A BOYCHIK FROM THE BRONX

Stanley Insler

I grew up in the Kingsbridge neighborhood of The Bronx, which was essentially a middle-class Jewish neighborhood. All my childhood friends were Jewish, not by choice, but simply out of saturation and proximity. My father was a cultural New York Jew. What I mean is that on the one hand he was orthodox and on the other hand he was quite liberal. He insisted that my mother and subsequently my stepmother keep a kosher home, but every time we ate out, he would eat pork and shellfish. He was not unusual in the least. I don't know whether you remember when Elena Kagan was nominated as a Supreme Court Justice and the Senate held a hearing for her, one particularly contentious senator asked, "Dean Kagan, what do you do on Christmas day?" She replied, "Well, I do what every other Jew in New York does. I eat at a Chinese restaurant and go to the movies." That rang a bell because that's what we did every Christmas.

My father did go to synagogue occasionally, and at the age of eight, I began to accompany him. I also went to Hebrew school on Tuesdays and Thursdays in preparation for my bar mitzvah. We supposedly learned Hebrew. However, the goal was not to study the texts or to understand them. The purpose was to learn to read Hebrew very quickly, and this is what I basically saw when I went to synagogue. Men sitting next to me were reading the prayers and the other tracts at breakneck speed without understanding a single word. So I figured, this won't do. I wanted to know what I was reading and what it meant and how it would all fit together in some kind of way. So I asked my father to buy me a Hebrew grammar and a Hebrew dictionary, and that opened vistas, enormous vistas, to me because a grammar teaches categories of language, inflectional types, and derivational processes. From a grammar you can comprehend that language is a system just like music.

In retrospect I can say that I am forever indebted to my bad Hebrew lessons for driving me to find out how a language works and how one can delve into it. And I must add, with current concerns in the public schools about reading and spelling, I think it essential to teach students the grammar of English. When we want to study Spanish or French or any other language, we get a grammar which presents, as I just mentioned, an idea of what the language looks like as a totality. But when we use our

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Stanley Insler, Salisbury Professor Emeritus of Sanskrit and Comparative Philology, joined the Yale faculty in 1963. He has held the positions of chair of the Department of Linguistics and director of graduate studies, and was an especially active member of the Yale College Course of Studies Committee. Insler specializes in the history and structure of the old languages of India and Iran. His studies include Sanskrit, Vedic, Avesta, Zarathustra, the history of Zoroastrianism, metrical texts of the Pali Buddhist Canon, Indian narrative literature, Silk Road studies, and *The Gathas of Zarathustra*. Among courses he taught were "Old Iranian: Avestan" and "Vedic Poetry." Selected publications include *The Gathas of Zarathustra,* edited with text, translation, and commentary (1975), "The Love of Truth in Ancient Iran," *Pariana,* September 1989, and the chapters "Human Behavior and Good Thinking" and "Zarathustra's Vision" in *An Introduction to the Gathas of Zarathustra* (1989–90).

own language, we have very little sense of how it's put together and how it functions. I truly think the sooner children are exposed to a grammar of English, the sooner they would be able to deal with their own language problems.

I went to public schools and, as Karl Turekian mentioned in his prior talk, the New York City public schools were truly excellent in that period. I received a superb education. Equally superb was the New York Public Library. My mother died when I was eight, and a year later my father remarried. In retrospect I realize that my stepmother was very sweet and very patient. But as a child, I had the fairy-tale version that she was the wicked stepmother. So, on Tuesdays and Thursdays after Hebrew school and on Saturdays, I went to the local branch of the library, where there were excellent librarians. One in particular saw that I was keen to learn about everything, and for the next five or six years she steered me into subjects I should really know: literature, history, some philosophy. I'm thoroughly indebted to her and to the New York Public Library for giving me a solid and broad education that was as important to me as the materials taught in the school system itself.

As for public school, I skipped a couple of grades—they pushed smart kids through quickly in those days—and I entered the Bronx High School of Science in 1951, a unique institution founded in 1938 by Morris Meister, who had the prescient view that New York City needed a scientific secondary school. It was a very interesting place. At Bronx Science we learned advanced physics and chemistry and mathematics and everything one should really know if one wanted to be a scientist of some sort. It was also the original Geeksville. Whereas in most high schools the fellows competed to be on the softball team or the basketball team or the football team, we competed to be on the chess team or the math team or the chemistry team. I vied to be on the debate team because I always loved to shoot off my mouth. And that's where I wound up.

While I was in high school, the Ford Foundation conceived the view that there are a number of students hanging around the high school system who really belong in college. So in the second year of this program, I was catapulted out of two years of high school into Columbia College. I was a street-smart kid from New York, so I didn't feel socially or intellectually deprived. Now, because we six Ford fellows were an experimental group—that is to say, much younger than the other students at Columbia—we had to fulfill the college requirements quickly. We had to complete the courses in the mandatory core curriculum within two years instead of the normal four years permitted regular students. It was somewhat tough insofar as there was little opportunity for electives, but it resulted in the benefit that we had the option to study whatever we wanted during the final two years of college.

