

JÓZSEF TORMA
(1943–2000)

In April 2000 Hungarian oriental studies lost József Torma. He graduated in 1967 in Russian and German at the University of Szeged, later learned several other languages, e.g. Polish. He joined the students of the Altaic Department in 1975. His first plan was to study Caucasian languages, but I suggested to him to frequent the courses in Turkology with a possible later step from the Turkic languages spoken in North Caucasia to other non-Turkic languages. His progress in the Altaic studies was extraordinary and soon he became one of the best students of his class. After a time he focussed his special interest on Bashkir and he had the opportunity to go to Ufa for learning the spoken language and for field-work. His progress in Bashkir was very fast, he began to translate folk tales and short novels from Bashkir. In 1981 he published the famous novel *Endless childhood* of the Bashkir author Mustai Kerim in Hungarian. He graduated in 1980 and got his second degree, now in Altaic studies, with specialisation in Turkology. He visited Bashkiria many times. His command of spoken Bashkirian became famous. He gave speeches and lectures in Ufa in Bashkir when all non-Bashkir guests spoke Russian. He visited such parts of Bashkiria where no linguist had ever been, and went to places where it was then forbidden to enter for persons from abroad. He had even some problems with the local police as many of us had, for whom field-work was more important than bureaucratic prescriptions. He had a sharp eye for the different layers of the everyday culture of the Bashkirs. Looking behind the Muslim faith on the surface he was able to identify older layers of Turkic folk beliefs. After a time he concentrated on the customs and beliefs connected with the health of the people. Folk medicine of the Turks was a big topic, to which he collected a huge material. He was a prolific writer, and published several papers in both Hungarian and other languages. Many of his papers were published in Russian and in the Turkic languages of the former Soviet Union, in Bashkir, Khazak, etc. But he published also in German, e.g. *Magische Prophylaxe in der volkstümlichen Heilkunde der Baschkiren* (UJb NF 11, 1992, pp. 91–102), or *Kultische Festmähler zum magischen Schutz Neugeborener in Baschkirien* (CAJ Vol. 36, 1992, pp. 242–281), both written together with the Bashkir scholar F. G. Hisametdinova. Torma took part

in many international conferences, where his scholarly and at the same time entertaining lectures were always welcome. The defence of his dissertation for the scientific grade “candidate of sciences” at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was protracted because of his beginning illness. He got the title for the successful defending of his dissertation on the system of the magic elements in the Bashkir folk medicine only in 1998.

In the academic year 1983/84, during my sabbatical year, he acted as the chair of the Department of Altaic Studies at the University of Szeged. Since his graduation at our Department he led the courses in Spoken Turkish and of course in Bashkir as well.

After the political changes in Hungary he used his vast knowledge also in the diplomatic service. He was the Hungarian Consul-General in Istanbul and later Ambassador to the Khazak Republic and represented Hungary in other neighbouring countries as well. During his diplomatic missions he always remained a busy scholar and a humble person. He found time to collect materials, books and to write papers. After his return he became a civil servant in the Library of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where his knowledge of the history, culture and language of the Turkic people was indispensable.

Struggling with the progress of his illness, he found remedy in his scholarly activities. However he could not publish his last lectures and a great amount of his collected material remained in manuscript. József Torma was a warm-hearted friend, always ready to help. He cut a new path in Turkology and we can only but hope that there will be young scholars who will follow his studies.

András Róna-Tas