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## Remembering Ralph Russell

By Muhammad Umar Memon

La'on kahan se dusra tujh sa kahen jise  
Where might I find someone like you?  
—Ghalib

Most of the obituaries and articles that have appeared about Ralph Russell in the past twelve months have said all that needs to be said about him, more eloquently perhaps than I could ever hope to. His life was an open book, but curiously a book that defied any notion of linearity or sequential order, based on some rare verity of spatial unfolding in which the entire content of a life is simultaneously present. Yet the book was not without discretion, shown largely in deference to the fragility of human feelings and our tendency to take umbrage where none is intended. If he slept a peaceful sleep—I believe some have alluded to the fact—it was because his conscience was not burdened with secrets or guilt. Ralph had probably uncovered much earlier in life what it had taken Ghalib a lifetime to learn,

Na luTta din ko to kab raat ko yun be-khabar sota  
Raha khatka na chori ka du'a deta hun rahzan ko

Why else would I sleep so soundly at night had I not been  
robbed during the day?  
No fear of theft assails my heart, I wish my robber well.

And as a bonus, without losing his assets to the highwayman: Ralph had set out on the highway of life with meager provisions, and practically no attachment to what little he did bring along. Why wonder if as an adult he slept like a child. He was such a light traveler after all.

For my part, all I can do is recount a few moments in which our lives intersected hoping that what transpired in those moments will confirm and corroborate the experiences of others and furnish a contextual framework for them. While he may have had especially strong relationships with some, the “specialness” of the

relationship did not place him or the other above everyone else on a human scale. In his eyes, all—or in Sa’dī’s words, the “*bani aadam*”—as he himself, were “*azaa’-e yak digar*,” or part of a single human continuum. Because his relationship was qualitatively the same with everyone, any elaboration of the relationship is likely to produce only variations on a single theme rather than radically different themes. In the end, any attempt to describe him will be at best an attempt to describe oneself. Well, so be it. ...

I had, of course, known Ralph through his Urdu work much earlier than 1977, but my formal interaction with him began that year. I invited him to a seminar on “The Urdu Ghazal and Prose Fiction: Materials for the Study of Muslim Society in South Asia” that was being planned for early 1978. Ralph graciously accepted, but warned me that it was unlikely that he would be given a U.S. visa, having been denied one earlier for a similar occasion because of being an active Communist. “If they ask me the question,” he wrote, “I’m afraid, my answer would be YES.” But we were still willing to do what we could to facilitate the process. It never got that far. A subsequent letter informed, “Mrs. Russell has been taken ill. I’m afraid I won’t be able to come.”

I do not recall any correspondence after that until, I believe, 1983 when the Amir Khusrau Society (Chicago) invited him to something like a mini-conference. He was to present his ideas about teaching Urdu to second generation South Asians and their American spouses and conduct a few workshops. Lectures at some American universities were also arranged for him. Luckily he did get the visa. I went to the Chicago event, mainly to see him and brought along some reprints of my articles, which I presented to him.

Next day Ralph told me in no uncertain terms that he did not agree with what I had written about the Urdu Progressives, especially in the article “Partition Literature: A Study of Intizar Husain” (*Modern Asian Studies*). He felt that I was grossly unfair in my assessment of the fictional work of the Progressives. He had apparently read the article in the intervening night and had even underscored some of the offending passages. I felt slightly disoriented: I liked the man for what I had seen of him, someone after my own heart, someone with whom I would like to have a long and lasting fellowship, and here it seemed our relationship was getting off to a bad start. As he registered his disapproval it became clear that his passionate high regard for the Progressives had more to do with their Socialist orientation and less with an evaluation of their output from a strictly literary point of view. This is perhaps not quite accurate: from Ralph’s vantage the socialist ideals of the Progressives, with whom he identified strongly out of his own commitment to communism, were in fact, or ought to be, the literary ideals, the only ideals worth having, much like Munshi Premchand who made no bones about harnessing literature in the ser-

vice of man and society. This fact perhaps also underlay his choice of the few Urdu short stories he had translated. I am reminded of two, though there may be more: Krishan Chandar's "Kaalū Bhangī" and Sa'adat Hasan Manto's "Kaali Shalwar." What attracted him to these stories, it would appear, were their characters—disfranchised and shunned by society for what they did to eke out a living. Yet none of this mattered, what did matter was the resilience of their spirit and their precious human fiber.