As I have mentioned, I was very much interested in language and linguistics, and in those years Columbia had an excellent department in that area of study. There were the famous French phonetician André Martinet, the distinguished semanticist Uriel Weinreich, the inspiring general linguist John Lotts, and several faculty members interested in ancient Indo-European languages. Happily there was Sanskrit, which

I studied for two years along with a number of other strange languages. In this way I received a rounded education in general, historical, and comparative linguistics. My linguistic studies at Columbia taught me two valuable principles that governed my future scholarship. First, certain languages are "genetically related" like living creatures and form closed families. Second, there are laws that govern the development of the elements of such related languages on manifold levels.

In my senior year, I attended a seminar sponsored by Columbia's German department. The speaker was Konstantin Reichardt, a Yale professor who taught Gothic, Old Irish, and his specialty, Old Norse skaldic poetry. After the lecture, Reichardt spoke individually to each of us present and asked about our interests. I mentioned to him that Vedic Sanskrit held a particular fascination for me. He immediately responded by saying the foremost Vedic scholar was Paul Thieme and that he had been teaching at Yale since 1954. They had been colleagues in Göttingen during their student years. Reichardt insisted that I visit Thieme in the near future. However, I wasn't quite ready for graduate school since I was going to graduate from Columbia before my twentieth birthday. Truth is, I had no idea of what I wanted to do in the future although I knew it involved higher education.

Upon graduation I went to England for three weeks with my best friend, Nick. We toured all the famous places on a dime and then returned home. What next? I truly didn't know, but I enjoyed England so much, I decided to return to Europe for four months in the hopes that some grand idea about the future would emerge. It didn't. After I returned home I took a translation job to earn money, but the thought of going to Yale and studying Vedic Sanskrit with Paul Thieme kept swirling around in my head. Thus I made an appointment to visit him in November 1957. Once I met him, I was hooked and applied for admission to the department, then called Indic and Far Eastern Languages. Acceptance came and I enrolled in the Ph.D. program in the fall of 1958.

Paul Thieme had taught in East Germany but fled to the West in 1953, securing a position in Frankfurt before coming to Yale. He was an ebullient man with deep passions. In his personal life he was fascinated by literature, chess problems, and drink. In his scientific life he was fascinated by the *Rigveda,* India's oldest text, and by the system of Sanskrit grammar founded in the fifth century B.C. by Panini, a genius who understood that every language has a deep structure of elements and processes that are projected onto a surface structure, the form of language that is employed by speakers. I worked on both these fields with Thieme at Yale, and they also became the staples of my scholarly interests throughout most of my career.

In his teaching, Thieme was not very systematic, but he was absolutely infectious in transmitting his love of ancient texts and the method for understanding them. It consisted of poetic intuition and the insistence on allowing the texts to speak for themselves rather than injecting our interpretations into them. It is quite amazing to discover that translations of ancient texts like the Hebrew Bible contain more of

the translators' ideas than the thoughts that are expressed in the originals themselves. This principle became seminal to all of my literary investigations.

At Yale I also worked with a curious scholar named Paul Tedesco. Tedesco had gotten his Ph.D. at the University of Vienna writing about Old and Middle Iranian. He became interested in the field just at the time when the great manuscript discoveries from the Silk Road were published in initial versions. France, Germany, and England had run expeditions, starting about 1891 until the beginning of World War I, along the northern and southern fringes of the great Taklamakan Desert, which formed the trade routes that linked Chang'an in eastern China to Kashgar, now the westernmost city in that country. All along these trade routes, Buddhist monks trudged, built monasteries, and wrote down their sacred texts, translated from Sanskrit and Pali (Buddha's language) into the local dialects. Suddenly a huge flood of material came to light, including texts composed in three new Iranian languages soon identified as Parthian, Sogdian, and Khotanese. Tedesco's brilliant contributions to the new material were writing an historical grammar of Sogdian and demonstrating the dialectal relationship among the new languages. From my studies with Tedesco I learned how to deal with intricate problems of historical grammar and interdialectal relationships.

I was extremely happy with my studies in Iranian with Professor Tedesco and Sanskrit with Professor Thieme, and everything was going along splendidly until Professor Thieme got bopped over the head with a steel pipe on Dixwell Avenue. Thieme had received two calls to Germany previously, but he liked being in America and he liked his Yale colleagues. His wife didn't like America. So after the incident she convinced him to accept a recent offer from Tübingen. He then resigned in the spring of 1960. Everyone encouraged me to go to Germany with him since we got along so well. Luckily I was able to obtain a Fulbright grant for two years to complete my studies with him in Germany. I moved to Tübingen in September 1960.

