

IN MEMORIAM

Professor Emeritus Peter J. Chelkowski

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The world has lost a giant. Dr. Peter Chelkowski, author, scholar, and humanist, passed away peacefully in Turin, Italy on October 21. He was 91.

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

Born and raised in World War II Poland, and a devout Catholic, he studied Oriental Philology at the Jagiellonian University and acting at the theater school of Krakow. He escaped to London to continue his education, as a student of Bernard Lewis, at the School of Oriental Studies (SOAS). Subsequently, he moved to Iran, where, in 1968, he received his PhD in Persian literature from the University of Tehran; the first Pole to ever receive a doctorate in Iranian Studies. He also worked for the charitable organization CARE Mission, for whom he traveled over 70,000 miles to numerous rural villages, building schools and bathhouses. It was on these journeys that he became fascinated by Ta'zieh, the ritual passion play of Shi'ite Muslims, which was to play a major role in defining his career, merging his passion for performing arts and Muslim culture.

In 1968, Professor Chelkowski was hired as a cultural historian at New York University, where he would remain and teach for the next fifty years. He was one of the founders of the The Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, where he served as both Chairman and Director for numerous years, collaborating with many illustrious colleagues including Richard Ettinghausen, Annemarie Schimmel, Hamid Dabashi, and Ehsan Yarshater.

It was in the lecture halls that Professor Chelkowski's passion and vigor was most pronounced. He enraptured audiences, bringing humanity and clarity to subjects Americans had never heard before. In recognition, he won the Golden Dozen Awards at NYU for best professor, not once but twice.

Professor Chelkowski wrote and edited twelve books and hundreds of articles, in publications ranging from *Encyclopedia Iranica* to *The Drama Review*. The subject matter of his work was always quite varied. In 1975, he wrote about Sufism in *Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamseh of Nizami* published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The book won the First Place Award of the American Association of University Presses. In 1999, Professor Chelkowski co-wrote, with Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. As Carlo McCormick wrote in *Bookforum*, "I urge people to get a hold of this book. . . it provides its readers with a higher level of understanding than any hundred hours logged on CNN.com."

Professor Chelkowski's lectures were not limited to the classroom, as he hosted forty-six episodes of *Sunrise Semester* on CBS. He was so popular that he once graced the cover of *The TV Guide*, with a caption that read, "Peter Chelkowski Ph.D., I love you." He was also the go to

expert for the BBC, NBC, CBS, Voice of America, and NPR news networks for all things Middle Eastern. In the 1990s, 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 Ta'zieh to the attention of the international theater world, to the likes of Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brooks, Richard Shekner, and many others. This culminated in 2002, when Chelkowski and Mohammed Gaffari brought Ta'zieh to Lincoln Center to sold out audiences.

In the end, 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 at the 2,500-year celebration of the Persian empire in 1971. In 2002, he accepted an invitation from the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to preside at Ta'zieh as the guest of honor in Kermanshah, Iran. In 2010, in conjunction with UNESCO and ISESCO, he was awarded the Farabi International Award for "Iranian and Islamic Studies" in Tehran.

He was also the recipient of multiple awards and fellowships from the Smithsonian Institute; the Hoover Institute on War, Revolution, and Peace Fellowship; and the Social Science Research Council. In 1997, he was awarded the Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation Award for Cross-Cultural Understanding and, in 2011, was presented with the Commander Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland by the President of Poland. In 2023, the Jagiellonian University honored him with the Plus Ratio Quam Vis Commemorative Medal for outstanding service in scholarship.

In 1975, Professor Chelkowski described Nizami's *Khamseh* as "sensuous, dramatic, gracious and refined." If you ever had the fortune of attending one of his lectures or dinner parties, you would probably use these same words to define him – Professor Emeritus Peter Chelkowski, scholar, orator, educator, and, most importantly, humanist.

Born in 1933 in Lubliniec, Poland, Peter J. Chelkowski is survived by his wife Goga Chelkowski, his daughter Monica Tarony, his son Peter Chelkowski, and his grandchildren Paolo Tarony, Sofia Tarony, Clyde Chelkowski, and Earl Chelkowski.