Oleg Fedorovich Akimushkin:  
(February 17, 1929–October 10, 2010)  

Alexey A. Khismatulin

Oleg Akimushkin was born on February 17, 1929 in the city of Penza. A year later his parents, Ol’ga Ivanovna Mikhaylova (1905–79) and Fyodor Semyonovich Akimushkin (1900–77), moved to Leningrad and soon separated. His mother remarried, and the child grew up in the new family with his mother and his step-father, Anatoliy Gavlovsky.
Oleg Fedorovich Akimushkin: (February 17, 1929–October 10, 2010)

Akimushkin started his secondary education in 1937. His high-school years coincided with the beginning of the Second World War. Hitler’s unexpected attack on the Soviet Union and the onset of the Great Patriotic War left the family stranded in Leningrad: They missed a chance to evacuate before the Nazi siege of the city, which started in September 1941 and lasted for close to 900 days. The first winter of the Leningrad blockade interrupted Akimushkin’s studies. A year later he moved to another school, from which he would graduate in 1948. During the summers of 1942 and 1943 Akimushkin—like other students of his age—took part in various community works dealing with the complex situation in the besieged city, and in November 1943 the fourteen-year-old teenager was awarded a medal “For the Defense of Leningrad.”

Sports played an important part in the curriculum during Akimushkin’s high school years, and basketball became one of his passions. He played on the school team along with the future coach of the Soviet national team Alexander Y. Gomel’sky (1928–2005), who decades later would lead his players to six European and two world championship titles. The school team, led by such an enthusiastic captain, regularly won the city championships. When Gomel’sky graduated and left the school, the leadership passed on to Akimushkin.

Akimushkin’s life as a university student started in September 1948, when he enrolled in the program of the Department of Iranian Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Leningrad State University. At the time, and up to the year 1991, Oriental studies, history, and philosophy, were considered ideologically sensitive disciplines in the USSR, and it was practically impossible to enroll in the corresponding faculties that taught them unless the prospective student was a member of the Komsomol (the youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union). Having become a member of the organization in 1943, Oleg Akimushkin continued within its ranks his active involvement in the life of the Faculty of Oriental and African Studies, thus gaining considerable organizational experience and leadership skills. This experience proved to be very useful in his administrative and academic work later on.

Akimushkin graduated from the university in 1953 with highest honours. His graduation thesis was dedicated to issues of nineteenth-century Iranian literature, and the Academic Council of the Faculty of
Oriental Studies recommended that he be accepted as a PhD candidate at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Soviet Academy of Sciences, Leningrad. However, at the time the institute had no vacancies at that level. So—although he successfully passed all qualifying examinations—Akimushkin was faced with the dilemma of what to do next (like many other graduates of the Faculty of Oriental and African Studies—then and now). Throughout his studies Akimushkin had continued his active involvement in sports, dividing his time between his academic pursuits and the university basketball team of elite players who participated in many competitions. When his aspirations for graduate studies did not materialize, he considered going into professional sports, especially since he received several invitations to join various basketball clubs.

As fate would have it, in December 1953 the director of the Leningrad branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies offered him the position of a research assistant at the Department of Oriental Manuscripts. This offer determined the vector of his future academic endeavours, introducing him to the Oriental manuscripts which he would study thoroughly, with dedication, love, and enthusiasm, for the rest of his life. Six months later he was invited to join an important team project dedicated to the compilation of materials on the history of the Kirgiz and Kirgizia found in Persian manuscripts. His task was to provide translations and commentaries of relevant excerpts from the fifteenth-century Persian chronicles, kept in the manuscript collection of the institute. (He investigated nine chronicles, making selections for translation from five of them.) In the course of this work, he started translating a chronicle on the history of Qashgar entitled Tārikh-e Mahmud Churas, which a few years later would become the centrepiece of his PhD dissertation.

However, the true initiation of the young scholar into the discipline of his choice came through a major team project, which encompassed the institute’s entire collection of manuscripts in the Iranian languages. The annotated list which the team compiled first, eventually evolved into a catalogue of the Persian and Tajik manuscripts preserved at the institute: Персидские и таджикские рукописи Института народов Азии АН СССР. Краткий алфавитный каталог (Persian and Tajik Manuscripts at the Institute of the Peoples of Asia, the Academy of Sciences of the USSR: Short Alphabetical Catalogue), ed., N. D. Miklukho-Maklay,
parts 1–2, (Moscow: Nauka, 1964. Reprint: New York: N. Ross Publishers, 1998, vols. 1–2). The completion of this project and the compilation of the indices took almost five years (1957–1962). In the course of it Akimushkin learned much and acquired considerable practical experience, working alongside the renowned specialist on Persian textology and translation Ol’ga Ivanovna Smirnova (1910–1982), and the experts on paleography, manuscriptology, and codicology Ilya Pavlovich Petrushevsky (1898–1977) and Nikolay Dmitrievich Miklukho-Maklay (1915–1975). This early exposure to the practicalities of the field allowed Akimushkin to develop his own methods in working with manuscripts. He also compiled a vast personal archive of annotated bibliographies and indices of manuscripts found in world collections and in the archives of the institute, methodically noting calligraphers’ names, places and dates of copies, owners’ marginal comments, remarks on manuscripts’ prices, and other details of interest. He prepared for publication more than one-third of the catalogue and its indices, and spent an additional eight months reading the proofs of the entire catalogue.

Alongside this major project, Akimushkin worked on the inventory and description of poetic diwans and albums of miniatures, wrote articles and book reviews, worked as a scholarly secretary of the section of Iranian Studies as well as an academic coordinator on international relations of the whole institute. In 1960–1961 he and Vladimir V. Kushev (1927–2001), the future expert Afghanologist, spent six months in Afghanistan as translators to a government delegation: At the time, young scholars were routinely sent out to work on different contracts as translators with various organizations in the countries where the language they studied was spoken. This practice considerably improved their communication and linguistic skills.

