

## **Discussion of Catriona Kelly's article, 'The School Waltz': The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom**

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## Discussion of Catriona Kelly's article, 'The School Waltz': The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom

### EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

For the fourth round of our Forum, we initiated discussion on the basis of an article published in the first issue of the journal that has attracted a good deal of discussion, and indeed controversy. This is Catriona Kelly's discussion of 'everyday life' in the post-Stalinist Soviet school, "The School Waltz": The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom'. The article attempts to write about the post-Stalinist Soviet school 'from the inside', giving the 'child's-eye view', as it were. At the same time, it is written by an adult observer, and one from a different culture, and in retrospect, relative to the events described. The central paradox is perhaps that it 'normalises' discussion of an experience that is considered so 'normal' that it is, in fact, scarcely ever discussed by those who have actually been through it. Further, the exercise of recapturing 'everyday life' in areas where written documentation is scarce or unreliable requires recourse to oral history, to informants' memories of their own behaviour and perceptions decades earlier than their statements were made. Obviously, there may be some considerable dislocation between the informants' current views of reality and their views at the time

(especially allowing for generational change). Yet the ‘archaeological’ approach espoused here essentially requires looking at the sources without correcting for possible retrospective rationalisation, and for features such as auto-stereotyping and ‘false memory syndrome’.

We felt that the exercise in ‘historical ethnography’ attempted here raises a number of issues of general interest, which include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- 1 What are the main gains and losses in the espousal of ‘insider ethnography’ by a cultural outsider? What is such an observer likely to see, and conversely, fail to see, in the culture under study?
- 2 How effective is oral history (whether recorded in the form of the ‘semi-structured interviews’ used here, or in some other way) as a resource for retrieving everyday experience? Is testimony of this kind reliable only as an expression of mentality, or can it also be seen as a repository of facts and events not recorded in written tradition (for example, where this is subject to censorship and self-censorship)?
- 3 Is the ‘everyday life’ of past generations best represented by the essentially narrative methods espoused here (which may at least have the virtue of accessibility to a non-specialised readership), or is it more effective to preserve analytical distance explicitly, and to look constantly at what the standpoint adopted by informants tells us about their experiences and mentality at the present, the time of giving the interview?

As we expected, the opinions expressed in the Forum varied quite widely. Some participants were taken aback or intrigued, or both, by the exercise of so elaborately reconstructing experience from the recent past, of discussing what any Russian reader born before about 1980 is likely to remember in considerable detail in any case. Some others took issue with the factual assertions in the article, and also with the interpretations presented. No consensus with regard to the practices of ‘insider ethnography’ or oral history emerged, nor was there agreement about the arguments made in the original article, or even what these arguments were. Not wishing to impose a ‘general view’ where there was none, we have therefore moved away from our usual practice of concluding the discussion with an editorial note. Instead, the various answers are followed by a reply from Catriona Kelly herself, and a response to the discussion from Sheila Fitzpatrick.

*Albert Baiburin*

**VADIM BAEVSKY****The Soviet School as Illuminated  
by Ethnography (a Response to Catriona  
Kelly)****Introduction**

One day my wife and I were walking down Vladimirskaya ulitsa — one of the central streets in Kiev — when a stranger stopped us. *'Excuse me,'* he said, addressing himself to me, *'I've a feeling you may have been at school No. 45 before the war. Is that right?'*

*'Quite right,' I replied.*

*'So I did recognise you, and it must have been you I had the fight with on 1 September 1937?'*

Exactly so. Neither of us could remember what the fight had been about. I had just entered Class One: it was my first day ever at school. We started fighting so fiercely that the school director was called out to deal with us. That was the start of it all. Not long afterwards, my father was arrested, and then war broke out, and life got complicated: in ten years I attended ten different schools, scattered all over the place, from Ashkhabad to Zhitomir. I detested every single

day of school with my whole heart, beginning to end. When I reached Class Ten, I managed to get myself expelled twice in a row. Along with three friends, I was plotting the murder of another boy; the only reason we didn't actually do the deed was that one of our own quartet got murdered himself the day before the day we'd been planning to do the deed.

So you can imagine how astonished the other boys in my class were when I applied for, and got, a place at teacher training college after leaving school. I put a lot of effort into my studies, and when I left I was sent to work<sup>1</sup> at a school in a mining village in Donetsk province. Here I spent eleven years teaching Russian language, literature, and logic, and working as a study director (*zavuch*) and then for a short time as a school director. I drew on my experience there when I began attending pedagogical conferences and also when, in due course, I joined the staff of Smolensk Pedagogical Institute, where I wrote my candidate's dissertation on 'Aesthetic Education in Literature Classes for the Senior Years in Secondary School'. One of my thesis examiners was V. N. Shatskaya, the wife of S. T. Shatsky,<sup>2</sup> who warmly supported my view that literature should be taught as an artistic subject and not an ideological one. My dissertation began with the words, 'Literature is an art form'. It's hard to imagine now how bold this statement seemed to readers of my dissertation back then. So my own experience bears out Catriona Kelly's assertions about the limited impact of S. T. Shatsky's ideas of 'free education' and of interest in aesthetic education during the Thaw years.

Not long ago, a lady arrived to inspect my department, which teaches the history and theory of literature. She took exception to the fact that our courses in literary theory differ from the so-called state standard.

*'You get funding from the state, so you should do what the state lays down,'* she said.

*'I teach Russian literature according to my own understanding of the subject,'* I replied. *'I worked in the Stalin era, then during the Khrushchev Thaw, then in the Brezhnev era and perestroika, and I'm still working now. Can you imagine the changes in the programmes over those decades? So what kind of shameless whore<sup>3</sup> do you think I'd have to be to spend my life doing what officials told me?'*

With this, our conversation came to an abrupt end.

<sup>1</sup> *poekhal po naznacheniyu*: referring to the period of compulsory state service after graduating from a college or university. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> One of the most prominent advocates of 'free education' before 1917 and between 1917 and 1932, when he was director of the First Experimental Station of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment. See [Partlett 2004]. [Editor].

<sup>3</sup> *blyad* is a very strong word for 'whore', until recently considered unprintable. [Editor].

### Some thoughts on methodology

Some time ago, I published a book on literature teaching in Russian schools during the nineteenth century. As I was reading Catriona Kelly's lively and thoughtful article, I began wondering what the difference between pedagogical history and ethnography might be. The answer I came to was that the body of Kelly's article is made up for the most part of material collected in face-to-face interviews with informants, while pedagogical history draws on printed sources. Ethnography is a more human discipline, so to speak. However, there are also risks here, and it seems to me that Kelly's work to some extent illustrates these. Children mostly can't distinguish between teachers and the subjects they are teaching: if a teacher is honest and fair, strict but kind (!), then children will feel affection for him or her and for the subject itself, and their memories will be positive even if the teacher's professional levels (knowledge of the subject, capacity to pass on skills) were in fact less than first-rate. So it is wise to restrict the weight given to informants' views in ethnographical discussions — as, in fact, Catriona Kelly does, since she cites a variety of print sources alongside the interviews.

I'll leave further debate on this point to professional ethnographers, however, and I recognise that conclusions about it have to be flexible. As a matter of fact, my book drew on memoirs of nineteenth-century teachers by some outstanding former pupils, such as Ivan Pushchin, Fedor Buslaev, Vladimir Korolenko, Konstantin Paustovsky, whom one might also rank as informants, though of a particularly elite kind, of course.

Catriona Kelly's article is valuable because it does not simply analyse the problematics of the Russian school from within, as is usually the case, but from the inside and the outside at one and the same time. The testimony of former pupils is supplemented by pedagogical texts, studies of school folklore, and a variety of other sources. What is more, Kelly's own view is not just distinct from Soviet pedagogy, but diametrically opposed to this. The result is to 'defamiliarise' the material discussed, as Kelly herself convincingly describes (pp. 114–7). She cogently discusses the political and social meaning of various phenomena of school life in the Stalin and post-Stalin eras, and much of what she says is well-observed and accurate. I could myself add a good deal about the way that teachers who were struggling to cope with their pupils moved them round the classroom (as a way of keeping order), and also (to take a quite different example) about those wonderful camping trips with nights spent out under the stars (pp. 129, 131). And so on.

In what follows, I have tried to supplement some points made in the article under discussion with the reflections drawn from my own experience of working in schools that Catriona Kelly's article has stimulated.

### Teachers

I have the habit of asking friends which teachers stand out in their memories as particularly important. As a rule, people can clearly remember two or three out of the several dozen they encountered in their ten or eleven years of school. One might think that wasn't very many. But sometimes those two or three teachers, or at times only one teacher, prompted a pupil's entire choice of life path. In some places, Catriona Kelly appears to see Soviet teachers in the way official views of the era under discussion saw them: as conduits for official ideology. Yet there were other kinds of teachers as well, who performed radically different roles, either directly opposing themselves to Soviet ideology or pointedly ignoring this, feeling more devotion for their pupils than for themselves, and carrying this devotion through their entire lives. Unfortunately, Kelly's informants did not reflect this important factor. Teachers are more important than any pedagogical plan, syllabus, or textbook. It is better to have a good teacher and a bad syllabus, dreadful pedagogical plans and textbooks, than the best possible books, plans, and syllabuses and a mediocre teacher.

When I arrived at my school in Tsentralny poselok [Central Settlement] — the name came from the fact that the place is surrounded by villages and mining settlements scattered over a radius of three to seven kilometres — I discovered that I was taking over my position from a teacher called Yuliya Nikolaevna Ponomarenko. She, I found, was the young wife of an army officer who'd arrived with him when he was posted in the locality; she'd only had a chance to work there a year when he was posted somewhere else, and off she went with him. The children spoke of her with awe, and I could work out that in only a year she'd been able to convey much more of Russian literature to the pupils in the senior classes than was anticipated in the state syllabus. The director of studies gave me her six-month plans for the study of literature in Classes Eight, Nine, and Ten, and also the thick exercise-books holding her lesson plans and summaries that she'd insouciantly left behind. I am myself struck by the fact that I can still remember, a lifetime later, the full name of my predecessor, despite our never having met. She deserved it.

The reason I'd left fragrant Kiev for the wilds of the Donbass was of course not to teach children that there were two (and only two) 'methods' in literature: critical realism and Socialist Realism. Yuliya Ponomarenko's plans and summaries gave me valuable support in my first years as a teacher. My pupils heard about Tyutchev and Fet, Blok and Bunin (yes, 'white emigré' Bunin!), and were taught many other extraordinarily valuable things as well. As for the authors who were mentioned in the official syllabus, we studied these in unusual ways. I would set them a strophe or two to learn from an ode by

Lomonosov or by Derzhavin, but in fact the atmosphere in our class made some pupils want to learn a whole lot more: competition worked wonders. And I remember how one girl, Valya Limonchenko, once recited the whole of Lomonosov's 1747 ode on the accession of Empress Elizabeth. Between them, my pupils in Class Eight learned the whole of Evgeny Onegin by heart. I split the novel into segments of 7-10 strophes, and my pupils chose segments to learn and comment on. Anyone who didn't want to didn't have to. I did not allow myself to give failing marks.

'*You won't find me giving you a two for Pushkin,*' I said. All the same, every one of them knew these lines by Pushkin:

*Accept my gratitude,  
Admirer of the peaceful Aonidae,  
O you, whose memory preserves  
My fleeting creations,  
Whose benevolent hand  
Will ruffle the old man's laurels!*

My pupils would wait impatiently for the moment when I'd arrive, sit down at my desk and say,

*'Well, ladies and gentlemen, let's ruffle the old man's laurels, shall we?'*

And they'd rush to recite and analyse their section of Evgeny Onegin, sticking their hands high in the air and bouncing up and down at their desks, and envying the pupils who got called out to answer, and getting offended when it wasn't them.

In my very first year as a teacher, I set up a school theatre group, 'Our Coeval', which only staged the classics. There was no TV back then, and the only entertainment was the dreadful films they showed at the settlement club. The children's home lives were highly specific too. Their fathers had to work very hard: mining sapped all their strength. So the children were left to their mothers, who weren't necessarily very well educated — a few couldn't even read or write. But we put on Gogol's *The Marriage* in full, as well as vaudevilles by Chekhov, a little-known comedy by Leo Tolstoy called *She is the Fount*, written for the amateur actors of Yasnaya Polyana, scenes from Griboedov's *Woe from Wit*, and other Russian classics as well. We charged for tickets when we gave performances in the miners' clubs and we used the money to buy clothes and shoes for the poorest pupils living in the local villages and settlements who had to struggle to our school — the only ten-year school in the locality — in all weathers.

What I've set down here is no more than a few broad brush-strokes. But I think that it's important to take a wide-ranging view, one rising above incidental details and assimilating the entire lives of teachers and pupils; without this, a true conception of the late twentieth-century school is impossible to realise.



### **From falsehood to truth**

I was surprised that the article didn't recognise clearly that Soviet schools saw an evolution from falsehood to truth in the course of the second half of the twentieth century. This factor is extraordinarily important when one is evaluating what went on. The school syllabuses and textbooks in humanities subjects became much more honest, and even more importantly, teachers were now able to move a long way away from these if they weren't happy with them, and were in almost no danger when doing so — while in earlier eras of Soviet history such liberty-taking would have meant risking one's job and perhaps even one's freedom.

### **The weakening of the primary school**

There were also some regrettable developments in the late Soviet school that Catriona Kelly ignores. Beginning in the 1950s, the plans and syllabuses and official targets for the primary school underwent significant change. Before that, teachers knew they were supposed to make children love schoolwork, to teach them to read, write, count, to memorise and read aloud. Children left primary school with a solid foundation for further study. In one of the Tsentralny poselok primary schools, there was a teacher called Antonina Petrovna Darova. She was famous throughout the whole district, though, as an exceptionally modest person, she did nothing to foster this herself. However, all the teachers dealing with the first year of secondary school did everything they could to get Antonina Petrovna's pupils in their class; almost fifty per cent would regularly end up at the top of the class. The 'Darova signature' was famous throughout the district, and they had it all over them. And Antonina Petrovna wasn't the only teacher like this; she simply embodied the most important functions of the primary school to an unusually high degree.

From the mid-1950s, the primary school started to be landed with more and more functions that were alien to it, and to a large extent lost its influence over children's later educational path.

### **Dehumanisation**

At the start of the Khrushchev Thaw, humanities subjects were to a large extent squeezed out of school syllabuses. 'Labour education' was introduced;<sup>1</sup> later it was to be adapted as 'industrial training'. In the senior classes of secondary school, 'industrial training' was assigned as much as 17% of the working week — an entire day. In order to accommodate it, logic was dropped from the school

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<sup>1</sup> Or reintroduced: it had dominated the school programme in the 1920s. [Editor].

timetable, and the amount of time available for Russian language and literature and for history was reduced.

All the pupils from our school, girls as well as boys, worked on the production line at the factory-training centre opposite the school and after three years had qualified as metal-workers or lathe-operators. But it only took three months for a school graduate to qualify for one of these jobs if he joined a factory after school. In sum: it was a fantastic waste of time, and we were in an enviable position too, because there was a factory just across the road from the school.<sup>1</sup> In lots of other schools, 'industrial training' was even more of a nonsense.

### 'A bad school is a good school'

The article doesn't allow one to form a holistic perception of the everyday life of the Soviet school in the post-Stalin era, from the 1950s to the 1980s. Partly this comes from the peculiarities of work with informants about which I said something earlier. But partly it is a result of the author's approach: it doesn't seem to have been part of her purpose to show the four decades of the post-Stalinist school in comparative perspective, against the background of the Stalinist school on the one hand, and the post-Soviet school on the other. To achieve this would be a near-impossible task. But Catriona Kelly chose the subject herself. Let us wish her all the best with continuing it.

## ALEKSANDR BELOUSOV

To be frank, I read Catriona Kelly's article "The School Waltz: The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom' with a growing sense of bewilderment, annoyance, and frustration.

The first thing that irritated me was the mistakes. It's clear that she can hardly have set eyes on Vladimir Glotser's book, *Deti pishut stikhi* [Children Writes Poetry], which certainly isn't 'an anthology of children's poetry dating from the Thaw era'. She must only have dimly heard of, never seen, *Pervoklassnitsa* [The Girl from Class One], whose director is not some 'A. Roitman' no-one has ever heard of, but Ilya Frez, and her grasp of the geography of our country must be

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<sup>1</sup> So that no time was wasted on travelling. [Editor].

very weak: I've no idea what she means by referring to a town called 'Staro-Kuznetsk', reputedly to be found in Stalinsk province. One has the impression that the totality of what she knows about life generally is encompassed in the narrow limits of the 'Soviet school in the post-Stalin era'.

This sensation is exacerbated by the lack of any meaningful analysis of past eras. Kelly does not pay the necessary attention to the quintessence of the Soviet school — the school of the Stalin era. If one doesn't count her rather weird comparison of *vydvizhenets* directors of the Stalin era, with their alleged habit of '*leading from the front*', and the directors of pre-1917 *gimnazii*, then she doesn't say anything about the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian school either. Which of course makes it difficult to understand what exactly was specific about the 'post-Stalin' Soviet school; after all, much of what is said about the behaviour of teachers and pupils relates to patterns that weren't shaped by the special circumstances of the 'post-Stalin era', but by those of Russian culture generally.

Added to that, Kelly's article doesn't even give a convincing and true-to-life picture of the 'Soviet school of the post-Stalin era'. I am not at all persuaded how representative her materials are. She says they were collected in Moscow, St Petersburg, and Ekaterinburg; so what about the rest of the country? I myself grew up in a quite different city, and much of what I remember doesn't correspond at all with the picture here; indeed, flatly contradicts it. Even the St Petersburg materials are dubious. A straw poll that I conducted with friends recently indicates that Kelly's assertion about school days '*always and everywhere*' beginning with a *lineika* is far from the truth. Some other formulations in the article are just as questionable: for instance, on the problem of *podskazka* (prompting) and copying work. Testimony from my friends does not at all bear out Kelly's suggestion that teachers 'tolerated' these practices.

It's evident that answering questions like this would require quantitative research. But even this wouldn't solve everything. The point is that when one is studying 'the everyday life of the post-Stalin era', questionnaires don't go far enough. They have to be supplemented by study of the narrative texts that regulated school life. Only then will we have a more or less objective picture of how the 'Soviet school of the post-Stalin era' functioned in real life. But here all we have is subjective recollections from some randomly collected group of people which Kelly has seen fit to 'spin' in her own way.

The authoress of the article was educated in England and she describes her own experiences for readers. We learn from her recollections that in the English school, '*disciplinary practices such as hand-raising before one answered and standing up when the teacher*

*came in were still required*'. But when she moves on to describe the 'Soviet school in the post-Stalin era', the tone of sweet reason changes entirely. Speaking of the ominous '*atmosphere of repression and fear*'<sup>1</sup> there, Kelly remarks that it was created by the following actions on the part of the teachers: '*making pupils stand up when a member of staff entered the room [and] insisting that hands were raised before a contribution was made to class discussion*' (p. 131) Dreadful, don't you agree? So isn't it odd that, when describing the 'trauma' inflicted on many children by the transfer from family life to life in the collective, Kelly makes no attempt to analyse this from the point of view of her own experience at school. Was there really no sign there of 'trauma'? And how are the 'fears' and 'horrors' of the post-Stalinist school to be related to the fact that '*what emerges in the end is less the peculiarity of the Soviet school experience than its typicality, vis-à-vis the standard post-industrial, 'Western' (in the broadest sense) school model*' (p. 117)? And how come that such a dreadful school education '*did succeed in providing clever pupils — including those from backgrounds where there was no history of academic achievement — with an incentive to learn*' (p. 149)?

Catriona Kelly's article is neither more nor less than an anthropological horror story penned by a dilettante. Its only possible merit is that it may inspire someone else to write a serious study of the Russian school.

## VITALY BEZROGOV

The article by Catriona Kelly under discussion is, so far as I can see, not 'insider ethnography' in the pure sense, but historical ethnography, or historical anthropology. It is an exercise in cultural history, a study of a past era of Soviet childhood. This era is vivid in the autobiographical memory of anyone from Russia, but does not belong to the personal memory of a researcher from England. Kelly has carried out a very solid historical study at the boundaries of ethnography, historical and pedagogical anthropology, the history of childhood and everyday life, oral history, and cultural studies. The execution of such an interdisciplinary study of 'the culture of children's school experience' bears witness to the overcoming of the internal

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<sup>1</sup> The original reads 'repressive awe'. [Editor].

conflicts of ethnographical methodology in a pure sense, conflicts which would have persisted had this discipline alone been applied to the theme in hand. 'The archaeology of childhood' in the twentieth century, which literally lies under our own feet and is barely noticed by us because of the low 'value' childhood has in the Russian cultural and scholarly tradition, this 'archaeology' has been revealed for Russian researchers by a professor at Oxford and enthusiast for Russian literature and culture.

It is in fact the history of childhood to which I would primarily assign this article, assuming classification were necessary, and this subject, before the appearance of the article in *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, a journal that from its beginning has manifested high scholarly standards [Bezrogov 2005], had not come much into the purview of Russian specialists in the humanities or been understood by them as a discipline with pretensions to serious scholarly status. Philippe Ariès's famous book, *L'Enfance et la vie familiale sous l'ancien regime*, which first appeared in 1960 and was rapidly translated into many other languages, appeared in Russian only in 1999, by which time international historiography had moved on to the extent that almost all Ariès's formulations had been disputed and textbooks on the 'history of childhood' intended for university teaching had appeared in some numbers. There is probably no other country in the world (apart from really deprived, small countries) where the number of museums dealing with the history of education and childhood is so out of step with the size of the population. I think these two facts are far from accidental, and they are testimony to serious discrimination against childhood in the world-view of Russians, and to the assumption that this period is of little significance to the biography of members of any generation in the history of Russia, and hence does not deserve scholarly attention.

The first achievement of Catriona Kelly's article is thus that it demonstrates how interesting and profound can be the investigation of such a 'group' or 'stratum' within society (here — Soviet society) as children. The reconstruction of normative and real models of childhood, of the processes by which these were formulated and interacted, and of how they interacted with the history of everyday practices at different periods, can lay bare many profound, 'serious in an adult sense' processes that normally tick along unnoticed in a given society and that are unlikely to come to light when one concentrates on the world of adults. The study of the world of children tells us much of importance about the world of adults who create the world of children, and about the children forced to live there as well. The real world of children that got buried under slogans about 'happy childhood' in the 'land of the Soviets' turns out to be very varied, yet posited, at the very least, upon the notion of the child as an amenable 'cog' in the larger social system.

So far as 'retrospective rationalisation' goes, then the materials of oral history (and it is not at all accidental that the present article should draw precisely on these, since the author has in a sense 'created' her own sources, given that memory can preserve traces of 'hidden', unofficial history) are less given to rationalisation post factum than memoirs, autobiographies, and other written 'personal sources' or 'ego-documents'. In-depth interviewing produces texts that are more informal from a structural point of view than a carefully edited written autobiography. So if it is acceptable for historians to make use of published or unpublished autobiographies in order to reconstruct the past, why should we suspect them of drawing on incomplete material if they use documentary records of personal conversations with living members of the generations that they study? In contemporary Russia, there is a huge gulf between 'history' and 'memory', which often gets expressed in an association of the former with 'lies' and the latter with 'truth'. The expression, '*That's what I remember, so of course it was like that,*' is often repeated by members of our fathers' and grandfathers' generations, and indeed by us as well. No wonder that the Soviet system put huge efforts into 'disciplining memory', which led, in particular, to the fact that that memoirs were considered to belong to the domain of 'publicistics'.<sup>1</sup>

Autobiographies of childhood are to some extent a special type of narrative, in which the distorting effects of the immediate socio-political situation to which the narrator belongs are considerably less marked than in narratives about later periods of an informant's life. When adults are asked about their childhood, then they have to turn their minds to a phase from which they long ago departed and with which they are no longer directly connected. Childhood belongs, so far as the informant is concerned, to a different 'level of self-identification' and to another era, which the person in question regards as a unified and quite distinctive phenomenon (*'I wasn't at all the person I've now become then'*) [Nurkova 2000]. Therefore, the inner connection with the period of childhood is different from the connection with later eras of life, more distanced. Nostalgia for childhood less often requires a self-conscious process of falsification. We can assume a high degree of sincerity about people telling us about their childhood. Their sincerity in a subjective sense does not signify that the narrative necessarily conforms to objectivity, but it does signify that what a given witness is telling about that reality is sincerely meant.

Of course, 'false memory syndrome' is possible in any society and in anybody. Take the well-known case of the psychoanalyst Alfred

<sup>1</sup> i.e., were essentially a genre of propaganda. [Editor].

Alder. Alder remembered running to and from school in the mornings and evenings through a cemetery: this was a short-cut, but using it terrified him. When he revisited the place of his childhood 40 years later, though, he realised to his astonishment that there was no cemetery there, nor ever had been. I think that ‘false memory syndrome’ can be seen not only in such personal details, but also in the specifics of association between personal and collective memory.<sup>1</sup>

If we move back to the discussion of Catriona Kelly’s article the source base used for it, then I understand the questionnaire to invite us to exchange views on whether the childhood memories cited here in some respects comprise a ‘layering’ on to individual recollections of images from the current media and so on, and of the respondents’ self-identification now — in other words, of a contemporary evaluation of the past on to the memories of people from the different age cohorts cited. But so far as one can tell from the quotations here (and some of them are quite extensive, I’m sure deliberately), very few of the informants interviewed by Kelly and her assistants were people who had a good grasp of the ideologemes applied in Soviet and Russian society to the life of children and its meaning. Of course they now see childhood ‘at that time’ from a distance, through the ‘air’ of the current era. Thus, reality has certainly been distorted (but then, what historical document does *not* distort reality?) But inasmuch as ‘that time’ has left very scant traces of the life of its children (most of the documents relating to them are trivial or misleading), then there is no other way into the ‘kingdom of distorting mirrors’ of Russian childhood during the third and fourth quarters of the twentieth century. And since Catriona Kelly and her colleagues interviewed large numbers of adults from the ‘non-intelligentsia’ about a time they now feel to be lost (simply as a result of advancing age), the level of alienation and marginalisation with reference to ideological clichés of earlier periods is sufficient to act, if not as a guarantee of the correspondence of narrative and reality, then at least as a testimony to some actual reality as reflected on and represented by ‘the person who was once a child’, who describes lived reality through the narrative of the adult informant.

Thus, I don’t think we should speak of ‘gains’ or ‘losses’, nor indeed of ‘insider ethnography’ as the only methodologically appropriate way of approaching this material. We don’t in fact have a comprehensive knowledge of the ‘whole’ with reference to which we might ‘gain’ or ‘lose’. So far as this article is concerned, the underlying ‘whole’ is the individual cases of ‘childhood memory’ existing in all of us, and the collective images of childhood in one or other generation that we preserve in our own subcultures. Now — and I

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<sup>1</sup> What I say here deals only with one aspect of this huge subject. See further [Bezrogov 2003a]; [Bezrogov 2004]; [Bezrogov 2003b].

am not afraid to say, thanks to Catriona Kelly's work — we have the chance at least to *begin* talking about the history of Russian childhood: not just as historical subjects who have lived through this, but also as scholars who adopt a metatextual position with regard to this. Whether we happen to practise 'insider ethnography' with reference to the childhood of our own generation (our own included), or attempt a historical reconstruction of the childhood of other generations, or an ethnography of childhood in another culture or other cultures, or a history of vanished worlds is a question of personal choice. Every one of these approaches is justifiable in a scholarly sense. What is not justifiable is paying no attention to the history of childhood, whether the historiographical tradition one comes from is Anglophone (where prejudice has long been overcome) or Rusophone (where prejudice still persists, both outside any individual scholar and within him or her).

So are any of the conclusions that Kelly draws from her material disputable on a basis of personal experience as remembered by members of Russian culture who were not among those interviewed? Some, yes, though I would approach this point more from the perspective of supplementation than of contradiction. For instance, take the point about the lack of authoritarianism in Soviet families as opposed to school life. It is certainly fair to say that there was a higher level of authoritarianism in schools and that it was more effectively regulated, but all the same, Soviet parents were officially supposed to offer a strict upbringing to a child who was meant to become a future citizen of the Soviet Union, and not an '*over-intellectual whinger and parasite*'. One of the basic positions adopted in official Soviet pedagogy was the idea that parents were responsible for the ideological education of their children as cogs in the machine. Parents were required to internalise the position of the Soviet state when socialising a child. The child was supposed to be confronted by the orderly, closed ranks of those responsible for his or her moral and social education, and here teachers were supposed to stand shoulder-to-shoulder not only with the specialists in pedagogical methodology in local education offices and political instructors from the Communist Party and Komsomol, Pioneer leaders and chairman of Pioneer *druzhina* soviets,<sup>1</sup> but also with parents, who in their turn implemented 'Communist education' at the level of the individual family. Soviet families practised a uniform style that was implemented by parents as representatives of the Soviet state. The unity of families who were hostile to the Soviet system was interpreted as extremely dangerous. Intergenerational conflict was seen as more desirable than replication of the 'prejudices' of former generations. Thus, the way individuals brought children up could become

<sup>1</sup> The governing body of the Pioneer organisation in schools. [Editor].



material for the agenda of a Party meeting. Children would hand their parents prize certificates praising them for bringing their children up in the proper style. As I see it, the authoritarian style characterising peasant families before 1917 was reproduced on a new level in the pedagogically-driven, strongly ideologised Soviet family, beginning from the 1930s, and in the family as well as the school.

