

## BORGMANN: THE MAN BEHIND THE LEGEND

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Dmitri Borgmann has been called the Father of Logology--a term he coined to describe recreational wordplay as distinguished from academic linguistics. His two books, Language on Vacation (1965) and Beyond Language (1967), have become classics in the field. In 1968 Greenwood Press selected him as **Word Ways'** first editor.

Despite this prominence in the field of logology, the man behind the legend has remained tantalizingly obscure. So far as the present editor knows, only one of his logological correspondents ever met Dmitri in person. Several times during the period 1979-81 we had occasion to be in the State of Washington, but Dmitri always discouraged us from paying him a visit.

In the summer of 1988 we were once again in the area, and this time we contacted Dmitri's widow, Iris, and offered to visit and, perhaps, make some evaluation of Borgmann's books and papers. She readily accepted our offer and so, on a scorching hot day, we drove the 400 miles east from the coast, arriving in Dayton about 6 P.M.

Dayton is a town whose central business district, a few blocks long, is totally without charm. Although not far from the university town of Walla Walla, and on the edge of the prosperous truck farming area of central Washington, Dayton shows evidence of being in a severe economic slump. We were told that unemployment there runs about 20 per cent. When asked why Dmitri chose such an unprepossessing town to move to, Iris replied that after many years in Oak Park (at the edge of Chicago), Dmitri wanted to live someplace where he would never have to see another Black again.

Dayton has a pleasant residential area with late 19th-century Victorian homes on tree-lined streets. In one of these, on a corner lot, Dmitri lived with his wife and son, Keith.

Dmitri valued his privacy highly, to the point of eccentricity. Most of the windows in his house were boarded up, or the shades pulled down, so that no one could look in. He refused to have the grass on his property mowed because this, too, increased his seclusion. Even the glass in the doors between rooms within the house was covered up with boards or heavy drapes, so that one could not see from room to room. He carried on a long feud, threatening legal action, with a nearby church because the pealing of its bells intruded on his privacy.

He would not permit mirrors in his home, and avoided looking

in them on the rare occasions when he was outside the house because he feared the persona that he believed was staring back at him from the other side of the glass. Once, a few months before his death, he inadvertently caught sight of himself in a mirror and stood transfixed. "I'm old," he moaned, "I'm incredibly old." Yet he was only 57 at the time.

Borgmann's desire for privacy extended to his work in progress. When Keith would ask him what he was working on, Dmitri would reply, "Go away; don't bother me. You wouldn't understand." After he had exhausted the supply of typists in Dayton--twenty-seven in succession were either fired or quit--Iris did his typing for him. But it was clear that she neither understood or knew very much about his work.

The editor's seventeen-year correspondence with Dmitri revealed a man of rather prickly personality. This was confirmed by Iris. Dmitri had a deep distrust of the Postal Service and always sent his **Word Ways** articles by registered mail. Since we were rarely at home when the postman came, this meant that the next day I had to stop at the Post Office and sign for the mail. When I told Iris that this had annoyed me, she remarked that if Dmitri had known this he would have made sure to register all his letters to us.

In his correspondence with us, Dmitri always came across as a man of colossal ego, yet Iris described him as having an enormous inferiority complex. He refused to learn to drive a car because he believed himself incapable of co-ordinating hands and feet. Despite his training as an actuary, he was "terrified" of numbers, and found the editor's mathematically-oriented word studies incomprehensible. He would make no attempt to understand them.

Iris reported that Dmitri's IQ was approximately 155, the lowest of any of the three men she was dating at the time she married him. However, he was wildly jealous of anyone whose IQ he judged to be even one point higher than his.

When a dispute with Greenwood Press caused Dmitri to resign his editorship in a huff at the end of 1968, he refused ever to speak again with Howard Bergerson, his successor as editor, claiming that Howard had traitorously "betrayed" him. (Apparently he had hoped that Greenwood Press would find him indispensable and accede to his monetary demands.) Further contact between Dmitri and Howard was accomplished through Iris acting as an intermediary.

Iris believes that some of Dmitri's paranoia may be traceable to his experiences as a boy. Born in Hitler's Germany to a Lutheran father and a Jewish mother, he was raised as a nominal Christian, and came with his parents to this country in the mid-1930s. Furthermore, his mother was severely crippled and subjected to cruel ridicule by neighborhood children. Some of this ridicule may well have spilled over onto Dmitri.

