

OBITUARIES

David Golan

1927-2019



Professor David Golan, one of the outstanding Israeli classicists, passed away on 12th March 2019 in his home at Nahalal at the age of 91.

Golan was born in Šiauliai (Lithuania) on 4th July 1927 to Moshe Holland and Rachel Shochat. He studied at the Hebrew Gymnasium in Šiauliai. His youth, like that of many of his generation, was marked by the horrors of the Holocaust. With the German occupation of Lithuania, he was deported with his family to a concentration camp in Stutthof (1941) and later transferred to several camps, including one near Dachau. David managed to survive the death march of Spring 1945 owing to the end of the Second World War (hence he considered the day of Germany's unconditional surrender, 7th May 1945, as his second birthday). Then he spent more than two years in a refugee camp in South Italy, where he taught Hebrew to a class of refugees' children. Usually he was reluctant to speak about those difficult years, but at one of our last meetings he remarked that this didactic experience in Italy provided him the opportunity to discover his vocation for teaching. In 1948 he immigrated to Israel (on board the *Altalena*) and started his pedagogic training at the Givat Hashlosha Seminar in Petah Tikva, where he met Malka Peimer (Israeli), whom he married shortly after. She was his devoted wife until her death in 2017. In 1952 they established their life-home in Malka's village, Nahalal. After marriage, on his wife's advice, he decided to change his family name from Holland to Golan (in line with the Russian pronunciation of the name Golland). At Nahalal he worked as a dedicated teacher and pedagogue, as did his wife. During the 50's he was the headmaster of the Nahalal elementary school.

In 1959 David Golan started his studies in History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and, in the course of his M.A. studies, he specialized in ancient history. In 1971 he submitted his doctoral dissertation at the Hebrew University under the supervision of Professor Alexander Fuks, whom he greatly admired as "mensch", teacher and researcher. During his doctoral studies he spent a year in Oxford (University College) as a "recognized" student, having Professor George Cawkwell as his advisor. I remember that he and Malka used to refer in Hebrew to the Oxonian

celebrated scholar as “Cawkwelleynu”, i.e. “our Cawkwell”. He, incidentally, passed away at the age of 99, less than a month before David Golan’s death.

From 1968 until his retirement in 1996 Golan worked in the Department of History at the University of Haifa, first as a lecturer, then as senior lecturer and professor. For five years he was the Head of the History Department; he also held the position of Head of the Classics division at the University of Haifa until his retirement. In one of his Sabbatical leaves at Harvard (1982/3), David had the opportunity of collaborating with Professor Ernst Badian, another great scholar, who had a deep influence on his approach to history.

Unlike many of us, who publish most of our work in English, David Golan published most of his work in Hebrew. For him this appears to have been a sort of commitment to the Israeli culture in general and to his students in particular. His first book, *The History of the Hellenistic World*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983, is a comprehensive work (of 912 pages) that includes aspects of politics, society, culture, religion, history of ideas, mentality and military history. This *magnum opus*, part of a series on the history of Greece and Rome, continues to be the standard textbook for the study of the Hellenistic period in all Israeli universities and colleges. Another of David Golan’s major contribution to the research of Hellenistic history and historiography (this time in English) is *The Res Graeciae in Polybius*, published in the *Bibliotheca di Athenaeum* (Como 1995).

In addition to the Hellenistic world, David Golan had a keen interest in the Roman empire. A few years after the publication of his first book he embarked on a large-scale project in this domain: the Hebrew translation (from Latin) of *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* — an impressive corpus of emperors’ biographies composed in the late fourth and early fifth centuries by an author (possibly more than one) who remains anonymous for us. This project, in which he saw a sort of life-enterprise, was carried out with great skill and diligence in four volumes published, like his book on Hellenistic history, by the Hebrew University Press: *The Life of Hadrianus* (1989), *The Lives of the Antonines* (2006), *The Lives of the Severi* (2009) and *The Soldier Emperors* (2014). Each volume contains an enlightening introduction, an accurate and elegant translation of the Latin text and a learned and highly useful commentary. This monumental enterprise, most of it carried out after his retirement, is of great importance for the large public of Israeli readers and humanist students interested in ancient history, particularly those specializing in the history of Rome. In addition to these books, David Golan published throughout his academic carrier a series of innovative and well written articles, particularly on the Hellenistic period, in prestigious journals in Israel and abroad. The greatest legacy of his scholarship in classical studies consists of his contribution to the dissemination of classics in Hebrew. In recognition for this unique contribution he was elected as honorary member of the Israeli Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies.

During the last decade he used his *cum dignitate otium* at Nahalal for writing on what he regarded as the universal, liberal and profoundly humanistic aspects of Judaism. His reflections on this subject, supported by illuminating comments on Biblical texts and contexts, were published in two books: *Judaism Wherefrom Whereto?* (2011) and *Moshe’s State Vision* (2018). By the end of 2018, about three months before his death, there was a festive meeting held in Nahalal to celebrate the launching of the latter, his last book. At that meeting, I was deeply impressed by the vivid, lucid and pithy way in which David presented his humanistic interpretation of “Torat Moshe”. In addition to his proficiency in Classics and Judaism, Golan was a man of exceptionally vast erudition, like a Renaissance scholar, practically at home in almost every field of science.

If asked to define his profession, I am sure that David would have answered without hesitation: “a teacher”. *Paideia* in its broadest sense was his vocation. He started teaching as a youngster, continued by educating children many years before turning to an academic career in history and classics, then he taught generations of admiring students, both undergraduate and graduate, and continued to teach, albeit in informal ways, groups of devoted audiences until shortly before his death. On the anniversary of his 80th birthday, under the significant title of

Moreh Nevuchim, "A Teacher (or Guide) for the Perplexed", inspired by Maimonides, many of his friends, colleagues and former students from all over the country came to Nahalal to honour him, to celebrate and express their profound gratitude. Many of them were also present at the event organized by the Department of History at the University of Haifa in May 1918 to celebrate his 91st birthday. He was a highly appreciated and cherished colleague, always ready to listen and to provide extremely wise advice based on his scholarship and life-experience.

David Golan had a philosophical attitude to life which stemmed from his temperament, personal experience and vast erudition, particularly from his scholarship in classics and his deep passion for Judaism. In addition to history he always had a vivid interest in philosophy. In his daily life he embodied the principles of the Stoa, first and foremost that of *sophrosyne*. He was a perfect gentleman, one of the most moderate, restrained, self-controlled and generous men I have ever met. He was also equipped with a peculiar sense of sophisticated humour, which was never aggressive. His extremely rich and elegant talk was normally accompanied by a long series of aphorisms in Hebrew, Greek and Latin as well as many modern languages. For almost every situation and problem he could find an appropriate *ad hoc dictum* to share with his interlocutor(s).

David Golan was also a remarkably warm family man. The last two years of his life were starkly shadowed by the loss of Malka, his devoted wife. He is survived by two sons, Amotz and Yoad, and by three grandchildren. *Sit ei terra levis!*

Ephraim David