Progressive or socially informed writing aside, Ralph was quite adamant in his insistence on reading the Urdu ghazal as a social document, a contentious point on which he was to lock horns with Frances Pritchett in the pages of the *Annual of Urdu Studies* (henceforward, *AUS*). This arguable conflation of the societal and the literary was a bit puzzling for me. I have always believed, wrongly or rightly, in the autonomy of literature.

So did the misstep doom our incipient relationship? Hardly. As the day wore on, my apprehension about its future dissipated. Having said his piece, Ralph was back to being his old self: cheery, spontaneous, warm, and attentive. Although I had not tried to defend myself or argue against his view, Ralph had apparently sensed that my silence did not indicate agreement. Perhaps it was already clear to both of us that our respective points of view were irreconcilable. I liked the man, but one-way relationships seldom endure. I wondered what lay behind what I assumed to be his acceptance of me? At the time I could only interpret it as an act of kindness on his part. It took years to realize that I was not the lone recipient that day or, for that matter, any other day, of his characteristic kindness (though Ralph would probably call it by some other name). It was something born out of his abiding regard for the value and worth of every human being, despite their human failings. As I would come to know later, existence for Ralph, however wretched or sublime, was a positive value in itself. ("Oh Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change," he would quote to me many times over the years. Perhaps my ideas about Progressive writing were just one of those things he could not change but accepted with serenity.)

After the Chicago *tamaasha*, he visited Madison. His lecture, but equally the atmosphere of *sulh-e kul* (not to be confused with opportunism or *ibnu'l-vaqti*) that radiated out of him like a comforting and life-affirming light, immediately endeared him to many of my colleagues, especially Sarah Atish who, to this day, remembers him with fondness and warmth. At home, he met my wife and our two boys and immediately became involved in their world. There was none of the painful diffidence or stiff formality of first meetings. It was as if they were friends who went back a long way. I mention this to underscore the effect he had on people. Those who were recipients of his "Journal" were kept informed, in an amazingly

detached and matter-of-fact manner, of his deteriorating condition. On 6 May 2008 he wrote:

On the 30th April I went for my regular appointment at the urology clinic. I was seen by the top consultant, Mr. Bailey. I have encountered him before and been very favourably impressed by him. He listens very carefully to what you have to tell him before jumping in and making pronouncements of his own. Marion, as always, was with me. He told me something which was more surprising to me than to Marion, which was that my cancer is spreading and the spread cannot be stopped; the best they can do is slow down its progress somewhat. I asked him myself at the end what the prognosis was. He said 'I don't like telling people these things' and I said, 'All the same, it is better to be told them.' He said the worst prognosis is that I have another 6–8 months to live. Marion and I talked about this on the way home and decided that since we knew that I was not likely to survive many more years it was not a great blow to be given an estimate, and that the conclusion to be drawn is for us to pay more attention to priorities and otherwise carry on as usual. One pleasing result is that two of my friends, Barbara Anglezarke and Liz Crompton, have said that they will be coming to see me. I think they would probably have come anyway but not felt that there was any great urgency about it. For myself it makes me feel more intensely the love which I feel for all the people who are close to me.

I informed my younger son, Anis, then in Italy, about the prognosis given by Ralph's physician. He said he would go and see him. When I later mentioned this to my wife she called Anis immediately to say that he should not wait, and he didn't. Later Anis told me that during the visit he found Ralph as he had always been: engaging, attentive and considerate, interested in knowing all about him and his life, without a trace of anxiety or the kind of aloofness that sometimes takes over a person aware of their imminent departure. Anis had visited him many times before, and on occasion had stayed with him. The two struck up quite a friendship. Since Anis lived sometimes in France, sometimes in Italy, Ralph would often ask me for his address and write to him. Correspondence and maintaining relationships has become increasingly difficult for me during the past decade or so. I remember Ralph often reminding me of my tardiness, especially during the last few years. It has never ceased to amaze me how Ralph managed a fairly large circle of friends across many continents, and yet found the time to read and write more than most of us can. I do recall Anis asking me a few years ago, "Why don't you talk to Ralph about Urdu literature?" Apparently Ralph had mentioned to him in passing, "Your

father avoids discussing Urdu literature with me.” I remembered what had transpired during the Chicago event as well as all my subsequent silences and evasions on occasions when Ralph had himself attempted to broach the subject. Maybe I should, I told myself. It never came to that. And even if it had, I know I would have woefully lacked the resources to engage with him in a dispassionate way about my views.

