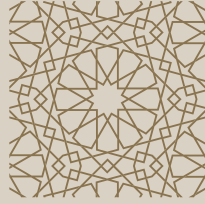


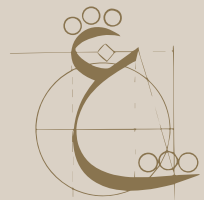
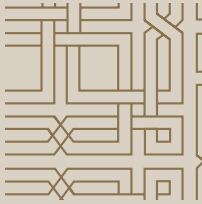


# kadim

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06



*kadim*

*“Kadim oldur ki  
evvelin kimesne bilmeye”*

*Kadim* is that no one knows what came before.

# kadim



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## Cornell H. Fleischer: A Life of Brilliance and Generosity

CORNELL H. FLEISCHER:  
PARILTI VE CÖMERTLİK DOLU  
BİR HAYAT



EMİN LELİĆ\*

Penning this is difficult because it is hard to accept that Cornell H. Fleischer is no longer with us. He was always a radiant presence in my life and in the lives of those who knew and loved him. Cornell H. Fleischer was many things to many people. The readers of this journal will primarily know of him as a renowned scholar. As a former student (M.A. and Ph.D.) and then a friend, I would like to take this opportunity to present a more personal aspect of this scholar whom friends and students shall miss dearly.



### 1. Hoca

I did not know much about Cornell H. Fleischer when he accepted me to be his M.A. student at the University of Chicago. Although, I was decidedly interested in studying Ottoman history, my own approach to Ottoman history at the time – shaped by my undergraduate mentor Shahzad Bashir – was primarily through Ottoman Sufism, particularly its less ‘orthodox’ or *Melami* manifestations during the Early Modern period. Fleischer’s gracious reception of my application convinced me to forego other offers

and to study with him. Bashir had informed me that Fleischer, impressed by my application, had called him on the telephone to discuss my prospects at the University of Chicago, with a



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full scholarship to boot. The very personal nature of his intervention made a deep and decisive impression. It would also become a lasting impression, for, at every turn Fleischer demonstrated that far more than simply initiating young scholars into the field of Ottoman studies, he was welcoming us into a “family” – to use his own word. On occasions, he would half-jokingly refer to us, his students, as *ihvan*, that is, a brotherhood.

Although undoubtedly rooted in intellectual exchange, family to Fleischer – as indicated by the term *ihvan*, which he liked so much – had almost spiritual undertones. He was inducting us into a *silsile* (also his term of choice) of great scholars and he saw himself as only a link in that grand chain of transmission of knowledge. He loved talking about his mentors (and their respective *silsiles*), especially Martin Dickson and Andreas Tietze.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, Tietze’s gracious response to Fleischer’s initial expression of interest in Mustafa Âli influenced his own approach to younger scholars – he often fondly recounted his amazement at the time that a scholar of such renown took an interest in a graduate student’s spontaneous queries. Later, Fleischer would become a regular guest at Tietze’s famous Istanbul gatherings, which established life-long friendships with German and other Ottomanists. I had often contemplated recording Fleischer’s colorful anecdotes – getting snowed in for days at the Tietze residence near Bosphorus University after a party; Talat Sait Halman’s visit to his modest graduate lodging at the Princeton “Project,” where, clad in a fine suit, Halman graciously joined his host on a carpet. And many others, which now I am sadly forced to reconstruct from memory.

## 2. Bey-efendi

To anyone even vaguely familiar with old Istanbul, Fleischer immediately evoked the image of an Istanbul bey-efendi – an Old World gentleman. It was a combination of his poetic and remarkably precise Turkish, which resonated with worldly refinement (he spoke English the same way), and an impeccably discreet and courteous manner. He never gossiped nor spoke ill of anyone. It was true *edeb* that he was embodying. Indeed, Fleischer was a man of the Old World. The son of a diplomat, he grew up around Middle Eastern royal courts and more generally in the late Ottoman aristocratic world. Although politically an avowed Socialist, his love of beauty led to a deep appreciation of that world – its elegant manners, which he himself had mastered, and the brilliant accoutrements it had produced, which filled his house. Yet, it was always a detached appreciation, the sort reminiscent of dervish anecdotes, with whom, not incidentally, he had spent time in his younger days. He freely gifted invaluable Persian rugs to friends and joked about his ignorance regarding the proper drinks for the array of exquisite crystal glassware he had inherited from his mother.

Incidentally, the Fleischers were titled European nobility, as I would learn much later when he showed me a book written in Swedish about his family. His ancestors had migrated from Prussia to Sweden, to serve the Swedish king. They specialized in skinning hunted game, hence the name Fleischer. This first biographical detail came to light through yet another fantastic anecdote – his life was full of them. In a Western European airport, a striking woman approached him, commenting on his remarkable resemblance to her ex-husband, a Swedish minister. As it turned out, the ex-husband was also a Fleischer, from the Swedish side of the

1 See also John E. Woods, “Cornell H. Fleischer: A Personal Memoir”, *Kadim* 6 (2023).

family. Both the Swedish and American branches were duly listed in the book. To me, his background seemed poetically linked to his cosmopolitan and refined proclivities and upbringing – riding horses with Egyptian royals, learning calligraphy, and summering with former Ottoman aristocrats-turned-Sufis in their hereditary, lately dilapidated summer villas on the Bosphorus.

