

## In Memory of Boris Christa 1925 – 2008

### Tribute<sup>1</sup>

In an autobiographical sketch he wrote earlier this year for the Australian Russian newspaper *Avstraliada*, Boris gave the following insight into how he came to embrace Russian language and literature as his life's work:

When I was a schoolboy it was always my intention to become a doctor of medicine. I dreamt that I would make great discoveries to help mankind in the fight against disease. These childhood fantasies came to an end with the outbreak of the War in 1939. As with many young people of my generation historical events took control. My participation in World War II changed my destiny. When eventually I could return to university studies, instead of taking medicine, I ended up graduating in Slavonic Studies and specializing in Russian. It was an outcome that I never imagined in my wildest youthful dreams.

Boris was born in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, on the 21<sup>st</sup> February 1925. He was the last of six children. His father was Bulgarian, and his mother, Nora, an English woman born in London. His maternal Grandfather, Max, worked for many years as a Professor of English in Stuttgart, Germany, and Boris' parents met there when they were both students. When Boris' father proposed marriage, Nora's parents were most reluctant for their daughter to go off and live in an unfamiliar Balkan country, and the Bulgarian grandfather, the Surgeon General of the Bulgarian Army, had to come dressed in his impressive uniform to ask for Nora's hand in marriage on behalf of his son.

When Boris was seven months old, his mother left Bulgaria with the youngest two children. Nora's mother was ill and needed her daughter back home in Stuttgart. The family never returned to Bulgaria. As a result of this move, Boris' upbringing and education came to be very

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Boris Christa's daughters, Natasha Christa and Mara Christa, for allowing me to use extracts from their funeral oration as the basis of the present tribute. I also wish to thank Dr John McNair, Head of the Russian Program, University of Queensland, for his assistance in the preparation of this obituary.

cosmopolitan. He went to a regular German school, while his language at home was English. His mother, a trained teacher, held the position of Secretary at the British Consulate in Stuttgart. However, even for English nationals, life in pre-war Germany under the Nazi regime had its problems. Nora saw clearly the possibility of impending war, and so in 1937, she took the 12 year old Boris and his 14 year old sister, Elka, to England to live permanently. Boris finished his education at Wynstones, a Rudolf Steiner school, which was a boarding school in the beautiful Cotswold Hills in South West England. It was an idyllic time for him, especially before the war started.

In April 1944, on leaving school, with World War II coming to its climax, Boris was called up to the British Army, and began military training. When he was selected for training as an officer, Boris expected to be sent to the front in France. He was very lucky. He graduated as a young Lieutenant on the day the war in Europe ended. The fighting was now over, and he was given command of a platoon of soldiers in a unit whose task was to guard a huge camp of German prisoners of war in England. Life here was not as exciting as he had expected but it nevertheless led to a radical change in his direction. In his autobiographical sketch, Boris describes how destiny took its shape:

“After some months my Commanding Officer called me into his office and in typical English fashion said, ‘Oh, Boris, old boy, I know you are interested in languages and that sort of thing. We have had a signal from the War Office. It seems they don’t have enough people, who can talk to our Soviet allies. They are looking for volunteers to go on a year’s course to learn Russian. I thought you might like to put in for it.’ The prospect of learning Russian presented itself completely out of the blue. In spite of my Slavonic name and the Russophile traditions of my family, I had grown up in the West, and could not speak a single word of Bulgarian or Russian. As so often in the army nothing happened for several long weeks. Then my Commanding Officer called me in again and said: ‘Oh, Boris, old boy, about that Russian course you applied for, I am sorry, it turns out the signals people got it all wrong. There isn’t a Russian course at all; it is a Rations course, about food supplies and that sort of thing. Do you still want to put in for it?’ Of course I declined emphatically and, frankly, I was quite disappointed. Another week or so passed, when I was told it was a Russian course after all. And a week later I was on the No.1 Inter Services Russian Course, learning Russian ‘24-hrs a day, and seven days a week!’ ”

After completing the Army Russian course, in August 1946, Boris was sent to Berlin to work as a liaison officer and interpreter with the Russian Allies. Speaking German as well as Russian was a great asset in occupied Germany, so Boris was transferred from Berlin to the Headquarters of the British Army of the Rhine, where as a British Officer he was attached to

the Soviet Military mission in nearby Bad Salzuflen and worked under General Konovalov. The exchange of these military missions had been agreed by Stalin and Churchill at their meeting in Yalta. Boris became part of the interface between the British Armies and the Russian Armies.

