Jewish Historian Yosef Yerushalmi Receives Honor at Sorbonne

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Salo Wittmayer Baron Professor of Jewish History, Culture, and Society, recently returned from Paris where, on Jan. 14, he received an honorary doctorate at the Sorbonne from the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. Honored at the same ceremony were the Japanese marine biologist Kiyoshi Yamazato and Chinese historian Guangda Zhang. Among Yerushalmi’s remarks to the audience, he reflected on his career.

“In the long years when I was studying for my doctorate in Jewish history, I did not know if there would be an academic position available when I finished,” Yerushalmi said. “I certainly did not dream that I would have the privilege of teaching at the two institutions that were the first secular universities in the Western world to integrate post-biblical Jewish studies as part of the patrimony of world civilization—Harvard, with its chair in Jewish literature and philosophy in 1925, and Columbia, with its chair in Jewish history in 1930. Nor could I imagine that one day I would be standing here.”

Born in New York, Yerushalmi received his PhD from Columbia in 1966, studying under Salo Baron. For the next fourteen years he taught at Harvard where he rose to become Safra Professor of Jewish History and Sephardic Civilization and chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. His scholarly interests have ranged through medieval and modern times—with special emphasis on the history of Spanish and Portuguese Jewry, modern German Jewry, the history of psychoanalysis and Jewish historiography.

He returned to Columbia in 1980, when he was invited to assume the new chair in history named for his mentor, Baron, and take over directorship of Columbia’s Center for Jewish History, Culture, and Society, receiving an honorary doctorate at the Sorbonne.

yal Baron believed that courses in Jewish studies should be taught within their respective disciplines, rather than gathered together in a separate department. He insisted that the only way to understand the Jewish experience was to study it in context with cognate subjects. This tradition has been maintained. Today at Columbia Jewish studies are based in four departments, each with its undergraduate majors and PhD programs: Jewish history in the Department of History, Judaism in the Department of Religion, Hebrew language and literature in the Department of Middle East Languages and Cultures, and Yiddish language and literature in The Department of Germanic Languages.

Yerushalmi’s books have been translated into seven languages and include From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto: Haggadah and History; The Lisbon Massacre of 1506; Zadok: Jewish History and Jewish Memory; and Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and an honorary member of the Portuguese Academy of History in Lisbon. From 1987 to 1991 he was president of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, the major research center for the study of the history of the Jews in the German speaking lands. He has also taught an annual seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. In 1998 he formed students, now teaching at universities on three continents, published a Festschrift in his honor.