This example makes clear how Catriona Kelly's line of argument might be supplemented by new facts and considerations, though without necessarily undermining it. I think the level of 'know how' that she has reached is very productive, and an indication of what one can achieve by basing one's description on interviews, on informants' descriptions of everyday reality.

Also very interesting are the unexpected questions raised by the 'outsider' researcher who has a thorough grasp of his or her material and is able to look at a culture 'from inside'. One example here was how Kelly's discussion of the relations between children and the school authorities was taken as a topic of inquiry of equivalent status to others handled in the article. It emerges that one can use oral discussions with 'the bearers of vanished children's culture' to depart from the discourse of written sources about this childhood, and that this departure allows one to grasp themes and problems that practically do not come up in written documents. Once the researcher has noted the existence of themes of this kind, then he or she can 'suddenly' discover traces of them in written sources too. Thus, Kelly works on the boundaries of texts and 'non-texts', supplementing and expanding the experience of the cultural anthropologist.<sup>1</sup> *'The childhood experience as such'*<sup>2</sup> of the post-Stalin generations becomes visible only when written and oral discourses are fused.

2

The question of the extent to which materials from oral history are useful as sources for describing everyday life is, to my mind, settled by the very existence of this direction, i.e. *oral history*, in historiographical practices from roughly the 1920s (when the first historical studies using in-depth structured or semi-structured/topic-based interviews began being carried out in the US). At the present, many different countries (including the US, Britain, Australia, Germany, Austria, Israel, France, and so on) have not only developed study centres for oral history, but also broader associations occupied with collecting, systematising, and analysing oral history sources.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in my opinion, the oral history method, as used by Kelly here (and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the way she cites her own school experience, dating from the 1960s and 1970s. On the textualisation of anthropology, see e.g. [Rubel, Chegrinets 1998].

<sup>2</sup> A phrase taken from the prison confessions of Yakov Blyumkin in 1928. See [Sazhneva 2005: 7].

<sup>3</sup> Periodical publications include *Oral History Yearbook*, *Narrative Inquiry*, *Bios*, *Auto/Biography Studies*, *Biography*, *Oral History Forum*, *Life Stories*, etc.

the fact that the answers given to the questions are so extensive is already an indication that the interviewing methods used were appropriate), is very productive. This is particularly clear when it comes to Russian historical materials from the Soviet period, since the conventions of official historiography here to a large extent determined the significant lacunae in sources to do with everyday life. Not only were studies of this topic not carried out, but the prevailing attitudes to memory and to everyday life also ruled out the collection of many documentary sources. Thus, in my view, the materials that Catriona Kelly has collected with the help of appropriate use of oral history (and I would stress that the material has been collected and employed with extreme care) can perfectly well be considered a repository of facts and events that are not recorded in the written tradition of the Soviet period. What is more, testimony of this kind sometimes even acquires in the eyes of Russian informants themselves the status of 'true witness' as a correction to official sources.

3

I think this final question is the hardest to answer. I think the essence lies in determining whether Catriona Kelly has reconstructed childhood experience of the post-Stalin era as such, or the way that this was seen by people living at the start of the twenty-first century, woven from the different strategies of remembrance and recollection, that is, from the strategies of memorising experience that characterise members of a given sub-culture. The easiest way of answering might be to see where further sources are used to supplement the quotations from interviews, and in which cases conclusions are drawn purely on the basis of interview data. However, the inherent nature of written texts in the Soviet period mean that this would not be sufficient, and that one must look further. In cases where there is the possibility of comparing oral and written sources, one can identify what elements in oral narrative are 'from then' and which relate to the evaluation of that 'then' from the position of 'now'; if such sources which might be ancillary to the use of oral history simply do not exist, then we are in the zone of uncertainty, but one that is no wider than that in which we find ourselves when having to use a narrow range of written sources to advance some particular argument, so far as I can see.

In this connection, let me turn once more to the problem of how *representative* these interviews are and how well-founded the conclusions based upon them. I think we can posit the existence of some kind of *representative case* here. Such an approach would mean that when using life histories, the question of how far they were unique or not would be no barrier to using them when reconstructing the past. Relying on interviews (oral history) shifts (supplements) the concept of representativeness and the criteria of validity for historical reconstructions made on the basis of these. The validity of such

material is ensured by the high degree of sincerity in informant testimony and by the stability in recollections of school life. Kelly's long-term research in twentieth-century Russian culture has allowed her to demonstrate that recollections of school life are indeed stable and '*do not always depend on the immediate political situation*' [Kelly 2003a: 251]. The 'representative case' does not constitute representativeness of the traditional sort, which is associated with particular methods of selection, with a spread of informant types according to gender, social status, age cohorts, etc. An informant's personal experience is, as it were, 'not necessarily what happened to everyone, but what could happen, what could be'. The representative case thus has 'exemplary' status, it signifies a kind of the possible life history in a given generation, as allowed by time, society, culture, political systems and so on. What is exemplary of a given era is also representative in its own way, since a given story was among the possibilities existing in that era.

I can imagine that there may well be critical comments addressed at the article under discussion from people whose own view of their childhood is different from that set out in the interviews quoted. But I think that criticism of this kind, assuming it occurs, will not indicate that the material in the article has been interpreted wrongly, but that children's experience in a given generation is extremely varied in whichever country it may take place, and that it will always amount to more than the dominant tones in a given time.

If we draw conclusions from our answers to the three questions assigned for discussion, we see that the representativeness of the history of everyday life can also rest on particular case narratives which show that experiences of 'this kind' were also possible in a given era, and that biographical strategies for expressing a case of 'this kind' were also available at that time. Narratives about childhood are of course remote from the period in which the events described happened, but they are much less likely to include self-conscious distortions than are narratives about some later era of life. In my view, the authoress maintains sufficient distance from her material in order to maintain the optimal balance of understanding and explanation, for discovering the dominant shades of experience in the history of Russian childhood from the 1940s to the 1980s. Representing the 'daily life' of past generations using narrative methods has indeed proved possible.

## EVGENY DOBRENKO

1

Obviously, the gains of the insider position as practised by an outsider are to do with the absence of post factum rationalisation, auto-stereotyping and 'false memory syndrome'. But herein also lie the losses, which come at the level of lack of criticism levelled at the corpus of 'factual material' that gets assembled. Let me cite a few examples from the article. On p. 120 it is asserted, that it was 1 September when a child learned which class he or she would study in. This is not completely right. To begin with, this only *could* be true of children entering Class One, since the classes later on had the same composition every year. Also, the class lists were released earlier, during the meetings for parents a day or so before the start of school, or even before that, since parents used to help get the classroom in order (redecorate it etc.) and redecorate it. So there weren't any surprises on 1 September. I know this for absolute certain, because my stepmother was a primary-school teacher. Equally, on p. 126 we hear that every school day started with a formal assembly (*lineika*). There must be a mistake of some kind here: the school day (I mean ordinarily) couldn't possibly have started with a *lineika*, this was much too costly in terms of time and energy (school wasn't a Pioneer camp). *Lineiki* were only held on special occasions — the October Revolution holiday on 7 November, Victory Day on 9 May, Lenin's birthday, formal admission to the Pioneers, the anniversary of the Pioneers on 19 May, and so on, or the case actually mentioned in the article, the day Gagarin arrived back from space. Ordinary days started with bedlam in the school cloakrooms (and in winter with a big mess of mud, melted snow and so on as well). So much for formal assemblies! There can't be a question of some people remembering and others not: a *lineika* was like a Komsomol or Party meeting (only it was for children of Pioneer age), and you had to prepare for it really thoroughly. You couldn't possibly have held one every day. In any case, it was usually held out in the playground or gym (there

had to be plenty of space so everyone could be fitted in!), and the place had to be set up and decorated and so on. It's this kind of case where a real insider's experience is needed.

2

'How useful is oral history?' What does one mean by 'useful' when it comes to history? How 'true to life' is it? I must say that I read Catriona Kelly's article with particular — very personal — interest. I'm not cut out for the role of a reader of '*sources without correcting for retrospective rationalisation, autostereotyping, and "false memory syndrome"*'. I suffer from all of them to a huge degree for the good reason that I was myself at school during the period described in the article, between 1969 and 1979. So can I be trusted as a witness? I think this is a very important question, since it's exactly cases like mine that Kelly relies on: the 'narrators' of today have been told for many years how bad Soviet power was and how dreadful Soviet schools were. The person listening yesterday (and 'narrating' today) has not just absorbed history, but is active now as a 'participant' in such history or, at the very least, a witness of it. I am sure that it was exactly this characteristic of human memory which that great expert on the human soul, Joseph Stalin, had in mind when he said that Chapaev's relations and associates who'd complained they didn't recognise Chapaev in the 'Vasiliev brothers' film about him '*are lying through their teeth as only eye-witnesses can*'. Though overall I do agree with what those eye-witnesses had to say. After all, I'm an eye-witness myself.

I'm not talking primarily about distortions of memory here. I think that statements taken from interviews as used here also are difficult to rely on because retrospectivity acts as an impediment. Once they reach maturity, people often say school was dreadful (I myself think like that). But that's what holds *now*. It's the diachronic factor at work: One wonders what these people thought when they were actually in school. I can say for myself that *at the time* I probably liked school. And what about modern children? What do *they* think of school? We can put that question differently: do children really have to become parents before anyone will listen to them? And if so, can we really take what parents say about children to be a true representation of children's own opinions?

There's another problem: we can't rely on language any more than we can on memory. One can't trust what adults say — it's not them that's lying, it's the words they use that are lying. There's a clear example on page 107: '*the teacher was kind but strict*'. That's not memory talking, it's linguistic stereotype: this is a cliché of positive heroes in Soviet novels. Stalin was also always '*strict but fair*', and teachers have to be strict and kind — that's how they were in any Soviet school story. Attaching any attention to this — except as a linguistic phenomenon — would be mistaken.

Another point: I think the opposition between 'the pupil' and 'the school' in the article is overstated. In actual fact, schoolchildren (if my own memory serves) didn't see the school as an institution (whatever the school was like): the opposition should be seen in more complex terms: the pupil versus the teacher (who was always seen in the most concrete, personal terms), the school director, other pupils, parents, and so on. To put it another way: everything was individualised and personalised to a high degree; it was multi-vectoral. It wasn't a question of 'school', 'class', 'teachers', and so on, but of one particular pupil, teacher... what you will. And it was the entirety of these individual, personal relations that constituted the whole. '*I don't like school*' meant: I'm having problems with the teachers, the director, fellow pupils, my parents, and so on, but my best friend gets on fine with everyone and so he loves 'school'. To put it another way: *school does not exist*.<sup>1</sup>

3

To some extent, I've answered this question already. The disadvantages of the 'insider' position as used by an 'outsider' are a direct continuation of the advantages: on the one hand, he or she avoids auto-stereotyping and 'false memory syndrome', but at the cost of critical distance. This is a problem with which theorists of translation are very well acquainted. In effect, this article is an exercise in cultural translation. The sensitivity that I'm talking about may work at a subconscious level. Let me illustrate this generalisation with instances from the article. It has a lot of material on the formality of relations between the teacher and his or her pupils, which it argues sometimes moved over into direct antagonism (p. 130). But this wasn't always the case: there were some popular teachers, and there was exemplary discipline in the classroom when their lessons took place: children used to sit there with their mouths open in fascination. Usually, teachers like this were born story-tellers. I had a history teacher like this (he was blind, by the way) and a Russian literature teacher too. In any case, the impersonality of relations can be explained in systemic terms: if they'd got too personal, then favourites would have started to dominate things. But there were teachers that no-one wanted to treat badly, who were protected by an unwritten law that emerged from among the pupils themselves — like, for instance, the teachers of history and Russian I've already mentioned. Others were openly disliked. But on the whole there was no consensus and all this took very personal forms.

From this flowed another element in classroom relations. Kelly talks about the unspoken agreement between the teachers and pupils about copying work (p. 138). I'm not sure things really worked like this. I'm even more uncertain about this statement: '*The root of*

<sup>1</sup> In English in the original. [Editor].

*collusion was the nature of the school programme, which was immensely demanding in terms of the standards required over a huge range of subjects.*’ To begin with, when has anyone in Russia ever paid any attention to standards? Were laws really made in order that people should obey them? And second, if there was ‘collusion’, then it was between teachers and parents (I think parents are an important omission from the article generally). The relations between these were variable and they had a huge impact on the relations between teachers and pupils. These were part of the Soviet *blat* [favour-trading] system; it was a classic illustration of ‘you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours’. The class might include a mum who worked in a food shop, a dad who was the director of a chemist’s shop, and a granny who was a doctor. The granny might well have her grand-daughter’s teacher as a patient, and if the grand-daughter had problems at school, she’d help out — she’d give her extra lessons, put up her exam marks and so on. The chemist’s shop dad would ‘get hold of’ some medicine that was hard to buy (and everything was in the late 1970s and 1980s, starting with aspirin). That’s how the system worked. The parents would organise a whip-round and buy the teacher a present, some big crystal vase or whatever, as a gift from the whole class. The teacher would be invigilating a three-hour written exam and would find some excuse to go out of the room. The rest was mechanics... Parents had all sorts of strings to pull. The pupils themselves didn’t have to have any influence at all. *Blat* worked all the way along the line, especially in cases where parents were worried about how well their children were doing. However, such parents weren’t the majority, of course. And a mother might well be heavily involved in school affairs and rush round getting hold of things for teacher (one favour for another), while the father couldn’t even remember which year his child was in at school.

All of this explains why a researcher belonging to a different culture who uses ‘insider ethnography’ inevitably ends up too dependent on informants and on prevailing mythologies. On pp. 146–7 of the article, there’s a lot said about ‘The Last Bell’ and how important it was for schoolchildren. What I remember is completely different: what was really important was the university entrance exams that followed all this. For many people (for all the boys, at least), this was a real question of life and death: if you didn’t get in, then you had to go into the army (and I finished school in 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan — need I say more?) So, almost everyone who wanted to go to university spent the second half of Class Ten mugging up for the university entrance exams. This made the leavers’ ball not so much the subject for later memories (I can hardly remember a thing about mine) as an annoying waste of precious study time. The school-leaving exams were in May and the first half of June. The leavers’ ball came at the end of June, and the university

entrance exams in the second half of July. So you had very little time to spare, and the entrance exams were weighing on your mind all the time.

I think that the representation of 'everyday life' of previous generations by means of a direct citation of their experience may well make this material accessible to non-specialists, but even so some 'analytical distance' is essential with regard both to the informant and to his or her experience. Yet the paradox is that an insider, whose experience would in theory allow him or her to maintain critical distance from the informant, is, as a result of 'auto-stereotyping', not in a position to maintain such distance, while the outsider, who lacks the 'antennae' furnished by direct experience, is far less constricted by stereotypes. It's impossible to say which is better: the fact is that both positions are complementary, and each has some obvious advantages. I can only say that when I was reading "The School Waltz", despite noticing some inaccuracies (mainly in what the informants were saying), I still felt that the text was accurate in some more general and maybe more important way, a way that lies beyond 'factual accuracy' as recorded by eye-witnesses (which I, an eye-witness myself, have no particular use for). My memory is itself 'more accurate', because it's me that's doing the reading. I think that the editorial board of *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* has dwelled too much on the relationship of researcher and informant, and that one should bear in mind another possible subject position — that of the reader of the article. Thus, as a reader, I simply ingest the informants' experience (this may well have been important for Kelly herself, but for me it's *de trop*: I don't need clay to make bricks when I've already built my own house). It's the author of the article that I'm communicating with, and an outsider-author who has supplemented her own position with insider knowledge, is preferable, so far as I'm concerned, to an insider-author, whose experience is the same as mine, and to the experience of the informants as well. The latter's subject position, as I see it, is considerably less rich.

## BEN EKLOF

### **A Foreign Traveller Waltzes Through the Soviet School: What Tune are we Listening to?**

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to respond to the new work of a distinguished colleague. The comments that follow will have a critical edge, but the reader should keep in mind that this is appreciative criticism, the kind



that arises in pondering challenging, innovative, and exciting new work. If the following remarks are posed primarily as challenges and queries, my own reading of 'The School Waltz' is overwhelmingly admiring. The author applies a keen analytical mind to make sense out of the interviews which make up the bulk of her source base. Moreover, her goals of both 'normalising' the post-Stalin school experience (for Western scholars), and 'defamiliarising' it (for Russian readers) as well as moving beyond the 'top-down' and 'resistance paradigm' approaches to the history of schooling, are admirable. So is her implicit agenda of integrating the history of education into the larger framework of Soviet cultural and social history: the history of the Soviet school is both part of and larger than the history of childhood — the author's own main project.

Others with more expertise can comment on her 'ethnographic history' and interview techniques, which are described with commendable transparency in her notes and supporting materials.<sup>1</sup> I will limit myself below to a few points arrived at from the perspective of someone who has spent a professional career looking at the history of Russian education, both pre-revolutionary and post-Soviet, and who lived in the Soviet Union, whose child attended a Soviet school, in the early Brezhnev era. My comments concern the definition and depiction of a *school culture*; the consequences of omitting *curriculum and content* in a history of school practices; the issue of traumatic initial school encounters, *relations between teacher and pupil*; the question of *internalisation* of beliefs and values at school; and the role Soviet and Soviet schools have played as *social havens* in times of upheaval. I would also pick up the question of *effective learning* and argue that the 'frontal', 'top-down', 'talk and chalk' approach of the Soviet school could, in the wrong hands be abusive, and did alienate some. But, it also provided a *structured* learning environment for many, the kind that British educator Margaret Donaldson has argued is often the best for children from impoverished or unstable family and social settings.

First, the notion of a *school culture*. In fact, Kelly describes not a culture, but rather a collection of practices (rituals, collusive behaviours, mechanisms of avoidance). From my perspective however, there was a distinctly Russian pedagogical culture that defined the atmosphere of the school and was the matrix in which practices occurred. This atmosphere pervaded the subjectivity of experience. But what was it? To say that Russian/Soviet school culture was

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed I suspect that her utilisation of oral history and 'memory' will vex some readers. After all, most of the people interviewed here lived through the Gorbachev era, which among other things, subjected Soviet education to harsh scrutiny and relentless criticism, for 'producing drones' and ignoring 'personality' (*lichnost*). At that time, urban families reportedly subscribed to up to thirty periodicals each; surely the avalanche of critical verbiage triggered by glasnost altered memories of schooling by highlighting the negative.

selectively borrowed from the West is true, for it is easy to find the Germanic and French roots. To protest that Ushinsky and Tolstoy contributed their theory and experience is also true. To deny that the catastrophic era of turmoil, deprivation and human slaughter had an impact would be myopic.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the persistence of an 'experimental tradition' on the margins of Soviet pedagogy adds yet another layer to this culture. It is acknowledged in this article, but may be understated in terms of indirect impact on the culture, if not the practices [Kerr 2005 a]. After all, the language of the '*Pedagogy of Cooperation*', the ideological constellation which emerged full-blown within a year of Gorbachev's assumption of the post of General Secretary, and the public reception given to school reformers associated with *pedagogika sotrudnichestva*,<sup>2</sup> were not a miraculous happening. The ground had been well prepared in the post-Stalin era, and all that was needed was a lifting of press restrictions for this side of Russian pedagogy to appear in full bloom, and to meet a response among an educated public more or less conversant with notions of critical thinking and inquiry based learning. The point here is that the Russian and Soviet experience nurtured a *distinctive* school culture. In terms of the outside world, this culture was both borrowed from and reactive to Western currents, but it also always was more than the sum of its parts, and, at least by 1900, had its own creative dynamic. We should note not only the singular contribution to *developmental education* made by figures of international renown such as Vygotsky and Luria, or to free education by Tolstoy, but also the combination of mainstream theory and practices contributed by less well known, but equally influential figures such as Kapterev, Demkov, Vakhterov, Bunakov and others, many of whom taught and wrote for teachers' seminars, and whose contributions spanned the gap between the pre- and post-revolutionary eras. We must include here the reformist capital city educators who clustered around Minister of Education P. Ignatyev and drew up the liberal reformist education measures of 1915–1916, for which he is famous [Krasovitskaya 2002] and who worked with Lunacharsky in the 'Petersburg group' between 1918 and 1920 in the struggle to preserve some of the better features of the Tsarist secondary school. But there were also numerous other reform-minded educators who, despite their distaste for the Bolsheviks, stayed on after the Revolution, as school inspectors, administrators and teacher trainers, and passed on a legacy of beliefs and practices, even after the 'labour principle' and 'polytechnical education' school took over in the 1920's.

<sup>1</sup> On the impact of war and revolution, see [Balashov 2003: 42-67]; [Holmes 1991]; [Dunstan 1997].

<sup>2</sup> See [Petrovsky 1989] for a good collection of articles laying out the 'pedagogy of cooperation'.

This elusive but powerful school culture persisted even as it evolved; in my mind the continuity between Tsarist and Soviet (and, we should add, post-Soviet) school cultures is undeniable, even if we have yet to describe it in a way that captures its dynamic and texture. Kelly's approach normalises the late Soviet school experience by drawing comparisons with the routines (and boredom and alienation) of her own schooling in Great Britain, and lumping both together into a post-industrial reality. She also identifies specific rituals, ceremonies and collusive practices which allowed students and teachers to get by tolerably in an authoritarian setting where impossible demands were made upon a deficit economy, in which schools were the residual (*ostatochnyi*) element, receiving only what was left over after priority state needs were met.<sup>1</sup> One of Kelly's aims is to describe the 'corporate identity' of the Soviet school, how it 'achieved coherence' by emphasising 'separateness from other forms of everyday life.' Thus, she seeks to describe how 'forms of behaviour' set the school apart from family and other Soviet institutions. But she does not look for an integrated whole, a combination of discrete practices, values and beliefs, that added up to a distinct entity, a culture both connected to and separate from global school cultures. Such a whole would include material culture, spatial arrangements, daily schedules, vertical and horizontal interpersonal relationships, textbooks and classroom aids, and elements in the curriculum that were and remained, regardless of political change, unmistakably Russian/Soviet.<sup>2</sup>

Capturing the nature of the Russian school environment would allow us to better address the question of family-school relations which Kelly depicts provocatively in this essay. In her view, by the late Soviet era there was a sharp conflict between the nurturing, permissive family environments characteristic of middle class Soviet families, and the regimented, highly structured, and demanding order of the classroom. Boris Mironov has also argued that 'middle class' and 'democratic' values and practices were taking over in Soviet society and conflicted with the political order. But I think there are some serious problems with this generalisation as applied here. Certainly, indulgent parent-child approaches were easy to observe as early as the 1970s, especially in the way young boys (often also only children) were smothered with affection by mothers (often

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<sup>1</sup> Here her arguments are similar to those presented by Larry Holmes in a meaty recent article [Holmes 2005] on school practices under Stalinism, with comments on the post-Stalinist period.

<sup>2</sup> This school culture was both Russian and Soviet: Russian in its roots; Soviet in that we can talk of Soviet-type schools that left a profound impact in Central Asia, East and Central Europe and elsewhere, in regions whose cultural roots were not Russian or even Slavic, and often not Orthodox. I have often attended conferences which brought together scholars from say, Bratislava, Riga, Bishkek, and Barnaul. The commonality of school experience, despite different national cultures, immediately set these participants apart from Western scholars.

single). Profoundly close emotional ties were also prevalent between mothers and daughters, in a distinctly Russian way. So it is easy to infer that a move from this environment to a highly structured school would be a profound jolt, if not a *trauma*, as Kelly describes it.

But was this always, or mostly the case? Yes, having an hour (or even two!) of homework in the first grades was excessive — and recognised as such by Soviet educators, even as schools sought to deal with *mnogopredmetnost*.<sup>1</sup> Some teachers, by all accounts, were curt and unsympathetic with children.<sup>2</sup> Wearing uniforms may have enforced a conformity not found in the family environment. And the 'eggcrate box' spatial arrangement and bell-driven daily schedule of the school must have left many young children pining for home. Yet it is also true that a large number of (admittedly middle class, and primarily of the intelligentsia) memoirs, including those of Soviet dissidents, depict the early years in school as bright, sunny, nurturing and secure. My own daughter, at age four, entered a Soviet pre-school. At first, the structure and control, even there, she found daunting. But soon she was thriving, and the predictable routines and practices, as well as the unquestioned authority of the teachers, created an orderly learning environment that was by no means oppressive. As Kelly notes, kindergarten and schools were very different institutions in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, both were structured, and if the kindergarten privileged play activities over the kind of mechanical learning that often prevailed in the schools, this was still largely the *same school culture*.

According to Larry Holmes, this sense of security and comfort was especially strong during the Stalin era. Admittedly, his *School No. 25* describes an elite school, where children (if not always their parents!) were pampered and nurtured, encouraged and given much individual attention [Holmes 1999]. Yet, as he points out in a later article, we also have the results of the massive Harvard Interview Project. This survey, conducted in 1950–1951, used detailed interviews with 762 former Soviet émigrés, most of whom had fled the USSR during or soon after World War II. Those interviewed could hardly be accused of being a cohort pampered under Stalin. Yet their responses to the questionnaire were surprising: while they rejected Stalin's terror and Stalin himself, they overwhelmingly endorsed the welfare aspects of the Soviet state. In particular, '*no aspect of Soviet society received more warm and spontaneous support than did the system of Soviet education.*' [Inkeles, Bauer: 132; cited in Holmes 2005: 86]. Apparently, adult emigrants who left between 1979 and 1982, felt the

<sup>1</sup> The requirement to teach a wide variety of subjects to a high level. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the first Western journalist to recognise the diversity in atmosphere in the Russian school, and the impact individual teachers and directors had on this atmosphere, was Susan Jacoby. See [Jacoby 1974].

same way, although responses from those who had begun their schooling *after* 1950 were much less positive about their experiences.<sup>1</sup>

Why would former Soviet citizens feel more secure in their school environment under Stalin than after he died? First, we should put aside all mention of Pavlik Morozov here: contrary to widespread Western perceptions, the state never succeeded (nor did it long try) in turning children against parents [Holmes 2005: 72–3]. What I have in mind is the role the Soviet school played as a *social haven*. This was the case during the civil war and during World War Two<sup>2</sup> when the school canteens often meant the difference between life and death, and when families were often separated, children orphaned, or other dire circumstances left families unable to provide basic support. As Stephen Kerr has shown, in the immediate post-Soviet era, during which an estimated two to three million ‘surplus deaths’ occurred in the former Soviet space from malnutrition and collapsing health care provision,<sup>3</sup> schools in provincial cities and the poorer regions of the country again became social welfare havens by default, often at the sacrifice of any educational mission whatsoever [Kerr 2005].

But this was before, and after, the post-Stalin, Soviet era scrutinised by Kelly in this article. In a sense, my comments would seem to buttress her point that school practices centred around coping strategies collusively joined by teachers and pupils to get around the ideological and curricular demands of a demanding, definitely not nurturing (in terms of provision) state. Schools were not a haven, but a space for negotiated practices. And yet we are all familiar with both Western and Soviet sociological data showing growing stratification and declining social mobility, evidence of anomie, family dysfunction and the rising frequency of single parent (overwhelming female, and disproportionately impoverished) families. To be sure, if movies such as *Little Vera* are representative, underprivileged adolescents often found their ‘social haven’ in street culture rather than schools. Rather than providing social mobility, it can be argued, the Soviet school system in the Brezhnev era ‘warehoused’ underachievers in dead-end vocational schools, where disciplinary problems had become endemic. Yet, by many accounts, social mobility in the late Soviet era, while declining, remained higher than in, say, the United States. If this is so, I posit that Soviet schools continued to play a significant role both as *social havens* and as *sites of learning and achievement*. If we include in our purview the vast network of free kindergartens, as well as summer camps, and finally, the remarkable

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<sup>1</sup> [Holmes 2005: 86], based on data for about three hundred interviews collected for the Soviet Interview Project. For this project generally, see [Millar 1987]. Holmes’s statements are based upon his own calculations from the original survey data.

