IN MEMORIAM
OLIVER H. RADKEY JR.

I was born on July 12, 1909, in Edna, Texas, son of Oliver H. and Sarah Hewlett Radkey, both of Austin, who had moved to south Texas to take advantage of an opening in the medical profession. In the ensuing years they lived at times in Austin, at times in Edna, since my father enjoyed outdoor activity and my mother the activities of the local United Daughters of the Confederacy, of which she was for some years president. I attended public schools in both places and liked neither. My time came when I entered The University of Texas. There I never made less than A. The reward was a scholarship at Harvard in the depths of the Depression.

Before I take up the Harvard experience, let me pay my debt to Texas, from which I carried away a good deal to Harvard. There were the English history courses taught by Dr. Milton Gutsch and his assistant, Mrs. Coral Horton Tullis. There were the German language courses taught by Professor Lee M. Hollander. There were the French classes of the two professors who were named Swanson. And the chemistry courses of the two professors of German backgrounds, Felsing and Lochte. These are memorable classes and fortunate are the students who had them.

The first year at Harvard was academically a success but spiritually a failure. I found the long, cold winter depressing. The Yankees and Irish disliked one another, and I liked neither. I decided to try the West Coast, where the University of California had recently introduced a Russian study program; most unwisely I had not informed the Harvard authorities. I was captivated by California but could not fail to see that the Harvard program was much superior to the one in California. I informed my aunt in Texas, who had advised against my leaving Harvard, that she had been correct, but that I was standing by my decision. By return mail came a message with $500 and instructions to go back to Harvard.

I remember in my sleeping car, from Oakland to Chicago, there were three other people, one a child. And I remember the Continental Divide in Wyoming with a neat little cabin and clean, white stones with the words "Hoover Flat 1932." When I came in the Harvard office, I was asked, "Mr. Radkey, why don't you answer your mail?" It transpired that when my first fellowship had ended, there was no application for a new one, so the Harvard authorities had filled out the papers themselves and sent them to Texas. No answer was received and the fellowship was withdrawn. The matter was never cleared up. I was thrown back on my own resources for that year. They sufficed, with aid from my aunt and uncle.

I should mention my course with Professor Sidney Bradshaw Fay. That was my chief qualification for teaching Central European (German) history. Professor Fay was a splendid teacher and a very kind man personally. He was New England at its best.

For the year 1934-1935 I was given a traveling fellowship. It was conceived in the broad spirit. I was not just to sit in the libraries and gather material. "We know you will do that anyway," they said. "We want you also to get out and see Europe." I entered Europe through southern France and proceeded through Italy to Vienna and Prague, where I was to live until the next summer with a Russian family befriended by Professor Karpovich at Harvard, who was my thesis supervisor. The head of the family was A. F. Iziumov, son of a village priest of
Kostroma Province. His wife was a princess (referring to early Russia, not a grand princess of the Romanov dynasty). It was her mission to help me get the Russian language by the tail, and one of her methods was never to speak a word of English to me (except about a hot cinder in the eye in Italy). It was hard but effective.

The Russian Archives of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs was presided over by a battle-scarred veteran of Czechoslovak politics, Dr. Jan Slávik, who often contrasted the easygoing working habits of Russians with the dedication of the young American scholar, always at the worktable with piles of Russian newspapers from 1917. I do not know his fate, except that under Hitler he suffered house arrest, and, under Joseph Stalin, was put in a concentration camp. May he rest in peace. I owe him much.

The Russian Archives Abroad were closed on weekends and these were turned to account by short trips by rail into the Bohemian and Moravian countryside, generally to some historic site such as a castle, shrine or battlefield, in the company of a professor of history at the University of Prague, Ótakar Odlozilk. He was generous with his time and, of course, knew a vast deal about my secondary field of Central European history. While at Prague, mindful of the Harvard admonition to get out and see Europe, I took several short trips by rail to Vienna (a fine city!), a river trip eastward to Budapest, and a river trip northward to Dresden in Germany.

I had now been a year in Europe. It was time to cease work in the archives in Prague and make the trip to Russia.

I chose to enter by Poland and White Russia. The poverty of Poland and Russia offered a sharp contrast to Central European countries. For example, gaping holes in pavements in risky places like a bridge over the Vistula at Warsaw in Poland, or an open manhole in Smolensk in a city street without any kind of marking to warn vehicles in motion. Moscow was somewhat better but by no means free of vexations for the traveler. I felt I should press on to the Volga, where the peasant revolutionary movement that I was studying had been very strong. And there was a new factor: I had discovered an unexpected affinity for a type of travelers found in Russia in some numbers. These were young British officials from London but of Scottish background, particularly from Edinburgh, either native to there or educated there. But what did they see in me? That was a puzzle to me. I finally decided that they liked me because I spoke both Russian and English, and yet was neither the one nor the other. Our itineraries differed, yet at times they coincided.

