MARION MOLTENO

Ralph Russell: The Theatre Street Years

In 1989 at the age of 70 Ralph Russell moved into a flat at 33 Theatre Street in South London that was to be his home for the last twenty years of his life. Friends and Urdu scholars from all over the U.K., from India, Pakistan and North America came to visit him there. They would sit on a sofa positioned under an Indian wall-hanging embroidered in red and blue and gold, while Ralph sat in an armchair opposite them against a backdrop of books. For hours together they would talk and laugh, discuss and argue, and the visitor would be treated to Ralph's characteristic style of conversation—questions about themselves, a genuine interest in anything they told him, and vigorous views emphasized by that characteristic downward hand gesture. They would leave feeling lifted by his company. Theatre Street, said Jogindar Shamsher, one of his oldest friends, was "a warm place for friends and dear ones, a center for learning and wisdom."

Ralph had retired in 1981 after thirty years as head of the Urdu Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). His period of retirement was almost equally long—twenty seven years—and through that time he continued to work on Urdu-related issues with a vigor that was an inspiration to all who came into contact with him. By the time he moved to Theatre Street he had decided to withdraw from many of the activities related to Urdu teaching in the community to give himself time to concentrate on his work on Urdu literature. But he continued to act as mentor to the scores of people he had by then equipped to carry on what he had started, listening as they told him about their difficulties and successes and encouraging them to keep at it. He was at his best talking one-to-one—warm in his appreciation, stimulating in his questioning, definite in his suggestions, and unstinting in the time he was prepared to give to help people of goodwill and serious commitment. Often he urged them to "*Write it all down*," so that their experience could be passed on to others. They would laugh in disbelief—who would want to read what

they wrote? At which point he would say, "Then let's tape it," and on would go the cassette recorder while he got them to tell the whole story, prompting them with questions. And all the time they were learning things from him, from his knowledge of South Asian society and his experience of how to work with people to bring about important changes. The manager of a multicultural education unit in Waltham Forest once said she wished she could carry him around in her pocket as a resource.

Students from his SOAS days and from the community Urdu classes made a point of coming to see him when they were in London. Several of them regarded him as the person who had inspired them to do the things they had done. Gillian Wright, who now translates novels from Hindi, says that without his encouragement she would never have gone to university and earned a degree. Sughra Choudhry, the first of her Mirpuri immigrant family to obtain higher education—and now head of the Aga Khan Education Service in Pakistan—describes Ralph as

> the kind of father that I never had—one that appreciated the questions that I asked of life and human behaviour and who believed in my ability to do whatever I wished to do. He was always there for me—I could talk to him about anything I wished. I could discuss all the difficulties in my personal life and in the various jobs that I held. He always had more confidence in me than I had in myself.[1]

Every few months he would be delighted to receive a visit from an Urdu scholar friend, visiting from South Asia or North America.

C.M. Naim describes the pleasures of these conversations:

> Anyone who came in contact with Ralph Russell […] always remembered him as a remarkable man. Mostly because he not only knew Urdu so well but insisted on using it. You either used English or talked in Urdu with him; no mixing of the two, certainly not the way most of us do. Then there was his knowledge of Urdu literature. He had read much and digested it better than most. So, talking about some literary topic, he could surprise you by referring to something that you of course knew but had not occurred to you as relevant. […] 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 a take a position, if he thought it was right, against popular acceptance.

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[1]Tribute for the SOAS day celebrating the life and work of Ralph Russell, June 2007. All other comments quoted are from messages sent after his death, 14 September 2008, or from personal communications to the author.

Ralph loved speaking Urdu and of course enjoyed knowing that he did it well, but he never let admiration of his command of it go to his head. He insisted that no non-native speaker of a language would ever acquire the same complete facility as a mother-tongue speaker, and was always on the lookout to learn from those he was talking with. He never published anything in Urdu without first checking it with his colleague Khaled Hasan Qadiri to be sure it was idiomatic. After one such visit I asked him how many changes he needed to make. He smiled and said, "Only two and they were optional. But it was still necessary to check. There might have been more."

