

Contribution to the Ralph Russell day

Alison Safadi

I have known Ralph now for over 30 years since I went to SOAS to study Urdu. Others are going to talk today about his contribution to Urdu literature and scholarship and about his role in the campaign to bring Urdu into British schools. I would like to talk about my experience of him as a teacher.

I have always been aware that you get very few good teachers in your life. Having been one myself now for nearly 20 years I am even more keenly aware of this. I personally can count mine on the fingers of one hand. Each of them made a significant contribution to my education but it is Ralph who had the biggest impact on my life and who has continued to influence it long after he ceased to teach me.

I nearly didn't get to SOAS at all. From the age of about 12 I was immensely interested in everything to do with India and Pakistan and in Urdu in particular. I could not have explained why then and still cannot now. I would go regularly to Twickenham library and gradually worked my way through all the books they had on India or Pakistan. I remember when I was about 14 reading Ayub Khan's autobiography, "Friends not Masters" which I followed immediately by Tariq Ali's "Pakistan - People's Power or Military Dictatorship". An interesting contrast!

When I was coming up to 15 I had a careers interview. My parents were very keen for me to go to Oxford or Cambridge and so I asked to see the prospectuses. When I commented on the fact that they offered courses in Oriental Studies the careers officer uttered the fatal words " Oh, if that's what you are interested in what you need is a SOAS prospectus." A few minutes later I discovered that I could study Urdu as a degree and my mind was made up. I went home full of excitement clutching my SOAS prospectus. To say that my parents were not equally excited would be an understatement. They were completely opposed to my plans to study Urdu and two years of battles began. I did apply to SOAS however and went for an interview. Ralph was not there on the day so was not involved in my interview. A short time afterwards however, he phoned me at home to talk about my application. I was very surprised that someone in such an elevated position in a university should bother to phone a prospective student. I suppose this was the first indication that he was not like other university teachers. I subsequently went to see him and during our conversation explained that my parents weren't exactly thrilled about the prospect of me studying Urdu to say the least. He then offered to ring my father which he did. I don't know what was said but according to Ralph it was a very civilized conversation and my father did eventually give in, although not very gracefully.

In October 1974 I arrived at SOAS to begin my study of Urdu. I had taken French, Russian and German for A level so was used to and enjoyed studying languages. Studying Urdu was somewhat different however because it was the only subject I was doing so all my time in that first year was spent on it. We had 8 hours a week in class with Ralph and were expected to do at least that much again outside class on our own.

Ralph has written somewhere that when he took up his post at SOAS he had two main goals. One, of course, was to make available in translation works of Urdu literature. The other was to develop effective teaching materials for undergraduates at SOAS. The need for such materials becomes immediately apparent if you take even a cursory look at the books that were previously available such as "Teach yourself Urdu" by T. Grahame Bailey. Sentences such as "Some rams have four horns." and "Village girls get confused and cry easily." are hardly the most useful. The course we used was the one that Ralph had written called "Essential Urdu".

Unlike many other courses of its time it has good quality listening materials and the conversation passages for which Ralph used real people, (students friends, and colleagues) add a personal dimension to it and make it more interesting. It is also accessible. The grammar progression is clear and well-explained and the vocabulary is relevant and useful to learners. I remember Ralph saying that the only useless sentence in the book is "I don't like

apricots – I don't like their rough hairy skins"! Although inevitably it is now somewhat dated I think it is still an excellent course and could easily be updated and re-published.

I was also lucky enough to have been taught exclusively by Ralph in the first year and for a substantial amount of time in the 2nd. His style of teaching was very different both from that I had experienced at school and also from most of his colleagues at SOAS. Lessons were informal, relaxed and full of fun and laughter. The fact that he was teaching his own course meant that he was able to give a personal dimension, telling various anecdotes which brought it to life. As a person he was frank and open and encouraged his students to be the same. His views were often unorthodox and at times controversial – something that did not endear him to the SOAS establishment. This did not bother him at all, rather it amused him and his account of various incidents reduced us to fits of laughter.

The eight hours we spent in class were spent almost entirely in speaking Urdu. Ralph put great emphasis on the need to learn to speak Urdu well and from the beginning we were encouraged to develop our spoken fluency. Over the last 25 years or so there has been a lot of often meaningless talk in the world of modern language teaching about the so-called "communicative approach". Although Essential Urdu was clearly based on grammatical progression, Ralph is one of the few people whose style of teaching was truly communicative. As his commitment to the campaign for Urdu grew Ralph spent less time at SOAS so I count myself as very fortunate to have been taught by him in this way. I do not think that anyone else could have taught us with the same enthusiasm, enjoyment and love for the language.

My parents' objections to me studying Urdu were mainly due to the worry that I would not subsequently get a good job. As a parent of grown-up children I now understand and sympathise more with this view than I did at 14. However they need not have worried – Ralph had that covered too! By spear-heading the campaign for Urdu in state schools and getting it established as a modern language he also provided me with a career! I have now earned my living teaching Urdu for nearly 20 years. Without his dedication I, and many others, would not have had such an interesting and rewarding career in the field of Urdu teaching.