MY ROAD TO LINGUISTICS

Alexander Schenker

At what point in life does one's intellectual trajectory begin, given that intellectual trajectories are coextensive and practically synonymous with life itself? I dare say I am not alone in admitting that I don't know the answer to this question. But begin somewhere one must and I have assumed that the moment of my intellectual "lift-off" occurred when I was about fourteen, that is, more or less at the cusp of puberty. That, at any rate, was the age when I began to think of my own life as separate from the lives of my parents. But to this day I am not sure what it was that launched me on that independent journey. Was it the hormonal revolution or, more plausibly, a contemporaneous event whose potential for mischief I could sense but whose catastrophic dimensions I couldn't possibly imagine? Let me expand on this quandary.

I was born in 1924 in Cracow, Poland, to a secular Polish-Jewish family. These three factors, which are not unlike the parameters one finds on a bottle of wine – vintage, vineyard and grape variety – should allow you to situate my early doings in space and time: Eastern Europe soon after the end of World War I or, as it was called in those days, the Great War, because it was supposed to be "the war to end all wars." A vain expectation, as it became clear in a matter of less than one generation – on Friday, September 1, 1939, to be precise – when German bombs began dropping on Cracow and other Polish cities. It was a beautiful day, as was all of September that year, and looking at the cloudless sky all I could think of in my juvenile insouciance was that the last weekend of my summer vacation would be lost.

A couple of days later France and Great Britain joined in the fray, claiming that it would not be a protracted affair. Buoyed by this reassurance, my parents decided to wait it out in the presumed safety of Lwów, a city in eastern Poland, which was my mother's birthplace and where we had family.

Let me add that geographic details in Eastern Europe must not be taken as writ in stone. When I was born, Cracow was in south-western Poland, but today it is in south-central Poland and as for Lwów, it bore the name of Lvov under the Russians, then Lemberg under the Austrians, and eventually moved out of Poland altogether under the Ukrainian name of Lviv. Even the English spelling of Cracow is given to variations. Not so long ago its standard spelling was with two "c's," as in "The Trumpeter of Cracow," a historical novel by Eric Kelly which topped the best seller list for children's books in 1929, but today it is usually spelled the Polish way, with two "k's".

Our hope that we would soon return to Cracow was dashed when two weeks after we had left it, Poland was split in half, the western part with Cracow in it taken over by Germany and the eastern part with Lwów – by the Soviet Union. This arrangement, known by the names of its two drafters as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was

played out to the accompaniment of loud assurances by the two new neighbors that their alliance was unshakable. Which, as you know, did not prevent Russia and Germany from starting to pound each other in less than two years. Three facts, however, admittedly of unequal importance, remain uncontested: World War II had begun, Poland's existence as a fully independent state was suspended – for half a century, as it turned out – and my secondary education came to a premature but permanent end.

My father, who was a judge in prewar Poland, faced imminent arrest by Soviet authorities, but managed to get away to Lithuania, which at that time enjoyed a brief period of freedom. He made it eventually to this country arriving in California a few months before Pearl Harbor. My mother and I were less fortunate. During the tough winter of 1940, as we trudged through deep snow on the Lithuanian border in order to join my father, we were arrested by Soviet border guards and eventually deported to a labor colony in northern Russia. With the war raging on, it wasn't till six years later that we were able to reunite as a family in New York.

My fascination with languages in all their variety and complexity goes back to my childhood. I spoke Polish at home and in school, but the hundred and twenty-three years of the Austrian rule over Cracow and the rest of Galicia ended a mere six years before I was born and its memory was still sufficiently vivid to make the presence of German around me seem natural. Of Cracow's population of a quarter million, 35% were Jews, many of them of Hassidic persuasion. In that milieu the language most commonly heard was Yiddish, and I couldn't but be struck by its similarity to German. German was also the most frequently elected foreign language in Cracow's schools. French, which was my option, trailed behind but not by much for at that time it was still considered the preferred idiom of international communication. Latin was obligatory; English was practically unknown; and as for Russian, it was present in Cracow as a distant echo of events in the history of Poland, but no more than that, even though the western outposts of the tsarist empire came very close to Cracow's city limits. Thus, when I found myself in Russia during the war, I had to learn Russian from scratch.

Of my six years there, the first two I spent in the forests of Russia's North working as a lumberjack. It was a skill I had to master, but eventually I became proficient in it and even came to appreciate the kind of life it offered – the excitement of adventure (I was fifteen going on sixteen at the time), the challenge of making do with manual tools only, the lure of wilderness around me, but above all, the camaraderie of adult men working by my side and the sense of being treated as their equal.

