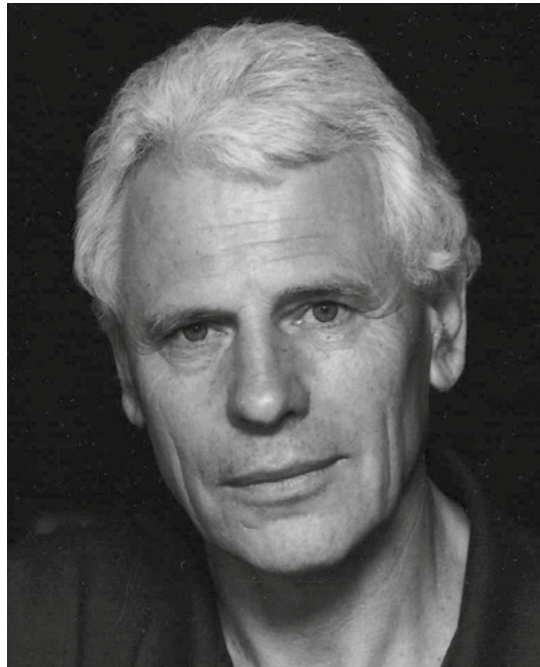


In Memoriam

Professor Peter J. Chelkowski (1933–2024)



On 21 October 2024 Professor Emeritus Peter J. Chelkowski, an eminent Polish and American Iranologist of international renown passed away at his home in Turin, Italy, at the age of ninety-one.



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Peter J. Chelkowski (Piotr Jan Chełkowski) was born on 10 July 1933 in Lubliniec, Poland in a noble family (Wczele coat of arms).¹ His father, Wojciech Chełkowski of Chełków (1908–1983), graduated from the Institut Supérieur de Commerce in Antwerp and the H. Wawelberg and S. Rotwand State College of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering in Warsaw. During World War II he served as a lieutenant of cavalry, adjutant of the 17th Regiment of Greater Poland Uh-lans of the Poznań Army.² He fought in the Battle of Bzura and Kampinos Forest. After capitulation and recovery from his wounds, Wojciech Chełkowski made his way through Hungary to France, where he was assigned to the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade under the command of General Stanisław Maczek, in whose ranks he took part in the French campaign of 1940, awarded the gold and silver Virtuti Militari Cross and twice the Cross of Valor. After the war he returned to Poland where he was repressed by the communist authorities, spending 5 years in prisons in Warsaw and Wronki. After 1956 he was released and then rehabilitated. Until his death in 1983 he worked as an X-ray technician.³

His son, Peter, also wanted to become an engineer, a specialist in electromedicine, but due to the repressions that his father suffered, he could not study at the Warsaw University of Technology. In 1953 Peter Chelkowski moved to Krakow, where he was allowed to study Oriental languages and drama. He enrolled at the Jagiellonian University (1953–1958) as a student of Oriental Philology and at the National Academy of Theatre Arts of Krakow (1955–1956) as an adept of acting. It was a turning point that influenced his entire life and academic career.

I began my Iranian studies at the Jagiellonian University in 1953. In addition to Persian, the syllabus included Arabic and Turkish. After my first year at the Department of Oriental Studies, I knew and felt that my specialization would be Persian language and literature. Professor Franciszek Machalski was one of the main reasons for my decision. Machalski taught Persian as a living, vibrant language with deep roots. He often reminded us that after the Arab invasion, only Persia did not change its language. He loved Iran and passed this love on to us, the students.⁴

These were phenomenal studies. Thanks to them, I was able to break away from the grey and sad reality of the Polish People's Republic.⁵

* This obituary article is based on *Peter J. Chelkowski: 45 Years at NYU*, a manuscript containing the Professor's scientific biography (Chelkowski 2012). The manuscript was given to the author of this text by Professor himself in 2012. The second source is an obituary prepared by his family that was mailed to friends and colleagues after Professor's death ('Shii News — Passing of Peter Chelkowski' 2024).

¹ Minakowski n.d.

² See Chełkowski (1972; 1995).

³ See Kostołowska (2009); 'Chełkowski, Wojciech' (2022).

⁴ Paraskiewicz 2016: 10–11.

⁵ Szczęśniak 2011: 10.

In 1959 Peter J. Chelkowski moved to London to continue his education as a post-graduate student. He chose History of Islamic Near East (1959–1962) at the School of Oriental Studies (now SOAS) of the University of London, and studied under supervision of a famous historian Bernard Lewis (1916–2018).

