

**ALEXANDER CHODZKO**  
**AS THE FORERUNNER OF UNVEILING**  
**THE AZERBAIJANI CULTURE IN THE WEST**

Ihar Lalkoŭ,  
 M.A., History,  
 Center for East European Studies,  
 Warsaw University



One shouldn't underestimate the role of the scientific activities of Alexander Chodzko (1804-1891)

<sup>1</sup> in the unveiling of the Azerbaijani culture in the West, and in that way, in the history of development of the Azerbaijani nation.

Alexander Chodzko, native of Kryvichy (today a small town in Miadziel region of the Bylorussia) was son of the famous Polish-Bylorussian-Lithuanian public figure and writer – Jan Chodzko-Borejka; alumnus of Vilnius University, poet and friend of the famous poet Adam Mickiewicz. In 1829 he graduated from the Institute of Oriental Studies that was attached to the Asian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire in Saint-Petersburg, with the specialization: Persian and

---

1 - The life and works of Chodzko are still waiting for serious research. For more information about biographic facts see: Chmielowski P., "Chodźko Borejko" in *Wielka encyklopedia powszechna ilustrowana*, T.XI/XII, Warszawa, 1893-1894; Zdziechowski M., "Aleksander Chodźko" in *Album biografii zasłużonych Polaków i Polek w. XIX*, T.1, Warszawa, 1901; Michalski J., "Chodźko Aleksander" in *Sto lat myśli polskiej*, T.3, Warszawa, 1907; Płoszewski L., "Chodźko Aleksander Borejko" in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, T.3, Kraków, 1937 etc.

Arabic languages. From 1830 until 1844, he worked as a Russian diplomat, mainly in Iran, chiefly as the consular attache in Rasht – administrative center of the province of Gilan. The important part of his official activities was consecrated to extensive travelling not only round Iran, but also in the Caspian regions belonging to the Russian Empire. He used these opportunities for collecting empirical materials for the future publications on the subject of the language, the culture and the folklore of Caspian peoples, including Azerbaijanis (Iranian Turks in the contemporary terminology).

Chodzko started to publish results of his researches after retirement, when he settled in Paris, working for some time in the Eastern Department of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then lecturing for 26 years (1857-1883) in the *Collège de France*. His publications (mainly in English and French) brought to him world recognition as one of the best specialists of the Orient.

The Azerbaijani theme was central to his scientific work. Probably an important role in all this was played by his main teacher with Azeri origins in Saint – Petersburg, Mirza Jafar Topchibashov, a famous Russian expert in oriental studies. He started to work on it even before the “Paris period” of his life, when his ethnographic tales from the travels in Azerbaijan were pulished in 1830 – 1833 in Russia on the pages of *Tygodnik petersburski* (‘Petersburg Weekly’) and ‘Literary Newspaper’. The reader of these essays could build an idea of the Azeri way of living and traditions, an idea of the richness of their culture. Here in particular we could quote the legends of the Maiden Tower and the ‘Legends of Aristotle and Plato’. As far as the records are concerned, Chodzko’s one happens to be the only known record of this widespread legend, well known at his times. The legend is still subject of analysis in the works of contemporary experts in Azeri folklore. Thanks to the Chodzko’s essays one can imagine what Baku and the life of its inhabitants were at the beginning of 1830’s (according to the researches there were 1200 houses and 5000 inhabitants). Admiring the art of Baku’s craftsmen or the abilities of six-year-old boy Jamil, who at this age was able to write ‘quite decent poems’, Chodzko, at the same time, shows his surprise from the fact that among ‘the decent people’ (bearing in mind the local

aristocracy) there are so many ‘*ignoramus*, who do not realize the meaning of the monuments of the past, that deserve to be respected by descendants’. From these essays one could also learn about the fire-worshippers that used to live in Baku and about their rich library, which was burned in 1826, during the Russo-Persian war.

However, his most important contribution to the unveiling of the Azerbaijani culture in the West was a book published in English in London in 1842 for *The Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland* (переиздана в 1971 г. in New York). The book has a comprehensive title "*Specimens of The Popular Poetry of Persia, Encountered in The Adventures and Improvisations of Koroglou, The Bandit Minstrel of Northern Iran; and The Songs of The People Inhabiting The Shores of The Caspian Sea, Orally Collected and Translated, with Philological and Historical Notes, by Alexander Chodzko*". The book contains 13 *medjlis* (parts) of the epos “*Koroglu*”, collected orally by Chodzko based on the narrations of the Azerbaijani *Ashiq Sadiq*, containing Chodzko’s comments.

To my information, this must be the first ever translation of Azeri literature into English. Moreover, Chodzko’s work contributed considerably to further popularity of this literature. A year later, in 1843, in Jena appeared its full translation into German, titled “*Specimens of The Popular Poetry ...*”, by O. Wolf<sup>1</sup>. Also in 1843 “*Adventures and Improvisations of Koroglu*” were already available to the French readers, thanks to the French translation, published in “*La Revue indépendante*” and another separate reprint version of the annual<sup>2</sup>. There are many reasons to believe that the author of the French translation of Azeri epic was also Alexander Chodzko. Later on, the text from “*La Revue indépendante*” became the basis, upon which the famous writer George Sand built the French version of the legend with an epic character. Based on Chodzko’s London book, S. Peno

---

1 *Die Abentheuer und Gesänge Korroglus, des Räubers und Dichters. Ein persischer Volksroman. Aus dem türkisch-persischen original wörtlich in das Engl. übersetzt von A. Chodzko. Deutsch von O.L.B. Wolf, Jena, 1843.*

2 *Les aventures et les improvisations de Kourrouglou, recueillies en Perse (Extrait de la Revue indépendante), Paris, 1843.*

accomplished also the first translation of “Koroglu” into Russian, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Tbilisi.

Thus, thanks to the academic work of this Bylorussian scholar, west European scientists and the public had a possibility to familiarize themselves, for the first time, with the national literature of Azarbaijan, translated into the main European Languages.