

# Moshe Gershovich:

## A life fully lived, lovingly recalled

**JOAN LATCHAW**

with **LEONARD GREENSPOON**

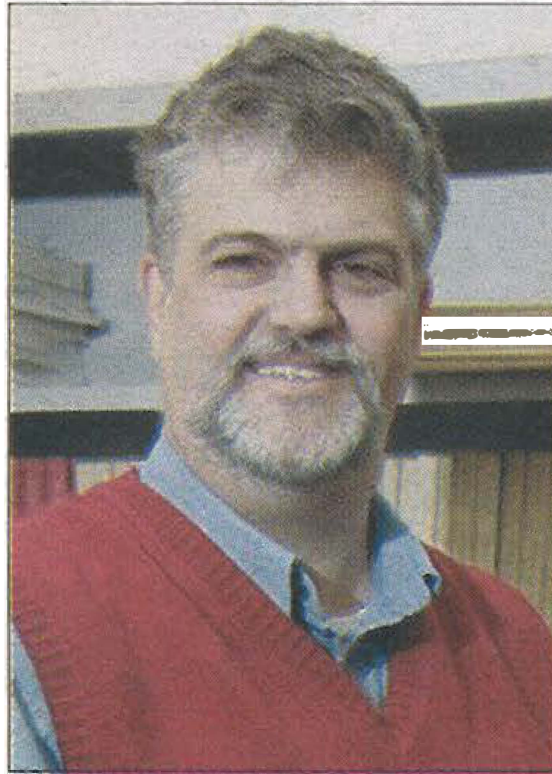
Years ago a colleague asked me, "What is the definition of a mensch?" I rifled through my mental dictionary and responded, "Someone who is responsible, ethical, kind-hearted, and compassionate." But those traits, laudable as they are, didn't have the taam, the spirit, the feel embodied in the Yiddish word. I finally gave up and named a person we both knew. Instantly my colleague understood.

Moshe Gershovich was a quintessential mensch. I instinctually knew this long before we became friends. So many friends, colleagues, and loved ones have expressed Moshe's spirit. The following incident occurred, just this year, in the Gershovich living room, where I was also a visitor. Kasey De Goey, the Schwalb Center staff assistant, recalls this visit to Moshe and his wife Beth shortly after her engagement. She says, "In my time as staff assistant to Moshe, our relationship blossomed to one like a father and daughter. In addition to giving me so many wonderful opportunities,

he was a protective and wise influence in my life. Moshe cautioned my then fiancé that if anything happened to me the IDF would be after him." Of course, this

"threat" was followed by hearty congratulations to Kevin. Moshe's gesture during this conversation brought me to tears -- when he put his arm around Kasey and said she was truly a daughter. In fond recollection Kasey mused, "Such was the manner of Moshe."

Vision and passion inspired Moshe -- as an administrator, teacher and researcher. His educa-



**Moshe Gershovich**

tional pedigree, a B.A. and M.A. from Tel Aviv University and Ph.D. from Harvard University, provided the foundation for a distinguished career. Moshe continued to build an impressive record after joining the UNO History Department in 2001. He has held the Martin Professorship of History at UNO, taught courses in Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Holocaust Studies, and U.S. and the Middle East; directed the Middle East Project Fund; and was the driving force behind UNO's popular Middle East  
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Forum, a monthly event that was always packed. After taking over the directorship of the Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies, Moshe's vision and outreach extended even further -- and the Center's with him. In that role, Moshe became a consummate collaborator, co-sponsoring events with Black Studies, Islamic Studies, OLLAS (Office of Latino and Latin American Studies) and Medieval Studies.

But the written record cannot capture the spirit, the *taam*, of an extraordinary life. Mark Scherer, a history colleague, said it best when he told me, "Moshe was a kind and gentle man who personified everything we aspire to be as dedicated scholars and teachers." So many of his colleagues reiterated this sentiment. Curtis Hutt, a close colleague and friend commented, "It is difficult to underestimate the effect that an individual University professor can have on a campus." For example, Curtis explained that UNO has experienced very few anti-Israel movements and anti-Semitism over the past five years. He believes Moshe's presence was a major factor: "Who was not Moshe's friend? In which college or department was Moshe not welcome? When representatives of the BDS movement wanted to hold an event on campus, Moshe invited them to his class so he could first make certain that both sides' positions were accurately presented and to moderate, even change, their minds. After the recent election, while watching Moshe advise and comfort Muslim students from Saudi Arabia worried about Islamophobia in the United States, one of them said, 'The only ones who care about Arabs in Omaha are Jews.' The BDS movement at UNO never stood any chance with Moshe Gershovich in town."

