The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Edgar Charles Polomé, professor emeritus, Germanic languages, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
EDGAR CHARLES POLOMÉ

Professor Edgar C. Polomé, Christie and Stanley E. Adams, Jr., Centennial Professor Emeritus in Liberal Arts, distinguished linguist, Indo-Europeanist, and professor of comparative religions and languages, died of an osteosarcoma at the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, on Saturday, March 11, 2000.

Professor Polomé was born on July 31, 1920, in Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, a suburb of Brussels, Belgium, the only child of Marcel and Berthe Polomé. His early childhood was already a multilingual one. He grew up speaking standard and Walloon French with his parents and paternal grandmother, though his mother was a native of Ghent who also spoke (Flemish) Dutch. With the family’s maid, Polomé spoke the local Brabantine dialect of Dutch. While his primary education was in Dutch, he enrolled in a French-medium secondary school (Athénée Royal de Koekelberg), adding Latin, Greek, German, and English to his knowledge of languages, and graduated at the top of his class. Although Polomé showed an early interest in science (“dabbling at home in all kinds of experiments that often scared my mother out of her wits”), he received a rigorous training in classical philology, as well as modern dialectology. His German teacher, a PhD candidate in Germanic philology, trained his students in phonological data collection and transcription using the International Phonetic Alphabet.

When he won a Belgium National Scholarship and entered the University of Brussels in 1938, Polomé was encouraged to study classics, but instead chose Germanic philology. In his own words:

These were, politically, very volatile years. We took our freshman exams at the time when there was a danger of war, but apparently I did all right since I passed with the highest distinction. As a result, my parents allowed me to go on a trip to Germany which almost turned into a disaster, because my parents were on vacation in France while I was on my way along the Rhine Valley towards southern Germany when the war between France, England and Germany broke out after Hitler’s invasion of Poland. I managed to scramble home with the last train before the border was closed, and Belgium remained out of the war until May 1940.

After Belgium’s entry into the war, Polomé was conscripted and sent to southern France, though he was able to avoid internment in a prisoner-of-war camp and returned to his studies in Brussels. After the German occupying authorities eventually closed the university in 1942, he completed his master’s degree (Candidature en philologie germanique) at the University of Louvain in 1943 (thesis title: De Middelnederlandse Bewerking van Liber VIII “De Proprietatibus Rerum” van Bartholomaeus Anglicus), working closely with Professor Etienne Lamotte on Sanskrit and Indic studies and developing his lifelong interest in comparative religions and cultures.

At war’s end in 1945, Polomé joined the U. S. Army as an interpreter in Eschwege in occupied Germany. Ever the autodidact, he managed to arrange work trips to the nearby university town, Göttingen, where he purchased a number of books and took up the study of Celtic. On his return to Belgium, he enrolled in the Free University of Brussels and completed his Doctorat en philologie germanique with Highest Distinction in 1949, writing his dissertation on labiovelars in Indo-European and the laryngeal theory under the
direction of Professor Adolph van Loey (*Linguistische Studiën in verband met de Germaanse Anlautgroep *hw-*)—Conducting his dissertation research brought Polomé into direct contact and correspondence with most of the great Indo-Europeanists of the time, including Pokorny, Dumézil, Benveniste, Kurylowicz, as well as W. P. Lehmann, now professor emeritus at The University of Texas at Austin.

Off and on from 1942 to 1956, Polomé taught Germanic languages at the Athénée Adolphe Max in Brussels and also taught Dutch on the radio from 1954 to 1956. At that time, he was invited to join the faculty of the Université Officielle du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Burundi in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi/Katanga) in the Shaba region of the Belgian Congo to establish a Department of Linguistics. There he developed a curriculum comparable to those in European universities and built up a well-equipped, highly-sophisticated phonetics laboratory—the finest of its kind in Africa—where he and his students were able to conduct state-of-the-art acoustic analysis of African languages. Indeed, Professor Polomé will be remembered by many colleagues as much for his work in Bantu linguistics as for Indo-European studies. He devoted considerable attention to Swahili, especially the creolized variety spoken in Elisabethville, producing many publications in this area and building on his earlier interests in the relationship between language and culture to include language contact, language planning, and modern sociolinguistics.

After the end of colonial rule in the Belgian Congo in 1960, Polomé was invited by Professor Lehmann to teach for one semester at The University of Texas at Austin as a visiting professor during the absence of Professor Werner Winter. He was quickly hired as a tenured professor in the Department of Germanic Languages which, despite its name, was the academic home for linguists working on topics of general and non-Germanic interest. Professors Polomé and Lehmann were instrumental in the creation of the Department of Linguistics and the Department of Oriental and African Languages and Literatures (DOALL), the latter established in 1969 with Polomé as its first chair (serving until 1976). In 1966, he became a United States citizen.