My family were not the only ones affected by Ralph’s vivacity and naturalness. As recently as mid-April of this year (2009), when my friends Itrat and his wife Elizabeth came to visit, I asked Elizabeth if she remembered Ralph. She had attended the 1983 Chicago event. “How could I forget him?” she said. “I attended his Urdu workshops. I still remember what he said about the U.S., ‘These toll-booths, they’re so medieval!’ I thought it was so funny that he would say that.” Her expression changed when I informed her of his death and a few moments of introspective silence followed.

During Ralph’s stay at my home he asked me one evening to take him to some store where he could buy a pair of pants. This threw me off. I could not believe anyone who lived in London would want to buy an item of clothing in this country. To me it seemed clothes were made more tastefully in the U.K., but I took him to a department store. He wasted no time looking around. He spotted a pile of corduroy pants and reached for the nearest pair, with the worst possible color, at least in my opinion. Color or choice did not seem to matter. He wanted a pair and any would do, why waste time. He wanted to just pay and for us to be on our way. I asked him to at least try it on. “What size do you wear?” He gave me a puzzled look. Finally the salesman, with his measuring tape, helped him out of this difficult situation. And that was that. On the way home he told me that he had heard clothes were cheaper in the U.S.

Ralph delivered his round of lectures and returned to London. The relationship that formed with Ralph during his visit to Madison was kept alive over roughly the next decade through sporadic correspondence and some brief meetings in London, usually on my way to or from Pakistan.

Around this time my case for promotion to full professorship came up and my committee approached five established scholars to evaluate my work, Ralph being one of them. I would never have known had I not received a copy of a four- or five-line handwritten letter Ralph had sent to the chair of my committee. He had excused himself saying he had not read enough of my work to speak confidently about it. Ralph had sent the copy to me himself, without any explanation or even the least bit of contrition. What preserved its integrity was its impeccable honesty and matter-of-factness. Did it hurt? Perhaps. But as calm settled in and reason returned, the hurt faded away. Whether I liked it or not, I could only respect such a man.

There was not a single word that betrayed the smallest trace of ill will or cunning or design. As I came to know more about Ralph and his dealings with others in the years that followed, I understood he could not have done otherwise. It was not a lack of goodwill, in fact he went out of his way to help people, but he did so without compromising his principles or his regard for honesty and fairness. He really had not read much of my work, and what little he had read disenchanting him. He did not even read any of my books, which I sent him later on, but nonetheless kept them in his library as a gift from a friend.

I vividly recall a visit to his office in a room of some building on campus which he used after he took early retirement from SOAS. *Aavaargi*, a book of my Urdu translations, had been recently published and I brought a copy for him. I asked him to read it. I had worked very hard on its language and was more than a little satisfied. Ralph graciously obliged and began to read my introduction out loud in my presence. He was visibly discomfited. The language was not simple enough—his verdict. Simple and straightforward expression was what he himself strived for and never lost an opportunity to point out disapprovingly if he spotted its absence in others. It was a theme to which he returned again and again with the regularity of a refrain in our countless discussions about Urduwallahs. While I appreciated his quest for simple language, this was another point where we did not see eye to eye, though we rarely debated the issue. I have always thought of literary writing as an artifact, something crafted. That the emphasis on “simple” was coming from a person who chose to translate Ghalib, who was anything but simple, was a bit surprising. Ralph could not do much about poetry. It was inherently the province of a select few. But the boundaries of prose stretched far enough to embrace the better part of humanity and Ralph’s business was with this “better part.” If one used difficult language and expression, it drove a wedge between human beings and risked alienation. Ralph would have none of it. The logic here was impeccable. Nevertheless I had my own reservations.

As I was to find out on my frequent future *ziyaarats* to Ralph’s Inn, his Sarae, the serenity pervading his small living room—which he regularly used for taking naps, not on the couch but on the thinly-carpeted floor—the feeling of being close to him, even when we just sat together each immersed in his own work, made debates on such subjects seem pointless, without any existential gravity or weight. There, in that haven of repose only the comfort of togetherness seemed real, the sole meaning of life.

I had come to look upon my visits to the Sarae as something of a necessity, which prompted me to visit him as often as I could, indeed so often and so regularly that I left a pair of slippers and a towel at his place so I would not have to lug them along every time. What drew me to him was the feeling that I could be myself in

his presence, without any pretensions or masks. Ralph's disarming innocence, his forthrightness, his total honesty and frankness about himself and the world at large left no room for pretension or masks. And I always came away feeling strangely light and renewed.

