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Luděk Vacín

The Unknown Benno Landsberger

A Biographical Sketch of an Assyriological *Altmeister's*
Development, Exile, and Personal Life

In collaboration
with Jitka Sýkorová

2018

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Cover picture: A rather gaunt BL apparently enduring a bout of depression, Ankara, 1940s. Source: NINO, Kraus Archive (courtesy of the Netherlands Institute for the Near East, Leiden).

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Abbreviations

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Abbreviations used in references to archival sources:

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>AMZV</i> | Archiv ministerstva zahraničních věcí, Praha (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague). |
| <i>AoIL</i> | Altorientalisches Institut, Fakultät für Geschichte, Kunst- und Orientwissenschaften, Universität Leipzig. |
| <i>AUK</i> | Archiv Univerzity Karlovy, Praha (Archive of Charles University, Prague). |
| <i>AŽM</i> | Archiv Židovského muzea, Praha (Archive of the Jewish Museum, Prague). |
| <i>LAJ</i> | Benno Landsberger's Archive Kept by Nathan Wasserman, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (for the catalogue, see http://altorient.gko.uni-leipzig.de/landsberger.html). |
| <i>NpM</i> | Národní muzeum – Náprstkovo muzeum asijských, afrických a amerických kultur, Praha (National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague). |
| <i>ÖStA</i> | Österreichisches Staatsarchiv Wien. |
| <i>PA EKL</i> | Private Archive of Ms Eva Kučerová-Landsbergerová, Frýdek-Místek. |
| <i>SOka FM</i> | Státní okresní archiv, Frýdek-Místek (State District Archive, Frýdek-Místek). |
| <i>SOka Náchod</i> | Státní okresní archiv, Náchod (State District Archive, Náchod). |
| <i>UAL</i> | Universitätsarchiv Leipzig. |
| <i>UBL</i> | Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig. |
| <i>ZAO</i> | Zemský archiv v Opavě (Provincial Archive in Opava). |
| f. | fond (archival collection). |
| fs. | fascikl (dossier). |
| inv. č. | inventární číslo (inventory number). |
| ka. | karton (box). |
| sig. | signatur(a) (call number). |

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This book is dedicated to the memory of our teacher, a student of Benno Landsberger's disciple Lubor Matouš (*1908): Blahoslav Hruška (†2008) was the first to tell both of us who Landsberger was and what his work meant for the science

of Assyriology; not to speak of the anecdotes about Landsberger which he narrated (and possibly doctored) with his unmistakable storyteller's charisma.

Luděk Vacín and Jitka Sýkorová
Hradec Králové and Prague, August 2018

Preface

Originally intended as an article in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Benno Landsberger's death, this work has evolved into a book, which often happened to Landsberger himself. When I began writing, I estimated the scope of the paper at 10 pages. The idea was to find an answer to the question that has always been lingering in my mind with regard to Landsberger: How does it happen that a youngster from a provincial town on the fringe of the then Habsburg Empire chooses Assyriology as his mission? Additional questions followed while more and more new information on his (early) life, career, and personality kept emerging along the way. In the end, the work has about 10 times the page count originally estimated.

As the title suggests, it is not a comprehensive scientific biography of Benno Landsberger, though. Such a work would have to be the product of a much larger project. Yet, considering that merely a single research article devoted solely to the life and work of the "Altmeister" is available (Oelsner 2006), a detailed biographical sketch covering selected stages and aspects of his scholarly development, work, and personal life should do no harm.

The focus of the present book is determined by the sources and their accessibility. Czech archives and libraries, as well as Czech and Polish on-line repositories of historical print material, such as newspapers and school annual reports, kept revealing new details on Landsberger's family, early education, his teachers and their influence on him, etc. The same applies to oral and written testimonies, private correspondence and other valuable items from the family archive. A number of books and research articles in Slavonic languages proved to be indispensable for the contextualization of the primary source material.

I heartily acknowledge the merit of my colleague Jitka Sýkorová, who collected, organized, and carefully checked most of those sources and literature. More than that, she put at my disposal her specialist knowledge of the "Babel-Bibel-Streit" and its repercussions in Central European society of the day, an immensely important contribution to the genesis of this book.

Speaking of the "Babel-Bibel" controversy, which will be shown to have had critical influence on Landsberger's decision to devote to Assyriology and his early scholarly work, a vital piece of evidence supporting my point was found in the Landsberger Nachlass kept in Jerusalem. In general, the Landsberger archives guarded by Nathan Wasserman in Jerusalem and Michael P. Streck in Leipzig yielded a number of interesting and important facts about Landsberger's study years, early work, military service, career prospects and disappointments, personal life, relationship with his students, etc. Regarding Landsberger's relationship with his Leipzig students but also his troubled existence in exile, marked by painful worries for his relatives, the large body of published correspondence with one of his former discip-

les (Schmidt 2014) was of particular importance. Many thanks go again to J. Sýkrová for combing the hundreds of letters for relevant information.