Life in Germany as an officer of the Allied Forces was most varied and pleasant. The Allied Forces had at their disposal tennis courts, swimming pools, restaurants with dance-bands, and a stable of beautiful horses, which had been 'liberated' from the German cavalry unit. Boris had learnt to ride as a boy, and much of his free time in Germany was spent on horseback. The British Army maintained ski resorts at Bad Harzburg and at Ehrwald, and Boris made good use of these. Here his life-long love of skiing was born.

Boris left the army with the rank of Major and returned to Cambridge University to complete his degree in Slavonic Studies in 1949. His plan now was to continue postgraduate studies and become an academic. He came to Australia a few months after graduating in 1950, with his first wife Ruth, to a lectureship in Russian at the University of Melbourne. This is where his children, Nicholas and Angela, were born. In 1964 he moved to an Associate Professorship at Auckland University, and in 1966 came to Brisbane, newly married to Tanya Wuttke, a young German academic, whose family had emigrated to Australia after World War II, to take up a prominent position in the German ex-patriot community in Melbourne. Boris was made inaugural Professor and Head of the Department of Russian at the University of Queensland. In Brisbane, his daughters Mara and Natasha were born.

Boris retired as Professor Emeritus in 1990. He was made Honorary Research Consultant, supervising theses, continuing his research and publications, presenting papers at conferences. In 1998, determined to support the studies of Russian in Queensland, he founded the Pushkin Foundation of Queensland. He was on the board of Governors of Cromwell College (University of Queensland) and was made Life Governor of Cromwell College in 2005.

On diagnosis at age 71 with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukaemia, and given a median life expectancy of 3-5 years, he embarked on an energetic program of both conventional and non-conventional treatments to contain the disease. He lived another 12 years and died at his home in Brisbane on the 19<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

When Boris would give talks at family events, he would always speak about his highs and lows. The major low in his life was the loss of his only son, Nicholas, in 1979. Nicholas, at the time, had completed his law

degree and had been admitted to the Bar. His highs were the wonderful marriage to Tanya, and raising his two daughters, both of whom became doctors, in a tight and warm family unit. Boris delighted in his grandchildren, Nicholas, Emma and Matthew, who were for him the answer to the big question of 'the meaning of life.'

Boris Christa will be remembered by Australian Slavists for his pioneering role in the establishment of the Australian and New Zealand Slavists Association, which he served as founding member and President as well as its representative on the International Committee of Slavists. Boris will be remembered by the scholarly community of Slavists worldwide for his contribution to the study of the life and works of F M Dostoevsky, as well as for his leadership role in the International Dostoevsky Society.

Boris will also be remembered for his cultural ambassadorship in the Australian Russian community, particularly through his long and fruitful relationship with the Brisbane Russian community, and his success, on their behalf, in persuading a reluctant Queensland University to provide a home for the bronze statue - a millennium memorial to St Vladimir. His many students will remember him for his writings on the Russian diaspora in Australia, the study cruises on Soviet vessels he organized to create an otherwise unavailable opportunity for them to practice their language skills, and the Russian Easter parties held for so many years at the Christa's family home.

Although, at the time, Boris was far from ready to retire, in many ways Boris was fortunate to retire when he did. The Australian university of the 1990s, with its bottom lines, restructuring and rationalization, he found uncongenial enough; the Australian university of the 2000s resembled even less the kind of institution he thought it should be. Boris did however enjoy a long and productive retirement. As an Honorary Research Consultant in the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies he continued to publish regularly and to attend international conferences until 2007. He and Tanya were able to travel in Russia much more widely than had been possible in the past; and he found a new outlet for his talents and energies as founder and more recently patron of the *Pushkin Foundation*, a community organization dedicated to advancing the cause of Russian language and culture in Queensland.

Vale Boris Christa! Vechnaia pamiat'!

*Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover*

Monash University, Australia