

TAMÁS IVÁNYI: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

“Provided It Has Nothing To Do With Fish.”
(P.G. Wodehouse, *Leave It to Psmith*)

The above citation comes from a novel whose absurd sense of humour has long been appreciated by Professor Tamás Iványi since well before he became a professor. He will undoubtedly recall its original context: It is the only proviso in a hilarious classified ad posted by Psmith, the smart and excentric protagonist of the novel, in which he announces his (almost) universal aptitude in dealing with even the most intractable tasks. Although I am unaware of any particular aversion to pisciculture on Professor Iványi’s part, the citation is fitting here in quite a number of ways. For a start, it evokes not just Professor Iványi’s penchant for Wodehouse’s novels but also his dry wit worthy of a Psmith. Like the latter, Iványi is pleasantly excentric, and behind the tongue-in-cheek, ironic façade he is also extremely helpful to students and colleagues alike – perhaps even about questions having to do, however remotely, with fish. For he is knowledgeable in myriad subjects having to do with Islam and the Arabic language, and the inscription also alludes to this remarkable intellectual versatility. Indeed, as a student of his I could not fail to observe, as all my fellow-students did, his trademark breadth of learning in Muslim culture, the product of an intellectual curiosity that ranges from Arabic and Semitic linguistics and general linguistics to Arabic literature to prosody to Muslim intellectual history to Islamic law and jurisprudence to Islamic mysticism to popular religion – and on, and on. His erudition, coupled with attention to even minute data, is rarely matched in these days of narrow disciplinary specialisation and properly belongs to a bygone era. His insatiable appetite for reading across a wide variety of disciplines, both as a pastime and for scholarly pursuits, has remained unchanged to this day, a fact that will impress even during a brief conversation with him.

Born in Budapest in December 1944 as the third of three brothers, Tamás Iványi lost his father when he was still in primary school. A knack for mathematics seems to have run in the family, since both his siblings chose, and came to be quite successful in, careers that needed an obvious aptitude for that discipline: László was a renowned architect, while György worked as a noted expert of civil engineering. As a primary school pupil, Tamás Iványi too was attracted to, and excelled in, the study of mathematics, an interest that he has not altogether abandoned ever since. Anyone familiar with the elegantly logical rules of syntax and word-formation of Classical Arabic will appreciate the extent to which a proclivity to mathematics can be a tremendous boost to learning Arabic, as later proved to be the case with

Professor Iványi's career. Mathematics, in which he showed remarkable talent, was only trumped by a newfound interest in the Arabic language during his final year in primary school, when an older friend of his brothers made an impromptu demonstration of the art of writing the beautiful Arabic script to him during a family holiday at a lakeside resort. István Boga (1934–2006), the friend responsible for introducing Iványi to the captivating world of the Arabic language, later left Hungary to settle and marry in Morocco, but their friendship, made all the more powerful by a shared love of all things Arabic and Islamic, would remain firm. In fact, it was with the assistance of Iványi that Boga at a much later date published or re-published a number of his language manuals in Arabic, including a Hungarian-Arabic dictionary, within a book series that Iványi edited. At any rate, having observed that brief show of the use of Arabic writing, Iványi was instantly hooked and, determined to learn the language as soon as possible, he set about the daunting task.

The summer over, he enrolled in the intensive Arabic course of the nationwide Society for the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge (a prominent academic society known in Hungary under the acronym TIT), where Arabic was taught by the nationally famous Arabist and journalist Alajos Chrudinák. Iványi continued his Arabic studies uninterrupted right to the moment he could apply for admission to Eötvös Loránd University. People familiar with Iványi from that early period recall that it was a matter of hours for the eager if still very young scholar to memorise the intricate syntactic system of Arabic verbs and verbal participles. Meanwhile he pursued his secondary school studies at the reputable Kölcsey Ferenc Gimnázium, an institution located in the Sixth District of central Budapest and renowned for its consistently high academic standards ever since its inception in 1898. His secondary school was by any measures a particularly inspiring intellectual environment, the circle of his schoolmates including among others the renowned late Sinologist, Koreanist and linguist Ferenc Mártonfi (1945–1991), as well as the writer and translator György Dalos (b. 1943). However, for all his precocious learning that included a thoroughgoing study of Latin, Greek and classics, Iványi was not just a denizen of the rarefied milieu of academia: In the summer of 1963, just prior to beginning his undergraduate studies, he sought and got temporary employment as an unskilled labourer at the reconstruction works of Erzsébet Bridge, today a major artery of traffic over the Danube in Budapest.

