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Ralph Russell as I Knew Him

WHEN PROFESSOR MEMON invited me to write about Ralph Russell for a special section to be published in his memory in the *AUS*, I accepted quite lightheartedly. Upon setting about this task, however, I realize how hard it is to say something about him that has not already been said by others, and in a better way than I may hope to.

Marion Molteno, in the opening article of Ralph Russell's collection of essays *How Not to Write a History of Urdu Literature*, said practically everything there is to say about him as a "Teacher, Scholar and Lover of Urdu" (1999, 3–28). Again, in the article at the end of the volume of studies in his honor entitled *Urdu and Muslim South Asia* (Shackle 1989, 191–200) she told about the energy and enthusiasm he put into the activity he devoted himself to after an early retirement from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 1981—teaching Urdu outside the academic circle and establishing it as a fully recognized subject in the British school system.

Christopher Shackle, in his introduction to the aforementioned festschrift, authoritatively declared Ralph Russell "unquestionably the outstanding Western scholar of Urdu of his generation," who "succeeded in working a magic in bringing his subject to life rivalled by few teachers of Middle Eastern and Indian languages" (*ibid.*, 1). Shackle's synthetic and pregnant essay cleverly delineated Russell's salient features, his charisma as a teacher and his extraordinary ability of concentrating only on what he himself had defined as being genuinely important, making his career exceptionally consistent. A look at Ralph Russell's bibliography is a sufficient confirmation of this statement.

The Annual of Urdu Studies has published quite a number of papers by and about Ralph Russell. I would like to specially mention here Frances Pritchett's "On Ralph Russell's Reading of the Classical Ghazal," expounding the reasons for her disagreement with Russell's essentially sociological vision of the ghazal (1996, 197–201), and Ather Farouqui's interview with him (1995, 168–74). In the latter, Ralph was asked—and

fully replied in his usual frank style, going over and over the ideas which guided his life's work—questions about Urdu in Europe, the prejudice of the English against Asians, Urdu in India, Urdu-speakers identified as Muslims, the ethos of Urdu as a Muslim ethos, Urdu script and literature, Urdu literature's comparison with the literatures of other (especially Western) languages, his favorite Urdu writers, and the production of English translations of Urdu poetry.

More recently, the participants in the "Ralph Russell Day" held at the School of Oriental and African Studies on 28 June 2007 (Subir Sinha, Talat Ahmed, Avril Powell, Alison Safadi, Ian Russell, Kasim Dalvi, Marion Molteno, Nancy Lindisfarne, Francesca Orsini, Daud Ali and Richard Harris) updated this information about his activity in the literary and teaching fields. His not so easy relationship with the SOAS establishment was also highlighted.

This subject was dealt with again in the brief but impressive tribute to Ralph Russell by Terry Byres, which was circulated in an email dated 22 September 2008 from Ian Russell. Byres underlined the long association of Ralph with the SOAS and his being an active member of the British Communist Party for all that time and continued:

Despite his outstanding scholarly credentials, he was never made a Professor. That was wholly political. It was the norm in British universities at the time. It was disgraceful.

SOAS, indeed, was the most reactionary university institution in Britain throughout the period of Ralph's time there. For example, it was, I think, the only university institution in Britain in which the union—the Association of University Teachers [AUT]—did not have official recognition (although there was an AUT branch in existence). Ralph's central concern was to bring SOAS on a par with other university institutions in Britain: in its hiring practices, its employment conditions and what one might call its working culture. Ralph fought long and hard to achieve that. I, and a few others, joined him in that effort. He, however, was the driving force and organizing genius. He knew SOAS inside out, and was determined to see it transformed. This was a formidable undertaking, given the deeply ingrained attitudes of deference among the vast majority of the staff. Whatever changes took place for the better, up to the time of his retirement, were largely due to his efforts.

Ralph was a brilliant organizer. He was articulate to a marked degree; and he was indomitable. He was fiercely honest and a loyal friend. It was a great privilege to have worked with him and to have been his friend.

