

IN MEMORIAM

KAMIL BAŇÁK
1942 – 2004

Less than a year ago, we at the university took leave of Kamil because he took early retirement. That was, to be precise, on Friday, October 10, 2003. Officially his retirement had taken effect from September 1, 2003, but the first thing Kamil did with his newly acquired freedom was – and that was very characteristic of him – to go to Bratislava in order to help his sisters with the renovations of their house. Thus it happened that we took leave of Kamil on October 10 in a reception, during which we presented him with a *liber amicorum*, entitled “*De band met u mijn vriend, verbreek ik niet*” (The bond with you, my friend, I will never break), a title extracted from one of the contributions to the book. With this *liber amicorum*, we wanted to show our appreciation for what he had done and meant for our department, the Department of Arabic, Persian and Turkish Studies, during the almost 17 years he had been attached to Leiden university.

Kamil joined the university on December 1, 1986. He had successfully answered an advertisement in which the university was looking for a person to be in charge of the Documentation Centre for Modern Iran. Iran was at that time the centre of interest because of the revolution that in 1979 had ended, rather spectacularly, the regime of the Shah, a regime that was thought of as being very solid and stable. The revolution had brought into power the Islamic Republic of Iran, that, to the amazement of everyone, was dominated by clergymen. Moreover, Iran was involved at that time in a bloody war with Saddam Husain's Irak. In these circumstances a documentation centre was expected to meet the growing need for information.

Kamil was thoroughly qualified for this post. First of all, he had in former Czechoslovakia been trained as an Iranologist by renowned scholars like Jan Rypka. In the second place, after he had moved to the Netherlands, he had received training as a librarian and archivist. It was this combination of Iranologist and archivist that made him very suitable both to set up and run the Documentation Centre for Modern Iran. Till his early retirement in 2003 he acquitted himself of this task very accurately and with great devotion. Over the years Ka-

mil succeeded in collecting and making accessible a very substantial amount of documents in the broadest sense of the word, including not only books, magazines and newspapers, but also videotapes. People like me, who regularly consulted the Documentation Centre, were rarely if ever disappointed when seeking information.

Kamil followed the developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran very accurately, but at the same time also with a critical mind. The latter showed itself particularly when certain developments in Iran gave some people – I was one of them – cause to be cautiously optimistic about the future of the country. For example, when President Khatami took office in 1997, a flourishing freedom of the press was to be witnessed, that seemed to involve a first step towards liberalization and democratization. The totalitarian regime appeared to display cracks, and even the most conservative clergy would not be able in the long run to turn a deaf ear to the public demands for reform and more liberty. A process of reform had started, so we thought, that was irreversible, however slow it went. Kamil's understanding of these developments was considerably less rosy. The reason for his caution can be understood when we look at the course of his life. In pre-1968 Czechoslovakia he had experienced personally what it means to live under a totalitarian regime; whether such a regime has a religious ideology, or is, on the contrary, anti-religious, does not make much difference, when it comes to freedom. In the case of a regime that bases itself on religion, caution is called for even more. In Kamil's eyes, real and lasting reform was not just a matter of adaptation, it involved a structural change and possibly even a revolution.

Over the years Kamil was increasingly involved in teaching courses. He has introduced quite a number of students to the fundamentals of the Persian language. He did it in such a way that these students would later remember this with pleasure and appreciation.

Kamil has been very important for our department not just because of his abilities as an archivist and a teacher, but also because of his amicable and charming personality. An appeal to him was never made in vain; he was always prepared to lend a helping hand. In the reactions to his death one thing in particular reveals itself very clearly, and that is his kindness and his readiness to help. In an e-mail, sent to me yesterday, it was phrased like this: "I took him, at that time, and also later, to be one of most gentle and kind-hearted people I have ever met, both I and the other members of the staff will always cherish his memory."

At the same time he was also a modest and unassuming man, who never pushed himself to the forefront. It is not impossible that not all of us have realized sufficiently that this unassuming man was a very capable scholar. Neither have all of us realized how important music was in his life. It is no coincidence that both a grand piano and an electric piano, together with a substantial collection of records, CD's and sheet music, dominated his living room. He was also a regular visitor of the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.

Of such a man we took leave on October 10,2003, when he took his early retirement. At that time nobody, absolutely nobody, could have expected that less than a year later we were to take leave of him again, but this time forever. The message that Kamil had suffered a cerebral haemorrhage came as a severe shock. It was even more saddening to witness how during the past weeks every hope of even a limited recovery went up in smoke. Finally we were confronted with the harsh reality that the finiteness of human life is not only irrevocable, but can also be merciless.

What is left now are memories of Kamil, memories of a modest, kind-hearted and loyal man. Let us cherish these memories as something precious. For the time being the memories will be accompanied by sadness and by tears in our eyes, or behind our eyes. But the time will come, I hope, that we, when thinking of Kamil, will feel warmth in our hearts, and that the memory of him will produce a smile on our face. May he rest in peace.

Johan ter Haar