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, Innocenti Center, *A Decade of Transition. Regional Monitoring Report 8* (report on transition economies, 2001).

system of free extracurricular education (*vneshkolnoe obrazovanie*) then we get a much better picture of how this system worked — and it did work, for many millions of Soviet youth, and not just those from privileged families enrolled in *spetshkoly*.<sup>1</sup> Finding a framework or terminology to describe this culture as a whole, not just the sum of its parts, might help us answer why, for example, Soviet pedagogy often achieved remarkably *effective learning*, despite investment of less than forty percent per capita on pupils, than did the poorest of the developed nations in the West.

Two other questions come to mind when reviewing “‘The School Waltz’”: what are the consequences of leaving out curriculum and content when discussing the Soviet school experience; and how do we assess the degree to which young Soviet people accepted and internalised the apparent and *hidden curriculum*?<sup>2</sup> Again, Kelly should not be faulted for not writing the article we might have written; her goal was to understand the school experience as part of the history of twentieth century Russian childhood. And yet, her agenda, as well as her comparisons with her own school experience, which she describes largely as time wasted, have the inadvertent effect of decentering learning in this environment. This is unfortunate, for, again, it can be argued that the Soviet school was, all things considered, a remarkably successful learning environment *for a large proportion* of its constituency. It is true that a World Bank study in the 1980s showed that Soviet schools excelled at instilling basic facts, but did much less well at inculcating problem-solving skills. It is also true that a recent PISA international study of school achievement in more than two-dozen countries gave Russia (as well as Germany!) low grades in several aspects of student performance. Indeed, Steve Kerr [2005b] recently argued that persistent underfunding of post-Soviet education has brought Russia schools today to the verge of system-wide collapse. In combination with the flight abroad of over two hundred thousand scientists and scholars, the collapse of the school system would, in effect, wipe out the human capital reserves accumulated over past generations. Former World Bank specialist Stephen Heyneman, who has written extensively on ‘human capital’ issues in the former Soviet Union, argues that a *generational interruption* in the transmission of education is very difficult to make up.

All reservations aside, however, most long- time observers of Soviet schooling agree that it provided a site of reasonably effective learning; for some, it brought out and nurtured exceptional talents in the sciences, arts, and sports, for others (including Vladimir Putin) it

<sup>1</sup> On *spetshkoly*, see John Dunstan’s remarkable book [Dunstan 1978]; see also [Riordan 1988].

<sup>2</sup> *hidden curriculum* is of course, a Western term for the non-content goals of the state embedded in prescribed school routines (a form of *vospitanie* encoded in routines, not phrases).

provided stability and opportunity. Any account which leaves all discussion of the cognitive and curricular side will leave out its agenda: an agenda agreed upon by state, teacher, parent, and even occasionally pupil. If pupils and teachers often colluded in getting around the dictates of the state,<sup>1</sup> it was often in order to achieve these very goals.

Finally, a word on the internalisation of values and state-set goals and aspirations for children. Western studies in the late Soviet era consistently showed that the prestige ranking of occupations was remarkably similar in the West and the USSR (children disproportionately wanted to be scientists, doctors, pilots, ‘captains of industry’... and FBI or KGB agents; few wanted to be manual labourers)<sup>2</sup> The 1984 Education Law sought to reverse the flow of graduates from basic secondary educational institutions from general advanced secondary classes into vocational schools.<sup>3</sup> Like many Brezhnev era priorities, this was futile. Despite the slowdown of the Soviet economy, and the growing gap between education level and job opportunity (many Moscow secretaries had a higher education), students continued to ignore pious Soviet ideological claims about the ‘dignity of all labour’. At the same time, they bought fully into the parallel belief in opportunity and social mobility promoted in the Soviet world for much of its existence, the pathway to which was held to be provided by achievement in school. Kelly is certainly right in pointing out that the increasingly empty rhetoric of communism was recognised for the blather that it was well before glasnost, but as John Gooding has argued, Soviet workers in the late Brezhnev era could be both anti-regime and anti-capitalist [Gooding 2002: 180–1]. Certainly, most were patriotic, and the post-World War fusion of Communism and patriotism makes the issue of ideological inculcation very difficult to sort out. Likewise, Paul Hollander, comparing American advertising and Soviet propaganda, observed that the permeation of both environments with roughly the same density could well have produced comparable effects on the subject: distaste, ridicule, and subconscious acceptance. At the least, it is a stretch to argue, as does Kelly, that most Soviet schoolchildren experienced cognitive dissonance, or a dual consciousness: what they heard at home and/or learned from the BBC, and what they were taught at school. This overstates the reach of the BBC and other Western

<sup>1</sup> Comments by Holmes in a section entitled ‘Programmed for Disaster’ in [Holmes 2005: 79–85], esp. p. 82, provides a rich, archival-based, description of the relentless, and self-defeating intervention of state authorities in all aspects of schooling.

<sup>2</sup> The teaching profession was also in decline. While *pedvuzy* always found applicants to fill their available places, graduates frequently sought to avoid their obligatory *raspredelenie*, and those who served the required three years often fled the profession immediately after. Today, fewer than fifty percent of state-funded graduates of teacher training institutions actually go into teaching.

<sup>3</sup> The stated goal was to reverse the ratio from 60:40 to 40:60 (general and vocational).

media, and of alternative ideas, but it also probably oversimplifies the messages many pupils received, through 'creative modification' at school.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Holmes' conclusions for School No. 25 under Stalin, still had resonance, if not for all, for many in the post Stalin era:<sup>2</sup>

*...the degree to which many Soviet young people accepted and internalized the apparent and hidden curriculum emerged as one of the Stalinist school system's greatest achievements...for these children, no disjunction existed between school and society, between what they wanted to learn and what they were taught. A convergence of attitudes about self, school, society, and state emerged....Because they felt 'at home' and 'free' these students willingly embraced what they were taught as their own.*

Kelly joins a venerable community (among its members, John Dewey and George Bernard Shaw) of 'foreign travellers' sharing their comments about Soviet education [Tomiak 1986]. By setting her own agenda, devising and using a unique source base of interviews, and pursuing an 'historical ethnography,' she has challenged all of us, Russian and Western, specialists in the history of education and those engaged in the study of other aspects of Soviet social, political and cultural history, to find common grounds in exploring the rich legacy of the Russian and Soviet school.

## BORIS FIRSOV

### *'Orderliness and efficiency counted for everything and self-expression for very little': Was it always like that in Soviet schools?*

Catriona Kelly's article holds one's attention; it reads like a social drama. The opening appears quite tranquil. A woman born into a working-class family in 1931 describes the awe that she felt in the presence of the sacramental rites of orthography, knowing as she did that studying well was essential. A mark of less than four represented not just failure, but a crime in the eyes of those surrounding her (p. 105). There was a more liberal tradition as well, but this is

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of teachers inserting their own interpretations into history and literature lessons can be found in [Holmes 2005: 75] and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> This discussion can be fruitfully gendered. Observers frequently pointed out that adolescent girls were often the most vociferous advocates of 'communist morality' among schoolchildren.



not discussed in Kelly's article; this died out, but traces of the 'free education' ethos were preserved. Discussions of school education were hesitant, a mark of the impoverishment of the Soviet system generally, and school became a space where creativity could not flourish. The finale of the drama takes place against the background of the last years of Soviet history, by which time pupils had begun avoiding school, and sitting it out till the time when you got your matriculation certificate was an ordeal. *'It horrifies me to think how little I got out of school, how awful it all was'*, another informant, this time born in 1949, remarks in distress (p. 107).

Different phases of school life, historically speaking, are recorded here, and one should note that they relate to the pre-war and to the post-war school. The pre-war school, especially the urban pre-war school, was a special phenomenon. The teachers were specialists and they were enthusiasts, and they did their job well. Most children got things from school that they could not get at home. The possibility of social mobility was already starting to make life happier and more interesting than had been true in the days when illusory beliefs about equality held sway [Zinovyev 2000: 84–85]. Zinovyev also writes that many of his contemporaries, who were called up the minute they left school, took the high-minded ideas to which they were exposed seriously [ibid.: 89]. And this mood was inherited by the first *'unslaughtered'* (the expression is Yury Levada's) Soviet generation, the generation from which I myself come. This generation did not itself fight in the War, but it had its share of wartime trials to bear and fully shared the hopes of real changes for the better that made up a significant part of the emotional popular upsurge greeting victory over Fascism.

I myself was at school between 1937 and 1941 at the No. 1 Secondary School in the Primorskaya district of Leningrad (Classes One to Four), and then from 1943 to 1948 at the No. 55 Secondary School for Boys (Classes Six to Ten). Whether directly or obliquely, I absorbed both kinds of relationship to schooling, and the experience of school that I had was, in the end, fundamentally different in terms of structure, content, and phenomena to the experience described in Catriona Kelly's article. In what follows, I hope to describe it for the readers of this Forum.

### **The word of the father**

I was an only child, and a loved and wanted one. My parents both doted on me, which did not stop them from expressing their love in different ways. My father, Maksim Fedorovich Firsov, spoiled me and, so far as I can recall, never stopped me from doing anything, let alone punished me. His main weapon was language. He was interested in every detail of my school experience from the moment

I first started attending, but he didn't solicit information directly, waiting for me to confide my experiences in him myself. I didn't always have that much to say, and once I decided to spice things up with a bit of invention. During the long recreation break that day, some of my new classmates had lain down on the floor so they could look up the girls' skirts. For some reason I now can't fathom, I told my father that I had been one of them. His reply, *'You're a bit young for that, boy!'* had a note of reproach that sank in once and for all. I burst into tears and blurted out that none of it was true; I'd simply wanted to boast about doing something out of the ordinary, that was all. My father refused to speak to me for a while, saying that he now felt he couldn't trust anything I'd told him about school before either.

I can recall another case like this from a year later as well. By then we were in Class Two, and a group of boys from the local orphanage joined the class. The group stood out rather anyway, and on top of that, one day one of them broke a window in our classroom when he was playing ball in there. After lessons, our class teacher started investigating who was to blame. The boy who'd done it said not a word, and everyone who'd seen the incident said they didn't know a thing either. Our class teacher said that she'd ask the boy who was top of the class, Borya Firsov, to tell the truth; he wouldn't be able to lie under any circumstances. I succumbed to the fear of losing the teacher's trust and I said who had done the deed. I didn't suffer too badly for my treachery in a physical sense. The orphanage boys pushed me into a corner of the corridor and started rubbing my ears till they were scarlet, muttering, *'That's the last time you ever squeal on one of your own.'* I think they were testing me out: would I go and report them for this too? When I didn't, 'the case file was closed', and I'd made my peace with my fellows. It took time for me to understand the power relations that underlay cases of this kind: as Firsov the sociologist would say now, the class teacher was forcing out Borya Firsov's sense of morality in favour of a sense of civic duty. Not long afterwards, I asked my father what he would have done in my place. He said that he'd have asked the boy who'd broken the glass to find the strength to own up. He also questioned me for a while about the boys from the orphanage, who saw me as a 'nancy boy' who'd grown up in a domestic hot-house and did everything my parents wanted. I told him about the longing stares I got from the orphanage boys when I took out the warm curd cheese dumplings with jam and the other tasty things my grandmother made for me to take to school — she had a dim view of school food. My father immediately put an end to my special diet, despite my grandmother's loud protests.

Another instance of my father's reliance on language as a therapeutic means of control came when I had to do the tests for the defence

medal BGSO ('Be Ready for Sanitary Defence') in Class Two. I prepared myself carefully for this and tormented my parents by endlessly practising the kiss of life on them, bandaging their limbs, fixing up slings for an imaginary broken arm, and so on. The exam itself was a let-down, though. The nurse didn't 'test' us in the usual sense at all: she drearily asked every one of us the same question: *'What do Soviet children say to Stalin?'* We knew the answer in any case (*'Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood!'*). I parroted away with the rest, and then got the medal I hadn't earned from the examiner. I bewailed all this to my father, who said something I have never forgotten: *'If you didn't earn a reward, then don't show it off!'*

Thanks to my father, I could already read and write fluently by the time I was six or seven, and I knew my multiplication tables by heart as well. The late 1930s witnessed a flowering of children's literature in the USSR. My parents denied themselves many things so that I could have the best books for children and young people. At first they read me fairy tales and other improving literature aloud, but soon I was gulping down (you can't put it otherwise) adventure stories, science fiction, historical novels, and travel sagas.

### **My mother's care during the Blockade and after the War**

My father died of a galloping consumption — the result of the harsh treatment meted out to him by the secret police when he was in prison. He was released when it was decided there was no case to answer, but lasted only just over a month once he got out. My mother, left a widow at just thirty-one years of age, now had two dependents to care for. I like to think that I did not cause difficulties for her at this very difficult period of her life; I did my best to be worthy of my father's memory. I didn't swear a solemn promise or anything like that, but I lived every day (and still do) fortified by lasting and grateful memories of him.

I should explain at this point why we weren't evacuated from Leningrad once war broke out. It was all down to my mother's attitude. She said: *'If we're going to die, then we'll do it together. I'm not giving up my twelve-year-old boy, or sending my elderly mother off who knows where.'*

The usual idea is that the worst thing about the Blockade was starvation. But there were more dangers than that, some nearly as great. Every one of them had to be overcome. The Blockade meant being forced to invent strategies by which one could survive oneself and ensure the survival of those dear to one. You survived as a group, not on your own. Success required not just avoiding danger; it was a moral, a spiritual issue as well. The first source of help and support,

of salvation, was the family, the social cell offering shelter and support in daily life, and here sacrificing things to help others was the basic law of existence — as Lidiya Ginzburg explains in her brilliant book, *Memoirs of a Blockade Survivor*, in which she recalls many of the experiences that my mother, my grandmother, and I also had.

Every Leningrad family had its own strategies for survival. Some relied on stores which they'd amassed in the early days of the war, some were saved by their relations at the Front. Serving men, soldiers and officers, denied themselves essentials so that they could send food to their families, to their close friends, sometimes just people they knew. Their bread rations or tinned meat kept body and soul together for the starving Leningraders at the worst moments of their lives. Major Semen Trofimovich Khorsun, for instance, arrived in Leningrad in 1942 from the front line, hoping to find his wife and daughter, of whose fate he knew nothing, and hand over a few kilos of rusks and two tins of meat that he'd saved from his officer's ration. When he got to the block where he lived, it had been bombed out. Then he remembered that his friend Maksim Firsov's family lived not far away. So maybe they'd survived, maybe they could have the food he'd brought from the Front? He did find us, and he gave us all the food that he'd saved from his own rations.

People's attitudes to the war were fatalistic, by and large. I'd survive, I told myself, but I spent every day worried sick about my mother. Of course, hunger had an anaesthetic effect: you weren't as scared as you would have been otherwise, but the fear never left you. On the other hand — though I wouldn't want to present myself as a hero — fear was kept down by other concerns, and in many cases also by the norms of behaviour during the Blockade, the noble unwritten code governing the struggle for survival and victory in the occupied city.

On New Year's Eve, 1942, my cousin and I were given tickets for a party. The tickets were addressed to us individually, and it said on them there would be a concert, and also 'refreshments' — if there hadn't been those, no-one would have bothered to turn up. Of course, what they gave us was pretty modest: some thin meat soup, a meatball with a small dollop of kasha alongside and a glass of stewed dried fruit. But it's not the meal itself that was most striking: all the children attending were carrying gas-masks, and inside each was a glass jar. Almost all the children divided the food into two halves and put half of it into the jar for their families at home.

When my cousin and I got home, we told all sorts of tall stories about the dinner and pretended we'd been given a special portion of food to bring home. I know that there were parties like that organised in every district of Leningrad, and that the food was assigned from the

extremely scarce supplies meant for the Leningrad and Baltic front lines — as a gift from the army to the children of Leningrad.

After the War, the political pressure stepped up again, but parents (and most teachers) tried to soften its effects on us. Often they pretended nothing had happened. To put it another way: the family and the school were incubators where people tried not to frighten the little chickens by letting on about the dreadful things they would have to experience. This protective humanism deserves recognition. The way our parents saw the world was different from the way we children saw it. But we ourselves were fated to experience the ‘qualities’ of the world we lived in and to make up our own minds about the advantages and disadvantages of life.

All this meant that my mother never discussed politics with me. A stern taboo lay over my father’s fate, and it was only when I finished school and told her I was planning to apply for higher education that she touched on the topic, giving me advice unprompted on how to fill in the bit of the form that asked about my father. She fetched the docket that stated he had been released ‘for absence of a *corpus delicti*’, reminded me that he had died of TB, and then she made me learn by heart a text that I have since then always included in application forms. Until 1936, my father served in the army; in that year, he took early retirement on health grounds, and on 30 December 1938, he died of TB in Leningrad. She told me that if I were asked for any other information, I should say my mother hadn’t told me anything else about my father. She was, of course, gripped by maternal anxiety about how life would turn out for me. Having the docket wasn’t enough to stop awkward questions: according to the attitudes of those years, my father had ‘been through the mill’ — though not every official was certain to believe that all I knew about my father was what I’d logged on the form.

### **Other people**

According to some psychologists, a child’s first gesture of intellectual independence is to choose a book to read on his or her own, instead of simply doing what parents or teachers suggest. This particular breakthrough happened early on in my life, and in large measure I have to thank the local library — it served the inhabitants of a few apartment blocks in our area. It was run by an elderly Leningrad German called Emma Khristoforovna, who was a good friend of my grandmother’s, and who was widely known as an excellent cook and a warm-hearted woman who was always pleased to give one good advice. I have a feeling that my grandmother may have broken, in her case, one of the ten commandments of life in our family — not complaining about how hard life was. My father’s cure-all was to joke when things were getting him down. My mother became

withdrawn. Asking for help was not something that came naturally to her. Whichever way, not long after my father died, Emma Khristoforovna did something surprising. She asked me in to the library (which was already a sign of respect), and told me that from now on I'd be the first to be loaned all the new books that came in, and more especially the magazines *Tekhnika — molodezhi* [Technology for Young People] and *Vokrug sveta* [Around the World], which were usually assigned first to the unofficial leaders of the local courtyard, the boys and girls from the top classes of school

As it happens, one of these, Vladimir Bystrov, used to hang about outside the library waiting for me and — the law of the jungle in action — make me give him the treasured book or magazine, but he would always return it a day later. Then it was my turn. Bystrov was very well-read; he was a talented boy, but also a good handyman who mended wind-up toys for all the children around and had the gift of thinking on his feet, giving brilliant retellings of everything he'd read. He, like all the other scaramouches from around us, had a wooden hut (his *'butakha'*) down in the maze of logs that took up half the yard. It was used not just for smoking and games of cards, but also for enlightening the masses. He'd gather a crowd of younger boys like me in the hut and in his scary but expressive voice retell chapter after chapter of Victor Hugo's *L'Homme qui rit*. It was creepy, but our desire to know how the plot came out kept us trapped. What was more, these performances came at a cost: a 'season ticket' set you back twenty kopecks, though you could buy one on credit, giving you a little time to pay.

In 1941, Bystrov finished school, volunteered for military service, and went off to the Front — as most of his coevals, girls and boys, from our yard also did. He came back as an officer with a chest full of medals. He had a deep scar on the forehead and face, a sign that his survival was some kind of a miracle. He got a brilliant degree from the Leningrad Technical Institute, and then did research on fuel for military rockets, which brought him the Government Medal; not long afterwards, though, he died tragically when he was blown up during an experiment on the fuel.

The Blockade brought people who were different closer together, breaking down social, cultural, and generational barriers. In the winter of 1942–3, I spent two months in hospital after I was diagnosed with pre-tuberculosis of the lungs. In the next bed was Semen Abramovich Olshanetsky, a doctor far older than me (he was then very elderly). He knew he was dying — he had a severe kidney condition — but all the same he found time to help with my education. He asked his wife to bring along Dickens, Jack London, Tolstoy (for instance, *War and Peace*) so that I could read them. Before war broke out, I'd already made my way through most of

Maine Reid and Walter Scott. My favourite hero was Aivengo, and his beloved, Lady Rowena, daughter of Cedric the Saxon, was the object of my secret passion. It was the euphony of the name itself that appealed to me; I had no idea then that its literal meaning was ‘slender and beautiful’.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Olshanetsky treated me like an equal; he used literature to take me into the world of adults, and spent days telling me the story of his life, about his love for medicine and his collection of porcelain. Although his professional life had been spent as a doctor, he had an extraordinary knowledge of Chinese and European porcelain. By the time I went home from hospital, I knew that the crossed-sword mark on china meant that a cup or plate came from the Meissen factory, the most expensive in Europe. More importantly, Dr Olshanetsky was able to pass on to me his love of literature. I have rarely encountered anyone who had such a profound intellectual and spiritual effect on me.

### **After the Blockade and the War**

I emerged from the Blockade and the War with a hugely optimistic outlook on life, a deep belief in collective values, and a desire to be useful to society. I got a string of top marks at school. True, some collective and individual misdemeanours meant that my good conduct mark was reduced on two occasions in the top forms, and that I even got suspended once — but for a very short time. I left school that day with my nose in the air: after all, there weren’t many top pupils who had the spirit for pranks. I have to confess though that the very next day (and especially after the dressing-down my mother had given me), I started wishing I was back in school. Accordingly, I wouldn’t join in any fun going on outside, but just hung round the flat moping, without a glance out of the window.

I think that I had some inner resources: communicability, the drive to do something for others and self-confidence. Friendship was what I valued most of all, and I was the leader in a smash-and-grab raid during which the register was spirited away and drowned in the river Karpovka with the entire class watching. The school director, the director of studies, and our class teacher put ever effort into tracing the perpetrator, but in vain. The oath of secrecy we had made every witness of the ‘sacrilege’ swear was more effective than the threats to which our teachers resorted. Another crime to which I confess here for the first time is one that I committed together with another of my friends, Lev Vlasov, and which we committed in the summer of 1945, the year we graduated from our seven-year school. We had

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<sup>1</sup> An alternative etymology of the name has it derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s garbling of Rhonwen, ‘white skirt’. [Editor].

both been out of the city at a summer camp. When we got back to our school, we found that the offices assigned to the director and the director of studies were empty, and that a pile of school-leaving certificates could be spied through the door of a half-open cupboard in the school office. (At this time, these certificates did not have an official numeration scheme indicating they were genuine.) Also there was a pack of prize certificates. Without exchanging a word, we helped ourselves to a stack of each of these, not really knowing what we would use them for. A few days later, however, we met some members of our class who were bewailing their fate. The admissions committee at some marine college they had applied for had refused to take them because of the large number of low marks they each had. In a flash, we decided to help out — after all, we had the certificates, didn't we? We didn't let on where we'd got them from, but we did promise to fix up some rather more solid-looking certificates for our two would-be marine cadets. We enjoyed what we were doing, spending a good deal of time in practising the signatures of the director and the teachers so they would look right. Now we had to solve a big problem: how to get the school stamp put on the certificates. We went to the director and said that we wanted to organise a party, and that we thought it would look good if we put the school stamp on the invitations... The story turned out amazingly well. Both the two 'marines' got into their college this time round. One later ended up in the navy, where he worked his way up to the rank of captain in due course. Another had a career as a merchant seaman and spent many years working as an on-board mechanic. I think we both knew in our heart of hearts that what we were doing was not exactly right — and so we never mentioned this incident when we met in later years.

### **My class at school**

In each of the post-war years (1945 through to 1948), the class I was studying in was the dominant one. Our inexhaustible energy was the key. Sometimes we'd all go to the cinema and skip the last class of the day; sometimes we'd all arrange that none of us would do our homework. Or we might all climb out on the concrete ledge above the school entrance so that our history teacher, whom we somehow never managed to wind up, would come into the classroom and find it empty.

We got away with a lot for a variety of reasons. To begin with, we studied hard and competed to get the best marks (which we saw as a result of our knowledge). A second important point is that we and the teachers felt a sense of unity because of our experiences during the Blockade and the War. During the Blockade itself, many teachers had made no secret of their interest in intellectual education (or enlightenment, to put it better) than in political education. I



don't know how conscious their decision to concentrate on the former was, but it was palpable, and meant that tedious pep-talks and politics were shoved into a remote corner of the school day. I do know that at the end of Soviet history pupils in Soviet schools simply 'sat out the day', squirming impatiently at their desks for the moment when their matriculation certificates would be given out. Adults and children, teachers and pupils would form two opposing groups. The aims of the former group would provoke surges of resistance on the part of the children; where they had been allies in the post-war years, teachers and pupils had become, by the end of Soviet history, antagonists in a mutual conflict.

However, I studied at a different era of the Soviet school, when there was no question of such conflict. There was no trauma involved in the transition from home to school. Added to this, the school could, during the War and immediately afterwards, give a child far more than most Soviet families could. For a pupil in Class Five or Class Six in 1942–1944, the school was nothing less than a means of salvation, a haven amid destruction and hunger; it was a human environment. All right, so the buildings weren't heated and they were cold, and the meal you got in exchange for your ration cards was quite rough-and-ready, but this was somewhere where you could find people who were ready to support your striving to survive no matter what happened. Class Eight — the start of the closing straight to the finish (1945–6) was also very important. The collective had already been formed, you had your friends, and they were your orientation group, and you had somewhere to go where they helped you get to grips with life after the war. By Class Nine (1946–7), we all really wanted to study, though it wasn't the thing to talk about it. Men and boys were supposed to express positive emotions. Class Ten was a window into the outside world. The messing round had come to an end: soon we'd be adults.

### **Teachers after the War**

Teachers would pass signals to us, sometimes openly, sometimes in secret, that made clear they knew we did need to absorb knowledge, even though we were growing more and more independent. They spared no effort in passing on their knowledge, and they all had different ways of approaching their pupils. Our German teacher, Luiza Romanovna Shteinberg, was what you call a born teacher. She managed to stop us thinking of German as an enemy language. The war with Germany was hardly over, Fascism had just been defeated — and here we were learning Heine and Goethe by heart. When a school friend of mine told this story to some Germans recently, they asked him to prove it, and he was able to recite them some lines by these poets. They simply couldn't imagine that anyone would have learned Pushkin and Lermontov by heart in Russian during the post-war years.

There were eleven leaving exams that you had to take in Class Ten. The final one was in history, and we had no interest at all in mugging up for this. So we decided to wing it — we divided the class into two groups, and assigned one group the first twenty-two exam questions and one group the other twenty-two. We were hoping to swing things with Irina (as we called Irina Andreevna Serenko, our history teacher, though not to her face). I can say for sure of myself and five of my closest friends that we stuck to the agreement and crammed the material for these twenty-two topics like lambs. At the session before the exams, which many of us sat through in fear and trembling, I told Irina Andreevna that no, we didn't have any questions, but we did have one request that I'd put to her in private, once everyone else had left the room. Once I had her *tete-à-tete*, I told her that each of us had properly prepared only half of the questions. But there was a way out: she had only to assign papers 1–22 to the first group of pupils (it didn't matter in which order), and question 23 onwards to the second group. She unhesitatingly agreed to do as we asked. At the exam itself, we all went up to the desk confidently, selected our paper, read out the number loudly (so everyone would be assured the system was working), and joyfully (yes — joyfully!) showed off what we knew. That day, the local inspector of schools was sitting in. He was delighted by our knowledge of history and was one of the first to offer us his congratulations at the graduation ceremony.

Our class teacher, Petr Ivanovich Diev, whose own subject was maths, played a big role in helping us to feel a mixture of friendship and respect for our teachers. When we reached Class Nine, he didn't give anyone a mark of five for a whole two terms. By doing this, he achieved his desired result — creating an atmosphere of rivalry in our algebra, geometry, and trigonometry classes. In Class Ten, we used to follow him home in a bevy, discussing all kinds of our own problems with him on the way.

### **We did what we liked in our free time**

No-one could influence 'from within' what we did outside class. The attempts by the school authorities to get us interested in amateur dramatics were an abject failure. To begin with, none of us had any talent for acting. A scene from Gogol's *The Government Inspector* staged by one of the teachers lasted only one performance. The efforts of the school director to get us interested by setting up a drama club involving girls from the local girls' school didn't help either. The girls we had crushes on didn't come from there...