Professor C. M. Naim, in his "Subaltern Urduwala" (2008, n.p.), written the day after Ralph Russell's passing, underlined once again the terrific contribution he made to Urdu, a language he loved to speak

without mixing it with English. About his noteworthy human qualities, Naim added:

But those who got to know him slightly better also found him remarkable on other accounts. For me the reasons were his intolerance for humbug. He spoke frankly and firmly, but never arrogantly. I never heard him make fun of someone just for the heck of it, while he always showed readiness to laugh with you at some foible of his own. Simultaneously, he was a principled man, and always ready to take a position, if he thought it was right, against popular acceptance. His “progressivism” was that of a true subaltern and not of the coffee-house type that prevailed in Urdu circles for decades.

(*ibid.*)

Dr. Asaduddin, in his tribute for the H-ASIA listserv, recalled Ralph Russell’s kindness and generosity along with his ability to disagree without being disagreeable and to carry on a rigorous debate without personal animosity or rancor (2008, n.p.). This quality enabled Professor Pritchett to pay him homage when she wrote as a conclusion to their debate on the Urdu ghazal:

I have long been grateful to Ralph Russell for his excellent knowledge of the language and literature, for his lucid and straightforward writing style, for his great scholarly integrity—and even for his heartfelt commitment to what I find to be a very unsuitable critical methodology. [...] I always end up admiring him, and admiring the solid achievement of his work.

(1996, 201)

Lastly, about himself and his life Ralph Russell has been very liberal in giving details in his three-volume autobiography, which he produced during his last years. All three volumes (*Findings, Keepings: Life, Communism and Everything* (2001), *Losses Gains* (2009), and *Some Day Someone* (forthcoming)) are described on his website. From this work—or, to be precise, from the first volume, the only one that at present I have read—emerge his candor, courage, fighting character, straightforwardness and his unconditional loyalty to the humanist ideals he chose so early in his life.

What more can I say about Ralph Russell? I cannot do more than give an image of him from my particular point of view, bring my personal grain of dust to add to his portrait. I have to draw from my memories, especially from what I remember of the year when I was so lucky as to meet him and become his pupil. I am going to be very personal, but in so doing, after all, I am going to follow the example set by him.

The thought of Ralph brings me back to the 1970s. After obtaining my

degree in politics from the University of Turin, I arrived in Rome and started my studies with Professor Alessandro Bausani. It was from him that I first heard of Ralph Russell. It is, perhaps, noteworthy that, even though my studying and working relationship with Alessandro Bausani was undoubtedly more continuous and steady, it never occurred to me to call or refer to him by his first name, while with Ralph the transition from “Mr. Russell” to “Ralph” came easily and naturally. Of course, this was also due to the fact that, no matter how friendly Professor Bausani might be, I was always well aware of his and my standing in the Italian academic hierarchy. At SOAS I was a stranger, quite happy to ignore the internal dynamics of institutional relationships, especially since I was only an occasional student there.

Upon winning a grant from the Italian Accademia dei Lincei, as an exchange with the British Academy, to go to London to pursue my postgraduate studies, I told Professor Bausani that I would seize the opportunity to learn the Urdu he had not taken the trouble to teach me. He laughed and told me: “Go to SOAS and see Ralph Russell. He enjoys teaching beginners.” Then he told me that Mr. Russell was the only scholar he recognized as his peer in Urdu studies (modesty had never been among Bausani’s virtues, nor had he ever practiced understatement). He wrote me a letter of introduction and gave me his blessing to leave for London.

