreciate his intellect, his breadth of vision and his seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of all learning that was of importance to us.

Occasionally too, Michael and his wife Miriam would host us at their small apartment; he slightly reserved, she bustling with energy and combustible warmth. We cannot say that the food was memorable there; but Michael would regale us with anecdotes he had assembled from many languages and ethnic affiliations. We were most fascinated by his tales of a pre-WW II Europe, even then seemingly so distant from us, when that world was on a verge of unimaginable carnage. He would reveal to us, in a guarded way and never without gaps, morsels from his extraordinary life. Michael's early years, we eventually realized, were the stuff of fiction, with events elating as often as harrowing. His years in Paris (1934—1937) coincided with the initial publications of great discoveries at Ugarit, Nuzi and Mari, and he studied with such great scholars as Charles Virolleaud, Edouard Dhorme, Roman Ghirschman, Raymond Weil, and Pierre Roussel. He traveled by train widely in the Middle East, spending much

time in Palestine. Those were tense times, with rising anti-Semitism; but for a young man absorbed by the lure of the past, also very exciting.

We were all awed, not just by Michael's learning, but also by his extraordinary ability to recall the minutest details of the vast literatures he had mastered before WW II in Poland and France, yet hardly dimmed by the many years of hard labor in soul shriveling Soviet camps. But he also told us of his "rebirth" on re-entering the West and on his fortunate landing at Brandeis University at the invitation of Cyrus H. Gordon. There, he was able to complete a dissertation on material he had begun to shape in the oppressive Soviet gulag. The volume was published as *Hellenosemitica*, a ground-breaking study of the impact of West Semitic cultures on Mycenaean Greece. Michael's mind and memory never ceased to amaze us and still, after so many years, we find ourselves fondly recalling samples of his erudition, first revealed in his graduate classes at Brandeis, then in his many publications and lectures, and lastly in numerous personal conversations.

After he left Brandeis for Southern Illinois University, and as we entered into our own academic careers, we continued to maintain close relationships by traditional post. But we also met regularly at professional meetings, in the United States and abroad. David and Susan visited sites in Greece with Michael and Miriam. Jack and Diane traveled with them in England. (No trips for the weak of heart, as Michael was a terrible driver.) Gordon Young also maintained a close relationship and organized an evening of conversations with Michael. The transcript was published in an anniversary volume that Gordon and other Astour admirers organized and edited.

Each of us corresponded regularly with Michael, filling him in with news of the latest publications, archaeological discoveries and professional gossip all through the years until his death. We recall fondly the visit we all made to his home in Collinsville almost at the turn of the millennium, to present him with a copy of his anniversary volume. We all dined together, Michael still fit but Miriam already relying on portable oxygen for life-giving breaths. Michael was clearly moved by this display, as we all were, and the memory of that special moment

remains a constant. Then, as countless times earlier, we urged him to write his life story, but he consistently declined to do so, presumably because crafting it would resurrect horrors he would rather to bury on another continent: the murder of family and friends, the pain and suffering in harsh surroundings, and the robbery of some of the best years of his life.

Michael's passing is emblematic of the loss of his generation of secular Jewish scholarship, particular in the Yiddish language that he spoke so eloquently and whose literature and poetry filled his soul. His regrettable hostility to Israel and Zionism was not hidden from us; but it was heavily veiled and we have fully plumbed it only as we read the pages that Professor Weingartner has patiently cobbled from hundreds of letters and testimonials. It is difficult for us who knew and loved the man to fully understand the vehemence and passion, as exposed in this work, with which he attacked the world that Judaism has created in our generation. We might attribute it to the brutal loss of family and world Michael knew as a young adult and the subsequent suffering he went through. We might even speculate that his emotional world was likely stunted during his travails. The crucial years in which Israel was being formed and facing its neighbors' hostilities were unknown to him. When he resurfaced, Israel was a *fait accompli* and he might have felt as having failed the father he adored, the Territorialist community that nourished their hopes, and the aspirations of all those who wished to create a secular but highly ethnic Jewish culture, somewhere far from its place of origins where it was sure to rekindle attachment to what they felt was unwanted theology. When he was a youngster in Vilna, Michael created Shparber (German: *Sperber*, a "sparrow hawk"), a youth movement for Young Territorialists, and adopted a version of the species, Astour, as his professional name. His commitment to the cause, emblematic in his two-volume (in Yiddish) history of the movement, remained with him to the last.

We could never agree with his personal views on Israel and challenged him on the few occasions he revealed them; but we tolerated them, for they hardly compromised his contributions on the ancient world, scarcely altered his humanity and had no impact on current events. Rather, we instinctively moved beyond them to celebrate Michael and his many virtues, among them

commitment to teaching, research, collegiality, and unfailing affection for his friends. Michael is now far away from the demons that stalked him for decades; but he has left us with much that is illuminating and nurturing. To have studied with him, to have known him so well for so many years, and yes, to have loved him, remain special elements in our lives.

David I. Owen (Emeritus, Cornell University)

Jack M. Sasson (Emeritus, Vanderbilt University)

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As has been true of all of my writing projects, this one benefitted immeasurably from the assistance of my editor, adviser, morale-booster, and grammarian-in-chief, my beloved wife, Jane. I owe more to her in this as in much else than I could hope to express.

Jim Weingartner

Edwardsville, April 2015

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³⁰³ This bibliography is based on the bibliography provided in *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons*, xv-xx.