Yet all the while our circle of private interests — music-making, dancing, popular songs and romances, and song and dance genres of all kinds — was growing. These genres were in tune with our

individual feelings and experiences, our romantic moods. Our fathers and mothers, who belonged to the first — one could say only — Soviet generation, were steeped in the culture of the Soviet gramophone. The most official records as put out by the ‘April’ factory and others like it (epoch-making speeches by Lenin, Stalin, and other revolutionary leaders) were, despite their very low prices and the huge numbers of copies made, bought by few people on a voluntary basis. Records of this kind did have a market of sorts, mind — as presents to outstanding citizens and the like. (This archaic tradition lasted on into the Brezhnev years, when Brezhnev’s own four-volume *Leninskii kurs* [A Lenin Primer] was doled out to leading propagandists, and also to manual and white-collar workers who’d passed the so-called ‘Lenin Tests’.) Other records released in vast numbers included tracks by the Pyatnitsky Folk Chorus, and the Red Army Chorus under Boris Aleksandrov. But no-one wanted to sing numbers like that at home, even with the famous choirs themselves playing in the background. Mainly, even before the War, our parents bought songs and romances sung by stars of the Soviet estrada and by jazz artistes, who sucked people into the tide of their precious, intimate emotions. The private character of Soviet popular music at that era is an indisputable fact.

The children born in the pre-war decade inherited from their parents a secret love for the work of artistes like Vertinsky, Leshchenko, Bayanova, Sokolsky. ‘White émigrés’ though they might be, these artistes had a firm place in the hearts of Soviet citizens too. The different attitudes among Soviet high-ups to such material meant that it could flourish on an underground or semi-legal basis. I myself have a set of records by the songsters just mentioned that was released at the end of the War not somewhere in the West, but in Leningrad itself, with the knowledge and collusion of the military command. As the custom was, the records were first of all released for ‘service use’ by Party and Soviet activists, but in fact they reached a much wider audience, and one that was diverse in social and generational terms. The lucky listeners included not just members of the Party elite, but ordinary people, and sons and daughters as well as mothers and son. However, the children’s tastes went much further than the parents’.

It was round about this time that I realised that if you couldn’t manage a quick-step or a fox-trot, a Boston waltz and so on, you’d never be a star at school dances. So I had, like my fellows, to cadge the money for dancing classes from my mother. Getting through the course was a hassle (my dance partners, grown women in their twenties, were pretty peeved at being paired off with a gangly sixteen-year-old), but when I’d got somewhere, I started teaching my friends the steps to the tranquil sounds of Leshchenko melodies. In this way (and many others), our parents’ flats rang to the sounds of suspect music more or less day and night.

In Class Nine, we set up our own school jazz band. At a competition for amateur groups, we performed a popular restaurant foxtrot number, 'Mary Pickford', along with what we thought was a screamingly witty skit, 'In Distant Dreary Anglia'. The skit began with a group of 'English' people performing the 'lindy', a dance that was then more or less forbidden, after which refreshments were laid on by the fictional host — a heap of pies nicely calculated so that there was just one pie more than the total number of guests. The guests duly declined a polite invitation for seconds. Then the stage lights went down (to the sound of a commentary saying that kind of thing was always happening in England). A few seconds later, the lights came up, to show the host's hand closing firmly on the remaining pie, while the guests' forks stabbed frenziedly at his hand... That gives some idea of the 'artistic levels' we reached.

The jury was horrified, and decided to declare us eliminated from competition. But we were delighted with the upset we'd caused, and we soon found a brilliant (as we thought) singer, Nadya Telegina from the No. 66 School for Girls. This gave us the chance to scandalise the teachers and class teachers at local girls' schools with our efforts a few more times. I should emphasise, though, that we weren't always allowed to finish the programme — but if not, we'd leave the dance hall with our heads at a defiant angle, to the sound of a drum we'd hired in the College of Military Topography.

Our jazz band was at some level a reaction to the Puritanism of the official evenings laid on for us at the school itself. Our music teachers paid no attention to those gatherings, since they thought an interest in the opposite sex was completely natural and that you couldn't do anything about it. The staffs of girls' schools, on the other hand, had a much more puritanical attitude on the whole, and they divided boys' schools into two categories: those that had pupils it was all right for their pupils to mix with, and those it was definitely not. The repertoire of dances was considered very important. In the most puritanical schools, you always had waltzes (to open and close the evening), pas-de-quatres, pas-de-patineurs, polonaises and mazurkas, and cracoviennes. If this classical section was got through with proper decorum, then the mistress of ceremonies (usually the school director) would make a gesture indicating that it was all right to move on to Boston waltzes, foxtrots or tangos. At this point, the hall would suddenly come to life, and exhausted lads would peel themselves off the walls and start peering through the crowds for their beloveds. But if any of the dancers tried to do any fancy steps (high kicks, for instance), then there would be a sharp command, 'Stop that nonsense!' And the atmosphere of artificial propriety would return.

The same was true of the local House of Pioneers. Here the mistress of ceremonies was one Basya Efimovna, the manager of the House,

a woman of what might politely be termed mature years who always dressed in black clothes with a military look to them and a pair of resin soldiers' topboots. She never let anyone near the amp and the records, but every now and again, when a wave of liberalism overtook her, she'd put on a quickstep or announce a tango — 'girls only'. I have a feeling that she was a bit sorry for us. After the official dance was closed, people who were in the know could use the back stairs to get through into the dance hall and spend half an hour or so doing Western dances. She didn't need to make special efforts: she had a service flat in the House of Pioneers itself and she also suffered from insomnia. All in all, our jazz band was a kind of naive protest against the official song and dance culture.

### **The attitudes of our elders to the younger generation**

Now, many years after I left school, I think I have started to understand the main ways that our elders thought of us back then. There was a sort of unspoken agreement that had been laid down in some mysterious way, and according to this, adults protected us, or more accurately, saved us from being disillusioned too early on by the life that they and we had to lead. They didn't open our eyes to the injustices of life in the land of victorious socialism, and but they also avoided idealising the development of the country and its future. They stopped us placing too great a trust in propaganda — which for its part was forever assuring us that the motherland was wonderful, that it was our elder brother, our father, our mother, an entire happy family. Our parents couldn't allow us to think of our family as just an annexe of the state system [cf. Vail, Genis 1988: 113]. In this lay their concealed, latent so to speak, capacity for free-thinking. Our parents and teachers didn't do too much to impose their views of the world on us, seeming to sense that their successors (as had already happened with them, the older generations) would in any case have to come to terms with a painful rejection of the truths they had absorbed in their childhood and youth.

### **'Happy End'**

I should finish by saying what happened to us all. All twenty-four of us in my class passed their matriculation, everyone went into higher education, eight of us into the Leningrad Electro-Technical Institute, five the Institute of Mines, three the Leningrad Polytechnic, one the Institute of Railway Engineers, one the Institute of Economics and Finance, one went on to art college, and four to Leningrad State University. 19 ended up as engineers, one as a stage designer. Of the four at university, there was one biologist, one lawyer, one geographer and one journalist. Four of my schoolmates are now Doctors of Science, and five hold candidates' degrees.

In conclusion, I'll briefly address the questions sent for discussion:

1

Any 'monocultural' analysis of anthropological or ethnographical problems is certain to have limited significance. An insider investigator is a unique informant about our culture, speaking as he or she does from a position informed by knowledge of another culture. Recently, I've been trying to work out just what it is about the Russian mentality that is so specific. My first attempts to pin down the phenomenon led me to think that it's hard to verbalise one's own view of one's own culture [Firsov 2003]. Without denying the value and profundity of self-examination, I would like to make an argument in favour of observing a mentality from the outside and of external expertise on this. For a long time we have realised that the strength of a given people may well not lie in the areas that this particular people believes to constitute its strengths. With peoples, just as with actual people, it isn't always the features that are subjectively seen as meritorious that are seen as such from the outside. What is more, too great an emphasis on what are subjectively seen as advantages can open the doors to theories of national exclusivity. Or to put it another way, there are many aspects of Russianness that have been accurately recorded by external observers (foreign scholars, diplomats, journalists, Russian émigrés, most particularly those from the so-called 'first wave').

For instance, Vladimir Weidlé, the writer and professor at the Prague Theological Academy wrote that Westerners are particularly irritated by two traits of Russians [Veidle [=Weidlé] 1954: 111–44]. The first is the tendency to spurn logic in favour of something else, which may be lower than logic or may be higher than this. The second is the substitution for rights and justice of pity and loving indulgence of weaknesses — both one's own and other people's. Long-standing domination of reason and morality by the 'dictates of the heart' is highly dangerous. It generates chaos, and in this both mercy and justice end up destroyed.

2

My answer to the question about oral history would take a pragmatic form. Soviet society remains *understudied* for a variety of reasons. The filling-in of 'blanks' on the map of our knowledge depends on our being able to use new or little-used sources of information such as are now attracting popularity among historians, ethnographers, cultural anthropologists, sociologists. One such source is the memories of the still living citizens of Russia, who represent the huge social range and variety of experience over the decades of Soviet history, and indeed post-Soviet history. Members of the oldest age cohorts are a special case: the natural aging process has made it difficult to collect information about experience in the 1930s. Now, we are facing analogous problems with regard to the history of the Second World War — and indeed, the relatively unknown territory of the 1950s and 1960s.

I think it would be a terrible mistake to leave future generations alone with official sources of information and not to provide them with blocks of unofficial information circulating in zones that are poorly illuminated by written culture of any kind. Let me term this information *existential*, reflecting the peculiarities of individual (or collective) *everyday* experience in Soviet and Russian society. Let me take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude to Catriona Kelly, whose intuition and acumen have helped recognise the dangers of making a mistake of this kind.

### LARRY E. HOLMES

#### 'Wanted Dead or Alive': the Past

Catriona Kelly's article, "'The School Waltz': The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom,' has provoked considerable controversy. The discussion that has followed is especially stimulating because its participants confront the many methodological (and epistemological) issues that arise with the use of oral testimony. I am pleased to comment on these issues and will do so as a historian of Russian and Soviet education who has relied extensively on interviews.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have long relied on memoirs when writing about the Russian and Soviet past. Before the opening of the archives in the USSR, they did so even as they acknowledged the subjectivity of their source. And yet precisely because of the recognizably highly subjective nature of oral testimony, many scholars have used it as an afterthought to reinforce what the available written record, presumably far more objective, already supposedly revealed.

Let me make my own position clear if it is not sufficiently so already. In my research during the early 1990s on Moscow's Model School No. 25, an elite institution whose pupils included the children of Joseph Stalin, among other party and state leaders, I interviewed thirty-seven individuals who had attended the school some time between 1931 and 1937 [Holmes

1999]. I believe that oral testimony if taken and used carefully can be immensely valuable as both a *source* and a *tool* for understanding the past. As a source, it provides remarkable insights into how the past was experienced. As a tool, it compels scholars to think critically about the discipline of history itself. Dr. Kelly's article is evidence of the former, this roundtable of the latter.

1

What are the benefits and potential pitfalls of an examination of any culture by an outsider? Any scholar working in the present is a cultural outsider when studying the past. And any student of the past runs the risk of mangling it, consciously or otherwise, in the image and interests of the present. This issue has been discussed at length in the literature surrounding the postmodern criticism of historical scholarship and I will not attempt to summarise it here.

Rather I want to address the issue that is at the core of Dr. Kelly's work and the controversy around it — the taking and use of oral testimony by a cultural outsider. Taking interviews brings to the fore, as no other kind of research can, the highly personal and subjective nature of much of what we as historians do. Dr. Kelly displays remarkable sensitivity to her role as an outsider. This critical self-awareness leads to a fascinating discussion of her own schooling as a way of clarifying for herself and for her readers the personal context from which she observes and evaluates her subject. To be sure, the outsider as scholar always runs the risk of looking for dysfunctional aspects of the subject under study and thus missing or downplaying how remarkably well the Soviet school system, in this case, developed cognitive skills. Yet as Dr. Kelly's article makes abundantly clear, it is precisely the cultural outsider who is predisposed to approach schools and schooling as cultural phenomena. Dr. Kelly therefore quite appropriately pays due attention to '*the cultural givens*,' '*the material fabric of the school*,' and '*the non-academic content of the curriculum*' (pp. 118–119, 125).

Informants share impressions that are, in my opinion, of far more value than any factual information they might provide. There is the ever-present danger that this most prized result can be tainted by the positive side of human nature. Informants might subconsciously recall what they believe the outsider wishes to hear. In a classic case a former American slave presented different versions, one for a white interviewer, another for a black, of the nature of black-white relations and of slavery.<sup>1</sup> It is important, therefore, that historians who take oral testimony discuss for their readers, if not in the article or book published, then in an item that is readily accessible, where and by what means interviews were conducted.

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 7, 'The View from the Bottom Rail' in [Davidson, Lytle 1992].



When I interviewed former pupils of School No. 25, I hoped to limit any undue influence on my part by meeting my informants in their apartments where they were most comfortable. Moreover, I became less relevant, or so it seemed to me, by demonstrating at the outset knowledge of their school. My informants would respond, ‘*You are one of us,*’ and proceed, I trusted, with largely reliable testimony irrespective of what they thought I might have wanted since I was now one of them. I found myself even less of a factor when among a gathering of several individuals from the school. They began to talk to, at, and with each other as if I existed, if at all, in a realm well beyond the table behind which all of us sat. I do wonder how they would have recalled things differently if we had met in the school, still existing as a school, in which they had studied sixty years ago. My sense is they would have remembered differently but not so much so that they would have changed significantly their story or, subsequently, mine about them and their school.

2

What is the value of oral testimony? I believe that the interview is hardly a beneficial way to discover the facts. It might serve to probe the details of a discrete incident or to confirm that something happened in a specific place at a specific time. But the human mind is not designed to remember in any structured way, chronological or otherwise, the facts. If we look to the oral record as a repository of ‘objective factual information,’ we run the risk of losing reminiscences altogether as an acceptable source. Some critics have attempted to discredit the entire testimony of Holocaust survivors because they confused or could not recall ‘the facts.’ I frequently found myself in a better command of the details about School No. 25 than my informants. One former pupil at School No. 25 had suffered numerous strokes that had ravaged his memory of names, dates, and places. But he remembered vividly his impressions of school life and recounted them with a beauty and verve that belied his physical condition.

As no other source can, oral testimony reveals how an institution or series of events was experienced. Dr. Kelly therefore discusses not just the Soviet school but *schooling*. Through her informants, she uses the classroom, corridors, and extracurricular activity to get at, as she has put it, the ‘*rituals and everyday practices that held schools together*’ (p. 115). The traditional record, even upon careful teasing of it, cannot display as clearly as Dr. Kelly’s informants the role of rule-bending, a sense of dislocation upon entering the first grade, youthful romance, and free-thinking.

Oral testimony displays how spontaneous factors existed as part and parcel of school life and, how ironically, that very spontaneity contributed to the success of a highly regimented educational effort. Not traditional sources but informants demonstrate how teachers

and children humanised the system and thereby made it work. This source alerted Dr. Kelly to teachers who imposed a hierarchy of favourites and scapegoats to enhance their own authority and to pupils who as a *kollektiv* reinforced the importance of the correct response during classroom drill. Similarly, my informants kindly instructed me that by their pranks and their sense of participation in determining what transpired in the classroom they were prepared to accept a structured environment of order and discipline. I am reminded here of what James Scott concluded in his influential book on the dangers and limits of the power of state-initiated social engineering: '*Formal order ... is always and to some considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognize, without which it could not exist, and which it alone cannot create or maintain.*' [Scott 1998: 310].

3

Are oral testimony and memory a reliable window on the past or only on the present? The question could be asked of all sources, written or otherwise, for they are all 'read' and understood in the present. I'll leave it for other scholars in other forums to discuss this larger issue and the corresponding post-modern challenge to the craft of history it has inspired. The oral record is admittedly different from other sources because it is not just read but also *made* in the present. When creating such a source, historians themselves become 'part of history' no matter how much they try to stand objectively apart from it. That function makes it all the more imperative, as I have discussed above, that scholars understand and account for any undue influence they might exert on the recall of their informants.

'*Memory is not a passive depository of facts,*' the oral historian, Alessandro Portelli, has observed, '*but an active process of creation of meanings.*' [Portelli 1991: 52]. David Henige has likened memory to a landscape, '*repeatedly exposed to weathering, its shapes deposited in secondary patterns and shifting with the wind.*' [Henige 1982: 4–5]. People remember the past in order to validate their own sense of themselves in the present. In so doing, they can inflate or deflate their importance then and now and romanticise or denigrate the past. This striking human ability at manipulation, especially by informants blessed with verbal eloquence, poses obvious problems for the historian.

The challenges memory presents, therefore, are daunting. Yet the interview and the nature of memory itself can be the closest historians come to the past itself. Dr. Kelly observed that during interviews many of her informants '*appeared to slip back into the language and perceptions of their schooldays... (often reported with a significant emotional coloration)*' (p. 116). When I interviewed former pupils of School No. 25, then in their seventies and eighties, I thought that they grew visibly younger in the process, age peeling from their faces,

layer by layer. When together, they re-enacted the past, in so doing even resurrecting in all their former intensity old spats. During one such session, one of my informants, a man who had lost both legs to diabetes, became so energised that I feared he would fall out of his wheelchair or topple it over. 'My children,' I found myself calling them in such circumstances, not in a collapse of objectivity on my part, but in wonderment at the extent to which the dead past could become alive for me as well as for these people.

No hard and fast rule exists by which we can confidently filter out the present from testimony about the past. In order to do so with certainty, if then, we would have to retrace if not experience each step in the informant's life after the event under study. Historians can with confidence, as Dr. Kelly suggests, use oral testimony to *complement* what we learn from other sources. Scholars should take as many interviews and from as diverse a subject population as possible. Then we can present the common thread that emerges as something that likely originated not in the recent past or present but in the period under review.

In conclusion, I think it imperative that scholars, all of them in one way or another cultural outsiders, use when possible oral testimony. The potential for abuse of this source is great, but the careful researcher can minimise the dangers and reap the significant benefits. Like no other source, oral testimony gives personality and spirit to history, it brings the past alive. It also reminds us of the important roles of individuals and the informal groups of which they are a part.

We would be well to be reminded of the earlier contribution to the study of the Soviet Union of the Harvard Interview Project, interviews and questionnaires administered to over 2,000 people who had left the Soviet Union for the most part from 1943 to 1946. Alfred G. Meyer has noted that even in the heyday of an unforgiving totalitarian model in the 1950s and 1960s, use of testimony produced by the Harvard Interview Project led to the application of '*sociological, anthropological and psychological concepts to the study of Soviet society*' and to the discovery of '*identifiable groups with problems, conflicts ... and with informal organization and unofficial cultures of their own.*' [Meyer 1986: 406]. For a brief period, until the Soviet Union allowed researchers extensive access to its citizens and archives, the Soviet Interview Project made a similar contribution.<sup>1</sup>

Most informants hope that scholars will avoid romanticising the past and what it represented for them, its participants. At the end of a session with several former pupils of School No. 25, one of them leaned over to me and whispered: '*Please don't make our school into*

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<sup>1</sup> For use of this material, see [Millar 1987]. For my modest use of both the Harvard and Soviet interview projects, see [Holmes 2005: 64, 75, 86–7].

*a sweet little nothing*' (*Ne delaite, pozhaluista, iz nashei shkoly konfetku*).<sup>1</sup> I trust that I have not done so. He has since died and taken with him any additional impressions and concerns he might have shared with me. His death reminds us all that as scholars we should take oral testimony when we can for the source is neither permanent nor renewable.

### CLAUDIO SERGIO NUN INGERFLOM

I. When the subject under study coincides in terms of problematics, if not necessarily geography, with the past of the culture to which the person writing belongs, then the identity of the author is split, he or she becomes at once an investigator of, and an actor in, the theme under study. It is as a historian of Russia that I shall react to the questions set for discussion. Yet I am also a former schoolboy: I attended school in the 1950s in Argentina, and in the next decades, I was connected in various different ways with the Soviet educational system as a student at Moscow State University (from which I graduated in 1972); more recently, I observed the French educational system from the outside, as the father of two boys (during the 1970s and 1980s in Paris). I recognise the risks posed by a move from one status to another. I recognise them, but I nurture no illusions about necessarily being able to avoid them entirely. But the reader has been warned, which is the most important thing. Let him or her read what follows in any way they can, or want to: I, like any other author, cannot exercise final control over the effects created by my own discourse.

My response to the editorial board of *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* has two parts. In the first, I set out some remarks about the article itself, and in the second, I offer some answers to the issues raised in the questionnaire.

**Claudio Sergio Nun Ingerflom**  
CRNS, Paris/SSEES, UCL, London

The article under discussion is particularly rich. Much of the material included in it was new to

<sup>1</sup> A bit like the English expression: 'don't make it too chocolate-boxey'. [Editor].

me, and I cannot consider all the many issues raised there. The first thing that strikes one about it is Catriona Kelly's ability to address the present (I mean this from the point of view of history in a broader sense — the post-Stalinist era, as she calls it, is part of our own time). She also works with her material in an interdisciplinary way — as ethnologist, sociologist, politologist. As a matter of fact, the material itself demands this: any other approach would be too narrow. Hence the, to my mind very productive, simultaneous use of oral history and traditional history based on published materials.

One leaves Catriona Kelly's descriptions with the sense that there are some factors uniting all schools, wherever they are, and independently of political, economic, and social systems: you can start with the fact that avant-garde directions in pedagogy and teaching methodology, new waves of child psychology and so on, actually make very little (if any) impact on schools themselves. True, the Communist and capitalist systems differ to the extent that the space allowed to private enterprise in the latter makes it possible for experimental schools to exist alongside 'normal' ones; in the former case, the organisers of these can choose to espouse a certain intellectual doctrine or introduce novelties, as indeed can individual teachers working within the second system. However, though I would emphasise that it is possible for teachers in state schools to give vent to their own intellectual interests, this phenomenon is relatively recent, or at least as something with broad impact. The level of teachers' salaries is low, and thus it is easy to see why, once the first years of enthusiasm pass, few have much interest in keeping up with innovations in methodology. To put it another way: capitalism is distinguished by not being able to survive (in the long term) without a space for struggle. The comparative dimension is acknowledged in the article itself, but I want to emphasise it here, and to stress the extreme importance of this element.

I shall make one critical comment here. I know what the author has in mind when she speaks of the 'post-Stalin' era, and I know how convenient that term is as a general label. However, I do think that there is a danger that the use of such a blanket term plays down the changes that took place between Stalin's death and the 1990s. Here I have in mind not even so much political changes as the changes that took place in the school itself. And this raises a question: might it not be possible to focus on some of these changes and thus avoid the homogenising effects of the very general term, 'post-Stalinist school'?

#### Answers to the questions raised in the Forum

**1**

To be honest, I don't see how another situation is possible. Insider informants always speak from 'inside', yet all ethnographers always

have to observe from a distance. One cannot be at once a member of a given ethnic group and an observer of that group. So maybe the fact that a researcher and 'actor' come from the same country, or speak the same language, is some kind of solution? But then other kinds of distancing come into force: an adult ethnographer stands at a distance from the world of children. The 'culture' of the school, like that of any other institution, has its own peculiarities, and one has to immerse oneself in these. Of course, in cases where researchers and informants come from the same culture, the distance will be smaller than in cases where, say, the former come from the English school system and the latter from the Russian, but I think this is mainly a question of technicalities. The larger theoretical questions remain the same in both cases. One can't say that a historian of Russia's world-view is likely to coincide with that of a peasant from the era of the Emancipation of the Serfs (1861), wherever that person comes from. In such cases, historians have to be anthropologists to at least as great an extent as they have to be historians. I think that a researcher should take a 'respectful' attitude to the question of distance, and bear in mind from the beginning the specific logic of the historical actor (the informant-member of the target culture), and also to be aware of the relationship between his or her own conceptual apparatus and the conceptual apparatus of the informant, not being tempted to regard the latter (the conceptual apparatus of the mid-nineteenth-century Russian peasant, say) in a reductive way, or to construct a hierarchy (the 'naive mentality' versus the 'scientific mentality'). Yet losses are inevitable: the gulf between the informant's language and that of the researcher means that part of the information conveyed is certain to be lost.

2

A view of testimony as a '*repository of facts and events*' is not proper to the historian, or at any rate one working according to a post-positivist programme. I can't in fact imagine how one can oppose an event as such and a narrative about this as the 'expression of a specific mode of thought'. Everything — the selection of a subject, a place, and an era, of a source and/or an informant, not to speak of interpretation and analysis — depends on a 'specific mode of thought', i.e. that of a given researcher. The same is true of the informant's discourse. Here, we have a case where informants were recorded in an interview situation. But archival sources are characterised to an equally high degree by the expression of 'specific modes of thought'. One could perfectly well say that the transformation of some fact derived from the past into an event is fundamentally dependent on a range of choices made by a given researcher (or informant!) In other words, of course we have to treat oral history with caution. But are archival sources not equally suspect? The methods we use to approach them may be different, but in every case we have, I think, to distinguish the theoretical, i.e. epistemological,

side of the question from methodological considerations (e.g. those relating to what type of interview strategy to adopt).

3

Anyone who uses language is always ‘narrating’. A style that is more accessible to a broad public sometimes (over)simplifies the analysis, and hence the underlying problem. The humanities should not lightly renege on their own arsenal of concepts, which — in historiography at least — is rather under-stocked as it is.

VERA KAPLAN

**‘Take this Waltz’. Comments on ‘The School Waltz’: The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom**

by **Catriona Kelly**

*The number 86 pen used to leave blots. To make matters worse, I was left-handed and the teacher made me write with my right hand, so my copy-book was usually a mess. But I always kept my ‘Rondo’ pen with me, and when the teacher turned around, I would pull it out and write with it. The nib was straight and it blotted less. But the teacher, when marking our work, would catch me immediately. The next day she would approach me and ask: ‘So, Levochka, writing with the Rondo again?’ I never lied. I confessed: ‘Yes, again.’*

*The number 86 pen was broad at the base and narrow at the tip. You could write with it using different pressure to produce thinner or thicker lines, and that is why we were only allowed to use the 86 when writing in our copybooks. The kids didn’t like it for some reason and tried to write with the ‘Rondo’. The nib of this was straight and it was impossible to make lines of different thickness with it, and that is why it was forbidden to use it in class, but many wrote with it anyway. I never tried. If it wasn’t allowed, then I didn’t do it.*

I had never heard of a ‘Rondo’ pen before. My parents, who studied in Stalinist schools of 1930s — 1940s, and then taught in post-Stalinist schools in 1950s — 1960s, told me about the ‘Rondo’ after I read them a fragment from ‘The

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School Waltz'. Wrought with elaborate and colourful detail, 'The School Waltz' creates an attractive and sophisticated picture of the Soviet School and strikes a responsive chord with the people who were schooled in the Soviet system. The essay depicts aspects of everyday school life which rarely appear in either scholarly works or memoirs of former teachers and pupils. The vivid reaction which 'The School Waltz' has generated among its readers provides the most authentic proof of the author's success. The article is well structured, subtle, yet penetrating in its description of the repertoire of school practices and rituals. Owing to these qualities, the essay serves as an impressive example of the 'thick description' method, which was formulated by Clifford Geertz in his classic work [Geertz 2000] and which has since proved its worth in numerous anthropological studies.

The 'School Waltz' not only awakens pleasant memories, but also raises some methodological questions, including those which have been presented for discussion by the editors of the *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*. The first question concerns the advantages and disadvantages of a researcher's 'outsider' status. In my view, such a position is preferable for studies of everyday life. Years ago Yury Lotman addressed a similar issue in his paper on the poetics of everyday behaviour in Russian eighteenth century culture. '*The documents which record the norms of everyday, ordinary behaviour for a particular social group as a rule originate with foreigners or are written for them*', Lotman argued, and emphasised that such an approach '*takes for granted an observer who is located outside the given social group*'. [Lotman 1984: 231–2]. Lotman's explanation of this phenomenon was based on the distinctiveness of the insider and outsider perceptions. In his view, everyday behaviour is perceived by its immediate bearers as '*natural*', '*as belonging to Nature rather than to Culture*'. '*The semiotic and conventional character of such behaviour is apparent only to an outside observer.*' [Lotman 1984: 232]. Hence, the profound conceptualisation of everyday school life in 'The School Waltz' was made possible precisely because of the author's perspective as an outside observer.

Such a position, however, has its own potential hazards. While being outside of the cultural context under scrutiny, the researcher is integrated into the context of his/her own culture. His/her methodological approach and theoretical concepts are formulated in the framework of this particular culture in order to be applied to the study of the 'other' culture. Yet how might one be certain that concepts and approaches, which stem from a particular cultural context, will serve as adequate research tools for study of an 'other' culture? How can one prevent the substitution of categories and concepts derived from the researcher's cultural background for categories and concepts inherent to the culture under investigation?



