



The Traveller to Legendary Lands

WardheerNews interview with Shiela

Andrzejewski April 12, 2009

Editor's Note:

No amount of praise can do justice for the late Bogumil Witalis Andrzejewski and his contribution to Somali literature and language. His tireless dedication and adoration for the Somali language had led to the Somali orthography which eventually would make Somali a written language.

Considered the world's leading connoisseur in Somali literature, Prof. Andrzejewski's meticulous research and writing of the Somali language, served as the blue print for many scholars and academicians in the field of Somali literature. He single handedly created a space for Somali oral literature and poetry in the composite world of literature. This interview highlights the labor of love between Andrzejewski and his beloved wife Sheila as they worked together side by side for years to translate intricate lines of Somali poetry. It's indeed a proud moment for WardheerNews to bring this rare interview conducted by Dr. Gorge Kapchits another devoted Somali Scholar and a distinguished student of the late Professor.

Georgi Kapchits: My Somali friend Khaliil Hassan who is a member of the editorial team of WardheerNews, one of the best Somali websites, says that a generation ago Professor Andrzejewski's nickname Goosh was known to every educated Somali. But today the young Somalis (even well educated) who visit his website know hardly anything about your husband's contribution to the development of Somali studies. Therefore he has offered me to ask you, if you could give me an interview about Goosh. He is sure that it would be not only interesting, but also useful. Especially for the young people. What do you think about it?

Sheila Andrzejewski: Yes, I would be most interested in answering any questions about Goosh. I hope I shall be able to remember it all. Of course I love the idea of keeping his name remembered as the pioneer of bringing Somali poetry to the notice of the world, though alas the world was not often very interested...

Georgi: I wouldn't share your opinion. It was interested, and it is interested today, 15 years after Goosh's demise. To make sure of this it is enough to look for "Andrzejewski" in the Internet. Every searching system will immediately give you his CV and the list of his numerous publications. By the way they do not deal with the Somali poetry only, but also with the Somali

language, folklore and culture. Besides there is not a single contemporary book or an article on Somali issues without a references either to “Somali poetry: An Introduction” which Goosh wrote with I. Lewis, “Xikmad Soomaali” (“Somali Wisdom”) published with Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal or “The Declensions of Somali Nouns”, “The Case System in Somali”, “The Role of Indicator Particles in Somali” and so on.

Sheila, I wonder what books or articles written by Goosh can be found now in his house in Harpenden, Herts, where, I am sure, a part of his soul lives?

Sheila: Not very much, in fact, can be found in Harpenden, because all his articles, notes on his work, even odd words on small pieces of paper, etc. are stored in two University libraries: the originals are in SOAS library, and photocopies of everything in Bloomington, Indiana. All printed works can be found in these, as well as in libraries of record and in others

specialising in Africa. Recordings of his first researches in 1950-51 are stored in the British Library’s African Recordings Section. Later ones are certainly in Bloomington Library, but I am not sure if they are in SOAS. The recordings of his 1950-51 research are his sessions with Muuse Galaal, his brilliant assistant, who on being asked for a grammatical example would always quote a line of poetry which contained it. The beginnings of Goosh's interest in literature...



From Left: Dr. Kapchits, Sheila and Prof. Andrzejewski

Georgi: How did Goosh happen to start learning Somali? When I first met him in 1990 we had a very long conversation, by the way in Somali. It was so wonderful to see the patriarch of the Somali studies and to listen to his excellent Somali. He was the first European scholar who was able to speak this language fluently. Goosh told me that Muuse Galaal had been his protector (*abbaan*) during his first trip to Somalia and his first teacher of Somali. Here in Moscow, in my study there is a photograph which you sent me several years ago for my book “*Faaliyihii la Bilkeyday*” (“A Soothsayer Tested”). This photograph was taken in 1951. I look at it every day and see Goosh as a young man with a group of Somalis. Goosh and his friends are serious. The only exception is Muuse Galaal, smiling. How did Goosh and Muuse meet? What kind of a person was poet Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal?

Sheila: When Goosh graduated from Oxford in 1947 with a degree in English language and literature, he started applying for jobs to teach English in schools abroad, where his Polish accent might not be noticed so much. At an interview for one in Malta (still a British colony then so the interview was at the Colonial Office in London) he talked of his interest in making a study of the Maltese language, with its links with Arabic, as he had become interested in Arabic while fighting the Germans and Italians in 1941 in Libya. He was not accepted for this job, but the interviewers promised to pass his name around, and indeed he got a letter a few weeks later offering him a job in British Somaliland, not to teach but to make a study of the language with a view to creating an alphabet; we knew nothing of the country but he accepted the job with joy! Our very first Somali friends were Anthony Mariano and Ali Sheikh Jirdeh, who were studying in England at that time (1948-9), and they gave him an idea of the pronunciation and culture,

without attempting to teach him very much of the language.