And there I was, looking for Mr. Russell’s room in the SOAS South Asia Department. Apart from what Professor Bausani had told me, I knew nothing about him or Urdu studies. Wondering what I could say to persuade him to accept me as an occasional student in his Urdu classes, I knocked on his door. Inside I found a smiling, white-haired man sitting at a table near the window in a room full of books and papers. I handed him Professor Bausani’s letter and, somewhat reassured by his unassuming appearance, waited for his questions. When he lifted his blue eyes, magnified by his glasses, and asked me why I was willing to study with him, I frankly told him of my unhappy experience with studying Urdu in Rome: Professor Bausani found teaching languages to beginners very boring so, as a starter, he had simply given me the Urdu alphabet to learn by heart and told me to come back to him after a week. When I returned he put a book under my eyes and asked me to read a few words. Somehow I managed to read them. Then he gave me an article of his, about the ergative ‘ne,’ telling me to read it carefully. When I went back to see him a few days later, he said: “Very well. Now we can start to read and translate something.” I had felt at a loss, especially because the grammar I had found in the department library, Tisdall’s *Hindustani Grammar*, looked

not at all simple enough to be studied on my own. And I needed to learn Urdu. I was interested in the modern South Asian history of Muslims. I could not go on without learning the language. Ralph found my tale quite amusing and enrolled me among his students without further enquires about my university background. Instead, he asked me about politics in Italy, and soon we were chatting about the Italian government, the Italian Communist Party and its secretary at that time, Mr. Berlinguer. He told me he was a card-holding member of the British Communist Party, which I knew was very small. How unusual, I thought. And I felt an immediate liking for such an extraordinary type of academic.

When I started attending his classes, sitting in the first row of desks next to my friend, colleague and fellow Italian Franco Coslovi, I found a free and informal atmosphere—which I liked—and a way of teaching completely different from what I was used to. In my Italian classic lycée I had learned Latin and ancient Greek well enough to get good marks, but my parents had to send me to England every summer if they wanted me to speak English. At university, modern language courses had been taught in very much the same fashion. My friend was a little impatient with the focus on spoken Urdu, because, as he kept remarking under his breath after having been prompted to answer Mr. Russell's questions in class, our (his and my) main objective was the reading and understanding of texts, but I found it stimulating and refreshing. I reasoned that while learning to speak I was also learning to read and write; the texts would come later and I could always check my understanding of them with Professor Bausani back in Rome. As relaxed as the atmosphere in the class might be, it was very clear that we were supposed to take things seriously, attending regularly, doing exercises and everything else. Mr. Russell did not mind a little questioning—such as one student's extremely critical comments about the formal expressions of Urdu greetings and the like—but he surely meant business. He did not refrain from words of encouragement and praise on occasion, but could also be quite harsh in his rebukes. Most of all, from every evidence, he cared about his pupils and enjoyed his teaching work. His enthusiasm was infectious. Rarely were we students able to keep to ourselves. Even the most reserved got involved, haltingly trying to express their thoughts in the language they were picking up. Many years later, recalling our poor efforts at conversation, Hastings Donnan, who was to become a professor of social anthropology at Queen's University of Belfast (Northern Ireland), and I had a nostalgic laugh.

Ralph Russell believed in what he was doing. He was keen to get people of different backgrounds to communicate and establish human

relationships. He kept reminding us of the importance of mixing with people who had Urdu as their mother tongue and of getting acquainted with their culture, history and way of life. In our class the students attending regularly were all British except for me, Franco Coslovi, and a rather shy girl of Punjabi origin. Perhaps because I was the only other non-British female in the class, the Punjabi student often came to sit by my side and I found it natural to smile and talk to her. She grew quite fond of me. Ralph noticed this and told me how pleased he was that I had readily accepted the elder sister's role this girl had instinctively assigned to me and had taken my younger classmate under my "protective wing."

