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OBSERVATIONS ON SOME CURRENT ISSUES IN RUSSIAN LABOR HISTORY AND ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF REGINALD ZELNIK TO THEIR ARTICULATION AND EXPLORATION

It is with great pleasure, but also a sense of shock, that I am recording these introductory remarks for the volume in honor of Reginald Zelnik. For in my mind's eye, it was not so long ago that the members of my family who met him during our periodic visits to Stanford, used to call him "the handsome graduate student." Reggie is still handsome, if a little grayer, but he is no longer a graduate student. Indeed, in the years that have passed since our first meetings, he has become an exemplar to us all: as a scholar, a teacher, a colleague, a friend, and as an intellectual and moral authority to whom we turn for counsel, especially in moments of doubt about our work, and of crisis in our personal lives.

In an essay of this type, it is appropriate to discuss first, among these various qualities and accomplishments of Reginald Zelnik, the character and significance of his scholarly accomplishments. Since he stands out in my eyes as a "complete historian" (a term that he has generously applied in the past to others) it is not easy to single out the distinguishing features of his work. Perhaps I might render my sense of them best by observing that as much as any scholar I know, his work has been driven by the two major, if seemingly conflicting, concerns that distinguish the preoccupations of truly major historians. The first is an almost obsessive, childlike urge to uncover the truth—the real truth—lurking behind various contemporary as well as retrospective accounts of events and of the behavior of historical actors, and to remove in this process—as in the restoration of an old painting—the layers of distortions imposed on these records of historical experience by the angles of vision, the values, and prejudices of the compilers of these historical records, as well as by the fallibility of their memories. The other driving force, which equally distinguishes and balances Reggie's scholarly work, is the recognition that any historian's performance of these tasks necessarily involves, already in the research in which he engages to reconstruct the historical record, a process
of abstraction and conceptualization from the density and ambiguity of historical experience.

In my mind, these two preoccupations have consistently distinguished the underlying concerns that have animated Reggie's work and the character and quality of his scholarship. In his larger and more synthetic works—I have in mind not only his published volume on factory workers in St. Petersburg (1855-70), but also and especially his follow-up volume (several chapters of which I have had the privilege to read in manuscript) one can observe an increasingly self-conscious effort to grasp for, if not to capture, the density, the particularity and contradictions of events and of the behavior and motivations of individual human actors, before placing, indeed, in order to place them successfully in a larger historical context. For these purposes, Reggie has consistently turned to case studies, to "la petite histoire," as the source from which a larger historical canvas is to be drawn, and any useful synthesis and generalizations about historical experience are to be made.

The character and intensity of these concerns have also been reflected in Reggie's writing in an increasingly sharp and assured eye in the selection of details, to approximate the density of the concrete but also to illuminate the broader and deeper picture that he is seeking to render. With the hope that it will not excessively embarrass Reggie, I would compare this technique to pointillist painting, and to the technique used by Chekhov in his short stories, in which it is precisely the details that provide the basis for a larger picture, and for the perceptions to be drawn from it by the observer.

Given the preoccupations that have increasingly distinguished Reggie's scholarly work, it is hardly an accident that the interval between the appearance of his first monograph and the completion of the second has been marked by the publication of a series of in-depth case studies of particular events in Russian labor history, as well as of the trajectories of the life experiences of individual workers. Increasingly, these case studies (usually drawn from memoir materials but also from contemporary records preserved in archival sources) have been focused on one major problem and set of issues: the definition, and especially self-definition, of individual and collective actors in the evolution of Russia's working class and of its labor struggles and the processes of interaction—both among various strata of Russian workers and between them and other political and social actors—that contributed to this definition and self-definition.

Let me offer a few observations about the features that have distinguished Reggie's treatment of this problem in the case studies that he has completed to date, not only to express my sense of his handling of them, but also to note the relationship that they bear to the more general conceptual, theoretical pieces that Reggie has published with increasing frequency in recent years.