### 3. Intellectual

Perhaps his most remarkable aspect, and certainly the reason that attracted so many of us to study with him, was Fleischer's extraordinary intellect. To a freshly minted graduate student, such as myself, his famous "Süleyman Seminar" at times approached something akin to a spiritual experience. Fleischer's incredible ability to bring the past to life through his immense historical and linguistic knowledge, paired with the subtlest cultural appreciation was infectious. At times, it would leave us, the listeners, simply stunned. I distinctly recall one particular paleography class, in which we were reading a random assortment of Ottoman and Arabic texts brought by students. We had finally translated an exceptionally difficult and painstaking manuscript passage from Ottoman to English. (Fleischer would never move on until every single word had been read and identified correctly, no matter how long it took nor how many dictionaries had to be consulted). Informing us that the passage was a reference to the *Shāhnāme*, Fleischer walked over to the little board in the corner of his crammed office, in which he held his seminars. As he was reciting, in Persian and from memory, the relevant couplets from the *Shāhnāme*, he wrote them on the board in elegant *nesih* script. In one stroke, he had unveiled the deep cultural layers of the Ottoman world. And for a moment, it felt as if that culture was still alive.

We, the students, quickly learned, however, that this fantastically mercurial approach, which in a moment could unearth deep connections between geographies, linguistic registers and historical epochs, was, in fact, rooted in an extremely conscientious and rigorous philological approach. On that count he was absolutely inflexible; he could not stand philological sloppiness. In fact, his relentless philological exactitude could be quite intimidating. I still recall exchanging nervous glances with fellow panelists – all of us his former students and now professors in our own right – as Fleischer was keenly scrutinizing the transliterations on our PowerPoint slides. His philological exactitude was softened, however, by his impeccable tact and even more so by his deep appreciation for hard work. He was always careful not to embarrass anyone, especially if he knew that the person had done the best they could. His criticism was usually reserved for what he thought of as shortcuts – especially, constructing what he termed 'sexy' historical arguments on shoddy philological foundations. Conversely, there was no higher praise, for me at least, than being told by Fleischer that one read Ottoman very well, which praise I, admittedly, earned after I had received my PhD. But that was the kind of *boca* that he was – always happy to read Ottoman and to build true ties of friendship with his students that transcended formal graduate training. In fact, just prior to his passing, we had been reading Ottoman texts together in preparation for an article that we planned to co-author. In hindsight, I am deeply grateful for his emphasis on philological training. It has made me into a much better historian than I would have been otherwise.

With time, I came to realize that his philological meticulousness was, in fact, rooted in deep respect for the texts we were reading and for their authors. If they could put in the work, which at times must have been tremendous, to compose what was often beautiful and deeply thoughtful Ottoman Turkish, the least we could do as historians was to correctly interpret it, with all its complexity and subtleties. In part, this must have been a lingering reaction to Orientalist biases, which Fleischer's generation had to contend with. When he approached one of his graduate mentors, Norman Itzkowitz, about writing a dissertation on sixteenth century Ottoman intellectual and cultural history, Itzkowitz supposedly responded, only half-jokingly: "It will be difficult. First you will need to demonstrate that the Ottomans had intellect, then that they had intellectuals, and finally that those intellectuals had original ideas".<sup>2</sup> The rest, as they say, is history. Fleischer's book, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541-1600)*, would transform the field of Ottoman studies by "re-construct[ing] the organic reality, of which, now, only inanimate relics remain," as he put it so eloquently in the book's introduction. The same spirit animated his seminars. *Bureaucrat and Intellectual*, as is well known, also earned him the prestigious McArthur genius award, for which he was recommended by his colleagues, who keenly recognized the significance of his contribution to Ottoman intellectual and cultural history.

He extended the same unfaltering respect to earlier scholarship, as evidenced by the wealth of even the most obscure references in his works. Well-versed in what his predecessors in the field had contributed across linguistic registers, he was equally insistent that his students familiarize themselves with older scholarship and learn to think of our academic field as a cross-generational joint venture – an academic *silsile*. Correspondingly, he was unequivocally respectful and supportive of younger scholars regardless of differences of age or prestige, even when their ideas and conclusions conflicted with his own.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, he always retained an open mind. His later work on occult practices, which he pursued courageously despite initially unfavorable reactions, show his exclusive dedication to the source materials and equal disregard for academic trends. Fleischer expected the same from his students and very consciously gave us a lot of room to explore and discover our own ideas. His only insistence was faithfulness to the sources.

We have lost a wonderful friend, teacher and role model. However, his lively legacy remains a source of comfort and encouragement.

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2 See Nenad Filipović, "Cornell H. Fleischer, Prevazilaženje Orijentalizma i Odanost Bosni", *Proglas* (Accessed 27 April 2023).

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APPENDIX



At the Graduation Ceremony, University of Chicago, 2017: Emin Lelić receives his PhD, alongside Cornell Fleischer among the faculty.