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# In Memoriam

## Raphael (Rafi) Ventura

### 1937–2020

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Raphael (Rafi) Ventura (1937–2020) was an outstanding teacher and lecturer who brought ancient Egypt to life for hundreds of students and members of the public.

Ventura was born in Athens, and moved to Israel with his family in 1951. He studied at the Ramat Gan Municipal High School and met his distant cousin Rosa (Shoshana) from Bulgaria, whom he was later to marry.

After his army service in the Signal Corps, Rafi studied physics, chemistry and mathematics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and became a chemistry teacher. He came to Egyptology quite by chance, on hearing a lecture by Professor Rafael Giveon. Rafi was captivated, and began his Egyptological studies at Tel Aviv University in 1966, with Giveon and Mordechai Gilula, a rising star in Egyptological linguistics.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Ventura participated in Giveon's epigraphic expeditions to Serabit el-Khadem, the remote site in the Sinai where the Egyptians had mined turquoise

during the Twelfth Dynasty and the New Kingdom, and built a temple in honour of the goddess Hathor, patroness of the mines. Ventura wrote several articles on the architecture of this temple and the officials who led the Egyptian expeditions. Over the years, he also published Egyptian inscribed artefacts from excavations in Israel.

In 1973, Tel Aviv University awarded Ventura a stipend for graduate studies at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. There he wrote a thesis on the workmen of Deir el-Medīna, the desert village near modern-day Luxor which was home to the artists and craftsmen who built and decorated the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. His thesis, later published as *Living in a City of the Dead: A Selection of Topographical and Administrative Terms in the Documents of the Theban Necropolis* (OBO 69), Freiburg and Göttingen, 1986, <https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/151167/>, argued that the workmen were subject to stringent security regulations and confined to the area of their homes and their worksites in order to keep the secrets of the royal burials. His work sparked a debate about the necropolis workmen's freedom of movement which continues to this day.

In 1976, Ventura returned to Israel to take up a teaching post at Tel Aviv University in the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures. He taught there for 34 years, until his retirement in 2010, fascinating generations of students and keeping Egyptology alive during the difficult years after the death of his colleague Giveon in 1985 and Mordechai Gilula's serious illness around the same time. Ventura loved teaching and excelled at it: he also taught at the Tel Aviv University's Faculty of Art, at Beit Berl Academic College, where he headed the section of ancient art, and, after his retirement, at the Multidisciplinary Center in Herzeliya.

In the days when Israelis could not travel to Egypt, Raphael Giveon used to say that, just as astronomers do not need to travel to outer space to pursue their research, Egyptologists do not necessarily need to go to Egypt. However, the situation changed dramatically after the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Ventura was one of the first Israeli Egyptologists to visit Egypt. He participated in and helped guide the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures' legendary first excursion to Egypt. He returned to Egypt more than a dozen times with students and friends, and wrote a book on Egyptian culture for the general public as background for visitors to Egypt.

Rafi died on the first day of Rosh HaShana 2020, after a short illness. He leaves behind two daughters, Rachel and Yael.

## Acknowledgment

The material in this obituary is derived in part from an autobiographical text which Rafi Ventura wrote and which was used for a speech by the author on an afternoon of lectures in his honour on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010, and based in part on an announcement of his death by the author which was distributed on the Egypt Electronic Forum on September 20<sup>th</sup> 2020 and the Agade list on September 21<sup>st</sup> 2020. Many thanks to Arlette David, Rachel Reiss and Yael Sharabi Ventura for checking the content of this material.

The photograph shows Dr. Ventura guiding at the Step Pyramid at Saqqara copyright © Arlette David. It is published here by kind permission of Rachel Reiss and Yael Sharabi Ventura.

*Deborah Sweeney*