Still, the study of Persian manuscripts remained at the core of Akimushkin’s academic interests. Given the immense amount of manuscripts that passed through his hands as he worked on the catalogue, it is not surprising that he became the unrivalled expert of Persian codicology in his own country, and one of the most authoritative specialists in the field worldwide. He studied the Persian handwritten book in all its aspects: from the binding and the paper, to the calligraphy and the miniatures. His findings were made public through numerous articles
He wrote a significant portion of the book Рукописная книга в культуре народов Востока (The handwritten book in the cultures of the Eastern peoples) (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), which dealt with Persian handwritten books. His section (330–406) sums up the results of his long years of work on premodern manuscripts, and demonstrates his unsurpassed expertise in the field.

The study of Persian manuscripts also presupposes solid grounding in the history, cultures, and literatures of Iran, Central Asia, and eastern Turkestan. Hence, from 1966 onward, at the request of the Department of the Near East (Faculty of Oriental and African Studies, Leningrad State University), Akimushkin started teaching courses on Islamic paleography, history of the Persian handwritten book, and Timurid history, to fourth-year/senior students. He also conducted a special seminar on sources on the Timurid epoch.

In 1970 Akimushkin defended his PhD dissertation on the chronicle of Shah-Mahmud Churas—a topic that he had started exploring in the late 1950s. Six years after the defense, his study was published as Shah-Mahmud ibn Mirza Fazil Churas, Хроника (Chronicles), critical edition, translation from the Persian, commentaries, study, and indices by О. Ф. Akimushkin (Moscow: Nauka, 1976). This monograph, which was subsequently translated into English and Uyghur languages, recently underwent a second edition in Russian (St. Petersburg: Peterburskoe lingvisticheskoe obschestvo, 2010).

The ideological shifts in the USSR, especially the country's gradual democratization during the 1980s, created favourable conditions for
the establishment of a transdepartmental research group on Islamic studies at the institute. Akimushkin was one of its founding members. This group prepared and published Ислам (Islam) (Moscow: Glavnaya redaktsiya vostochnoi literatury, 1991), the first encyclopedic lexicon on the subject ever published in the country. Akimushkin contributed to it a number of articles on Iranian Sufism pertaining to the history, theory, and practice of Sufi orders on the territories of present-day Iran, Turkey, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and India. Later on, under the supervision of Stanislav M. Prozorov and with the participation of Akimushkin, this group initiated an international project which resulted in the publication of the dictionary Ислам на территории бывшей Российской империи (Islam on the territories of the former Russian empire), vol. 1 (Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 2006).

Over the last few years Oleg F. Akimushkin took part as an expert and manager in numerous exhibitions of calligraphic samples and miniatures from the collections of the institute, presenting them across Europe and the United States. The exhibitions had a phenomenal success, adding to the prestige of the institute and confirming its status as a world-class centre of Oriental and African studies, and a treasure trove of sources and artifacts from the civilizations of these regions.

During his years at the institute Akimushkin authored more than two hundred and seventy academic publications, among them six monographs. The latest (far from complete) list of his works is published in his recent book Средневековый Иран: Культура. История. Филология (Medieval Iran: Culture, history, philology) (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2004). The book presents some of his earlier articles (all of them were selected by the author himself) which have not lost their scholarly value, despite the passage of time, because most of them rest on the thorough and careful analysis of manuscript sources.

Akimushkin was the editor of many books on the Middle East and sat on the editorial boards of academic journals and book series published in the USSR and beyond. When acting as an academic or managing editor, he showed sensitivity and discernment, intervening in the text only where absolutely necessary, or where factual accuracy was at issue: The choice of style and methods of interpretation he considered the prerogative of the author.

During the last decades of his life, he also read lectures on Islamic
mysticism at the Faculty of Oriental and African Studies (St. Petersburg State University). These lectures represent the first ever attempt to teach this subject at any of the country’s universities. At the same time, he taught Persian language, worked with students at several university departments, and supervised PhD candidates at the institute. Many of his former graduate students are currently successful researchers and scholars at academic institutions in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Over the last thirty years, Akimushkin was the head of the Middle East Department of the institute and also supervised the section of Kurdology. He carefully nurtured the talents of the young specialists at the department, who could also be rightfully considered students of his. Without his tactful and discrete guidance and the generous opportunities for academic self-realization that he offered them, many young scholars would not have found their rightful place in the academic world. His care for the next generation of Iranists was central to his efforts to ensure academic continuity in the field of Iranian studies.

During his final years Akimushkin invested considerable efforts in Qazi Ahmad’s seventeenth-century treatise “On Calligraphers and Painters.” He had been working on it for many years, seeking out various manuscript versions, determining their editions, translating the text, and collecting information about the personalities mentioned in it. Fortunately, shortly before his death, he completed this major project. Hopefully, not too long hence, this work of his will also be published, adding one more noteworthy title to the creative biography of a talented scholar and a remarkable man.

Reading the biography of Oleg F. Akimushkin, one can not help thinking that the self-realization of talented individuals hinges not so much on the conditions—favourable or not—in which they may find themselves, but rather on their inexplicable, driven desire for creative expression, on a relentless, insatiable thirst to do what no one else has done, and to know what very few are even aware of. Hidden talents and potential geniuses are hardly worth talking about if not confirmed through creative acts. We can only measure the stature of talented individuals who have left a cultural legacy that will live on long after their passing, thus transcending death. The legacy of Oleg F. Akimushkin will remain a living testimony to his stature as a prominent scholar.