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У. К. Брумфилд

доктор философии; профессор славяноведения, Тулейнский университет,
Новый Орлеан, США; e-mail: william.brumfield@gmail.com

ЮРИЙ ГАГАРИН И МОЙ «СВОБОДНЫЙ ПОЛЕТ»

В статье автор описывает, как он рос в небольшом городке на американском Юге в 1950-е и начале 1960-х гг. – в период серьезных социальных противоречий. Попытка обрести духовные ценности в этих условиях и изучение истории положили начало интересу к русской культуре: сначала через прочтение романов Толстого и Достоевского, а затем романа «Евгений Онегин» Пушкина уже на русском языке. Особую роль в жизни автора сыграл спутник и полет Юрия Гагарина в космос, так как это явилось большим стимулом для тех, кто хотел посвятить себя русистике.

Ключевые слова: Гражданская война в США; Джорджия; десегрегация; Лев Толстой; Федор Достоевский; Александр Пушкин; Юрий Гагарин; спутник.

Brumfield William Craft

YURII GAGARIN AND MY LAUNCH INTO SPACE

The author writes of growing up in a small town in the American South during the 1950s and early 1960s, a time of complex social tensions. As the essay demonstrates, this context of moral searching and the study of history provided the beginnings of the author's path toward Russian culture – first through the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and later through Pushkin's Eugene Onegin (in Russian). Also noted is the role of Sputnik and the flight of Yuri Gagarin in providing essential support for those who wished to devote themselves to Russian studies.

Key words: American Civil War; Georgia; desegregation; Lev Tolstoy; Fedor Dostoevsky; Aleksandr Pushkin; Yurii Gagarin; sputnik.

Where was I on April 12, 1961 and what do I remember of the event that transformed our relation to the cosmos? Of course there were news reports of Gagarin's heroic flight and much discussion of its political ramifications. To tell the truth, I remembered little of that momentous event. At the time I was completing my penultimate year at the high school

in a small Georgia town, and our family was planning to move to a city in a neighboring state. While driving back from that city with my mother and sister, I was suddenly distracted by a bee that had flown into the car. When my mother saw that the car was headed into a red clay ditch along the winding road, she tried to grasp the steering wheel, but too late. As we went into the ditch, the steering wheel turned with an instantaneous force that broke both parts of my mother's lower arm. In the midst of our shock and despair, good people soon drove up from the opposite direction, took my mother to the nearest town with a hospital, and made sure that our battered 1958 Chevrolet was towed back home with my sister and me inside. To this day I clearly remember that terrifying accident; these are the events that give texture to our memories, not flights into space.

But to dismiss the personal significance of Gagarin's epochal deed would be inappropriate. Life is not a straight path, and everything is connected. Why, in fact, did I become interested in Russia? After public lectures people often ask if I have Russian ancestors. Not at all. Then what is the source of this profound interest that has led me for more than four decades throughout the vast expanse of Russia, from Smolensk and Arkhangelsk to Vladivostok? Over the years I have developed a few standard replies; but a meaningful answer is elusive, and I continue to ponder the impulses that propelled me in such an unlikely direction:

To begin: I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, the first child of Pauline Elizabeth (1917–1997) and Lewis Floyd Brumfield (1895–1975). The date of my birth was June 28, 1944, three weeks after the Normandy Invasion. My mother frequently told me of the thrilling sound when all the city's church bells rang out on D-Day. Although our American soil was untouched by the enemy, times were nevertheless unsettled. In the first few years of my life, the family was always on the move, with my father in search of work in distant cities.

The situation settled after my fifth birthday, when we arrived in the north Georgia town of Gainesville. Like so many other Georgia county centers, Gainesville had a quiet charm in the 1950s, but it also had debilitating poverty, among the white population as well as the black. From our unfinished brick house on the fringe of town I could walk to fields scarred with red clay gullies (an ideal playground). Around were groves of scrawny pines and oaks, as well as the overgrown pond of an abandoned farm. Everywhere the loud hum of black crickets. Once a snake (probably

a copperhead) bit me as I walked back in tall grass from the pond; but the bite only led to a large swelling of my ankle, and I even went to Sunday church service the next day.

