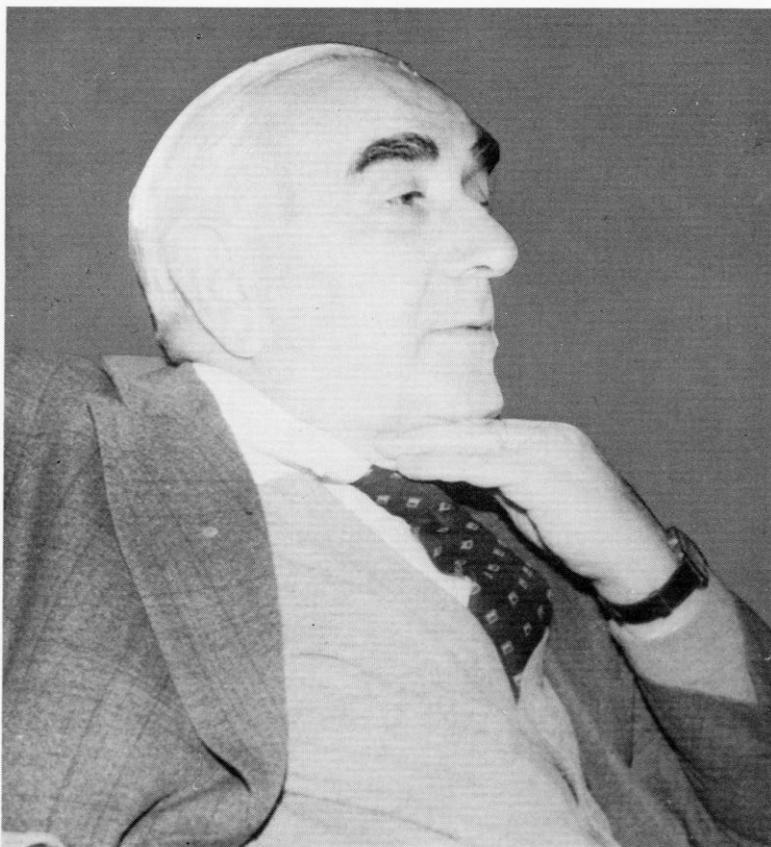


PLATE XXV



STEFAN STRELCYN

STEFAN STRELCYN

1918–1981

I

STEFAN STRELCYN was born at Warsaw on 28 June 1918, the son of Szaja Strelcyn and Cywia, née Frank. He died at Manchester on 19 May 1981, suddenly and at the height of his scholarly achievements. Between those dates lies a career as *éthiopisant* and Semitist which has brought genuine enrichment to our knowledge and understanding of Ethiopian manuscripts, of magical, medical, and botanical texts and lore, as well as of sundry other aspects of Semitic studies.

At Warsaw Strelcyn attended the Gimnazjum Ascola and the Technical Engineering School, but at the age of twenty, in 1938, he left both engineering and Poland; the former because his interests had turned towards oriental studies, and the latter because he could no longer put up with the atmosphere of anti-Semitism so pervasive in Polish life and politics—irrespective of the ideological hue of the regime. He went to Belgium where he enrolled in the Université Libre de Bruxelles and devoted himself to the study of oriental archaeology and philology, including Egyptian and Coptic. Though the latter subsequently ceased to be at the centre of his interests, the smattering (no doubt it was a good deal more in reality) that he admitted having retained proved to be a useful adjunct to his later Ethiopian specialization.

These studies were interrupted by the events of 1940 when he enlisted in the Polish Forces in France until the defeat of the French brought all open fighting to a close. However, Strelcyn was never a defeatist and from 1941 he was a member of the French resistance movement. He was, fortunately, able at the same time to pursue his studies at the ancient university of Montpellier where he specialized in general linguistics and in the history of art (1940–2). Earlier, in 1940, he had married his fellow-Pole Maria Kirzner, his lifelong close companion who was associated with him in all the struggles, vicissitudes, and joys of his career. Later on, in the 1950s and 1960s, she held senior positions in the Polish civil service. She survives him together with the two sons of the marriage, the elder a mathematician in France and the younger a geologist in this country.