Hopefully, the result of my work with the knowledge from all those diverse and often piecemeal sources fulfills the intended purpose of the publication: to describe and account for Benno Landsberger's origins, development, character, and conduct as a scholar, teacher, and human being in the context of the cultural discourses and historical events that determined his scholarly outlook, career path, and personal life in his European and Turkish periods.

The chronologically arranged narrative should thereby fill a substantial gap in Landsberger's biography both as the first book-length tribute to the "Altmeister" and as a contribution to the historiography of the discipline which until recently has only seldom reflected on her roots, progress, and achievements.

Luděk Vacín
Hradec Králové, August 2018

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Meine Lieben, ... Weiss nicht ob Ihr von Bennos Tod vor circa 3 Monaten hörtet. Er wurde an Cancer operiert u. starb in der Narcose ... Ein grosser Geist, ich sagte immer: ‘Das Licht der Familie.’”¹ This is how Benno Landsberger’s cousin, Margarethe, announced to the relatives in BL’s birthplace the passing of one of the most brilliant and influential Assyriologists of the 20th century, who died on April 26, 1968 in Chicago.²

BL directly shaped the development of the discipline in Central and Western Europe, Turkey, and the United States while the results of his research and teaching have been absorbed by Assyriologists worldwide to such an extent that nowadays they are universally taken as a matter of course without which the academic study of Mesopotamia would be inconceivable anywhere in the world. To name only a few of such major achievements, BL’s works on Sumero-Akkadian lexicography, his concept of “Eigenbegrifflichkeit” of Mesopotamian culture, his contributions to the *CAD*, and his discoveries in the field of Akkadian grammar which he passed on to his students – e.g. the “Landsbergersche Tempuslehre,” the categories of meaning for fientic weak verbs in Semitic, or the classification of word classes in Akkadian – have become the fundamentals for further research on the cuneiform cultures.³

As “a larger-than-life figure,”⁴ a penetrating scholar, captivating teacher and enthralling personality – “ein Original,”⁵ BL became the synonym for an “Altmeis-

1 Letter from Markéta Müller (i.e., Margarethe, née Landsberger), Praia de Botafogo 518, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to Eva Kučerová-Landsbergerová and her parents in Frýdek-Místek, Czechoslovakia, December 29, 1968; kept in *PA EKL*.

2 Since Benno Landsberger’s name will be ubiquitous in this work, I will use his initials only, as appropriate. In order to facilitate orientation in BL’s family relations, genealogical charts are provided in the appendices. Family members mentioned in the book are highlighted in the charts. The charts are based on relevant sections in the magisterial work by Georg Gaugusch (2016, 1745–1750, 3033–3034), combined with information from Ms Eva Kučerová-Landsbergerová. On the Hitschmanns, see Čtvrtečková 2010, 303–308.

3 So far, BL’s research and teaching have been studied by Manfred Müller (1979, 76–80), Joachim Oelsner (2006, 273–284), Michael P. Streck (2009, 356–358). The on-line version of Streck’s paper contains a complete list of courses that BL offered in Leipzig (pp. 35–38). For lists of BL’s lexicographical contributions, see Geers et al. 1950b; Foxvog and Kilmer 1975. On BL as a lexicographer, see Reiner 2002, 5–9. For an analysis of the “Eigenbegrifflichkeit” and its limitations, see Sallaberger 2007. For a critical assessment of BL’s ideas on the Akkadian system of tenses and his conclusions regarding the worldview of the Mesopotamians, see Streck 2003. The full bibliography of BL’s works was published by Anne Draffkorn Kilmer and Johannes Renger (1974). “Festschriften”: the April 1960 issue of *JNES* entitled *Studies Presented to Benno Landsberger on His Seventieth Birthday*; Güterbock and Jacobsen 1965.

4 Reiner 2002, 5.

5 Merzbacher 1990, 1. Eugen Merzbacher was BL’s personal secretary in Turkey during 1943–1947. He read the full text of his memoir at the AOS meeting commemorating the centenary of

ter,”⁶ or doyen of 20th century Assyriology about whom numerous anecdotes continue to be transmitted within the guild. Some of the stories may even not go back to BL or his disciples but may be the products of the imagination of the next generation, proud of having BL in their academic ancestry.⁷ BL is among the very few, if not indeed the only Assyriologist who acquired such a legendary status.⁸

In view of this, I decided to look at “Landsberger – the man.” Specifically, I am concerned with BL’s family background, early education, cultural influences and intellectual incentives, his motivation for the study of Mesopotamia, and his early development as a student and scholar. Additionally, I will discuss BL’s relationship with his family, his efforts to rescue endangered relatives, and his steady concern for his Leipzig students.