Our family life was complicated. Throughout my childhood, my father was with our family only for brief periods. Perhaps for that reason there are moments with him that I remember with unusual clarity. Such as the morning when I (eight years old) was playing with toy soldiers—Americans against communist Russians—and my father suddenly said: “Son, we will never fight the Russians.” What was the basis of this firm opinion, which so surprised me? My father was a southern conservative, anything but a leftist liberal, and this was the time of the Korean War. Yet he knew his own direct experience. My father was the first person I knew who had encountered Russians.

When the United States entered the First World War in 1917, young Lewis left the family farm in southeast Louisiana and enlisted in the Marines in August 1917. Trained at the recruit base of Parris Island, South Carolina, he qualified as a marksman in October 1917. In May 1918 he was shipped overseas to France and served for the duration of the war in the 6th regiment of the U.S. Marines, part of a Marine brigade within the US Army’s 2nd Division. He participated in two of the most important offensives on the American sector of the front: the St. Mihiel Offensive (September 1918); and the costly Meuse-Argonne Offensive (October 1918). For exceptional courage he was awarded three Bronze Stars, as well as three campaign medals. He marched to the Rhine in November 1918, and spent six months with occupation forces in Coblenz. (The above information comes from his official service record.)

Although I expected stories about the battlefield, my father was reluctant to talk about the experience, which taught him more than enough about the violence and degradation of war. In remembering the occupation he said that the German people behaved decently to Americans, but the German officers that he encountered were possessed with a desire for revenge—something he never forgot when he witnessed the rise of Hitler in the 1930s and heard fragments of the dictator’s manic speeches. He also remembered sympathy at seeing Russian soldiers in French internment camps in 1918. These were soldiers who had served in Russian formations with the French army on the western front and had been interned as potential subversives following the October Revolution. (After the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, Russia was technically no longer

at war with Germany.) Despite the lack of common language, this personal encounter formed my father's attitude of sympathy for the Russians. They had been our allies, and now they were in filthy, inhuman conditions. As a child, I was puzzled by his opinion, but I never forgot it.

Like my mother I considered myself a devout Christian. During my early teens I systematically read the Bible in a daily quota of chapters; in fact I read it three times from beginning to end. Thus I absorbed the magnificent 17th-century English of the King James translation--the "Protestant Bible". Our mother supported me and my younger sister, Carol with the small salary of a north Georgia school teacher. Money was a constant concern sharpened by infrequent contributions from the absent father. Relief from family stress occurred during yearly trips to my mother's family, in the Piedmont region of central North Carolina. I was always struck by the contrast between our stunted north Georgia pines and the long-leaf, fragrant pines of North Carolina in charming resort towns such as Southern Pines. There we visited the large house of one of my mother's sisters--a most elegant and beautiful woman who had a difficult marriage and died at the tragically early age of 47.

At first glance nothing in this southern narrative provides a hint of interest in Russia, but now I see that the strands were coming together. High school provided me with a knowledge of Latin, which would later prepare me for the difficult declensions of Russian nouns. Trips to the modest town library surrounded me with books on great leaders and the clash of nations. My reading focused on what was known in the south as the "War between the States." I remember the four large red volumes of Douglas Southall Freeman's biography of Robert E. Lee. And there was Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, with its tale of pride and suffering in the state of Georgia, where people still talked of Sherman's March to the Sea. I embraced Mitchell's narrative of Atlanta in flames and resurgent! Later I found another large volume, an edition of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, with end papers showing Napoleon's invasion and inglorious retreat from Moscow and back end papers showing the same process with Hitler. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I found an epic and a people worthy of my adolescent Southern vision of heroic commanders and the endurance of war-torn cities.

Captivated by the work of Tolstoy, I subsequently discovered Dostoevsky. The characters of *Crime and Punishment* projected an odd allure for my adolescent imagination--as they have for so many others.

(In the entry of October 4, 1934 in his “Notes from Svendborg”, Walter Benjamin claims that Bertold Brecht warned him that reading Crime and Punishment was dangerous to one’s health and could cause physical illness!) If Tolstoy provided a way to interpret the fate of the South, then Dostoevsky seemed to offer profound insight into the tempests of a fractured family. In this great literature people are as miserable as we were—but they lived in hope and faith! And there was Gagarin’s magnificent flight, the triumph of hope.

