Personalia

In memoriam Stanislaw Chojnacki (1915–2010)
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Professor Stanislaw Chojnacki, librarian, museologist, art historian, educator and horticulturalist, was born in Riga, Latvia on 1 October 1915, and died in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, on 3 July 2010 aged 95. His funeral took place at St. Casimir’s Church, Sudbury and Professors Mulugeta Wodajo and Aklilu Habte convened a memorial service in Washington DC on 2 November 2010, attended by many former colleagues and other friends from Ethiopia.

Chojnacki’s earliest years were Europe-oriented, but the greater part of his professional life was involved with Ethiopia. His first university studies were in law in Warsaw whence he travelled to Paris, enrolling at the Sorbonne. His educational career was interrupted in 1939 by the German invasion of Poland. As he later recalled, he devoted five days to his motherland’s defence, before he was captured and spent the next five years as a prisoner-of-war in Germany. At the termination of hostilities in 1945 he went to Rome to assist with a Polish Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) publishing project, after which he emigrated to Canada, where he joined the University of Montreal, and took an MA in Slavonic studies.

That was the time when Dr Lucien Matte, director of Addis Abäba’s Täfäri Mäkonnen School, was chosen by the Emperor to establish the country’s first college of higher education. Modern education in this post-liberation period had been established only a decade earlier, so that not many students were adequately qualified. Initially no more than 71 in number, they were for the most part boarders. This meant that Chojnacki and his colleagues had closer relations with them than only a few years later, when student numbers began to rise.

Dr Matte, a French Canadian Jesuit, recruited mainly Roman Catholics, many of them refugees from Eastern Europe. For the post of Librarian he approached Chojnacki, who had studied librarianship in Montreal, and came from a scholarly family interested in the outside world – his father was a keen book collector and he himself read and travelled widely. He was surprised when Matte phoned to offer him the post of Librarian of the University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA). Knowing little about Africa, Chojnacki asked Matte in what part of Canada Addis Abäba was situated.
That little point solved Chojnacki willingly accepted the offered employment. Thereafter he took a keen interest in Ethiopia, and, unlike many librarians, read most of the books he ordered.

Chojnacki, as the first librarian of UCAA, was largely free to build up its library as he wished. Education at the college was based mainly on general survey courses on world cultures, but, realising that the students needed to know more about their own country, he succeeded in purchasing a core of works on Ethiopia. This was relatively easy before the establishment of African Studies Programs in North America and elsewhere, for works on Africa could be obtained for the picking, and Chojnacki soon built up good relations with a second-hand bookseller in Britain.

Chojnacki likewise began the collection of Ethiopian ethnographic objects, many of which he collected himself. Once while walking in a remote part of northern Ethiopia he suddenly came upon a local inhabitant with an outlandish-looking dagger tied to his waist. He and the owner had no language in common, and thus relied on signs. The man had no interest in money, but took a liking to the professor’s shirt. A deal was thereupon struck, as a result of which the librarian returned to his hotel bare-chested, but in possession of the cherished weapon, which was duly displayed, along with other ethnographic acquisitions, above the shelves in the library. He always claimed that this location caused the students to look on such articles with enhanced interest and respect. He also founded a student Ethnological Society, the Bulletin of which ran from 1953 to 1961, and was reprinted in 2002. One of the founders of the Horticultural Society of Ethiopia he organised the UCAA’s gardens. The indigenous trees he planted, now fully grown, are bringing shade and fresh air to the Arat Kilo campus. The Bulletin of the Horticultural Society of Ethiopia published numerous articles by him: on growing African violets, greenhouse gardening, shrubs and trees grown in Ethiopia, lilies, azaleas, and dry weather gardening. He also collected zoological specimens, especially butterflies, which were later transferred to Addis Ababa’s Natural History Museum and persuaded students, by whom he was known as “Hoy”, to go with him out of the capital to enjoy and sketch country scenes.

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Haile Sellassie I University (HSIU) later Addis Ababa University (AAU) was founded in 1961 to replace the UCAA. This was followed in the same year by the founding of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES). In the course of these developments Chojnacki was transferred to the newly established Institute. He became its first Librarian and Museum Curator, as well as Co-Editor, with Richard Pankhurst, of the Journal of Ethiopian Studies (JES) and the first volume of a Dictionary of Ethiopian Biography (1975).
The IES was situated in the Emperor’s former Palace, and, benefiting from the monarch’s life-long interest, the Institute was set up at minimum cost. As heir to the UCAA, it inherited the latter’s library on Ethiopia and virtually all its ethnographic collection. Books and artefacts were transported by the Imperial Bodyguard from the old site at Arat Kilo to the new at Saddast Kilo without any cost to the University.

The transition from College to University was effected wherever possible by staff transfers, rather than by new appointments. Personnel were thus transferred to the IES from both the UCAA and from another Government institution: the National Library of Ethiopia. Chojnacki, Librarian of the UCAA, thus became Librarian of the IES. Richard Pankhurst, history professor in the UCAA, was appointed Director of IES, while continuing his teaching commitments. Stephen Wright, an English librarian in the National Library, was made the IES librarian for works in Amharic. Rita Pankhurst, too, was transferred from the National Library, to become the first University Librarian, and thereby the first librarian of the newly erected Kennedy Library, built with US funds and called after the assassinated President Kennedy. This juggling of staff was achieved without any significant increase in the Government payroll.