Soon after moving to Theatre Street he started a once-a-week Urdu conversation group at home for busy professionals who had learned some Urdu and wanted to keep it up. He could never resist the invitation to help people who wanted to learn. They came with great regularity for years together and a major part of the draw was Ralph himself. He refused payment for the lessons so, instead, a tradition grew up of them contributing beer, turning the second hour into a social occasion when they switched to English and munched the cashew nuts which Ralph provided in unlimited quantities. John Bray has said,

> I was a regular attender for more than a decade until I moved to Tokyo in 2002. Even now, wherever I am, I feel a certain twitchiness on Wednesday evenings ("It's Wednesday—surely I ought to be in Theatre Street tonight?") Those evenings were very special, and we all realised that we were privileged to sit at Ralph's feet, or at least at his sofa. Those times brought us much more than an improved knowledge of Urdu grammar, or indeed of the many varieties of beer available at the local off-licence. We also benefited from selected excerpts from Ralph's own history, and from his views on life, universities and everything. The two qualities that always struck me most were first a warm interest in people, and secondly his personal and intellectual honesty. His honesty of course led to an impatience with humbug of all descriptions, and his repertoire included many stories of his subversive encounters with higher authority.

The Theatre Street classes were not only in Urdu. I told him once that my yoga teacher wanted to learn Sanskrit to help her understand some of the concepts in yoga. He promptly offered to teach her and began reviving his own knowledge of Sanskrit, last used when he had studied for his degree in the late 1940s. Along with the language lessons they had lively discussions in which Ralph learned things about yoga and Sophy was treated to Ralph's vigorous opinions about Sanskrit literature. She had a respectful attitude toward the Vedas, of which he did not think much.

What he really enjoyed was the secular literature. Later I discovered that a colleague at my work had, together with a group of friends, been struggling to learn Hindi for some years and was not making much progress. I introduced him to Ralph who was soon offering to teach the group once a fortnight. So out came the Hindi books as he revived his own knowledge and prepared meticulously for each lesson. After the first session I asked my colleague David how the evening had gone. He said, simply, "They loved him, and he loved them."

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Older people are often lonely—many friends from their generation have died, and those who remain may be themselves too frail to visit. For Ralph the last twenty years were probably more sociable than any early period. He had never had a car and years of walking to catch buses had kept him fitter than many people years younger. He thought nothing of journeys of several hours to visit a friend. Neither delays in railway stations nor time spent waiting about for other people bothered him—as long as he had pen and paper he was self-sufficient and content. He went to talks at the Marx Memorial Library and renewed contact with valued old political colleagues with whom he had long and satisfying conversations. He also found new ones. He was always searching for people who would be willing to critically reexamine the history of the Communist Party in Britain, and mostly he was disappointed—not many shared his insistent desire to learn lessons from history. One rediscovered friend was Margaret Horton. They had been part of the same Party branch when he was seventeen and she was in her mid-twenties, and more perhaps than politics, their friendship had been founded on a shared love of literature. Now, meeting her again in her eighties, he found she had trouble with her eyes and could no longer read. The idea of *Margaret* not being able to read was shocking to him. He began to make regular visits to Brighton to read to her—mostly extracts from the autobiography he was busy drafting, for which she was an excellent foil having lived through the same times. At about the same time he renewed a lost closeness with his brother Rex. Together they revisited the Yorkshire village of their childhood and met again the woman who had been Ralph's beloved in his student days. She was now widowed, living a life much more circumscribed than his. From then on he visited her every three months, giving her a loving companionship which transformed the last fourteen years of her life.

Perhaps the thing that made his life so strikingly different from that of

most older people was that he had so many younger friends, and continued throughout these years to make more. He had a talent for turning what would for most people have been limited encounters into real friendships. Once when he had some discomfort in his legs and went for a series of treatments with an osteopath, he found her to be a delightful person and it was not long before he was inviting her home so that they could have more time to talk. She became one of his most valued friends. At one point I arranged for him to give a series of public lectures on Urdu literature. When those attending came up to tell him how much they had enjoyed it he would immediately want to know all about them, and what was their connection with Urdu or South Asia. One woman had been a Salvation Army missionary in India and had once spoken fluent Urdu—soon she and this communist atheist had become appreciative friends and were exchanging drafts of their autobiographies. Two others—Urdu speakers—were delighted at the invitation to meet again after the course to discuss their mutual interests further. Each became a close friend; for years until his death they would visit every few months and talk about literature, politics, humanism and life.

