

Father Alexander Nadson (8 August 1926 – 15 April 2015)

In Remembrance

Father Alexander Nadson, Director of the Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum in London, and Apostolic Visitor for all Belarusian Greek-Catholics abroad, was one of those exceptional people who change other people's lives. A caring and devoted priest, he was also a fine scholar with many interests, a bibliophile, and a generous, inspiring mentor.

I first met him in the late 1960s, soon after he had acquired a Tatar *tefsir* (text of the holy Quran, with an interlinear translation in Belarusian-Polish, written in the Arabic script) for the Library. He consulted the Oriental Department of the British Library for help in identifying the manuscript. To his surprise and delight, he found two more Tatar manuscripts in their collection – wrongly catalogued, as it happened. He knew very little about Islam and almost nothing about the Tatars at that time but, undeterred, set to work to learn to read the Arabic script, and to study the history, religion and social background of the Tatars. The result was an erudite paper on 'The Byelorussian Tartars and Their Writings' (*Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, II/2, London, 1970, in collaboration with the British orientalist G. M. Meredith-Owens).

At that time I was just finishing my first degree at the University of London, where I had specialised in Slavonic philology and Turkish language and literature (Ottoman and Modern). I was considering what to do next and so was pleased, but also daunted, when Father Alexander suggested that I study the religious language of the British Library Tatar *kitab*, as this would combine both strands of my education. He was right: it was the ideal project for me and it started me on an intellectual journey which still enthral me. However, I doubt if I would have got far with my research if had he not given me endless encouragement and support. He was indefatigable in tracking down the material that I needed, whatever the language and however tiny the print-run. He also introduced me to the wider sphere of Belarusian language and literature. This, too, became an important part of my life. Father Alexander loved his culture and his country, but not in a narrow, nationalistic way. He always insisted that those of us who were interested in Belarusian studies should strive to maintain academic objectivity. It is a principle that applies to all spheres of scholarship – but is easily forgotten in a world that is sometimes overly influenced by political-ideological considerations.

I shall miss Father Alexander – his lively intellect, generosity and deep personal faith – but I count myself privileged to have known him.

(Dr) Shirin Akiner, Senior Fellow, Cambridge Central Asian Research Forum, and Research Associate, University of London, April 2015