Profile of a Swedish Arabist

Steve Tamari

When we decided to devote an issue to Syria studies in Scotland and among Scandinavians, I couldn’t help but think of my friend and colleague Tetz Rooke. Rooke made a name for himself as a scholar of modern Arabic literature with his 1997 work *In My Childhood: a Study of Arabic Autobiography*, a literary study based on 20 autobiographies. He has also published translations from Arabic into Swedish, recently focusing on the work of the Kurdish Syrian novelist and poet Salim Barakat.

Tetz Rooke and I were in the same intermediate Arabic class—our teacher was the fabulous Muhammad Ibrahim al-Masri—at the Ma’had li-Ta’лим al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya during the academic year 1986-1987. In those days the Ma’had was located in the Muhajirin neighborhood of northern Damascus. We were a motley crew of internationals finally beginning to conquer Arabic in an Arabic-speaking environment during an era that is now long gone. Syria was part of the Soviet bloc, non-essentials like Kleenex could only be had on the black market, and yellow American cars of the 1950s—rebuilt and lovingly maintained by Syrian mechanics—dominated service circuits.

Now, almost 25 years later, I was curious about how a Syrian experience helped shape the career of a Swedish Arabist.

Tetz Rooke was born in 1955 in the southern Swedish town of Malmö across a strait known as The Sound from Copenhagen in Denmark. He completed his undergraduate studies at Stockholm University with a degree in journalism and worked in radio journalism while dabbling in poetry and publishing a volume of poems. He went back to university in the early 1980s and began his study of Arabic mainly, he says, “for fun and a means to travel without any professional goals in mind.” After two years of almost full-time study of Arabic and a short stint in Tunisia, in the fall of 1986 he landed in Syria at the Ma’had. He lived with a Syrian family which contributed significantly to the speed with which he developed his proficiency.
By the end of the academic year, Rooke relates, “I had decided to continue with Arabic; it seemed like it would have been a pity not to because living in Syria had improved my Arabic so much.” What are his thoughts looking back at his stay in Syria? “The country made a huge impression on me. It is so rich in history and culture. It was so easy to make friends and to travel at little expense.”

Rooke returned to Stockholm University’s Dept. of Oriental Languages and completed his graduate studies in Arabic in 1989. He has since made several trips to Syria. Beginning in 1997, he was involved in a research project on Muhammad Kurd Ali which took him to Damascus on several occasions. He has since devoted his attention to the Syrian Kurdish poet Salim Barakat, translating his work into Swedish. He was last in Syria a year ago with a group of Swedish poets whose work was translated into Arabic through the support of the Swedish Cultural Council.

Since 2003, Rooke has taught Arabic at Göteborg (Gothenburg) University in Sweden’s second city. He reports a growing interest in Arabic over the last few years. Not long ago, Arabic was only available at the university level in Stockholm; now it is offered at four Swedish universities. Partly this is due to global political and economic developments but, says Rooke, Arabic has become a major Swedish language, the third most widely spoken language in the country and, at the primary school level, second only to Swedish itself.

This spike in interest has taken place since Rooke began studying Arabic. Damascus, 1986 was, indeed, an auspicious time and place for a Swedish Arabist to begin his career whether he knew it or not at the time.

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