Phillip Valentine Tobias 1925–2012: A Personal Reminiscence

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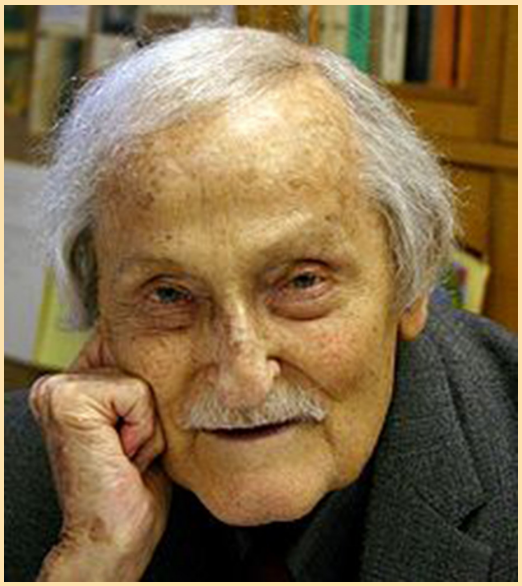
OBITUARY



A late photo of Phillip (courtesy of Milford Wolpoff).

Phillip Valentine Tobias was born on 14 October 1925. He often pointed out that being born in the same year (1925) that Raymond Dart published his description of the child from T'aung with the first mention of *Australopithecus africanus*, linked him in some important way with these early hominins. In his memoir (Tobias 2005: 211) he goes on to note that "With some small smattering of the gestation period in humans, I worked out that, if my birth on 14 October 1925 followed an average duration of my mother's second pregnancy, I would have been conceived on or about 3 February, the very evening on which the *Star* of Johannesburg carried the first exciting announcement of the discovery of the Taung skull". Such was the way Phillip saw his entry into the world of human evolution.

Through more than 60 years of field work, research and publications this connection provided biological anthropology and paleoanthropology with an enormous corpus of data, anatomical descriptions, and insightful observations on the human condition. His death on 7 June 2012 at the age of 86 deprives us of his knowledge, wisdom, and courage.

This is not an obituary in the traditional sense, but a personal reminiscence of my more than 45 years of professional and personal association with Phillip. More conventional discussions of his professional work and contributions to human biology and evolution can be found elsewhere (Grady 2012; White 2012; Wood 2012). His memoir (2005) describes in some detail many of his most memorable travels and experiences. A series of conversations with two colleagues appeared in 2008 (Tobias, Strkalj and Dugard 2008), in which Phillip roamed over a vast realm of intellectual, professional, and personal ideas, views, and opinions.

I first met Phillip in 1966 when I was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. Phillip visited the campus as the guest of his good friend Desmond Clark, as well as being hosted by T.D. McCown and S.L. Washburn. He gave a lecture to a packed auditorium of several hundred, bringing the latest news about early hominin (then, of course, hominid) discoveries in East and South Africa. At the time, the fossil discoveries in Bed 1 at Olduvai Gorge by Mary and Louis Leakey had resulted in the newly recognized early *Homo, H. habilis*. Two years before, Phillip, with Louis Leakey and John Napier, had authored the 1964 *Nature* paper in which the fossils attributed to this taxon were first described, along with the associated stone tools that

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An undated photo of a younger Phillip at the Makapansgat australopithecine site (courtesy of Milford Wolpoff).