As a result of his early introduction to the Arabic language, his familiarity with both written and spoken Arabic was already well-established by the time he applied for admission to university. Indeed, an anecdote fondly recalled by childhood friends tells of a class excursion during which Iványi recorded an appreciative note in Arabic in the visitors' book of a museum, a rather unusual thing for a teenager to do that, perhaps being considered an *ipso facto* suspicious act under a slightly paranoid communist régime, almost led to his dismissal from secondary school. Disciplined though he was, any punishment he received was more than offset by his successful application later on to Eötvös Loránd University. His unproblematic admission was

due partly to his already considerable knowledge of Arabic and partly to the fact that he had finished third in that year's national students' competition in history, which accorded the first ten contestants in each subject automatic admission to university in their chosen field. Given the breadth of his interests, it is hardly surprising that despite his demonstrated proficiency in historical studies, Iványi insisted on pursuing studies in other subjects as well and ended up with a degree in general linguistics as well as in Arabic, with a minor specialisation in African Studies into the bargain. As part of the latter specialisation, he studied Bantu linguistics from the late comparative linguist László Dezső (1927–2016), and he still fondly recalls his study of Swahili under the guidance of Edgar Kadenyi, a Kenyan medical student. Iványi also eagerly joined the so-called Scientific Students' Association in Oriental Studies, an institution that has long constituted a competitive and highly inspiring environment to young scholars with outstanding academic talent and scholarly ambitions. The list of his professors in Arabic philology is virtually a who's-who of this academic field in 1960's Hungary, including Károly Czeglédy (1914–1996; then head of the Department of Arabic and Semitic Philology), Julius (a.k.a. Abdul-Karim) Germanus (1884–1979), Alajos Chrudinák (1937–2020), Ernő Juhász (1939–2004), Abdel-Moneim Moukhtar (1929–2006), Csilla Prileszky (1939–1995) and Alexander Fodor (1941–2014).

Having completed his studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) between 1963 and 1968, Tamás Iványi graduated with honours in July 1968, his MA thesis addressing an important issue of Arabic grammar, the usage of the ubiquitous particles *an* and *anna* in Classical Arabic. After graduation he completed a full academic year of language training in Baghdad in 1968–1969, an exceptionally fruitful and inspiring year that left him with an abundance of keen observations on Arab culture in everyday settings, a cultural milieu for which his love is all too apparent to any interlocutor to this day. A long visit that he undertook in the company of the young ethnographer László Törő to aš-Šikk (also known as al-Qašaba), an agricultural village located by the Tigris directly north of the Little Zāb confluence, proved a particularly enthralling experience. It is hardly surprising that he feels an enduring intellectual and emotional attachment to Iraq and its unique culture and dialects in particular, although circumstances allowed him to return there only on a couple of occasions, specifically to attend the al-Mirbad International Poetry Festival along with a few colleagues.

After completing his linguistic training in 1969, Iványi was hired by the Institute for Intercultural Relations to work as an interpreter in Arabic, a job that, while not a permanent position and an employment having only marginal academic relevance, did provide not just a passable income but also a prime opportunity to practise Arabic as a living language, to gain a vast assortment of cultural insights, and to experience contemporary Arab culture in its manifold aspects. His tasks as an interpreter offered opportunities to interact with diverse groups of professionals, such as Middle Eastern agricultural experts as well as a team of ballet dancers touring the stages of Egypt,

an experience that left him with an appreciation of cultural variety and helped discard any trace of a scholarly perspective based on Orientalist clichés.

While codicology is not one of his academic specialisations, he does have considerable experience in this field as well. Between 1968 and 1971 he participated in a major project aimed at cataloguing the Franciscan Library in Gyöngyös, a collection established in mediaeval times and expanding ever since that for administrative purposes came to form part of the holdings of the National Library. While only partly relevant to Iványi's expertise in Oriental languages and cultures, this certainly was a prime opportunity to hone his skills in codicological issues and handling manuscript and printed book collections. From December 1970 to March 1974 Professor Iványi was employed by the Oriental Collection of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (then known as the Oriental Library). In this position, he was responsible for the library's customer services as well as for the management of the Arabic books collection and the whole Oriental journal collection. In his last year spent as a member of staff at the library, he spent months surveying, on behalf of the Oriental Collection, the African Studies library of the prominent politician and diplomat Endre Sík (d. 1978), a widely recognised specialist of African history. (Alas, the Oriental Collection eventually did not decide to buy this important personal collection.)

