

Nekrolog

Laura Janda*

Charles E. Townsend (1932–2015)

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Charles E. Townsend, a legendary figure in Slavic linguistics, died peacefully at his home on June 7, 2015 surrounded by his family members. He is survived by his wife Janet, three daughters – Erica, Sylvia, and Louise, five grandchildren, and many grateful colleagues and students who fondly addressed him as “Charlie”.

Townsend was born in 1932 and grew up in Vermont and New York. After graduating first in his class from the Trinity School in Manhattan, Townsend pursued an all-Ivy academic career. He graduated *magna cum laude* in German from Yale and obtained his PhD in Slavic linguistics under the tutelage of Roman Jakobson and Horace Lunt at Harvard, where he also served as an assistant professor for four years. Townsend then spent four decades at Princeton, most of that time as Chair of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures. He also taught intensive Russian courses in the Slavic Summer Workshop at Indiana University in 1972–81.

Townsend’s achievements were remarkable in their quantity, quality, and scope. Though his primary focus was on Russian and Czech, he also taught courses in Polish, Serbian/Croatian, Bulgarian, Old Church Slavonic, and comparative Slavic linguistics. Several of Townsend’s books have become classics, appreciated by generations of Slavists, among them: *Russian Word-Formation* (1968, reprinted in 1975), *Continuing with Russian* (1970), *Czech through Russian* (1981, revised and expanded in 2001), *A Description of Spoken Prague Czech* (1990), and *Common and Comparative Slavic* (1996, translated into German in 2000 and into Korean in 2011). In over fifty published articles, Townsend addressed an impressive range of issues in Slavic phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, 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 the means for his sustained commitment to contrastive analysis of languages.

*Corresponding author: Prof. Dr. Laura Janda, Uit Norges Arktiske Universitet, Institutt for språkvitenskap, Tromsø, SVHUM E 1006 – Sv fak – Hum fak bygget, E-Mail: laura.janda@uit.no

In 1994 Townsend received the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages Award for Distinguished Contribution to the Profession and in that same year he was made an Honorary Member of the prestigious Czech Linguistics Society in Prague. In 2002 students and colleagues presented Townsend with a festschrift (*Where One's Tongue Rules Well: A Festschrift for Charles E. Townsend* (= *Indiana Slavic Studies* 13), ed. by Laura A. Janda, Steven Franks, and Ronald Feldstein. Bloomington, IN: Slavica) on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. In it we expressed “our gratitude for the inspiring ideas, careful mentoring, vigilant feedback, and unflagging friendship with which Charlie has enriched our lives”.

Charlie was always an enthusiastic traveler. In 1954 he set sail for Germany and met his future wife Janet among the fellow Fulbright scholars on board. After studying Russian at the Army Language School in Monterey, California, Charlie returned to Germany in 1957–8 with the US Counter-Intelligence Corps. The following year he sailed to Italy and then traveled by train through Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Poland before reaching Moscow, where he served as a guide at the US National Exposition. In the summer of 1965 Charlie and Janet drove a car through most of the countries of Western and Eastern Europe and the USSR. In the course of his career, Charlie delivered invited lectures throughout the US and in Russia, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and China.

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 colleagues and students who were brave (or foolish) enough to face off with him on a court.

A lifetime learner, Charlie studied Spanish, Swedish, and Persian in retirement, all of which he mastered to the point that he could enjoy novels in their original languages. Right up until his death he participated in a German-language book club.

In his later years, Charlie entertained dozens of friends and colleagues with limericks, which he wrote in English, Czech, and Russian, and distributed by email. Eight of his limericks written in Czech were published in the *Revolver Revue* in Prague in 2013. 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 – one in each language – 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.

Charlie was proud to have put in 1000 hours of hospice volunteer work. He compiled a songbook of popular tunes from the 1930s and 40s that he would bang out on a piano for patients to sing along with him.

In the last few months of his life, Charlie translated into English a series of love poems penned by the Czech author Eduard Petiška. It seems fitting to close with the last poem he translated, only 10 days before he passed away:

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?