When reading the numerous appreciations and obituaries,⁹ it becomes clear that the points mentioned above constitute the greyest area in BL’s biography. Very little has hitherto been known about his youth and personal life,¹⁰ and even the few pieces of information published by people who knew him well must be carefully examined because it turns out that some of them are inaccurate.¹¹

From the viewpoint of the history of science in general, and the historiography of Assyriology in particular, the methodology chosen for this work is what has been called the “biographical approach.” While this method is prone to a number of pitfalls, e.g. the “great man complex” or uncritical appreciation of the respective individual, it has recently yielded important results in general historical research.¹² The

BL, a recording of which can be viewed at

<http://discoverarchive.vanderbilt.edu/xmlui/handle/1803/4342> (accessed August 15, 2018).

6 See, e.g., Müller 1990.

7 E.g., Hruška 1995, 117: “Particularly Landsberger, who used to smoke cigars and drink beer even in class, attracted students from all over Europe.”

8 Thorkild Jacobsen in his Introduction to the English edition of BL’s “Eigenbegrifflichkeit,” Landsberger 1976, 4: “... no present personality in the field is genuine enough, controversial enough, and striking enough to be worth telling anecdotes about.”

9 Geers et al. 1950a; Güterbock 1968–1969; Güterbock 1991; Kienast 1970; Martin 1968; Oppenheim 1968; Petschow 1970; Reiner 1969; von Soden 1965; von Soden 1970; von Soden 1980–1983; von Soden 1982; Tadmor 2007.

10 Summarized by Oelsner (2006, 269–271, 284–285).

11 E.g., von Soden 1970, 2: “Welchen Einfluß auf seinen späteren Lebensweg das Elternhaus und das Gymnasium in Mährisch-Ostrau hatten, ist mir nicht bekannt. Jedenfalls ging er zum Studium nach einem Semester in Prag 1908 nach Leipzig, ...” As noted already by Oelsner (2006, 270), there is an error in each of the two sentences.

12 The “biographical approach” has been very popular in the historiography of 20th century dictatorships. Schmidt (2007, 9) describes the concept as follows: “A book about a single individual in the context of the Third Reich and the Nuremberg war crimes trials obviously involves a number of methodological and conceptual risks. ... Recent biographical approaches, however, have proved to be fruitful in enhancing our understanding of the leadership structure, generational patterns, ideological driving forces and rationalization strategies. Ian Kershaw’s extensive treatment of Hitler’s life, Ulrich Herbert’s compelling analysis of Werner Best, and David Cesarani’s study on Eichmann’s life and crimes have all shown the value of examining a single individual who shaped the character of Nazi genocidal policies and culture. Their work has de-

concept has been successfully applied also in the historiography of exact sciences, as demonstrated for instance by the monographs about physicists Wolfgang Pauli and J. Robert Oppenheimer, or a collective volume about Albert Einstein.¹³ While the historiography of Cuneiform Studies is still in infancy, the “biographical approach” is not entirely alien to her either. Yet, there are only a few more substantial works using this method and those deal largely with the beginnings and early development of Hittitology.¹⁴

Thus, even though the general trend in the history of science, including Assyriology, may be the focus on concepts, ideas, large-scale projects, international networks and the like, instead of writing biographies of individual scholars, I believe that the “biographical approach” can come in useful for the historiography of Assyriology. Considering the current state of research on the discipline’s past, I would even argue that the “biographical approach” should come first in order to lay the “material foundations” for further (and no doubt methodologically more sophisticated) research.

As for the present work, the observation of BL’s background and early intellectual development in the local milieu and broader historical context will contribute to the elucidation of some of the central issues of the discipline’s genesis. For instance, the motivation of some founding fathers for the study of Assyriology and the ways in which it determined her research agenda and methodology back in the day. Similarly, much light will be shed on the origins of the constitutive text that has set the discipline on her own feet but is nowadays held responsible for the apparently never-ending tension and lack of collaboration between Assyriology and Biblical scholarship.

New knowledge on BL’s personality will help explain his appeal as an academic teacher, uncover the inner dynamics of the “Leipziger Schule” at its peak and after its dispersion, as well as enable a better understanding of the reasons for the domination of BL’s disciples in post-war Assyriology. Documents of personal nature also betray many seemingly marginal details, such as glimpses on BL’s and his students’ prewar involvement in the *CAD* project, or ample evidence of incessant collaboration, support, and willingness of senior Assyriologists to help younger colleagues in interwar Central Europe across the boundaries of language, nationality, or religion. The latter point is important not only for further research on the social networks of Assyriologists in a bygone era of the discipline but also for deliberations about her future.

monstrated that a biographical approach can overcome the tension between depicting ‘everyday normality,’ on the one hand, and unprecedented levels of violence and ‘political criminality’ in the Third Reich, on the other.” See further Küpper 2010; Rees 2012 with methodological considerations in the introduction.

13 Enz 2002; Bird and Sherwin 2005; Renn 2005.

14 Oberheid 2007; Velhartická 2015a; Raulwing, van den Hout, and Petersen, forthcoming.