German attack on Russia in June 1941 changed the political atmosphere of the land in favor of the western allies and brought release to many thousands of Polish detainees including my mother and me. After some roaming about, we settled in Tajikistan, one of the five Soviet republics in Central Asia. Most of the time we lived in the capital called Stalinabad, meaning the city of Stalin. Today Tajikistan gets mentioned now and then in western press because it shares a long border with Afghani-

stan, which has preoccupied our political thinking of late for reasons which are not always easy to grasp. But when I was there, Tajikistan was a land almost beyond the rainbow, with large cotton plantations in the valleys and flocks of fat sheep grazing on the upland meadows within sight of the mountain chains of Pamir. It was in that unlikely setting that I resumed my formal education by enrolling in the English department of the Stalinabad State Pedagogical Institute (which I'll call SSPI for short) in a five-year program leading to the equivalent of an MA. But I never made it to graduation because of the ten required terms I had time to do only five before leaving the Soviet Union for the United States.

How it happened that in 1942 my mother and I found ourselves in Stalinabad and that, a year later I, who had no high school diploma and whose knowledge of Russian was still rudimentary, got admitted to a university-level program is too long a story to be told on this occasion. Let me just say that if one's intellectual trajectory is measured by the number of one's academic testimonials (or diplomas, as the Wizard of Oz calls them), my record must have looked very thin to the Russian academics who judged my fitness for higher education. Even today the only diploma in my academic basket is a Yale PhD in general linguistics which I obtained at age twenty-nine. The sheer improbability of my admission to SSPI on the strength of one interview and several largely pro-forma exams deserves a full account. But it'll have to wait for the time when I gather enough oomph to write my memoirs. For now let me limit myself to a description of my program in the English department at SSPI which was, in fact, a prelude to my five years in Yale's Department of Linguistics.

But first, a few words about Stalinabad as I knew it during the four years of my residence there. It was an attractive city resembling some southern Balkan towns that I know, like Skopje in Macedonia or Belgrade in Serbia. When I was there it had about 120,000 inhabitants, but just fifteen years earlier it was a village of 6,000. Its original name was Dushanbe meaning Monday, which was the market day for the area growers. (It reverted to that name in the sixties, after Stalin was stripped of his aura of immortality.) It had a center of massive official buildings surrounded by a maze of small residential dwellings whose building material ranged from locally quarried stone to the much more common bricks made of a mixture of mud and camel dung dried in the sun. It had a concert hall, an opera, a permanent Russian theater, and a very good light drama theater whose permanent home was in Leningrad. One memorable performance that I saw in it was a comedy whose title was "On the Way to New York," but it was only after I had come to this country that I realized that it was a remake of the 1934 American movie called "It Happened One Night" with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert.

Due to the influx of professionals, evacuated from major Russian cities, enveloped or threatened by the war, Stalinabad dropped much of its provincial character and the English department at SSPI was a good example of this change. It was run by a group of Leningrad professors, not only superbly qualified as pedagogues, but also

exceedingly friendly and accessible to our small group of first-year students. There were eleven of us – nine women and two men. This disproportion was due to the draft of men into the army and strategic industries.

All my courses were obligatory. They included a large number of English courses, not just in language and literature but also in British and American history and geography. Courses in Marxism and Leninism and in the history of the Soviet Communist Party were de rigueur. In addition, I had to take several linguistic courses and two years of Tajik, a language very close to Farsi which is spoken in today's Iran. In a city, which was largely Russified, including Tajik in all programs of study was a PC gesture to the indigenous population, and my Russian classmates, who were there as evacuees from the western parts of the country, viewed it as a bothersome imposition. I, however, approached it with interest and in a fairly short time was able to bargain in Tajik in the bazaar and make out the headlines in the local daily called "Tojikistoni Surkh" (meaning Red Tajikistan).

As a curiosity, let me mention that one of my English courses was called "Military Translation." It was taught by a retired colonel of the Red Army and its subject was how to interrogate English-speaking POWs. As a result, I knew how to ask "What's the name and rank of your commanding officer?" and "How many artillery pieces have you got?" almost before I learned how to say "Nice to meet you." That was, mind you, in 1944/45 when the Soviet Union was a wartime ally of the US and Great Britain.

