

OBITUARY

Jens Hanssen

THOMAS PHILIPP (1941–2015)

Since Thursday, 11 June 2015, the pen of Germany's most prolific modern Middle East historian rests. Thomas Philipp's scholarly work will live on and inspire new generations of historians of Syria and Arab intellectual history. Although we will miss his humanity and personality, we will carry both within us. We have known for years that Thomas was battling cancer. And yet, when the tragic news of his passing emerged out of Erlangen that Friday, it hit me like a lightning bolt: it could not be; thoughts of denial rushed through my head. Had I not spoken to him just the other day? It felt like it. I checked my inbox: our last correspondence—March . . . three months had passed! And no mention of health concerns. We must have been too busy whipping into shape his two chapters for an edited volume on Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

None of us ever seriously entertained the thought of modern Middle East scholarship bereft of Thomas Philipp's presence. To be sure, Thomas was older and wiser than us. The trademark ascot tie he sported firmly placed him at the height of fashion between 1965 and 1975. And his habit of carrying his Swiss Army knife everywhere he went, and using it whenever half an opportunity arose, was endearingly quaint. But he was of our age, he shared our sense of humor—in fact, he battled the international stigma that Germans have no sense of humor. Thomas was one of us because he shared our worries about US foreign policy and deteriorating politics in the Middle East. He also made us feel that we were part of his world in great measure because he eschewed the formal hierarchies that so stifle the German scholarly community.

I had two epiphanies in the minutes and hours after hearing the devastating message about Thomas' passing. The first was that all of my own scholarly interests turned out to be extensions of Thomas' research interests: the discussion of Beirut's late Ottoman history in my dissertation was in large measure a sequel to his groundbreaking Acre book. My interest in the 19th-century *nahda* was a field that his own dissertation had shaped and that was crowned late last year with his *Jurji Zaydan and the Foundations of Arab Nationalism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2014). My current attempt to place German-Jewish intellectual history in modern Arabic literature is also shaped by Thomas and his generation of German postwar Arabists who grappled with the entangled triangular relationship among the land of Palestine, the State of Israel, and post-Nazi Germany.

The second epiphany was that, in so many ways, Thomas was the generational link between Albert Hourani and today's new intellectual historians. I am aware that to speak of a mentor's academic corpus is to bask, uncomfortably, in the achievements of

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someone who can no longer respond. But to remain silent on the effects and afterlives of Thomas' many, often visionary, scholarly contributions would be to limit him to his albeit larger-than-life, corporal dimension. Theoretical approaches have evolved, but the research topics Thomas explored decades ago have crystallized into vibrant fields in Middle East history. One thinks of the blossoming Arab migration studies, the growing literature on Arabic autobiography, the veritable Arabic to English translation industry, and, most pressing of all, the study of modern Syria.

My inhibition to place myself in relation to Thomas' lifework also stems from the recognition that this role should have much more naturally fallen to his star pupil and direct successor at Erlangen University. Professor Christoph Schumann—my cohort—was suddenly struck down two years ago by the same disease that Thomas was battling. Schumann's cruelly interrupted life and corpus, above all his writings on the active, if fragile, legacy of critical secularism in Arabic thought, shared with Thomas the belief that a better, autochthonous future for the Middle East is possible and indispensable.

I got to know Thomas in 1996 while beginning my doctorate studies. He was the only person to respond to a circular I sent to the few modern Middle East historians tolerated by the German university system. He invited me to Erlangen to discuss my research and to help find German grants. He must have acted out of pity for a student disillusioned by German history departments' disinterest in teaching the modern Middle East, or any non-Western history for that matter. The year 1996 was also when Thomas' father passed away. A professor of medieval Russian history and for many years the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the Free University of Berlin, as well as the founding director of its Osteuropa Institute, Werner Philipp is still remembered at the Free University for building its reputation for rigorous scholarship on Russia that steered clear of Cold War polemics. Werner Philipp was a role model whose recognition Thomas sought throughout his life and whose insistence on documentary evidence and textual interpretation shaped his scholarship.