Two months after Yuri Gagarin flew into space, in the summer before my final year in high school, the family moved to Columbia, the capital city of the neighboring state of South Carolina. In Columbia I benefited from the guidance of an excellent teacher of English, who introduced me to the concept of style in writing and encouraged my reading of Russian literature. By the time I arrived at The Johns Hopkins University on a crisp fall morning in 1962, I was primed for the “Russian disease”. Perhaps this distinguished university in the old city of Baltimore, Maryland is a more congenial place for undergraduates these days, but I was not comfortable with the insistent drive toward medical school that I saw in most of the students. In a contrarian mood, I noticed that a few Russian courses (the offspring of Sputnik) were offered, and I decided to choose Russian as the farthest subject removed from the pre-medical obsession.

Thus I began formal study of Russian at The Johns Hopkins University, which in the early 1960s had a miniscule program staffed by one untenured lecturer. My entry into the program was motivated partly to escape the pervasive Hopkins competition for medical school and to achieve a space of my own. The very small Russian classes allowed me to enter the language of a great literature that I had begun to read in high school. Eugene Onegin was my primary textbook. No special methodology in those days!

The Russian program on the main Hopkins campus eventually disappeared, as have so many others at American universities during the past two decades. With the waning of the Cold War, administrative expediency and budget cuts have led numerous institutions of higher education to decrease or eliminate Russian instruction. Administrative logic insists on cuts in “underperforming programs,” and American Slavists have not always been effective in developing a new approach to Russian culture.

Nonetheless, I believe that every institution with any claim to global humanities education should have at least one faculty position in Russian. It is not enough to assume that students with an interest in Russian will seek

universities that offer it full programs in Russian. Most students (myself included) have little idea of pursuing such interests until they are presented with the opportunity. All it takes is one person. Without that modest instructor in Russian language at Hopkins in the early 1960s, I would not have entered the world of Russian studies. Perhaps my life would have taken a more “normal” course, but Russian architecture would have lost one of its most active proponents.

The essential thing about those early college years was the realization that a study of Russia would allow me to create a space of my own. The quiet, meek character of my first Russian teacher made it easier still for me to escape the monotonous sense of academic competition. And the role of Yuri Gagarin? Also essential. There is no doubt that his flight stimulated interest in things Russian, just as it stimulated academic development generally in the United States. If Sputnik was the first stage, Gagarin was the booster. Now I comprehend: Yuri Gagarin launched me into space. And that space was Russia.

LITERATURE

Приемская Е., Юришина М. Это ваша история. Одинаково важно, чтобы об этом знали в РФ и у нас. – URL: <http://izvestia.ru/news/668936>

Photographic work of William C. Brumfield on internet sites

1) *Documentary Photography from the William Brumfield Collection*. Created by the Information Section of the Vologda Regional Cultural Department (Russia), with original support from the Vologda Regional Library. Contains a photographic archive with images of over 30,000 photographs by WCB, a gallery with several hundred black-and-white photographs by WCB, numerous article texts in Russian and English, and bibliographies of works by and about WCB (<http://www.cultinfo.ru/brumfield>; English: http://cultinfo.ru/brumfield/index_e.htm)

2) *William C. Brumfield Collection*. Primary collection of photographic work, held at the Department of Image Collections at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

The collection archive includes some 60,000 digital images by Brumfield. The NGA also has on long-term loan approximately 40,000 B/W negatives, of which some 10,000 have been printed as 8»x10» study prints.

3) *William C. Brumfield Collection*, created at the Library of Congress as part of the “Meeting of Frontiers” digital project (<http://frontiers.loc.gov>). Currently contains over 1,100 color photographs under “William C. Brumfield Collection” (http://frontiers.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mfdigcol/mfdcpht.html#a_eng)

4) “*Discovering Russia*” site within “*Russia beyond the Headlines*”. A bi-monthly series of articles and photograph galleries; currently contains over 4,500 photographs by William Brumfield (http://rbth.com/special/discovering_russia)

5) *William C. Brumfield site*. Contains some 1,300 images displayed within the site <http://temples.ru>, dedicated to Russian Orthodox churches. Also contains an interactive map showing the geographic range of the displayed photographic work: http://temples.ru/photo_stat.php?ID=1287

6) *The William C. Brumfield Russian Architecture Collection* is a collaboration between the University of Washington Libraries and William Brumfield to digitize and catalog 30,000 of his photographs of Russian architecture for preservation and study <http://content.lib.washington.edu/brumfieldweb/>



Lewis Floyd Brumfield
(author's father) in uniform of US
Marines, Aix-les-Bains, France,
summer of 1918



Author with mother and sister.
Columbia, South Carolina,
April 1961 (at time of Gagarin flight)