

Jaime Litvak King

“A Helluva Guy”

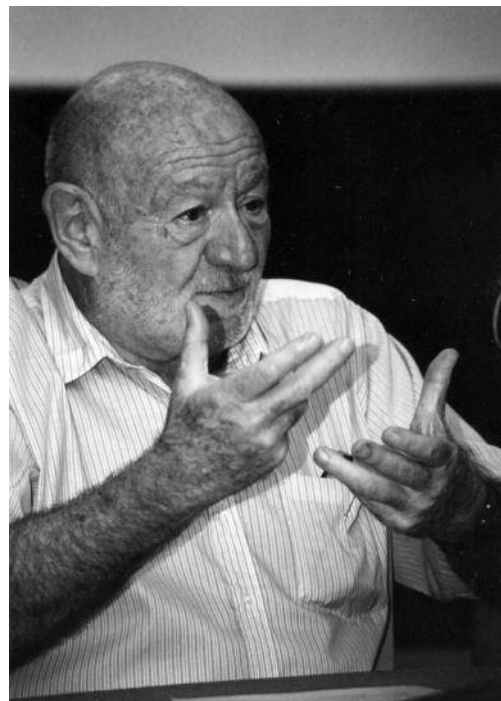
(1933-2006)

Joel Santos*

Dr. Jaime Litvak King, distinguished, exceptional university professor, noteworthy archaeologist, and beloved human being, died in Mexico City, October 2, 2006.

Born in the country’s capital December 10, 1933, his early schooling took place in the Israelite College of Mexico from 1939 to 1950, where he graduated in economics. Later he did his college-level work at different institutions: he graduated as an archaeologist from the National School of Anthropology and History in 1963; he received his master’s in anthropology from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), with the thesis *Cihuatlán y Tepecoacuilco, dos provincias tributarias de México en el siglo XVI* (Cihuatlán and Tepecoacuilco, Two Tribute-Paying Provinces of Mexico in the Sixteenth Century). He received his doctorate in anthropology from the UNAM in 1970 with the thesis *El valle de Xochicalco. Un modelo estadístico para la arqueología regional* (The Valley of Xochicalco. A Statistical Model for Regional Archaeology). He also did graduate work at several universities abroad: Indiana University (1964), the University of Pennsylvania (1964), Cambridge University (1967-1968) and Fondazione Lerici (1967).

He became a researcher at the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) (1963-1967) and then at the UNAM in 1968. He researched at sites in Guanajuato, Guerrero, Morelos, Chiapas and the Valley of Mexico. His



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publications include innumerable articles and books, among them *Todas las piedras tienen 2000 años* (All Stones are 2000 Years Old), an introduction to archaeology (1986). He was the founding director of the UNAM Institute for Anthropological Research (1973-1984). Among the awards he received are the Friar Bernardino de Sahagún INAH Prize for Archaeology (1971), the National University Prize (1996) and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society for American Archaeology (2002).

He was named researcher emeritus at the UNAM and was a member of the National System of Researchers. He taught at several uni-

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versities and schools: the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH); the UNAM; the University of the Americas, Puebla campus; the University of Minnesota; the University of New Mexico; the University of Texas in El Paso; and Tulane University. As if that were not enough, he was the coordinator of the Juan Comas Library; a member of several commissions and councils; the editor and contributor to several publications; thesis advisor for many students; and program host at UNAM Radio.

Dr. Litvak would have preferred a eulogy without preamble; he might have asked to be remembered merely as a researcher at the UNAM Institute for Anthropological Research. Despite being exceptional, he never wanted to be treated differently. But, it would be unpardonable for those of us who knew him to forget to mention his innumerable qualities, his contributions to Mexican anthropology, his enormous endeavors as a member of the university, and how valuable he was as a teacher and human being.

His first studies were about economics, perhaps because of his interest in statistics and his mathematical ability. However, he soon realized that he had a different vocation. That is when he studied a bachelor's in archaeology at the ENAH, where his teachers were some of the most renowned anthropologists of his time. He collaborated with Dr. Ignacio Bernal at the Museum of Anthropology. He was the student of and worked alongside José Luis Lorenzo, from whom he learned the importance of the methods and techniques of archaeological excavation as well as the interdisciplinary nature of archaeology and the fundamental role that disciplines like geology, geography and biology played in his work. When José Luis Lorenzo founded the INAH's Department of Prehistory, Litvak joined it, participating in several research projects to recover sites like those at the El Infiernillo and La Villita Dams.