In the case of this article the situation is rather complicated. On the one hand, the nature of the research data (respondents' accounts of their personal experience) should mitigate possible cultural substitution. On the other hand, the researcher herself formulated questions for respondents and, by so doing, inevitably defined 'the prism' through which their past was reconsidered and 'the field' in which memory of the school past was actualised. Consequently, her pre-conceptions influenced the subjects which were recalled.

One example of possible distortion occurred to me. I was surprised by the lack of attention devoted to the practices and rituals connected with pupils' extracurricular activities. It was precisely such activities in their different forms, from Pioneer and Komsomol school organisations up to school amateur theatres and music groups, which provided a flexible framework for creating and maintaining 'horizontal' relationships among pupils. This sphere was extremely emotion-laden. Even the most official extracurricular school practices had a ritual, not a ceremonial character; in the course of participating in them, a new quality of relations was produced, derived from communication among adolescents, and distinct from the declared political or educational aims of an event. This particular sphere was a kind of hothouse for developing group solidarity, which provided fertile ground for fostering corporative consciousness. Such corporative solidarity cemented the Soviet system better than any ideology. It seems odd to see very little attention devoted to this side of school life. One can only hope that the author will pursue further the subject of school extracurricular activities in her future research.

The second methodological question concerns the capacity of oral history to preserve accounts of facts and events which elude the domain of written history. In general, such a question relates to the psychology of memory more than to history. According to my personal experience in working with memoirs, materials provided by oral history convey numerous reliable details. The problem is that when collected together, these realistic details sometimes form a distorted picture of the past. As far as I can conclude, the materials on which 'The School Waltz' is based produce very few aberrations of memory, but they are still present. Thus, the impression that *'Brezhnev seemed to be enjoying eternal life'* (p. 127, Russian version of the paper) could not have characterised the 1980s, since Brezhnev passed away in 1982, but this feeling was indeed ubiquitous in the 1970s. In the 1970s, at least, ordinary school days did not begin with a formal assembly in which the whole school was supposed to stand in line (p. 126). However, the elements of standing in line permeated the school day. Pupils were meant, for instance, to line up before entering the classroom when the bell for a lesson rang. It was recommended that pupils walk in

pairs in the hallway (*rekriatsiya*) during breaks, and that practice was carried out more or less routinely in the early grades. At the end of a school day, teachers were supposed to arrange their classes in lines and to take their pupils in 'orderly' fashion into the cloak-room. When classes were changing between duty shifts at the end of each week, a mini-line up would be held: '*Duty terminated!*' '*Duty taken over!*' This is what happened at the school I attended between 1964 and 1967 in Leningrad (School No. 221, on ulitsa Plekhanova, about two hundred metres from Nevsky Prospekt),<sup>1</sup> and later (1967–8 and 1969–1974) in schools no. 269 and 249 (also in Leningrad, but this time in newbuild districts, the famous areas of 'Khrushchev slums' [*khrushchoby*]).<sup>2</sup> It was also the case in the school where I taught history for some years (1979–1984) — this was School no. 288, in another area of the centre, known as Kolomna, which is old and with strong literary associations, but is not on the tourist trail. The practice continued in the school my daughter began attending in 1988 — a language special school this time, School No. 506, which was right next door to a lovely park. The children had sports lessons in the park, and drawing lessons, and reading lessons too — but they were marched there in line. It is not surprising that these refracted images merged together in the memory of a general daily assembly in drill formation — but the latter, to the best of my knowledge, was not characteristic of late Soviet school life.

Regarding the third query: the narrative character of the essay creates no impediments to posing analytical questions, first and foremost among them — why, in fact, did the participants in the survey perceive of their schools as bad? The author of the paper, who early on in the article makes a comparison between her own school experience and the experience of the respondents, draws the conclusion that the Soviet school experience is more typical than atypical of the standard post-industrial school model (p. 117, Russian text). This essay creates the impression that the 'Soviet school' was more 'school' than it was 'Soviet'. In this connection, it is interesting to note that emigrants from the Soviet Union, when comparing the Soviet school with those schools where their children now study in US or Israel, tend to express a preference for the Soviet school — the very same school that is described in negative terms by the subjects of this article. According to the dominant émigré opinion, the Soviet school was a good one because it provided its pupils with systematic and broad knowledge; there was much more order and discipline, and the Soviet school taught children how to

<sup>1</sup> Behind the Kazan Cathedral. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> A joking term for the functional if unattractive boxy low-rise blocks put up to standard designs from 1955 onwards. [Editor].

work<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, a group of educators who emigrated from Russia in 1990s went so far as to initiate the foundation of ‘Russian’ schools in Israel. This initiative was supported by the Israeli Ministry of Education. These schools have been functioning in the framework of the state educational system, teaching has been in Hebrew (with Russian language being taught as well). There are no entrance exams or any kind of preliminary conditions for enrolling to these schools, but they are built according to the model of Soviet mathematics schools. These schools are known as ‘MOFET’ — technically an abbreviation for ‘pedagogical and technological centre’. Yet the noun ‘mofet’ means ‘model’ or ‘ideal’ in Hebrew, and this is precisely how ‘Mofet’ schools are being perceived in Israeli society. Undeniably, the level of knowledge in maths and natural sciences among graduates of such schools is higher than average for Israeli schools. From this perspective, the Soviet school looks fairly good in comparison with other school systems. So what is the object of comparison for respondents who assess the Soviet school negatively? In my opinion (in this case I rely on my personal experience as a former pupil and then as a teacher in Leningrad school), this object is not any other school system in particular, but an ideal type of school, one created by literature, theatre and, especially, by cinema. In keeping with custom in modern Russian culture, an artificial model, an artistic representation with little relation to reality set the tone for real practice, and established the criteria by which reality — in this particular case the reality of school life — was evaluated.

It would be very interesting to examine these criteria in detail. For emigrants from the former Soviet Union, the main reason for the positive evaluation they accorded to the Soviet school was the breadth of knowledge which, they believed, this school provided. Order and discipline were important factors in their positive evaluation since these factors, in their view, were conducive to effective study. However, the respondents whose comments are cited in this article apparently evaluated their school based on its general atmosphere and relationships between teachers and pupils, their ‘warmth’ or ‘coldness’. These elements, one might think, are more characteristic of an assessment of home and family than of an educational institution. Yet the Soviet school was expected to be ‘a second home’ to its pupils. The most astonishing thing is that in some successful cases the Soviet school was really the ‘school of joy’ about which Vasily Sukhomlinsky wrote, or a kind of sanctuary, where it was possible to find refuge from the tragic reality; it is in this fashion that Larry E. Holmes represents the Stalinist School in his study devoted

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<sup>1</sup> Writing about émigrés’ opinion, I do not mean the results of survey or systematic study of the topic and rest only on the informal discussions of the issue among ‘Russian Israelis’, to whom I belong myself, and ‘Russian Americans’, with whom I have rather extensive contacts.

to Moscow's model School No. 25 in the 1930s [Holmes 1999]. Sometimes, the school could turn into a warm home for those of its pupils whose family did not provide them with one. In the latter cases it is possible to talk about a continuation of the tradition of Russian progressive pedagogy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Soviet School. This might be an interesting starting point for the next round of research.

### ALEKSANDR LYARSKY, ELENA LYARSKAYA

*The answer to the problem, I figured,  
Was two and two thirds of a digger*  
(From a poem learned by heart in school)<sup>1</sup>

To begin with some very general comments: We, the authors of these responses, are ourselves external observers of the societies we study. This is probably true of most researchers in the humanities, though there can be differences of degree in one's closeness or otherwise to the subject in hand. Both a Russian researcher studying Nenets culture, and a historian researching late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century education, will sooner or later be confronted with the issue of how far his or her work accurately reflects the reality under scrutiny. Could it be that often (more often than one might like), one's conviction of having a satisfactory result is more closely based on common sense than on a clearly thought-out, self-consciously understood, tried and tested methodology? Certainly an external observer may have considerable advantages: for instance, a historian may have access to documents that illuminate a given situation at a variety of social levels, some of which may have been inaccessible to immediate witnesses of a historical event, while others were beyond the purview of the authorities who sought to orchestrate and exercise control over this. And so on. An anthropologist has a unique capacity to pose questions to informants that

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<sup>1</sup> That is, the answer to a traditional narrative maths problem of the kind, 'A single digger can displace 3 cubic metres of earth during a day's work. How many diggers would it take to displace 8 cubic metres of earth in the course of a day?' [Editor].

they may well not have thought of, and so on. Some perspectives on events allow one to glimpse structures behind the stream of everyday experience that lie below the level of self-consciousness, to spy out 'surprising elements in normality'. This allows one a certain sense of 'objectivity'. In other words, as researchers we ourselves would be inclined to credit Catriona Kelly's basic position as an 'outsider' with more advantages than disadvantages (both from the point of view of the method adopted and from the point of view of our own confidence in the accuracy of the judgements we make).

But the provocative thing about the article being discussed is that it transforms us, with all our experience, methodological strategies, and analytical skills, into 'informants', 'bearers of culture'. Catriona Kelly's article gives us a rare opportunity to feel the direct effects of all the advantages and disadvantages of our own research position. If this were a question merely of factual errors, then there would be no point in further discussion. However, what we have in mind is something odder: everything seems to be right, indeed many things about the description are brilliant, but we just don't recognise ourselves. The article is to some extent 'about us', because we were pupils in Soviet schools at just this period, but reading it leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth, because we didn't live like that and we weren't like that. Or more accurately, we were, but we weren't only like that. The 'not only' has somehow vanished beyond the account given here, but precisely it was very important to us. After all, what's being discussed here is not just some abstract 'other reality' — it's our actual lives...

It is this point, our 'feelings as readers', on which we shall concentrate here. We don't intend to argue with Catriona Kelly on the basis that 'we don't remember anything like that'. After all, haven't we suffered from exactly this kind of argument ourselves? And is the desire to pick holes in someone's argument really a sign that 'they've got us all wrong'? As researchers, speaking from our general, abstract, position, we'd probably answer no. But as 'informants', so to speak, we still feel as though we'd been done out of something. To repeat: we don't recognise ourselves, there seems to be something missing. And this useful sense of being unsettled that Catriona Kelly's wonderful article has provoked in us will be the starting point of our answers to the questions in the Forum. We will try to understand what it is about this text that has provoked these feelings of alienation. Let us emphasise immediately that we are not trying to find things that are wrong with the article. We are trying to grasp the particularities of an intellectual approach from this concrete example.

The first thing that gets one exercised is, as always, small misunderstandings. Speaking as informants, these are some of the points we

spotted. We'd never have thought of describing the anecdote hero Vovochka as *'half-witted'*, or at least not only so: he all too often seemed the only normal person in the whole crazy world of the school as represented in children's jokes. And we certainly wouldn't place him in a line with Cornet Rzhevsky, Stirlitz, and Cheburashka — they were all funny in quite different ways, and the situations in which the jokes were told were quite different as well. Finally, we certainly wouldn't see any of these figures as representing only an inversion of school reality.

Or then again, if it was customary for classes to *'torment the [lieutenant]-colonel taking the class by saying 'Zdraviya zhelayu, tovarishch podokonnik' (approximately, 'Good day to you, Comrade Kernel')*, as argued in note 32, we couldn't say that military training (termed 'civil defence' here for some reason) was *'always* (our emphasis) *taught by retired low-ranking officers...*'; a colonel is not a person one could easily describe as 'low-ranking'.

We feel the lack of contact between us and Catriona Kelly particularly strongly when it comes to the 'imaginary life' of schoolchildren. We don't think that social inequality created problems for our own friendships, we can't really accept that school romances attracted disapproval because they were a threat to the 'collective spirit', and it's really hard for us to sense any approval or disapproval of teenage romances in the time-honoured and unchanging (as we thought for our ten years of school) rites for celebrating 8 March and 23 February.

The more we say, the more we want to say, having once got going. Especially if you bear in mind that we're not just 'researchers and informants', that is, fairly abstract creatures, but parents too, and one-time teachers as well. Our experience as parents of a schoolgirl and teachers relates entirely to the post-Soviet period, but given our direct connection to teaching, we find it difficult to believe that all Soviet teachers were always *'only conduits for official values'*.<sup>1</sup> We think that in any system of personal relations it is difficult to remain 'only a conduit' or to construct such relationships only antagonistically — on the basis of enforced compliance and mutual compromise. Our own experiences of teaching and the overlay of memories of our own teachers makes it impossible for us to agree with the thoughts about using *shpargalki* and so on set out here.

When you read this article, objections and cases of mismatch between personal experience and the ideas set out in the essay mount up with astonishing speed. We could continue for some time with

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<sup>1</sup> Sic. The article actually states, *'While official guides for "class teachers" continued to stress their function as conduits for official values, and as regulators of discipline, in at least some cases contact was warmer and more personal than methodological prescription envisaged.'* [Editor].

listing such cases of mismatch, but we would already seem to have the basis for moving to an analysis of our feelings of unease. Let us repeat: this is not a question of ‘mistakes’. We need to understand why reading this text makes us so uncomfortable. Surely it isn’t because, or only because, it exposes uncongenial truths?

We think that, in fact, the basis of our bewilderment is a primary assumption made by Kelly, and also the fact that this assumption is not always treated self-consciously. Kelly takes for granted that the political authorities and the state played the chief role in the construction of the school as ‘an instrument of collective socialisation’. At the same time — and this is sometimes mentioned in the article — for participants in school life (and, accordingly, for the informants cited in the study), school was a cultural given, part of everyday life. That is, the school, regarded as a process, has a strict teleology for Kelly, and all the phenomena associated with it are seen according to a framework of violation and oppression organised from the top down, while everyday life is perceived as resistance. In turn, this theoretical absolutism undermines our trust in the analysis. Our own everyday life did not include any sense that the school was part of the state. When we put buttons on the teacher’s chair or hid the register in her desk, we weren’t in the least interested in the global structures of social interaction. We just didn’t like the ‘schoolmarm’ in question.

From the point of view of a teleology identified *a priori*, it makes sense to say that ‘The Last Bell’ was likely to generate positive reactions, since it ‘*meant leaving an institution that was associated by many with vexatious regimentation*’. From the point of view of anyone who actually lived through the event, it’s impossible to exclude touching experiences such as saying farewell to established custom, or one’s sense of a new life — not an ‘independent’ one, simply a new, different life.

From the point of view of a teleology identified *a priori*, one can talk about a mutual agreement or bond between teachers and pupils in the face of the overweening control exercised by the powers that be. From the point of view of rank-and-file teachers, wouldn’t it have made more sense to pay attention to the methods of teaching a given subject to a particular class (or indeed the methodological particularities of taking an individual lesson)? Seen like this, ‘oral testing’ would have been something more than ‘*an instrument of social control*’.

In turn, the tendentious line taken here is accompanied by a categorical flavour in the assertions, which we find very off-putting. For instance, why did Kelly have to say, ‘*None of these uniforms [...] was liked by those who actually had to wear it*’?<sup>1</sup> This is a complicated

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<sup>1</sup> Sic. The English in fact reads, ‘*was much liked*’ (emphasis supplied). [Editor].

question, and the categorical tone simply makes one want to object. Why, in the discussion of the lesson scenario, did Kelly have to use the phrase *'formal discussion of new material'*, as though it had been considered imperative to make such discussion rigid and stuffy?<sup>1</sup>

Equally, it seems strange to assert that the *lineika* 'always and everywhere' marked the start of the school day. Maybe it did in some places, but it certainly didn't always. At any rate, neither of us can remember any 'always and everywhere'. Is the uncompromising tone of the discussion determined by the fixity of Kelly's views with regard to everything she sees?

Maybe when pupils hung their fellows up to dangle on hooks on the wall there was some kind of copying of the school's authoritarian structures at work, but both of us remembers the delight that younger pupils took in provoking older ones, in drawing attention to oneself and being at the centre of the kerfuffle going on in the corridors during recreation. So why didn't Kelly pay attention to the phrase, *'to the delight of all the onlookers'*? Why doesn't she care that the person hanging there was a schoolboy? Who was supposed to 'tease the bears' if he couldn't?

And take the paragraph on 'The Last Bell'. Kelly keeps saying that the ritual wasn't meaningful for many pupils, that the drilling going on at schools spoiled life afterwards<sup>2</sup> for *'a significant contingent'* of pupils. So what happened to the others? The direction taken by Kelly has meant that their experience is simply excised, as though she were using a scalpel. But we *were* those others. (And now we're wandering around unburied and unmourned, like the one-third of the digger not mentioned in the epigraph above, who has to be wandering round somewhere, after all). And thus, too, if we don't see the school process as something with a strict teleology, if we bear in mind what children are actually like, then we can see their arrival at school as a change of environmental parameters, a specific transition from one world to another, and so on. If we don't do this, we risk reproducing an *'atmosphere of intimidation'* and nothing else.

As readers and 'informants', we are also disconcerted by the broad chronological scope in the discussion. So maybe the discrepancy in

<sup>1</sup> The authors have identified a difficulty in translation here. 'Formal' in English means simply, 'organised as opposed to spontaneous (informal)'; in Russian, the word *formalny* implies over-formality and rigidity. Thus, the apparently literal translation *formalnoe obsuzhdenie novogo materiala* is in fact misleading [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> The passage referred to reads, *'For many, therefore, the "last bell" was essentially an irrelevance, in emotional terms; and, rather than laying the foundation for a life of gratitude and happy memories of schooling, accompanied by regular attendance at school reunions (yubilei), it marked a one-way trip out of the school gates, acting not so much as a rite of passage as an annoying reminder of the kind of parade-ground drill (mushtrovka) that had made first contacts with school alienating, and that — for a significant contingent of pupils — soured a good deal of later experience [i.e. later experience in the school] as well.'* [Editor].



Kelly's views and ours is traceable to this? Partly. For us, the post-Stalin school is a varied phenomenon. In theory, Kelly also seems to think this. But in fact, she doesn't make any chronological differentiations in any of the thematic sections (and we should say in all fairness that in some cases this would be very hard to do). So we end up with the impression that 'the culture of playgrounds and corridors' was the same right across the post-Stalin era. We'd hardly be inclined to agree that we and our parents spent our playtime in exactly the same way. But by implication, this is exactly what emerges here.

Now let's try and draw out some conclusions, in part with reference to the questions that have been formulated for discussion in the Forum.

Might it not follow from everything we have said that the reason behind our objections lies in the fact that daily life is perceived, when one is actually living it, as an unending stream of experience, which is structured only when the informant and researcher begin their reflections on it? In this sense, all of us are like spools on to which the thread of experience is constantly winding itself. We have to stop the spool rolling on if we are to understand ourselves, but we often don't want to do this, this isn't a primary need. We often don't want to do it, there isn't even time to do it, or we don't even consider the possibility of doing it, and the mechanisms that might stop the spool (for instance, diaries, letters, or family folklore, memoirs or recollections in the company of friends, and so on) aren't everyday practices of the usual kind, such as cleaning your teeth. In this respect, the interviews that informants give to anthropologists give the opportunity to stop the spool rolling, to carry out mental tasks that the person concerned may never have carried out before. And here the mechanisms of memory start to work: reflections on events are different from events themselves, since they involve a selection of experience and an evaluation of this from the point of view of one's current self. One can't describe this as 'erroneous' or 'distorted', since these memories, the process of selection and evaluation, were the whole reason for stopping the spool rolling in the first place.

In this sense, oral narratives are a superb example of a source with a double meaning: information on the past and evaluations of the past are conveyed at one and the same time, both in an implicit and in an explicit way. This is where their whole value as sources lies. Maybe it's impossible to separate information and evaluation, but researchers should constantly remind themselves, and their readers too, of the nature of oral narratives if they want to draw any conclusions about these.

Whichever way, the researcher's role becomes all the more important when we are in a situation of 'reflecting on the informant's own

reflections', i.e. a process of reflexivity of a secondary kind. And here the question arises of the extent to which distance from the daily life under study affects the conclusions that may be arrived at.

It's clear that the fact that a researcher belongs to another culture (or era, social stratum, generation, or whatever) may make him or her hostage to the informant. Sometimes, qualitative methods or what is described as 'source criticism' may obviate this danger.

But in the essay we are discussing here (and maybe this is another cause of our problems with it), the danger turns out to lie somewhere different, *As we have said before*, the 'foreignness' of a researcher can be his or her main advantage, lying as it does in the ability to be surprised by things and the ability to ask questions (and sometimes the degree of the observer's alienation can be such that the questions arise of themselves, without any effort being made, in a situation where problems simply don't arise for informants themselves). That is, the outsider is able to see something unique and astonishing in phenomena that the bearers of a given tradition see as perfectly normal. However, it is extremely difficult to work in the other direction — to remember that something astonishing to us is simply uninteresting to our informants and that they've remembered about it simply because we happened to ask them, while at the same time we've omitted to notice things that they really do find important. We should also remember that things which seemed unimportant to them *then* have become important *now*, and vice versa. When we were at school, the fact that we didn't know any foreign languages didn't much bother us; the point was scraping a reasonable mark in German (or English, or whatever). Who thought back then that foreign languages would ever be any use? Just so, relations with our classmates (for instance, the problems created by *gopniki*<sup>1</sup>) were much more important and pressing than our relations with the state, which was totally abstract and unknown to us. This teacher was nice, that one nasty, it was interesting in this one's classes and not in this one's, and so on. Did we care that the 'nasty, boring one' might teach better than the 'nice' one? No, of course not, it's only years later that starts to seem important. Just so, years later, we simply stop remembering what was once important for the child we were. Any researcher easily falls into this trap, not just a foreign researcher looking at Russia, but, let's say, any adult looking at children's lives in the framework of the school system. Instead of seeing 'the normal as astonishing', he or she concentrates on 'astonishing' things that we would have found shatteringly unexpected back then too. Imag-

<sup>1</sup> *Gopniki*: a derogatory name for aggressive, criminally-inclined members of the urban lower classes that came into use during the late Soviet era. The current British term 'chavs' (said to be derived from 'council house and violent') is quite close in terms of meaning and intonation. [Editor].

ine how shocked we'd have been if someone had told us that our running-round during lesson breaks was subversive, or that *dezhurstvo* [cleaning-up work done on duty rotas] wasn't a dreary chore, but a simulation of authoritarian practices.

So perhaps this is what makes us feel dissatisfied? The fact that the values and meanings of our daily life as children don't coincide with those of our adult world? And maybe the fact that Kelly is an adult, rather than a foreigner, is what's important? This explanation seems to restore our equilibrium: it's no easier for adults to remember being children than for an English person to remember studying in the Soviet school.

And now that our points of disagreement have been cleared up, our lack of understanding explained, we'd like to repeat that this isn't a question of 'mistakes'. Catriona Kelly's article does part of the work that has to be done in recovering the history of the Soviet school, but only part of it. Her look at the school as an instrument of socialisation, where relations are shaped by the powers that be and by awareness of the work done by these powers, is a valuable and, let us stress, essential illumination of things from the outside. We'd never have written anything like this when remembering our school years. To be honest, we don't spend much time remembering them anyway. But now that we've started, we've suddenly grasped that remembering them without giving weight to our child's view of the world (for which read, Nenets view of the world, our view of the world as inhabitants of past eras of history) will leave us with a view of the social relations we describe that is as incomplete as the two-thirds of the digger remembered in the poem.

### SOFYA LOITER

Catriona Kelly's article "The School Waltz": The Everyday Life of the Post-Stalinist Soviet Classroom' is of interest to me primarily because its underlying subject is the life of children, and because it, as is made clear in one of the footnotes, represents only part of a larger project on the social and cultural history of Russian childhood. This very fact represents something out of the ordinary. We should note that an objective, retrospective and multi-faceted history of childhood in Russia, of 'children's culture' has not yet been attempted in Russia on a large scale, nor indeed has a history of the

school in these terms. Catriona Kelly's excursus in the field of 'historical ethnography' using material from Russian childhood therefore deserves special attention both because it has been carried out by a researcher from a different culture, and because she has no predecessors among specialists from within Russia. Undoubtedly, the work under discussion is testimony not just to a high level of professional competence, an exemplary and meticulous treatment of the problem, using a broad range of different sources (from documents to memoirs and school folklore), but also to the risk that the authoress herself alludes to ('a risk of producing an extended statement of the obvious, a kind of fragmented and faulty version of what would be remembered by one of the historical subjects here', p. 124).

At the same time, Catriona Kelly's attempt to describe the Soviet school using the methods of 'insider ethnography' throws up both discoveries and losses. Despite the fact that 'insider ethnography' involves first and foremost a gaze 'from within', founded as it is on questionnaire and interview work with informants who themselves experienced a different educational reality, as used in the analysis here it inevitably conveys the views of an outsider, an adult with a different mentality and from a different culture, who, finally, experienced a different school life. And this lays its own kind of stamp on the impression of another reality, illuminating everything that Russian researchers apparently do not notice, for example, '*the cases where adults (particularly teachers) and pupils had to work together and make compromises, or might be jointly involved in adapting the regulations sent down from above*' (p. 105).

The 'dominant' in Kelly's approach is her view of the Soviet and late Soviet school as an instrument of the totalitarian system, and to teachers and school directors as personifications of totalitarian power and ideology. This is wonderfully reflected in the epigraph to the essay, taken from Viktor Shklovsky: '*Actually, a bad school is a good school.*'<sup>1</sup> The paradoxicality of this statement is easily comprehensible for anyone who studied in a 'good' school, that is, a school that was considered advanced, exemplary, that was talked about everywhere. In a school of this kind, life is strictly regulated and subordinated to the unbending sway of official norms, demands, and documents. I think that perceptions of such a hypertrophied official school existence dominate in the oral histories cited by Kelly and have driven her whole view of school life.

My own experience of school life includes study at a provincial school in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and years spent teaching

<sup>1</sup> In Russian, this phrase could also mean, 'Actually, a bad school is a good school,' though in fact contextually the first meaning would be preferred, since Shklovsky is describing the advantages of the laissez-faire treatment in his own disorganised and pedagogically inept private gimnaziya. [Editor].

in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the school my son attended in the 1970s, and many years working with students as a supervisor of teaching practice in several Petrozavodsk schools, and it suggests to me that everyday practices in the school and celebratory rituals were, contrary to official decree, not so one-sided as they seem to be in the memories of Kelly's informants. School life was in reality more varied, more liberal, and less dependent on prescriptions and laws — which in Russia, by the way, are rarely observed. The school of Moscow and Leningrad/St Petersburg is not at all the same as the provincial Russian school, and the village school is still more different, collecting together as it does children from small villages across a radius of 3–5 kilometres. There is no sign here of urban alienation and officiousness, there is more patriarchal tradition here, and the human relations are very different. I'm not trying to state which kind of school is better, or which the pupils like better (often, in fact, pupils in village schools enjoy school more, since it is the only alternative in their lives to the poverty and difficult human relations they experience at home). Village schools are different, that's all.

All the everyday practices and festivals describes in the passages that Kelly cites has just one coloration — official and ideological. The representation is categorical and absolute: every testimony about things seen and experienced is presented with what the writer Valentin Kaverin called *'the final level of directness'*, but in fact what is presented as obvious often seems doubtful, if not actually false. It is hard to imagine normal teachers (me included) setting off to teach a lesson with the understanding that they were transmitters, loud-speakers for the system or for Soviet power. Is that really what you think when you go off to the classroom? It is hard to agree with the understanding of the First of September as a *'quintessentially Stalinist festival'* and a *'joyful day of integration into the collective and unity with the whole motherland'*: this was first and foremost a festival for children entering Class One and for their parents, a personal or family festival connected with the entry of a child into a new age-group and social category. In addition, the rituals for first-formers described don't include the Alphabet Festival (Prazdnik Bukvarya), which is so vividly reflected in poetry for children (e.g. Samuil Marshak, Irina Tokmakova, Boris Zakhoder, Mikhail Yasnov).

It's hard to agree that the questioning of pupils, the 'testing of knowledge' every day in classes was considered *'an ideal manifestation of socialist competition and collective harmony'* (p. 134). In fact, what was bad about this came at a different level — fear of being called on to answer, the experiences of any child as accurately conveyed by Boris Zakhoder in his poem 'Petya Dreams':

*If, for instance,  
A magician*

*Made me a present of a book  
 That could  
 All on its own  
 Answer questions on any lesson...  
 And gave me alongside it  
 A pen  
 That could answer problems,  
 Write dictations  
 On its own,  
 On its own and by itself!*

A stamp of hypertrophied ideologisation and auto-stereotyping lies on the perception (*'tolerance for forms of behaviour that kept the system ticking over'*, p. 139) of such totally natural and unchanging attributes of the life of our schools at any period, including pre-1917 (remember the wonderful chapter on this in Kornei Chukovsky's *The Silver Crest* or Lev Kassil's *The Conduct Book and Shvambrianiya*) as the *shpargalka* (crib) or *podskazka* (prompting), which are not only allowed by the (unofficial) code of practices in the schoolroom, but welcomed by this as a manifestation of solidarity and friendship among pupils. Here again Boris Zakhoder speaks 'with the mouths of children': *'You'll never catch up with Vova! / See what a marvel he is! / In five minutes flat / He did a whole load of things... / He asked whether he could copy some answers... / ('Break between Classes); 'And for that test, say / I / Really / Expected good marks: / Managed a word or two with Petka / And he passed along the crib.'* ('Unlucky').