In 1985 I stopped briefly in London on my way to Pakistan. I went to see Ralph at his office. His face lit up. At lunch time he took me to a Sardarji's Indian restaurant, praised it to high heaven, and ordered a few dishes, among them a couple of skewers of our spicy *seekh kabaab*, which to my surprise looked strangely pinkish and grainy. Of course I later found out that the liberal use of red food coloring was the hallmark of many grilled or *tanduri* dishes in overseas Indian cuisine. Physical appearance aside, the taste of the *kabaabs* was good.

I cannot now recollect what we talked about then except that he again invited me to stay at his place anytime I visited London. "It will be no trouble," he said, "you will do your work, and I will do mine, and we will talk when I have time."

A couple of years after the *sikh kabaabs*, I decided to visit and stay with him at his 33 Theatre Street Sarae. I had been to London many times before, where access to most places is fairly easy by public transportation. All the same, Ralph met me at Heathrow. I was not only pleasantly surprised but also quite embarrassed. What with my decades of living in the West, I still retained something of the Easterner in me. He was a good twenty years my senior. The kind gesture left a deep impression on me. A second embarrassment came on a subsequent visit when I was flying in and out of Gatwick. Sarae Raalf was only a couple of blocks from the Clapham Junction station with access to trains for Gatwick. On the day of my departure as we were ready to leave, Ralph picked up one of my bags and slung it over his back like a knapsack (the veritable image of a South Asian railway-station coolie) and said, "Let's go." Try as hard as I could, I was not able to convince him to set the bag down. He insisted, I unwillingly relented, and we set off for the station.

Soon after arriving at his place on this first visit I had noticed the absence of Mrs. Russell. I knew she existed because it was her illness that had prevented Ralph from coming to our seminar in 1978. But from my experience of such situations in the U.S., where it is considered impolite to ask a person about their spouse when meeting them after an appreciably long interval, I restrained myself from asking about her outright. Perhaps at some point he sensed the question lurking in my eyes and put me at ease. With his characteristic matter-of-factness he informed me that they had parted company, or words to that effect. He did not use the word "divorce." It was not my business to know anything more, but he did say by way of the briefest explanation that they had difficulty getting along.

The week or so I stayed with him we talked—only when he took a break from his work or at meal times—about all kinds of things: people we both knew, books, his experiences in India and Pakistan. And this remained pretty much the pattern of our interaction during many subsequent visits, broken now and then by sunny walks in the park near his Sarae in Battersea, an inner-city district in South-West London. He introduced me to his South African friends Robert and Marion Molteno, living in the U.K. since 1977, who were like his family, their house just a few minutes walk from the Sarae. Marion used to come early in the morning, when we were both still sleeping, to work on her novel (probably *A Shield of Coolest Air*, 1992) in the solitude of Ralph's small study before going to work. I don't remember whether it was a Wednesday or a Thursday that some students came to study Urdu with him—grown men and occasionally a woman who were professionals, one was even a doctor. (So this was his free-of-charge Urdu class!) The little group gave the impression of an informal gathering of friends having a good time—munching salted nuts provided by Ralph, drinking the beer they had brought, chatting in Urdu with Ralph explaining points of grammar in between, his uproarious laugh rising above everyone else's following some spicy joke, a witty remark, a wisecrack now and then. It was hard to escape the feeling of being in the midst of a carnival of some sort, a celebration of life, to be enjoyed utterly. For Ralph, life was a gift for which one ought to be grateful. He sang and laughed, recited poetry and told jokes as he explored its possibilities with uncommon diligence and verve, and without wasting a moment. In the end, he lived it as he wanted to, and made it a little better for others.

Perhaps they were students, but Ralph seemed to know them intimately, the smallest detail of their lives. He was full of inquisitiveness, but only if this word were to be stripped of the unfortunate implication of snooping sometimes attached to it. His was not the kind of curiosity that makes you put up your guard. No, it was an exuberant and deep-rooted participation in life, not just his own, but everyone else's, if only to feel the bond shared by all humanity. Ralph was never direct. He had an unobtrusive way of asking about you. He gave his queries a contextual relevance: your life was part of a human narrative that did not begin with you, nor was it likely to end with you, but neither could it do without you.

During my visits Ralph told me about his brothers, his three children whom he felt very close to and visited regularly, and his father who had been involved in some kind of mismanagement that had brought down the family. He talked about women he had known and been close to, especially one he had loved dearly as a young man and she him. He had wanted to marry her but that didn't happen. Decades later he ran into her, now widowed, and they met occasionally as friends. This was neither confession nor confiding. He was very open about many things. It is all



there in *Findings, Keepings: Life, Communism and Everything*, the first volume of his autobiography.

