The Covid-19 virus emerged in late 2019 and soon became a global pandemic. Within its first twelve months it had cut short a million lives. Beloved master of pilgrimage studies David M. Gitlitz, still flourishing in retirement in Oaxaca, México, was one of those lives lost. His long, learned arc took him to a dozen professional settings, almost always in leadership positions, and hundreds of sites of fieldwork. He and Linda Kay Davidson, his wife and frequent co-author, explored challenging archives and remote shrine sites; many of their co-authored publications were surveyed in a previous issue of Ad Limina (Vol. 10, pp. 203-210). Scores of audiences enjoyed David’s animated lectures that fused tremendous erudition with an unexpected (and unnecessary) modesty. Gregarious and affable, this world traveler was the ideal educator, an “explainaholic” who delighted in sharing his inexhaustible command of fine grained detail and assured macrovision. During the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, he was the greatest authority on pilgrimage studies in the western hemisphere.

Gitlitz took his academic degrees at Oberlin College and Harvard. His university teaching positions included Northeastern, Indiana, Nebraska-Lincoln, the State University of New York at Binghamton, and Rhode Island. He held visiting positions at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, at UCLA as the Maurice Amado Visiting Professor of Sephardic Studies, and at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales & Collège de France.

Gitlitz excelled as a senior administrator in American higher education, anchoring posts in International and Overseas Study Programs at Indiana University, as Department Chair at Nebraska, as Dean of Arts and Sciences and Acting Provost at SUNY-Binghamton, and as Provost at the University of Rhode Island. A fellow senior administrator, Dr. Lynn Pasquerella, herself rose to become president several times over, of a university, of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, and of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Pasquerella and Gitlitz overlapped for two decades at Rhode Island. She observed that, “His appointment as provost in 1988 precipitated robust academic planning ... feelings of excitement and optimism as those of us on a commission he charged with strategic planning gathered around the dining room table in the home [where] he and Linda lived on the edge of campus. Whenever I reflect on the transformative power of the humanities, David comes to mind.” She remembers Gitlitz as a “passionate public...
intellectual [who] foregrounded and celebrated the lives of those whose narratives have been consigned to the lower shelves of history.” When it came to promoting the teacher/scholars under him, Gitlitz could be sanguine about the long road to achievement. He once confided that he might underwrite the research of ten faculty applicants and if only one produced notable results, he considered that success.

As he grew to a preeminent voice in Iberian literatures and cultures, Gitlitz built powerfully from a base in early modern Spanish theater and his doctoral dissertation on “The Jew in the Comedia of the Golden Age”. The themes of performance of ritualized roles – on the stage, at court, through political posturing and in the course of the sometimes bloody negotiations between Iberian Christianity and resident Jews – endured throughout his academic life even while expanding into pilgrimage studies.

Gitlitz edited and analyzed underappreciated gems in the vast corpus of Calderón de la Barca (Guárdate del agua mansa), Tirso de Molina (La gallega Mari-Hernández), and Lope de Vega (El anzuelo de Fenisa, Mejor mozo de España, Vida y Muerte de Santa Teresa de Jesús, La discreta enamorada, El Galán Castrucho). His range extended to Francesco Petrarch, Garcilaso de la Vega, Fernando de Herrera, Fray Luis de León, Francisco de Quevedo and Miguel de Cervantes. One former undergraduate student, Maryjane Dunn, recalls how Gitlitz marshalled colleagues in French and Italian for a team-taught class on Petrarchan influence on poetry, which she counts as “probably the single most important class I took in preparation for graduate school.”

Gitlitz was an engaging prose stylist in all the genres he contributed to. A natural storyteller and fabulist, his joy in the arts of language made him a keen reader of Hebrew scripture and early modern Romance languages. He published ambitious English verse translations of the poetry of Gonzalo de Berceo and Francisco de Quevedo and several comedias of Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón de la Barca which were staged at American universities.