led to the coining of the specific name, *habilis* (dextrous). As usual, Phillip gave a wonderfully informative as well as entertaining lecture, outlining his thoughts about the place of *H. habilis* in the human evolutionary record. Afterwards, several graduate students met with Phillip at the house on Piedmont Ave where Clark, Washburn, and Glynn Isaac had their offices. Phillip was very gracious, discussing early hominin evolution with us and sharing many details about the discoveries as well as information about newly discovered materials that had not yet been published. Later on, in 1967, during my Ph.D. dissertation research in South Africa, I visited Phillip in his office at the University of the Witwatersrand Medical School. His inner sanctum was ferociously guarded by his secretary, Carole Orkin. Anyone who visited Phillip during her reign is certain to have fond memories of Carole, with her wondrous bouffant and her fierce commitment to the maintenance of the PROFESSOR'S privacy. If you had an appointment, you could gain entrance; I was very surprised when he remembered me, one among many graduate students whom he had met in a rather prolonged visit to the United States. He had even remembered some of my questions. Much later, when Phillip was a Visiting Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, I learned from Janet Monge about one of his more endearing qualities. Phillip maintained a journal in which he recorded the details of those people he met each day. As I came to understand, even lowly graduate students were remembered in the journal. If there was a chance that he might meet someone that he had encountered before, he would look over his notes and refresh his memory of the earlier meeting. In this way, Phillip was able to greet people with questions and comments about their life, family, and other matters that surely would have been long forgotten. I remember several brief visits Phillip made to Philadelphia, when I would join him for dinner with South African born physicians who had trained with him at Wits and who now worked in the U.S. Without hesitation, he would ask about family, professional interests, and personal details. This knowledge of their lives by a revered mentor was extremely flattering and I never met one of his ex-medical students who were not unfailingly fond of him.

For many of us, each Christmas time brought an elaborate end-of-year letter from Phillip in which he would summarize his research, publications, and especially his travels and the people, colleagues, acquaintances, and ex-students from the medical school whom he had seen that year. The gist of these letters also came from his journals. Though his colleagues often referred to him as 'PVT' and I am using his full name in this reminiscence, he often signed these letters, as well as the reprints of his articles, 'Phil'.

For my Ph.D. dissertation research, I spent many months in South Africa in 1967 working on the australopithecine materials from the Sterkfontein Valley and from Makapansgat. It was a time when apartheid was being strongly enforced and my wife and I found it very difficult to live in a society marked by such horrendous social inequality. Many of the scholars I met found it awkward to speak of political and social matters and I quickly learned not to bring up anything to do with politics or racial policies. Given the situation, this reticence was quite understandable. In 1950, the passage of the Suppression of Communism Act by the ruling National Party provided for very

Phillip demonstrating his wonderful social gifts in the company of appreciative friends (1990).

stiff penalties for any group or individual who espoused communist ideas. Because the definition of communism in the Act was so diffuse, individuals could be, and were, convicted on the basis of speeches, newspaper articles, or classroom lectures that were focused on racial inequality rather than Marxist theories. Part of this legislation was the act of 'Banning' which could be declared by the Minister of Justice and was without judicial review. For as long as five years, a person who was banned would have their ability to meet with or talk with people, travel, or even leave home, drastically curtailed (Pincus 1966). Several Wits faculty members had been sentenced under this Act and it definitely had a chilling effect on free discussion.

This did not, however, include Phillip. His efforts in publically opposing the oppression of the regime and his total commitment to human equality represent one of his greatest gifts to human advancement. Phillip's courage in this endeavor cannot be minimized. I do not mean to in any way understate his scientific accomplishments. He was a great and careful scholar and a meticulous anatomical observer. When his monograph on the Olduvai Hominid 5 skull was published in 1967, I recall Ted McCown, who had just finished reviewing it, commenting that he was overwhelmed by the amount of detail that Phillip had amassed in the volume. And this from the co-author of the second Mount Carmel volume on the Skhul and Tabūn human remains, a monument of anatomical analysis.

Phillip gave numerous public lectures and produced many reports and articles on the ways by which his country was using biology and the fabricated notions of race to define African peoples as biologically inferior and incapable of performing in a civilized manner. One notable presentation in this regard was *The Meaning of Race*, published initially in 1961 with a second, revised edition appearing in 1972, both under the auspices of the South African Institute of Race Relations, an organization dedicated to the free expression of ideas.