Subsequently in 1962, he went to Iran to continue his studies. After defending his doctoral thesis on Persian Literature in 1968, he was awarded a PhD from the University of Tehran. In Iran he also worked as a volunteer for a charitable organization, for whom he travelled to numerous rural areas, building schools and bathhouses.

While in Iran, I also worked for a charitable organization called CARE Mission. This allowed me to cover Iran to and fro to the tune of some seventy thousand miles and to meet all classes of people in the country in a practical capacity.⁶

It was on these travels that Chelkowski became fascinated by *ta'zieh*, a kind of ritual passion play of Shi'ite Muslims, which was to play a key role in defining his career, merging his passion for performing arts with fascination for Muslim culture.

My teaching and writings reflect that education and experience in the field. Within the framework of Islam, whether in the area of Islamic mysticism or that of popular beliefs and rituals, my scholarly interests range from the many and varied uses of the language itself to the role of Islam in architecture and the relation of art to society.⁷

In Iran, Peter married Goga (Stefania) Przyłuska, a painter, whom he had met earlier in London. The ceremony took place in an Italian church. 'The priest was German, the text of marriage vows was in Old English, we were Polish, and our 25 guests came from 17 countries.'⁸ Also their daughter Monika Chelkowski-Tarony was born in Tehran in 1965.

In 1968 Chelkowski as a cultural historian of the Middle East joined the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, New York University. In 1968–1973 he was employed as Assistant Professor of Persian and Near Eastern Studies, then in 1973–1977 as Associate Professor and as Full Professor from 1977 to his retirement. In recognition for his academic superiority, he won the Golden Dozen Awards at NYU for Excellence in Teaching, not once but twice (1989, 1996).

⁶ 'Peter J. Chelkowski, Professor Emeritus' n.d.

⁷ 'Peter J. Chelkowski, Professor Emeritus' n.d.

⁸ Szczęśniak 2011: 10.

Since joining the NYU academic community, he has been one of the most beloved faculty members by students (...). He has also become known as an internationally renowned expert in Persian literature and culture.⁹

He stands out not only for his knowledge, but also for his charisma, high culture and gallant behaviour towards women. (...) All this testifies to his noble origin and the ideal fusion of two cultures in him, Polish and Persian.¹⁰

Among his many achievements, Professor Chelkowski was one of the founders of the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University. This institution was created in 1966 to foster the interdisciplinary study of the modern and contemporary Middle East, and to enhance public understanding of the region. Professor served there as both Chairman and Director in 1975–1978 and 1988–1991.

In his active years, Professor enjoyed profound respect and appreciation from several illustrious colleagues. He collaborated with many of them like Richard Ettinghausen, Annemarie Schimmel, Hamid Dabashi, Ehsan Yarshater and Ann K.S. Lambton.

In the summer of 1969, I was doing research in Istanbul. Professor Lambton stopped by on her way to a conference in Cyprus and visited me for a week or so. One day, I took her to Polonezkoy, a Polish village located on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus. This settlement was established by Prince Adam Czartoryski in 1842, as a refuge for Polish freedom fighters who had participated in the unsuccessful uprising against the Russian occupiers in 1830–31. It was a pleasure to watch Lambton in her element in this village environment. There was no end to the questions and comments which she posed to the simple farmers regarding agriculture, machinery, and daily life. Polonezkoy is not far from the shore of the Black Sea. After visiting with the villagers, we drove to the shore and started walking towards the east. After two hours of brisk walking (or maybe more like marching), I was exhausted. I turned to the Professor and said, 'If we continue walking at this pace, soon we will hit the Soviet border, and the Russians are going to arrest me.' She looked at my face covered with sweat and taking pity on me, said, 'It is a good reason to turn around and head for home.'¹¹

Professor Chelkowski's lectures were not limited to the academic classroom. He hosted forty six episodes of NYU Sunrise Semester aired on CBS television network. It was an instructional show on Persian culture and art.

⁹ New York University, diploma plaque 'In Appreciation of More than 25 Years of Outstanding Teaching', May 1995.

¹⁰ Waziri 1374 (1996): 88–89.

¹¹ Chelkowski 2009a: 141.

One of the viewers of this program was Mrs. Abby Grey who was a collector of Middle Eastern art living in Minnesota. Her enthusiasm for my show was so great that she came to New York to meet me. We became friends and over the course of several years met and corresponded often. As a result of our friendship and my advice and encouragement, she donated her Near Eastern Art collection to NYU, along with a substantial endowment.¹²

He was also an expert for the BBC, NBC, CBS, Voice of America, NPR news networks for matters regarding the Middle East. In the 1990's, he co-produced 'Hosay Trinidad', a documentary about *ta'zieh* in the Caribbean for the Smithsonian. From the shores of the Caspian to the island of Trinidad, he brought *taz'ieh* to the attention of the international theatre world, to directors like Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, Richard Shekner, and many others. This culminated in 2002 when Chelkowski in collaboration with Mohammed Gaffari brought *ta'zieh* to Lincoln Center to sold out audiences¹³.

Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Tadeusz Kantor discovered *ta'zia* in Persia. Brook, in particular, was profoundly impacted by the dramatic possibilities of the Persian form. He explained: 'I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have ever seen in theatre: a group of 400 villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under the tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing — although they knew perfectly well the end of the story — as they saw Hussein in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theatre form became truth' (*Leaning on the Moment: A Conversation with Peter Brook*, Parabola 4, May 1979, p. 52).¹⁴

In the obituary published by the Chelkowski family, we read: 'Professor Chelkowski's appreciation of Persian and Islamic culture was always pure and apolitical. He felt comfortable crossing divides where many others felt reluctant.' He was a guest of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi at the 2,500-year celebration of the Persian Empire in 1971. Many times he took part in The Shiraz Festival of Arts, an annual international summer arts festival organized by the initiative of Shahbanu Farah Pahlavi and held in Iran, facilitating the encounter between the East and the West (from 1967 to 1977). In 2002, he accepted an invitation from the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to preside at *ta'zieh* as the guest of honour in Kermanshah, Iran.

¹² Chelkowski 2012.

¹³ 'Shii News — Passing of Peter Chelkowski' 2024.

¹⁴ Chelkowski 2009b.

In 2010 Peter Chelkowski was awarded the Farabi International Award, in conjunction with UNESCO and ISESCO, for 'Iranian and Islamic Studies' in Tehran. He was also the recipient of multiple awards and fellowships from the Smithsonian Institute (e.g. Smithsonian Folklife Studies grant for a film 'Muharram-related observances in Iran, India, and Trinidad' 1991–1993); the Hoover Institute on War, Revolution, and Peace Fellowship for research on contemporary Islam, Summer 1982 and 1983; and the Social Science Research Council (1971). In 1997 he was awarded the Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation Award for Cross-Cultural Understanding. In 2011 he was presented the Commander Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland by the President of Poland. In 2023, the Jagiellonian University honoured him the Plus Ratio Quam Vis commemorative Medal for outstanding service in scholarship.

In his international career, Professor Chelkowski never forgot his Alma Mater, i.e. the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, emphasizing his academic roots on many occasions. In 2005, he visited the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Jagiellonian University and the Polish Academy of Sciences to give a series of lectures. When Professor retired, he decided to donate the first part of his extremely valuable book collection (several hundred volumes) to the Department of Iranian Studies, sending the donation to Poland from New York at his own expense. At the beginning of 2023, the last part of his Oriental library, including a unique collection of publications on *ta'zieh*, was sent to Krakow from Turin, where he used to live on his retirement.

In lecture halls, on theatre stages and TV screens, Professor Chelkowski spent a lifetime enchanting audiences with the beauty and depth of the Muslim world, fulfilling his purpose — to promote cross-cultural understanding and rectify Western misconceptions of Islam, as both a religion and a multi-faceted culture.

In my graduate courses dealing with Islam in the contemporary world, I am primarily concerned with rectifying Western misconceptions of Islam both as a religion and in its various cultural forms. My love of the performing arts further led me to the Caribbean basin, where in recent years I have been tracing a religious ritual called Hosay which began in the Shi'i Muslim Middle East and was brought to the Caribbean by East Indian indentured laborers, where it has come to co-exist with Carnival.¹⁵

Professor Peter Chelkowski authored and edited many books, hundreds of articles, book chapters, encyclopaedia entries in English, Persian, French, Italian and Polish. In 1975 he published his famous *Sufism in Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamseh of Nizami*. The book won the First Place Award by the American Association of University Presses. He was also honoured by two Festschrifts: *Muraqqa'e Sharqi (An Eastern Album): Studies in Honor of Peter Chelkowski*,

¹⁵ 'Peter J. Chelkowski, Professor Emeritus' n.d.

and *Critical Encounters: Essays on Persian Literature and Culture in Honor of Peter J. Chelkowski*.¹⁶ In the 'Foreword' we read:

As his students attest, every session in Professor Peter J. Chelkowski classes is a memorable event. This has consistently been the cause during his long and distinguished career. He is often described by his students as a superb teacher who has mastered of his subject of his lessons and delivers his lectures with enthusiasm and flair.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Rastegar and Vanzan 2007; Khorrami and Ghanoonparvar 2007.

¹⁷ Khorrami and Ghanoonparvar 2007: ix.

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