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Ralph Russell: Teacher of Urdu

I FIRST MET Ralph Russell in 1974 when I went to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) to study Urdu. I have always been aware that you get very few good teachers in your life. Having been a teacher myself now for nearly twenty years I am even more keenly aware of this. I personally can count the good teachers I have had on the fingers of one hand. Each of them made a significant contribution to my education, but it was Ralph Russell who had the biggest impact on my life, and who continued to influence it long after he ceased being my teacher.

I almost did not get to the SOAS at all. From the age of about twelve 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 the local library and I gradually worked my way through all the books they had on India or Pakistan. I remember when I was about fourteen reading Ayub Khan's autobiography, *Friends not Masters*, which I followed immediately with Tariq Ali's *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*. An interesting contrast!

When I was coming up to fifteen 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 was invited for an interview. Ralph Russell was not there that day so he was not involved in it. 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 were not exactly thrilled about the prospect of me studying Urdu, to say the least. He then offered to ring my father, which he did. I do not know what was said, but, according to Ralph, it was a very civilized conversation and my parents 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 I was used to and enjoyed studying languages. Studying Urdu was somewhat different however because it was the only subject I was doing. All my time during that first year was spent on it. We had eight 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 works of Urdu literature available in translation. 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 (1956). 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* (1971).

Unlike many other courses of its time, it had good quality listening materials and the conversation passages, for which Ralph used real people (students, friends and colleagues), added a personal dimension to it and made it more interesting. It was also accessible. The grammar progression is clear and explained well 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 republished.

I was also lucky enough to have been taught exclusively by Ralph during the first year and for a substantial amount of time during the second. His style of teaching was very different, both from that I had experienced at school earlier and 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 often reduced us to fits of laughter.

The eight hours we spent in class were devoted almost entirely to 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 was one of the few people whose style of teaching was truly communicative.

As his commitment to the campaign for Urdu in British schools increased, Ralph spent less time at SOAS, so I count myself very fortunate to have been taught by him in this way. I do not think 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 sympathize more with this view than I did at fourteen. However, they need not have worried—Ralph had that covered too! By spearheading the campaign for the teaching of Urdu in British state schools, and getting it established as a modern language, he also provided me with a career! I have earned my living teaching Urdu for nearly twenty years. Without his dedication I, and many others, would not have had such an interesting and rewarding career in the field.

After 30 years, I returned to SOAS this year to do an M.A. in South Asian Studies. When I first mentioned, rather tentatively, to Ralph that I was thinking of doing so he said, in his usual unequivocal way, “Of *course* you should.” One of the things I was most looking forward to was being able to discuss the course with him. Sadly that has not been possible and I have missed him terribly, especially when things got challenging. At such times, however, it was the thought of what he *would have* said to me that helped to keep me going. Ralph had no time for qualifications for their own sake, and when I told him a few months before he died that I would like to go on to do research for a Ph.D. he asked why I felt I needed a Ph.D. I think, however, that he would have been pleased to know that I am intending to carry on with research next year. I will always miss his scholarship, his advice, his criticism, his humor and his friendship, but the things he taught me over many years will hopefully help me to succeed and I like to think he would have been just a little bit proud. □