

Jacques Le Goff (1924-2014)

The world-famous medievalist, Jacques Le Goff, died on April 1, at the age of 90. That day, around noon, e-mails ran around the world, announcing the sad news to friends, colleagues, students, and those who revered him --I received quite a few. I had the great luck to belong to all four of these categories, thus the loss is all the greater.

For several decades, since 1969, LeGoff had been a central member of the editorial board of the *Annales E. S. C.*, the review of French "New History." From 1960 he taught at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, where he became president in 1972, the successor of Fernand Braudel. In 1975 he transformed this school into an autonomous institution of graduate higher education and research, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales; it was a model for the interdisciplinary alliance of history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and economics.

Together with his friend and colleague (an in a certain sense rival), Georges Duby, Le Goff was the best known representative of twentieth-century Medieval Studies world-wide. One could say that in the past decades he played a major part in transforming medieval historical research from a source of national pride and romantic nostalgia, to the principal starting point and operating engine of new methodologies that have transformed historiography in general.

LeGoff started his career with two pioneering books, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages* (1957) and *Merchants and Bankers* (1957); both expressed his view of the history of ideas and of economics as filtered by lives of the social classes. His broad synthesis, *Medieval Civilization* (1964), became the model for a new historical approach, an inspiring treatment that combined the history of humans, the natural environment, material culture, social history, the history of mentalities, artistic creation, and intellectual achievement. In 1974 he (and Pierre Nora) edited a three-volume methodological manifesto of the *Annales* group, entitled *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology (Faire de l'histoire)*; another work, *La Nouvelle Histoire*, co-edited with Jacques Revel, followed in 1978. LeGoff also provided a model of these new approaches in two influential collections of his studies: *Time, Work, & Culture in the Middle Ages* (1975) and *The Medieval Imagination* (1985). His monograph on *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981) gives an overarching synthesis from late antique mythologies of the underworld to the *Divina Commedia* of Dante. His principal work, the thousand-page biography of *Saint Louis (IX), King of France* (1995), despite its volume and its heavy scholarly apparatus, emerged as a best-seller in France. And one could continue this enumeration up to the very present with further dozens of books.

Writing now from my home in Budapest, I cannot help but remember that Central Europe held a special attraction for Le Goff, thanks both to his politics and his biography. During World War II, as a young man on the side of the Popular Front, he participated in the southern French resistance, fighting in the *maquis* against the Vichy government. His left-wing sympathies and his interest in Marxism were cooled by a sobering experience in Prague in 1948, when, as a scholarship student, he was an eye-witness to the Communist takeover. In subsequent decades he kept an attentive eye on the recurrent reforming efforts of internal opposition movements in the socialist countries. In 1960, in the company of Fernand Braudel, he traveled to Poland several times to offer French cooperation to Western-oriented intellectuals. During one such trip he met his wife, Hanka Dunin-Wąsowicz, whom he married in 1962. This was also the time that he developed a friendship with the medievalist and reform-oriented politician, Bronisław Geremek, who became the principal advisor of Lech Wałęsa in the 1980s, and later, in the late 1990s, the Foreign Minister of Poland, managing the entry of Poland into the EU. Le Goff organized an international protest when Geremek (and other Polish medievalists like Karol Modzelewski) were imprisoned. His friendship and support were extended to other excellent Polish medievalists, including Witold Kula, Tadeusz Manteuffel, Aleksander Gieysztor, Jerzy Kłoczowski, Henryk Samsonowicz, and Hanna Zaremska.

LeGoff made them in a way “external members” of the *Annales* circle; he invited them to France, and published their books in French translation. He also offered similar care to other East Central European colleagues: the Czechs Frantisek Graus and František Šmahel, the Russians Aron Gurevich and Juri Bessmertni, and the Hungarians Erik Fügedi, Éva H. Balázs, Béla Köpeczi, and Domokos Kosáry.