Every now and then I used to stop by his room for a talk. He seemed to like it, and did not mind the waste of his time. Among other things, we discussed my readings of his books—I had just discovered *Three Mughal Poets* and *Ghalib: Life and Letters* and was quite enthusiastic about them. He knew I was studying Muslim peasant upheavals in northern India and that I was looking for materials in the India Office Library and Records, at Blackfriars in those days, and he teased me about my entirely bookish approach to the subject. When I told him that after I was finished with my present research I was thinking of starting a project about contemporary Pakistani peasants and their attitudes toward politics and Islam, he did not put me off, but rightly wondered how an Italian girl, who had never seen a Pakistani peasant in her life, could understand anything about it. I interpreted his words as a challenge: he was suggesting that I should go to see for myself, then I could make up my mind; perhaps I was being overly ambitious in my project. In my youthful and reckless self-confidence, I told him that I was willing to experience a Pakistani village. I also told him of my admiration for Hamza Alavi and his work. A few days later he asked me if I would like to meet him. We could go to Leeds, where Hamza Alavi was living, and I could interview him. I was only too happy to accept and off we went, one day, by train, but I did not interview the famous sociologist, whose articles in the *New Left Review* had such a deep impact on me. I remained in the background listening to the two of them talking, somewhat overwhelmed by their powerful personalities.

A little before the end of the Urdu course at SOAS, Ralph suggested I go to see Jill Evans, a social worker and friend of his, in a northern England town where a substantial community of people from Pakistani villages lived. She introduced me to Rashida, a remarkable widow who bravely chose to remain in England with her two sons after her husband's death and who was ready to put me in touch with her relatives in her home village. They could receive me as a guest, if I wanted to go and stay with them. I seized the opportunity. I would go in October and stay until

Christmas time. It would be my very first experience of the Subcontinent and I looked forward to it with a mixture of excitement and fear. Ralph had scheduled a trip to Pakistan and India and was going to be in Pakistan at the time of my arrival. Realizing how scared I might be, he reassured me. He would meet me at the Islamabad airport and accompany me to the village.

And so it was. After a rest and some shopping—I bought two shalwar-kamiz that later turned out to be for men not women, much to the amusement of my hosts—we set off for the village of Kanyal, Gujrat District. We went by bus to Sarai Alamgir where we were met and welcomed by a group from the village, then by tonga to Qasba, and lastly by camel to our final destination. Ralph seemed to know people everywhere, and everyone seemed to know him. He enjoyed his popularity and talked in Urdu with everybody, their conversations ranging from Pakistani politics, emigration and Islam (he wrote about it in his article “Islam in a Pakistan Village” (1978)),¹ to crops, the prices of agricultural products, children’s health and women’s sewing. He stayed in Kanyal for more than a week and every evening there was a gathering of people coming from nearby places to see and greet him. Completely at ease, he sat on his charpoy in the courtyard of the house, where occasionally some musicians also came with harmoniums and tablas playing and singing for a good part of the night. One day I went with Ralph to a nearby town to see one of his friends, the owner of a shop on whose signboard was pompously written “Asia Engineering Centre.” The man was an activist of the Tehrik-e Istiqlal and he gave me some pamphlets of his party and other things about the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP). He called Ralph his *bē-takalluf* friend. On another occasion, I had the chance to be present during a conversation between Ralph and a member of the Jamaat-e Islami, whose ideas met with strong opposition in the village.

At the end of his stay in the village, Ralph took me to Lahore from where he was leaving for India. He introduced me to Ebadat Bareilvi and his family who were so kind as to have me as their guest again later during my escapes from Kanyal from time to time. To be honest, and to my regret, I do not remember much about their conversations with Ralph, whether they touched on literary topics at all. But one thing was absolutely clear: their warm friendship and mutual esteem. Once, talking with

¹For the changed conditions in Punjabi villages see Jugnu Mohsin, “How Ajmal Kasab Took to Radical Islam,” <http://www.rediff.com/news/2009/jan/05/mumterror-how-ajmal-kasab-took-to-radical-islam.htm> (reprinted from *The Friday Times* (Lahore)).

a young visitor—perhaps a sister-in-law—Ralph touched on the subject of veiling, asking her if she ever covered her head with the dupatta she was wearing casually on her shoulders. The young lady replied no, she did not, not even in her father-in-law's presence, because respect and honor lay not upon one's head, but in one's heart and mind. He was extremely pleased with her answer.

