

Foreword

James Lloydovich Patterson, born in Moscow on July 17, 1933, has enjoyed a truly charmed life. He was the first son of Vera Aralova, a Russian painter, graphic artist, and fashion designer, and her husband, Lloyd Patterson, who had arrived in Russia the year before James's birth as part of a group of young, adventurous black Americans recruited for a soon-to-be aborted Soviet-propaganda film project. In 1936, James achieved instant national fame as a baby actor in a different film, *Tsirk* [*Circus*]. The Russian public's adoration for "Baby James" paralleled that of American audiences' love for Shirley Temple, his contemporary in the United States. In fact, his national audience was even larger than Temple's and it is not much of an exaggeration to say that everyone in the Soviet Union watched the same movies.

In that era, crowds feted James Patterson as the marshal of parades. He remained a privileged celebrity for much of his life. The magnitude of his success as a child star in just that one movie discouraged him from accepting later film roles. During World War II, as a result of the Soviet government's massive evacuation of European Russia in the face of the 1941 German invasion, he went to primary school in Sverdlovsk, in the Ural Mountains. After the war, James attended naval schools, was eventually commissioned as an officer, and pursued a naval career for several years before resigning to become a full-time poet in the 1960s. In the mid-1950s,

he had already begun publishing poems in several of the top literary journals (*Moskva, Ogonyok, Voin, Sovetskii Ukraine*). He then published a number of books of poetry and graduated from the Moscow Literary Institute in 1964. Some of his pieces dealt with Russia's relationship to Africa and with African-American themes, including the Little Rock school integration struggle. In the 1990s, he and his mother moved to Washington, DC, at his mother's bidding, hoping to find a wider market for her art.

The book James Patterson offers here in its first English translation—*Chronicle of the Left Hand*—is essentially his paternal grandmother Margaret Glascoe's memoir, which has also led a charmed life. Profizdat, the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions publishing house, originally released it in 1937 while Margaret worked briefly as a shock worker in an auto parts factory in Russia; her visit, to be closer to her son, Lloyd, lasted three and a half years. She titled the memoir *Dvoinoe iarmo* [*Double Yoke*], alluding to the double burden of racial and economic oppression her family shared with the majority of black people in the United States under slavery and the similarly repressive Jim Crow system that replaced it. James titled a 1964 Russian edition, published by Molodaia Gvardia under his authorship, *Khronika levoi ruki* [*Chronicle of the Left Hand*]. As will become apparent in reading this work, the symbolism of the left hand reflected more clearly that his grandmother was using the experience of four generations of their family's personal hardships in the United States as an exemplary contrast to the official depiction of life in Soviet Russia.

In her version of the book, Margaret humbly admits that she had never picked up a pen to write before arriving in the Soviet Union; and census records show that growing up in a family of sharecroppers allowed her just a third-grade level of formal education. She asks her readers to accept her stories for their message, as a token of gratitude for Soviet hospitality

affording her better living conditions than the racist regime at home. Other available evidence also affirms that Margaret had scant literacy in English and none at all in Russian. Therefore, certainly either Lloyd, who ended his studies in interior decorating at Hampton Institute for the Soviet adventure, or Soviet editors wrote her manuscript. Nevertheless, this narrative of her family's experience reveals Margaret as a gifted storyteller; and, although evidence shows that she and her ghostwriter—or ghostwriters—embellished some of the book's accounts to make them even stronger contributions to Soviet antiracist propaganda, this fact can't be denied: Racist oppression in the United States was so intense that even an unvarnished, factual narrative about it would have been heady material for Soviet purposes.

So, this manuscript paid dividends for three generations of the Patterson family; and for our time, it is a valuable relic of Soviet culture at the climax of its ideological dream phase that incongruously included one of the worst famines in Russia's long history of famines and Joseph Stalin's nightmarish political purges. Although the Patterson family's considerable body of documents shows little awareness of those events, Margaret's memoir still provides a rare glimpse into that bygone era from the perspective of eyewitness participants who were Afro-American, Afro-Soviet, and fortunate enough to be protected by the government for their contributions to its political agenda. This made it very important that Lloyd's, Margaret's, and James's writings toe the Communist Party line. The content of the book probably helped ensure their safety in a period when even false whispers might lead to government agents paying an unwelcome visit. It was also important that Lloyd be officially called a "propagandist," his professional title while he worked for MOPR [International Organization for Aid to Revolutionary Fighters], an affiliate under the Communist International. The title provides clear evidence of his usefulness to the Communist cause.

A quarter of a century later, Lloyd's son James appropriated his grandmother's book as the main substance of the writing sample he presented to the Union of Soviet Writers to qualify for his membership, which entailed considerable professional and financial advantages. His original contributions to his grandmother's memoir are a poem at the start; brief annotative commentary looking back from the early 1960s interjected at selected points; and a conclusion consisting of impressionistic musings on events of the 1960s related to social justice. The audience for this new edition can know with hindsight that the Soviet experiment in popular democracy it sought to support collapsed from the weight of its internal contradictions; and that the similarly idealistic American experiment it challenged is still in progress but likewise remains endangered by its own internal contradictions.*

Allison Blakely
Professor of European and Comparative History, Emeritus
Boston University

* I am indebted to Romy Taylor for sharing documentary evidence supportive of my account on the Pattersons here from her own research in Russian archives, those of Hampton University, and African-American newspapers. My thanks as well to Rimgaila Salys for additional advice on sources.