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In Memoriam

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/6209>

ISSN: 2075-5287

Publisher

Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2009

Electronic reference

Florence Heymann, « Sophie Kessler-Mesguich », *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem* [Online], 20 | 2009, Online since 10 March 2010, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/6209>

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.

© Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem

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In Memoriam

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- 1 Sophie Kessler-Mesguich left us suddenly on February 8, 2010, at the age of 52. We did not have the time to wish her adieu. Sophie, I believe, would not have wanted us to wish her adieu, nor would she have wanted to say it herself, for she may have seen this as a sign of failure. Indeed, when we spoke on the telephone on February 6, she told me she felt better than before her departure to Paris. And though a scheme had been devised to force her to take some rest – she suspected her husband, David, was at the bottom of it – she fully intended to return to Jerusalem as quickly as possible. She told me: “There are projects which I am eager to do, which I didn’t have the time to tell you about, and I am really the only one who knows how to deal with the pile of papers stacked up in my office.” Those who knew Sophie well will admit that this was an irrefutable argument.

Sophie Kessler-Mesguich ת"ו



- 2 I would like to pay tribute to the woman who headed the CRFJ for the last year and a half and who aroused the admiration of everyone. But, over and above this, I would like to remember the woman who was my friend, my closest friend, for the last thirty years. A friend to whom one confides everything, or nearly everything, peppered with the words: “please keep this to yourself!” Sophie left with many of my secrets. I shall continue to live with hers.
- 3 At the end of June 2008, the day after the COS (Strategic Orientation Committee) was due to confirm her appointment, Sophie learned, during a routine examination, that she had suffered a relapse and the cancer, which she believed had been cured, following four years of remission, had metastasized. What a shock! On the phone, she sounded shattered not only by this news but also because of all the questions it raised for a person of her integrity: “Will I be able to head a research center?” “Do I have the right to hide the fact that I am sick?” During this conversation, she asked me: “What would you do in my place?” Of course, I could not put myself in her place, and only her husband, David, and her children, Martin, Laure and Anna had the right to influence her decision.
- 4 When, a few days later, Sophie told me that she was determined to assume her position, I could not prevent myself from thinking that she was making a terrible mistake. But, today, I acknowledge that I was wrong. Sophie experienced much happiness during this year and a half and she took up the challenge she had set herself: to become a great director. The Center was her pride and joy and she spoke about it with great enthusiasm to everyone she met. During one of her last chemotherapy sessions in the oncology department of Hadassah, I heard her tell a nurse excitedly, in her *ivrit shel Shabbat* (“refined Hebrew”), that she was the director of the CRFJ, a Center charged with carrying out research on archaeology, antiquity sciences, traditions and contemporary Israel.

These were not exactly the subjects of conversation the personnel of this cancer ward were used to.

- 5 In the course of her work, Sophie forged remarkable ties. She loved her staff, and they loved her. She appreciated their scientific expertise and intellectual brilliance, but also their friendship, humor, affection and closeness. She, very quickly, told them about her illness and she benefited, in return, from the loyalty and “protection” of her colleagues. I will not hide the fact that she sometimes curtly rejected offers of assistance extended to her. As she often repeated, she had difficulty delegating tasks, particularly because, in her eyes, this meant giving in to the illness. In the last weeks, it occurs that some of us wrote texts, and we would deposit them casually on her desk, saying: “take a look at these if it’s okay.” She would look at them and always found something to correct, for she was a perfectionist. It is due to this perfectionism that she delayed again and again the publication of her thesis. We hope to publish this thesis very soon as part of our publications.
- 6 At the Center, in Sophie’s hierarchy of priorities, after her staff, came in second or even joint first place, the possession of an upholsterer’s needle she always kept on her to enable her to repair the carpet of the staircase. She often came to the Center, on Sundays, and when she didn’t work on urgent files, she would varnish the counter on the ground floor, or wash the windows in the front entrance, she was so obsessed by finger marks she spotted and found it insufferable that this did not bother us as much as it did her.
- 7 It is hard to resume, in a few words, thirty years of friendship, exchanges, confidences, laughter, smiles and intimacy. So I shall limit myself to a few flashbacks: At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, there was first the “you are the cat” episode, then the “diet of the stars” episode.
- 8 The first took place in Paris, during one of my stays with Sophie and David, who lived at the time on rue Linné. Roudoudou was the family cat. Sophie would lock him up at home and didn’t let him get out onto the rooftops. Indeed, a neighbor one day grumbled: “Your cat did his business in our pram!” There was a storm and the cat was very nervous. We were talking about a book and Sophie had climbed onto a chair to get the book out of her Ikea bookcase, which she of course had assembled herself. But the shelving collapsed with a frightening din. The cat went crazy, flying at me with its claws out. Sophie tried to grab it and was attacked in turn. We were both in a pitiable state, terror-stricken, crying, bleeding, unable to cope with an animal who had turned into a wildcat. And, just as in the Marx Brothers’ cabin, in *A Night at the Opera*, which Sophie loved so much, the apartment began to implode with: David, the children, firemen, the dog brigade – for lack of a cat brigade –, we even called a psychologist friend, we were in such angst. We ended up that evening in the emergency ward. Roudoudou did not survive, and I think that Martin, Laure and Anna held me, somewhat, accountable. But, rest assured, I have since developed an excellent rapport with Figaro, Roudoudou’s successor. In Jerusalem, the story was recounted for months and even years and, during Sophie’s subsequent stays here, whenever I presented her to people, the conversation always began with: “Ah, so you are the cat!”
- 9 Then there was the “diet of the stars” episode. Sophie had noticed on the cover of a magazine: “Lose 5 kg. in 15 days with the diet of the stars.” She bought the magazine, followed the diet and lost the said amount of kilos. On her next visit to Jerusalem, she enthusiastically dragged me into the same diet. Every lunchtime, at the Center’s cafeteria, we would scrupulously eat our white cheese and red fruits under the skeptical glare of

our colleagues. I have to admit, Sophie would often add: “what really irks me is to see slim people diet!”