Phillip begins this work by noting that "South Africa occupies a unique position in the world today. It is unique in that it bases its entire constitution, legislative system and practically every other phase of life on differential treatment of different sections of its population. Rightly or wrongly, these different groups of people are spoken of as 'races'. Every single aspect of our life has come to be dominated by the thought: to what group or race does *that* man belong?" (Tobias 1961: 1). He goes on to note that while race plays this central role in the ways members of South African society are treated and dealt with, the people in power, political leaders and others, know little about the biology of human populations. In this context, he states that "I would be failing miserably therefore, in my academic duty, if I were to hold my peace and say nothing about race, simply because the scientific truth about race may run counter to the race policies of my country. Sometimes the truth hurts; but the truth must out none the less. For it is the faith of a scientist to pursue the truth, whithersoever the pursuit may lead, and to give utterance to it without fear of the consequences" (Tobias 1961: 2). For example, he quotes the then Governor of the Transvaal Province, F.H. Odendaal, who said in a speech at the University of Pretoria in 1961 that "Universities should teach only those doctrines which did not threaten the survival of the White races. A great responsibility rested on the university authorities to see that the lecturers were people who advocate the right attitude toward the White race" (quoted in Tobias 1961: 2).

In spite of this admonition and the not so subtle threat it communicated, Phillip, after citing this quote, focuses his attention on the very ways the South African government used the apartheid laws to maintain the political, economic, and social superiority of Europeans (It should be noted

that the concept of the European was quite flexible. While most Asians were placed in their own racial category with somewhat limited freedoms, Japanese people, because of the business relationships between the two countries, were considered 'European'.). Phillip makes this quite clear when he states that "Behind all racially-discriminating legislation is the assumption, sometimes stated, sometimes tacitly implied, that what is good enough for members of one racial group is too good for members of another" (Tobias 1961: 11). In what is surely one of the most telling comments ever made about the mechanisms of inequality, Phillip observed that "It is easy to deny a subservient people the benefits of civilizations and then to describe them as uncivilized" (Tobias 1961: 15).

In summarizing the discussions presented in the text, Phillip concludes that "Science provides no evidence that any single one of the assumptions underlying South Africa's racial legislation is justified" (Tobias 1961: 36). He goes on to point out that "Science has offered no confirmation that some races are superior to others. Science has failed to confirm that some races are nearer to the apes and others to the angels" (Tobias 1961: 37). Considering the government's attempt to control exactly this kind of writing, I once asked Phillip whether he was concerned that his outspokenness would lead to difficulties with the government. I knew that he had received several offers of senior positions in the United States and I was curious to learn why he remained in South Africa and in possible danger of being banned. He was very aware, he told me, that he might run afoul of the apartheid laws but he believed that as a prominent South African scholar, the government would let him be as a symbol demonstrating to the world that there was free and open discussion in South Africa. I think also that Phillip enjoyed being a well known scholar in South Africa whereas, in a larger country like the U.S., he might not have the same prominence. Whatever the reason, Phillip remained at the Witwatersrand Medical School and continued to speak out against the racist policies of his government.

In some ways, Phillip was fortunate in that, because of his family's history, he was able to have both a South African and a United Kingdom passport, which allowed him entry into Kenya to work on the fossils excavated by the Leakeys at Olduvai Gorge (during these years, South African nationals were not permitted entry into a number of other African nations).