Once when we had separated, a disaster nearly ended my life. Below Nizhni Novgorod, the Volga takes up the Kama River, the tributary that drains the western Urals (the side that gets rain). It makes the Volga a big river, something I did not realize, as we had passed it at night. The panorama the next morning at the Samara Bend was quite imposing and I at once wanted to swim. Being free for an hour or so was attractive to the guide, and he assured me Russians were not concerned with bathhouses, so I undressed on the white sand beach and went right in. All was well until I got near the inner rim side, where I was gripped by a powerful current and swept downstream. All I could think of was what my father had said when I was a boy—that if caught in a current, do not fight it but swim at an angle and try to get into more quiet water. I tried it, and what happened? At first nothing, and I despaired of ever having students or of teaching them history, until the dread current slackened and I made progress toward a bay with fishing boats that had a drift rather than a current. I heard a fisherman say, "He can swim." It was well that I could. They would not have lifted a finger to help me. Life is cheap in Russia. I already had learned that. I lay exhausted on the white sand beach, gratified that I would have students and teach them history, but grieved that I could never thank my father, who had died at 51 of Bright's disease, just as I entered The University of Texas. He was a dear father who had had a hard life. I have had a long life, yet grieve for him still (as I do also for my mother, who lived only 53 years).

I continued down the river to Saratov and Tsaritsyn or Stalingrad, where a friendly official said he would tell me something I might otherwise not hear about. He said that in the spring, some hundreds of miles to the west, the mother of God had appeared in the sky over Kiev with no public reference being allowed, and yet it became known over all of eastern Europe. He said she would not have appeared on the Volga, where the population had moved around too much, but in Kiev it was still possible.

My trip on the river was now over. Ahead lay the Military Georgian Highway, leading from Europe to Asia, and from Russia to Georgia and Armenia. The Russian driver had a bottle from which he took an occasional swig. One guess as to what was in the bottle. It was not conducive to my peace of mind, so I sat on the inner side of the truck all night, prepared to jump out if we went over the precipice. But nothing happened and the next afternoon we rode into Tiflis in Georgia. On one side there was a beautiful garden. It was not possible to say
whether the foliage of the plants or the flowers on them contributed more to the beauty. It was a tea plantation, the first I had ever seen. The Georgians and Armenians impressed me more favorably than the Moslems or the Russians themselves (the latter impression I resisted); they drank less, were more orderly, and raised their children better. I regretted having only a few days in the Transcaucasia before leaving by the Black Sea to the Crimea, where I found a medley of ruins including not only medieval ones but also ancient ones. For example the Scythians, the horse peoples of ancient times, of Aryan or Indo-European stock, antedating the Turanian or Turkic peoples of later times. But I had to hasten onward to Kiev, first capital of Russia and occupying a grand location; the mother of God had chosen well the place over which to appear in the spring of 1935. But I had not enough time to do justice to it. In a couple of days I had to leave it and Russia, too.

At the frontier occurred an unpleasant incident. I went up to the locomotive, the cab of which the crew of five had gathered. All five came down to talk to me. But the Polish police came, they ordered the Russians back into the cab, and me back to the waiting room. It made me very angry. We were doing them or Poland no harm.

The next morning we passed through Cracow, the first capital of Poland. Joseph Pilsudski, dictator of Poland, had died and was lying in state in the cathedral. A long line of people was wending its way up the mountainside to view the corpse. It occurred to me I could interrupt my trip, switch to an afternoon train, ascend the mountain, and seek to view the body. I did just that. When I entered the cathedral I went up to a general, explained what I wanted and the need for special consideration; I used the Russian language because I had to. He never said a word; whether because he did not speak Russian, or because he did not want to speak it, I do not know. He took me by the arm, led me to the casket and, to my amazement, inserted me in the line, bowed, and left. For once I had done something right. I looked right down on Pilsudski, at his decorations and his blond, drooping (in Russian "fallen") moustache. Anyhow, I got results. I made the afternoon train, sped away through Slovakia and Moravia, and into a Bohemia in disorder. The Iziumovs met the train because they feared I might ask for directions in German and be assaulted.

Princess Aleksandra Stepanovna Shcherbatova was purely Russian—no German in her—though a Tatar admixture showed in her eyes. She had a heart condition that ended her life not long after I left Europe. Her husband, Aleksander Felaretovich Iziumov, was left alone without anyone to care for him. He lived on for a while, then went into the Capuchin Cellar, our favorite drinking place, had some beer, came out, fell on the street, and died. When the news of all this came to me in the United States, it was like a knife in the heart. It was as though I had lost my parents for the second time. I would be in Europe again, but not in Prague. Too many sad memories.