Living in a city as multicultural as London perfectly suited his outgoing nature and curiosity, and he would make the most of each small contact. With the Ghanaian postman he would exchange each morning a broad smile and a few words, and the man would go off beaming with pleasure. He bought his milk at the local store run by a Gujarati couple who watched Hindi videos when nothing much was happening in the shop. Ralph spoke Hindi with them and was soon their friend, giving treats to their daughters and being invited to their home. When they had difficulty getting a visa for their mother to visit from India, Ralph offered to write a letter to the officials on her behalf. She got her visa.

A large part of what kept him young—and in the company of people much younger—was his ability to respond positively to new situations. Hearing about my work in adult education in Croydon, he began to get involved in some of the voluntary projects that grew out of it. He lent his stature to a campaign to save a profoundly deaf Pakistani woman, Rashida Abedi, from being deported—which amazingly, was successful. He was an advisor to a project we called "Our Lives" that encouraged people in our English classes to write their life stories, which were then published. As the first lines of Ralph's own autobiography make clear, he believed that everyone's life was important and everyone had a story to tell, so this project really appealed to him. For some years he chaired the committee; he translated Rashida's story into Urdu, and he helped edit the story of an Afghan refugee. After I had left Croydon, a group of us whom

Ralph called "the Croydon Walkers" started meeting for an annual weekend walk in the country. Mary Simpson recalls:

> Ralph, although 30 years older than most of us, proved to be the fittest. Despite nontraditional walking gear—he wore his ordinary shoes and insisted on carrying a shopping bag rather than the traditional rucksack—he happily walked all day and he would lead us in singing songs and even hymns—and he somehow seemed to remember tunes and song words better than the rest of us.

Once when our Dutch friends were organizing a group cycling holiday in the Netherlands he showed obvious interest. They said he would be welcome to come but we were all doubtful if he could manage it. In his youth he had cycled from Essex to Yorkshire in a day, a feat none of the younger members of the party could have matched, but that was over fifty years ago. Ralph himself was perfectly confident that he would be fine, and he was. (It was I, twenty-six years younger, who was exhausted.) Leo van den Berg recalled:

> We cherish our memory of him cycling with us against the winds, and in the morning preparing our breakfast while we were still in the process of waking up: a big bowl full of cleaned parts of several grapefruits! He was such a thoughtful person! A very special friend: sharp in such a disarmingly friendly manner that one wishes to have been in debate with him 100 times as often as we could.

He delighted in the freedom that living on his own gave him to be hospitable. In this he was culturally more South Asian than British. There was an open invitation to friends from elsewhere in the U.K. to stay overnight if they were in London, and those from India and Pakistan often stayed weeks. He used to say that in a South Asian household no one ever asked a guest how long they would stay. He approved of that, but knew also what he needed to make things comfortable. With typical directness he explained the ground rules. They would each come and go as they pleased. He would get on with his work while they got on with whatever they needed to do. They would each fend for themselves as to meals, and take time to sit and chat as and when it suited them. Having spelled out the limits, he proceeded to transcend them, happily giving each visitor as much time as they asked for.

The fact that many of his friends did not share his political outlook never got in the way. He understood well that some of the differences were a question of vocabulary—his view of what it meant to be a true communist was so broad, so humane that much of it was what many of his friends would simply have thought of as being a good person. But if

people disapproved—about his views or about anything else—it did not bother him. His oldest brother, Noel, had told him years before that it would be better if they did not meet, for Noel could not stomach the idea of his brother being a communist. Now Noel had mellowed and they rediscovered the personal things they shared—to Ralph's considerable satisfaction. It was one of his maxims that even if there is only one percent that you have in common with someone, that is more important than the ninety-nine percent on which you may differ.

"He was a lovely man," said Musseret Anwar, "and he just loved people." He also loved to express that warmth. He greatly appreciated the change in the norms of British behavior that had made a hug on greeting unremarkable, even between people who were not intimate. Perhaps he still could not quite believe it, for he would sometimes ask a new woman friend, "Is it OK if I hug you?"—to which there was really only one answer. There was nothing superficial about this wide affection. It was founded on a real appreciation of who each person was—he just zoned in more quickly than most people did to the best in each person he met, and because of that, drew it out. And though he would spontaneously tell people how delightful they were, he would as easily tell them off if he felt they merited it. The forthrightness for which he was famous in his political and literary worlds applied just as much to friendships. He once started an email to a dear and very busy friend in India by saying, "You know how much I love you but unless—God forbid—you are either dead or seriously ill your continued silence is a disgrace." She took it as it was meant. He would not have bothered to write like that to someone he did not care about. He gave advice freely to the many younger friends who spoke to him about their personal dilemmas, particularly when he thought they were handling something in a way that would not be good for them, or avoiding facing up to some challenge that would be better met now, rather than storing up trouble for themselves in the future. Sughra Choudhry describes how "when I went to him, solving a problem always seemed so clear and logical—and yet a few minutes after leaving him that wonderful clarity shared with him would all disappear in a sea of emotions!" He knew they could not always follow his advice but he still felt it was his job to give it.

