“CONSIGNED TO THE GENIZAH—
BUT FOR ONLY A THIRD OF A CENTURY”

Stefan C. Reif

The following is an edited version of the after-dinner talk given by Professor Stefan Reif during the conference held in his honour. This speech was wide ranging, discussing various parts of Stefan’s career, and included a typically humorous and pointed reminiscence of his three decades at the Unit. The anecdotes were all the more memorable for the manner in which they were presented, and, as Stefan’s thoughts moved from the past to the future, all listened attentively to his expression of confidence that the Unit was in safe and certain hands. With Stefan’s approval, we present below those parts of the address that are most relevant to his work with the Genizah Research Unit, leaving the rest for possible publication in another context.

First, let me express my warm thanks to Ben Outhwaite, Rebecca Jefferson and Siam Bhayro in particular but also to the whole team in the Genizah Research Unit for going to such inordinate lengths in making all the arrangements for this conference and ensuring its overall success. I am also greatly indebted to all of you for coming such long distances to participate, for the important, informative and interesting papers that you have given and will be giving, and for all your kind wishes, both written and oral. In sum, I am deeply grateful and not a little moved by the generosity that Shulie and I have experienced from so many colleagues.

Apart from functioning as the recipient of so much kindness and thoughtfulness, and offering the thanks that are due to all of you, what precisely is the purpose of this presentation by me here this evening? As with all scholarly initiatives, this topic has been the subject of some variance of opinion among all those involved in planning these proceedings. What would indeed be most appropriate for me to undertake this evening?

What immediately occurs is obviously the possibility of another scholarly paper, ideally something utterly dull on the technical, textual variations between one manuscript prayer-book or Genizah fragment and several others. I never seem to be short of something to say
or lacking in data with which to anaesthetise my colleagues in that respect. I am, however, already committed to four such papers this summer so a fifth is perhaps somewhat de trop and there is, after all, a limit even to my imaginativeness and speculation. I am also conscious of the fact that it would raise some questions if I contributed to my own Festschrift. You can, I am sure, imagine the kind of comment that such a contribution would precipitate: ‘Not only does Reif always ensure that his photograph is in every issue of the Unit’s newsletter even when he has stopped editing it; he also has to be a major contributor to the essays in his own honour’!

Perhaps what is called for, then, is a serious analysis of the University of Cambridge, of the University Library, of the Faculty of Oriental Studies and perhaps also of other institutions within the University. I could undertake an assessment of their generosity to staff, their innovation, their intense industry, their social cohesion, their willingness to adjust to all new situations. The slight problem with such an analysis is that a wholly favourable evaluation might lead to questions about integrity and honesty (might, I said, might) while a less than favourable evaluation if, heaven forbid, one could think of anything unfavourable to say, would probably lead to litigation. So it came about that another idea occurred to us all.

What about an accurate assessment of scholars and scholarship I have known in almost forty years of active effort? I began as a postgraduate researcher in the 1960s in the University of London (the recipient of the William Lincoln Shelley studentship, its top award in humanities), held a lectureship at the University of Glasgow in 1968, then taught at Dropsie College in Philadelphia in 1972–73, finally arriving in Cambridge in the summer of 1973, with Shulie and two very young children.

I remember what the late Ezra Fleischer (with whom I corresponded regularly for many years) wrote to me in February 1974 when I had recently moved to Cambridge. Having looked back at my scholarly peregrinations, he remarked that my movements would shame even the Jewish itinerant scholars of the Middle Ages (מיסים טלטליך ממקומם לעמקים יהודים יהודים שלנו בימינו במחמם. ממקום קיםבריג' או מקומ טוב בהなくて, איך איננוحكן מבית את האוותל שאריד יימוי). I never really ascertained whether that comment represented Fleischanerian humour or Fleischanerian sharpness. Perhaps knowing him fairly well, as I later came to do, one may detect a little of each.