While I visited Phillip a number of times in Johannesburg, he returned the favor by visiting the University of Pennsylvania while I was a member of the Penn Anthropology Department. In the early 1970s, I was appointed the President of the Philadelphia Anthropological Society, an honor bestowed on assistant professors at Temple and Penn as part of our necessary initiation into the local culture (in other societies, it would be akin to going into battle for the first time and eating your subdued enemy). Phillip graciously agreed to give a talk to the Society; the announcement of his coming talk generated much excitement and the night of his presentation, the lecture hall in the basement of the University of Pennsylvania Museum was filled to overflowing, more than 200 people. As usual, Phillip gave a sparkling lecture, one focused on hominin origins and providing much detail, but also general enough so that non-specialists in the audience could follow without difficulty. This was one of Phillip's great skills; at the end of one of his talks, scholar and lay person alike were both aware that they had learned a great deal. On this occasion, my joy at the quality of his lecture got the best of me. In thanking him for his presentation, I rashly invited everyone in the auditorium to come to my house for a party in Phillip's honor. My announcement was greeted with a moment's silence and then with much laughter when the audience realized that I was risking outright catastrophe if everyone took me up on my offer. Fortunately, a reasonable number did show up; Phillip found a comfy easy chair and he was quickly surrounded by people with questions and comments. It was a place Phillip liked to be—the center of a group where his enormous social skills and *joie de vie* could be employed to maximum benefit.

Bernard Vandermeersch and Phillip, Bordeaux (1990).

In 1990, I was working with Bernard Vandermeersch at the Laboratoire de l'Anthropologie of the Université de Bordeaux when Phillip came to visit. Phillip's mastery of French was limited but, as usual, his charm and the strategic use of French words allowed him to simply wow the students and members of both the laboratory and the Institute du Quaternaire. At a celebratory party after his well received talk, he mingled with students and had long discussions with many of the archaeologists and physical anthropologists who worked at the university, including Denise de Sonneville-Bordes, Bernard Vandermeersch, and Jean-Philippe Rigaud. Several of them, including Henri Laville, told me afterwards how knowledgeable Phillip was of their published research and specific interests. They were very impressed that a researcher whose primary concerns were with the African early hominin fossil record knew so much about, for example, the Pleistocene glacial geology and environment of Southwest France, Laville's primary focus (e.g., 1975). I never did find out whether Phillip was really the master of all their research, mostly published in French, or had done his usual homework and looked up details of each of the people he would be likely to meet.

The author and Phillip enjoying some wine (Bordeaux, bien sûr), Laboratoire de l'Anthropologie, Bordeaux (1990).

Whatever the explanation, the ability he demonstrated here to inculcate a level of mutual collegiality between scholars with different backgrounds and research interests was certainly one of his signal abilities, which allowed him to successfully interact with colleagues all over the world.

The next day, Bernard Vandermeersch took Phillip and me to the town of St. Emilion, a mostly preserved Medieval hill town about 35km from Bordeaux that is surrounded by some of the world's great vineyards. While we toured the sights including the donjon and the underground church, I began to understand Phillip's wanderlust. Throughout his professional life, Phillip had traveled to virtually all parts of the world, with many of these voyages recounted in his annual end-of-year letters and in his memoir (2005). In St. Emilion, Phillip's joy and intense interest in all the details of the place were obvious and quite infectious. He wanted to know everything about each of the sights, often adding details from his own broad experiences. What was clear was that the observational skills and insights he brought to the examination of fossil bones carried over to the places he visited. Although I had toured St. Emilion before, after this visit, like after one of Phillip's public lectures, I realized I had learned a great deal.

In 1992, Phillip took up a post of Visiting Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. His classes were extremely popular and although he was often off traveling, his presence was very welcomed. He relied on Janet Monge, then Keeper of the Skeletal Collections in the Penn Museum, to take care of many of the details associated with his appointment and teaching duties. For reasons that remain unclear, he insisted upon calling Janet "Duchess" with himself being the "Duke." This elevation to the nobility produced much merriment in the department though Janet found it hard to live up to her new status.

William Howells (1959: 250) once observed, in an admiring way, about another of the truly great members of the paleoanthropology community, Franz Weidenreich, "that Weidenreich was an acute and deeply experienced student of human form and not much inclined to let geological scruples interfere with anatomical conclusions". In Philip's case, geological scruples were always integrated into his anatomical conclusions. Phillip's global interests, civilized demeanor, moral courage, and superb anatomical knowledge, insight, and instincts were unique in our discipline. I do not think we will see his like again.

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