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Johanson, Lars

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Kontakt / Contact

DigiZeitschriften e.V.

Papendiek 14

37073 Goettingen

Email: info@digizeitschriften.de



Gerhard Doerfer (1920-2003)

Lars Johanson

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This obituary is dedicated to the memory of Gerhard Doerfer (1920-2003).

Lars Johanson, Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Mainz, D-55099 Mainz, Germany. E-mail: johanson@uni-mainz.de

On December 27, 2003, Professor Emeritus Gerhard Doerfer, the distinguished scholar of Turkic and Altaic studies, passed away in Göttingen at the age of 82. He is survived by his widow Mrs. Ingeborg Doerfer, née Blüthner, and their sons Achim and Matthias.

Gerhard Doerfer was born on March 8, 1920 in the East Prussian city of Königsberg, present-day Kaliningrad, the son of the postal official Franz Doerfer and his wife Adina née Bruchmann. He attended primary school in his home town and, from 1928 on, in Berlin, where he subsequently (1930-1938) attended the secondary school Realgymnasium Reinickendorf-Ost. According to an autobiographical article published in 1989 (*Journal of Turkish Studies* 13, i-iv), Doerfer sacrificed the dark years 1938-1945 to compulsory service to the state (“Reichsarbeitsdienst”) and to military service as a private (“gemeiner Soldat”) and as a prisoner of war. In the

spring of 1946 he was able to return to Berlin, where he held various jobs, attended evening classes and, at the age of 29, passed the matriculation exam (“Abitur”).

From 1949 until 1951, Doerfer studied Romance Philology, English Philology and Islamology at the Humboldt University in Berlin. After a short interruption due to financial problems he continued his higher education at the Freie Universität Berlin. From 1952 until 1954 he studied Turcology and Altaistics under the guidance of Karl Heinrich Menges. His subsidiary subjects were Islamic and Iranian studies. On July 29, 1954 he received his Ph.D. degree, graduating *summa cum laude*. The topic of his doctoral thesis was “Zur Syntax der Geheimen Geschichte der Mongolen” (On the syntax of the Secret History of the Mongols).

In October 1955, Gerhard Doerfer was offered a position as a research assistant and secretary at the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz, where he remained until the spring of 1957. His main task at the Academy consisted in editorial work on the first volume of *Philologiae turcicae fundamenta* (published in 1959). Besides contributing four valuable articles of his own, he elaborated a consistent transcription system and a uniform arrangement of the articles for this still unrivalled standard work. The most important personal result of the two years at the Academy was his acquaintance with Ingeborg Blüthner, whom he married on April 4, 1957.

From 1957 until 1960, Doerfer worked, with a grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, on his postdoctoral project “Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen” (Turkic and Mongolic elements in Modern Persian). His habilitation in Turcology took place in Göttingen on December 19, 1960. In 1963, his *venia legendi* was expanded to Turcology and Altaistics. On April 4, 1966, he was appointed non-tenured professor (“außerplanmässiger Professor”) at Göttingen. In 1966, 1967 and 1968, Doerfer lectured as Visiting Scholar and Visiting Professor at Indiana University at Bloomington. On November 16, 1970 he was finally appointed Full Professor of Turkic and Altaic Studies at the Georg August University in Göttingen. In the winter semester of 1975-1976 he lectured as Visiting Professor at the University of Istanbul. In 1982, his chair in Göttingen was given the status of a Department of Turkic and Central Asian studies (“Seminar für Turkologie und Zentralasienkunde”). He became Professor Emeritus in 1988, but continued both his research work and his teaching activities with unimpaired vitality. In 1994 he lectured as Visiting Professor at the Seminar für Orientkunde of the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, rediscovering a town with which he connected highly emotional memories. After the fall of the Soviet regime, he also had the opportunity to visit his native city Königsberg again.

Gerhard Doerfer received numerous honours in the course of his academic career. Three *Festschriften* were presented to him, on the occasions of his 65th, 70th and 75th birthdays. He was an honorary member of the Türk Dil Kurumu, the Csoma de Kőrös Society and the Societas Uralo-Altaica. From 1975 to 1979 he also acted as President of the latter society. In 1992, he received an honorary doctorship from the University of Szeged.

Though this obituary is not the adequate place for an evaluation of Gerhard Doerfer's extremely prolific scholarly work, some brief comments on his achievements may be allowed. His first major contribution to Altaic studies, the doctoral thesis on the syntax of the Secret History, has regrettably remained unpublished. His *Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen* (Turkic and Mongolic elements in Modern Persian), published in four volumes (1963-1975), is a monumental standard work.

In 1967, Doerfer had started collecting comprehensive materials on the Turkic varieties of Iran. He had organized fieldwork expeditions to Central Iran in 1968 and 1969, and one expedition to Khorasan in 1973. Doerfer's research on the Turkic varieties of Iran, often in cooperation with Semih Tezcan, includes major and minor discoveries in a huge area that had so far been a *terra incognita*. The discovery and description of the archaic language Khalaj has been characterized as the greatest event in Turkic studies since Vilhelm Thomsen's deciphering of the Turkic runiform script. The exploration of Khorasan Turkic, a previously unknown brand of Oghuz Turkic, and the description of South Oghuz varieties spoken in Iran, are also of utmost interest. Gerhard Doerfer's lectures at the Seminar für Orientkunde in Mainz gave a strong impetus to the preparations for the research projects on Turkic-Iranian language contacts that have been carried out at Mainz since 1997 in the framework of a Special Research Area of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

Most of Doerfer's numerous scholarly contributions are listed in *Schriftenverzeichnis Gerhard Doerfer*, compiled by Michael Knüppel (*Materialia Turcica*, Beiheft 139, Göttingen, 2000, 100 pages). Besides the publications on the topics already mentioned, Doerfer's most important books include *Der Numerus im Mandshu* (1963), *Türkische Lehnwörter im Tadschikischen* (1967), *Anatomie der Syntax* (1973), *Lautgesetz und Zufall* (1973), *Lamutisches Wörterbuch* (1980; with Wolfram Hesse and Hartwig Scheinhardt), *Mongolo-Tungusica* (1985), *Grundwort und Sprachmischung* (1988), *Versuch einer linguistischen Datierung älterer ost-türkischer Texte* (1993) and *Formen der älteren türkischen Lyrik* (1996).

The immense width and depth of Doerfer's research activities is obvious. His writings are widely known and admired. On the other hand, the author has been criticized for his rather polemic style, in particular for his attacks on the hypothesis of a genealogical relationship of the Altaic languages. Suffice it to say that Doerfer created an intellectual universe that has been of extreme importance for many Turcologists and Altaicists of his own and the following generation. While being a man of strong and bold statements, he could also show an astonishing modesty that manifested itself in his readiness to learn from others and even to polemicize against his own standpoints. The last time I talked to him, on the 8th of March 2003, our common birthday, he tried to summarize his achievements in a self-examining way and in an *ars longa, vita brevis* perspective. As he always stressed, the only thing that matters is the oeuvre in which a scholar can pass on the "spiritual torch" to future generations. In the autobiographical article mentioned above he says exactly this:

“Das Leben eines Gelehrten ist im Grund unwichtig; wichtig sind allein die Werke, in denen er weiterlebt und (man entschuldige das Pathos) die Fackel des Geistes künftigen Generationen weiterreicht”. There can be no doubt about the future significance of the rich legacy that Gerhard Doerfer has left us.