In 1944 his courageous activities in the French *résistance* came

to a halt when he was deported to Eutritzsch near Leipzig. It was his impeccable French (a language to which he was devoted throughout his life and of which he was such a notable practitioner) that stood him in such good stead then, for the Germans never suspected him of being a Pole. After the war he was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

In 1945 he resumed his studies, now at the Sorbonne, the *École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes*, and the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*—a period extending up to 1950. His energies and interest had become increasingly focused upon classical Ethiopic (Gə'əz), Amharic, the modern official language, and Ethiopian studies in general. He came under the influence of Marcel Cohen to whom he remained utterly devoted. His closest colleagues, all disciples of Marcel Cohen, were Joseph Tubiana, Roger Schneider, and Maxime Rodinson who have all contributed so signally to Ethiopian and general oriental studies and also continued their ties of intimate friendship with Strelcyn. Tubiana has written a moving tribute to his late friend which I was allowed to see before its publication in the *Journal of Semitic Studies* (spring 1982) and from whose perusal I benefited in the writing of this memoir.

At the behest of Marcel Cohen, Strelcyn turned his attention to two main tasks: the completion of the catalogue of Ethiopic manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris (a work of which Sylvain Grébaut had published several parts but which had not been concluded by him) and an edition of Ethiopian magical prayers. Neither enterprise was published during Strelcyn's sojourn at Paris. In 1949–50 he served as *attaché de recherches* at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and was thus able to make much headway with the two projects commissioned by his *maître*. Marcel Cohen was an exacting teacher, a caring supervisor who, together with his solicitous wife, allowed his closest disciples into his hospitable home, and also exerted a strong influence, perhaps not entirely free of a somewhat imperious element, upon those under his tutelage. Cohen himself had always seemed to me more than a little naïve in his communist attachment, but Strelcyn was a passionate soul underneath his well-modulated exterior and deeply devoted to the amelioration of society and of the individual's lot within it. He fell foul of the French authorities and in the autumn of 1950 he was expelled from France and despatched to a Poland in which he had not lived for twelve years.

His reception at Warsaw was highly gratifying, a consummation to which his scholarly stature and the manner of his departure

from France probably contributed in equal measure. He was soon installed as Associate Professor of Semitic Studies (1950-4) and head of the eponymous department. From 1954 to 1969 he served his university as a full professor. It was thanks to Strelcyn's initiative that in 1962 the Centre of African Studies was founded, under his direction, at the University of Warsaw; and Poland became an internationally recognized nucleus of oriental and African research, sustained by the excellence of Strelcyn's own publications (about which see anon) and by the contributions of the students he had trained.

When he attended the international congress of orientologists at Cambridge, in 1954, his recently published massive catalogue of the Paris Griaule collection and some fine articles, mainly in *GLECS* and the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, had preceded him and provided him with an enviable introduction to his professional colleagues assembled in England. It was at that time that I first met Stefan Strelcyn in person; and having just reviewed his *Erstlingswerk* in enthusiastic terms I was naturally pleased to welcome a new face among the then small band of *éthiopisants*. We got on well from our first meeting, although at that time he was still a little edgy and defensive and had not yet developed the urbane personality his colleagues came to know so well later on. It was his first visit to Britain and to this side of the Iron Curtain since his return to Warsaw, and the scars of his expulsion from France had not yet healed.

The next important stage in Strelcyn's career (and, as it happens, also in the development of our friendship) was his research journey to Ethiopia in 1957-8. This was his first glimpse of the promised land, and he was not disappointed. When I arrived at Addis Ababa, early in 1958, it was with genuine surprise and pleasure that I found Strelcyn ensconced there. He had taken lodgings in a little French pension, while I was established in a somewhat run-down 'native' hostelry. I had little difficulty in persuading him, 'the representative of a socialist country', to move to the more authentic and humbler surroundings occupied by myself. Here we spent many happy weeks together in pursuit of our different purposes and exchanging information and impressions. He had made magnificent use of the opportunities offered, but he suffered a little from the absence in those years of any official representation of his country in Ethiopia. By comparison my passage was infinitely smoother. His conscience and his convictions forbade him at that time to seek any contact with the Palace; I offered to arrange an audience of the Emperor but he

felt he had to decline. It was at a chance meeting, after an Easter church service, that I had an opportunity of presenting him informally to Emperor Haile Sellassie who made an indelible impression on Strelcyn. In later years he remained steadfastly faithful to the monarch and to his memory. Earlier on I had taken him with me to show him northern Ethiopia and Eritrea where I had served in the British Military Administration during the war. These travels consolidated our friendship and revealed Strelcyn's character and knowledge to best advantage.

