

OBITUARY

Professor Mirella Galletti (1949 – 2012)

JOYCE BLAU [♦]

Abstract

Professor Mirella Galletti, a great friend of the Kurds, died in Rome on 4 September 2012. Mirella's work is of inestimable value to the field of Kurdish Studies and her publications cover not only the history, society and traditions of the Kurds, but also the Christian minorities of the Middle East, particularly those of Iraq and Kurdistan.

Keywords: Professor Mirella Galletti.

The world of *Kurdish Studies* is in mourning. In less than three years, two great women have passed away suddenly: Professor Mirella Galletti died in Rome on 4 September 2012, and one year later, on 23 October 2013, Professor Ol'ga Ivanovna Zhigalina died in Moscow (see the obituary by Khanna Omarkhali, in *Kurdish Studies*, 2(1), 2014 pp. 75-79.) The news of Mirella's death came like a thunderbolt and shocked us all. It fell to Mirella's beloved niece and nephew, Serena and Andrea Galletti, to announce the news that stunned and saddened her friends and colleagues throughout the world.

Mirella Galletti, a great friend of the Kurds, was born on 25 February 1949 in a town near Bologna, Italy, into a family whose members had participated in the Italian resistance. She received her PhD in Political Science in 1974 from the University of Bologna, with a thesis on "The Political Structure and Cultural Values of Kurdish Society". She then studied journalism and obtained her degree in journalism from the same university. From the 1970s on, she travelled in the Middle East, particularly Kurdistan. She received a research grant from the Italian Foreign Ministry that enabled her to undertake her earlier field studies. In 1974, shortly after obtaining her Ph.D., she went to Kirkuk in Iraqi Kurdistan, where she met Kurdish intellectuals and political leaders. When the Iraq-Iran War broke out in 1980, she was in Tehran. In June 1988, in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, Mirella Galletti was one of the first Europeans to interview Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In September 1988, she was in the refugee camps in Tur-

[♦] Joyce Blau is Professor Emeritus at the National Institute of Oriental Language and Civilization of the University of Paris (INALCO). E-mail: jblau@club-internet.fr.

key's Kurdistan at Yüksekova, where she met thousands of Iraqi Kurdish refugees who had fled from Saddam Hussein's chemical warfare.

Dr. Galletti was a member of the Kurdish Institute of Paris from its foundation in February 1983 and a member of the Reference-Group of the Kurdish Library in Stockholm from 1998. She had been on the Committee of the Journal "Etudes kurdes" published by the Kurdish Institute of Paris since 2000.

In 1990-1991 Galetti was Visiting Professor of Kurdish History at the University of Bologna. In 1996-1997, she was Visiting Professor of Kurdish history and Culture at the University of Trieste, while participating in international conferences. She wrote for many magazines and journals, among them: *Oriente Moderno*, *Acta Kurdica*, *Journal of Assyrian Academic Society*, *The Journal of Kurdish Studies*, *Etudes kurdes*, *Kervan*, *La Porta d'Oriente*, *Millenovecento*, *Il Regno*, *Mondo e Missione*.

In 1992, we were in Iraqi Kurdistan together and in April 1994 she lectured at both the Salah al-din University in Erbil and at the Sulaimaniya University on the "Italian Contribution to Kurdology (13th to 20th century)". Dr. Galletti returned to Kurdistan again in 2005. In 2006 Mirella spoke at the First World Congress of Kurdish Studies in Erbil and in 2011 at the Second World Congress of Kurdish Studies at Duhok. During the 2000s, she taught the Law of Islamic Communities at Venice's Ca' Foscari University and the History of the Transnational Peoples of Western Asia at Milano Bicocca University. In 2008, she was appointed Professor-Researcher at the Second Naples University, at Caserta, where she taught Arab and Islamic History.

During her lifetime, Mirella Galletti published 18 books and dozens of papers covering not only the history, society and traditions of the Kurds, but also the Christian minorities of the Middle East, particularly those of Iraq and Kurdistan. She also published widely on Iraq and Syria and many of these studies have been translated into Kurdish, Armenian, Turkish and Arabic. When asked what she wanted to achieve with her work and her career, she replied "to know and make known the living conditions and difficulties of the Kurdish and Islamic world" and to observe "other cultures with empathy and without prejudice". Mirella imparted her enthusiasm for her research to the students under her supervision and many have expressed their extreme gratitude for her academic passion and immense generosity.

