Donald Male (1955)

When I came to study at Birmingham the B.Com (Russian Studies) seemed an interesting proposition with the attraction of learning a new language and studying what in 1955 was the 'other half" of the world. There were just three of us who took this option. The whole ethos of the Faculty was then geared to giving students tutorial time, but we were especially fortunate, as in addition to fortnightly formal tutorials with other staff members, lectures on the Russian Studies component of the course usually involved just the three of us and one or two students from other courses.

The Faculty was in the 'Dome' and just three steps down on the left was the Departmental library where Bob Smith, then research associate had his desk, together with the two post graduate students, Dan Podolski, and Bill Small. Bill gave me as a fresher the best piece of advice-' Never refuse a suggestion to meet for coffee'-- I still hold on to that! Off the library was Geoff Barker's office, where we met for lectures on Soviet Industrial Policy. Bob Davies came the following year, and that was, physically, the Department. Further along the warren of rooms housing the Faculty were Miss Koutaissoff, who with great patience and courtesy guided our small group of departmental students with a scientist or two thrown in.

Professor Baykov oversaw the department from another room along this corridor, with what for us students was at times a perplexing mixture of geniality, humour and severity. I certainly owe much to him for his encouragement and insistence on the academic rigour of 'methodological approach. He supervised me in the early days of what started as an M.Com thesis on the Russian Peasant Commune at the time of Collectivisation, and was an important influence on my gaining a place in the first 'post thaw' exchange of graduate students with the USSR. My year at the Timiryazev Agricultural Academy was good personally in that I was the only West European student and was able to see life for Soviet students at first hand and made friends, with whom I am sadly no longer in contact,

None of us could foresee the changes which lay ahead at that time of optimism in the Krushchev 'thaw' years.

After time in Birmingham on a research grant I then went to Glasgow, but continued work on my thesis with Bob Smith supervising after Professor Baykov died. Bob Smith organised an annual seminar on peasant history which attracted participants nationally and internationally. Bob Davies was very encouraging to me at this time and his Glasgow links were helpful as I settled in there- and I learned from first hand experience that he was no mean hill walker! When I decided to move to a 'people centered' career in the Probation Service.

I continued work on the thesis in my 'spare' time, and was very pleased when I had a phone call to say it was to be published as one of the CUP monographs from the National Association. Now long retired, spending my time with family, some work with voluntary associations and the Methodist Church, my use of Russian is limited to my orders at the local fish and chip shop where the assistant is from Ukraine. In 1955 it was inconceivable that one would hear Russian spoken in an English street!

I look back on those days at Birmingham with gratitude for the insistence on mental rigour, for the kind support of the staff who exercised a 'pastoral' responsibility to us students, and for encouraging a strong sense that being human gave us an obligation to explore and understand difference. I read the Centre's website and am enthralled by what I see there.

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