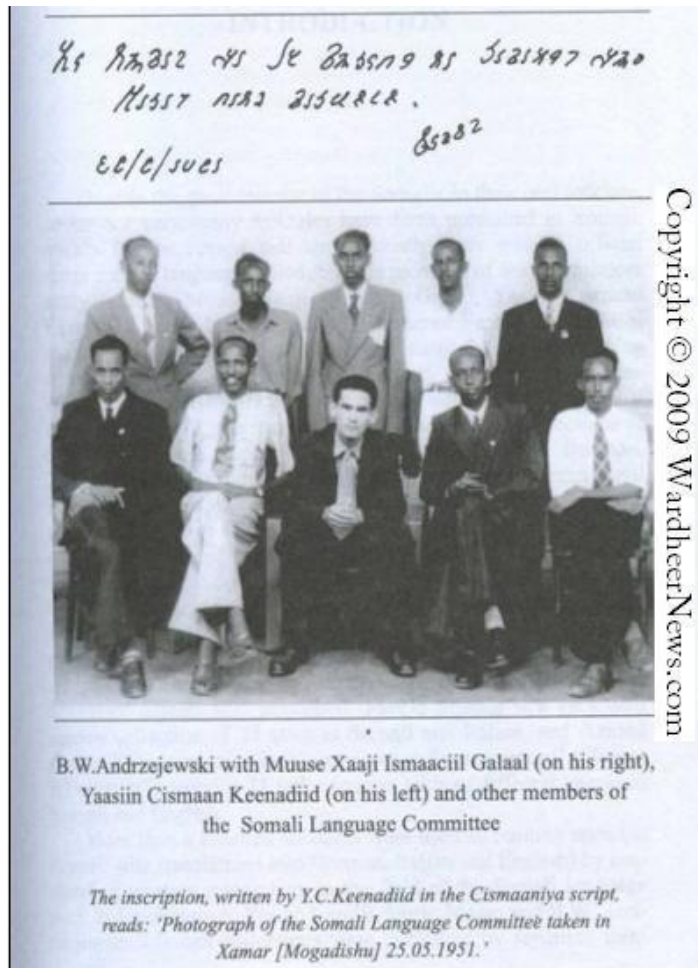
Prof. Andrzejewski (Goosh) and his wife Sheila
@ the background

After Goosh's 18 months' initial training at SOAS on phonetics and the technique of constructing an alphabet, we arrived in Sheikh in February 1950 and found that Muuse Galaal, a teacher, had been seconded from the school to be Goosh's informant and teacher of Somali. He very soon became our very much valued friend and adviser, as well as one of the world's great story-tellers – he was such fun! I feel that all we knew about Somali traditional life came from him. Later he came to London to work again as Goosh's helper, and took a diploma in linguistics, then in later life he travelled the world in various capacities, I think as the UNESCO representative for a time. He remained our beloved friend till his untimely death.

Georgi: You are absolutely right calling Muuse Galaal a great story-teller. It is enough to read "*Faalyihii la Bilkeydey*" ("A Soothsayer tested") recited by him to Goosh who made it known to the world when published it in "*Xikmad Soomaali*" ("Somali Wisdom") in 1956 and supplied with grammatical introduction and notes, which enabled it to be read in English. The folktale reveals the richness of the Somali language, the limitless creative imagination of the Somalis and their amazing philosophical insights. Here is the plot of the tale: *Motivated by an order and the promise of a reward, a soothsayer concludes a contract with an oracle (a snake) about prediction; they communicate in a special place and at a special time. As predicted, war, draught and rain one after another occur. The soothsayer is rewarded each time but acts respectively aggressively, stingily and generously towards the oracle. In the end, the oracle reveals to him that the actions of people, including those of the soothsayer's, have an affinity with the course of world events: life resembles the structure of the world.*

By the way Muse Gaalaal supplied the tale with three excellent poems. My blood freezes each time I read the lines of one of them, predicting war: Eight years have passed since the deeds of Iblis, Prince of Evil. The round of the years has brought back the jinns And all their wicked deeds. There are signs to be seen in the return of this eighth year – A wife who covers her head with a mourning-scarf, Brave men slaughtered, looted herds, Vultures pecking at the flesh of sturdy warriors, Disaster! (*Translated into English by B.W. Andrzejewski and Sheila Andrzejewski*) Judging by the title-page of "*Xikmad Soomaali*", Andrzejewski in 1956 was a lecturer in Cushitic languages at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). How did his career as a scholar develop?