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Enlivening as his many friendships were, his daily routine was quiet, centered around his writing, and he liked it that way. Many days were taken up with what he called *čẖōṭē-mōṭē kām* (which he would translate

literally for the benefit of non-Urdu speakers as "little fat works")—shopping, domestic tasks, correspondence, and the endless sorting and filing of papers that goes with a busy intellectual life. In his eighties he astonished his younger friends by learning to use a computer and email, but he still only typed on his own in emergencies, preferring to draft in pencil and wait to dictate to the succession of women whom he paid to do his typing—and who naturally either were or soon became close friends. Every few weeks another unsolicited collection of Urdu poetry would arrive in the post with a request for him to give his esteemed opinion. He took defense in a standard letter sent out to such hopefuls explaining that he could not promise to read it but wished them well. To those who sent him what he regarded as inadequate translations of Urdu poetry into English, he was more outspoken—particularly if they were translations of Ghālib. He took very seriously the responsibility of doing Ghālib justice and expected others to do the same. He was certainly open to admiring other translations than his own, but could not let pass those that strayed from the original meaning, or produced flowery versions in unidiomatic English. He would respond at almost indecent length, pointing out each infelicity, and I would feel a secret sympathy for the person who would doubtless regret ever having asked for his esteemed opinion. At the same time Ralph found the most outrageous of these translations highly entertaining, and soon had them by heart, to quote to Urdu-speaking friends.

The good weeks were ones in which he got several continuous days to work on Ghālib or whatever his current writing project was. A glance at the bibliography of his published work will show how continuously productive he was during these years. In earlier periods he had never stopped writing, but for the two decades before moving to Theatre Street much of his output related to Urdu teaching in the U.K., and he wanted to concentrate on literature. The books that he and Khurshidul Islam had produced together, *Three Mughal Poets* and *Ghalib, Life and Letters,* had been published twenty years earlier and had long been out of print. His translations of Ghālib's ghazals had stalled and were still unpublished. Many of Ralph's articles on literature, produced over forty years, had appeared in journals now defunct and were known to only a handful of scholars.

His first project, which he and I began working on together two years before he moved into Theatre Street, was to edit the most significant of those articles into a select history of Urdu literature, focusing on the writers and periods that had been of most interest to him. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* appeared in 1992, was followed in 1995 by *Hidden in the Lute,* his anthology of Urdu literature which included the pieces he had earlier

translated and many now newly translated, and in 1999 by *How Not to Write the History of Urdu Literature*. During the same years he had made two extended visits to India and Pakistan, renewed old contacts with Urdu scholars and made new ones, and was producing a stream of new articles and translations, many of which first appeared in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*. He now had books in print through five different publishers. By 2003—when he was 85—the Ghālib ghazals were finally published, first in Pakistan and then in India, and he felt satisfied that his life's work was available and would be found by people who were interested in it.

Alongside all of that, he was working on his autobiography. This was a long-standing project—his first unpublished autobiographical piece had been written on his return from India at the end of World War II, and in the early 1970s he produced a full-length autobiography of his political involvement as a communist. He kept sharing this with potential readers, but seldom found anyone who was really interested. The year he moved to Theatre Street was also the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union. As the communist movement dwindled away he reluctantly recognized that there would now never be a readership for his book in its existing form and he accepted my offer to help him recast it as a more general autobiography. The first volume, *Findings Keepings,* was finally published in 2001 and some years later, to his delight, in both Urdu and Panjabi translations. He felt a deep urge to share his experience of life, and the nearer the end seemed, the stronger it became. By the summer of 2007—he was now 89—we had got a text of volume two off to the publishers. The last stages took longer than expected so he never did see it in book form, but he knew it would be there for others, which was what mattered. When he heard that he had only a limited number of months to live, one of his first responses was, "So I won't finish volume three after all." But he almost got there—he left extensive drafts for me to edit and up to the last few weeks was dictating extra bits that occurred to him. And then with characteristic realism, he stopped bothering about what could not be changed.