The simple, unpretentious décor of his house betrayed its occupant's indifference to matter and money, beyond what was necessary for a simple life. One day he told me that he did not have enough funds to buy his present lodging in a block of what might be best described as interconnected townhouses. The Moltenos offered to make up the difference, their contribution reverting to them after he was gone, the rest divided among his heirs. It was then he told me that when he and Mrs. Russell parted, he had not wanted to terminate the relationship with a divorce—not because he entertained any notion of their coming together again at some point, but because he wished for her to receive his pension after him.

The Moltenos were the sort of friends few people are fortunate to have. They looked after him and considered him family. Marion would come and check on him practically every day and during his last illness, as well as all previous ones, her devotion and care were exemplary. One can gather as much from the frequent references to her in Ralph's "Journal." The Moltenos would also put up his friends at their place if his were unavailable for some reason. I remember one time I spent a night at their home. When I had arrived Ralph's niece Kleta and her Algerian-French Muslim husband Boucif Slimane, who lived in France, were visiting him. Probably it was an unexpected visit. I spent most of the day with Ralph and the couple. In the evening the husband, a non-literary man, exuberant and full of life, fixed us a fine meal slapped together from whatever provisions he could find in Ralph's small refrigerator and cupboards. Next day, Ralph told me all about the couple's life and their children. As Boucif didn't know English, Ralph would brush up on his French before the couple's visit. He enjoyed the husband's company a lot, so much that the two had taken a trip together to India in the early 1990s and had a fine time.

My other memories include Ralph talking about various Urduwallahs (incidentally, our favorite subject), some of whom he respected and remembered tenderly while others, well let's just say he did not mention them with any feeling of unpleasantness or ill will. Apparently some had treated him rather shabbily. In one conversation Ahmed Ali of *Twilight in Delhi* fame cropped up. I knew Ahmed Ali quite well, and made a point of visiting him whenever I was in Karachi. Tall—or at any rate tall-looking because skeletal—he exuded an aura of refinement and culture. Otherwise delightful and engaging, he suffered from an undue suspicion of others' motives. He had a long-standing feud with the Urdu Progressives and lambasted them roundly in his scathing articles and conversation. His deep-seated dislike sprang from his feeling that although he had played an important, indeed a pivotal role in the founding of the Progressive Movement, its *karta-dhartas*, Saj-

jad Zaheer and his cohorts, had willfully ignored it and had practically excised him from the Movement's annals. He never lost an opportunity to chastise them and unload his bitter feelings. In the long list of affronts and injustices perpetrated against him by various people, he once mentioned Ralph. He was adamant that it was Ralph's negative evaluation of his translations of Urdu poetry (which were eventually published by Columbia University Press as *The Golden Tradition: An Anthology of Urdu Poetry*) that led to the book's rejection by Oxford University Press (OUP), to which it had been initially submitted. He was so bitter about it that he even wrote disparaging things about Ralph in Pakistani English newspapers when, if my memory serves me right, Ralph was visiting Pakistan.

Ralph, on the other hand, had a different story to tell. He felt sorry that Ahmed Ali felt that way, for he had done no such thing. He had stressed the strong points in his evaluation and offered some suggestions that he thought would enhance the book's value. If OUP didn't accept the book, this could not have been because of Ralph's evaluation alone.

Ralph had quite a lot to say about Khurshidul Islam. I recall during one of my now more or less yearly trips to the Sarae, he handed me a thick sheaf of papers. It was an article he had written about Khurshidul Islam and his dealings with him over the years, particularly regarding their collaboration on *Three Mughal Poets* and *Ghalib: Life and Letters*. He gave it to me and said "Keep it but don't publish it, not until I'm gone." (He kept sending me additions to it as further developments took place between the two men.) I have no wish to dwell on what Ralph recorded in this piece (sooner or later it will find its way into print), except to say that when I later read it I felt rather sorry for Ralph. He certainly did not deserve what he had received from a friend he had done so much for. However, what surprised me most was Ralph's tone: nowhere was it sullied with even a hint of ire or sarcasm. The whole piece was refreshingly free of acrimony or maudlin self-pity, or even a feeling of having been wronged, or a desire to get even. It was a bare-bones, unaccented account of what happened, without editorial comment or any kind of judgment.

