

IN MEMORIAM

JEAN-PIERRE THIECK
1949–1990

THE YOUNG FRENCH SCHOLAR Jean-Pierre Thieck, who died in Paris just over a month ago at the age of forty-one, was one of the most remarkable students of the Middle East whom his country has ever produced. Using his remarkable gift for languages and for making friends, he immersed himself fully in the life of Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, and finally Istanbul, where he combined regular visits to the Ottoman archives with the post of Turkish correspondent for *Le Monde*. He will be sorely missed.

Jean-Pierre Thieck was born in Paris in 1949, educated at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and then at various Parisian universities, where he studied Arabic and history. His first lengthy visit to the Arab world took place in the early 1970s, when he spent nearly two years in Egypt collecting material for his thesis on Egyptian trade unionism and in particular on the Committee of Workers and Students, which played a significant role in the turbulent politics of the last years before the revolution of 1952. He then moved on to the University of Aix-en-Provence, where he began a second thesis on the economic and social history of nineteenth-century Cairo under the direction of the famous French scholar Professor André Raymond, whose path-breaking study *Artisans et commerçants au Caire* had just been published. Thieck's first task was to study the urban geography of his period, using Ali Mubarak's *Khitat* to map out the location of the major public buildings with the use of computer—certainly one of the first occasions on which such a method had been used in the study of a major Middle Eastern city. This interest in nineteenth-century urban history brought him to Oxford University in 1978 to work with the distinguished Middle Eastern historian Albert Hourani.

Events then forced Thieck to change the direction of his studies. It became clear that the authorities in Cairo, worried about his earlier acquaintance with a number of former members of the defunct Egyptian Communist Party, would not give him a visa for research, and he turned to the study of eighteenth-century Aleppo instead. His first short visit to that city in 1980 proved a great success, as he was able to locate the records of one of its leading merchant families who had kept copies of all their commercial correspondence going back several hundred years. He also began to learn Persian to help him with the study of Aleppo's traditional silk trade with Isfahan, as well as Ottoman Turkish. He went on to complete these studies at the University of Chicago under the supervision of the distinguished Ottoman historian Professor Halil İnalcık.

Thieck returned to the Middle East in 1982 for work in the state archives in Damascus, and then to Beirut, where he was attached to the French research institute, the CERMOC (Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur le Moyen-Orient Contemporaine), and worked closely on the study of Middle Eastern urbanization with the late Michel Seurat. Finally, he moved on to Istanbul to work in the Ottoman archives where, amongst other things, he was very excited to discover a hitherto unknown population census from Aleppo dating from the late eighteenth century. Sadly, he died before he could publish very much of his findings, his only long article being his "Decentralisation ottomane et affirmation urbaine à Aleppe à la fin du XVIIIème siècle," which appeared in a study put out by CERMOC in 1985. This indicates something of the approach which he proposed to follow, beginning with a detailed study of the urban geography of the city, of its quarters and communities, and then going on to examine the important changes beginning to take place which resulted in the development of new modes of communal organization based on a reshaping of relationships among the various ethnic and religious communities and the state.

But Jean-Pierre Thieck was much more than a promising scholar. From the beginning he was fascinated by the politics and the peoples of the contemporary Middle East. It was typical of him that he got into Beirut during the Israeli siege of 1982 to work with the Palestinian Red Crescent in looking after the wounded. I remember one telephone conversation with him from a temporary hospital in an underground car-park in one of the apartment buildings near the Pigeon Rocks. The PLO fighters had just been evacuated by ship, and he and the rest of the volunteers were wondering what would happen next and whether the Israelis would break their agreement not to enter the city. He sounded both scared and defiant, as well as happy in the knowledge that the telephone company could no longer send out bills and that the call was free.

Later he got even more involved with the affairs of the city through his friendship with Michel Seurat, and then, when Seurat was taken hostage, with his wife Mary and her circle of friends, whom he did much to comfort. As always, he was a shrewd observer of politics at ground level, traveling in and around Beirut as much as possible, getting to know members of the various militias, and witnessing the growing sectarianism of the period after 1982. It was he who told me of one significant incident from those days, an Egyptian friend of his being stopped at a road block and getting very upset at being asked what kind of Muslim he was, a question which was still unthinkable in Egypt itself.

Thieck moved on to Istanbul in 1985, where, getting bored by his work in the Archives and in need of money, he obtained employment with *Le Monde*. Then began his second career as a journalist, writing under the pen-name of Michel Farrère, the "Michel" in memory of his friend

Seurat. Once again he traveled all over Turkey in search of a story, making friends and acquaintances everywhere. He was particularly good at making sense of the various trends of opinion among the Kurds, concluding quite early that the majority of them would be content to remain as citizens of Turkey provided they were allowed a greater freedom and political and cultural autonomy. These and other insights found their way into *Le Monde* on a regular basis, as well as articles on important subjects such as the religious revival in Turkey and the implications of the Turkish application to join the European Community, all informed by his detailed knowledge of Turkey's history and culture. These were interspersed with other shrewd observations about the development of modern Turkey, its film festivals, its growing sense of the importance of ecology, and its tiny gay rights movement. More than any other journalist I've met, he fought to have his articles printed just as he had written them and on one famous occasion persuaded *Le Monde* to print two of the paragraphs which its editor had deleted in the form of a letter from its Turkish correspondent, Jean-Pierre himself, some days later.

It was while he was living in Istanbul that he became aware that he had the illness which finally led to his death. This required him to return to France for longer and longer periods of treatment and then to go off to the United States in search of the cure which he always believed would come just in time to save him. There was also some talk of his finding a teaching job at a university like Princeton. But by this time he was too ill and he was forced to return to France for his last few months. I met him for the last time at the Middle East Studies Association meeting in Toronto last November where, for a moment, he was very like his old self, attending the more interesting panels, laughing with friends and, as always, quick to help the younger scholars who came to him for advice. This is how he will be best remembered.

ROGER OWEN

JOSHUA PRAWER
died 30 April 1990

An obituary notice by Sylvia Schein will appear in the July issue.

JOSEPH B. ROBERTS
26 August 1950–20 September 1990

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