IN MEMORIAM

DAVID EDWARD SOPHER

1923 – 1984

The field of cultural and social geography, and in particular that of geography of India, has suffered a serious loss with the death from cancer of Professor David E. Sopher on March 8, 1984. This distinguished scholar was a sensitive interpreter of the living civilization of India, an extremely able research guide, a citizen of the world, and a friend and mentor to his many students.

David Sopher lived among many cultures and had acquired a respect for the life of the people he studied. He grew up in a Baghdadi Jewish family which had spent many years in India. His father was associated with the famous business house of the Sassons in Bombay and his mother had attended a school in Pune. By the time Sopher was born his parents had moved to the Chinese treaty port of Shanghai. Growing up in that cosmopolitan community gave Sopher an early awareness of the religious, linguistic and ethnic diversities that became the subject of his research studies later in the life. The family spoke Arabic at home, used Hebrew in temple, and conversed in English and Chinese outside. Sopher learned Latin in school and later on acquired a competency in French, German, Portuguese, Spanish, Bengali and Gujarati. To him language was a key element in understanding cultures. But language alone was not enough. For Sopher understanding cultural cues was most important.

David Sopher left China in 1945 to study at the University of California at Berkeley from where he obtained all his degrees : B.A. (1948), M.A. (1950), Ph.D. (1954). Sopher was fortunate to be at Berkeley with a number of talented students who were to make an indelible mark on American geography. That unusual group of scholars was inspired by the teaching of the distinguished cultural geographer Carl Ortwin Sauer. Sopher's research as a graduate student reflected the emphases of that time on plant and animal domestication and origin and dispersal of culture traits. His master's thesis was an examination of the use of turmeric (*curcuma domestica*) in

south and South-east Asia and Oceania and its impact on cultural relations. His doctoral work has been published as *The Sea Nomads* (1965 & 1978), an essay on man-nature relationships of the technologically simpler people who survive on the fringes of mainstream cultures in south-east Asia.

Like his co-students and professors Sopher dealt with ecological relationships of simple folk societies and their milieus. But a major change took place when Sopher turned his attention to more complex societies. After a three year stint as an Instructor at the University of Minnesota Sopher joined the American Geographical Society as a research associate in 1954 to work on *India : A Compendium* (1962). He contributed two long chapters on the peoples and their history, and language and religion. For the next three decades Sopher devoted his attention to the Indian subcontinent. While teaching at Sacramento State College (1956-64) extensive field work was carried out, mainly during the summer vacations, along the coastal regions of India. He focussed his study on strand habitats and cultural landscapes. An eight month stint in the Chittagong Hill tracts led to important papers on Swidden Wet rice cultivation of the Mizos, Chakmas, and the Lushai. David Sopher was a rare scholar who through his field experience and reading had acquired a secure grasp of the regional societies of the sub-continent. His expertise was recognized in 1964 when the Department of Geography, Syracuse University – a leading center for graduate training in North America – invited him to succeed the late George B. Cressey. In the next twenty years Sopher guided about three dozen students towards their master's or doctoral degrees. Sopher believed in working with scholars in the allied disciplines of anthropology, sociology, history, demography, comparative religion, linguistics, and archeology. With them he explored topics such as pilgrimage, language, caste, marriage, sex-ratios, literacy, and ecology. He believed in using a variety of tools – field work, library research, quantitative and cartographic analyses, to understand peoples in particular places. During his last days Sopher spent considerable time investigating miniature paintings and novels so as to grasp the Indian sense of place, attitudes toward nature, and cultural landscapes. *An Exploration of India : Geographical Perspectives on Society and Culture* (1980) reflects the scholarly interests of Sopher and his students.

David Sopher's academic interests ranged beyond India. He was an outstanding cultural geographer and along with his colleague D.W. Meinig brought fresh impetus to the study of cultural landscapes, spatial manifestations of culture and society, non-material aspects of culture and dynamics of regional culture. His views on the apparatus of cultural geography are noteworthy. *Geography . of Religions* (1967) was his best known publication and its ideas and insights have led to numerous studies on religion in the geography departments of North America. Sopher's cartographic editorship of *Historical Atlas of the Religions of the World* (1974) has been known for its innovative character.

David Sopher had very high standards for himself and his coworkers. Naturally, he was uneasy with the imitative and state-interest oriented work in Indian geography that he thought lacked "Indianess". "Toward a rediscovery of India: Thoughts on some Neglected Geography" (in *Geographers Abroad : Essays on the Problems and Prospects of Research in Foreign Areas*, ed. M.W. Mikesell, 1973) is his thoughtful critique of the work on India by American, British, French, German and Indian geographers. This paper of David Sopher, I feel, should be read by all geographers whose interest centers on India.

David Sopher was a stern teacher who also showed extreme affection and concern for his students. He insisted on high standards in academic and social endeavours. David Sopher's artful blending of scholarship and social relationships was remarkable. He and his wife Tressa were very hospitable and many Indian geographers, among others, had visited their lovely home in Syracuse. The best tribute we can pay to David Sopher is to read his writings and try to continue his tradition of sensitive scholarly research.

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