On the other hand, Ralph never tired of praising Khurshidul Islam for his rather uncommon breadth of knowledge, not just of Urdu and Persian but also Western literature. He clearly admired the man for his penetrating intelligence and sagacity, his erudition and genius. It has never ceased to amaze me how he could so easily banish personal feelings in his transactions with people, so supremely impervious to feeling hurt. Perhaps he never allowed himself to feel hurt. People were what they were, and they certainly were never monochromatic. He appreciated their goodness, and did not let their faults bother him. On occasion, when he did mention some fault, he never called it that. In any case, he especially regretted

the fact that because of Khurshidul Islam's whims their project to collaborate on a series of Urdu translations—of which *Three Mughal Poets* and *Ghalib: Life and Letters* were the first two—could not continue.

The request Ralph made of me regarding his paper on Khurshidul Islam puzzled me then and later. He never said anything about people he could not say to their faces. Why was he asking me not to publish the paper until after he was gone? What added to my puzzlement was that I gradually found out he had given copies of the same paper to many other people (as recently as a few months before his death when he gave one to Ather Farouqui who was then staying at the Sarae and who sent it to me to be published after Ralph died) and had related everything he had written about Khurshidul Islam to just about anybody who would care to listen. I'm still wondering about it.

During his tenure as director of Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu, Pakistan, Jami-luddin Aali invited Ralph to give a lecture on Iqbal, to be published later as a monograph. Ralph had some difficulty with Iqbal's ideas. Now, everyone in Pakistan worships Iqbal. A whole industry has been built on sanctifying him. Ralph could not have cared less what Pakistanis thought, and Aali had no idea what lay afoot. Ralph said what he had to say, politically correct or not. When the time came to publish the piece, Aali broke into a fine sweat. He kept dragging his feet. Finally when he did print it, he felt compelled to disagree with Ralph in his foreword, most likely to save his skin.

Ralph narrated this tale and added that Aali and he were still good friends, that Aali frequently came to London and stayed at the Sarae. As proof positive of his friendship, Ralph handed me a few pages with his translation of a large number of Aali's *dohās*. I published some of them in the *AUS*.

Urduwallahs were not the only ones Ralph talked about. He told me about some of his colleagues at SOAS, among them Aziz Ahmad, novelist-turned-bureaucrat-turned-historian. Ralph translated his novel *Aisi Bulandi, Aisi Pasti*, in close cooperation with the author, as *The Shore and the Wave* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971). What he related to me can also be found in his introduction to the translation. It is quite revealing, not just about the man but also about how writing is a work in progress. One is never quite done with it, each subsequent visit prompting the inexorable desire to have done it differently.

He [Aziz Ahmad] took the opportunity to make revisions, some of them fairly considerable, in the original text, and these were incorporated in the translation. For the most part, these revisions consist of omissions and abridgements of certain passages, but numerous other minor changes have also been made. Most of these were made at the author's own wish, and

none of them without his consent. In detail, therefore, the translation often diverges considerably from the published text. (*The Shore and the Wave*, 8)

There is one memory that keeps coming back: During our conversations Ralph would stop me and reach out for his pencil and scratch paper (little cuttings saved from unused portions of any paper and pressed with a clip; he also reused envelopes) to jot down a word or a phrase or idiom I had used which he once knew but had long forgotten or which he had never come across. This happened every time, even on my last trip to the Sarae.

Much of what transpired during my visits is not substantially different from what other visitors have experienced and written about. If I want to go over some of these memories, it is not because they are unique, but because it is a way of experiencing the warmth and closeness of a departed friend. In its faltering rhythms memory restores, however imperfectly, what time takes away from us.

In 1990, ten years and seven issues of the *Annual of Urdu Studies* later, Professor C. M. Naim decided to close shop, announcing in a note in the last issue that if someone wanted to continue it, they were free to do so. Something like the *AUS* was sorely needed. I waited three years and then decided to revive it myself. I was at a point in my career where I could indulge in such risky, at times damaging adventures. I soon realized that in addition to good wishes, hard cash and, more importantly, a steady flow of publication-worthy material was needed to turn the *AUS* into a truly professional journal.

