

## Contribution to the Ralph Russell Day

### Marion Molteno

I am one of the many people here who is privileged to have been taught Urdu by Ralph, to have been one of his co-teachers, and friend. I have also in recent years worked with him to get his autobiography into publication. I'm happy to have the chance to tell you something about this.

#### Learning Urdu

I had started wanting to learn an Asian language in the early 1980s, when I was working as an adult education organiser in Croydon, running English classes for adults who had come from other countries, mostly South Asia. Before this I had lived for eight years in Zambia, an experience I loved. But when I had to leave suddenly and thought back on my time there, I felt very regretful that I had never learnt a Zambian language, and I vowed that if I was ever again lucky enough to work in a multi-cultural situation I wouldn't let that happen again – I wouldn't teach my language without at least *trying* to learn the language of the people I was teaching. So here I was now teaching people from South Asia, surrounded by the sounds of many Asian languages, and I felt I had to do something about it.

I started with Hindi, thinking this would be a lingua franca, and struggled away largely on my own for a couple of years – with inadequate teaching materials, and well-meaning but inexperienced teachers – and got to the point where I could pass an O level exam but not have a conversation. At the same time I was working with people in minority communities who were running Saturday classes for their children to learn their community languages. They were using the methods by which they had been taught as children, and although they didn't question these methods, they could sense that the children weren't learning very easily. It was at this point that I picked up one of Ralph's course books on a bookstall at an education conference, and simply reading the introduction I could see that here was someone who taught *people*, who had a unique understanding of the methods these teachers had inherited and what was needed to help them past this to something more effective. So I contacted him and asked if he would help me run some training sessions with these teachers. After the first session I knew this was the teacher who could also help *me* break through to being able to speak. So I switched from Hindi to Urdu, and although Ralph was extremely busy, he agreed to fit in a once a week class with me if I came first thing in the morning. Within a matter of months he had helped me break through to the point where I could chat to people at a simple level - which was what I had wanted to do all along, and thought I would never achieve.

But also through his lessons I – like so many others who have been taught by him – learnt a whole host of things that I had not been looking for, and that I am equally grateful to have found. First there was the amazing discovery of the literature of Urdu. Like many westerners I was entirely ignorant of the fact that Urdu has a rich literature, and certainly hadn't been aiming to study it. But I got drawn into it by observing Ralph's own response to this literature. He has described in his autobiographical pieces how difficult it was for him initially to appreciate much of Urdu literature, and *ghazal* poetry in particular. It all seemed very odd, and about things that didn't connect with his life. But by the time I was introduced to this poetry by Ralph it had for decades been integrated into his way of thinking, and illuminated his way of looking at things – in all sorts of situations he would quote an Urdu couplet that connected with what was happening, and could tell stories about how he had first learnt it, and what it meant to people. I gradually came to understand that this was a common thing among Urdu speakers, that poetry featured strongly in people's daily lives. That made me feel that, however strange it appeared at first, there must be something about it that I could learn to respond to. And through Ralph's wonderful way of sharing his understanding of the poetry, that did happen. I still need help reading and understanding it, but Urdu literature has become a pleasurable thing for me, something that has helped me understand aspects of the lives of Urdu speakers that I would never have had access to otherwise.

### **Being a co-teacher**

Within a year of starting learning Urdu with Ralph he had drawn me into co-teaching basic spoken Urdu to adults, in the sort of courses that Ian was describing. Both Alison and Ian have talked about Ralph's approach to language teaching, and I have a couple of stories to add. As Ian has said, as the demand for these courses grew, Ralph recruited assistant teachers from those who had learnt from him. I was an experienced language teacher but my Urdu was still not at all at the level that I would have liked before starting to teach it. But it was possible for me and others to teach it effectively at beginner level because of his very carefully prepared teaching materials – he gave us the confidence that if we stuck to his materials, and kept firmly within the limits of what we knew how to say accurately, we could pass on what we knew how to say to others. And that actually worked.

The first set of courses on which I taught were run by the Lancashire Education Department, for teachers working in schools with large numbers of children from Pakistani families. They were week-long intensive courses, held at a residential adult education centre in Chorley in Lancashire every three or four months, and often the same people would come back each time. Many of us used our leave to go on them, and they became a whole social world in which friendships developed and we looked forward to seeing each other again on the next course. The Chorley courses also developed their own jokes and vocabulary, a lot which of course were around Ralph's personality and the uniquely enjoyable atmosphere he created in the classes. One was about Krishna and the *gopis*. Ralph's style of teaching had been formed in SOAS where he taught one-to-one or very small classes, and he somehow carried the atmosphere of that over into the much bigger classes he was now teaching, twenty or thirty people. The students were almost all women, and he made each of them feel that he was teaching them individually. So there they were, all these women looking at him and hanging on his every word, and like the girls dancing with Krishna, each thought she was the only person he was dancing with.