In the following year, in 1959, Enrico Cerulli, the greatest of *éthiopisants*, convened the first international conference of Ethiopian studies at the Accademia dei Lincei at Rome. Strelcyn was able to attend, but it should be recalled that these relatively frequent journeys abroad entailed a great many problems of finance, organization, and indeed politics. Only someone in the strong academic and general position then held by Strelcyn was able to arrange and to maintain such virtually annual international contacts in the Western world. At Rome he occupied a fairly central stance; his scholarship was now generally recognized and acknowledged; Cerulli thought exceptionally highly of him, and Strelcyn was the only scholar to read two papers to the conference, on Ethiopian plant names and on Ethiopian magic, the twin subjects then absorbing his interests, to which he had made such important contributions. I myself was fortunate in having Strelcyn in the chair for my own paper. Rome also meant a reunion with Marcel Cohen, Tubiana, and Rodinson as well as the definitive confirmation, the decisive accolade, of his entry among the foremost names in the world of Ethiopian scholarship.

In 1961 the British Council facilitated a visit by him to Manchester where C. F. Beckingham and myself were then serving in chairs of Islamic Studies and Semitic languages, respectively. He delivered several lectures in French and participated in teaching and in the discussion of research projects. When, in 1963, I was able to go to Warsaw on a reciprocal visit, I saw him for the first and only time in his native ambience. I came to realize the pivotal position he held in Polish oriental studies. He showed me with pride the impressive rebuilding of Warsaw and the excellent department of Semitic, Ethiopian, and African studies he had established. His colleagues and students spoke with admiration and some awe of the central and influential position he occupied in Poland, a situation which was not without advantage to them. Not all of them were mindful of these benefits when, in the later 1960s, Strelcyn fell on evil days.

When I first arrived at his Warsaw department his colleagues and students were lined up outside the building and gave a splendid rendering of *gaudeamus igitur*—in classical Ethiopic. This was based on a bibliographical curiosum (Strelcyn was always a great collector of these) of which I had been quite unaware until then. In 1899 the young Enno Littmann, later to become one of the outstanding German orientalists, had privately printed, at the Straub Press at Munich, seventy-five copies of his translation into Ethiopic (Gə'əz) of a number of German songs, including *yā'əzeke nətḥässah* (*gaudeamus igitur*), *namsa namsa la'lä kwəllu* ('Deutschland, Deutschland über alles'), as well as birthday odes to Professors Nöldeke and Praetorius. This memoir may possibly contain the first published reference to this literary oddity.

In the summer of 1963 he returned to Manchester to attend the second international conference of Ethiopian studies. He was particularly gratified to see honorary degrees conferred upon his teacher Marcel Cohen and on Enrico Cerulli and H. J. Polotsky. The paper which he read to the congress marked a fresh departure in his scholarly concerns, although it arose from his preoccupation with early medical and botanical texts: henceforth the exploration of the earliest recorded phases of Amharic moved close to the centre of his interests (see presently).

1965 found him on his first visit to Israel attending the international conference of Semitists at Jerusalem. He combined this purpose with the first of several *sondages* in the Faitlovitch Library at Tel Aviv (foreshadowing a later interest, in the footsteps of Stephen Wright, in Ethiopian 'incunabula') and with the checking of some Hebrew manuscripts in several Israeli libraries. Since 1953 he had been preparing, jointly with F. Kupfer, a catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts in the Jewish Historical Institute at Warsaw, but this work of more than a thousand entries has never been published—for political reasons. This restriction and curtailment of objective (and entirely non-political) scholarship had by now begun to cause him a good deal of worry and anguish. The fetters and shackles, the restraints upon the mind, were becoming increasingly irksome to one who wished to be a loyal participant in the socialist experiment but found it hard to accept some of the concomitant phenomena. Yet he remained discreet and circumspect in the expression of such criticisms, even in conversation with his closest friends. He had experienced exile and expulsion before!

His first contact with Israel was not without problems either. Strelcyn was never an observant or a practising Jew, but he wished Israel well. The chauvinistic and discordant noises,

emanating from Mr Begin in opposition, were as uncongenial to him then as they later became with Begin installed in government. It was a poignant irony (to anticipate a little) that, when he was forced to leave Poland in 1969, the Polish authorities compelled him and others to apply for emigration to Israel, in order to castigate them as Zionist lackeys, although Strelcyn wanted to go to England to which he had an entry visa and the offer of an academic post.