During one of my sojourns at the Sarae I asked Ralph if he would consider writing something for it. He gladly accepted and over the years helped the journal *daame, darme, qadame, sukhane*—the hoary cliché we Urduwallahs never tire of repeating. Readers of the *AUS* are familiar with some of the very fine articles he wrote for it, among them his fairly long and now nearly classic “Urdu and I,” and the shorter “Urdu, Khurshidul Islam, and I.” Now and then Ralph would also dig up one of his old translations (originally done for use in his Urdu classes), revise and polish it and send it to me. The one translation that did not fall into this category was the opening section of Krishan Chandar’s semi-autobiographical novel *Meri Yaadon ke Chinaar*. He liked Krishan Chandar immensely and had started translating the novel God knows how long ago. As I accepted the incomplete translation I also insisted that he finish the remainder to be published serially in the *AUS*. He agreed but never got around to fulfilling his promise, despite several reminders and pleas. This was not the only promise that was to remain unfulfilled. There were others too. My feeling is that in the last five or six years his attention was drifting away from writing about or in Urdu, partly because of his preoccupation with his autobiography.

These contributions were a real treat for the *AUS*, but for me personally his informal, unstructured, stray thoughts about Urdu books, Urdu people, their foibles, hypocrisy and double-talk, their cloying *takalluf*, hollow *tapaak*, and oppressive *mubaalgha-aaraa'i*—all of which found such a fluid and easy but non-judgmental expression in his “Shaadam az Zindagi-e Kheesh”—were nothing short of a *ne'mat-e ghair-mutaraqqiba* (I can already see Ralph raising his eyebrows at this expression and snapping with mock disdain, “down right highfalutin”). Many people have told me how much they appreciated his intrepid, off-the-cuff style in this series. I believe what affected them the most was the rare balance of frankness and total absence of ill will that permeated his writing as much as it did his life. That unalloyed, even brutal criticism that never sought to mock or hurt or belittle, so that even if it did not go down well with you, you at least did not feel diminished or slighted or small. I suggested that he write something along these lines in Urdu for each issue of the *AUS*, but the choice of the title for the series was entirely his own. Strangely, when I last visited him in 2007, he was still wondering about the *she'r* in which the phrase “shaadam...” occurs and I had to find out the complete *she'r* for him from Naiyer Masud:

*Haasil-e umr nisaar-e rah-e yaare kardam  
Shaadam az zindagi-e kheesh keh kaare kardam.*

The idea resonated with him partly because he had himself been thinking of putting together a collection of his reminiscences focusing on books, personalities, and events that he had found interesting and memorable in his then nearly fifty-five-year-long career as a scholar/teacher of Urdu. The first installment of “Shaadam ...” appeared in the 1998 (No. 13) issue of the *AUS*.

I must confess that a secret reason prompted me to make this suggestion to him. I have often wondered why many non-South Asian scholars of Urdu, despite their considerable scholarship, rarely speak or write in Urdu. I have long felt that informal accounts about the encounter of Western scholars with the land and people of their formal work can provide valuable insights about the latter.

Anyone who speaks Urdu and has come in contact with Ralph knows that he will not let you talk to him in English. Not only would he speak in Urdu but also, depending on how open and informal you wanted to get, unabashedly but lightheartedly share with you some bawdy Urdu jokes rarely heard in the company of our South Asian *shurafa*, certainly not between two people twenty years apart in age. After each joke he would break into full-throated laughter and expect you to do the same. Knowing that I am hell’s fodder, and he being an atheist who could scarcely believe in any retribution other than human, I did not mind his pulling out

a few cassettes from his library and playing some of the choicest examples of the kind of Urdu verse our miscreants classify as—*na'uzu billah—ilaahiyaat*. Ralph was not the only Western scholar I had asked to write something in Urdu about their experiences of South Asia and its people, but he was the only one who went for it. He would send an installment of “Shaadam...” every year—though during the last five years he had started to skip, and the last two installments had to literally be wrenched out of him during my now more or less yearly visits to his restful Sarae. He relented only after I gladly accepted to take dictation.

Ralph's help to the *AUS* was not confined to articles and translations. He introduced it to many of his friends who had some interest in Urdu and actively sought subscribers, sometimes even had me send gift copies to old friends of his in India and to one in Canada. He had more or less adopted it, but the adoption never infringed on my role as editor. At one time he sent me an article which dealt almost exclusively with Urdu instruction in the U.K. I found it too specific to a given situation and decided against publishing it. Another piece, probably sent only a year ago, was a review of the Urdu translation of a play written originally in English. The translation was all right, but nothing memorable, so I gave him my reasons and excused myself.