Sheila: When we left Somaliland in September 1950 Goosh was uncertain about the future; Professor J. R. Firth of SOAS, who had been reading his regular reports on his work, had written that he would do his best to find him a job at SOAS but nothing had been settled. Meanwhile, on his return to London he completed his report, with his plans for an official alphabet, and submitted it to the Colonial Development and Welfare Office. They eventually decided that the alphabet would be too politically difficult to introduce, so the plan was abandoned. Twenty years later it was the basis of the new alphabet, with some necessary changes proposed by Muuse and other members of the Language Committee. In January 1952 Goosh took up the post of Lecturer in Cushitic Languages at SOAS, which had been created for him, and he rose through the grades of Reader and Professor to Professor Emeritus on his retirement in 1982. Latterly the title of his post had changed from Cushitic Languages to Somali Language and Literature, reflecting his main interests.



Georgi: The 1960s were very productive for Andrzejewski as a scholar. Along with a series of pioneering articles on Somali lexicography, phonology, morphology and syntax, such as *“Speech and writing dichotomy as the pattern of multilingualism in the Somali Republic”*, *“Pronominal and Prepositional Particles in Northern Somali”*, *“Notes on the Substantive Pronouns in Somali”*, *“Inflectional Characteristics of the so-called „Weak Verbs” in Somali”*, *“Some Observations on Hybrid Verbs in Somali”* and others, his fundamental work *“The Declensions of Somali Nouns”* appeared. Simultaneously his love for Somali poetry, which you have already mentioned, resulted in *“Poetry in Somali society”*, *“A Somali poetic combat”* (with Galaal) and the brilliant *“Somali poetry. An Introduction”* written with Ioan Lewis. It would be nice if you could recollect how they worked on this book. Where and when did Goosh meet then young anthropologist who later grew into professor at the London School of Economics and one of the world’s authorities on Somali?

Sheila: I remember our first meeting with Ioan Lewis very well, but unfortunately I can’t recollect the exact year; it was probably late 1953. He was studying at Oxford for a B.Litt in anthropology with, I think, Evans-Pritchard, who had suggested he go to Somaliland for his research fieldwork. He therefore contacted Goosh, who invited him to our home for tea - our home consisted then of a small room in a friend’s house. Goosh agreed to teach him Somali,

with the help of Muuse Galaal, whom Goosh had arranged for SOAS to bring over to continue his research, and also to enable Muuse to work for a Diploma in Linguistics. Ioan and Goosh soon became very firm friends and collaborators, so it was natural that they would join together to work on *“Somali Poetry: An Introduction”*. Goosh would do the preliminary translations, then Ioan would work with him on making the English perfect. They shared the extensive comments according to each one’s expertise.

Georgi: Your remark on the preliminary character of Goosh’s translations into English has reminded me of his roots. Bogumil Witalis Andrzejewski (this is Goosh’s full name) was born in the Polish city of Poznan in 1922. Every modern Polish encyclopaedia defines him as a Polish linguist and poet. I had had no idea about his second (if not the first!) talent till 1993 when he presented me with his *“Podroz do krajow legendarnykh”* (*“Travel to legendary lands”*). Could you please elaborate on Goosh’s young years? You have already mentioned that he had fought the Nazis in 1941. As we know from history, Poland was occupied by the Germans in 1939. What happened to young Bogumil then? If I am not mistaken, Bogumil in Polish means „Loved by God”. It seems that he was really loved and taken care of by God, since he survived the disaster of war...

Sheila: In 1939 Goosh was 17 years old, looking forward to completing his secondary school and going on to university, but then Nazi Germany invaded Poland, and at once decreed that in future no Polish children were to be educated above primary level. In 1940 Goosh decided to escape from Poland, but by this time the Nazis had conquered most of Western Europe except Britain, and he had to go towards the east, through countries which had not yet been conquered, which meant Hungary, Yugoslavia and Greece. He walked most of the way, and six months after his departure he reached Palestine. This was then ruled by the British, and was one of their main bases from which to fight the Nazis. Goosh found there many other Poles who had made the same journey, and they all joined a special unit, called the Polish Army under British Command. He fought in North Africa, mainly in Libya, where he took part in the siege of Tobruk; at that time he began his enduring love for the Arabic language, though he could not undertake any serious study of it as it was more important that he should learn English. In the fighting he was wounded by a shell, and after a stay in hospital he was sent to different duties: he had to help with escorting German prisoners of war from North Africa to America. This was done because it was difficult to control the prisoners in open desert country, and anyway there was not enough food for them. After a long journey made very dangerous by the threat of torpedoes from Nazi submarines, everyone was very glad to see the Statue of Liberty. But for the Poles the war was not over, and they sailed to Britain, where Goosh was given a job as interpreter in the Polish Army. He remained in that position until he was lucky enough in 1944 to receive a scholarship to Oxford University.