I hope it will not seem pretentious if I relate some personal memories of LeGoff. I chose the topic of my MA and Ph.D. theses -- medieval heresies – because I was inspired by his books and studies. In 1973, while still a student, I translated his book on medieval intellectuals into Hungarian, which put me in personal contact with him. I had the chance to spend four months in Paris on scholarship in 1976, and took the opportunity to frequent his seminars at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*. There I was amazed by the fresh, new approaches of those seminars, where historians, anthropologists, theologians, art historians, archaeologists joined in debating how to analyze medieval rites, *exempla*, gestures, the history of the body, dreams and visions. And I was even more impressed by the kind, immediate, friendly tone LeGoff used to communicate with every student, the sincere curiosity with which he questioned them, encouraging them to discover how they might go beyond the established interpretations. He always found time for these discussions, even though he was president of the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*. After the seminars, if he had the opportunity, he did not miss going out with us for a drink or an abundant feast to continue the debates around the table.

From that time on I remained in close contact with LeGoff. I went to see him whenever I managed to travel to Paris, and he was a frequent guest in Hungary at the French-Hungarian bilateral workshops, for he had been one of the chief organizers on the French side. He held the co-presiding role in the French-Hungarian Mixed Commission of Historians (together with Prof. Éva H. Balázs). In 1979, at a French-Hungarian conference in Tihany, he was the first person to popularize the new method of historical anthropology; in 1986, when he was inaugurated as doctor *honoris causa* at Eötvös Loránd University, he presented his -- then -- most recent book on the medieval imagination.

In 1992, after the collapse of Communism, when the Central European University was founded, and within it the Department of Medieval Studies, Le Goff came again to Budapest to help this new initiative as chairman of our Academic Advisory Board. A few years later, in another newly founded international academic institution, the Collegium Budapest - Institute for Advanced Study, he presented his new work, a book series on European history entitled *Making Europe (Faire l'Europe)*, written by the best historians from different European countries and published simultaneously in half a dozen European languages. With his support, the group of “great” European publishers (Seuil, Blackwell, Beck, Laterza, Critica) admitted a Hungarian publisher, Atlantisz, from the very beginning of that series. Le Goff's Budapest visit in 1995 featured a high profile, public event: Collegium Budapest and the City Council of Budapest offered a public series entitled “City Hall Conversations,” where LeGoff spoke about medieval European regions, centers and peripheries – I had the great honor to be his interlocutor in this conversation.

Fifteen years ago, when French newspapers honored his birthday with the headline “Jacques Le Goff – 75,” a Hungarian journalist misinterpreted the information and published the news that the great French historian had passed away. Shattered, I phoned Paris immediately to find out what had happened, and I was very glad to learn that the news was false. I informed the Hungarian weekly, which duly published a retraction and apology. I also wrote to Le Goff, who was laughing about it: he reminded me of the old saying that those whose death is falsely announced will have true longevity.

LeGoff did indeed have fifteen more years, which allowed him to realize many important scholarly plans. But life in this period was no longer easy for him. He was a great traveler, and when at home he was at the center of the rush of Paris life. In 2000, however, his feet betrayed him; an incurable condition of his knees prevented him from moving around and condemned him to live secluded in his own apartment.

This setback was followed in 2004 by an even more terrible blow, the sudden loss of his wife, Hanka. While he could cope with his physical impairment jokingly or with serenity, this new tragedy made him collapse. Le Goff, who had been celebrated a few years before by his colleagues as a “man-eating giant” (by Jacques Revel and Jean-Claude Schmitt in *L'Ogre historien. Autour de Jacques Le Goff* [1998]), hinting at his endless vitality, energy, and dynamism, he nearly lost his will to live. It took him several years to recover by writing a moving biography of his wife, which developed into an intellectual autobiography about how she opened the whole world of East-Central Europe for him (*Avec Hanka* [2008]). Able to set to work again, he published at least a book every year. The radio station France Culture has a special program on historiography (*Les lundis de l'histoire*); every month a program was recorded at his flat, where he had fascinating and amusing conversations with the authors of the best novelties in medieval studies. The editorial board of the *Annales* also visited his flat regularly to get his input. He had a busy schedule; historians from around the world, when going to Paris, frequently made a pilgrimage to his flat on the outskirts of Paris. This was my routine, too, the last time in February 2014.

In 1996 a book of conversations with Le Goff was published with the title: *Une vie pour l'histoire*. How could that be translated? A life for historiography? Or for history? To live, shape and understand history at the same time? In any case, Jacques Le Goff not only inscribed his name in history of historiography but also on the hearts of those who knew him. He was an extraordinary personality. May he be remembered a long time.

Gábor Klaniczay