Professor Polomé gave much to the University. Aside from his work in DOALL, he was one of the first directors of the Center for Asian Studies (1962-72) and taught courses in many departments, including anthropology, classics, linguistics, foreign language education, and Germanic languages, dealing with historical linguistics, comparative linguistics, sociolinguistics, the history of religion, and comparative religions. In 1984 he was honored with a centennial professorship in liberal arts. Among his numerous other honors were a Fulbright professorship to Kiel, Germany, in 1968, and a Ford Foundation grant to survey languages in Tanzania in 1969-1970, which took him back as a researcher and teacher of linguistics to East Africa. Based at the University of Dar es Salaam, he also helped develop the bachelor’s and master’s programs in linguistics at the University of Nairobi. Polomé was chair of the Language Committee of the American Institute of India Studies from 1972 to 1978, organized an international seminar "Perspectives on the Ancient Indo-European World" sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1990, and was awarded the first Sociolinguistics Prize by the University of Umeå, Sweden, in October, 1991. Professor Polomé became professor emeritus at UT Austin in 1997.

Though paralyzed on his left side by a stroke in 1993, Polomé remained a prolific author and editor. His textbook *Swahili Language Handbook* (1967) is still used in many universities. Other books he wrote or edited include:

- *Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (1969)
- *Reconstructing Languages and Cultures* (1992)

Over his career Professor Polomé wrote hundreds of articles and reviews for festschrifts and scholarly journals, edited and wrote the book chronicle for the *Journal of Indo-European Studies* from 1973 until his
death, co-edited *The Mankind Quarterly*, and had wide correspondence with colleagues and friends around the world.

Professor Polomé was beloved by his students for his lively personality, generous intellectual character, humorous charm and wit, encyclopedic knowledge, deep commitment to his students, passion for his work, as well as for his unfailing ability in lectures to accentuate the wrong syllable, a phonological regularity which became known as Polomé’s Law. This “law” was originally formulated by Mrs. Garland Bills as ‘Addon’s Law after a graduate student named Judy Haddon whose surname was regularly pronounced by Polomé without the “h”. In time, the more exact formulation of Polomé’s Law came to be: stress the penultimate syllable of an English word, unless that would be correct; otherwise stress the antepenultimate. One of his former students, Joseph C. Salmons, now a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, recalls also that

there was another Polomé’s Law: I was talking to him once about Nostratic and related matters and he said, “If you give me one rule that says any segment X can go to any other segment Y in any environment Z, I can give you Proto-Human.” We came to call that Polomé’s Law, too.

Another of Professor Polome’s former students, Bridget Drinka, currently on the faculty of The University of Texas at San Antonio, adds:

I felt that Edgar really enjoyed watching me attack a problem in my own way. He knew and appreciated how I thought, but was always ready to demand a little more, or a lot more. To the extent that I am a critical thinker and an inquisitive researcher today, I owe these attributes to Edgar’s care, guidance, and meticulous attention to detail. No one did more to shape my mind and my ability to reason than Edgar did. I definitely rewrote every word of my dissertation at least once under his critical eye. He let me get away with absolutely nothing. He showed me the value of his own eclectic approach: read profusely, examine the validity of all sides of the issue, stake out a position, but keep your mind open to other interpretations. This might be what I would really call Polome’s Law: immerse yourself in the possibilities.

Polomé reached countless individuals through his participation in many international congresses, travels as a consultant to Kenya, Tanzania, India, and elsewhere, and affiliations with respected professional organizations and journals, not to mention his publications. Still, his greatest legacy is his students, many of whom continue his work as teachers and scholars. Despite the demands of a career filled with multiple research, teaching, and administrative duties, Polomé will be remembered by his students and colleagues for generously giving his time to discuss topics of mutual scholarly interest and for offering supportive questioning when he did not agree.

Professor Polomé has been honored by several festschrifts, to which many scholars throughout the world have contributed. The latest, a two-volume homage in honor of his 80th birthday, is due to appear later this year.

In the words of his wife, Sharon:

Edgar was dynamic, “a live coal straight from the furnace of creation,” a kind, wonderful man and gregarious host. He loved to eat, loved to cook chicken curry and was known for his Indonesian specialties. He was the “Rail Baron” who ran LGB trains so many wonderful Sunday afternoons in the last year of his life, and who sang sweet and comic songs in his gravelly voice to his wife, who will miss him more than he ever could have dreamt.

Polomé is survived by his beloved wife, Sharon, his son André and daughter-in-law Susan, of Bozeman, Montana, André’s son Chris and wife, Debbie, and their daughter—Polomé’s first great-grandchild—Rénée Polomé, and his daughter Monique and her husband, John Ellsworth, and their daughter, Danielle, of Fairfax, Virginia. He is also survived by ex-wife Barbara Harris. Professor Polomé’s first wife, Julia Schwindt, whom he married in 1944 and who was the mother of his children, died in 1975.

Of his long and productive life, Professor Polomé once said:
Having taught and done research on four continents—Europe, Africa, America and Asia—I feel gratitude that my experience has enabled me to discover the richness of Man's intellectual and artistic heritage .... It has especially allowed better appreciation of the perennial aesthetic, ethical and social values that make us all part of the great human brotherhood.

We are fortunate that Professor Edgar Polomé cared enough to share so much of his knowledge and experience with us. We are all immeasurably blessed by having known him.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Mark L. Louden (chair), Carol F. Justus, and Robert D. King.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on June 12, 2000. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/
Autobiographical essays:

Festschriften:

Lists of Publications—Books, Articles, Reviews:
http://www.dla.utexas.edu/depts/lrc/iedocctr/ie-pubs/ecpbooks.html
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