And now for my return to the United States. The Iziumovs sat in the compartment with me for ten minutes, as is the Russian custom. All three of us were in tears, for we had a presentiment that we would never see each other again. Then they left, and the train sped away to Dresden in Germany. The next stop was in Berlin, where I visited Communists in East Berlin. They were poor, but their quarters were very clean. Then came Magdeburg, Hanover, and Cologne, where I went in the cathedral and heard beautiful music. Then Trier or Trêves on the border, and then to Paris. I found I had downgraded Paris. It was a fine city, clean and resplendent, with rich libraries and service in four languages: French and English, as expected, but also German and Russian, as not expected. I could have worked there, but am still glad I chose Prague, because it was Central Europe I would teach about as well as eastern Europe.

I came home on the Normandie, destined to be destroyed in the war to come. My bride-to-be, Jakoba Balt, awaited me at the wharf in New York. I had met her in Dr. Hollander's German class at The University of Texas. Her parents, both from Holland, had taken up land in Bosnia and chosen to leave after it passed to Yugoslavia. They eventually emigrated to the United States and settled in El Paso, where Jakoba had an uncle in the American army. Dr. Hollander had selected the University of Wisconsin for her work toward the doctorate.

She and I decided on marriage the next year (1936). We went back to our respective universities, met again at Harvard early in 1936, and were married in a civil ceremony by the city clerk of Somerville, Massachusetts. In the summer of 1936, we returned to Texas.

In the face of adversity and with our future clouded over, our only child was born on January 7, 1939, receiving a double name, Edith Ingrid, of which the English component was her father's choice and the Scandinavian her
mother's. We could afford some domestic help, but not a nurse. As my wife still wished to try for the doctorate, which was her right, we had to give up any thought of a second child. Such considerations increased further my resentment of ill-wishers in the department and the University. But I do not wish to leave the impression that I was friendless in the department. I enjoyed excellent relations with Professor Gutsch and his secretary, Mrs. Tullis, with senior Professors Barker and Ramsdell, and with my distant kinsman, Professor Walter Prescott Webb.

I faced a complex situation on my return to Texas. The reigning professor of European history did not want anyone in Russian history because he wanted it for himself, but he already had a full load and did not even read the language. It was a clear case of blocking natural growth. The matter was complicated by the war in Europe. Majority sentiment in the department favored intervention, whereas I was a hard-bitten isolationist, standing with Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, Robert Marion LaFollette of Wisconsin, William Borah of Idaho, and Hiram Johnson of California. On the state scene I was aligned with Governor Coke Stevenson and Governor Ferguson and his wife. I abominated Lyndon Johnson but respected his wife.

My isolationism was strong, but not fanatical. For example, I opposed the German submarine campaign. And I favored stopping that, even at the cost of war. I did not doubt that Hitler later on would encroach on Latin America and must be opposed at any cost. The solution I favored was to kill Hitler, also von Papen, and I greatly regretted it when Count von Stauffenberg tried and failed. So what was left of my isolationism? I was against the sending of a conscript army to Europe. Only that and nothing more. To that I was unalterably opposed and it evoked hostility in the department and University.

So also did my stand on teaching. I felt that in a state university the primary duty of the faculty was instruction of the youth of the state, whereas the prevailing view of the University and department was that it was research and publication of the faculty. In other words, advertisement of the University. Was a compromise possible? And how to prevent it from becoming a rotten compromise? Matters were made much more difficult by the dearth of material on the Russian Revolution at The University of Texas. This precluded all but a minimum of research while teaching at this university.

To carry on serious research, it would be necessary to take leaves of absence from teaching and go to a major repository of materials on the Russian Revolution. There was such a place, thanks to Herbert Hoover's establishment at Stanford University of a repository for materials on food relief during the first world war and on the Russian Revolution in general. If I went there, I could gather material in addition to what I already had from Europe and publish my studies. But how to make up the lost salary? For this it would be necessary to receive grants. Would they be forthcoming? It could be tried and a modus vivendi established.

So we purchased in the Santa Clara Valley a small house with a yard and convenient access to the Hoover Library. It is now a part of Silicon Valley. Needless to say, we did not lose on this investment. The Stanford campus itself was a game refuge, and you could have a colorful bird jump up in front of you and take off when you were walking to the library or back from it.

A typical week in California would find me five days hard at work in the library, one day in the little house and yard in the Santa Clara Valley, and one day out in California, in some wild and beautiful place, beset only by animals and American children. Nothing like a great redwood forest to cut American children down to size and render them less raucous, more tractable, and even dear. Often these children were from broken homes in a state that had many broken homes. Whenever they asked permission to walk with me, I always granted it, even when I would have preferred to be alone. In short, I found compensation in California for the teaching time I had to give up in Texas.

