



# In Memoriam: Catherine Schoun (1924–2021)

By Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

**M**rs. Catherine Schoun passed away peacefully at her home in Bloomington, Indiana, on the evening of Wednesday, April 7th, at the age of ninety-six; she was surrounded by close friends in an ambience of profound prayer and recollection. On Friday, April 9th a funeral was held for her, attended by nearly a hundred long-time and close friends from across the United States. The funeral in the idyllic forest setting was filled with radiant sunshine followed by rolling thunder, gentle rain, a bald eagle flying over the grave, and a beautiful double rainbow, a fitting image of earth joining harmoniously to heaven. We are most grateful that she has made the blessed passage to the other world to return to the peace of her Beloved: *‘And whosoever keepeth their covenant with God, on them shall He bestow immense reward’ (Surat al-Fath, 48:10).*

Catherine Schoun was born on August 13, 1924 in Bern, Switzerland. As the daughter of a career Swiss diplomat she was exposed to many cultures, spending her early school years in pre-war Berlin and then in Algiers, where she learned French and came to love North-African culture. She returned to Switzerland during World War II, where she received her Maturité Fédérale degree in 1943 and helped to care for refugee children. Just as World War II ended, she joined her father, who had been named Swiss Ambassador to Argentina. While in Argentina she was introduced to the works of René Guénon (1886–1951), she learned Spanish, and developed her remarkable gift for painting. Having no affinity with the diplomatic life, she returned to Switzerland where she worked with Italian artists.

Her interest in world religions and spirituality brought her into contact with Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), the famous writer, whom she married in May 1949. She accompanied her husband on all of his travels and helped him to receive visits and to answer correspondence from spiritual seekers who came to seek her husband's counsel. Her work with her husband brought her into contact with people from diverse religions and from throughout the world. Gifted in languages, she also became fluent in English and conversant in Italian, in addition to the three languages of her youth: German, French, and Spanish. Along with her husband, Catherine Schuon was adopted into the Sioux and Crow tribes. In addition, the Lakota holy man, Hehaka Sapa known as Black Elk (1863–1950), gave her the name Wámpli Oyáte Win, which means 'Eagle People Woman'. The Schuons lived near Lake Geneva until 1980 when they moved to the United States and established themselves in the forests of Indiana. After her husband's death in 1998 she spent several months each year traveling throughout the world to visit many of her late husband's admirers, each time returning to the serenity of her home in the woods of Indiana.

Catherine Schuon authored, edited, and translated several noteworthy works, including the translation of the French edition of John G. Neihardt's, *Black Elk Speaks* (1969); edited and provided illustrations for her husband's selected writings on art in *Art from the Sacred to the Profane: East and West* (2007); *A King James Christmas: Biblical Selections with Illustrations from Around the World* (2012; edited with Michael Oren Fitzgerald), which contains nine of her paintings; *Emir Abd el-Kader: Hero and Saint of Islam* (2012; co-translated with Gustavo Polit); and 'Frithjof Schuon: Memories and Anecdotes', *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Volume 8 (Winter 2001), pp. 35–60, which has been translated from the original French into English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Bosnian. Furthermore, her familiarity with her husband's intended meanings, as well as her fluency in so many languages meant that her contributions were essential to the accurate translations of Frithjof Schuon's numerous poems and letters, which have appeared in books worldwide.

My first and only meeting with Mrs. Schuon was at the Sacred Web Conference in September 2006 in Edmonton, Canada. I was introduced to her by a mutual friend, and I remember seeing her from a distance

and appreciating her natural beauty and elegance. When standing in front of her and making eye contact, there was something very youthful about her presence, something much younger than her chronological years indicated. During the meeting, she demonstrated a nobility and a regality, while being personable and kind. It was a brief encounter, yet I feel blessed and grateful for having been able to meet her.

Some years ago, Mrs. Schoun asked if I would prepare a review of the book *The City of the Heart: Yunus Emre's Verses of Wisdom and Love* (translated by Süha Faiz). Prior to reviewing this remarkable work, I was not very familiar with the Turkish poet and Sufi mystic, Yunus Emre (1238–1320). I was much obliged that she brought this work to my attention. I recall the following lines from Yunus's treasury of Sufi wisdom, which she would have likely appreciated:

The Beloved is made manifest in colours multitudinous —

But one is His accent which a hundred thousand hearts with joy has filled.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, book review—'The City of the Heart: Yunus Emre's Verses of Wisdom and Love', *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Volume 43 (Summer 2019), pp. 140-151.