Georgi: The Libyan port Tobruk is described by *“Collins Concise English Dictionary”* as *“scene of severe fighting in Word War II: taken from the Italians by the British in January 1941, from the British by the Germans in June 1942, and finally by the British in November 1942”*. When I met Goosh in Harpenden I asked him to remember those tragic events. Instead he told me a funny story about the football match in Tobruk in which he had taken part. He was running zigzag until he met the ball. Then he started pondering over to whom of his team mates he should have passed it. He never made up his mind, because he could not choose between them

and did not want to offend anyone. Goosh was very unusual. One of his poems in prose is entitled “Dziwy niebieskie w Tobruku” (“Heavenly wonders in Tobruk”). Only a poet could see stars, not planes in the menacing sky of war. And, of course, only a poet could appreciate in full measure the beauty of Somali poetry. No wonder that Goosh not only described the poetical traditions of the Somalis, the genres and the structure of their poetry, but also did all he could to bring Somali poetry, according to your words, to the notice of the world. These efforts were crowned by “An Anthology of Somali Poetry” (1993) translated by Goosh and you. What could you tell our readers about this book and your work on it?

Sheila: Of course, out of the hundreds of thousands of Somali poems that actually exist, Goosh could only use those that he knew himself and had collected during his researches in Somalia. From among these, he used several criteria to select the ones to translate: they had to be considered by Somalis to be good poems; they had to be representative of various genres and to vary from old to modern; they had to be likely to interest an English-speaking public; and they had to be reasonably easy to translate, without too much about local politics or clan feuds, for he wanted to avoid explanatory footnotes. Our method of working was simple: he would make the first, fairly literal translation and then I worked on it to make the English as poetic as I could, paying particular attention to the rhythm of the verse, which we wanted to sound like true English verse rather than an imitation of the patterns of Somali verse. Sometimes I would stray too far from the Somali meanings in my attempts, and Goosh would remonstrate and bring me back in line! It was of great help to me that, although I do not actually speak Somali, I did know something of traditional Somali life, and of modern life up to 1984, when we made our final visit to Mogadishu. I read it now and I am still generally pleased with our efforts, though there are some places where I see I could have done better!

Georgi: Goosh was a teacher of many, some of his former students becoming teachers themselves. But there are also many scholars who weren't his students but regard him as their teacher. For example, Dr. Martin Orwin, who continues in SOAS what was started by Prof. Andrzejewski, and Prof. Alexander Zholkovsky, who was my teacher of Somali, the pioneer of Somali studies in Russia. He is famous not only for his works on the Somali language, structural linguistics and Russian literature, but also for his non-fiction stories. In one of them entitled in Polish “Nowy Swiat” (“New World”) Zholkovsky recollects his first meeting with Goosh in Warsaw in 1976. *“Andrzejewski turned out to be a grizzled handsome gentleman with moustache. He took me for lunch to the expensive café “Nowy Swiat” in the street of the same name – one of the central which leads to the Old Town... He praised my book on Somali syntax having revealed good knowledge of it. Then I screwed up my courage and asked about what I had wanted to ask for long – his attitude towards Appendix V in which the interpretation of the particle waxaa differs from his own. He said that by and large he had accepted my interpretation. “I use it, said he, for teaching Somali students the Somali grammar”. Now I felt that the tears started to my eyes and ran down my cheeks. There was a good reason for that. None other but Andrzejewski himself, nowhere else but in The School in London, teaches Somali none other but Somali students and teaches them with none other's but with my book!”* The Somalis say: *Rag qabri iyo qawl baa ka hara* – Of a man, a tomb and a word remains. Not one, but many wise words remained of your husband. They will never be forgotten by those who were lucky to be his friends, colleagues, readers and students.

Sheila: I like that proverb very much. Indeed, Goosh’s words will not be forgotten as long as there are libraries in the world, and they will be read as long as people are interested in Somali language and literature. He will be remembered, too, through the small scholarship which was founded in his name to provide, every two years or so, funds to help finance some project connected with Somali studies, or even with Oromo studies, in which he was also interested.

Georgi: Thank you very much, Sheila.

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