Before leaving, Ralph took me to visit the editor of *Viewpoint* magazine, Mazhar Ali Khan (Tariq Ali's father) at his stylish home, where he and his bright and beautiful wife welcomed us. Sitting on one of the sofas in a tastefully furnished living-room, I listened to them discussing Islamic socialism and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's policies. On our way back, Ralph enquired about my impressions, whether I had thoughts about left-wing people being so well off and living in such style, as often happened in Pakistan and India. I thought I detected a slight tinge of criticism in his words and I remarked that it was not so unusual in Italy either. He went on to say that he found people such as the Italian Danilo Dolcini, who had chosen to live among poor workers in Sicily, to be more consistent.

After Ralph's departure for India, I went back to the village and had a good taste of peasant life. Whether it was Ralph's intention or not, that experience taught me a lesson for life.

Since that year, so marked by his teaching and generous example, I developed a deep gratitude and attachment to Ralph, with whom I kept in touch, even if a bit discontinuously, until his passing. Whenever I was in London I went to see him and tell him about my studies, my career and my life. Entering his room at the SOAS, until his retirement, or his Theatre Street home later, I always found him smiling and willing to listen to me, ready to help and give advice, which I regret not having always followed.

I do not think it necessary here to underline Ralph Russell's merits as a translator and as a scholar who succeeded in giving his subject the place it deserved inside and outside the academic world. Coming from Italy—where Urdu was an almost unknown word until Alessandro Bausani started translating Iqbal and Ghalib and wrote his *Storia delle Letterature del Pakistan*—I knew only too well the difficulties of having Urdu receive its proper place among the languages taught in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies' departments (Arabic, Persian and Turkish). Bausani himself was mainly a scholar of Islam and an Iranist whose genius and amazing talent for languages enabled him to greatly enlarge the scope of the discipline of Islamic Studies, otherwise restricted to the main lands of Islam. He did pioneering work and planted many seeds in the academic field, but Urdu was just one of his multiple interests. Used to Bausani's eclecticism and his intellectual approach, I was struck by Russell's dedi-

cation to a single subject and the extent of his personal involvement. However, I must admit, my Italian background sometimes prevented my full appreciation of his fight to make Urdu and its literature understandable and appreciable to an audience of “general readers.” Until recently, conditions in Italy were very different from those in Great Britain. Italy had not yet experienced a massive influx of immigrants, especially from Muslim countries and the Indian subcontinent. Italian society had not yet undergone the transformation that quite quickly made Islam its second religion (as far as number of followers), and Italian historical links were with northern Africa not with South Asia. Urdu could be, at best, an academic subject. Now that multiculturalism is an Italian reality as well, and a good number of immigrants from South Asia live in Italy, I am in a better position to value Ralph’s extraordinary work. I witness every day the importance of helping people know and understand each other. And this can only be done by reaching the “general readers,” and giving access to languages as alien as Urdu to Italian social workers, elementary school teachers, health service workers, and so on.

I regret not having told him this the last time I saw him in the first days of September 2007. I arrived during the underground strike and moving around London was not an easy thing. I finally succeeded in seeing him at Theatre Street and we had our last conversation. A few years had elapsed since my previous visit but he received me with his usual warmth and affection, mildly scolding me for my laziness in writing letters. I had brought him the last book of another great friend of mine who passed away in June 2005, Napoleone Colajanni. An economist and a “revisionist” communist, he had written a sharp analysis of the “global economy,” devoting a good part to China and India. I thought Ralph might appreciate it, since, in my opinion, the two had a lot in common: communism, of course, and a fierce commitment to ideals, a deep intellectual integrity, frugality of life, and an uncompromising temperament that could make them occasionally spiky. We talked about him and my sadness at the loss of friends. I did not imagine that in a short span of time I was going to lose Ralph as well.

After I returned home we exchanged news regularly by e-mail. I received his weekly journal so I should have been aware of his failing health, but until the very last I refused to admit that his illness was getting worse and he was going to leave us. Even in his old age he was so full of life and interested in people that it was, and still is, difficult for me to accept that upon going to London I will not find him at his place, among his books and things. It is no mere rhetoric to say that it has been a privilege to have him as a teacher and a friend. Thank you, Ralph. □

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