

Charles E. Townsend In Memoriam*

Charles E. Townsend (1932–2015) was an exceptional scholar, a dedicated teacher, and a loyal friend, who we will dearly miss.

Townsend the Scholar

Townsend's career as a Slavist began when he was drafted and spent a year at the Army Language School in Monterey, California, studying Russian. Upon his release from the Army, Charlie enrolled in graduate studies at Harvard, where he earned his PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures in 1962. From Harvard, Townsend moved on to Princeton, where he served as Chair of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures for 32 years.

Townsend's dissertation, written under the supervision of Horace Lunt, was a linguistic analysis of the 18th-century memoirs of Princess Natal'ja Borisovna Dolgorukaja, which he later published as a book. The Townsend edition of Dolgorukaja's memoirs is now considered a pioneering document in Russian autobiographical and gender studies.

The graduate program that Townsend had been hired to help build was discontinued in 1970, only to be reinstated—thanks largely to Townsend's tenacity—in 1991. For twenty years he managed to continue a research scholar's productivity in the absence of a graduate program.

Townsend's lifetime of achievements is remarkable in its quantity, quality, and scope. Townsend went on to author eight more books and over 50 scholarly articles addressing an impressive range of issues in Slavic phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics and exploring the form-function dynamic across the contexts of various literary and spoken registers. A dual purpose prevailed throughout his work, combining intellectual precision with pedagogical application, demonstrating the role that linguistic description can play in the language classroom. The range of languages in Townsend's mastery provided

* Thanks to Michael Wachtel and Michael Launer for portions of the content in this tribute.

the means for his sustained commitment to contrastive analysis of languages.

Townsend spent a year in Prague in 1968, and that marked the beginning of his fascination with Czech. Although he was invited by the East-Slavic Institute for a project focused on Russian, Townsend was giving lectures in Czech within three months of his arrival. That year was of course pivotal in Czech history, with both the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion, which he and his family witnessed, cementing his affinity for the Czech language and people.

Townsend's *A description of spoken Prague Czech* (1990) was a brave piece of scholarship, documenting the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical differences between the official Czech literary language (*spisovná čeština*, a rather artificial code) and the language spoken in Prague (*běžně mluvená pražština*). Though there had been some prior descriptions of spoken Czech, none were as comprehensive or specifically targeted at the Prague norm. It is hard for people today to imagine how daring it was for an American to undertake a survey of any kind in communist Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. At that time the government saw the spoken language as an unruly force and did not approve of such research. Townsend created a book that brought to life the language of the people of Prague in a way that was impossible for local linguists of the time. A native Czech and Bohemist living in the west proclaimed "This is an amazing book. As I read it, I discovered what my mother tongue really is."

Townsend coauthored *Common and comparative Slavic* (1996), a book that tracked the evolution of Slavic from Indo-European and detailed the relationships among all of the Slavic languages. This volume grew from Townsend's trove of handouts, reflecting decades of research, and has become a classic in the field. It was republished in both German (2000) and Korean (2011).

A reference grammar of Czech coauthored by Townsend was published in 2000 and released in digital format by the Duke University Slavic and East European Language Resource Center in 2002, where it is available at: <http://www.seelrc.org:8080/grammar/mainframe.jsp?nLanguageID=2>.

To celebrate his scholarly accomplishments, and to mark his seventieth birthday and the year of his retirement from Princeton, in 2002 Townsend's colleagues presented him with *Where one's tongue rules well: A Festschrift for Charles E. Townsend* (*Indiana Slavic studies*, 13). Twenty-one

Slavic linguists published articles in Townsend's honor in that volume and an additional fifty-two colleagues signed the *Tabula Gratuloria*.

Professor Townsend the Teacher

Professor Townsend was a legendary figure in the classroom. The high expectations he set for his students were only surpassed by the demands he made on himself and his unflagging devotion to his students. The annual Slavic Christmas party at Princeton always culminated with a performance of "The Twelve Days of Russian Class," with its opening line: "On the first day of Russian class my teacher said to me: If you work hard you can get a 'C'." At the memorial held in September of this year, Professor Townsend's students recounted how he routinely went out of his way on their behalf—locating needed stipends, pulling strings to secure jobs, even confronting parents and administrators in order to promote his students' academic pursuits.

Professor Townsend spent four years as an assistant professor at Harvard, where he taught year-round, including summer intensive second-year Russian courses. At Princeton, Professor Townsend regularly taught 20 hours a week, in addition to his duties as chair. He developed the most rigorous undergraduate Russian program in the country, which covered not only the grammar, but also the linguistic theory behind it. If students were interested in Czech, Polish, or Bulgarian, he would arrange a course for them, even if there was only one taker. Instead of vacationing, Professor Townsend taught intensive Russian courses in the Summer Workshop in Slavic and East European Languages at Indiana University from 1972 to 1981. Two weeks after a major operation for colon cancer in 1985, Professor Townsend was back in the classroom, and he taught through his entire chemotherapy treatment, not missing a single class. After retiring in 2002, Professor Townsend continued to teach languages, both privately and for Berlitz.

In the course of his teaching career, Professor Townsend produced a raft of textbooks and classroom materials that are a testimony to both his mastery of language pedagogy and his enduring enthusiasm for teaching.