To revert to the chronological sequence: the third international conference of Ethiopian studies took place at Addis Ababa in 1966. By now there had occurred a very considerable accretion to the practitioners of Ethiopian studies in many countries, but particularly in Ethiopia itself and in the United States. The position of eminence which Strelcyn occupied in this company was eloquently confirmed when Warsaw was elected, in preference to the United States, as the venue for the next congress. This, alas, was the last time he could represent his country from a position of strength and authority: restrictions on freedom in general, and academic freedom in particular, began to grow apace; and, as so often happens, anti-Semitism in Poland was no longer a private pastime but had once again become an aspect of official policy. A minor victim of this recidivism was the fourth Ethiopian congress scheduled to be held at Warsaw University.

It so happened that the international Haile Sellassie Prize for Ethiopian studies was awarded in 1967 to the Polish scholar Stefan Strelcyn. The Poles felt that even their new policy had to yield before so significant an event and they permitted him to travel to Addis Ababa and to accept the prize, medal and money, from the hands of Emperor Haile Sellassie. But that was the last flicker of light and concession to one who was now increasingly in the doldrums.

The long-drawn-out saga of chicanery and harassment, leading eventually to exile, need not be rehearsed here in detail. These stories are part of all regimes of oppression and appear to attract media coverage in the West on a curiously haphazard and selective basis. Open communication between Strelcyn and his friends in the free world was no longer possible, and messages, often in somewhat garbled forms, reached us by all sorts of channels. The pressure on Strelcyn and his family became very harsh, and the severance of all external contact added to the sense of isolation and abandonment. This is a time when friendship undergoes genuine tests, and the courageous are distinguished from the faint-hearted. Strelcyn was above all a proud man and he watched with dismay,

but without remonstrances, the behaviour of some of his closest colleagues and collaborators.

Meanwhile his friends abroad mustered their resources; there were principally three centres of action: Beckingham at SOAS, London University (by now strategically placed as head of the Near and Middle East department and supported by the then Director of SOAS, Sir Cyril Philips), Tubiana at Paris, and Cerulli at Rome (now in turn President or Vice-President of the Lincei). In the end, London was ready first, and Strelcyn, his wife, and two sons, with little English and fewer physical means (though abundant inner resources), arrived here in November 1969. During the 1969–70 session he served as Visiting Lecturer in Semitic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, but in 1970 James Barr, then Professor of Semitic languages in the University of Manchester, was able to offer him a lectureship, at first on a temporary but soon on a permanent basis, which led to a close professional and personal relationship between these two fine scholars. In 1973 Strelcyn was promoted to a readership in Semitic languages, and shortly before his death in 1981 Manchester University decided to confer upon him a personal professorship. Already in 1976 he had been elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy. He became a naturalized British citizen in 1975.

His colleagues abroad did not relax even after his safe arrival in Britain. Tubiana was soon by his side, and Cerulli organized for him an annual seminar which Strelcyn conducted at Rome during the Easter vacations. Cerulli and the Lincei were a source of constant spiritual and physical support to him. The trauma of Poland had been of massive dimensions, almost overwhelming a man of such delicate sensibility. Henceforth he would shun all public exposure and withdraw from all activities that were not scholarly in the most narrow sense. In 1966 he had been advising UNESCO on Somalia and in 1974 on Ethiopia, but the viciousness and extreme violence of the revolution in Ethiopia made him recoil from that regime in horror—another trauma added to that of Poland, another light extinguished.

II

His arrival in England, the last eleven and a half years of his life, ushers in a prodigious literary activity, so that the output of this period, at first under adverse conditions, equals that of all the preceding years of his career. His bibliography runs to some 130

items, books, articles, and reviews. His last years in particular, since he became joint editor of the *Journal of Semitic Studies* in 1976 (he had also been joint editor of the *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* from 1954 to 1968), produced some magisterial reviews which added very substantially to our knowledge of the relevant bibliography as well as the subject itself. I am thinking here in particular of the volumes published under the auspices of the Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilming Library at Collegeville, Minn., of Hammer-schmidt's Ethiopic manuscripts from Lake Tana, T. L. Kane's work on Amharic literature, and of my own edition and translation of Emperor Haile Sellassie's autobiography, to all of which he was able to add comments, observations, corrections, and general guidance of much importance and value. He was always a scrupulously fair reviewer; and in the very few cases where an aggrieved author felt impelled to engage in controversy he would either silence him by his exquisite courtesy or recoil from contamination with any display of bad manners.