As a true scholar of Kurdish Studies, Mirella Galletti worked on all aspects of Kurdish social life. She was particularly fond of some of her studies. She was for example proud of having discovered a painting of the famous Battle of Chaldiran. In 1997, during her holidays in Sicily, she was on a visit to the magnificent Mirto Palace, in central Palermo. There she was astonished to find a large painting of a war scene hanging above the mantelpiece of a chimney in the *Rose Salone* of this princely Palace. It depicted a battle which was in fact the battle of Chaldiran that occurred in 1514, a crucial event in the history

of the Ottoman and Safavid dynasties, and especially in that of the Kurds. By pure chance, Mirella had run into the first, and perhaps the only picture of this famous battle. This painting, measuring about 3.5 m by 2 m bore neither date nor signature. Beneath the war scene was a long Italian inscription describing the battle between Sultan Selim I and Shah Esmail I, as well as positions and numbers of the Ottoman forces. It seems that no one before Mirella had shown any interest in this canvas, preserved for unknown reasons in a palace in Palermo. In the West, it is a rare and probably unique witness of an event that occurred at the borders of the Ottoman and Persian Empires, echoes of which even resounded as far as in Europe. Specialists have since dated the painting to between 1580 and 1650. Mirella published a long paper on this painting, first in Kervan, *Rivista Internazionale di studi afroasiatici II* (July 2005) and then in Paris in *Studia Iranica* 36, 2007, pp. 65-86. Following these publications Mirella was invited by a group of Turkish historians to Istanbul to talk about the painting. They were very impressed by the importance of this work and invited her to speak at several meetings during her stay in Istanbul.

Mirella was also interested in the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriac- Catholics and Orthodox Christians of Kurdistan, who are among the oldest Christian communities in the world. Her approach to the Christians runs through all her research on the Kurds, whether archival or in the field. On this topic she noted:

Since I was a student my main interests were in the Kurds and Kurdistan. But whenever I met Kurds I found that the Christians also had their particular qualities ... My interest in the Christian communities was also nurtured by the fact that in those decades, the 1970s and 1980, I was collaborating with Catholic magazines that were among the few to publish works on the Kurdish problem. In those years the Italian left wing usually considered Saddam Hussein an ally of the Soviet Union, and the conservatives on the other hand, were making money from Iraqi oil, so both were silent about the massacres of the Kurds and Anfal period...¹

Writing about the Christians of Kurdistan was, for her, a way “to show my affection for the whole region and, at the same time, to give an overview of the Christians and their history. My basic topic is the history and problems of the Christians of Kurdistan. I analyse both the Christians of Kurdistan and the Christians from Kurdistan.”

Her work “*Le Kurdistan et ses chrétiens*” was published by the *éditions du CERF, Paris 2010, p 399*, with a preface by Louis Sako, the Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk and a postscript by the blackfriar Jean-Marie Mérigoux. It analyses the relations between the diverse communities of Kurdistan, particu-

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

larly the Christians. It contains pages written by missionaries and travellers in previous centuries, documents preserved in the archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign affairs and in those of some religious orders, especially the Black-friars. The numerous testimonies regarding Assyro-Chaldeans collected between 1980 and 2007 cover a considerable length of time – and they are many more than had previously been published. They throw fresh light on the past and present of the religious community. The bibliography is substantial.

Mirella loved good food. With her friend Fuad Rahman, a restaurant owner in Torino who was originally from Kirkuk, she wrote a book about Kurdish cuisine (“Kurdistan. Cucina e tradizioni del popolo curdo”, Ananke, Torino 2008) that was so successful that it was translated into several languages. “My goal is to provide the reader with a broader knowledge of Kurdish cuisine, its relation to the surrounding populations as well as with its own culture”. Before offering the delicious recipes of Kurdish cuisine from Kirkuk (including some from Mahabad) that Fuad Rahman provides for his lucky Torino guests, Mirella related at length the history of Kurdish cooking from its origins. She stresses the link between the land of Kurdistan and the food. While this cuisine pays little attention to the political borders, it has been developed and elaborated by contact with some of the Kurds’ closest neighbours: the Jews, the Armenians, the Assyrio-Chaldeans and the Turcomans, with whom exchanges were numerous and constant.

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Mirella also took an interest in Kurdish donkeys to whom she devoted a lengthy study. Like some Kurdish intellectuals she stressed the importance of preserving this animal and the extent to which Kurdish society was indebted to it. “For the mountainous Kurds, the donkey (“*ker*”) and the mule (“*êstîr*”) have been essential to daily life, from ancient times to the present. Their presence is vivid in the Kurdish culture with hundreds and hundreds of proverbs, fables and tales” (“*L’âne dans la société et la culture kurdes - passé et présent*” In: *Revue d’Ethnozootechnie*, 87, Paris 2010).