The first year in Germany was difficult because Thieme had serious family problems that occupied his time and mind. But I knew how to work independently by then. Moreover, I had good friends living in Paris and in Rome. I spent long sojourns with them and was able to listen to lectures in Paris by the important scholar Louis Renou. By the beginning of my second year, Thieme was normal again and we worked together again. Moreover, I was off and running with a dissertation topic. Things were good all around. I really polished my German and was even able to spend a semester in Erlangen with the Vedic grammarian Karl Hoffmann.

After the completion of my thesis came the inevitable question: what next? Fortunately, the Ford Foundation believed one could not be a proper Indologist without spending a year in India, so they sent me off to Madras to continue my studies of native grammar among other things. Every day at seven o'clock in the morning I sat with a pundit under a coconut tree reading and discussing, among other texts, a work titled "The Moon Diadem of Inferential Procedures in Panini's Grammar." There was more to my stay in Madras. I took a couple of holidays, let's say, long ones like a month or two. I had purchased a Lambretta motor scooter and so I crisscrossed much of south

India that way, sleeping in villages and making all kinds of friends, absorbing the true essence of the land.

The end of the Madras year was approaching, along with the inescapable question of what was to come next. I had saved money and it was my intention to stay on two more years in India, this time to visit north India. This plan was thwarted at a golden moment by the receipt of a letter from the chairman of the Linguistics department at Yale. He related that the professor of Sanskrit was going on sabbatical for the whole year and wanted me to substitute for him. So, I thought, gee, this solves the problem of what to do next year. I could go back to Yale for a year, save more money, and return to India for five years. India was very inexpensive in those years.

So, to continue the story of what happened when I came back to Yale, I taught Sanskrit at every level and enjoyed it immensely. The students were smart and hard-working; my colleagues very helpful and cordial. But my mind was still fixed on returning to India after the year. However, in the spring of 1964 the chairman called me into his office and said, "We think you're doing a good job. We'd like you to stay on." Hiring somebody in those days was not too difficult and so I said to myself, "Don't be a jerk. You can go back to India anytime but how often is somebody going to offer you a fixed job at Yale?" I took the job and I remained here ever since, teaching, advising, and studying for forty-five years.

We had wonderful students in the old days. Students came prepared, knowing French and German, Latin and Greek. In fact, I had a wonderful student who came from the Classics department of the University of Bucharest. As director of graduate studies (DGS) I used to administer all of the language examinations the first week of class. When it was her turn I gave her a passage from a German article and asked her to translate it verbally into French. She did so perfectly without hesitation. Then, I asked, "Can you translate this passage from Homer into Latin?" She replied, "Should I do it in prose or in verse?" When I inquired how she could do that, she told me that students were required every semester to perform impromptu compositions in both Latin and Greek prose and verse. Mind you, this was on the undergraduate level. She was a remarkable student in every other way until she was seduced by the theories of Chomsky and headed off to MIT after two years at Yale.

My closest colleague at Yale was Warren Cowgill. We worked well together. I taught all of the Indo-Iranian languages. He taught the history of all the other Indo-European languages from Hittite to Old Irish, from Old Norse to Tocharian. He knew all the exacting features of their historical development in his head. Together we produced solidly trained students in Indo-European linguistics for the longest time. I also had students who only wanted to study Sanskrit. A lot of them came from Religious Studies or the Divinity School. Yet I drilled Sanskrit grammar into their heads like the multiplication table.

In 1975 my life changed when I became secretary-treasurer of the American Oriental Society. Founded in 1842 in Boston, the AOS (as it's called) is the third-oldest learned society in the United States. It was brought to Yale by Edward E. Salisbury

and William Dwight Whitney around 1852, and its library is now housed in Sterling Memorial Library. The original purpose of the society was to translate the Bible into all the oriental tongues of the world, but under Salisbury's leadership it became a ranking scholarly organization which publishes a large quarterly journal and a series of monographs. When I took the position in 1975, there was little organization and poor financial advice about its small endowment. Over the years, matters changed, and one colleague could write in a felicitation volume that Stanley Insler had brought the AOS into the twentieth century. I still work for the society as finance director.

In the Linguistics department I served about fourteen years as DGS and twelve years as chairman. In the latter position there was much Sturm und Drang in the 1980s, and I was also kept busy dealing with two Russian members of the department who were the legacy from the former chairman. In 1985 my colleague Cowgill died and I took over his courses in Hittite and Germanic in addition to my own courses and administrative responsibilities. Those years were not easy for me.

As for my scholarly achievements, they are founded upon the global principle that everything is organized according to systems. Furthermore, every system, whether it is language, music, mathematics, chemistry, or biology, is composed of a limited number of discrete elements which combine according to certain rules. These combinatory processes are what impart inner meaning to the system itself. When elements seem out of place, it is important to contemplate that the rules have changed or have been reordered in a different way. Therefore, when pondering a problem, it is valuable to think in terms of analogy; namely, to consider how the elements under consideration may be organized in a fashion similar to another well-understood system. Both nature and our minds could not function without systemization.