Gitlitz achieved his widest fame as a scholar of the Camino de Santiago and pilgrimage worldwide. His Pilgrimage Road to Santiago: The Complete Cultural Handbook, co-authored with Linda Davidson, became something of a bible among Camino enthusiasts in English-speaking nations. It remains the best one-volume survey of the historical Camino francés, its traditional customs, medieval lore and architectural styles in any language. Pilgrimage and the Jews traces the steady arc of sacred travel from earliest Hebraic myth to modern rabbinic tomb cults. The impossibly ambitious Pilgrimage, from the Ganges to Graceland: an Encyclopedia (also co-authored with Davidson) includes the unexpectedly rewarding inclusion of places like Graceland, the former home and now burial place of the rock and roll musician Elvis Presley, and the Stonewall Inn, the iconic launch point of the gay rights movement in the United States.

Gitlitz’s influence on pilgrimage studies stamped more than what appeared in print. He provided an influential American model for what a comprehensive
academic study trip on the Camino de Santiago could be. In total he led five treks in Spain, in 1974, 1979, 1987, 1993 and 1996. Two of his early participants, Dr. Lynn Talbot (1974) and Dr. Maryjane Dunn (1979) became noted Camino scholars and leaders of multiple study trips for their universities. Others, including the author of this note, learned from his lectures and example, and tried to emulate his teaching methods. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the expansive “Gitlitz curriculum” grew into something of a prestige model that most subsequent American educators pared down according to their more limited expertise.

David enlivened the walk with plenty of singing: songs from the American folk revival and his tenure in the Boy Scouts, but also Spanish *romances* and *tuna* songs which he had acquired when he sang as a *tuno* in his own college days in Spain. His approach to travel was adventurous, assigning every student in turn to find the group’s lodging for the night along some unmarked Camino route referenced in the twelfth-century Pilgrims Guide in the *Liber Sancti Iacobi*, the *Poema de mio Cid* or the *Poema de Fernán González*. Some nights the youthful *caminantes* slept in a rectory or on church pews and once in a hay barn. On another occasion the women found beds in a conven while the men made do with the sofas in a bar. Bearded like an Old Testament patriarch in his prime and wearing a traditional pilgrim’s hat, replete with upturned brim and shell decoration, David led his students, mostly in their twenties, using old Spanish army topographic maps and dead reckoning. They clambered through the then uncurated Médulas *sans* visitor center or signage, craggy rearing hillsides with tunnels virtually untouched since the Romans walked away from them when the gold mines shut down. Traveling “at random” in their Volkswagen minibus during rest days in Ponferrada, then student Lynn Talbot reports that, “David suddenly slammed on the brakes, pointed to a castle on the hill, and shouted, ‘There’s Cornatel!’ Off we went to hike up to the castle, and then we sat on the wall, looking over the precipice, while we read the chapter in *El señor de Bembibre* that describes how the castle is attacked via that precipice. Now, David probably knew that we would pass that castle (otherwise, why did he have a copy of Gil y Carrasco’s novel with him?), but this type of experience, over and over again, made Spain come alive.”

Another student *peregrina*, Maryjane Dunn, recalls that, “On the Camino, in the classroom, at home... it didn’t matter, [Gitlitz] was always excited to show and share something new... His first Camino (1974) was a great adventure; his second, in 1979 (my Camino), probably happened because I badgered him nearly daily to lead another one. After that he had caught the bug, but by 1996 he was rather jaded about the [increasing] numbers of pilgrims and how little they knew about the history of the pilgrimage, Spain, the architecture, etc. that they saw around them. He was forever searching for new, minor paths to recreate that sense of aloneness / independence / medievalness.” She reflects on the scholarly trajectory that Gitlitz and Davidson pursued after 1996, that it was in part their disillusionment with later day ‘turigrinos’ which led them to write the *Cultural Handbook* and other reference works.
David M. Gitlitz, San Juan de la Peña, July 1979 (photo by Univ. of Nebraska 1979 pilgrim Michael Davis).
Davidson and Dunn sustained their links to the Camino through their jointly produced “Friends of the Road to Santiago” newsletter (July 25, 1989 - Fall, 2004), and later by promoting the national association American Pilgrims on the Camino. Dunn notes that “Gitlitz became detached and limited his later participation except as a bemused observer, lecturer and cheerleader to our efforts.”