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For many people who visited Ralph at Theatre Street, one of the strongest visual images they retain is the backdrop of all his books. He read constantly and on an extraordinary range of topics. His bookshelves were filled with Marxist classics and the writings of dissidents, history and politics, religion and sex. He was fascinated by popular literature in all

periods, by traditional tales from all cultures, by medieval literature and modern children's fiction. There were shelves and shelves of poetry and songs. There was literature in English, Urdu, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Russian, Persian, Arabic, and none of it just sitting on the shelves—he had read and had clear views about what was worthwhile in each of them. He noted in the inside covers of books the dates that he bought them and the dates that he read them, and marked passages that particularly struck him. Many of these he seemed to know by heart—he had an extraordinary facility for memorizing words—and they would slip into conversation at unexpected moments. Into his late eighties he was pursuing lines of thought begun years earlier, reading new translations from the Greek and introductions to new editions of Milton. He loved reference books—searching for information using Google would never hold for him the pleasure of fetching a large tome from the shelves and looking up the origin of a phrase or the biography of a lesser-known person. He had books on birds and trees and aerial views of the countryside, and from any country place he visited he collected guidebooks and postcards and pencils. He loved maps. He had ordnance survey maps of most parts of England he had been to, detailed rolled-up maps of India going back to the 1940s, and on the wall of his bedroom he pasted a large-scale map of the greater London area—and then another that he unearthed—and then yet another. I asked him once why he wanted them there—they were certainly not aesthetic, half torn and coming away from the wall where the tape had become old. He said simply, "I like looking at them."

He was constantly adding to his collection. They were not so much possessions as things of the mind, potential conversations or reflections or arguments. He browsed in secondhand shops and picked up oddities, books he had heard of vaguely and thought one day he might read. He took recommendations from younger friends on contemporary writing of all kinds, and they would quite possibly then get some notes with his opinions about it—*particularly* if he had not liked it, for he would be very curious to know why they had. Often they could not really say. Few people read as sharply as he did, or with as strong a filter of the values he believed in. Style mattered—he was impatient with anything that hinted at pretension or what he thought of as gimmicky experimentation—but he had a wide tolerance for anything that was sincerely presented. What mattered was what the writer had to say; and in fiction, characters he could believe in. His favorite reading for relaxation was detective stories. He read them in a laid-back way, seldom caught up in any build-up of tension—in fact, he rarely followed the details of the plot and the ending was always a surprise to him. Even in retrospect he could not see how the

detective had worked it out. But he enjoyed them no less for that and was particularly pleased to discover a new set of writers with humane views on social issues.

His books on sex ranged from *The Hite Report*—of which he was a great admirer—through practical manuals, to nineteenth century "erotica" that could only be published secretly in its own day. He was interested in sex from every angle—how people experienced it, how differently it appeared in various societies, what people would talk about and what they would not. It seemed highly regrettable to him that an experience so universal should labor under such taboos and embarrassment. He believed strongly that more openness about sex would be good for everyone and you did not have to be his friend for very long before facing a surprisingly direct invitation to be open. He was dissatisfied with all the books he had seen that introduced children to adult sexuality. One of his unfinished projects was to write such a book himself.

Andrew Simms, a much younger friend who writes on political issues, said that Ralph was more alert and in tune with the world than many people of his own generation. People sometimes puzzled over how he did it. He did not listen to the radio, watch television or read a daily newspaper. His niece in France used to send him a pile of issues of *The Guardian Weekly* after she had finished with them, but they would be a few weeks out of date before he saw them and then might sit around for yet more weeks till he made time to look through them. He used to say, "If there's a war, someone will tell me"—and they did. But the next time they met him they would find that he had read a couple of articles in serious journals analyzing what was going on, and was better informed than many newspaper readers about the underlying issues, if not the current details.