Chojnacki, an Ethiopicist in his own right, kept abreast of research in the area and, in 1966, with Richard Pankhurst, convened the First International Conference of Ethiopian Studies to take place on Ethiopian soil. He was later involved in the International Conferences in the History of Ethiopian Art. Throughout this time he enjoyed close ties with other scholars, and this enabled him to enlist their help in his acquisitions programme. Every year he undertook purchasing forays to Asmāra, Harār and Dørre Dawa. He built up an extensive manuscript microfilm collection by obtaining copies of films taken by Ernst Hammerschmidt, UNESCO and the US-based Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, as well as European and other diplomatic papers on Ethiopia filmed by Sven Rubenson. To familiarise readers with recent publications on Ethiopia he produced Ethiopian Publications, an annual listing of books and articles printed on Ethiopia, and several other bibliographical works, including a Register of Current Research on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, edited in collaboration with Richard Pankhurst. In the course of producing these publications he trained several library assistants in bibliography, among them Ṣaylā Mäsqāl Gābrā Wāłd and Māṛgā Dīro. Chojnacki joined other librarians in pressing for a law of deposit for printed materials but was no more successful than they were in getting one enacted. The IES Library nonetheless grew steadily under his stewardship. His achievement may be seen in the fact that the IES library, which he had built up from scratch, at the time of his retirement in 1975 numbered over 10,600 works in Ethiopian and some 14,350 in foreign languages, while the Museum housed almost 5,500 ethnological objects.
The Institute’s museum, of which the Emperor was very proud, and which he often inspected, was regularly seen by visiting heads-of-state. In 1965, finding that the expansion of tourism and growing foreign interest in Ethiopian art was leading to a serious drain of antiquities from the country, Chojnacki founded a Committee for the Preservation and Restoration of Old Ethiopian Paintings. It evolved in 1968 into the Society of Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (SOFIES) which exists to this day. Both organisations purchased works of art for the museum, which, regrettably, had, and still has, no acquisitions budget. Despite all difficulties Chojnacki developed the world’s finest collection of Ethiopian icons.

He won the support of a dedicated band of followers, most notably Dägafe Gäbrä-Şadaq, who succeeded him as IES Librarian, Garma Fassaḥa who, on leaving Ethiopia, continued with museum work at the Völkerkunde Museum in Munich, and Ṭlaye Gäbrä-Mādḥan, who was always ready to help him in his research.

In 1970 the Emperor awarded Chojnacki the “Star of Ethiopia” and the AAU Senate decided in 2010 that the Museum should be called after him.

Chojnacki was a prolific author, writing on such diverse topics as forestry problems, foreign travellers to Ethiopia and the history of the Ethiopian flag, on which he published three articles. Initially interested in modern Ethiopian art, Chojnacki encouraged contemporary Ethiopian artists. He began by writing in Ethiopia Observer about some post-Liberation foreign trained ones, such as Ṣkunder (Skunder), Gäbrä Krāstos and Wärqu Goššu, but also drew attention to talented lesser known younger artists, such as Danə’el Tayyä from whom he commissioned a portrait.

It is, however, a historian of traditional Ethiopian Christian art, who opened up Ethiopian art history as a field of Ethiopian Studies, that he made his most outstanding contribution. Some of his earliest articles appeared in the JES, and included his “Short Introduction to Ethiopian Painting” (1964) and “Notes on art in Ethiopia in the 16th century: an enquiry into the unknown” (1971). These were followed by detailed studies of specific aspects of Ethiopian iconography, many in his pioneering Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting (1983). There followed two further important works: Ethiopian Icons (2000), a monumental beautifully reproduced catalogue of the IES icon collection which he had done so much to build, and Ethiopian Crosses (2006), an important aspect of Ethiopian faith and creativity.

Throughout his life Stanislaw Chojnacki travelled and read widely and developed many interests, though political affairs were not one of these. He did not listen to the radio news nor read newspapers, declaring that if a matter were important enough people would soon tell him about it. Richard Pankhurst, who worked closely with him, and often saw him daily, had a constructive and trouble-free relationship, can testify to his dedication to
the Institute and to Ethiopian Studies in general. Chojnacki encouraged and advised Rita Pankhurst on her gardening pursuits and she enjoyed discussing contemporary Ethiopian art with him. His picturesque and idiosyncratic English will be remembered by many of his British friends. He would refer to the waste paper basket as the wasting paper box – a not inept description.

Chojnacki returned to Canada in 1976 and was given a leading position in the Sudbury University Library until his retirement in 1986, when he became Emeritus Professor of that University. He continued to live in Sudbury for the last thirty-four years of his life, with frequent travels to friends in distant parts. He also usually attended, and presented papers to the German-based scholarly society, Orbis Aethiopicus, which published a Festschrift in his honour in 1992 and designated him a Most Distinguished Fellow of the society.

Though a citizen of the world and a resident of Canada, when this became possible he was happy to go back to Poland to visit his family and take an interest in the education of its younger members. He also gave scholarships to students to attend the John Paul II University in Lublin. Throughout his life he maintained his affectionate links with the Ethiopian people and his love for the land of his birth.

Select Bibliography of Stanislaw Chojnacki

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* The list includes only titles not compiled in two former bibliographies of Chojnacki’s contributions; see SCHOLZ 1992: xvii–xx (bibliography 1959–1990) and RAUNIG – ASFA WOSSEN ASSERATE 2007: xi–xii (bibliography since 1990).


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2010 Twenty-five Years of Service at the University College of Addis Ababa and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University (formerly Haile Sellase I University), between 1950 and 1975, Toronto [s.n.].

Other Relevant Literature


Obituary

Sudbury Star, 6 July 2010

In memoriam Edward Ullendorff (1920–2011)

MICHAEL A. KNIBB – King’s College London

Edward Ullendorff, who died in Oxford on 6 March 2011 at the age of ninety-one, was the most distinguished and influential scholar in the field of Ethiopian studies in Great Britain in the second half of the twentieth century, and

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