Over the course of half a century of scholarship, Gitlitz produced a powerful series of studies of the Jewish community’s long and troubled history of cultural participation and persecution in Iberia and in the New World. Often driven underground within their own Iberian communities, even Sephardic Jews who willingly converted to Christianity became masters of dissembling. Many who cherished traditional practices and beliefs were subjected to intimidation, investigation, shame and slaughter. Gitlitz was a major voice in documenting the agony of concealment in award winning books like *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*, *Los Arias Dávila de Segovia: entre la iglesia y la sinagoga*, *Pilgrimage and the Jews*, *A Drizzle of Honey: The Lives and Recipes of Spain’s Secret Jews*, *The Lost Minyan* and, shortly before his unexpected death, *Living in Silverado: Secret Jews in the Silver Mining Towns of Colonial Mexico*.

*Secrecy and Deceit* (1996) renewed and considerably expanded themes discussed by towering figures before, like those of Benzion Netanyahu (*Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain*, 1995) and since, like works by David Nirenberg (*Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, 2013). Were the Jews of Iberia ever integrated into their societies? Were any truly converted to Christianity, by coercion or persuasion, and then settled into that identity unconflicted? To this last question Gitlitz gives a confident yes. Thoroughly alert to the conventions of staging an identity for political advancement or personal defense, Gitlitz argued that multiple performances were in play over time, in vastly different cultural settings in Old Spain, in the New World, among transient merchants and settled families of distinction. Reviewers of *Secrecy and Deceit* praised Gitlitz’s mastery of primary sources “drawn from jurisdictions as diverse as those of Córdoba and Goa, Majorca and Lima” and his ability to organize “the devices that crypto-Jews developed to hide their proscribed customs.” He concludes that “paranoid fear of the Inquisition was joined to a pervasive schizophrenia, as each new Christian consciously had to don a public persona behind which to safeguard private spiritual or social practices. Each *converso* perched on his own shoulder and watched himself act. Each became at once the protagonist and author of his own fictionalized autobiography” (598).

Individuals too could shift among their preferred identities when functioning either as a public figure or in a family setting. Gitlitz’s most striking example was Juan Arias Dávila (1436-1497) who rose from a *converso* ancestry to become the bishop of Segovia, an apostolic protonotary, and member of the Royal Council of Enrique IV and his successors, the Catholic Monarchs Fernando and Isabel. The good bishop constructed a discreet passageway between his episcopal residence in Segovia to the adjoining home of his observant Jewish sister and quietly celebrated Sabbath meals.
David Martin Gitlitz, April 24, 1942 - December 30, 2020
with family. The Spanish Inquisition’s pursuit of everyone with Jewish blood lines reached even those in high positions. Arias Dávila found himself compelled to disinter the remains of his accused parents and carry them to Rome for reburial. His canonical status – a performance of authority – ironically carried more weight in the bosom of the papal court than in his homeland.

David and Linda’s curiosities were limitless. Their move to México was partly for a more healthful climate for Linda but also to access some of the great archives of Spain’s colonial period with their untapped wealth of documentation on Inquisition records and the long overlooked Jewish lives they chronicled. For Living in Silverado, David schooled himself in the chemistry and engineering of colonial Mexican mining operations. Immersed in Oaxacan life and culture, David came to identify himself as oaxaqueño. He was entrusted by his new community with a cargo for which he was uniquely suited: producing a fluent translation of the only scholarly chronicle of his new home, Helen Bailley Miller’s Santa Cruz of the Etla Hills. His translation made the story of the everyday lives of his new neighbors’ grandparents accessible in Spanish for the first time.

Late in life David enjoyed exploring the valley’s pre-Columbian archeology and helped monitor the region’s avian migration patterns for Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology. He volunteered as a docent at La Reserva Ecológica “La Mesita” in the mid-altitudes of the Sierra Madre Oriental where he helped guide Mexican schoolchildren through its enchanting butterfly pen and explained traditional land conservation practices.

An accomplished versifier, David’s own poem on the meaning of pilgrimage is a fitting epitaph:

The pilgrims speak in fits and starts
of what throbs in their heads and hearts;
the seer, for all his delving arts,
is left outside.

Some crave the crowd, some march alone,
some walk to seek the self unknown;
some to attune, some to atone,
and some to hide.

Some probe the deserts for a cure,
some scale high mountains to ensure
their souls a sacred sinecure;
some walk to rest.

Pilgrim, divinity’s design
is masked. Take up your staff. Define
your road as church, your love as shrine,
your life as quest. (2001)
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Reviews


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