

Title: The Pattersons Join the Party

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Lloyd Patterson, an African-American with about a year of college, emigrated to the USSR at age 20 in 1932. He married a Russian woman and worked hard, but the family struggled: three sons were born successively, during some of the hardest years in Soviet economic history (1933-1937). Lloyd, the family's sole source of support, jumped from low-paying job to low-paying job, sometimes working two jobs at once. When Lloyd died in 1942, he left his widow, a second-rate theater designer named Vera Aralova; his mother-in-law; and his sons; in precarious circumstances. However, the family's fortunes turned in 1943, when Vera joined the Party and made a series of decisions that catapulted herself and her oldest son into the artistic nomenclatura. Working in Moscow archives, I found that the nature of my research on pre-1943 years differed starkly from research on later years.

Pre-1943 research involved simply digging until a fuller portrait of Lloyd's obscurity formed. However, post-1943, the family's history becomes encrusted in the "Circus" myth, linking Jim the growing boy ontologically to the toddler embraced by all of Moscow. This myth was generated by Soviet media and concretized in a 1950 biography. But the family – first Aralova, then Jim – navigated the myth wisely. Both Vera and Jim became Party members, traveled extensively, inhabited ever more prestigious apartments; their dacha was in Abramtsevo. With such links to power, it should have come as no surprise that I came across constant roadblocks. As I heard rumors of "spets-sluzhba" ties surrounding "the entire family," I felt a rupture with my subject, Jim Patterson, the romantic figure who wrote quite bad poetry. The topic of subjectivity that I've been forced to confront – idealized subjects, bad subjects, myths, how archives respond to various narratives – has been wrinkled by the fact that Jim Patterson is still "alive and well," as his brother Tom reports, living as a recluse with no telephone.