The year 1973 marked the start of Iványi's long and ongoing career as an exceptionally popular professor teaching countless cohorts of students various aspects of Muslim culture and the intricacies of the Arabic language. The academic year 1973–1974 he spent as a lecturer at József Attila University (JATE) in Szeged at the invitation of Professor András Róna-Tas (today a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and an internationally recognised expert on the languages and cultures of Central Asian Turkic-speaking peoples). While in Szeged, Iványi taught various courses on the Arabic language, general linguistics and the Arabic sources of early Hungarian ethnohistory, subjects that have remained at the forefront of his teaching and publication activity. The next academic year saw him return to his *alma mater* and take up teaching in March 1974 at the Department of Arabic and Semitic Philology of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), an academic home in which he has remained since, and which continues to benefit enormously from his vast and non-pareil expertise even after his official retirement in 2010. It would be a demanding task beyond the scope of this brief biographical précis to offer an exhaustive list of the subjects to which he introduced generations of students, and an understatement to say that he has been a decisive intellectual influence upon the later careers of those students, including the author of these lines. His trademark style, displaying a striking erudition coupled with an unfailing intellectual rigour and delivered in a characteristically reserved demeanour, is a rare combination that perhaps provides adequate explanation for the enthusiasm his former students tend to continue to feel for him even decades after graduation. The fact that he is an exceptionally dedicated educationist has been manifested in more than one way. This includes the more than

24 textbooks and coursebooks that he has written and/or edited for the purposes of use in a variety of university courses. It is no exaggeration to say that the teaching of Islamic and Arabic culture at the Department of Arabic and Semitic Philology at Eötvös Loránd University would now be inconceivable without the tomes that he has contributed.

Although palpably averse to seeking administrative positions, Professor Iványi could not escape the responsibility of becoming Head of the Department of Arabic and Semitic Philology between 2006 and 2010, a task to which he managed to apply his seemingly effortless effectiveness and a refreshing lack of bureaucratic inflexibility. His retirement in 2010 did not bring his teaching to an end, since his expertise in a range of subjects is practically indispensable, and at any rate unmatched, among the faculty. It is an immense bonus and an honour to the Department that he generously volunteers to impart that expertise to students despite the ludicrously frugal compensation of a retired lecturer's work. Ever since his retirement, Professor Iványi has continued teaching a wide variety of courses on many aspects of Islam, Muslim cultures and Arabic linguistics. Students continue to flock to his courses, not surprisingly given the unique opportunity to learn from a professor of unique erudition and often first-hand experience in such fields as popular religion, Sufism, Salafism, linguistics, literature and Islamic law.

Professor Iványi obtained his doctorate in Semitic Philology with the grade *summa cum laude* on 8th June 1974. The subject of his doctoral dissertation stays within one of his enduring interests, linguistics, treating as it does the issue of the semantic analysis of theme-rheme structures in Arabic. Since a list of Tamás Iványi's publications follows this biographical note, we shall not dwell here on this aspect of his academic career. The list is a more eloquent witness to both depth and breadth of scholarship than a brief summary could ever be. One aspect, however, deserves emphasis in this context: the effort to make available to the Hungarian-speaking public the major sources of Muslim culture as well as the results of recent scholarship has always been a prominent part of his scholarly endeavours, in the form of both publications and lectures. Since 1991, he has been secretary general of the Alexander Csoma de Kőrös Society, the umbrella organisation of Oriental studies in Hungary, which plays a dual role within the country of maintaining rigorous standards of scholarship in the study of Asian and African cultures, as well as disseminating the results of academic learning in this field to the general public. Given the prominent role of Oriental studies in Hungarian culture and historiography, this is far from being a peripheral responsibility. He was founder and, ever since, director of the College of Oriental Languages programme of the Alexander Csoma de Kőrös Society, an important forum for the teaching of Asian languages outside the formal tertiary education system. Since 1995 he has been a member of the editorial board of *Keletkutatás*, the leading Hungarian-language scholarly journal of Oriental studies in Hungary. He is also member of the editorial board of *The Arabist: Budapest Studies in Arabic*, the journal in which this collection of essays celebrating his

eightieth birthday appear – in all likelihood the first-ever issue of the journal that he played no part whatsoever in editing. Indeed, as recently as 2021 he was the editor responsible for that year's issue, dedicated to the memory of the late Professor Alan Jones of Oxford University, a colleague as well as a close personal friend of Iványi. Professor Iványi has also organised or co-organised a number of important international and domestic academic meetings, including the mammoth thirty-fifth International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (ICANAS) in the year 1997 and the fourteenth and twentieth congresses of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants (UEAI) in 1988 and 2000 respectively, both of which were held in Budapest.

In recognition of his wide-ranging scholarly and educational accomplishments, he was decorated with various awards and honours, including the Pro Universitate award of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in September 1989 for his exemplary service as an educationist and researcher, and the prestigious national Hungarian Order of Merit (Knight's Cross) in July 2019 for his outstanding teaching and research career and his role as secretary general of the Alexander Csoma de Kőrös Society.

As colleagues and as editors of and contributors to this volume, we wish Professor Iványi good health and ample energy to continue to regale us with the characteristic voice of his delectable wit and vast scholarship.

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