We have heard from Howard Bergerson (who learned it from Iris)

that Dmitri had been in poor health for a number of years before his death. He had a heart condition (a form of angina pectoris) and had become quite obese as well. Yet he refused to follow his doctor's instructions or to take his prescribed medication. His great passion was candy bars, and he would sneak down to the corner store to buy them. After his death, Iris and Keith found boxes of empty candy wrappers secreted in his room. He hoarded other things as well; cases of soda, job lots of hair shampoo, etc., were stuffed into closets and corners.

Toward the end of his life, Dmitri became even more reclusive. He didn't come downstairs from his room very often and rarely shaved or dressed. He ate and slept when it suited him on no particular schedule, and worked feverishly and secretly on his logological research. Once in a while his personal schedule would coincide with that of the rest of the family, but Keith reported that often weeks went by when he never saw his father.

Dmitri opposed any attempt to straighten out his clutter, and even the routine noises of housekeeping, such as that of a vacuum cleaner, were an extreme aggravation. Consequently, Iris eventually abandoned any attempt at housecleaning or maintenance. She intimated that his embarrassment over the deteriorated and cluttered condition of his house was the real reason Dmitri had refused to let us visit.

In the two-and-one-half years since Dmitri's death, little has changed in the Borgmann household. A number of windows remain boarded up, although the grass has been cut. Initially, his books and papers were all crammed higgledy-piggledy into cardboard cartons and piled high in a closet. Only recently has Keith begun to try and bring some order out of this chaos. We were able to examine two of his boxes of papers, and found them to be a complete jumble of papers, file cards, and letters (a few, arriving shortly after his death, never opened). Neither Keith nor Iris were able to shed any light on the work represented here, and it would have required days to sort through all this material and make sense out of it. We did find five articles which Dmitri had apparently prepared for **Word Ways**, and will be publishing them.

We saw between one and two hundred of his collection of books, mostly specialized dictionaries that Keith had shelved in the living room. We were curious about the apparently-random patches of duct tape placed on some of the spines and inside title pages of a few historical reference works. It developed that Dmitri had shamelessly stolen these books from public or university libraries. The duct tape was applied to conceal the library markings.

What effect did life with Dmitri have upon his family? It was clear that both Iris and Keith were enormously impressed with his genius, as well as by his selection for "Who's Who in America" at the time of his death. The black box containing his ashes occupies a prominent place in their living room. Yet, there were intimations of physical as well as mental abuse, and Keith confessed that he was not altogether sorry when his father died.

In his later years, Dmitri failed to make very much money from his logological activities, and medical expenses were undoubtedly high; the family lives in straitened circumstances today. Some of his father's personality may have rubbed off on Keith: he believes that there is a conspiracy to prevent him from securing a suitable job in Dayton (at present he tutors students part-time), and he also warned us against eating in one of Dayton's restaurants lest we succumb to food poisoning.

One of Dmitri's more curious undertakings was setting himself up as the chief guru of the Divine Immortality Church. He awarded himself a bogus doctorate in theology, had stationery printed up, and advertised in various magazines offering theological degrees and a cabalistic drawing for a substantial price.

We had always assumed that his was some sort of tax dodge as well as an attempt to bilk a gullible public. "Not so," said Keith, who believes that his father was sincerely trying to come to terms with life's great questions. At the same time, Dmitri encouraged such magazines as *Hustler* to omit the first T in the name of the church in their ads. Keith estimates that during the existence of the church, perhaps one hundred people signed on.

Time allowed us to spend only one evening in Dayton, but our visit left us with some memorable impressions. The man behind the legend emerged as an enigmatic and profoundly disturbed personality. I suspect that it's just as well that we never actually met him. The content of his unpublished work remains a mystery. Perhaps someday, someone will have the time to unravel it.

#### SHAKESPEARIAN ONOMASTICS

*Word Ways* author Leonard R. N. Ashley is the editor of a special Shakespeare issue of the onomastic journal *Names* (Vol. 35, Nos. 3-4, September-December 1987). It has important articles, bibliographies, etc., on Shakespearian onomastics, and is available from Prof. Wayne H. Finke, 7 East 14th St., New York NY 10003 for \$10 postpaid (United States) or \$15 postpaid (overseas).