That I could do so well was due in large measure to the favor shown me by the Hoover Institution and its general excellence. It was so well run, so rich in materials, and so well disposed toward me that I could scarcely fail. The first grant to replace the salary lost at Texas was from the Hoover Institution itself. After that it gave aid from time to time and furnished facilities for work. The general atmosphere could not have been more conducive to success. To Directors Harold Fisher and Glen Campbell and Assistant Director Witold Sworakowski I owe many favors, and out in the country generally I received substantial assistance from Professor Geriald T. Robinson of Columbia, Oscar Handlin of Harvard, and, of course, my thesis supervisor at Harvard, Professor Michael Karpovich.
At Texas the two most hostile professors had died and things improved. Harvard found me a new job, at the University of Cincinnati, and I decided to give it a try. I took leave and went there with my wife for an academic year. It was satisfactory and I could have stayed there, but Harry Ransom and Deans Parlin and Whaley made it known that they would override Bonar and other enemies and make me a professor whenever Harvard would publish my dissertation. Since that was now assured, I had a free choice. I chose to return to Texas, and in 1958 I became a professor here. The long struggle was for the most part over, though not the bitterness left in its wake.

And so I was able to confound my enemies and finish my career with success. But not without sorrow at the end. My wife and companion of 62 years, in fair weather and in foul, fell in time to cancer of the blood and, after a brave struggle, died July 21, 1998, taking with her my happiness.

Despite child care and attention to business matters, she had managed to complete her work for the doctorate at Wisconsin by 1950, and was awarded the degree that year. But to find employment commensurate with her qualifications was no easy matter. Finally, such a position opened up at a regional branch of the University of Wisconsin itself, but for her to take it would have required me to resign my last years of teaching here and go with her, and that is possible only in retrospect. I wish now I had done it, but at the time it was not possible unless she had asked me. And that she would not do.

And now I go to lie with her, with my parents, and not far from my aunt and uncle, Hattie W. and David G. Hewlett, who helped me through my higher education, without taking from my inheritance. To friends who because of location or otherwise may not be able to be here today, my best wishes the rest of the way.

Memorial Statement by Professor Emeritus Sidney Monas, Department of History and Slavic Languages:

Oliver Radkey was fifteen years my senior, but our scholarly background was similar in that we both did our graduate work at Harvard and wrote our respective dissertations under the supervision of Professor Michael Karpovich. It was rather typical of Oliver that he would insist on writing his own memorial. It was also typical of him that he would make no mention of the four important books he wrote on Russian history, since he programmatically valued his teaching more highly than his scholarship. He was a splendid lecturer and his courses were always extremely well attended, yet he never accepted a “grader” from the department and scrupulously went over every paper of his students for both style and content. He was a curmudgeon and did not encourage intimacy with either students or colleagues. His eccentricities were well known and much discussed. He had a kind of phobia about germs and was known to wipe the handles of doors or his microphone with a kerchief before using them. His cane and ten-gallon hat were also landmarks on campus.

In an uncharacteristically bitter note in his memorial he mentions an unnamed European history professor who refused to let him teach Russian history during his early years in the department. I told him that something quite similar had happened to me during my first full-time teaching job, but that did not endear me to him one bit. He let me know in no uncertain terms that he would take unkindly to any attempt on my part to run a course that could even remotely be considered competitive, even during those semesters when he was not teaching Russian history. Of course, I was a full professor, too, and could have ignored his feelings. But I respected him too much to do anything that would clearly antagonize him. He was not exactly hostile; he just made it clear that we were not going to be friends. On social occasions, however, the warmth and friendliness of his wife, Jakoba, made up for his always well-kept distance.

Oliver’s books were meticulously researched and exceptionally well written. His doctoral dissertation, “The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism,” which was published by Columbia University Press, was a landmark contribution to scholarship on the Russian Revolution. He published two more monographs on the (peasant) Socialist Revolutionary Party, “The Sickle Under the Hammer” (Harvard University Press) and “Russia’s Unknown Civil War.” The latter dealt with peasant resistance to Bolshevik grain requisitioning, especially in the Volga region, and the formation of a “Green” party of resistance in that area and elsewhere. He felt that he had found in the official Soviet archives incontrovertible evidence of the scope and importance of this resistance, but that the trunk of the rental car in which he had kept his notes while in the USSR had been broken into, most probably by the KGB. He was quite bitter about this and it did not improve his receptivity to things Russian even after glasnost.
It is ironic that Oliver, who had critics in the state legislature just for teaching Russian history at all, should later be accused by some of his professional colleagues of being “anti-Russian.”

I think his scholarship will stand, in spite of the occasionally curmudgeonly tone that has gotten into it. His teaching will certainly be remembered. Whatever his disposition, his integrity was unquestionable.

Professor Radkey’s reminiscence was submitted by a special committee consisting of Professor Norman D. Brown (chair), and Professors Emeritus William R. Braisted and Philip L. White. It was edited by the Secretary.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on January 15, 2002. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.