His career in the UNAM includes having been founding director of the Institute for Anthropological Research, a post he fulfilled admirably.

His interest in developing new studies in archaeology led him away from the INAH Department of Prehistory. He entered the UNAM, where he focused his research on western Morelos. He developed ground-breaking work in Xochicalco by applying a statistical model to understanding its regional development and its relationship with all of Mesoamerica. In this way, he began to innovate in an area that had always interested him: the application of techniques and methods in archaeology. But, he also delved into the field of cultural explanations. His most important contributions to archaeology are in these two areas.

Litvak is considered one of the pioneers in applying quantitative methods and computers to archaeology. As a theoretician, his proposed explanations of the cultural dynamic of Mesoamerica are outstanding, above all of the causes of the fall and abandonment of the main cities of the classical period, which gave rise to a new cultural stage, the post-classical. According to Litvak, this phenomenon was

due to the political and economic break of the subject provinces, which, as they grew and acquired domination over their own territory, isolated the great cities. He called this process "Balkanization."

His career in the UNAM includes having been founding director of the Institute for Anthropological Research, a post he fulfilled admirably. During his term, the new building was erected, and he himself took charge of making sure it had the necessary infrastructure to turn it into a world class center for anthropological research. From 1994 to 2002, he coordinated the Juan Comas Library, turning it into the most important anthropological library in Latin America, with more than 500,000 books and an exceptional computer consultation system.

He also founded the newspaper *Humanidades* (Humanities), with the idea of providing all members of the university with a medi-

um for information and communication. Until it stopped circulating, *Humanidades* was distributed free of charge to all corners of the university.

Dr. Litvak was an exceptional teacher, an archaeologist who loved and enjoyed his profession. He was a rather unconventional: his classes were clear and concise; in a few words, he explained his vision of archaeology and his opinions about the complexity of culture. His lectures were full of pleasant moments, experiences, anecdotes and good humor. He never refused to give class, much less if it was in the ENAH, his beloved alma mater.

He continually received invitations to speak at high schools, colleges, in congresses, before groups of congresspersons. He hardly ever turned them down, given his passion for spreading his ideas and knowledge. For Dr. Litvak, that was the job of the anthropologist, above and beyond books, classrooms and academic circles.

Few people know that after the 1985 earthquake, Dr. Litvak, as director of academic projects, decided to join the aid organization headquartered at the UNAM Medical Services Office, at the University Medical Center. He set up a team to coordinate the rescue brigades and groups to obtain information about the dead and people living in shelters. Nowhere else in the city was there a data bank like the one organized in the UNAM. The first operations making it possible to locate people who had disappeared and to coordinate aid efforts were organized from University City. This enormous job, headed by Litvak, was rewarded with the government's "September 19 Recognition of Heroic Valor" award.

Litvak was convinced that science should have a practical application, that all knowledge gathered in anthropology should be used to serve society and the country's development. He dedicated a large part of his life to creating and promoting institutions, and many spaces for an-

thropology and the university were the result of his efforts.

Dr. Litvak was a simple man, with practical ideas and a sensational sense of humor. His loud, deep voice made itself heard no matter where he was. He did not mind using swear words; he loved always taking the opposite view in conversations, he just could not help it. He brooked no protocol; he loved jokes, breaking with formalities, laughing and having a good time. Some people did not like it; others were disconcerted; but most admired his ways.

We cannot leave out his fascination with music, particularly jazz. He was the host of two unforgettable programs on University Radio: "University Space" and "The Music in Life."

His taste for the cinema and his love of soccer are also memorable. He was part of the board of the University Club and he used to go to every game that the UNAM Pumas soccer team played at the University City stadium. Everything came to a halt in his office, no matter what time it was or how

much work there was, when an important soccer match was on.

Definitely, Dr. Litvak did not fit the stereotype of an erudite man, which he undoubtedly was. He was a man of the world, a polyglot, knowledgeable, with an extraordinary memory and an enormous organizational capability, although he seemed to be rough and ready since he did not show his feelings easily, or his acts of kindness, which were a clue to his sensitivity.

Much is left that could be said of Dr. Litvak. He was more widely known and recognized as an anthropologist abroad than in his own country. He did important work in the Mexican Society of Anthropology, and he dedicated the last years of his life to the development of industrial archaeology in Mexico.

As for myself, I will remember him in the way that he remembered many of his own beloved teachers: "He was a Helluva guy." **MM**

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