Examples of auto-stereotyping of this kind would not be hard to proliferate. Many things are more ambiguous than Kelly's article suggests (e.g. school uniform, school food and so on).

The point is not to question whether 'insider ethnography' is useful or not, but rather to point out that here a) the everyday life of schools in the capitals, in provincial towns, and villages is assimilated into a single homogeneous tradition; b) that the opinions cited, representing as they do only working-class subjects, are of limited significance; c) that there is not enough variety in the extracts to be representative — it is clearly insufficient to cite a single judgement or reminiscence about a given event.

All the same, I do think that Catriona Kelly's article is extremely important and interesting. She has managed to capture the main feature of Russian schooling — the fact that no attention was paid to freedom of thought and that the behaviour norms of a 'double life' were observed. This is a truth that is seldom met with in our own pedagogical, culturological, and sociological studies. And also very important for me personally is that the article under discussion is only part of a large-scale project on childhood, from which I await much of interest.

## FRAN MARKOWITZ

I would like to take the opportunity of participating in this round-table discussion of Catriona Kelly's "The School Waltz" to argue against two key assumptions underlying *Antropologicheskii Forum's* instructions to the discussants. The first is that Kelly's article paradoxically "normalises" *discussion of an experience that is considered so "normal" that it is, in fact, scarcely discussed by those who have actually been through it.* The second concerns the socio-political temporality of what is, or what counts as, post-Stalinist Soviet culture.

The major points that I raise in my discussion focus on how analysts from within and without the time and space considered in the article connect with or stand apart from the lives that their informants narrate and are living. Looking at what Catriona Kelly calls 'historical ethnography' I aim my comments at the theoretical and empirical results of the meetings that take place between researchers and the researched through that genre.

I view Kelly's method of retrospective interviews and perusal of written memoirs, coupled with a writing style that liberally quotes from both sources, rather like a window through which readers can see a bit of the negotiations that occur as people remember, articulate and measure their own experiences against and within the backdrop of broader, weightier historical processes. But that window is not any window. It is located in a particular structure, perhaps obscured a bit by some kind of curtain within or from without by (moving) objects that block the view. That view is refracted at a particular angle and frozen in a particular time. Nonetheless, along with Catriona Kelly I insist that this view, no matter how partial or distorted, holds some truth, and is consequently worth seeing, and worth pondering. I hope that my remarks will clarify why that is so.

Before proceeding further, I wish to situate myself and my work vis-à-vis Kelly's article and (the reminiscences of) the people who are its

subjects. During the 1980s, as a doctoral student in cultural anthropology, I spent my time in Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, New York, living among and working, eating, drinking, dancing, laughing, crying, talking with and listening to émigrés from what was then the Soviet Union. What I wanted to know and what they strove to show and tell me, was: How were they rebuilding their lives after immigration? How were they making these lives satisfying and meaningful? I focused my research on their narratives and practices of Russianness and Jewishness, their professional identities and cultural tastes, and how all these aspects of self, developed and fostered in a different time and place, were now being reassessed as they grappled with America, and their own increasingly Americanised selves [see Markowitz 1993].

Most of my informants and friends were parents. Frequently they expressed the desire to do the best for their children; indeed, many made sure to repeat again and again that they left the Soviet Union for the sake of the children. Be that as it may, many were not prepared for the personal and familial consequences of changing countries. Contending with an alien language and a consumer-based, capitalist economic system were one thing. Dealing with American schools was quite another. These well-meaning parents, who only a matter of months or years before had known, seemingly instinctively, how to get along with school teachers and directors were now not so sure. They were often stymied by the challenges and frustrations they faced in dealing with a school system that, as they saw it, did not necessarily do the best for their children. American schools, they complained, only give education (*obrazovanie*) and ignore the most basic elements of enculturation, etiquette and morality (*vospitanie*). They were shocked to learn that in America, parents alone are responsible for teaching values to their children, including respect, discipline, and the love of high culture. These very parents were spending long hours at work and contending with their own problems of making a living, making themselves understood and preserving some sense of dignity and self-respect. How could they bring up their children with no help from the school?

These dilemmas sparked long conversations about how things had been back in the USSR. Jerked free of its setting, the everyday (*byt*) of their childhood, of their youth, of their entire lives turned into a conversational theme, if not the yardstick against which they were now measuring their experiences in New York. Sometimes informants' reminiscences were veiled in wistful nostalgia; sometimes they focused on horrible incidents, embarrassing moments or the strict discipline that they had endured. Sometimes it was I who raised the issue of 'there and then' but much more often it was my friends and neighbours themselves who launched into spontaneous reminiscences, often sparked by events in the here and now:



— While attending a Bar Mitzvah ceremony I heard parents of the celebrant discuss with their friends how they and all the ‘Jewish kids’ were sent to the school toilets on the day of Stalin’s death while the teachers deliberated what would happen next.

— When complaining about the short school day of their children, several parents contrasted this with the longer school day of their childhood that included Pioneer activities, supplemented by hours of (usually tedious, but now remembered as important for self-development) art or music lessons.

Like the vignettes offered in Kelly’s article I have heard fond memories of particularly dedicated teachers and witnessed wry smiles accompanying accounts of classroom pranks. More often than not parents offered unflattering comparisons between the skills that Soviet schoolchildren learn and those of Americans. I found myself thick in debate, countering self-righteous declarations of how many Pushkin and Lermontov poems they could recite by age 10 and the rigorous lessons in maths and science that they had mastered with the critical thinking skills and the ability for self-expression that (I hope that) American children internalise by their teens.

Sometimes during these discussions I would catch the eye of a child who had been listening from a protective corner. Then I would follow that child into his room and listen to his — or her — reflections after overhearing the adults praise the rigour of Soviet schools and berate the looseness of American ones. As the days and months of my research period passed, I came to think more and more about the experiences of immigrant children as they navigated both the classroom and the dynamics of their families, and I sought out additional opportunities to speak in-depth with these young people [see Markowitz 1993; 1994].

As I came to the end of this, my first fieldwork, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party, and the Soviet Union changed course; it underwent perestroika and then, suddenly, it was no more. What must it be like, I wondered, for Russian teenagers to experience in situ the same kinds of adjustments that their émigré counterparts contended with a world away? In the mid 1990s I came to Moscow where I spent most days with sixteen-year olds in their classrooms examining how they were *Coming of Age in Post-Soviet Russia* [Markowitz 2000]. But instead of the anomie, immorality, and confusion that many journalists, educators and social commentators were describing, I found the teenagers taking it all in their stride. Indeed, many offered the opinion that although their country changed there had not been any great changes in their lives. In writing up my monograph I suggested that perhaps the grand transformations about which politicians and journalists had much to say reflected more the desires of adult public figures and the studied

conclusions of academics than the felt experiences of the young people who were living them.

Thus, it came as no big surprise to me that the reminiscences that are the data of Kelly's article and the narratives of sixteen-year-olds who were still in school when I met with them in 1995 and 1996 are quite similar. It was also not surprising to hear the parents of the teenagers I met in Moscow, as well as my émigré friends, talking enthusiastically about their school days as they compared everyday life in the present with what they had known from their life-in-the-past. What did surprise me was to read in *AF*'s instructions to discussants that these issues, the everyday experiences of school, were '*scarcely ever discussed*'.

The stories continue: Just two weeks ago I visited my friend Lena. I've known Lena, her parents, her husband and their son since they arrived in Chicago from Odessa in 1989. Today their son is completing his last year of college, and Lena and Kolya's American-born daughter is in the fourth grade. Of course we talked about the kids and their progress in school. Lena described her little girl as her 'father's daughter' because she, unlike her mother or brother, excels in mathematics. But Lena had earned a medical degree in the Soviet Union. Didn't she have to have received excellent school grades in math and the sciences to have been accepted into the Odessa medical institute? Lena laughed and said that yes, she did:

*'My Mom went to see the teacher.'*

*'Aha', I thought, 'here comes yet another case of concerned parents cajoling or bribing teachers to give their children high grades.'*

Lena continued, *'My Mom asked her, "Why did you give my Lena a pyatyorka<sup>1</sup>? She doesn't understand the first thing about mathematics!' Yes, that's my Mom!'*

After I joined Lena in laughter over this ironic twist I asked, *'What did the teacher do?'*

*'My teacher,' Lena told me, 'was Anna Borisovna Rabinovitch. And she said to my Mom, "Don't worry. Your daughter is a good girl!'*

There I was sitting with Lena in a Chicago coffee shop, and some 30 to 40 years after she received excellent grades in maths despite having only poor comprehension of the subject, this was the topic of our conversation. Lena, a certified medical technologist (once a *vrach laborant*)<sup>2</sup> currently working in pharmaceutical research, pulled this incident out of the past while talking about the present. Lena moved the conversation to focus on the extraordinary strength of her mother's character, her honesty, her integrity. But I remained

<sup>1</sup> A five, i.e. the top mark. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> i.e. a clinically qualified physician engaged in medical research, clinical researcher. [Editor].

transfixed by the long ago and faraway parent-teacher scene because of its ongoing significance as an example of the mundane experiences that intertwined children, their parents, and their teachers as they navigated a life course while negotiating educational institutions. Lena expressed awareness and gratitude that a committed teacher's faith in — or collusion with — her helped to get her where she is today. But for me, this vignette illustrates the unspoken issues of discrimination and ethnic solidarity that place this particular instance of student-parent-teacher complicity within the wider, internally contradictory Soviet cultural system of ideology and practice, so poignantly captured by Catriona Kelly in her 'School Waltz.'

The 'School Waltz' itself, like the American High School senior prom, lends itself to many kinds of experiences and varied memories of them. Teachers probably hold different views from those of students of what happened at the end-of-school ball; conformist students probably remember something different from their wilder classmates; popular kids from the awkward ones, and so on. But what about those youngsters who, knowing what everyone knew then anyway just did not go, preferring instead what Kelly (p. 147) calls *'the real celebrations [that took] place outside the school building'*? Today, do they regret not having had that experience to look back upon? Are they thereby precluded from using it as a shared item of Soviet *byt*, indeed as a referent, that helps them to separate out the formerly Soviet from their current, post-Soviet world?

Let's listen to Natasha F. She was in her last year of an eleven-year general school when I met her in 1995. When she invited me to her home in January 1996 she had already given much thought to all the school experiences that she and her classmates had missed out on. Natasha told me fondly about a class trip she had taken a few years ago to Crimea. Immediately she added, regretfully, that ever since no school-organised activities had taken place. *'Our class would like to have a dance or put on a play. We'd like to have some activities: a songfest, a concert, like a big celebration [at the end of the year] where everyone gets together—teachers, parents, the whole class—and everyone sings.'* But, as it turned out, the school director refused permission to hold such an event. A class New Year's party was held at one boy's home and most pupils and teachers attended. But somehow, this celebration outside the school building lacked panache because there was no parallel official event to oppose. Natasha sighed as she looked ahead to the end of the year, explaining that there will be no official senior class trip, no senior class ball: *'[W]e're in our last year of school. We'd like to think back on our school days, to remember something'* [Markowitz 2000: 89–90].

Natasha's wistful nostalgia for an experience she did not and would not have derives from habitual practices that had been repeated as

par for the course over the years. The School Waltz was part of a wider, taken-for-granted cultural repertoire, known to all through discussions about it with parents and older brothers and sisters and witnessed as film scenes or in news reports. Natasha and all the teenagers I met in the mid-1990s vividly remembered receiving their Octobrists' pins and wearing the red Pioneer tie. And they also remembered exulting in the elimination of school uniforms, the disintegration of the Pioneers and the end of tedious *lineiki*. The uniforms, assemblies and statues of Lenin that were part of the everyday setting of their youth may be gone, but memories of them are not. These were all part of a shared childhood and the foundation for shared reminiscences, and even if the memories are not fond they remain palpable, part of the embodied experiences of the self. Michel de Certeau says it best, '*It is striking here that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there "you see, here there used to be..." but it can no longer be seen*' [de Certeau 1984: 108].

Natasha feels cheated out of a school event that she was looking forward to — not necessarily because she would have enjoyed lounging awkwardly against the wall with her girlfriends as they waited for some boys to approach to dance the waltz, or to drink the overly-sweet punch always served at such occasions — but for a future memory, a benchmark event that would have reminded her as an adult of the happier times of childhood. Now that it is not to be, the dull school-leavers' ball, where prim Valentina Feliksevna waltzes with fuddy-duddy Pavel Mikhailovich; where the cool kids sneak out back to smoke cigarettes, take a swig of vodka and listen to their own *dikii rok*, can take on fantastic proportions. 'Outbreaks of nostalgia,' Boym reminds us, '*often follow revolutions.*' [Boym 2001: xvi]. The once obligatory event becomes cast as a joyous milestone, an essential rite de passage. Without the structured beginnings and ends that seemed so natural through the habitual practices of Soviet culture childhood with a capital 'C' seems shaky; how can we now measure a life-course?

At the same time as the school-leavers' ball disappears Russian young (and not so young) people are confronted with a new ways that just do not seem to fit. Although historians may have no difficulty defining a period in terms of beginning dates and ending years, these demarcations may be experienced more as blurry than clear to the people whose lives are lived across them. What makes a classroom 'post-Stalinist Soviet' in 1981, 1986 and 1991 but 'post-Soviet' in 1992, 1996, or 2002? Certainly the Soviet state has been extinct since the end of 1991, but the edifices it erected; the policies it carried out; the parades it sponsored, the school programs it promulgated, and the people it socialised live on, either physically, or as recent memories that guide behaviour and gain in salience the more that

people talk about them...and then perhaps re-emerge in new forms. As I watched a televised broadcast of the gala celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of *Den' Pobedy*, (The Red Army's World War II V-E Day) from Moscow on 9 May 2005 I could not help thinking that while the Russian tricolour has replaced the red flag with its gold hammer and sickle, I was witnessing Soviet public culture.

One of the advantages of long-term ethnographic research is the ongoing opportunity to hear people invoke instances of the past as they mull over and make meaningful their life in the present. And to experience along with one's informants the changing sense of the present. Cultural anthropology, and in particular the ethnographic study of everyday life, is a latecomer to the Russian academic scene. Whereas Russian and Soviet ethnographers excelled in gathering village folklore and documenting the ethos and ethnos of the 'little peoples of the North' they, primarily for political reasons, avoided research into the symbols, meanings, and contradictions of city *byt*. Ordinary, daily life routines of urbanites and *kolkhozniki* were left to the 'imagination' of fiction writers and film-makers. Some of them got too close to the mark and lost their lives; others emigrated.

Interestingly, toward the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s several American and British ethnographers were able to come to Russia where they pursued this very kind of research [see for example, Creuzinger 1996; Pesman 2000; Pilkington 1994; Ries 1997; Riordan 1989]. Some Russian ethnographers quickly followed suit [e.g., Shchepanskaya 1993]. Perhaps the richest interpretive analyses and critical ethnographies that blur the line between the here and there and the then and now are those written by former Soviet school-children; those who, as young people, emigrated westward in the 1970s and 1980s and then returned to use their now defamiliarised experiential knowledge and linguistic skills to reexamine what they had always known, but in a different way [Boym 1994; Yurchak 2006].

De-familiarisation, the central tenet of cultural anthropology's method of fieldwork, is not only or exclusively reserved for various kinds of outsiders looking in. Kelly's interviewees, although they stayed in place, experienced a kind of migration, through time and political changes that upset the predictable 'normalcy' of their everyday life. The same goes for my sixteen-year old informant, Natasha. Now that the Soviet Union — be it Leninist, Stalinist, or post-Stalinist; of NEP, WWII, the Thaw, the Stagnation, or perestroika — is no more, formerly Soviet citizens may objectify (parts of) their life as 'history', no longer too ordinary to talk about but extraordinary. And with that realisation comes, perhaps, a desire to activate that history and make it known — to future generations of Russians; to Amer-

icans, to the British, to have it recorded as it was lived for posterity; the School Waltz that Natasha will not personally experience will be preserved as part of Soviet Russian history to look back upon.

Which brings me back to my original premises: Catriona Kelly's article does not normalise an *'experience that is considered so "normal" that it is, in fact, scarcely discussed by those who have actually been through it.'* Rather, it captures discussions of a normal that has been de-normalised by the interviewees' own life experiences which are now counterpoised to the everyday of their past by quite routine discussions and frequent references. It is only scholars, perhaps, who deem shared childhood experiences too banal to be the focus of their academic research much as *meshchanstvo* was disdained and ignored in Soviet times. It took Catriona Kelly to shake up Russian institutes of anthropology, ethnography and sociology to get their researches to look more closely, analytically and appreciatively at *byt*.

As I mull over one more story I must chasten myself for being overly harsh toward Russian social scientists: During my 1995–96 stay in Moscow I got together from time to time with a dear colleague from the Institute of Sociology. He was conducting his own research project about youth and sexuality but unlike my observer-participant methodology he was administering written questionnaires to teenagers. When I recounted to him some of the issues that my informants raised with me his response was that he could never have gotten them to discuss such things with him. And why not? Because, he explained, that the teenagers were sure that no intelligent Russian adult would find what they had to say useful or interesting. Why? Because, he explained, what they had to say was too ordinary. Any person who had grown up in Soviet Russia and was now living in the Russian Federation would take everything that they had to say about the Pioneers, about school activities, about good and bad grades for granted. And discussions about their taste in music, about dance parties and experiments with cigarettes, drink and drugs were not acceptable fare between teenagers, who are spoken to as children with the informal *ty*, and adult research scientists, who must be addressed formally with *Vy*. Defamiliarisation is only part of the problem of ethnography; the other part is that although researchers coming from abroad might not be fluent in the language of the land or well enough versed in local symbols and their meanings to even know what questions to ask, native researchers, because of their high social status and related taboos may be locked out of analytical, to say nothing of descriptive, talk about subjects not meant to be discussed in public. So once again the problem of ethnography, be it historical or synchronic is that if the ethnographer limits herself to formal one-time interviews removed from the routine of everyday life, much of what is usually unsaid, but often bursts into the said at apposite

moments, will remain unnoticed even if not unsaid. In a study of *byt*, it may be advantageous for the researcher — and not the researched — to be particular, concerned, interested, different and from faraway as they seek to understand history, a place and time that once was but is no more along with the here and now. Of course, the lenses of reminiscence along with the desire to translate the experience to one who did not and never could have shared it colour the narrative that results. And so the research is plagued by the recurring question: Did it really happen that way? Now, after having read the stories I wanted to tell, I ask you to join with me in asking rhetorically: Is that the point?

### ALEKSANDRA PIIR

#### **The Role of the Interviewer: Interviewing 'For Other People'**

The issues that most concern me in this discussion of Catriona Kelly's article 'The School Waltz' and the theme of the 'researcher from outside' are those connected with fieldwork. Some of the materials on which the article is based (and those on which the broader project 'Childhood in Russia, 1890–1991: A Social and Cultural History' is based) have been collected by me and by others at the European University, St Petersburg. To some extent, therefore, I can consider myself a participant in the project, and it is therefore more appropriate for me to discuss the role of the interviewer than the merits or otherwise of the article itself.

I think a lot of Russian readers of Catriona Kelly's article will have found that it provoked memories of their own childhood and schooling. I am no exception. In the mid-1970s, when I was at primary school, one of the games we used to play during recreation breaks was the famous 'The Telephone's Out of Order'. The people playing it would sit in a long line and someone at one end would whisper a phrase or combination of words, which would then be passed all the way down to the other end. If the phrase ended up distorted, then a search would begin for the person responsible, the player

who'd misheard what was said and passed it on wrongly to their neighbour.<sup>1</sup>

When materials are being collected in the field, there are only three people taking part: the informant, the interviewer, and the researcher; thus, the only source of information that's 'out of order' is the middle link in the chain — there's no need to look further. Unfortunately, however, the accepted forms of fieldwork don't take into consideration the specifics of the situation where an interviewer is collecting material for 'someone else', and this stops the interviewer from passing on information with minimum distortions and the researcher from receiving it thus. As a result, when the interviewer reads quotations from his or her 'own' interviews, these may provoke a wide range of different feelings: from delight in some unexpected reading of 'everyday' material on the one hand to frustration and uncomfortable feelings that material has been communicated, or understood, in a distorted form.

I am not, of course, intending to suggest that an 'outside' researcher cannot interpret material passed on to him or her without the help of those who have collected it. All of us come from 'outside' a culture to a certain extent, but we also firmly believe that cultural languages are in principle 'translatable' and we purposely maintain the distance essential to analysing material that seems 'close'. Besides, any researcher seriously working on a particular topic is likely to know more about some aspects of it than the interviewer (as was definitely the case with Catriona Kelly and me); the interviewer may well be a 'native anthropologist', who is simply in a more convenient position to select informants and record interviews with them. All the same, in a situation where the researcher and interviewer are to a different extent 'plugged into' a culture, the latter will act not only as a communicator of materials, but also as a filter of sorts for these, which may hold back or distort part of the information in view.

As a rule, informants are rarely told that an interview is being recorded for 'a foreigner'. Experience has shown that telling them this may make them, depending on the direction an interview takes, refuse to take part at all, rule some subjects 'out of bounds', or more usually (and this is the best result) simply ignore who the final addressee is. Thus, in his or her responses to questions the informant almost always refers to the shared knowledge that he or she thinks they have in common with the interviewer. This particular orientation to the interlocutor means that many 'obvious' themes, realia, and emotional reactions aren't 'spelled out'. Leaving aside the fact

<sup>1</sup> This game used to be called 'Chinese Whispers' in my own schooldays, but I cannot remember that finding 'who was to blame' was ever the point: instead, players used simply to enjoy the ludicrous contrast between 'input' at one end and 'output' at the other. [Editor].



that this 'obviousness' may be misleading (and that both sides of the dialogue may be misled by it), one comes to the question of how to retrieve the information that is missing from the dialogue.

Harping on 'the obvious', i.e. the use of a kind of 'journalistic strategy', disrupts one of the main conditions of a successful interview, since it undermines the mutual understanding of the interviewer and the interviewee. 'False naivety' ('I don't remember anything like that when I was a child', 'we didn't do it that way in my school', etc.) is not that effective either, nor are provocative examples taken from the interviewer's own childhood — these are only helpful in relatively straightforward cases, when the informant has 'left out' concrete detail. Direct questions create the impression of a successful interview but leave out of the count the central fact — *if the interviewer and the interviewee belong to the same culture part of the information essential to the analysis will be ignored.*

Correction with respect to the context is particularly important when it comes to evaluations made by the informant and descriptions of his or her emotional reactions. Informants' efforts to situate themselves vis-à-vis the interviewer mean that they tend to present themselves as representatives of a particular generation, or — if there is no significant age difference — of a particular school, family, or peer group; on the other hand, if the interviewer were a foreigner, informants would become representatives of a given country: their subject position would be quite different. This situation generates both gains and losses; whichever way, it alters the sense of objectivity and the degree of responsibility for the information being passed along, since the interviewer is, in terms of the broader cultural context, 'one of us' and ought to 'understand' the person talking to them, relying on their own experience, which includes experience of how Soviet/national/local reality is emotionally interpreted.

The presence of a 'mediator' should also be foregrounded in the relations between the interviewer and the researcher. The customary methods of presenting interviews as used in fieldwork are totally insufficient in this respect. It is normal for the researcher to be passed sound and written recordings, transcriptions, and in the best cases, a field diary as well. This last may contain biographical information about the informant, descriptions of how and where the interview was conducted, and a list of the topics addressed. Interviews documented in this way recall the not-quite-fully-attributed objects to be found in museums: the objects themselves are on view, and there is some information about when and where they were acquired, but their cultural significance is unclear.

The informational value of 'unattributed' interviews is limited not just for a researcher from another culture, but also if, say, one sets up an 'open access' electronic archive. Yet the main function of the

interviewer is still held to be his or work with the informant, i.e. the gathering of information in an absolute sense — a task that can be more or less successful. At the next stage, though, the 'telephone' starts playing up, because the interviewer stands as far as possible to one side and 'constricts' part of the information (transcribing fieldwork recordings is considered to be purely mechanical work that can easily be handed over to someone not the interviewer).

I think that the communication of material to a final addressee (a foreign researcher, 'everyone', 'future generations', etc.) ought to include another kind of 'transcription' as well: the text should be analysed by the interviewer before being passed on. I would like to emphasise once more that the reason why this is important is not because a foreigner can't work out independently what the informant is saying. The interviewer should provide material about him- or herself as an addressee and about the cultural context that the informant was invoking. This should be along the lines of 'the informant through the eyes of the collector' — a characterisation in physical terms of the filter or lens that the information passed through before reaching the researcher.

Catriona Kelly's "The School Waltz" is interesting and thought-provoking for Russian readers as well, not least because the Soviet school is represented through the eyes of someone from another culture. In other words, the article includes information not only about Soviet culture, but also about the culture that shaped the author's own perceptions. This is why her recollections of her own schooldays seem an organic part of the text. In turn, the interviewer's own analysis of the interviews collected can be informative for a researcher from the point of view of the emotional and evaluative perceptions obtaining within that culture: of what is 'directly perceived' and 'overlooked', 'important' and 'trivial' — in other words, from the point of view of what is not always directly retrievable from the informant's own discussion. It is clear that when the researcher makes use of an 'expert' commentary of this kind, he or she should also correct for 'mistakes' such as may be thrown up by differences in age, social status and origins (e.g. rural versus urban culture), etc. 'Mistakes' of this kind are 'useful' to the researcher in themselves, because they provide extra information about the actual cultural distance between the two sides of the interview process and about moments of 'illusory understanding' between them. In addition, during the interview, especially if it is recorded in the informant's own house or place of work, the interviewer absorbs highly specific visual information about him or her that is rarely included in the field diary (certainly not in detail) and which therefore rarely reaches the researcher.

The kind of supplementary information and analysis that is necessary of course depends on the aims and priorities of the larger study itself

and need to be defined individually in each case. There can hardly be any general formulae here. However, it seems important that the researcher who is using material that he or she has not collected (even if the interviews were organised by him or her and according to a schedule that he or she created) should, as well as correcting for retrospectivity, auto-stereotyping, and so on, also bear the issue of the addressee in mind and correct for this. Correction of this kind is an obvious procedure when using written sources, but the difference is that in this case the interviewer *is able to* pass on supplementary information, yet, as in the case of a mute document from some dusty case file, keeps it to himself or herself for ever.

I'm not sure how to explain this case of 'The Telephone's Out of Order': are foreign researchers simply not interested, do 'native anthropologists' not want to share 'their' information, or is the situation merely accidental? On the whole, I think the right explanation is probably the third one.

#### DAVID RANSEL

"The School Waltz" by Catriona Kelly offers valuable insight into the everyday life of post-war Russia and also raises a number of interesting questions in regard to the use of oral testimony. The questions posed for this forum are, however, not necessarily consonant with the ones raised by Kelly's essay. For example, the first question asks about the gains and losses of insider ethnography by an outsider. But Kelly's study is not entirely an outsider investigation, resting as it does on interviews conducted by Russians themselves. Unless we can know more about the contribution of the Russian interviewers to the interview process, we cannot assess the mix of internal and external influences in the collection of information. The interactions between interviewer and interviewee can be highly influential in the type and quality of information that is garnered from an interview. A Russian interviewer, even when armed with a questionnaire devised by a foreigner, is going to inflect the interview in substantive ways by probing certain areas of inquiry more than others and by accepting as given certain circumstances that a foreigner would probe in detail.

On the most obvious level, a researcher is going to focus more on ideas and practices that are markedly different and less on those that are familiar. Kelly makes this point in her discussion of defamiliarisation. An example of this can be found in the field notes of Olga Petrovna Semenova-Tian-Shanskaya on Russian peasant life. When I was translating them for publication in English, I was struck by how little attention she gave to kinship. Kinship was a major focus, even a foundation, of western ethnography, whereas it was scarcely mentioned by Semenova.<sup>1</sup> Because Russian peasant kin structures differed little, if at all, from those of the Russian educated classes, she may have failed to reference them as significant. A foreign researcher would certainly have paid attention to this aspect of Russian peasant life, as it could be understood as a key explanatory variable in the sustainability of Russian household and economic production and reproduction.