Thomas grew up in Berlin after World War II and attended the classicist Heese-Gymnasium in Steglitz. He left Berlin for Jerusalem after two years studying Arabic and sociology. At Hebrew University he obtained a BA in sociology and modern Arab history—in the then-mandatory Hebrew language no less—in 1966. From there, he decided to follow the great Viennese Orientalist, Gustav von Grunebaum, to the University of California, Los Angeles, where he not only completed his PhD dissertation on Jurji Zaydan in 1971, but also—and much more importantly—met Mangol (Goli) Bayat, who was doing her PhD on mysticism and dissent in 19th-century Iran with the modern historian of Iran Nikki Keddie and von Grunebaum. Goli, the love of Thomas' life, brought him to the University of Shiraz in Iran, where he held his first academic post in the history department. In 1975, they both moved to Harvard University where they taught on contract until 1983. Thomas quickly made a name for himself with publications on the history of Egyptian women, Arab feminism, Arab Jews and Christians, and Syrian migration to Egypt. During this time, Thomas attracted a motely crew of American "Young Turks" who were to become leading scholars of Ottoman and Syrian history as well as Arabic literature: Eugene Rogan, Hasan Kayali, Najwa al-Qattan, Joshua Landis, and Marilyn Booth, to name only some of the most prominent MESA members today.

Thomas became Professor of Politics and Contemporary History at Erlangen University in 1988, replacing Alexander Schölch, who had unexpectedly died the previous year. No sooner had he acclimated himself in Franconia when he invited his colleagues and former students from the United States and the Middle East to the first of three field-defining conferences on Bilad al-Sham. Under his custody, the Zentrum der Zeitgenössischen Nahostforschung on Erlangen's Bismarckstrasse emerged as the hub of European, American, Arab, and Israeli scholarly exchange and the international signboard for modern Middle East history in Germany. Thomas achieved this feat in large measure because he managed to convince German industrial foundations to fund Syrian studies.

Thomas also pursued the much less convivial practice of translating Arabic historical texts. His coproduced 2,000-page Jabarti translation has made the writing of a canonical figure of modern Arab historiography and an eyewitness to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt fully available to English-reading audiences. What made Thomas' approach to modern Arab history so rare, and unfortunately still all too rare, is that he did not use the frame of modernity to avoid deeper history. Many of our modern Middle East colleagues still conveniently posit that, for better or worse, Napoleon brought modernity to the Middle East. The move to locate the birth of modern Arab history in 1798 or thereabouts means that we do not have to worry about what happened before or how to account for historical continuity across the great Napoleonic divide. Thomas did not fall into the Orientalist perpetuity trap, the return of the ever-same Islamic creed. For him, continuity did not at all represent permanence. Rather, he taught us to conceive of history as the cosmic interplay among context and text, commonality and particularity; material condition and meaning making; structure and agency; imperial and national projections and individual, local, or regional self-imagining. It is in this vein that I have particularly appreciated Thomas' abiding interest in the early modern history of the Mamluks. This interest manifested itself most enduringly in his cooperation with the great, late German scholar of the Arab world, Ulrich Haarmann, which led to their edited volume on *The Mamluks in Egyptian Society and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Thomas' most important book on the early modern period, however, is *Acre: The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian City—World-Economy and Local Politics, 1730–1841* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). It is also a book that garnered controversy because some historians rejected the idea that Palestinians had any history, let alone urban history. But Thomas had learned from his father to eschew polemics, and his Acre book continues to stand as a monument for the Palestinian people's rootedness.

Thomas never self-identified with a particular school of thought, but looking back, perhaps his scholarly approach had a noticeable affinity with Reinhart Kosellek's sense of history. Both shared the view that human thinking, feeling, and acting were shaped by expectations for the future as much as experiences of the past. Time and again, Thomas focused on the historicity of Arab self-views. This is why he took on arduous translation tasks, reenacted the inner lives of *nahḍa* figures, and read very closely 18th- and early 19th-century Arabic chronicles of Palestinian notables.

Thomas was, above all, a real mensch. He took a genuine interest in the travails of junior colleagues and old friends alike and liked to engage both in rounds of squash and whiskey. Luckily, Boston, where he and Goli spent much time with their daughter's

family, was not too far away from Toronto. I would have liked to help him finish his magnum opus, his history of Bilad al-Sham. He regretted deeply that his time was running out. His illness has taken him from us far too soon. But we are grateful for every hour we spent with him.