Music was one of his great pleasures, but there too he had his own approach to it. As people went over to CDs he bought up secondhand records from library sales and charity shops—classical, folk, Irish, music hall, Paul Robeson, Scott Joplin…. But he had a resistance to overcome about the technology of providing himself with music in the home. Pressing buttons on machines was not his strong point. His son and friends set him up with more user-friendly equipment. He would listen regularly for some months and then lose the habit. Mostly he provided his own, by singing. His singing was proverbial. The songs would slip out at anytime of day—while moving about the house, to beguile away time on a journey, or when he was not part of the conversation; sometimes it was actually prompted by what people around him said. Tom Freeman remembered Ralph's "amazing (and very funny) talent for improvising

songs where he would put the words of the current conversation or topic to some well-known tune." Wendy Giles wrote of her new baby, "He's not a great sleeper—some of Ralph's songs would come in handy. I remember him jiggling Georgia when she was a baby once, with some expertise!" Dinah and Mark Tyszka said, "Our lasting memory will be his singing. It punctuated our days with him and enriched our lives."

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Ralph was close to all three of his children and loved the time he spent with them—days out, weekends, holidays. Ian and Sarah had growing families and there are delightful photographs of Ralph sitting on a beach with a naked paunch and a knotted handkerchief for a hat while his small grandchildren clamber over him. With Ellen and her partner he spent regular weekends in Wales and later Oxford. He was going on camping holidays with them well into his eighties. He joined the Molteno family on holidays in the Isles of Scilly, windblown on boats between the islands; or in an old farm cottage in Wiltshire where he made it his job to keep the fires going, drawing on a childhood lived at a time when fires were the ordinary way to heat a house. For the benefit of younger people who could not remember a time before central heating, he wrote detailed notes on fire-making.

His flat was a ten-minute walk from ours and during these years he became almost a member of our family. When our extended family or long-time friends came to stay in London there were often more than we could fit into our small flat, so some would sleep at Theatre Street and spend the days with us. In this way he made a new circle of friends from South Africa, Zambia, the Netherlands and Denmark. My brother Colin, a frequent Theatre Street guest, wrote,

> Ralph was a very, very special man for many reasons, not least that he spread sweetness and light wherever he went. Despite his strong convictions he was everybody's friend, including mine—always willing to take the time to listen, always interested, always offering to do little services.

Lorraine Lawrence, who stayed with him each year on her visits from South Africa, listed some of the memories she would treasure from these times:

> —His curiosity, sometimes infuriating, but always genuine, about just about everything.
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> —His ability to make you feel completely welcome when you came to visit or stay with him; endless but unobtrusive hospitality; the knack to let

> you get on with your life while he got on with his, interspersed with delightful times of chat and meals.
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> —His acceptance of difference; I am a Catholic, he a communist but we always talked, never fought or hurt each other about the differences; he often found positive things to say about a faith that he certainly must have great difficulties with (since I do myself!).

His new friends enjoyed his directness and his freedom from adherence to convention. He wore this lightly, not seeking to shock. He used to say it was a pointless convention to wear a suit and tie, but he would do so on occasion if he thought that *not* wearing one would make it difficult for people to relax with him. It pleased him that there were fewer such occasions as time went on. At home he wore clothes he was comfortable with, including Indian kurta and pajama. He decided once that he had too many long-sleeved shirts but it seemed a waste to get rid of them, so he cut the sleeves off, rather jaggedly, and wore them that way, unhemmed. The one consideration that had the power to move him on such matters was a desire to please his daughters. They took care to keep him supplied with good-looking clothes, and he took care to wear them—when they were around.

The only difficulty his guests experienced was Ralph's insistence that he would sleep on a rolled-out mat on the floor of the living room while they (often thirty years younger) had the comfort of his bedroom. He insisted that he slept perfectly comfortably on the floor, having got used to it in the army, and that, as he usually woke earlier than his guests, it suited him for them to be in the bedroom so that he could move around the living room freely. The logic might have been impeccable, but every guest protested. He was in his late eighties before he gave in on this point to the combined pressure of family and friends.

With all his prodigious capacity for work he never gave out an aura of being busy or of having pressing things of his own to attend to. When he was around other people he was simply available to them. My daughter Star, who was a child of seven when he first started visiting us, recalled:

> One of my big grievances as a child was having to do the washing up. Ralph came along and would lightly offer to do this chore with willingness and joy in his heart—even singing as he did so. I took much inspiration from this attitude and it has helped me enormously in life.

If there were lots of people together his deafness made it difficult for him to follow and take part in conversations, but he never let it bother him. He would find practical things to do or would get out pencil and paper and start noting things he had done. Even when not overtly part of

what was going on he emanated a simple kind of happiness. He took small crises calmly—"Think nothing of it," he would say, and seemed easily able to do so himself. If he saw something he could do to help a situation, nothing was too much trouble; if he could not, he would move on. He did not seem to carry the debilitating stresses most people are burdened with—anxiety, insecurity, lack of self-esteem, guilt. He was fortunate in his temperament, certainly, but there was philosophy in it too, and years of practice. He used to like quoting the prayer:

> Oh Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change
> The courage to change the things I can
> And the wisdom to know the difference.