General linguistics turned out to be the least satisfactory aspect of my program, the reason being that in the first half of the past century, theoretical linguistics in the Soviet Union was dominated by the so-called "New Theory of Language" devised by one Nicholas Marr, an Orientalist, born in the republic of Georgia in the Caucasus. Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, where the boy grew up, and still is, a multilingual and multicultural city and the boy was raised knowing Georgian of his mother and English of his Scottish father, as well as Armenian, Turkish, Farsi, and Russian of his playmates. It's not surprising, therefore, that in his later studies he specialized in the languages and nationalities of the Caucasus, a field in which he gained great distinction crowned by his election to the Imperial Russian Academy of Sciences and nomination as chair of the Department of Oriental Languages at the University of St. Petersburg.

After the October Revolution Marr became a convinced communist and, answering Stalin's call to politicize all scholarship, he took upon himself the task of fitting language into the Marxist scheme of history. It was an attempt doomed from its inception and it did eventually collapse under the blows of Marr's traditionally minded colleagues aided unexpectedly by none other than Stalin himself. Alas, Marr's fall from grace occurred too late for me to benefit from it. While I was a student at SSPI his ideas were still considered the only truly progressive theory of language development. They were enforced in teaching and research throughout the Soviet Union and the scholars who refused to adopt and promote it were not merely disciplined and dismissed from their posts, but also subjected to the notorious Stalinist methods of persuasion.

The principal tenet of Marxism is that all social change is due to the interplay of two forces: the economic base which encompasses all aspects of production of material goods, and the superstructure which is derived from the base and which includes such products of mental activity as law, politics, the sciences, the arts, etc. The base, according to this scheme, evolves gradually and evenly, while the superstructure tends to lag behind it and, in order to catch up resorts to qualitative leaps known as revolutions.

Marr equated language with other products of the human mind and concluded that it was a phenomenon of the superstructure. A necessary corollary of this view was that language should change in a violent, revolutionary way. This assumption, however, flew in the face of the observable facts of linguistic change as described in many meticulous studies of the Indo-European languages produced in nineteenth-century Europe, mostly in Germany.

In response, Marr who was not one to give up easily came up with the idea that all the languages of the world go back to one mega-family which he called Noëtic (from the name of Noah, our Biblical forefather). He included in it the Semitic and Japhetic languages, the latter was a branch of his invention incorporating all the Eurasian and African languages and even the native languages of America. The differences among the various language families were attributed to the changes in the economic base; for example, the Indo-European languages and Chinese were deemed to be related, the differences between them attributed to the differences in the levels of economic development of their societies. Giving free play to his imagination, Marr pushed this monogenetic theory beyond all limits of verisimilitude by claiming that the vocabulary of all the languages of the world could be derived from four primitive monosyllables which he transcribed as *SAL*, *BER*, *YON* and *ROSH*. Don't ask me how he came by this epiphany.

In considering the reclame surrounding Marr's "New Theory of Language," one has to keep in mind two circumstances. One was plain mercenary interest. Not only did Marr's outlandish ideas appeal to the imagination of the party ideologues, but they also caused a rapid turnover in the academic ranks, with the traditionally minded scholars being removed from their positions which were then filled by the largely opportunistic followers of Marr. This situation lasted till 1950 when Stalin himself, prompted by several recognized scholars whose judgment he trusted, ruled that language was, so to say, "unaffiliated," that is, that it didn't belong either to the base or superstructure which, from a strictly Marxist point of view, should have meant that language didn't exist at all.

Secondly, Marr's innovations were just one instance in Stalin's program to revolutionize Soviet science by making it fall in step with the goals of the October Revolution. Traditional values had to be discarded because they bore the imprint of the old regime and coming to replace them were the so-called "progressive" theories, compatible presumably with the political climate of socialism. All segments of society

were affected by this flight from tradition and, all too frequently, reason. In addition to linguistics it involved philosophy (Alexandrov's "History of Western Philosophy); genetics (agronomist Lysenko who insisted that acquired characteristics can be inherited); agriculture (forced collectivization which resulted in disastrous famines); music (infamous attack on Shostakovich by Zhdanov who was Stalin's guardian of ideological purity); economics (very costly and inefficient central planning and command economy); literature (socialist realism with its programmatically optimistic worldview); and even the lay of the land (a hallucinatory project to reverse the natural flow of some northbound Siberian rivers in order to irrigate the deserts of Central Asia and refill the Caspian and Aral seas).