His first book as well as his last one were catalogues of Ethiopian manuscripts: the first was a volume of some 300 pages dealing with the Griaule collection in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris, while the last one described, in 185 choice pages, the Ethiopian manuscripts acquired by the British Library (formerly part of the British Museum) since 1877. He was thus able to deal with the two finest collections of Ethiopian manuscript holdings in the world. During the 1970s he published two further books on this subject, the first about the Ethiopic manuscripts in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester (which I had begun but had had to abandon), and the second a massive tome dealing with the Ethiopian manuscript holdings of the Accademia dei Lincei (the Conti Rossini and Caetani collections). His masterly descriptions of the manuscripts of the British Library, John Rylands, and Conti Rossini were the culmination of long years spent in the pursuit of these studies, but the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale was, in chronological terms, the work of a neophyte—yet it was an accomplished production that had, Athene-like, sprung fully mature from the head of its creator.

It must not be supposed that the writing of such catalogues of Ethiopic manuscripts is a mechanical or routine undertaking. In Strelcyn's hands they represented major contributions to palaeography, manuscript lore, language and literature, art and history. In a series of articles he also described the Ethiopian holdings of the Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine in London and of the Bibliothèque Royale de Bruxelles. It may thus be said that

Strelcyn became the most accomplished connoisseur of Ethiopian manuscripts in our generation. His only friendly rival to this claim would be Dr Getatchew Haile who has been engaged for some time on the description of the thousands of manuscripts micro-filmed in Ethiopia and processed at Collegeville, USA. Perhaps I may be permitted to quote at this point from my review of Strelcyn's 1978 British Library catalogue:

There is, however, one major inaccuracy on p. xiii which is wholly characteristic of the author of this catalogue. He deplores, rightly, the absence of any reliable guide to Ethiopian palaeography and the dating of MSS and then continues: 'The experience of the author of the present catalogue is also insufficient to atone for this lack of information.' In fact, however, the remarkable knowledge and instinct for reliable dating, displayed by Strelcyn in this and previous catalogues, belie the accuracy of his modest disclaimer. (*JRAS* 1979/1, p. 53.)

And this is, indeed, another reason why Ethiopian scholarship has suffered such an irreparable loss by Strelcyn's premature death: during the last year or two of his life he had been engaged on collecting material for a systematic study of Ethiopic palaeography, a subject for which his entire career had constituted an unrivalled preparation. This expertise is now lost, for those who are currently working in this field, even with the benefit of his unpublished notes, will need very many years of experience and habituation to equal his sovereign command of the subject. I may, perhaps, take this opportunity of counselling these epigones not to rush into print without the advice of Getatchew Haile.

Strelcyn's second book, which had also been started at Paris, was published at Warsaw in 1955 under the title *Prières magiques éthiopiennes*. It constituted a veritable encyclopaedia of magical lore and included a consideration of Eastern magic in general. Others had worked in this field before him, but his treatment was infinitely more detailed as well as more comprehensive and included lists of magical names, diseases, plants, animals, as well as an excellent study of the grammatical and syntactical peculiarities of this genre. The book was later on followed, over a long period, by a series of *Einzelstudien* in the form of articles in learned journals. The only sad feature of this very considerable opus was the inclusion, entirely irrelevant in that context, of extracts from A. B. Ranovitch's *Marxist Analysis of Hellenism*—no doubt a *de rigueur* (but profoundly depressing) sop to the powers that be. Tubiana, in his forthcoming obituary (*JSS*, spring 1982), says that 'Strelcyn me confiera plus tard qu'il ne l'avait pas inséré de son plein gré'.

Fortunately (at least for the present obituarist) most of Strelcyn's writings were composed in French (two of his last books were written in English as well as a few more recent articles and reviews), but his third book was in Polish. It is an extract translation of the *Kebra Nagast*, the Ethiopian national saga, together with an introduction and annotation by the learned translator. It was, in Strelcyn's own words, a popular presentation of Ethiopia's premier literary creation for the benefit of his fellow-countrymen, without any claims to originality. Regrettably, I am unable to read this book.

Strelcyn had for many years been the foremost (perhaps the only?) authority on Ethiopian traditional medicine and plants. His two volumes (Warsaw 1968 and Naples 1973, respectively), running together to close on 1,100 pages, are eloquent as well as impressive testimony to this interesting and unhackneyed specialization. Like his catalogues and writings on magic, these two books were in their turn buttressed by a series of supporting and complementing articles. Anyone anywhere in the world desirous of instruction on Ethiopian plants and the traditional pharmacopœia of that country would turn to him and would receive a prompt reply which was as meticulous in factual information as it was patient and courteous in manner.