His homeopath friend Mike Strange once said that it was a pity Ralph could not bottle his secret of happiness and make it widely available.

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Ralph's full life began to slow down seriously only in the last few years of his life. He got tired more easily and could work for progressively shorter times—something he found very tedious but learned to be patient with. He had several operations, each of which took a long while to recover from. Trouble with his eyes made it increasingly difficult to read. The astonishing thing is how he kept so much of the positive going in his life through all of this. He had for some years been writing a regular weekly journal which he sent out to friends—it was going to sixty-seven people by the end—and all over the world they followed his doings and were inspired by his continuing rich life of friendships and books.

He discovered a younger generation of students and scholars who had been influenced by his writing and were keen to meet him. One of them, Talat Ahmed, took a lead in organizing a day in June 2007 to celebrate Ralph's life and work at SOAS. By then Ralph was already frail, but that day he summoned energy from some secret source and was in highest form, delighting the lecture hall full of people who had come to hear him. In a guest book where participants could leave messages, someone unknown to him wrote: "I came across your work only last year and am amongst the many, yes many, younger generation of inspired students. You have unleashed a new understanding and appreciation of Urdu ghazals for me. So thank you." It was signed Rahima, in Hindi script.

Ralph's pleasure in new people never diminished. Every time I took him for a hospital visit, his chief concern was to keep an eye out for his friend the Filipino nurse in the prostate clinic; if she was on duty else-

where that day we would go looking for her so that they could have their five minute chat. When reporting back to his children or friends after such a visit, the medical details were decidedly vague but he would relay with complete recall his conversation with the Zambian nurse or the Bosnian oncologist. And as readers of his regular journal did not fail to notice, his pleasure was enhanced if the person concerned happened to be female, and young—but when you are in your eighties almost everyone seems young.

For the last many months of his life Ralph had a visitor almost every day, many making journeys from other towns to see him. The Hindi lessons and the Wednesday Urdu group continued until a month before his death, his mind as clear then as ever, as was his instinctive skill as a teacher and his pleasure in people. The friends who received his journal had become a small society, scattered around the world, most not knowing each other but each following his weekly doings, moved by his calm acceptance of diminishing health and his ability always to delight in small things. Often the journal was funny, for his sense of the ridiculous was undimmed, and it was always typically Ralph. At a time he and his friends knew he had not many months to live, his journal reported that some people had been sending him get-well cards and he needed to make clear to them that he was not going to get well! My cousin Elizabeth phoned from South Africa, laughing and saying, "*Only* Ralph could have written that!" After he had gone Elizabeth said, "I'm sorry for every one of those sixty-seven people who won't be getting the journal anymore."

More than 150 people sent deeply-felt messages after his death. Many seemed to echo each other, saying it had been a privilege to know him and talking of his inspirational effect on their lives.

Khaled Hasan Qadiri, his closest colleague during his years at SOAS wrote:

> It is not possible to adequately describe his good qualities. The truth is that we did not properly recognise him, did not understand his stature. We did not value him as we should have, did not accord him his rightful honour. Guided always by his own high standards, he dedicated himself to the service of Urdu language, Urdu literature, and Urdu criticism, providing an example that cannot be matched anywhere.

Many who knew him primarily as a scholar were also moved to talk of his unique qualities as a person. Barbara Metcalf wrote,

> He was truly unlike anyone else, not only in his cultivation of Urdu but in his relentlessly honest personality and his extraordinary commitment to what he believed in. He was so generous in what he did, and for myself his

selfless kindness was really a landmark in my life.

And Francis Robinson said,

> Ralph was a remarkable scholar but an even more remarkable human being. His powerful sense of the brotherhood of humankind and his service of humankind in his own life is an example which has influenced my life, as I am sure it has influenced those of many others. My memories are of unstinting intellectual and personal generosity, combined with a great sense of fun.

Perhaps Nasreen Rehman spoke for many people when she said, "I find it difficult to accept that a person as warm, generous and vital as Ralph is no more. He was a rare human being, who did not fit into any mould." ❑