At SSPI I had the good fortune that of the four linguistic or quasi-linguistic courses I took, only one was tainted by Marr's views. The other three were taught by bona fide scholars who paid lip service to Marr, but did so with a knowing smile. My favorite was Israel Vol'fson who started his teaching career before the war at the University of Kaunas in Lithuania and spent a year on a fellowship at the University of London studying English philology. He taught the history of the English language and we read with him medieval texts including the epic poem Beowulf.

As the date of my departure for America was approaching, Professor Vol'fson, took me aside and told me to think seriously of going into linguistics: "When you are in America," he said, "do two things: subscribe to The New Yorker and study with Leonard Bloomfield." Subscribing to The New Yorker was no problem and I have ever since been its faithful reader, as those of you who pass by my office door may verify, but finding Bloomfield *WAS* a problem because I didn't know anybody in the academic circles who could help. I asked about him at NYU, where I tried to resume my studies, but the dean of admissions spread his arms and said that no one by that name was on its faculty. It was late fall of 1947 and in order not to waste the year, I packed up my belongings and went to France where I enrolled in a linguistics program in the Institut de Phonétique at the Sorbonne.

When a year later I came back to New York, I did manage to locate Professor Bloomfield. It turned out that he was a Sterling professor and chair of the Department of Linguistics at Yale. That was in mid-August 1948 and I immediately wrote to him recounting the unusual way in which I became aware of his position in American linguistics and asking for an appointment. Weeks passed and there was no reply. Finally, toward the end of September, I got on the train to New Haven and somehow found my way to HGS where the Department of Linguistics had its office. There I learned that Bloomfield was gravely ill and was not expected to return to teaching and administration. Franklin Edgerton, a professor of Sanskrit, who took over Bloomfield's administrative duties, examined my transcripts from SSPI and the Sorbonne and to my great surprise concluded that my educational experience had put me beyond Yale's undergraduate programs and that he would support my application to the Graduate School.

With Edgerton as my reference, I applied to the Ph.D. program in the Department of Linguistics and was soon notified of my admission. Five years later I received my doctorate and soon thereafter my appointment as instructor in the Russian language program. It led eventually to a ladder appointment in the Slavic Department making me the only tenured professor at Yale, perhaps in all of America, without a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree. I never got a chance to meet Bloomfield who died in 1949, six months after I became a graduate student in the department which he had fashioned and which became known as the Yale school of linguistics.

American linguistics gravitated at that time toward two related goals. One was the preparation of grammars and textbooks of unknown or little known languages. The other was the elevation of linguistics to the status of an exact science, on a par with such modern disciplines as molecular biology or neuroscience. Both of these goals demanded precision and uniformity in the discovery procedures, that is, in the collection of data which were to form the corpus of the analysis. They were to be elicited from linguistically naïve native speakers who were called "informants" and they had to be synchronic, that is, they had to come from the same time period. Written tradition, if it existed, was to be relegated to philology. The linguist was to show utmost objectivity in studying that corpus. In particular, he was to guard against the influence of existing grammars of other languages, such as the traditional treatments of the classical languages. Most importantly, he was to shun all the mentalist notions, that is, notions whose validity cannot be verified by methods analogical to those used in the exact sciences. As it happens, such mentalist notions as consciousness, perception, emotion, intuition, and the like, do not have any application in descriptions of language structures, but the mentalist concept of meaning is of fundamental importance because linguistic signs are a conflation of form and meaning.

Such purely descriptive procedures were called forth by the unprecedented demand for descriptions of unknown or little known languages, some of which had not yet been reduced to writing, let alone had their native grammatical traditions. Many of them came into view during the American involvement in World War II, chiefly in Southeast Asia, and through missionary activity among the indigenous peoples of America. In dealing with such languages this methodology was useful, but when it was applied to languages with a rich and learned grammatical tradition, it often amounted to the breaking down of open doors and at times to the subversion of well-founded classifications.

Bloomfield, whose behaviorist and descriptivist interests made him a strong believer in a strictly scientific, mechanistic approach to language phenomena, understood that meaning was an essential component of linguistic analysis and never openly denied its role. It was, however, different with his disciples who became interpreters of his views. They had no qualms about banning meaning from linguistic analysis and putting in its place the sum total of all the environments or contexts in which a given element of language occurs.

This approach, called "distributionalism," was in my view a needlessly laborious way of doing linguistic analysis. In general, the emphasis on making linguistics come as close to the exact sciences as possible and the doctrinaire way in which this goal was proffered made me think of the theories of Marr as they were taught at SSPI. The chief difference, it seemed to me, was that while at SSPI the issue was how to make linguistics politically acceptable, at Yale it was how to make it scientifically respectable.