However, I especially regret the exclusion of one piece, largely because of technical difficulties. It was the B.A. thesis of one of Ralph's former students, Alison Barnsby (now Safadi), entitled “An Analysis of the Linguistic Differences between the Urdu and Hindi Versions of a Selection of Premchand's Short Stories.” “In it,” in Ralph's own words,

she made a detailed study of both the Hindi and the Urdu versions of ten of Prem Chand's short stories, representative of the whole period from 1910 to 1936. Her dissertation covers ninety handwritten pages and provides conclusive proof of the truth of my earlier assertion that Prem Chand's Urdu was standard literary Urdu and his Hindi standard literary Hindi, and that by and large he made no attempt to write in the “Hindustani” he advocated. (It is, I imagine, possible that the Hindi and Urdu versions of the stories are not all Prem Chand's own work, but even if that were the case it seems, to say the least of it, unlikely that either version would have been published without his approval.) Barnsby's study quotes numerous examples of sentences which could equally well be described as Hindi or Urdu but which are *not* used in both versions. (*AUS* 1996, 207)

It was a fine piece of scholarship but interspersed with elements in the Hindi and Urdu scripts as well as numerous linguistic symbols. In those days I typed,

Memon

transliterated, and formatted the material for the *AUS* myself and we did not, nor do we now have software capable of handling all this. I had no way of printing it. For a number of years Ralph said nothing, he only reminded me much later during a stay at his Sarae and I explained the problem.

In the last three or four years Ralph started to ration his time stringently, most probably due to the work he was doing on his autobiography. He had not been well (though the cancer which eventually took him had not been diagnosed yet) and complained of a more than usual fatigue and lack of energy. However, rationing meant just that—rationing, not severance of contact. Henceforward he would write to friends and go to visit those who lived in and around London at set intervals, and pretty much kept to his schedule. The “Journal” he had started writing and sending to friends who requested it was probably a result of his desire to economize time in order to spend it, instead—with frequent interruptions due to fatigue—on his autobiography.

After my last visit to the Sarae in March-April 2007, our e-mail correspondence had become less frequent and more business-like, perhaps due to his newly devised timetable. In an e-mail dated 11 July 2008 he wrote:

Dear Muhammad,

This e-mail begins with a complaint against you. Your last e-mail makes no reference to our agreement made a long time ago that our correspondence would be on the ‘nisf mulaqat’ basis. I consider that by sending you my journal I fulfil my part of the bargain, and I consider that you don’t fulfil your part. Sometime I’ll tell you why I think this may have happened, but in the meanwhile let me say that I don’t understand why I had to wait to hear from Anis about your travels and your very satisfactory visit to Turkey. So please mend your ways from now on.

Yours,  
Ralph

I wrote back to him, somewhat testily, that there was absolutely no such agreement, and even if he had suggested one along those lines, I would never have agreed to it. Given the infrequency of his e-mails, I had myself suggested that he write to me at least once every six months, if not more. (And by “write” I meant a real, personal letter.) In the same message I also asked a second time for the last installment of “Shaadam...,” which he had himself offered to write but had never sent. While I regretted my testiness, at the time I had not wished to give the slight-

est impression that anything had changed in my behavior now that he had six to eight months. He replied on 12 August, one month before he passed away, with his characteristic generosity:

OK. There's absolutely no ill feeling. I'll write again quite soon (I hope) BUT THE PROOFS OF part 2 of my autobiography have just arrived and I'm giving priority to the possibly quite lengthy task of correcting the pagination of a long index. So be patient! All the best. Yours, Ralph.

This was Ralph, very much himself.

\*

A small life such as mine, Ralph, so limited in every way, is hardly qualified to judge the measure of a life so full and warm and rich and human as yours. Jane Shum, who transcribed your *AUS* articles from the tapes, recently wrote to me:

Though I never met him, I personally have the impression that Ralph Russell was a man of the heart, a man who knew the "true meaning of life" and who saw through all the rubbish most people waste their lives pursuing. This despite being an "atheist."

And lest this account become mushy or maudlin (I know you would not like that), let me smile, as you would be, thinking that just as the earthly *mehvash* and *parichehras* could not resist the seduction of your formidable charms and you theirs, the houris too must find them pleasing enough to defect their Islamic heaven and join you in your cubicle, wherever it may be.

I would love to conclude by "haq maghfirat kare 'ajab aazaad mard tha!" but I'm afraid. I could faintly hear you admonish me with a smile: "What's this *haq-vaq*. Don't you know I don't believe in your Haq?" Yes, I know you don't, Ralph. But consider who said it—the bard you loved, Ghalib. It is *his* Haq. You're in good company! Good-bye, old friend.