The second question posed for this forum asks how effective is oral history as a resource for retrieving everyday experience. The question implies a high degree of uncertainty and even suspicion of information collected by oral interview techniques. I have always been puzzled by this attitude. Most researchers, it is true, accord greater reliability to written sources than to oral interview testimony. Some scholars, if they credit oral testimony at all, accept it only as a reflection of a collective state of mind, as revealed, for example, in Alesandro Portelli's famous study of 'The Death of Luigi Trastulli'.<sup>2</sup> But why should information retrieved by oral interview methods be more suspect than the information contained in written documents? Many of the written documents that scholars use such as memoirs, letters referencing past events, even state papers in the form of memoranda, field reports, and policy analyses are composed after the time, and in some cases very long after the time, that the events described in them occurred. They are therefore dependent on memory in much the same way as oral testimony. Indeed, the interactive and directive character of the oral interview allows the researcher to probe memory, question statements that conflict with other sources and testimonies, and to pursue internal inconsistencies with the interviewee in ways that are obviously impossible when using written documents. So, while it is true that memory is fragmentary, fragile, subject to inflection by current concerns, and moulded by current discourse, these conditions likewise affect writ-

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [Stocking 1983]. The original publication of Semenova Tian-Shanskaya's work is [Tian-Shanskaya 1914]. My edition, which is revised and supplemented by additional published and archival sources is [Tian-Shanskaya 1993].

<sup>2</sup> This study demonstrated that memory could compress and recombine historical events in order to assign them more acceptable and understandable collective significance. First published as [Portelli 1981]; in a revised version in Spanish translation as [Portelli 1989]; and in English [Portelli 1991].

ten documents that were composed on the basis of information stored in memory.

When I was doing my study of village women in the twentieth century [Ransel 2000], I used a variety of written sources on everyday life, in addition to the oral interview materials that formed the largest body of evidence. Let's compare the different sources. First, I turned to the pages of the magazine *Krestyanka*, a publication that pretended to convey authentic representations of rural life and that, indeed, accepted and published reports from village correspondents, in other words, first-hand observers. Yet it soon became clear that no judicious researcher could take the material presented in the magazine at face value, except as an indication of the methods the Party was using at any particular time in its effort to convince the public and its own activists that it was enjoying success in transforming village life. Indeed, its content suggests that it was aimed principally at urban-based activists interested in agrarian development.<sup>1</sup> The possible distortions attributable to faulty memory were scarcely an issue because conscious manipulation influenced far more the character of the information presented. Even if researchers tried to pick through the ignorant stereotypes of peasant women in the pages of *Krestyanka* to find some kernel of reality of everyday life, they would surely fail because of the multiple manipulations to which the material was subjected. It is not merely that the editors rejected genuine reports of village life submitted by correspondents or rewrote them into the language of the Party discourse on rural life, but they also introduced distortions at the very inception of the writing process by directly tutoring the correspondents in what to write about and how to express their observations in the desired mobilisational tone [Ransel 2000: 48–52]. Furthermore, the melodramatic narrative form into which the editors cast the stories (a form evidently preferred by their readers) dressed the information in a garb familiar to urban readers and revealed, once again, that the intended audience was more likely in the cities than in the countryside.

Another written source I found, and a really valuable one, was unpublished field reports of public health teams that went to the villages in the 1920s and 1930s to train women in reproductive hygiene and general health and to organise them for collective action to improve their condition. Because of the direct contact with village women, the limited purposes of these teams, and lack of editing for publication, the reports come across as more sympathetic and somewhat less ignorant than the material in *Krestyanka*. Even so, these teams of educated medics and Party activists entered the villages with a ready-

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<sup>1</sup> In much the same way as the poster art about agrarian life and reform produced in the same period was apparently intended not for villagers themselves but for an urban-based reader. See [Bonnell 1993].

made grid of expectations and rural character types that necessarily shaped their reactions to the villagers. Accordingly, these field reports were also freighted with the categories that inhabited the Party's mobilisational discourse. These activists told us much more about their view of the world they encountered than about the experience of the women they described. However much sympathy they may have felt for the women they contacted, their reports tell more about their own work than about the women and offer assessments of what the activists regarded as their successes without any reference to the views of their female clients about whether their work was successful or not. We are unable to penetrate the textual surface of these reports and hear the voice of the village women themselves. Even when the activists brought back a statement of the women's needs and desires, it was a statement obviously composed by the activists themselves and supposedly signed by the village women.

What about the reports of professional ethnographers and public health researchers of the post-collectivisation period? Did their published works give us an accurate picture of village life? In conducting research for my book on village mothers, I initially tried to use these materials as well. But professional ethnographers and specialists in social medicine from the Semashko Institute warned me that they had been prevented from publishing an honest picture of village life before the glasnost era. The most conscientious of them reported that they tried to limit the distortion in their published writings to sins of omission more than commission. Some admitted that much of the material, health statistics in particular, were consciously distorted and that much of what they published about village life was worthless. How, after all, could they honestly report on the destruction of the village by conscious government policy? More recently, historians have been able to tell some of the story more honestly on the basis of archival materials, but these studies usually take a macroscopic view and do not record the voice of the ordinary people who lived through this period of history.

What then can be said of oral testimony? The suspicion of oral testimony of historical events arises from its almost exclusive reliance on memory. Memory, we know, is fragmentary, fragile, and subject to being reshaped by later experience. Informants even relay as their own observations stories that they have heard from others. Like written documents, memory must be conveyed in language, and this vehicle is coloured by the dominant discourse, in some cases heavily. Yet when the testimony is that of ordinary people, it rests on experience that is different from that of educated observers and government or Party officials. It comes from a subject position not before consulted and usually not included in other sources, except in a heavily mediated and distorted form. It therefore yields different information and retrieves a voice not before heard.

Take the question of abortion and the choices of village women. Statistics could tell us that few village women underwent abortions in the 1920s and early 1930s when it was legal. Analysts might assume that the lower priority given to villagers for this procedure and the difficulty of access to clinics were the primary reasons. Our interviews with women of this generation, however, brought out equally salient impediments: their own religious objections to the procedure and their beliefs about the grotesque fate of women who submitted themselves to or who performed abortions. Without the direct voice of the women collected through oral interviews we would have missed a key explanation of their behaviour and a vivid picture of their cosmology. Despite the acceptance of abortion by younger generations of village women, the new attitude did not seem to inflect the memories of the women of this early generation. And this is not surprising. The forceful religious messages and ugly folk images associated with abortion when these interviewees were girls left a deep imprint. Such vivid and emotionally charged ideas and images remain fixed firmly in memory.

Or take the question of how women coped with the death of small children. Until recently, a very large proportion of Russian children died before age five. The best written sources we had for the causes and impact of this loss were field reports by doctors and other medical personnel. Often these missionaries from the cities had little understanding of the lives and needs of villagers and described them as neglectful and irresponsible parents, sometimes even portraying them as unfeeling brutes who cared more about their cow than their children. Only by gathering the direct testimony of the villagers themselves was it possible to discover their motives, their devotion to the well-being of their children, to grasp their nuanced understandings of health and illness and their efforts through a variety of methods to rescue their children from danger or to find in their religious practices a route to salvation for the children who would not survive. In listening to the villagers' descriptions of their actions, we are able to appreciate and respect the choices they made and to understand the dignity with which they made them.

The second question, it should be added, is not entirely well posed, as it assumes that 'facts and events' can be separated from expressions of mentality. But facts and events are not independent of the mental attitudes with which they are observed and reported. The fact of collusion, say, that Catriona Kelly records, may not be a fact in the observations of others. It may be something else or nothing at all, that is, it may not rise to the level of 'fact'. Or what of a village woman whispering and rubbing water on the body of a dying child. What 'fact; are we witnessing? A doctor, if she took note of it at all, might condemn the action as a harmful, thoughtless intervention. A village healer would understand it as a beneficial medical practice.

A priest might view it as a prayer. One of the strengths of oral interview testimony is that the stories that subjects tell of their own lives yield information critical to understanding what are and are not facts. The different renderings that people give of similar actions or events reveal the hopes, desires, ambitions, and myths that lie behind the story and animate the minds of the tellers, and it is the mind of the storyteller that invests facts with meaning — or in essence creates facts.

Finally, the third question presents a number of complicated issues. The choices offered, much as in question 2, reflect suspicion of oral testimony as a means of retrieving information about the past. The first choice suggests that narrative methods are useful primarily for reaching a non-specialised readership and that narrative by its very nature compromises our view of the past. The second choice, that of maintaining analytical distance, indicates an interest in the current state of mind of interviewees and not in their account of past events. A proper historical account would ideally do both these things: present a narrative and an analysis. A thoughtful historian would also recognise that narrative form and framing establish a point of view and sequence action in a way that implies an analytical stance from the very beginning. Because of the linear character of narrative and the implication that an action that follows a previous action was caused in some measure by the prior action, the selection and placement of events in a story contain an explanation of their results. Narrative functions as a string of causes and effects.

The way question 3 is posed seems to align its authors with the neo-positivist approach that demeans narrative as 'mere' description and privileges explanation. But for a historian narrative is a crucial step in a four-step process of knowledge creation. The first is narrative recounting or telling what is the case, the second is explanation (some of which is contained in narrative), the third is argument or establishing the historian's claim that her descriptions and explanations constitute accurate representations of the past, and the fourth is interpretation, that is showing the relationship of the present to the past. The American intellectual historian Allan Megill made this point some years ago [Megill 1989]. It would tax the reader's patience to develop it in detail here, but I wanted at least to counter the implication of question 3 that narrative is merely something for 'a non-specialised readership'. On the contrary, it is an essential step in the process of knowledge production. Where is it missing in some texts that appear to be purely explanatory, the description or narrative is indeed there by implication. In these cases, the narrative is so familiar that it is taken for granted.



## ANDREI TOPORKOV

1

I think ‘outsider’ ethnographers are a thoroughly good thing. Their emergence means that layers of culture that have formerly not attracted sufficient interest in the autochthonic scholarly tradition can become the subject of interested scrutiny. In addition, researchers who have been educated in a different system are able to apply new approaches that are as yet unfamiliar to researchers from within a given society, or that have not yet been fully internalised by them. They can also cite comparative material from their own culture, of which they have an in-depth knowledge.

The losses here are connected with the fact that foreign researchers are forced to depend on their informants, by no means all of whom may necessarily be reliable, and that they have no chance to cross-check the information received against their own experience, or even to rely on the common sense that is proper to representatives of the culture under study. In this respect, Catriona Kelly’s article clearly demonstrates both the merits and the demerits of ‘outsider ethnography’. Among the merits of the article is the fact that it has raised the topic of investigation to begin with, that Kelly has organised a large-scale programme of interviews, and has systematised and analysed materials from this. The demerits, as I see them, lie in the factual errors made and in the fact that the picture of school life as presented by Catriona Kelly has little in common with reality and is closer to George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* than to the late Soviet school from which most of *Antropologicheskii forum*’s readers are likely to be drawn.

I’ll content myself with just one example. Kelly writes that ‘*Days still started with a lineika, formal assembly, at which Pioneer symbolism (the bugle and the drum, red banners) was prominent, and which included speechifying by the director, and sometimes also members of staff and even pupils.*’ I don’t know who told her that Soviet school days always began with a *lineika*. I was

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at school myself in Leningrad from 1965 to 1975 and worked as a teacher from 1980 to 1983. I can assert with complete confidence that *lineiki* only took place on especially festive occasions, and that no-one would have dreamt of organising them every day of the week.

Incidentally, the very description of the 1970s and 1980s Soviet school as 'post-Stalinist' looks odd. It would be equally appropriate to describe it as 'post-Leninist', or indeed 'post-revolutionary'; one might just as well describe the Russian school today as 'post-Stalinist'. In the Russian language, 'post-Stalinist' assumes that the events referred to are those immediately following Stalin's death, not those occurring decades later. It's perfectly obvious that the mid-1950s Soviet school, that of the 'thaw' period (late 1950s-mid 1960s), and the school of the so-called 'period of stagnation' (late 1960s-mid-1980s) wasn't a unified phenomenon. But Kelly's article dots about between the early 1960s and the 1980s. The conclusion has to be that for her, the term 'post-Stalinist' is appropriate for a different reason: because she sees the Soviet school of the entire period following the leader's death as bearing the indelible imprint of Stalinism.<sup>1</sup>

2

Oral history can indeed provide valuable sources for documenting everyday life, but one has to observe certain conditions, 'rules of the game'. It is essential to create a representative sample in terms of gender, social status, profession, place of residence etc. If one is studying a phenomenon that has changed over time, then one has to give attention to its dynamics. If one is analysing a social institution with which people were involved over a number of years, then one has to give attention to the fact that the way this institution was perceived could also change. In cases where a phenomenon lies some distance away from the time that the narrative about it was composed, one has to bear this temporal gulf in mind and to distinguish the evaluation that participants made at the time something happened and the one being made at the time an interview was set down. It is also essential to give attention to the fact that evaluations of events are dependent on a whole range of factors (the life experience of the person being interviewed, the nature of the distance between the event being described and the time of the interview, the emotional attitudes of the informant and his or her temperament and outlook generally). Interviews of this kind can indeed constitute a '*repository of facts and events not recorded in written tradition*', but interviews have to be worked with in particular ways, critically analysed, compared with each other and other

<sup>1</sup> Here, as with *formal/formalnyi* above, there is a problem of translation: in English, 'post-Stalinist' is the standard term for the decades following Stalin's death, and use of the term in no sense points to the user's desire to emphasise the continuing influence of the 'genius of all peoples'. [Editor].

sources. In this respect, Kelly's article has not only positive, but also negative features. Information about the informants is given only in the most general way: the sex and age of the people cited are left unclear. The excerpts are given with references to an archive to which, self-evidently, most readers will not have access, yet sex, age, occupation, educational levels and place of residence are not given. It is nowhere specified whether the corpus of interviews being used in fact included different opinions on the same subject, different evaluations of the same phenomenon. In essence, the interview excerpts are used as illustrations to Kelly's own argument as advanced a priori; they are not analysed or treated critically in any way.

And here it is possible to grasp another characteristic of Kelly's approach. She clearly takes a negative, hostile attitude towards her subject. This is clear not just in her own comments, but in the interview quotations that she cites. Let me quote a few characteristic examples:

The general picture painted by the article is fairly hair-raising. Teachers given children cigarette burns on the cheek (p. 140 note 1); senior pupils hang up little children on hooks (p. 139); children are constantly gripped with fear; every day starts with a Pioneer meeting, and so on. Extreme and pathological phenomena are presented as normal; fairly insignificant elements of school discipline, such as having to raise your hand before giving an answer, are represented as a frightful violation of children's personality; dubious material is dragged in along with the rest (cf. my comments above on the *lineika*).

As one's schooldays wore on, attitudes to school rituals, the syllabus for particular subjects, Pioneer and Komsomol life and the Soviet system generally changed significantly. Children arrived at school aged seven and left when they were seventeen. I can remember myself that admission to the Pioneers in Class Four was a real event, but also that by Class Seven I couldn't wait for the moment when I'd be able to come to school without wearing 'that red rag' round my neck. This aspect of school life — how the perception of school rituals changed with advancing age — is unfortunately not given any attention at all in Catriona Kelly's article.

One can hardly evaluate the system of ideological education without bearing in mind that this was not only carried out directly, by the political organisations for children and young people (Octobrists, Pioneers, Komsomol) but also by teaching in the humanities — especially literature, history, and Russian language. In this respect, the school syllabus for these disciplines and the content of textbooks from the 'post-Stalin' era as such to the end of the era of stagnation would have provided valuable material for the analysis of everyday life of the Soviet school. These topics are also absent from Kelly's article, though they are directly relevant to the subject in hand.

3

It is clear that the 'narrative methods employed in the article' have an unsatisfactory character, generating subjective, tendentious attitudes and turning 'The School Waltz' into something resembling a work of fiction. It stands to reason that researchers should maintain distance towards the period under study and to their interviewees, paying attention to their biographies, personal experience, education, etc. It is also vital that generalisations and deductions draw on a representative sample of material, and that interview texts should be handled in a critical manner, and material of them compared with sources of different kinds.

## CATRIONA KELLY

## Author's Reply

Writing an article, as opposed to a book, tends to be like dropping a stone down a very long well shaft. Truth may, as folklore has it, be at the bottom, but it is rare to hear an echo. I am therefore grateful to the editorial board of *Antropologicheskii forum* for organising this discussion, and for giving me the chance to reply. It is also stimulating, if also humbling, for someone who has worked largely on the relatively distant past to be confronted with the — happily — still very vocal historical subjects whose lives are discussed in her text. The opportunity for this to occur has itself a precise historical location, both because oral history of the kind upon which my discussion is partly based could not have been carried out in Russia even twenty years ago, and because genuinely multinational forums of this kind are an even more recent development.

In what I say here, I shall confine myself to generalities — a list of incidental replies on points of detail would make dull reading<sup>1</sup> — beginning with the first issue raised in the questionnaire: that of 'insider' versus 'outsider' perspective. Here I would myself take a pragmatic view: the advantages and disadvantages of these

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<sup>1</sup> One or two corrections do seem appropriate, since they relate to the field of academic ethics. Andrei Toporkov complains in his response to question 2, *The fragments from interviews are cited with reference to an archive that is self-evidently inaccessible to the majority of readers, but the sex, age, occupation, educational credentials and place of residence of the informants are not given.* Originally, "The School Waltz" contained, in the Appendix, a precise list of informants, detailing dates and places of birth, parental occupation, and other basic biographical information. This was cut at the proof stage in order to reduce what was already a very long article to manageable size. The biographical information has been available since October 2004 on the website for the Leverhulme-sponsored project, 'Childhood in Russia, 1890–1991: A Social and Cultural History', at [www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/russian/childhood/](http://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/russian/childhood/). The entire archive of interviews (currently standing at around 300 tapes with over 150 informants) will in due course be made available to researchers. Regarding Aleksandr Belousov's comments about various 'errors', I would note the following: 1. A. Roitman is the conductor of the score in *The Girl from Class One*; I mistranscribed the credits from the video when checking the director's name because the curlicued script eluded my shortsighted gaze (interestingly, too, the credit for Roitman, clearly once a figure of stature, appears in larger script than the credit for the director); 2. I do not follow the practice of citing material that I have only heard about. 3. I would describe Glotser's *Deti pishut stikhi* (Children Write Verses), which I read in the British Library's copy, as an annotated anthology or an appreciation of literature by children, and not as a scholarly study (compare Chukovsky's *From Two to Five*).

perspectives depend a great deal on context. The value of an 'outsider's' observations is likely to depend on the length of exposure to a given society, on the presence or absence of first-hand experience of a certain situation, and on how permeable the society of origin and the society visited are. Superficial observers, especially those from closed or semi-closed societies, will usually address what they see purely in terms of the familiar; for other observers, 'abroad' is valued precisely because it is different from home.<sup>1</sup> Yet there are also observers who are genuinely interested in immersing themselves in what they see, in trying to see 'from the inside'. In the pre-revolutionary era, these included such relatively long-term residents as Maurice Baring or Rothay Reynolds; an example from the Stalin years is Freda Utley. Such observers may well — assuming a capacity for observation, analysis, and self-analysis — be able to discuss situations they have witnessed (behaviour in the workplace, house-keeping, and the conduct of affective relationships, say), with roughly as much authority as a native inhabitant of a given society.<sup>2</sup> Outsiders may *perform* cultural roles worse — making themselves ridiculous by not knowing how to cope practically, or falling into dreadful lapses of etiquette — but they may, in due course, come to understand these better, simply because avoiding humiliation and distress takes effort. There is a direct linguistic analogy: a non-native-speaker will always make mistakes when articulating a language, but may be a particularly effective commentator on the rules of that language (after all, the first ever grammar of the Russian language was written by a German, in Latin, and published by Oxford University Press).<sup>3</sup> The fact that the 'insider/outsider' problem seems so pressing in the case of Russian culture is no doubt

<sup>1</sup> Examples of the first type of traveller include such early modern visitors as Giles Fletcher and Richard Turberville; examples of the second include the sympathisers of Bolshevism mentioned by Ben Eklof — Bernard Shaw and John Dewey.

<sup>2</sup> [Baring 1922]; [Reynolds 1913]; [Utley 1949]. The second book contains, for example, very interesting observations on the layout of Russian apartments and on relations with servants, of the kind seldom recorded in diaries or memoirs by Russians. Utley's book has valuable descriptions of medical treatment, modern apartment living, and life at work (she deliberately spoke Russian as badly as possible so as to be spared making political speeches). Other close observers of the pre-1917 period include Elizabeth Hill and Walter Gerhardt, both of whom were born in Russia and would best be described as 'Anglo-Russian' in the full bilingual and bicultural sense. While not laying claim to fall in this second category, I might qualify as a 'long-term resident', given that I have now been visiting Russia for quite long periods of time (including a year as a student in Voronezh from 1980 to 1981) for more than twenty-five years. There are some areas of Russian existence — such as life in a provincial student hostel in the Brezhnev years — about which I probably know more than many of my contemporaries from educated backgrounds in the Russian capitals. This kind of long-term exposure became possible for many students and scholars from the late 1950s onwards, and is typical of British and American Russianists aged 70 and under.

<sup>3</sup> HEINRICI WILHELMI LUDOLFI GRAMMATICA RUSSICA QUÆ CONTINET Non tantum præcipia fundamenta RUSSICÆ LINGUÆ, Verum etiam Manuductionem quondam AD GRAMMATICAM SLAVONICAM. Oxonii, E Theatro Sheldoniano, A. D. MDCXCVI. On the history of this book, see [Stone 2005].

derived from the relative impermeability of the culture in the days of Soviet power. On the one hand, this meant that even superficial commentaries made by ‘outsiders’ (an ambassador’s trip round Black Sea resorts, say) were perceived as authoritative within the culture of these outsiders. On the other hand, there was a widespread view among ‘insiders’ that assumed ‘outsiders’ to be condemned to perpetual misunderstanding when it came to all the important facts of Soviet, and more broadly Russian, culture. I am not sure that these attitudes have vanished completely: take, for instance, Aleksandr Belousov’s supposition that the toponym ‘Staro-Kuznetsk’, reproduced verbatim from an archival source and referring to a district of the town then called Stalinsk (later Novokuznetsk) that was considered a separate territorial entity till the late twentieth century, reflects a foreigner’s outrageous ignorance of Russian geography.

Problematised though one may the assumption that ‘outsider’ testimony is necessarily lacking in insight, though, there is a degree of sheer perversity in choosing to analyse situations, such as childhood in a different culture, that the ‘outsider’ can by definition not have lived through directly. The situation here is not the same as the one described by Claudio Ingerflom. When describing the *distant* past, ‘outsider’ observers are not necessarily at a disadvantage. When describing the recent past, they undoubtedly are. One saving grace may lie in an ‘outsider’s’ capacity for analogous experience. Even convinced constructivists, such as I myself am, have to accept the existence of some universal components in childhood — language acquisition, play, intensive socialisation into adult behaviour codes. At a more specific level, there is clearly a great deal in common in the schooling experience across twentieth-century industrial and post-industrial societies, from the importance of compulsory schooling as a component of ‘extended childhood’ — the prolongation of an individual’s years of economic and emotional dependency into the mid-teens or indeed the late teens — to the details of school curriculum and the organisation of the working day.

Further, the frustrations for the ‘outsider’ in researching a topic where written sources are inadequate, thus compelling recourse to the perhaps faulty memories of interviewees, may be offset by the open-mindedness that is engendered by not having one’s own direct experience to rely on. Perhaps outsiders are better able to perform the exercise that deconstructionists used to term ‘decentring the subject’. As Kirill Kobrin has argued at the beginning of an interesting meditation on his own early years, ‘*You can’t write about other people’s childhoods. Only your own.*’ [Kobrin 2000: 24]. Where attitudes to childhood are so supremely individualist, anyone else’s experience is likely to seem suspect. And indeed, some of the ‘insider’ participants in this Forum seem to have run into the logical contradiction of at once criticising the use of oral history because it

makes the analyst prey to unverifiable retrospective testimony, and at the same time offering their own retrospective testimony as an authoritative alternative source that demonstrates why the informants cited in this essay are wrong.

In whatever case, the 'outsider' mentality is essential when one attempts to explain social processes that may not be interpreted at the conscious level by those going through them. As Aleksandra Piir points out, the final analysis is always at one remove, or more, from the human situation in which confidences were made. There is a loss of context, an elision of what the interviewer and interlocutor took for granted — an elision, one could add, that may not be reparable, even if interviewers carry out the analysis of the material themselves, since someone orchestrating a conversation and someone quoting from it to demonstrate a particular thematic or conceptual preoccupation are in a quite fundamental sense engaged in separate tasks.

This gap between informant recollection and analysis perhaps explains the sense of alienation that Aleksandr and Elena Lyarsky felt when reading the article. Alienation of this kind may be all the more likely when one is dealing with the earlier phases of life experience. It is no doubt right to argue (as the Lyarskys do) that children do not think of themselves as undergoing a process of socialisation, or indeed as located in social relations at all.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, I would agree that children's interpretations of power relations are different from those of adults. In one of his essays, Lev Vygotsky cites an experiment where an adult is invited to an appointment with an educational psychologist; the latter then makes an excuse and leaves the room, and the adult's behaviour is secretly observed. Typically, the adult would start picking up items such as letters and books and looking at them. Vygotsky himself saw this in terms of the infantilisation, through powerlessness, of the adult subject. But this is melodramatic and one-sided. Children placed in the same position, and asked why they were looking around, might be more likely to say they were simply interested, curious, or bored, and not to see the situation as exploitative at all. Well-intentioned adult concern with children's welfare, with their potential for suffering, can actually distort the nature of experience as emotionally interpreted by children — who have at times a startling capacity for *sang froid*.

The history of everyday life is always an intellectual exercise; as David Ransel argues, it renders meaningless the **binary opposition between 'analysis' and 'narrative'** to which the final question refers.

<sup>1</sup> Except perhaps in a relatively primitive sense: material from the archive of the First Experimental Station of Narkompros in the archive of the Russian Academy of Education indicates that schoolchildren quite readily reproduced the 'class war' politics of the early Soviet era in their school essays, describing their own families as *bednyaki* and talking of the *kulaki* in the village, and so on.



Yet a narrative that is open to children's imagined experience should also be, I think, a different type of narrative from, say, a political history of the Stalin era. At some level it has to be (in the creative sense of the word) 'naïve' — it must represent and explain in equal measure. This has nothing to do with the writing of 'fiction', which, in contradistinction to historiography, has the right to eschew the retrospective view altogether, purporting to represent 'what really happened'. At the same time, this genre conflict, presence of two competing narrative traditions, is of a specific kind, which may explain the discomfort that my article inspired in some readers. An alternative would be to represent memories in anthologistic fashion, without intervention from the narrator at all — though this should not necessarily make us feel that we are any closer to the informants. In short quotations, the repetitions and hesitations natural to spoken narrative may be easier to reproduce than they are in publications adopting the 'life history' format.<sup>1</sup>

The feeling of alienation provoked by the attempt to see childhood analytically, yet at the same time 'from within', may also be a reason why several contributors to the discussion have expressed reservations about the usefulness of **oral history as a source for the study of everyday life** — the last question raised in this Forum. I completely agree about the need for scepticism with regard to oral history, but would agree with David Ransel that such scepticism should be turned on written documentation too — whoever its author might be. To regard material that comes from the oral domain, or is written by non-professional and/or politically suspect writers, as suitable for analysis in terms primarily of its rhetorical structures, while keeping alive classical positivism where the authors happen to be, say, classic Russian writers or famous scholars, is to practise a very particular kind of historical partiality and resurrect 'the condescension of posterity' in new form.

Oral history allows us to go, in the recording of experience, *beyond* the perspective of those who succeeded in the educational system, as by definition any contributor to *Antropologicheskii forum* must have done. I would certainly accept that there were alternative, more enthusiastic, views of school among some pupils (such as are evoked by Andrei Toporkov and Evgeny Dobrenko, and also by Ben Eklof, Vadim Baevsky, Sofya Loiter, and others). The point is that oral history points to the existence of a group — significantly underrepresented in written sources — that found school alienating and tedious.<sup>2</sup> Ben Eklof may well be right to argue that the Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> On the centrality of the role of transcription to oral history, see [Frisch 1990].