In his landmark *Russian word formation* (1968, 1975), Professor Townsend put flesh on Roman Jakobson's proposal of a one-stem verb system. This text is still the greatest book of its kind, guiding the reader through the myriad morphological complexities of a language in which the exceptions always seem to outnumber the rules. When his student

Michael Launer suggested that a claim in that book might be incorrect, Professor Townsend's response was: "Fine, there's your dissertation topic—prove me wrong." Professor Townsend then shepherded the project through to completion, meeting with Launer on Saturdays and making special arrangements so that the dissertation could be submitted in time to meet an urgent deadline. Professor Townsend's second-year textbook *Continuing with Russian* (1970), used by generations of students, integrated the concepts and structures elucidated in *Russian Word-Formation* with lessons on the finer points of Russian grammar.

Czech through Russian (1981, 2000) is a thorough and precise guide to the linguistic transition Professor Townsend himself undertook in Prague in 1968, with all the perks and pitfalls clearly exposed. This book builds on his lifetime attraction to close cross-linguistic comparison, and is an invaluable bridge for students using Russian as a gateway to other Slavic languages.

In the early 1980s Professor Townsend spent his summers leading a team of colleagues in authoring an ambitious project, the Ohio State University *Czech individualized instruction* materials (1984), culminating in six volumes, plus 85 audiotapes and instructor's manuals. These materials provided comprehensive instruction for all students, from raw beginner to advanced.

Russian readings for close analysis (1993) supplies authentic texts penned by a range of authors from Pushkin to Yeltsin with "copious and comprehensive" (in the author's own words) annotations for advanced learners.

In 1994, Townsend was named an honorary member of the Czech Linguistic Society. That same year he received an award for "distinguished contribution to the profession" from the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. Also in the mid-1990s, Townsend was President of the National Association of Teachers of Czech (later renamed the International Association of Teachers of Czech).

It is no exaggeration to say that most of the Americans who have studied Russian or Czech in the past half-century, along with their teachers, have been influenced directly or indirectly by Professor Townsend's legacy.

Charlie Our Friend

Charlie was a faithful companion who never shied away from sharing his opinions. It wasn't always easy being Charlie, delivering up the "unvarnished truth," as he called it. But we knew that we could depend on him, that he would never backpedal or dissemble.

Charlie liked to refer to himself as a "jock." He played varsity football and basketball in high school and in Cambridge took up tennis and squash. Charlie regularly defeated all colleagues and students who were brave (or foolish) enough to face off with him on a court. He always rode his bicycle to work at Princeton.

When his health no longer permitted him to play sports, Charlie took up walking. To keep himself busy during these walks, he began to compose limericks—in English, French, Czech, German, and Russian—which he distributed over email to entertain his friends and family. The topics of these literary creations ran the gamut from politics to potholes and included odes to his friends and family members, to his doctors, and of course to Slavic languages and linguistics. Here is a sample of items that will surely strike home for students and scholars of Slavic languages:

All hail to Slavic linguistics,
 And though I have no real statistics,
 When Jakobson speaks
 Every girl student squeaks,
 And the guys, they just go ballistic.

Čeština řeč elegantní
 Má strukturu velmi markantní.
 Tak kdo se mu naučí
 Přes tolik obtíží
 Má právo být arogantní.

Я человек недовольный
 Не хочу изучать вид глагольный.
 Мне никак не понять
 Какой вид подобрать
 Я пойду играть в теннис настольный.

Although Charlie liked to apologize for his limericks, we all knew that he was really fishing for compliments. He was quite proud of his clever poems and was especially happy when eight of his limericks written in Czech were published in the *Revolver revue* in Prague in 2013. Charlie composed a limerick to honor Ronald Feldstein, published alongside thirty other limericks of his in *Studies in Slavic linguistics and accentology in honor of Ronald F. Feldstein*. This festschrift came out after Charlie's death, in August 2015. At Charlie's memorial service, Ron told the many family members, friends, and colleagues gathered there about his surprise at receiving this posthumous gift from his former mentor and lifetime friend.

After Charlie retired, he continued learning languages, among them Spanish, Swedish, and Persian, all of which he mastered to the point that he could enjoy literature in the original languages. He also kept up with his German, and together with his wife Janet participated in a German-language book club right up until his death.

In the last few months of his life, Charlie translated into English a series of love poems by the Czech author Eduard Petiška. Here is the last poem he translated, only 10 days before he died, from *Svatební noci... a jiné lásky* (1983, p. 296):

Instead of everything suddenly nothing. And this, too, you can
 read in the unnoticed movement of flowers,
 when they enter into the first frost
 without bees, without fragrance, without color.
 The account for the past season
 looks as clean as the face of a full moon,
 only here and there some darkish spots,
 which resemble neither letters nor numbers,
 but more like something forgotten.
 Is it us, maybe?

Czech original:

Pro všechno náhle nic. I to můžeš
 přčíst v nepovšimnutém pohybu květin,
 když vcházejí do prvního mrazu
 bez včel, bez vůně, bez barvy.
 Účet za prošlou sezónu
 je zdánlivě čistý jako tvář úplňku,
 jen tu a tam tmavší skvrna,

která se nepodobá ani písmenu, ani číslu,
spíše někomu zapomenutému.
Jsme to snad my?

In keeping with the way he lived his life, Charlie left this world on his own terms. He had studied up on death, putting in 1,000 hours of hospice volunteer work. When his doctors said there was nothing more they could do for him and put him into hospice care, Charlie knew what he was up against. He was unable to properly digest food any more, so he stopped eating and drinking. He called his family together to see him off, said goodbye to his friends and colleagues, and slipped peacefully away on June 7, 2015.

For the memorial at Princeton, his colleague and friend Michael Wachtel said goodbye in a format he knew Charlie would appreciate:

There once was a linguist named Charlie;
That guy really knew how to parley!
With French, German, and Czech
At his call and his beck—
I thought he was gifted “unfairly.”

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Received: December 2015