Students flocked to Moshe because, in Jeanne Reames' words, "he was a your-success- promotes-the success-of-us-all sort of person." Moshe spent tireless hours mentoring graduate students and he "mother-henned them, even as he established high standards of research." One of those students, Anthony Hughes, recognized that Moshe's ancestry, homeland, and life experience was the force behind his success as a mentor. "One of Moshe's greatest gifts was drawn from his own personal journey. Descended from Lithuanian and Polish Jews who made Aliyah to Israel, the Holy Land became his home away from home after moving to America. Moshe extensively researched and shared the experiences of fellow Jews in Morocco and Europe, while in the U.S. he provided a rich environment of learning to countless students. Moshe's life was a microcosm of the Jewish experience in the late 20th and 21st centuries: bridging the different cultures through education and sharing in the common bonds of history to promote humanity."

Moshe built bridges in so many different directions.

I [Leonard Greenspoon, ed.] knew Moshe, as a professional and personal colleague, since his arrival in Omaha. We became especially close when the Schwalb Center joined as a full partner in the annual fall symposium I sponsor as Klutznick Chair at Creighton. Whenever I couldn't think of a topic or speakers, I'd panic and then call Moshe. In his calm collegial way, he invariably came up with outstanding ideas and worked with all of us to carry them out.

Alan Potash, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Omaha, speaks for many when he assessed Moshe's contributions:

"My relationship with Moshe grew and evolved over the years. During my time with the ADL, we addressed anti-Israel activity in schools and participated in several debates with Palestinians. Moshe was passionate about partnering with the Federation to bring major speakers to Omaha. His enthusiasm for sharing his scholarship around Israel and the Middle East was often contagious. I will truly miss our time and our work together. He had so many ideas left to fulfill."

Martin Buber said, "In the beginning is the relation." He meant that deep connections are creative, in that the self affirms to the Other his or her intrinsic value. As personal friends of Moshe and Beth, I can attest

to the nature of their relationship. It is not an exaggeration to say that I was in awe of Beth and Moshe's marriage. Particularly in the fullness of their intellectual, affectionate, and emotional exuberance. Being in their company -- at dinners, events, classes, films, living room chats -- was always exhilarating. Whether the topic was a Shakespeare play, a book series, Israeli politics or their beloved cats. Moshe and Beth had each other's back and were each other's ardent advocates. No husband has ever been prouder than Moshe, who promoted every one of her art shows, display at the Joslyn, or new styles of Beth's vibrant fused glass jewelry and bowls. Among her numerous accomplishments, Beth curated a 2014 exhibit, "My Heart is in the East and I am in the Farthest West," which featured a wide variety of work from ten area artists at UNO Criss Library's Osborne Family Gallery.

It is impossible to summarize a person's life. But it is possible to grasp the essence, the *taam* of a fellow human being. Moshe's close friend, Charles Mikhail, expresses it beautifully, "Moshe saw the good in everything and everyone. He was the best friend I ever had. I loved him dearly for being, as Proverbs 18:24 describes, 'a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.'"

A memorial service for Moshe Gershovich will be celebrated at UNO's Thompson Alumni Center on **Friday, Feb. 24**. Services will be from 11 a.m.-Noon followed by a luncheon.

## Dr. Aomar Boum

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and sent to forced labor camps in the Saharan desert of Morocco and Algeria where they built trans-Saharan railroads. Following the American landing in Casablanca, many refugees were able to leave the camps, although a number were not able to survive the desert climate and Vichy treatment. This talk sheds light on this marginalized story of the war by highlighting the daily lives of a number of Jews who were interned in these desert camps.

Thursday, **March 2** at 7 p.m. at the Magnolia Hotel, 1615 Howard Street, Omaha, Dr. Boum will be the keynote lecturer for the Missouri Valley History Conference. This year's conference theme is *Remembering and Being Remembered: Monuments, Memorials, and Legacies*. Dr. Boum's keynote address is *The Politics of Memory: Muslim Perception of Jews in Post-colonial Morocco*. The evening begins with a reception at 6:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. This is the second consecutive year that the Schwalb Center and History Department at UNO has sponsored a speaker for the Missouri Valley History Conference. The Jewish Federation of Omaha readily accepted the offer to sponsor Dr. Boum for the Friday luncheon lecture. The Schwalb Center originally came to know Dr. Boum when Dr. Moshe Gershovich, of recent memory, met him while on a trip to Morocco. Moshe was impressed with his depth and breadth of knowledge and was the primary advocate for Boum's coming to Omaha for this conference and lecture.

Mark your calendar to attend either or both, the keynote address on **March 2** at 7 p.m. at the Magnolia Hotel or the luncheon lecture at **Noon** on **March 3** at the Rose Blumkin Jewish Home.