<sup>2</sup> In a recent study of children's reading, I have likewise contrasted the reactions retrieved by oral history work with informants who grew up in working-class families or in the Russian countryside. See [Kelly 2005].

education system had a rather better record with regard to social mobility than its US equivalent<sup>1</sup> (though social mobility was probably greater in the early Soviet era than in the 1960s and 1970s). Yet the supposedly socially neutral, purely meritocratic system that existed from the mid-1930s undoubtedly placed children of parents who had experienced high-level education, and valued books, at an advantage. How much of an advantage is difficult to calculate, given that there were no national examining boards, so that discrepancies in standards were concealed (an answer that was awarded a five in one school might have obtained only a three in another), and given also that schools were not ranked according to what are now known as 'value added' criteria (which attempt to compute how efficiently a school is educating children from disadvantaged homes). But reports from the files of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences about direly low standards in village schools do make clear the obstacles to educational progress among at least a substantial minority of Soviet Russian children.<sup>2</sup>

I accept Larry Holmes's point that 'outsider' researchers are often looking for material about the dysfunctional in the societies they study. If one looks at general histories of Russia, one tends to find 'children' figuring in contexts of social anomie: 'children's camps, neglected, of enemies of the people, of kulaks, of stigmatized parents'.<sup>3</sup> In this perspective, oral history can be interpreted as a way of retrieving the 'disgraceful facts' (*vopiyushchie fakty*) that propaganda concealed from view.<sup>4</sup> But in fact, if one actually listens to what informants are saying, the picture is often different. For instance, where Soviet 'total institutions', such as orphanages, are concerned, oral testimony provides an important corrective to archival data such as reports precisely because it tends to draw a positive picture of relations between staff and inmates, suggesting that a good many of the former did their best to help the children under their care in very trying circumstances (see e.g. Oxf/Lev SPb-02

<sup>1</sup> Certainly, an international survey some years ago ranked the US rather low in terms of social mobility compared with a number of different European countries. The 'American dream', one may suppose, is kept alive by recent immigrants who watch their children do better, educationally and economically, than they did.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Materialy po ekspeditsii v Borskii raion Gor'kovskoi oblasti za 1947', RAO NA f. 32 op. 1 d. 119, l. 3 (which reports a serious lack of specialist science teaching in rural schools), l. 12 (which quotes a pupil essay saying, '*The plant eats carbon dioxide through its whiskers* [sic.]. *Then it gets broken down and turned into fats*'), l. 28 ('*insects have two pairs of legs*').

<sup>3</sup> [Fitzpatrick 1999: 282]. The index also includes the more neutral categories of 'upbringing', 'child support', and in fact the discussion in the book is wider than the categories would suggest. But the sense of priorities is typical of Western social history.

<sup>4</sup> Elements of this attitude are evident in [Engel, Posadskaya-Vanderbeck 1998]; as I pointed out when reviewing this (in many respects very interesting) volume of women's oral autobiographies for *Journal of Modern History*, questions such as 'When did you have your first abortion?' have the same ritualised status here as the question, 'When did you join the Party?' in Soviet recordings of oral testimony.

PF1–4). I would not have been surprised if interviews about schools had produced a similar picture. However, the data from our interviews relating to the experiences of working-class subjects at school in the post-Stalin era does seem to point in the direction of widespread boredom and frustration. The interviews carried out in Perm', which I had not seen when I wrote this article, confirm the general picture too.

Of course, these reactions were not uniform: they varied from person to person, and could change over time, both during a particular individual's biography, and from era to era. Andrei Toporkov's comments about the crucial part played by advancing age are pertinent. The temporal context worked in other ways too. Typically, respondents schooled during the 1930s and 1940s, as Boris Firsov rightly suggests, recall school as a refuge from dire conditions (overcrowding, semi-starvation or worse) at home, and as a centre of *kultura* not otherwise easily accessible at this date. I am sure that Sofya Loiter is right to argue that attitudes to the school as a refuge and 'temple of culture' persisted for longer in villages than in urban settlements; they were perhaps also more tenacious in provincial towns than in major cities.

Equally, I accept completely Ben Eklof's point about the positive response of many to structured education. There were pupils in the 1920s who were bored by project work and pupil self-government (though others who loved these things); just so, there were pupils who, once academic values had been restored, came into their element. Among memoirists of the 1930s, one could mention David Samoilov, or Yakov Avidon, later to be imprisoned in a labour camp, but lastingly grateful for the education that he received in the 1930s [Kent 1997: 185, 187, 188]. The relative scarcity of such positive evaluations when it comes to schooling in the post-Stalinist era may well be due to the post-Romantic self-mythologisation of the period — 'as an alternative person, a true individualist, I *of course* disliked school'. It is also to do with the well-attested paradox that Soviet citizens became more dissatisfied, the more the standard of living (and the standards of institutional provision) improved.<sup>1</sup> Yet, such hidden agendas notwithstanding, one does have to allow for the possibility that informants are at some level accurate when they describe disaffection with their school experience — as Larry Holmes

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<sup>1</sup> One might compare commentary on Soviet nurseries (*yasli* and *detskie sady*): provision was both more generous and often better than in the first three decades of Soviet power, but parents — at least from culturally empowered circles — complained about them more. For examples, take [Mukhina 1969], or the commentaries running in *Nedelya* during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. I would see criticism under glasnost and after (as mentioned by Ben Eklof) as a sequel to this, rather than something that came totally out of the blue. As for individualism, one might note Aleksandr Zholkovsky's ironic comments [2003] on hating school as a social cliché.

emphasises, it is precisely when describing emotional reactions that oral history sources are most persuasive.

I would underline here that the emotion that I was trying to describe was precisely *disaffection*. The purpose of the article was certainly not to question the achievements of the Soviet school, from the mid-1930s to the late 1980s, in providing a good many pupils with a thorough academic grounding, particularly in maths and science. Probably every generation of educated parents, not just the émigré parents mentioned by Vera Kaplan and Fran Markowitz, is inclined to think that its children is being educated worse than it was, but there were some objective grounds for this feeling among Russian émigrés of the 1970s and 1980s. There is much to be said for rote-learning: it does not have to be deadening, and provides pupils with a basic network of knowledge, from arithmetical tables to spelling and grammatical rules to famous poems. (I should know — I was made to do plenty of it myself, and wish I had been made to do more.) Nor was I intending to embroider at length the cliché of Russian educational reformers, 'school cripples the child', or to suggest that the school was a microcosm of 'totalitarian' society (a term round which I, like most Western specialists on the Soviet system since the 1970s, would always place inverted commas).<sup>1</sup>

It seems worth stressing this point, since a number of the commentators, particularly Andrei Toporkov, seem to have misunderstood the argument of the article at a quite fundamental level. The 'corporate ethos' that I describe here has nothing at all to do with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>2</sup> One could begin with the elementary fact that children practically don't figure in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,<sup>3</sup> and where they do, it is most certainly not as victims 'traumatised' by an alien

<sup>1</sup> The term is probably now more widely used with reference to Russia in Russia itself than in the West: see e.g. "Totalitarizm" kak teoreticheskaya ramka: popytki revizii spornogo ponyatiya', [Gudkov 2004: 362–446].

<sup>2</sup> As a footnote: I had read *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* only once in my life (until re-reading it for this article), more than twenty years ago. At the time I was still an undergraduate, and hugely ignorant about Soviet history. It struck me then forcefully as a story about the betrayal of love and the self-disgust and hatred towards the loved one which ensue, and I still think that is one of its primary narrative lines. On re-reading it, I was entertained by Orwell's accurate and at times hysterically funny parody of high Stalinist (and Third Reich) propaganda (one might take particularly the passages dealing with invented statistics and with the invention of a military hero, Comrade Ogilvy, who bears more than a passing resemblance to Aleksandr Matrosov). But the thrust of the novel very obviously lies, as is commonly argued, in its application of a 'totalitarian' model to a modulated but still recognisable portrait of post-war Britain, with popular culture as represented by nursery rhymes and trash pornographic novels somehow surviving oppression in the form of censorship ('careless talk costs lives'), food rationing, goods shortages, and evaporating morale. Like Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Orwell takes issue with patriotic smugness of the 'it could never happen here, the homeland of democracy' kind: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reminds the late 1940s reader that Britain might as easily four decades hence be the home of slavery as of freedom.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Andrei Toporkov was thinking of Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*, which does indeed hinge on the destruction of a child by a repressive, 'totalitarian', regime?

system. As the heroine, Julia, says, ‘*All children are swine*’ (part 2, ch. 7) [Orwell 1990: 171]. Even if one takes it that the children in my article are supposed to share the subject position of the hapless *adult* denizens of Oceania, the analogy doesn’t work. As everyone knows, Orwell depicted a society where everyone is perpetually in reach of a ‘telescreen’ that both transmits and records — Foucault’s *surveillance universelle* gone electronic. “‘The School Waltz’”, on the other hand, portrays a community where ‘turning a blind eye’ was endemic, because the teachers were often too overstretched to enforce discipline (as at break-times, for example), or because they had a vested interest in not doing so — as might happen with cases of idleness or non-co-operation during ideologically important but academically peripheral activities such as ‘war preparation’ (*voennaya podgotovka*),<sup>1</sup> but also during oral questions or indeed written tests on academic subjects. The key word, used at an early stage in the article, is ‘collusion’. This is not a model of ‘*repression and resistance*’, as Aleksandr and Elena Liarsky, for instance, suggest, but a model of (at times bad-tempered and reluctant) co-operation, with games and other unofficial activities on the part of pupils, as in Bakhtin’s famous theories of carnival culture, working as a force of stability rather than of entropy. Larry Holmes’ terms ‘rule-bending’ and ‘humanisation’ capture what I had in mind.

“‘The School Waltz’” does not describe a community whose inhabitants were cowed or traumatised (though the shock effects of arriving at school for the first time are dwelled on). It delineates one in which they sometimes felt bewilderment and annoyance — but might equally well find sudden sources of interest (as is suggested by the account of teachers who could get the more competent pupils interested in oral questioning by arranging the sessions as quizzes). Unlike Evgeny Dobrenko, but following my informants, I do think that ‘school’, as an institution and not just a collection of people, really did ‘exist’. Interesting research by Allison James on modern British ten- and eleven-year-olds has shown that they divide non-school time into a variety of different categories — ‘Playing out with my friends, Play on Computer, Watch TV, GO TO BED’, but see school time as a more or less undifferentiated block. In the words of one girl, ‘Amy’, ‘BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD I wish they’d never invented it’ [James 2002: 151–3]. But school was not just ‘bad bad bad’: it was an institution that allowed breaks within its own routine (even James’s informants mention ‘sport’ and ‘playtime’), and one that was constantly subject to improvisation and modification [James 2002]. It was at one and the same time overwhelming (as children’s primary point of contact with

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<sup>1</sup> Alternatively known as *grazhdanskaya oborona* (some informants know it by this term, some as *voennaya podgotovka*).

culture beyond the family) and negligible — because relationships with individuals were much more memorable, in the long term, than corporate values. In the memorable image of Aleksandr and Elena Lyarsky: 'When we put buttons on teacher's chair or hid the register, we weren't in the least interested in the global structures of social interaction. We just didn't like the "schoolmarm"<sup>1</sup> in question.'

Whichever way, the school of 'everyday life' was certainly nothing like the school as described in pedagogical textbooks. Sofya Loiter is quite right to argue, 'It is hard to agree that the questioning of pupils, the daily oral testing of knowledge, was regarded as an "ideal manifestation of socialist and collective harmony"' Pupils of course did not regard 'oral testing of knowledge' in this way. But I never said that they did. In citing this passage, she has omitted the crucial introductory phrase, 'Officially speaking, this was supposed to be...' As this opening suggests, I am not describing the reality of the Soviet classroom in the post-Stalin era, but paraphrasing the behaviour models set down by pedagogical writers such as Shimbirev and Perovsky, who indeed do talk of 'oral testing' as an exercise in performance before the 'rational collective'. One might compare the representations of 'horizontal surveillance' set out by Anton Makarenko in his hugely influential *Pedagogicheskaya poema*.<sup>2</sup>

I would not pretend that "The School Waltz" exhausts the subject of 'school life' in an overall sense. As all the participants have pointed out, there are some subjects that are not addressed at all, or insufficiently: the role of supremely dedicated teachers (Vladimir Baevsky gives a very interesting and moving description of imaginative teaching, speaking from personal experience), or of the school curriculum, and especially the way that this changed in the 1960s (Ben Eklof and Vladimir Baevsky both raise this point); the many extra-curricular activities that were on offer (Vera Kaplan). I have never been inclined to follow Luther and say, '*Hier steh' ich, ich kann nicht anders,*' and I have been glad to have the chance to think again about some of the statements and generalisations that I originally made. In the expanded version of this essay that forms a chapter in my history of Russian childhood over the twentieth century, *Chil-*

<sup>1</sup> The word used in the original, *rusichka*, is actually a colloquial word for a female Russian teacher.

<sup>2</sup> On Makarenko, see also [Fitzpatrick 1992: 249–53]; [Fitzpatrick 1999: 77]; [Kharkhordin 1999]. I of course don't see this high-Stalinist ideal as being imported unmodified into post-Stalinist culture, and indeed directly argue, 'While later manuals were less explicit about the link between oral testing and social control, they still emphasised the role of the process in enforcing a sense of the need for self-improvement'. Equally, on another point that has upset Loiter, I did not say that the First of September remained forever a Stalinist ritual, merely that it *originated* as such (i.e., was introduced as one of the pleiad of official holidays that marked the era of 'life has become jollier' in 1935–6: on others, New Year and Constitution Day, see [Petrone 2000]).

*dren's World* [Kelly: 2007], I have included sections on teachers, on the syllabus, and on the influence of parents, and I have paid much more attention to diversity of reaction among pupils according to age, social status, and era. *Children's World* also contains a much fuller discussion of upbringing in families, with attention given to what Vitaly Bezrogov has called the way that (some) ‘*Soviet parents felt the call to be strict educators of young Soviet citizens, not “whining, layabout members of the intelligentsia”*’ — so that school education might sometimes work as a continuation of home life, rather than a contrast to this.

Clearly, no generalising cultural history will ever reflect the totality of childhood experience, but if it stimulates the publication of new sources, it has served a useful purpose. I have been left both informed by, and grateful for, this exercise in ‘collaborative anthropology’, and I hope that “‘The School Waltz’”, and this discussion of it, will encourage many more scholars to take an interest in what is still — strangely enough for a country where ‘childhood’ in the symbolic sense has carried such a huge political charge — a relatively neglected area of the national past.

**SHEILA FITZPATRICK****Afterword****Whose School is it, Anyway?**

Everybody went to school, and everybody has their own memories of it. That's one of the obvious reasons Catriona Kelly's article provoked such passionate and varied reactions. But there are other less obvious reasons, some of them only hinted at in the responses. 1) There are the vexed questions of memory, not just the problem that it changes over time or in response to external circumstances but also the 'truth' status of the memories we particularly cherish. 2) There is the unspoken but important question of class: is all oral informants' testimony created equal, or should some testimony (that of those best qualified to judge, i.e. the intelligentsia) be privileged? Related to this is the question of whether we best catch the everyday life of the school by asking former pupils about it, rather than their teachers or even their parents. 3) Finally, and perhaps most bothersome to the Russian respondents, there is the question of whether a foreigner has any right to be interpreting Russian culture; specifically, should she be directing a Russian 'insider ethnography' of this kind.

**1. Memory**

That memories are narratives we have constructed about the past rather than stored 'facts' that we can access has become a cliché in post-modern scholarship. Cliché or not, however, most people have difficulty seeing their personal memories in these terms. We experience our own memories as 'true', or at least as stable records of our perceptions at the time, and it is always a shock to be confronted with evidence to the contrary. Take my own memory of studying history as an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne in the late 1950s, on which, as it happens, I was polled twice, once around 1970 and more recently in 2005 (with a slightly different phrasing of the question). On the first



occasion, I said that I had learnt little from any of my Melbourne history professors, probably because I was unteachable; on the second occasion (having totally forgotten about the first, either the fact of the survey or my answer), I responded that it was from the Melbourne History Department — not from Oxford or any other later training — that I had learnt how to be a historian. Taking either answer in isolation, one might conclude that they shed some light a) about my experience in the Melbourne History Department, or b) about the general experience of being a student there in the late 1950s. Yet when looking at the two of them together, an outsider would have to wonder if they shed light on anything except perhaps that *'the thought expressed is a lie'* — even though I myself continue to believe, despite the apparent contradiction, that I have a coherent memory of my student days in Melbourne and that the way I remember the History Department has something to do with the way the History Department was.

In the case of memory of late-Soviet schooldays, there are additional problems. First there is the problem of *treasured* memory, the memories that we particularly value and often invoke. One finds rare cases of individuals who want their memories of childhood, youth, or other treasured times corrected for inaccuracy and screened for bias (Mary McCarthy being a case in point),<sup>1</sup> but that is the exception rather than the rule. Most people want their memories to serve quite different purposes from historical testimony — reinforcement of a particular sense of self, for example. Memories of childhood, especially childhoods construed as happy, are particularly sacrosanct for many people; their retelling is an honoured Russian tradition [Slezkine 2000]. But it's not only childhood memories that have this quality: in her recent book on the experience of ordinary Soviet soldiers in World War II, based partly on oral history, Catherine Merridale found her efforts to debunk the patriotic myth of wartime heroism and comradeship frustrated by the fact that veterans she interviewed wouldn't cooperate: the myth was a comfort for them; it was the way they wanted to remember the war [Merridale 2006].

Then there is the 1991 problem. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that its former citizens had to make rapid adjustments to their view of the world, which meant also adjusting their view of themselves and their memory of their lives. This adjustment was occurring just as the first wave of anthropologists and historians was conducting interviews among Russians [Rees 1997; Pesman 2000; Holmes 1997; Engel 1998; Ransel 2000; Merridale 2000] — earlier, a difficult if not

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<sup>1</sup> See [McCarthy 1987], a volume intended partly as a 'correction' to her more famous early autobiographical work, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957).

impossible undertaking. This produced fascinating testimony about reactions to the present and memories of the past, but one can't help regretting that there were no 'before 1991' interviews to match the 'after 1991' set. In terms of memory, 1991 was surely one of those watersheds, like the Russian Revolution in 1917 or the German defeat in 1945, that change the way the past is understood as much as they transform the present. One might even speak of a degree of social compulsion on Russians to view the past in a new light that went along with the impulse to repudiate all things 'Soviet' in the early 1990s. But there is nostalgia for that Soviet past, too [Shevchenko 2002], which also affects memory in general, and memory of the Soviet school in particular.

## 2. Class

In the Soviet era, writers and memoirists often recalled their schooldays (mainly the school of the 1930s) in very positive terms, dwelling lovingly on inspiring teachers, camaraderie among pupils, and the discovery of the great literary and artistic works that would be treasured for a lifetime ([Orlova 1983]; [Kosterina 1968]; [Holmes 1997]). To be sure, some of these idyllic 1930s schooldays were brutally interrupted by the arrest of family members in the Great Purges, which spoiled things at school as well as at home ([Shikheeva-Gaister 1998]; [Kosterina 1968]). In general, however, the nostalgic glow of Russian/Soviet schooldays differs strikingly from memoir conventions elsewhere, for example, in twentieth-century England, where men educated at public (that is, elite private) schools developed an entire genre of autobiographical denunciation of the institutional environment that traumatized and humiliated them as children [Gagnier 1991: 171–94]. Yet despite these two very different modes of remembering school, there is also an underlying similarity: the authors are members of an elite (the English aristocracy/upper middle class, in the one case; the Russian intelligentsia, in the other) and went to schools attended primarily by elite children.

By contrast, Catriona Kelly's study covers a much wider social group. As her description of the oral-history project makes clear, she intentionally sought out working-class informants for her socially-mixed sample. Not surprisingly, the result was a different set of school memories than the familiar one — or from those obtained by the American historian Don Raleigh's recent oral history, whose subjects were pupils at Saratov's elite school no. 42 in 1957–1967 [Raleigh 2006]. Unlike Raleigh's high achievers, most of them from intelligentsia families, many of Kelly's informants come from less privileged backgrounds, and consequently tend to be less interested in studying, less appreciative of the efforts of their teachers, and altogether more restless and dissatisfied with school than the intelligentsia children. This shows up clearly in their responses, which are

notably less enthusiastic about school and the learning process than those in Raleigh's study. In Kelly's group, boredom replaces the thrill of the first acquaintance with *Evgenii Onegin* as the dominant trope.

There is perhaps an element of *provokatsiya*<sup>1</sup> in Kelly's presentation of her material, which not only stresses the negative but implicitly dismisses the familiar 'idyllic schooldays' story as romantic myth. This dismissal obviously rankles with some of the Russian commentators. What is at stake, I assume, is not just the evaluation of the Soviet school but also the thorny question of the Russian intelligentsia's moral authority: is an intelligentsia account (e.g. about the experience of Soviet schooling) ipso facto 'truer' than accounts circulating in less enlightened social circles? To many Russian intellectuals, the answer may seem obvious (which could, of course, be part of the problem). In the West, on the other hand, there has always been some division of opinion, though seldom outright debate, about the necessity or desirability of viewing Russia (the Soviet Union) through the eyes of its intelligentsia. For some Western scholars — one might call them the 'Isaiah Berlin school' — the Russian intelligentsia provides the paradigms of interpretation (as Akhmatova did for Berlin in their famous all-night conversation), and the Westerner's task is to listen, learn, and (in the old days of the Cold War) support the struggle of the intelligentsia's 'critical thinkers' against the regime. For others — let us call them the 'E. H. Carr school' — detachment is a higher scholarly virtue than advocacy, and the Russian intelligentsia is seen less in moral-exemplary terms and more in sociological ones (the intelligentsia as part of the object of study).<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Foreign invasion

Perhaps the most sensitive aspect of Catriona Kelly's study is that it is presented as 'insider' ethnography — conducted by Russians with Russian subjects — although the project was largely conceived, directed and financed by foreigners. There is certainly room for argument about the appropriateness of the 'insider' designation when both Russians and Westerners are involved in a study of Russian society. (I use the loaded term 'Westerners' for North Americans, Europeans, and other minor 'First-Worlders' like myself because its loading — implications of Western superiority and Russian tutelage — is exactly the point at issue.) But I imagine that

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<sup>1</sup> Desire to provoke, mischief. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> For elaboration of the view of the Russian intelligentsia as a social elite, see [Fitzpatrick 1992: ch. 1]. For the argument that the status groups called 'classes' in the Soviet Union, including the intelligentsia, might be better understood as Soviet *sosloviya*, see [Fitzpatrick 2005: ch. 3].

the irritation discernable in some of the Russian commentaries is as much a response to the new, obtrusive Western presence in post-Soviet Russia as to this specific project.

Foreign financing is a fact of life in post-Soviet scholarship and culture in Russia, as is foreign or at least collaborative direction of projects. In some collaborative projects, for example most of those involving publication of archival documents, Russians are the real intellectual directors and planners, with foreign collaborators lending their names and handling the funding; in others, including most of the oral history projects, the intellectual leadership as well as the funding tends to be Western, with Russians serving as advisors and executants. In addition to the collaborative projects (strongly encouraged as a genre since the early 1990s by Western foundations), there have been hundreds of foundation- and government-backed schemes to bring Western skills, values, and practices to Russia and other formerly Communist countries. On offer along with straightforwardly political tutelage in democratic values, entrepreneurial skills, legal safeguards, and constitution-making, was instruction by Western academics on the theories and methodologies currently in vogue in the humanities and social sciences. The idea that we needed to bring Theory to the benighted ex-Communist world that knew only Marxism had a sensible rationale, since familiarity with the various canonical bodies of social and cultural theory is indeed a current prerequisite for active participation in the international scholarly community in the humanities and social sciences, from which Soviet scholars had been long involuntarily excluded. For the young and ambitious among Russian scholars, the instruction received from Western teachers on social construction, imagined communities, theories of the everyday, Foucault on discipline and sexuality, and Habermas on the public sphere was without doubt both practically useful and intellectually stimulating.

At the same time, it is hard to avoid the sense that something like Western cultural imperialism was also at play. Among Russian scholars, particularly of the older generation, it must surely rankle at some level to be relegated to the status of intellectual colony, all the more as the past work of Soviet historians, social scientists, and humanities specialists has often been dismissed as worthless in the 'reevaluation of values' of the post-Soviet era. This kind of resentment was first manifested in the early 1990s, as far as history was concerned, with the periodic alarms in the Duma and the press about Westerners' new access to archives and the 'selling of our patrimony' to foreigners.

Post-Soviet reevaluation, conducted under the stress of regime collapse and Western tutelage, required Russians to reassess not just the nation's past but also their own [Fitzpatrick 2005: ch. 15]. In

literature and the arts, for example, public success under Soviet power became a handicap to reputation, while emigration and dissidence in the Soviet period became great reputational advantages. For anyone old enough to have lived an adult Soviet life, it became important to tell the story of one's life in what one might call 'anti-socialist realist' mode, that is, identifying the seeds of doubt about Soviet socialism and the growing understanding that the future lay with capitalism and Western-style democracy. It was possible, of course, to refuse to revise your life story in this way, as a number of respondents in early oral history projects did [Engel 1998]. But that carried the risk of having grandchildren and Western listeners listen politely to your reminiscences, while mentally classifying you as 'typically Soviet'.

#### 4. Schools as totalitarian institutions

One of the charges that Catriona Kelly rejects with particular energy is that she represented the Soviet school as 'totalitarian'. Her reaction is understandable, given that the uncritical post-Soviet Russian embrace of the concept of totalitarianism is a running source of irritation for those Western scholars who have struggled since the 1970s to get out from under its constraints (meaning its Cold War, judgemental overtones; its implicit, value-laden comparison with Nazi Germany; and its premise that everything in Soviet history must be understood in 'top down' terms). 'Totalitarianism' is a still a loaded word for Western scholars because of its Cold War overtones and the bitterness of the fights in the 1970s and 1980s between 'Cold Warriors' and 'revisionists'; in addition, in terms of our (Western) scholarship, it's a concept that now seems outdated and to some degree embarrassing even to those most inclined to sympathize. Since I was on the 'revisionist' side of the Western debates, I fully sympathize with what I take to be Kelly's irritation at the new Russian discourse of totalitarianism. All the same, I can't help taking up the issue of schools and totalitarian systems as represented in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* — not because I think Soviet schools actually functioned on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* principles, but rather to point out the piquant connection between a particularly kind of school (the British public school) and Orwell's idea of totalitarianism.

Orwell had no firsthand experience of either of the two regimes (Nazi and Stalinist) labelled 'totalitarian' in the 1950s. The repressive regime of which he had firsthand experience was the early twentieth-century English public (= private, elite) school, notorious for its sadism and bullying, insistence on hierarchy and esoteric rules, refusal of privacy, and outlawing of the emotions, and the consequent anomie of such of its young (all male) pupils who were not brainwashed into becoming patriots of the system and bullies in their

turn. According to a specialist in English autobiography, the analogy of school (that is, the male public school) and totalitarianism 'is explicit in countless early twentieth-century memoirs and autobiographies' [Gagnier 190–93]; in Orwell's case, she shows how his autobiographical essay about his schooldays, 'Such, Such Were the Joys,' uses essentially the same tropes as his dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This does indeed establish some sort of relationship between school and Orwell's version of totalitarianism. The school in question, however, is not Soviet; and instead of totalitarianism providing a model for the school, it is the school that provided the model for a concept of totalitarianism.

Even leaving aside the egregious example of the British public school, moreover, it can be argued that schools and totalitarian political systems have something in common. This applies particularly to schools like boarding schools with a strongly developed hermetic culture; that is to say, less to really-existing Soviet schools of any period than to many other national models. When I looked for a metaphor for the Soviet system in my book on everyday Stalinism, the school was one of the three (along with the prison and the soup-kitchen) that came to mind [Fitzpatrick 2000: 226–27]. Schools are closed 'total' institutions [Goffman 1961] with a strong local culture that all inmates have to master, whose purpose is to educate (instil values) into their pupils; the pupils learn to mimic these value statements (SchoolSpeak), while usually maintaining a separate subaltern value system; denunciation is encouraged and viewed as civic duty by teachers, though condemned by pupils; hypocrisy is rampant, though students may well at some level accept the school's values and in later life impart them to their children; low-level everyday resistance (students against teachers) is endemic but revolt almost unknown. If we move back from the universal to the Soviet particular, it seems to be neither interesting nor particularly accurate to say that Soviet schools functioned like in miniature totalitarian regime. What is interesting for students of Soviet history is to consider the proposition that the Soviet political regime, especially in its post-Stalinist version, was centrally defined by its school-like characteristics — the absolute value placed on *vospitanie* and *kulturnost*; the didactic smugness of officials in their role as teachers of the population; the assumption that a primary task of government was the enlightenment and education of citizens and that the state had the credentials and moral capital to carry it out.

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