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On the Occasion of Wolf Leslau's 100th Birthday

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I spoke with Wolf Leslau recently. The conversation went something like this. "How are you doing?" I asked. "Good," he said, "I'm working on Gogot." "Interesting," I said. "Yes" came the reply. "And it will only take me some few more months to finish." "What then?" I asked. "Then I can start on another dialect, using some data I collected a long time ago. No one has worked on it since," he said. There was an unspoken "can you believe it?" floating in the air. He told me how grateful he was to still be able to work, to still have something that interests him and that engages his mind. He wished me the same good fortune, and I hung up the phone as much in awe as ever of the phenomenon that is Wolf Leslau.

Wolf Leslau is an inspiration to everyone who knows him because his focus on yet another project concerning some problem in Ethiopian studies is as reliable as the rising of tomorrow's sun. This steadfastness was evident at the time of his 75th birthday, when the first volume in his honor – *Ethiopian Studies Dedicated to Wolf Leslau* (Ed. S. Segert and A. Bodrogligeti, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983) – appeared. It was still apparent at his 85th birthday, when the second volume – *Semitic Studies in Honor of Wolf Leslau* (Ed. A. Kaye, 2 v., Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991) – appeared, and at his 90th birthday, when the third volume – *Essays on Gurage Language and Culture Dedicated to Wolf Leslau* (Ed. G. Hudson, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996) – appeared. It is, amazingly, still there today at the occasion of his 100th birthday and the publication of this volume of *Aethiopica*. Only an external force will ever stop Professor Leslau's intellectual march forward.

Professor Leslau was born in Czestochowa, Poland, on November 14, 1906. He began his training in Semitic languages in Vienna and completed his graduate studies at the Sorbonne, under the direction of Marcel Cohen. For most of his career, he was a member of the faculty of the Department of Near Eastern Languages at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). His scholarly work has touched every area of Semitic studies, every area of Ethiopian studies, and some areas of Cushitic studies as well.

He has been recognized for this scholarship through grants and prizes, honorary degrees and dedicated volumes. Despite the remarkable breadth of his scholarship, his strong interests in field research and in ethnography unify his work.

Professor Leslau has achieved all this – hundreds of publications, books, articles, reviews, even recordings – the hard way: through perseverance, determination, and grueling work. He epitomizes *sitzfleisch*. Whatever hardships he has had to endure, both personal and professional, whether at home or in the field, were worth enduring in order to complete the tasks he set for himself. Even a World War II internment camp did not derail his focus, as he managed to produce *Documents Tigrigna* during that period.

Not all his challenges were so grim, of course. The task of teaching Amharic to 1500 Peace Corps volunteers without any educational materials provided the impetus for his Amharic conversation book, Amharic textbook, and English–Amharic dictionary. Professor Leslau has definitely mastered the art of turning necessity to benefit.

Since his 90th birthday in 1996, Professor Leslau has published five books: *Ethiopic Documents: Argobba* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997); *Zway: Ethiopic Documents* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999); *Introductory Grammar of Amharic* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000); *Amharic Cultural Reader* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001, with the late Thomas Kane); and *The Verb in Mäsqän as Compared with other Gurage Dialects* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), along with a number of articles. A much younger person would be justifiably proud of such a record, and yet, given his personal history, we are not even surprised by this achievement.

In some small way, it has been difficult to be Wolf Leslau's student. Whatever hopes a student might have of eventually surpassing the master are for naught. But such a master! He has been consistently generous with his time, generous with his wisdom, and generous with his praise. He took particular interest in Ethiopian students at UCLA over the years, including the well-known linguists Hailu Fulass and the late Abraham Demoz. At every juncture in life, he has risen to the occasion and proved himself to be not only a successful scholar, but an equally successful human being.

The only sorrow on the occasion of Wolf Leslau's 100th birthday is that his beloved wife, Charlotte, is not here to celebrate with him. But we – students and colleagues, family and friends – are grateful that he remains an example to us all. In the words of the well-known Hebrew wish, 'ad me'ah ve'esrim – may he live to 120! I am quite sure Professor Leslau has enough data to keep himself going another 20 years at the very least.