Another of our jokes was about the Roman transcriptions of the sounds of Urdu, which had been devised by Firth but which Ralph popularised in his courses. Most people on the courses didn't go on to learn the script and would have been unable to get anywhere in learning to speak without this transcription. Ralph was very insistent that we learn to use it accurately, because then we could use his course books to study on our own, and when we met knew words would be sure to pronounce them correctly. The script became known as the Ralphabet, or more briefly, Ralphy. When one of the teachers used a word that was new to the students, they would say, 'Can you write that for me in Ralphy?'

### **Encouragement to write**

There are other things I owe to Ralph apart from learning Urdu. One of the major ones is being a writer. In the years since I met him I have had published a collection of stories and three novels, and he played a critical part in helping me develop the confidence that people would want to read what I was writing. When I first met him I had written a few short stories based on my experiences of working with South Asian women who have come to live in Britain. They were the first generation here and many of them had had experiences that I felt needed to be shared. So I started writing fictional stories based on some of the more recurrent themes. I showed them to Ralph for him to see if I had captured things about South Asian life accurately, and he said, 'You *must* publish these.' I'm absolutely not alone in having had this response, and this encouragement from him. It wouldn't be possible to count the number of people to whom Ralph has said, 'You must write that.' And not just people who have something to say about a recognised area of knowledge, but many others whom he encourages to share their more personal life experiences. He's a strong believer in autobiography as a form of communication. He sees it as a way we can each share what we have experienced and learnt from that experience, and that it is an important way of advancing our collective understanding.

### **Editing Ralph's autobiography**

The last thing I want to talk about is that I've had the great privilege over the last few years of editing Ralph's own autobiography. The first volume is on sale outside and is an extremely

entertaining and illuminating read. The second volume is due out towards the end of the year. When I say 'edited' I need to explain. Ralph had over many years been writing pieces about his life, his activities, his politics, his work. All this provided a rich source of raw material, and from it he had written something called *Communist Conclusions* – his thoughts from a lifetime as a communist and how he'd reacted to various political challenges along the way. When he gave it to me to read, I felt extremely uncertain as to whether it would communicate with people in the way he hoped. The main content seemed to be taking up political positions about issues that were long past and difficult for a reader today to connect with, but about which he seemed to feel as passionate as he had done at the time, many decades ago. These were the aspects of his experience that he thought worthwhile to communicate. A constant refrain was, 'In 1935 I came to the conclusion that .. and I still hold that belief'. The impression you got reading it was of a closed-minded person who once having taken up a position never abandoned it – a rigid and almost Stalinist picture of a person. This was so completely different from the person I knew that I got engaged with quite a long set of arguments with him, trying to disentangle what and who he was. I just couldn't bear it to go into print in a way that was not going to communicate the way he was. As we worked together on this, I realised that the problem lay in the fact that he had cobbled together bits written at many different stages of his own development, most of them put onto paper near the time that those events were happening, and then fixed forever in his memory in the way he had written it then. And he had not realised how much of the context would need explaining to enable younger readers to enter into what it had felt like to be caught up in those issues all those decades ago. So my role was to press him to tell me more about the context – and then to rewrite sections to make all that clearer.

Another major way in which the early draft didn't seem to do him justice was that it made him seem quite narrowly focused in his concerns – which is far from the case. What he had written was actually an extended argument with his communist colleagues on why they ought to have rethought a lot of their positions and they hadn't. And there weren't too many of them around reading the book. I felt it was a kind of wasted energy. And meanwhile there were all these other people in the world that he could have communicated his amazing life experience to, if he would put all the other bits of his life and way of understanding things in. So my role was to urge him to do that, to say 'You say there are three really important strands in your life: your communism, Urdu and people. So put them all in.' As anyone here can testify he is a great lover of people, exceptionally generous and open and interested in everybody, and I didn't see any of that in the book. Initially I didn't see much of his Urdu work and interests either. So I argued for all that to go in.

The most difficult part of his life to reflect in the book was his personality, his approach to people. He would say, 'Well, what's there to say about that?' Then I would say, 'You remember that story you told me about you and so-and-so? Just write that down.' And then he started to write down all these stories. Then one day it occurred to me that was one particular characteristic of his that was not at all reflected in the book. It is something nobody here has mentioned today. If you are around him for any length of time, you will discover that he sings all the time. And his fund of songs goes back over his whole long lifetime. Just as he remembers 'Oh yes, I met you in 1949 and I met you in 1971', he remembers 'I learnt that song in 1932' or 'I remember that song from primary school.' So there, through the songs that he sang, was a way of sharing something about his way of being, and at the same time giving a glimpse into the times he had grown up in. So I persuaded him that the songs should go in to. So by now the book had moved quite a long way from being a set of political positions, to what I feel is a real reflection of the whole person.

As a novelist, working in this way with him was an unusual but absorbing experience. The thing that I really find difficult about writing novels is the plot. Here was something where I was given the plot, was given the characters, all the instances were there. All I had to do was to make it a little bit more readable, and true to the quality of the central character. And that was a very enjoyable task.

We are here today to celebrate Ralph's contribution as an Urdu teacher and scholar. But like almost everybody who has come into contact with Ralph, I've learnt from him far more than Urdu. And for that I am very grateful.

Marion Molteno