

OBITUARY

Remembering Our Professor Ján Pauliny,
the Leading Slovak Arabist

It was not long ago that I was preparing a speech on the occasion of the ceremony for the presentation of the special volume (*Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honour of Ján Pauliny*) to our beloved and respected Professor Ján Pauliny, the most knowledgeable authority on Arabic literature, medieval historiography, and Islam in Slovakia. However, I had to modify the speech on the spot since Professor Pauliny, despite his previous reassurances, was unexpectedly unable to attend the ceremony owing to his deteriorating health. We all sincerely hoped that this situation was only temporary and that he would be sharing with us his vast scholarly knowledge for many years to come. Unfortunately, despite occasional improvements in his health, he finally passed away at the age of 81 on the 25th of January 2021. Yet, his passing was still a shock. It was painful to realize that these prolific and skilful hands, that had written and translated thousands pages of Arabic texts over fifty-five years, had surrendered the pen at last. This sad news was even more painful to bear since he left us in the middle of the terrible corona crisis, which did not allow us to accompany him on his final journey.

Death is overwhelming to the living. It prompts us to go back in time and reflect. I was fortunate enough to have worked side by side with Professor Pauliny for more than 15 years. And it was a truly invaluable experience to observe directly the methods of his scholarly work and pedagogy, his enthusiasm when something turned out well, his good-natured attitude to students, his sharp wit and his special gift for the exact assessment of important and unimportant tasks. The important ones had to be carried out without haste and with the utmost attention and dedication, and the others, mostly routine matters, had to be handled with great efficiency without wasting precious time. Most engagingly, Pauliny would speak not only about various avenues of research in the field of Arabic studies and his personal experiences during his fellowships abroad but also about his beloved family.

Ján Pauliny was born in Martin on 4 June 1939 into a family of intellectuals. His father, Professor Eugen Pauliny, was a highly respected Slovakist; his mother had graduated in French and Latin, and had studied both in Slovakia and France. An intellectual career and a talent for foreign languages were thus part of his birthright. After attending secondary school in Bratislava, he went to the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University, where he started studying Slovak language and literature in combination with Arabic.

In the following years, he opted to study at the Charles University in Prague where Oriental studies had a much longer scholarly tradition and where, in addition to Arabic, he studied English language and literature. Among his teachers were well-known Czech Arabists, especially Karel Petrůček and Felix Tauer, the translator of the *Thousand and One Nights* into the Czech language. These scholars had a profound impact on Pauliny's further professional development.

In 1961 Pauliny received his Master's degree and was immediately offered a position at Professor Ján Bakoš's Semitic Seminar at Comenius University in Bratislava. Similarly, his academic career seemed to progress quickly. In 1969 he completed his dissertation (*al-Kisā'ī: Kitāb qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) and in 1975 his habilitation, entitled *Zwei Beiträge zur Kenntnis der Arabischer Volksliteratur des Mittelalters: Zur Rolle der quṣṣāṣ, al-Kisā'īs Werk Kitāb 'adjā'ib al-malakūt* [Two Contributions to the Understanding of Arabic Popular Literature: al-Kisā'ī's Work Kitāb 'adjā'ib al-malakūt]. However, for political reasons, it was only after 26 years of academic work that, in 1987, he was finally awarded the position of associate professor (*docent*).

After the revolution in 1989, the political situation in the country changed, and it was possible to travel to Western countries. Pauliny also started taking part in conferences and giving lectures (in 1991 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; in 1993 at the Université de Toulouse II – Le Mirail; in 1993, 1995 and 1996 at the Universität Heidelberg; in 1996 at Yale University and in 1996 at the Atlantic University of Florida). In addition to this, from 1991 to 1996 he was a regular Visiting Professor at the Oriental Institute at the University of Vienna, where he taught a course on Arabic popular literature.

After the retirement of Ladislav Drozdík (who was the successor of Ján Bakoš, the founder of the Semitic Seminar) in 1995, Pauliny played a decisive role in the formation of Arabic literary studies in Slovakia. He became the head of the Department of Classical and Semitic Philology (the name of the department since 1976), and in 1997 he was inaugurated as full professor in Arabic Language and Culture. In addition to that position, he had a profound impact on the faculty's academic life, serving as its dean from 1994 to 1998.

Pauliny's research has been mainly associated with Arabic profane and religious popular literature: writings mainly preserved in manuscripts or in early

printed editions, a subject that at that time had received little attention. This area of Arabic studies influenced his whole academic career and became the dominant feature of his research from then on. In the course of his academic career he wrote more than forty scientific articles that were published worldwide but mainly in the faculty's journal, *Graecolatina et Orientalia*, which he cofounded, and in *Asian and African Studies* published by the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The impact of his research can be demonstrated by the number of citations of his papers, which by 1997 had already reached 194 (154 of which were from abroad). Many of his books become classics in their own right, e.g. *Abú al-Hasan al-Kisá'í: Kniha o počiatku a konci a rozprávania o prorokoch* [A Book about the Beginning and the End of the World, and Stories about the Prophets], Bratislava, Veda 1980. His monograph, *Arabské správy o Slovanoch 9. – 12. stor* [Arabic Reports about the Slavic People from the 9th to the 12th Centuries], published in 1999, represents, by contrast, a valuable source on the history of medieval Central Europe. Pauliny also played a significant role in the inclusion of the Bashagić Collection of Islamic manuscripts in UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme in 1997.

Of course, the fact that the field of popular Arabic is also generally known to Slovak readers is in part due to his 25-year history of association with the translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*. This impressive eight-volume edition of Shahrazad's stories, illustrated by the most distinguished Slovak artists, was finally published in the years 2009 – 2011 by the Ikar publishing house. His other valuable translations from Arabic literature include Ibn Ishāq's *Život Muhammada, Posla Božieho* [The Life of Muhammad, Messenger of God], from 1967, with a second enlarged edition in 2003, or Ibn Sīrīn's *Muntakhab al-kalām fī tafsīr al-aḥlām* [A Concise Guide for the Interpretation of Dreams], in 2 volumes, from 1996.

It is no wonder that as early as 2003 Ján Pauliny was awarded the Ján Hollý Prize for literary translation. In 2011 he received a nomination for the Krišťáľové krídlo [Crystal Wing] for literature and a special prize of the Slovak Minister of Culture. In 2016 he obtained the Gold Medal of the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University and in 2019 the Great Silver Medal of Comenius University. In 2019 he obtained the Blahoslav Hečko Prize for his lifelong work.

It is difficult to bid farewell to Professor Ján Pauliny: a scholar, an author, a translator and a teacher who taught us to admire Arabic history and literature. His passing is a great loss for both Slovak and international scholarship. Our delightful memories of him – of many inspiring talks, dinners, lessons and personal conversations – will remain with us forever.

Zuzana Gažáková