

Leopold Haimson-Remembrance

I represent the first generation of Leopold's Russian history students. I began graduate work at the University of Chicago more than fifty years ago, when I was twenty, and Leopold a young and brilliant Assistant Professor, age thirty-one. I can still remember registration in October 1958-- making the acquaintance of another eager entering student, Robert Crummey, who was planning to study French history, he thought.

I had met Leopold the previous year. My undergraduate teacher, of French history at Cornell, was Edward Fox, who had previously taught at Harvard. Two of his favorite students were Leopold and Marc Raeff then at Clark College, and Professor Fox suggested I talk to both of them. I met Leopold in December 1957, at the AHA meeting in New York. And of course he impressed me with his enthusiasm, eloquence and energy. I had not encountered anyone like him; I still have not encountered anyone like him. From the conversation I remember only his warning that I not go into Russian history on a lark. I remember that well. I didn't quite understand what he meant. Why would I go into Russian history as a lark?

Well, I later found out the real meaning of the warning, for Leopold didn't do things on a lark. His commitment was great, all-embracing. The late fifties and early sixties were times of great exhilaration about Russia, the opening of the Soviet Union, the thaw, sputnik, great musicians, astonishing ballet, adventurous and rebellious writers. Leopold caught that spirit. His love for Russia and the Russian intelligentsia was passionate; he conveyed it to his students, in a dramatic, moving way. And when he spoke about Russia he was larger than life, commanding, dominating.

For Leopold Russian history was a mission. And he involved his students personally in that mission. The relations were ones not between a distant professor and subservient student, but between friends, members of his circle, and most accurately, though I shy from using the term, comrades. And though my research goals and his soon diverged, his interest in what I was doing never flagged. He read many of my drafts, liked some, not so much others, but his observations and criticisms showed his own unique and I would say profound grasp of the subjects, yielding powerful insights about what the work could become, how it could fit in the broader interpretations of history. From the start, he was a rare example of what I think of as wisdom. His incredible faculty of empathy gave one the feeling that he understood what you were really saying, when you were not sure yourself and had to give it more thought. The bonds of mutual understanding, as with many of his students, provide the basis of friendship that lasted many years, visits, dinners, sharing the *joie de vivre* that he could epitomize.

Leopold quickly and clearly distinguished between those who belonged to his circle and those who didn't—there could be no mistakes about that. But those who did were fired with a sense of importance, destiny, the significance of their work, a calling. He had a remarkable ability to bring people together. We met and chatted at the Social Science Tea, which took place every afternoon in the Social Science building, at a time when the library was part of that building. He and his good friend Hugh Mclean threw memorable parties for those in the Russian field. Amidst food and drink, they gave free rein to Leo's *razmakh*, the Russian spirit of glorious abandon.

At the time I was fascinated by Russian intellectual history, and Leopold's book *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism*, which I had read before going to Chicago, was a transformative experience, a revelation for me as for many others. Its combination of the personal histories of the individual Marxists, illuminated by his study of anthropology and psychology, and the different visions of the revolution was startling and new. He placed the Marxists' early evolution in the context of the intelligentsia's mentality, which swung between emphases on consciousness, the intellectuals' efforts to direct reality according to particular revolutionary programs, and spontaneity, the reliance on the masses spirit of *buntarstvo* to arise against the existing order. His focus on individual psychology within the ideological context of an era was a decisive influence on my own work, setting a model that I would strive for in studying figures inhabiting different historical scenes. His empathy for the individual Marxists as he followed their intellectual evolution was remarkable. His language, often difficult and involuted, resonated with a sense of historical truth, poetic in his manner of bringing concepts to life as sources of inspiration and action.

Leopold's lectures at the time were equally commanding. Unlike many of his colleagues', they were not dry factual summaries. Rather he introduced students to the great Russian historians and their historical controversies. We read and discussed Soloviev, Kliuchevskii, Platonov, Presniakov, Pokrovskii. In this way we were drawn into debates about the contesting visions of Russia's past and felt that own work could contribute to those debates.

In the 1960s, Leopold's interests shifted to social history. In 1964 and 1965, he published his landmark articles on social stability in urban Russia, which revealed the

social and political developments that on the eve of the First World War made a revolution likely, though he later claimed that he never argued that it was inevitable. His theses engaged the entire field in an intense debate on the origins of the revolution. When he moved to Columbia in 1965, Leopold maintained his intensive commitment to his graduate students. He introduced Social History Workshops to discuss the research of students and visiting scholars, and they continue to this day. The discussions, I remember were lively and penetrating, and often very long, the questions sharp and irreverent. We called the workshop, not completely in jest, "the little red schoolhouse." After the seminar, the participants repaired to a Chinese restaurant for ample dinners and considerable quantities of beer, though Leopold had a weakness for Margaritas.

With perestroika, Leopold's talent for bringing scholars together helped establish lasting contacts between American and Soviet scholars. It culminated in the remarkable series of conferences, under the aegis of the Leningrad, later the Saint Petersburg, Institute of History and the St. Petersburg European University, and they continue to meet. I participated in one of the first in 1991 about the working class in early twentieth century Russia, the focus the last years of his scholarship. This was far from my interests of course, but Leopold made sure I was included. As a result I could deliver a paper on representations of Nicholas II, which was published in *Istoriia SSSR* and stirred interest in a subject long taboo in Soviet scholarship. At the banquet afterwards Leopold's spirit prevailed and the participants made friendships, ties many of them lasting to his day.

Leopold flourished most in Russia during the years of perestroika. He pursued his work in the archive with his usual intensity, shared his enthusiasm about discoveries

that promised new understandings of Russian political life between the two revolutions. He thrived with the spirit of academic companionship, especially among the scholars at the Petersburg Institute of History. At night he was the bon vivant visiting his friends at their homes, going to restaurants. I can still see him, at his table in a special room in the archive, concentrating intensely on documents, chatting with the archivists, whom he charmed, drinking tea, even smoking a cigar or a cigarette. On one occasion, he lived in a suite, in the old Leningrad Hotel (now part of the Astoria), where it was said the poet Esenin ended his life. He luxuriated in the old world opulence, sat on a couch reading, writing, and enjoying a drink, with Cuban cigars strewn about the room. In these years, he met and courted Natasha. He wed her in New York, where I had joined him at Columbia, and there was a joyous reception in our apartment. He settled down for the first time, happy after decades of quest and wandering.

During perestroika Russia had opened possibilities to reform and enliven the Russian historical profession together with western historians who would enrich their methodology and at the same time develop their own research on Russia's past. And to a certain degree Leopold succeeded in achieving that. But the Russia that emerged in the two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union proved not to be what he had loved or envisioned. The idealism mixed with socialist inclinations that inspired his scholarly mission and those who joined him was subverted by the disorder and rampant materialism of the 1990s, the repudiation of socialism, and the idealization of western capitalism that he found most abhorrent. He was destined to live through one of the many sharp reversals of direction that characterize the Russian past and to join the

ranks of the many members of the intelligentsia whose lofty missions, viewed from the present, are seen in the hues of tragedy.