Dennis Biggs (1961-1964)

My memories of my studies at Birmingham University have somewhat faded but I recall spending 3 happy and productive years from 1961 to 1964 in the Department of Russian Studies of the Faculty of Commerce.

During the first year I remember the interesting lectures by Prof. Baykov, the intensive lessons in the Russian language from Mrs Koutsaikoff and the stimulating tutorials with Mr. Bob Smith, who inspired me to broaden my horizons. It was a shock when we learned of the death of Prof. Baykov but things continued smoothly with the provocative tuition of Prof. Davies. I graduated with a B.Com (Russian Studies) in 1964 presented by the Chancellor, Sir Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon.

During the vacations, I undertook a 3 week visit to Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev with a group of students on a NUS sponsored tour; and took part in a student work camp in Krakow, Poland. I also spent a month in Cambridge on a Russian language course with Prof. Elizabeth Hill. I wrote my extended essay on Anglo-Soviet trade between 1917 and 1960.

I was fortunate to have personal trading links with the USSR when I joined Wogau Machinery Ltd. a subsidiary of the Guinness Mahon Merchant Bank in London. I was a sales negotiator representing a number of leading British manufacturers who were taking their first steps in seeking business with the USSR and Eastern Europe. I attended the Trade Fairs in Poznan, Brno and Budapest during these years and had an active part in the establishment of the first British Trade Fair in Moscow in 1966.

I completed an engineering apprenticeship in 1960 and worked for a year in both France and Germany, prior to my studies at Birmingham University so I was well placed to work with a number of important engineering companies in promoting sales to the difficult markets of Eastern Europe.

It was stimulating and sometimes tricky dealing with the State controlled import organisations and bureaucracy and of course there were certain political and personal dangers and suspicions during such early trading contacts during the height of the cold war. For instance, I knew Greville Wynn who was involved in spying operations and all business visitors were under intense scrutiny and observation during their visits. However the business deals were rewarding and I was personally responsible for a number of multi-million pound projects in the USSR and the Comecon countries, including complete turnkey factory deals.

Doing business in Eastern Europe was fraught with problems due to the intense personal scrutiny and hardships inherent in this era and after 7 years of such difficulties I was prompted to seek wider business horizons. I became an overseas representative travelling world-wide selling British and German engineering products and spent the last 12 years living and working in Germany.

I try to maintain my knowledge of the Russian language and have meanwhile mastered Romanian and Spanish.

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