

# Haim Blanc's life was long

enough to establish him as a linguist of international standing. Lamentably, it was far too short for this unique scholar and exceptional human being to exhaust his great talents. When he died in Jerusalem ten years ago he was only 58 years of age.

Three different countries were home to the young Blanc before he finally made Jerusalem his permanent home. He was born on 25 July 1926 in Cernauti, Rumania, where his parents, Nathan and Chava Blanc, had recently moved from Dunaevcy. In 1933, his family again emigrated, this time to France, where Haim lived until the age of thirteen. On the eve of World War II, the family left for New York. Haim was to reside in the United States for nine years. As a result of these peregrinations, French and English became the languages of Haim's upbringing and education, though he spoke Yiddish and Hebrew from childhood and was at home in several other languages as well.

Shortly after entering Harvard University in 1944, Haim enlisted in the United States Army and was eventually posted to Europe as a liaison officer to the French in the occupied Austria. There he met Jewish emissaries from Palestine who were involved in the clandestine immigration of Jews from newly-liberated Europe to Palestine, then still under the British mandate. Leaving the army in 1945, Haim returned to Harvard and in 1948 completed his B. A. in linguistics, writing a thesis on Slavic influences on Yiddish under the guidance of Roman Jakobson. In July 1948, immediately upon graduating, Haim set

out for France, where he joined other volunteers to participate in Israel's War of Independence. At his own request he was posted as a platoon commander in the 1st company of the Har'el Brigade of the Palmach. In September 1948, after a short period of active service, Haim was wounded in an artillery barrage at Hartur, on the road to Jerusalem, and was permanently blinded.

Haim went back to the United States for treatment. With his seeing-eye dog, he returned to Jerusalem to continue his studies in the field of Arabic linguistics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He wrote his doctoral thesis under the supervision of the late S. D. Goitein and H. J. Polotsky on the dialect of the Druze community in the Galilee. This work was published in Jerusalem in 1953 as *Studies in North Palestinian Arabic*. In October 1954, Haim married Judith Mogil; in 1955 a daughter, Sara, was born, followed by David (1957) and Jeremiah (1961).

In 1958, Haim returned to Harvard University with a grant that enabled him to conduct research for his influential work *Communal Dialects in Baghdad*, published in 1964. He received numerous awards: the Warburg Prize in 1953-55, a Guggenheim Foundation award in 1965-66 and a second research grant from Harvard University in 1969-70; in 1980 he was awarded the Rothschild prize for his research on Arabic dialectology. After presiding as chair of the Linguistics Department at the Hebrew University in the 1970s, Haim transferred to the Department of Arabic Language and Literature. He also held summer positions at UCLA (1964) and Columbia University (1967). Worsening health led to his retirement in 1981.

In *Communal Dialects in Baghdad*, Haim succinctly provided a comprehensive description of the *gelet-geltu* dialect types in that city, relating the contemporary socio-linguistic situation to its historical roots. Hailed as a breakthrough in Arabic dialectology as well as in socio-linguistics, this work has since had an impact on many Arabic dialectological studies. Six years later, Blanc turned to the Bedouins, publishing a short but exhaustive description of the Negev dialect in 1970, and then collaborating with Dr. Frank Stewart on a study of the dialect of the neighbouring Sinai Desert. This project was regrettably interrupted by his illness and death.

His numerous papers on the Egyptian (Cairene) dialect are, without a doubt, among the most original in their field. Among other things, these works set out to reconstruct certain phonetic and phonological features which were current in the dialect of Cairo in centuries past, drawing information from the late medieval and early modern transcriptions in Arabic, Latin, and Hebrew scripts, and incorporating oral evidence culled from speakers of "marginal" sub-dialects.

Haim's main dialectal studies often went beyond the confines of a specific dialect to tackle major issues in Arabic dialectology. Such is, for instance, his seminal research on "Dual and Pseudo-Dual in Arabic Dialects" (1970). His interest in the history of the linguistic phenomena he discussed in these works soon brought him to medieval Arab grammarians such as Sibawayhi, Ibn Jinni and others. His discussion of medieval linguistic concepts was by no means detached from his interest in modern Arabic dialects, as is evident in these and other articles. Another topic that captured Blanc's imagination was the process of standardization in modern Arabic and the stylistic variation in the language that present day Arabs use orally on semi-formal occasions or when educated Arabs of different regions speak to one another.

Less widely known are Blanc's writings on Israeli Hebrew. He was one of the first scholars in Israel to view modern Hebrew as a new linguistic system, with some major features that are systematically different from Biblical or Mishnaic Hebrew. His papers *Hebrew in Israel: Trends and Problems* (1957), *Some Yiddish Influences in Israeli Hebrew* (1965) and *The Israeli koine as an emergent national standard* (1986) are but a few examples of Blanc's interest in this new-old language. He also embarked on a project to transcribe and analyse some spoken texts of Israeli Hebrew. In dealing with Hebrew, however, Blanc did not stop at a description of a linguistic system. He went beyond that to produce a full-fledged "course" on Israeli linguistics (1961), the novel feature of which was to teach the Hebrew actually spoken in Israel rather than the eclectic language we find in many of the textbooks that were then in circulation (and still are to a great extent). Finally, Blanc set out in the 1950s to popularise his

unorthodox approach to Israeli Hebrew by publishing a language column in an Israeli cultural journal called *Masa*. Many of the readers of that column, who had hitherto been exposed to a prescriptive and puristic approach, were at first shocked by Blanc's descriptive method as well as by his "irreverent" treatment of the rigid, conservative attitudes then prevalent in some Israeli linguistic circles. Finally, Haim turned his attention on more than one occasion to contemporary Arab politics and their socio-cultural background factors.

His numerous students in Israel and abroad will remember Haim Blanc as a man who taught them not only Arabic linguistics but also — and above all — a humane approach to scholarship. He always projected the image of one who believed in our capability to solve many of the intractable problems in the study of "the language of human beings" (this was, incidentally, the name of his language column in *Masa*), but who, at the same time, readily admitted the limits of scholarly investigation. These two apparent extremes, self-assurance and modesty, very often found their expression (and meeting point) in his inexorable sense of humour. At times, a novice in one of his courses would ask him a thorny question to which research had no ready answer ("What is the etymology of x?" for example). "Do you want the long answer or the short one?," Blanc would ask the enquirer. "The short one," the student would reply; whereupon the distinguished professor would be heard to say, to the surprise of everyone present, "I don't know."

Haim was in no way an ivory-tower scholar. His interest in the Israeli-Arab conflict and in the predicament of the Palestinian nation was evident to all his friends. In contemporary Israeli terms, he was regarded as extremely dovish and was always surrounded by Palestinians from Israel and, later on, from the Occupied Territories. He was often able to work most amicably with Arabs in Israeli and American universities even in times of crisis and extreme tension. He would have certainly cherished the prospect of peace between the speakers of the two languages he so lovingly researched, between Palestinians and Israelis.

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