

Bo Utas, a 70 years “young” scholar and friend

Written by Carina Jahani

Bo Utas was born on May 26, 1938 in Höglunda, a small village in the northern province of Jämtland, Sweden. His parents were Jan and Elvi Utas (born Eriksson) and he is one of five sisters and brothers. Bo Utas is married to Elizabeth Utas and has three children, Anders, Mats and Cecilia, and five grandchildren, Cassandra, Olivia, Petter, Edwin and Simon.

Already during his last years at school, Bo Utas got acquainted with Persian literature, an acquaintance that has later developed into a deep love, and this literature has now for decades been an inseparable part of his life. His first study on Persian literature was about the life and works of the poet and astronomer ‘Umar Khayyām.

During his military service, Bo Utas got the opportunity to study Russian, and in the Russian literature he found numerous references to Classical Persian literature. At this point, a desire to be able to read this literature in the original language was born, and before long he started to study Persian, first on his own and later at Uppsala University. He began his University Studies in Persian under the auspices of the retired professor of Semitic languages in Uppsala H.S. Nyberg, who was also a great scholar of Iranian languages, particularly Middle Persian.

From the year 1959, when Bo Utas started studying Persian at Uppsala University and down to 1973, when he defended his Ph.D. thesis, he had studied not only Persian but also several other languages, including Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and Chinese. In 1962-63 Bo Utas went to Iran to pursue his studies of Persian in Esfahan. Travelling there by train and bus was “interesting and venturesome” and the same can be said about his time in Iran. The country was in the midst of the “White Revolution” with, among other things, a land reform and a programme of alphabetisation on the agenda.

Bo Utas’ Ph.D. thesis consists of a critical edition of the Sufi masnavi poem *Ṭarīq ut-tahqīq*, and also after the dissertation Classical Persian Sufi literature has continued to play an important part in his scholarly work. Among the Sufi writers that have attracted his

particular attention Sanā’ī-yi Ghaznavī, ‘Abdullāh Anṣārī and Aḥmad Ghazālī can be mentioned. In the modern Persian literature Ṣādeq Hedāyat and Forugh Farrokhzād are two writers that he has taken a special interest in. A full list of Bo Utas’ publications, which shows his broad and diverse scholarship on Middle and New Persian language and literature, manuscript tradition and text edition, culture, religion and contemporary political affairs in Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia etc. etc. is also found in this volume.

Bo Utas spent the years 1973-81 at the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen, Denmark, where, in addition to continuing his studies of Persian literature, he started studying Pashto, and for this purpose he also went to Afghanistan. However, political upheavals did not permit him to stay in that country as long as he had intended. During his time in Denmark, he also became one of the initiators of the Societas Iranologica Europaea, which has later grown to an association of scholars working in the field of Iranian Studies with members not only from European countries, but from all over the world. For many years Bo Utas was the secretary of this society.

In the year 1981 Bo Utas returned to Uppsala where he got a research position at Uppsala University financed by the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR) and from the year 1988 as the first professor of Iranian studies at Uppsala University, a chair that he held until May 2003, when he retired. Under his supervision no less than eight Ph.D. candidates defended their theses successfully, and he still acts as supervisor for a few students who are about to complete their dissertations.

Bo Utas never tried to create a “school” of researchers who treated a particular subject with a particular method, but rather gave us freedom to work on the subject of our own choice. That is why the dissertations defended in Iranian languages at Uppsala University are of a highly diverse nature and include studies not only of the Persian language and its literature, but also of other Iranian languages, particularly Kurdish and Balochi.

Bo Utas was also actively involved in developing undergraduate courses in Persian and he was one of the initiators of the Programme of Oriental Studies, which is a study programme combining the study of one or two of the languages Arabic, Persian or Turkish with Middle-East area studies. For several years, Bo Utas was the scientific coordinator of this programme. He was also the head of the Department of Asian and African languages for four years.

Bo Utas is a member of several learned societies, e.g. the above mentioned *Societas Iranologica Europaea*, the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters (*Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab*), the Royal Society for the Humanities (*Kungliga Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet*) in Uppsala, where he also served as secretary for many years, and the *Societas Soederblomiana Upsaliensis* (*Nathan Söderblom-Sällskapet*).

Those of us who know Bo Utas well also know that he always carries three objects in his pocket; a tiny pencil, a handkerchief, and a clasp-knife. To me, they symbolise different sides of his character and I would like to end by giving to these three objects some thoughts.

In my opinion, the pencil represents Bo Utas’ constant striving for knowledge. He always wants to be able to note down anything that he finds important. His quest for knowledge has driven him to dedicate his whole life to scholarship, and he is still very curious to learn, even though he has reached the highest degree of knowledge in his field.

His curiosity has also taken him on several journeys to far-away lands, some of them mentioned above. Another journey, which Bo Utas undertook together with his wife Elizabeth, was to travel the Karakoram highway from Pakistan to China in 1988, just after this road was opened to foreigners. Upon his return to Uppsala, he gave a report of his journey, where he particularly stressed the important role that the Persian language still plays among, particularly the older generation along the former Silk Road. He even met a boy in the bazar in Kashgar who, when he learned that Bo Utas knew Persian, uttered the sentence *Fārsī šekar ast* (Persian is sugar). I am particularly happy that Bo Utas’ next scholarly journey, in October 2008, is planned for Zahedan, where he is going to be one of the plenary speakers at a conference on the topic of *Languges and Dialects in Iran* at the University of Sistan and Baluchistan.

The handkerchief has a special function. It is used for tying knots on in order to remember what Bo has promised to do for his students and/or colleagues “asap”. It may be a book he has promised to lend someone, a piece of information he will check, an article where he hopes to be able to find a reference etc. This shows just how encouraging he is towards all the people around him. He is a master in helping young scholars in their academic career and in playing the role of a “father of science” to all his students. The two editors, who incidentally are the two Ph.D. candidates Bo Utas first (Carina Jahani) and last (Dariush Kargar) recommended to be accepted for a Ph.D.

programme in Iranian languages at Uppsala university, and his other students can testify to this quality of his.

The clasp-knife is mainly employed outside the academic circles. Bo Utas is a friend of nature and wildlife and, even though we as his students do not have much first-hand knowledge about his adventures in the forests and mountains of northern Sweden, we have been told that he has a summer cottage without a telephone where you have to get out of your car and climb a steep hill for the last 200 yards or so to get there. After the summer holidays we get reports of his swimming in the river by his house and in the winter he is often out skiing or skating. He has even been on a kayak expedition on Greenland!

Bo Utas is a very active 70 years “young” scholar, who writes many more articles and books now that he is retired than he had time for when he was active as the professor of Iranian Studies at Uppsala University and had to spend a considerable amount of time teaching and supervising Ph.D. candidates, not to mention all the administration. However, he still “ties his knots on his handkerchief” and is always there to lend a book or to give a piece of good advice and a word of encouragement to anyone who turns to him for help. To me, Bo Utas is a scholarly father and a friend without whose help and encouragement I would never have been where I am today, and I am convinced that I also speak on behalf of many others.

