

Jules Piccus – A Personal Remembrance of one of the Founding Fathers of Judaic Studies

By both vocation and avocation Jules Piccus was a philologist, a scholar of old texts, a lover of languages – from the Yiddish that he spoke with his parents to the Hebrew that he learned as a boy to the Spanish that was at the center of his life's work to the French, German, Greek, Arabic and Turkish that were his tools in trade to the Japanese that he took up in retirement – and a lover of words. Let me therefore offer some brief commentary on a few words that describe him: friend, colleague, neighbor.

The word "friend" probably requires the least explanation, and there are other contributors to this volume whose friendship with Jules extended for more than the twenty-five or so years that were granted to me. But if a friend is someone you can talk with about life's little triumphs and defeats, someone you can run to to tell or hear the latest joke, then I'll remember Jules as a friend.

What about the word "colleague"? Once when I looked in on Jules shortly before he died, a respiratory therapist asked me if we were co-workers. Almost without thinking I replied that, yes, we were colleagues, using a term that's more common in academic circles. But in a sense the young man was right: Jules and I worked together, sometimes struggled together. Before I came to the University in 1971, Jules had led the successful struggle to have instruction in Hebrew added to the curriculum. When I arrived I joined Jules, Leonard Ehrlich and others in working for the establishment of a Judaic Studies major, then a program, and finally a department. It was often a struggle, and Jules was always in the front lines. When the major was established, he felt and I agreed that Yiddish should be part of it. Since he had grown up with the language while my Yiddish was book-learned, we decided that I would work with the beginners while he would teach the more advanced students. We were indeed co-workers.

Finally, the word "neighbor." When you think of a good neighbor, you usually think of someone who lives next-door or across the street, someone from whom you can borrow a couple of eggs or a cup of sugar. I never lived on Maplewood Drive, and I didn't ever run to Jules for help with my baking. Jules was my neighbor on the fourth floor of Herter Hall, and he was the good neighbor from whom I could borrow a word or a dictionary.

When we lose a friend and a colleague, it is the family that decides what will be inscribed about him in granite. But each of us carves an epitaph for that friend in his or her own heart. My epitaph for Jules would read, "Here was a man from whom one could borrow a dictionary." It reminds me of Jules Piccus – my friend, my co-worker, my good neighbor.

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