It was at that point that I realized that it is one thing to work with a theory in the making, a theory which is still open to refinements and change, and quite another to deal with a method frozen into a dogma. Bloomfield's major work, Language, seemed to me to be a very sensible introduction to linguistics in its refusal to accept traditional formulations whose validity could neither be confirmed nor disproved and in its recognition that in the linguistic sign consisting of form and meaning, precedence belonged to form. But I was put off by the aridity of the quasi-scientific procedures propounded by Bloomfield's disciples who became my teachers. I was bothered by the rules based more on symmetry than on actual linguistic data, by the insistence on a strict separation of different levels of analysis, such as morphology and syntax which in a total view of linguistic structures constantly intrude upon each other, by the consideration given to idiolects, that is, to speech peculiarities of a single individual, an idea which ran counter to the basic function of language, which is that of communication.

I came to grips with these problems while working on my doctoral dissertation which dealt with an aspect of the grammatical structure of Polish and which I wrote under the direction of Bernard Bloch, editor of "Language," the journal of the American Linguistic Society and Yale's chief specialist on linguistic theory. I understood then that, if I wanted to remain faithful to my own beliefs, I'd better part company with Bloomfield's fiery prophets.

I looked briefly into the possibility of working within the mold of transformational grammar, which was just then emerging as a successor to American descriptivism, but found it even less satisfying because in its concern with the so-called deep structure it tended to neglect the organization of surface phenomena which were to me the all-important building blocks of language systems and a basis for typological studies.

All in all, the linguists from whom I learned the most during my graduate training were not exclusively, not even primarily, concerned with the discipline of linguistics, but dealt with particular languages or worked in fields related to linguistics, but not in linguistics proper. I remember with special fondness and gratitude two of them, both refugees from the Nazis: Paul Tedesco, a distinguished Iranianist originally from Vienna who taught me Old Church Slavic and Slavic historical grammar and who trained me in Slavic philology, and Konstantin Reichardt, an excellent Germanist born in St. Petersburg but educated in Berlin, who specialized in Old Norse and Old Icelandic. He taught me Gothic and the foundations of Germanic philology, including runic epigraphy. I cherished also the learning and friendship of Franklin Edgerton,

with whom I took two years of Sanskrit; William S. Cornyn, one of Bloomfield's favorite students, who taught typology and worked on Burmese and Russian, an odd couple to be sure; the philosopher Rulon Wells who taught semantics and the history of linguistics; and the anthropologist Floyd Lounsbury whose interests were as broad as his world view – they included kinship systems, the Iroquoian languages, and the Maya hieroglyphs.

But the linguist who meant the most to me was Roman Jakobson, a Russian polymath, who was equally at home in linguistics and poetics. He taught at that time at Harvard, but I visited him as frequently as his time allowed it. It was these informal sessions and the study of his writings which taught me how to discover self-contained systems in the apparent chaos of surface phenomena, an approach which was characteristic of the so-called Prague School of linguistics of which Jakobson was one of the founding fathers. I will spare you the specifics. Suffice to say that Jakobson taught me how to discover and make use of the flexibility and adaptability of linguistic structures, so unlike the rigidity of Yale's "neo-Bloomfieldianism." Jakobson's linguistics was for me linguistics with a human face, if I may extend the use of a metaphor coined originally to describe the more liberal forms of Soviet socialism. I have remained faithful to its tenets throughout my involvement with Slavic linguistics and consider Roman Jakobson my true master in this field.

Throughout the forty-four years of my career at Yale, I taught various Slavic subjects and served in several capacities in Yale's administrative structures, including sixteen years as chair of the Slavic Department and four years as chair of Russian and East European Studies. After retirement I tried my hand at Russian cultural history, specifically at the history of what is to me the most spectacular equestrian monument of all time, the statue to Peter the Great in St. Petersburg by the eighteenth-century French sculptor Etienne Falconet. The result of this effort, titled The Bronze Horseman, came out in 2003 in Yale Press. Its Russian translation appeared earlier this year.

I'd like to close this presentation with the last quatrain of Goethe's poem titled "Dauer im Wechsel" (Permanence in Change, 1803):

Danke, dass die Gunst der Musen
Unvergängliches verheißt,
Den Gehalt in deinem Busen
Und die Form in deinem Geist.

(Be grateful that the kindly muses
Offer you what is imperishable,
Meaning which resides in your bosom
And form which resides in your mind.)

May it serve as a reminder to those who would bar meaning from linguistic analysis!