IN MEMORIAM

HARRY JOSHUA LEON

The beloved and well-known classicist Harry Joshua Leon, born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on September 4, 1896, died in Austin on December 4, 1967. Harvard awarded him the A.B. in 1918, M.A. in 1919, and Ph.D. in 1927. From 1920 to 1922 he traveled as a Sheldon Fellow through Italy gathering numerous slides of architectural vestiges of Roman civilization; subsequently his lectures, based on that collection and on a similar one gathered when he was a Fulbright Fellow in 1950-51, proved to be so popular that the class had to be moved to ever larger quarters until finally the Academic Center Auditorium became available. His only teaching experience, before joining the staff of the University of Texas, was at the University of Pittsburgh (1922-23). He served as an Instructor for four years, as an Assistant Professor for eight years, and as an Associate Professor for eight years more until his promotion to the rank of Professor (1942). Upon retirement of William J. Battle, he took over the chairmanship of the Department of Classics. He held that chairmanship for twenty years. Under his sagacious guidance, the department grew continuously both in size and in stature.

Harry Leon's bibliography attests to his thorough understanding of the diverse facets of ancient civilization and culture. His knowledge of Greek was profound. At Harvard he studied with the most distinguished American Hellenist of that time, H.W. Smyth; later Dr. Leon assisted him in a highly technical project on Aeschylus. It was however, the Harvard Latinist E.K.Rand who exerted the main influence on Dr. Leon's scholarly activities. It led him

to acquire a precise knowledge of Catullus, Tacitus, and Plautus, and a true appreciation of the masterpieces of Latin literature. At the time of his death he had just sent to the publisher a commented edition of Catullus, which embodies a lifetime's study of his favorite poet. His production also includes original monographs in the field of Judaica. His epigraphical investigations of the Hebrew, Latin, and Greek inscriptions in Roman catacombs prove that large communities of Jews had settled along the Via Appia more than 2000 years ago.

The esteem in which Dr. Leon was held by his peers is evident in his being elected president of three academic organizations: The Classical Society of the American Academy in Rome; the Classical Association of the Middle West and South; The Central District of Phi Beta Kappa. In 1961 he received a Teaching Excellence Award from the Students' Association, and in 1966 he was made an Honorary Life Member of the Texas Foreign Language Association. He was in charge of the Kallah Library Fund of Texas Rabbis and of the Silberstein Scholarship Awards in Hebrew until 1967, and he served on the Editorial Board of the Jewish Apocryphal Literary Series.

Scores of former students have expressed their sorrow at his death in two ways. When a provision in the will established the Leon Memorial Scholarship Fund in Classics with a gift of $10,000, they augmented it with contributions of over $1500. As soon as news of the death was made public, Paul Crume wrote in the Dallas Morning News: "I think that these people who spend most of their lives in the world that is ancient Greece and ancient Rome spend their lives in a kind of perfection. I think that living with perfection, even a dead and innocent perfection, leaves its mark on a human spirit, and it did on Harry Leon." Miss Bertha Casey, who sat in Dr. Leon's

first classes at the University of Texas, and is now one of Texas' most distinguished high school teachers, writes: "Dr. Leon had the happy faculty of combining teaching with research and publication, and we students always benefited from his meticulous scholarship. The love of the classics that shone forth in the career of Dr. Leon, his enthusiasm for his job, the high principles of character that he exemplified and taught will vanish only as his students vanish." Another alumnus expressed his opinion of Dr. Leon anonymously: "It was his mission to introduce ignoramuses like me to the Latin classics. He practically lived them in class, rolling off Vergilian lines with great savor, scaling the Roman heights of De Senectute and descending the depths of Terence's Parasite. I never saw him angry or disheartened--always enthusiastic and cheerful."

Aside from his multiple duties and commitments, Harry Leon found time and energy to build up three fine collections as a bibliophile, as a philatelist, and as a numismatist.

Harry Leon was a man of short height but great dignity. He was a staunch believer in the desirability of classical studies for an educated person. Whenever his administrative chores aroused controversy, he was eager to suggest a compromise. His austere oratory was often broken by a clever witticism. In class his literary explanations were crystal clear, constantly reinforced by pertinent allusions to history or to archaeology.

What we soon learned to respect in Harry Leon during his lifetime and what we now value in his memory is the perfect harmony of scholarship with character. In both appeared the same regard for truth, the same modest use of common sense, the same humaneness and integrity. Vir bonus, dicendi peritus.

His wife Ernestine, a classical scholar in her own right, survived him by only one month. The children are Mrs. Max Samfield of Durham, North Carolina; Benjamin Leon of West Lafayette, Indiana; Mrs. Scott Smith of San Antonio.

Biographical listings of Harry Joshua Leon are to be found in:

Who's Who in America;

Who's Who in the South and Southwest;

Who's Who in American Education;

Who's Who in World Jewry;

Jews in the World of Science;

Directory of American Scholars;

Dictionary of International Biography.

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