Mirella’s funeral took place on Saturday, 8 September 2012 at 4.30 p.m. in the Basilica dei SS. Apostoli, Piazza Santi Apostoli, near her home. The church was filled with relatives, friends, colleagues and public figures from the scientific world as well as official representatives from Iraq and Kurdistan. Dr. Saywan Barzani, Iraqi Ambassador to Italy, with whom she had forged close links of work and friendship, came with the entire Embassy staff. Present as well were the Iraqi Ambassadors to the Vatican, to the United Nations and to the Arab League and their colleagues. Also present was Monseigneur Haddad, Melkite Greek-Catholic Archbishop, president of the *Bucca de la Verita* Cultural Centre, who had known Mirella well and who was the only person asked to make the funeral oration. In an eloquent manner, Monseigneur Haddad recalled the importance of Mirella Galletti’s work, which, as he reiterated several times, has allowed the Christian communities living in the Middle East since time immemorial, and aspiring to continue living in peace and harmony with

their Muslim neighbours, to become better known. He not only stressed Mirella's erudition but also her kindness and generosity.

Among the throngs surrounding Mirella's family, more particularly her dear nephew Andrea and niece Serena and their children, we should be mention Anna Tordenti, her childhood friend, Dr. Paola Orsatti, Professor of Persian Language and Literature at the "La Sapienza" University of Rome, Professor Angelo-Michele Piemontese, of the University of Rome, Dr. Claudio Caprotti, Professor of ancient languages and Mirella's colleague, Professor Gian-Maria Piccinelli, President of the Jean Monnet Faculty of the Seconda Università degli studi of Naples, where Mirella taught, the Arabic specialist Professor Isabella Camera d'Afflitto of "La Sapienza" University. I was among the several dozen other colleagues and friends, many of whom had come from great distances, and who were all distressed at the sudden loss of this exceptional woman.

On Saturday 27 October at 4.00 p.m. at the Kurdish Institute of Paris we paid tribute to Mirella Galletti, together with her family and a large audience of academics and friends. Several of them spoke and offered their testimony. Kendal Nezan, President of the Kurdish Institute recalled his long discussions with Mirella, while Ephrem Isa Yousif, a Chaldean philosopher and author of many works about Mesopotamia, whose memory of Mirella was "of an attentive friend who wrote kind and wise accounts of two of my books in some Italian reviews. At a symposium at Nusaybin, in Turkey, to which I had invited her, in 2002, Mirella played an important role — it was she who answered the local media in English or in Italian. She was a friend of the Kurds — and also of the Assyro-Chaldeans. She was an intelligent and endearing personality".

Hamid Bozarslan, Professor at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*, in Paris, said: "I wish, by these few words to recall the memory of a very generous member of our Institute. My memory of Mirella is, above all, of a personality of great contrasts: her extreme modesty forbade her any public visibility, any title of nobility yet as a pioneer, she has left a multitude of profound, voluminous works that place her very high in our community's eyes. Without her self-denial and hard work we would still be in the dark regarding many pages of Kurdish history..."

Salih Akin, Professor at Rouen University, said: "Like many researchers working on the Kurds and Kurdistan I was very moved by the sudden death of our friend and colleague Mirella ... During the two Congresses on Kurdish Studies that we attended in Kurdistan, we often had occasion to discuss the different aspects of her research into the history of the Kurds and their traditions. I was always surprised by the scientific light she brought to bear, the lucidity of her approach and the profundity of her knowledge of Middle Eastern societies. With Mirella's death Kurdish Studies have lost a great specialist in Kurdish history".

We also received many expressions of friendship from those who were unable to make the journey to Paris, including: Seywan Barzani, Iraqi Ambassador to Rome; Professor Mohsen Ahmad Omar, head of the French Department of Erbil's Salah ad-Din University; Dr. Najat Abdulla, Secretary of the Kurdish Scientific Academy in Erbil; Dr. Paola Orsatti, Lecturer in Persian Language and Literature at La Sapienza University in Rome; Dominican Father Eric de Clermont-Tonnerre, President of the Directory of Editions du Cerf; Olivier Rouault, Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology at Lyon 2 University; Maria-Grazia Masetti-Rouault, Director of Research at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris and Philip Kreyenbroek, Professor of Iranian Studies at Georg-August University of Göttingen.

Mirella was my friend for over thirty years. I loved her greatly. My home in Paris was her second home. My family had adopted her and she was part of it. Her sudden disappearance breaks our hearts. Mirella was not only an exceptional person, kind, attentive to others, always grateful for the slightest thing we did for her — she was also an exceptionally competent person, and enthusiastic about her work on the Kurds. She kept informed about all the events concerning Kurdistan and took part in them with great feeling and sensitivity. She was a great friend of the Kurds, whom she loved deeply. She leaves behind a fascinating and very rich work of inestimable value to Kurdish Studies. All of us, her friends who loved her, and her colleagues, will miss her warm, friendly and always cheerful presence.

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