Apart from his unfinished work on Ethiopic palaeography, there are two other areas (already referred to *en passant*) on which he had published preliminary articles but not yet the comprehensive books of synthesis that were planned: (a) materials for the study of early Amharic, a by-product to some extent of his work on medical and plant names in old manuscripts, were first presented to the 1963 Manchester Congress (*JSS*, spring 1964) and remained a subject of abiding interest to him; (b) the study and collection of all the earliest works printed in Ethiopia itself. Between 1974 and 1980 he published three considerable articles on these 'incunabula' (thus first termed, with deliberate inaccuracy, by Stephen Wright) running together to some 140 pages. In search of these rarities he would travel far and wide and spend many days in libraries poring over such curiosa.

During the last two or three days of his life I repeatedly sought his advice over the telephone on the subject of the *Hebrew Letters of Prester John* on which Charles Beckingham and I were then engaged. In fact, the Publications Officer of SOAS received a letter from him on this subject a day or two after his death. We have dedicated that book (OUP 1982) to the memory of Stefan Strelcyn.

III

In appearance Strelcyn was short and stocky, tending to a measure of portliness in his later years. His eyes were at once humorous and sad. He had a fine voice, and his French had a magnificent authenticity; his Italian was sonorous, while his English (a relatively recent acquisition) and his spoken Hebrew and Amharic were serviceable; on his Polish and his Russian my ignorance compels me to remain mute. When I visited Warsaw as his guest in 1963 he took me to concerts and theatres. Tubiana confirms that he was much attracted to the theatre and that 'il avait beaucoup pratiqué l'art de la diction'. His delivery in whatever language certainly possessed an element of care and deliberation.

He was at all times a man of great courtesy and gentleness; bad manners repelled him. Above all, he had innate dignity. He could at times be slightly ponderous, but he was never pompous. His sense of humour was well developed, and for many years an atmosphere of banter and gentle teasing prevailed between us, whether we met in London or Rome or Addis Ababa. When I scoffed at his excessive devotion to his teacher Marcel Cohen, he would reciprocate with pinpricks aimed at my admiration for my master, H. J. Polotsky; and we would indulge in mock arguments whether Polotsky or Cohen was the greater scholar. When we were unable to meet, we would speak over the telephone every week ever since he came to live in Britain.

Friendship and loyalty mattered to him deeply. His friendships, particularly for his junior colleagues, were of a very unselfish kind, and he would take great pains and endless trouble to assist them in their work and their careers. On the rare occasions when disappointment came he would be profoundly upset. Expulsion, exile, and failure by some to rise up to his human expectations had given him an understandably pessimistic outlook. His own experience of life had taught him the supreme value of loyalty, and no more dependable or loyal friend could be imagined. He was very hurt by colleagues (though he would never remonstrate with them) who were willing to accept invitations from the department, the university, and the country from which he had been extruded. Such spinelessness he would not forget; he called them invertebrates. Similarly, he thought it highly distasteful ('extrêmement dégoûtant') for people who had eagerly sought contact with Emperor Haile Sellassie in good days to disavow and to decry him when things changed in Ethiopia.

He was absolutely steadfast in all circumstances and could be

relied on whatever tribulations life had in store for him or his friends. He was a man of the greatest integrity. When, not very long ago, I resigned from a committee which had to my mind become excessively politicized, he was invited to take my place. We had not discussed the matter, but without a moment's hesitation (so I learnt later) he replied to the invitation in one sentence: 'What makes you think that I am endowed with less of a conscience than the scholar whom you wish me to replace?'

Ever since he returned from his annual visit, almost a pilgrimage, to Rome and to Cerulli and the Lincei, in April 1981, he had complained of heart trouble. When talking to his colleagues at the Near Eastern Department of Manchester University, on 19 May 1981, he suddenly suffered a massive heart attack and was rushed to the adjacent hospital where he died shortly afterwards. His death brought forth quite remarkable testimonies of affection and respect from colleagues and pupils in many lands. And the University of Manchester, with its Acting Vice-Chancellor and his colleague Mervyn Richardson first and foremost, responded with characteristic generosity and tact.

His memory will be cherished wherever Ethiopian studies are cultivated.

EDWARD ULLENDORFF

Note: Cf. J. Tubiana in *JSS*, spring 1982. A full bibliography will appear in the same issue of the *JSS*. See also *The Times*, 23 May 1981.