- 10 Sophie also represented the love of Hebrew and the experts have noted how she helped advance Hebrew studies in France. Her doctoral thesis, submitted in 1994, dealt with “*Hebrew studies in France, from François Tissard to Richard Simon (1510-1685)*.” Her Habilitation to supervise research (2000) focused on the theme: “*From Sa’dya Ga’on to the Hebrew Language Academy, ten decades of Hebrew grammatical tradition*.” Before taking up her post as Director of the Center, Sophie served as Professor in Hebrew linguistics and literature at the University of Paris 3 – the new Sorbonne. The projects she was working on, sadly unfinished, included the publication of a work on Hebrew studies in France in the 16th and 17th centuries and, in particular, the compilation, with a French-Israeli team, of a modern Hebrew grammar book in French. We plan, as I have noted, to publish her thesis as part of the Center’s publications and other projects have also been suggested: a Sophie Kessler-Mesguich Fund in our library, an annual study grant in her name and planting a tree to honour her memory in Abu Gosh.
- 11 Beyond these scholarly projects, there are anecdotes. Until Sophie took up her position as Director of the Center, I was her Jerusalemite hotel, just as Sophie and David were my Parisian hotel. Whenever Sophie stayed with me, she would read the newspaper *Haaretz* every morning, not so much for the news, but to identify words and phrases which would become, in the near future, examples of the contemporary Hebrew grammar book she planned to compile. She particularly loved the creativity of terms such as *lehisdengef*, “strolling down Dizengoff” until the next fashionable street.... She would smile at the innovations made by my children who, when I asked them to clear the dishes, would announce to the assembled company: *mi medrabes ha-yom?* (“who is clearing today”), appreciating the forming of *ledrabes* from the French verb “*débarrasser*” (to clear). Other times, she would comment to me: “listen to the way people say *sukeret* (“diabetes”) because of *sukar* (“sugar”), it’s interesting and will surely become accepted Hebrew!” and I, rigidly-normative, would answer: “it’s not *sukeret*, the exact form is *sakeret!*” And how she would exult when someone would say *khole sukeret* (“diabetic”), exclaiming: you see that I was right!”¹
- 12 Hebrew was also in the spotlight when we spent a few days together at *Yaarot ha-Carmet*, a hotel-spa where visitors wander around in towel robes, get massaged and covered in aromatic oils. The day of our arrival, in the restaurant, Sophie asked me: “how does one say robe in Hebrew?” The word *khaluk* didn’t come to my mind then. Since a waitress was passing by, Sophie asked her: *tislekhi li, ekh korim le ze?* (“Please, how does one call this?”) pointing to a lady in a robe who was returning from the buffet with a bowl of ice cream in her hand. The waitress answered; “sorbet.” During the rest of our stay, our robes became sorbets. But I doubt that the word will enter the Hebrew language.
- 13 Hebrew was a language of intimacy between Sophie and me. In Paris, near the rue de l’Essai, there is a Moroccan restaurant which Sophie liked a lot. One evening, we were dining there and, as was often the case, when we didn’t want to be understood by fellow diners, we resorted to Hebrew. So that’s what we did, that evening, in order to talk about some secret or indiscretion, until the gentleman at a neighboring table turned towards us and said: “*efshar et ha-tafrit bevakasha?*” (“could I have the menu, please?”).
- 14 Sophie maintained her laughter and humor to the very last day. She addressed her anger to the illness and its effect on her body. In our last telephone talk, on Saturday evening, she told me that she had started to read again *Á la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. She knew

that the perusal of a few pages by Proust constituted one of my morning rituals. It is Sophie who gave me as a present the Quarto Gallimard edition which holds pride of place on my bedside table. That evening, I said to her: look at page 974 in “*Le Côté de Guermantes I*”, I am sure you will identify with what Proust says about the body and illness.” Did she read these lines? I would like to do so here: “It is in moments of illness that we are compelled to recognize that we do not live alone but chained to a creature of a different realm, whole worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us: our body. A brigand whom we met on the road, perhaps we will succeed in rendering him sensitive to his personal interest, if not to our misfortune. But to ask pity of our body is to discourse with an octopus, for whom what we say has no more sense than the sound of water, and with whom we would be appalled to be condemned to live.”

- 15 Sophie nearly always set out late to catch a taxi, train or plane. But on February 8, she left too soon, much, much too soon... And we miss her so much.
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NOTES

1. An epilogue which Sophie would have greatly appreciated: after I had paid tribute to Sophie, during the memorial ceremony at the CRFJ, on February 26, Professor Moshe Bar-Asher, President of the Hebrew Language Academy, turned towards me and said: “Florence, the exact form is *sukeret*, not *sakeret*!”.