

Notes and Comments

The Haemmerle Archive

by Elizabeth Shapiro

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The Haemmerle archive, measuring approximately 1.2 linear metres, in the McGill University Archives consists of a large number of letters to and from various members of a Russian emigré family who settled in England, France, Japan, the United States and Canada. In addition, there are Russian documents dating from the second half of the 19th century, many family photographs from the same period and more modern snapshots and photograph albums. As the Haemmerle family had a Danish branch, parts of the archival material relate to this connection.

However, the letters primarily concern the branch of the Haemmerle family who settled in Montreal in 1920 – the father, Alfred, his wife, Amy and their son, Anatole. This correspondence can be divided into two parts:

1. Letters written in Russian:

a) Almost daily letters from Alfred to his wife in Montreal when he was working for the Canadian Government in Ottawa during World War II.

b) Weekly letters from Amy to Anatole when the latter was working in Boston. These letters cover the period from 1947 to Amy's death in 1957.

c) Letters from Amy Haemmerle's sister, Mary, who lived in Buffalo, New York. Her letters cover the same period (1947-1957) and were written to both Amy and Anatole.

This Russian correspondence provides a detailed glimpse of the life of an emigré family.

2. Letters written in English to Anatole Haemmerle:

a) Correspondence from his twin aunts, Alma and Irma Haemmerle, who lived in England. The letters are mainly from the 1950s and early 1960s.

b) Correspondence from his aunt, Dina Waht, who settled in Japan. Her letters were written between 1960 and the early 1970s.

This note deals with the son, Anatole Haemmerle, and is based, not only on the letters written to him in English but also on his own memories which he dictated shortly before his death in 1986.

Family Man

Anatole Alfred Haemmerle was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1908, the son of a well-to-do banker, Alfred Haemmerle, and Amy Waht Haemmerle. His paternal grandfather, Jean Haemmerle, was a prominent merchant in Odessa who married Agathe Larssen, daughter of a Danish merchant shipper. This marriage was the origin of two branches of this family, some of whose descendants scattered throughout Europe only to be re-united several generations later. Anatole recalled the origin of this connection of these two families in the memoirs that he dictated to a friend late in his life.

The story of how Grandfather Haemmerle met Grandmother is worth a mention. Grandfather's estate was in the south of Russia bordering on the

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Sea of Azov. The nearest town was Berdiansk. He was a very large land owner having inherited the land from his parents and was engaged in growing and exporting grain. I believe he had a fleet of barges. Apparently the whole fleet was sunk by the British during the Crimean War. Grandfather began to look around for somebody with ships who could transport his crops the next season. He was given the name of a Danish Captain Klitgaard. Together they went about Norway seeking additional ships and Captains. They went to the city of Arundel. There he met Captain Larssen whose chief occupation was Pilot of the harbor of Arundel and who made his home on the island of Merdo situated at the entrance to the harbour [This house is now a museum] ... Captain Larssen had several very good looking daughters and my grandfather became enamoured (*sic*) and eventually married Agathe. [Her sister, Sophie, married Captain Klitgaard].

Anatole also dictated other recollections – of his childhood in St. Petersburg and growing up in Japan and Canada. He gives a vivid picture of pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg as seen through the eyes of an eight year old. He enjoyed the comfortable life of the upper classes, was taught by French and German tutors, went on outings with his parents or nurse, and spent happy summer holidays with his Danish grandmother in Arundel, Norway.

The day would start with breakfast in the dining room. At the conclusion of this father would go off to the bank... I would retire to the Children's (*sic*) quarters there to await the arrival of my teachers, which could either be the German 'Bonna' or the French 'Mademoiselle' and thus my day would begin ... Around mid afternoon I was taken for walks in the park... My escorts would either be the old nurse...or mother would go if she was free... A foray with my father was always an adventure...our coachman in his crushed black stovepipe hat soon arrived at the front gates with our carriage...we entered St. Isaac's Square. We stopped in front of the great cathedral and got out. I was a bit distracted by the large statue of Nicholas I close by the cathedral. But the domes of St. Isaac seemed so mammoth and so far up as I leaned back to look at them. Upon entering I was startled by the vast array of mosaic work of the interior. Father said that St. Isaac's was the third largest Cathedral in the world and was built in the 19th century by 400,000 serfs...father thought it was part of my education to see this great and famous cathedral.

Anatole also recounts the birth and tragic death in 1917, at the age of 5, of his only sibling, Eugene. Both the children had contracted dysentery after their nurse had given them unwashed apples to eat. Eugene did not survive, and Anatole remained sickly for many months.

Gradually Anatole's recollections introduce the ominous shadow of the Revolution. The gracious life into which he had been born ended abruptly in 1917 when the Haemmerle family, still mourning the death of their second son, escaped by train to Siberia together with Amy Haemmerle's unmarried sister, Dina. Her sister, Anne, had fled to Paris, and another sister, Mary, had gone to the United States. Alfred Haemmerle's sisters, the twins, Alma and Irma, had already moved to England, his mother had settled in Antwerp, and close cousins, Catherine and Nicholas Koolichenko (*sic*), after hiding in the Haemmerle's St. Petersburg home, had managed to get to Yugoslavia. These turbulent times made a lasting impression on the young boy. Gone was the secure affluent life and it was gone abruptly – home, possessions, business – all disappeared. What remained was a small family – mother, father and only child. Their safety and well-being became the dominant factor in their lives.



Figure 1. Amy Waht, Anatole and Alfred Haemmerle, ca. 1917.

Included with the memoirs is a copy of a talk that Anatole delivered at a boy's school in 1972. It is entitled "The Long Long Train Ride" and gives a vivid description of the civil disturbances in St. Petersburg in the spring and summer of 1917 and the family's subsequent flight to Vladivostock. The situation in St. Petersburg had deteriorated quickly, and the Haemmerle family was forced to flee by train with only what possessions they could carry.

The station itself was complete and utter chaos with thousands of people milling about, all trying to find some train that went somewhere to get away from the violence in St. Petersburg... the entrance to the platform was barred by a group of soldiers with fixed bayonets who stuck out their guns and flatly refused to let us proceed any further.

Mr. Haemmerle had had the use, for many years, of a private railway car for conducting his banking business throughout Russia. By bribing the appropriate officials as well as the hostile soldiers he had managed to have this car attached to a train going to Siberia. Onto this car scrambled the family and some of their friends, and the doors were bolted. The guard in charge was a Swiss, an employee of the Cie Wagon-Lits and sympathetic to their plight. The trip across the 6,000 miles of country took two weeks. It was not without danger as rebellious soldiers were determined to board the train at every stop, ready to loot and murder. It took the efforts of the sympathetic engineer and some friendly Chinese officials to keep the fleeing Russians ahead of the pursuing Bolshevik army. Eventually the Haemmerles arrived in Vladivostock, but any chance to settle there was thwarted by the advancing Red Army. After a year the family fled once more, this time to Tokyo. Unable to re-establish an international banking career, Alfred Haemmerle moved his family once again, this time to Montreal, arriving in 1920.

Anatole's recollections of the years 1920-1940 are detailed but light hearted as he remembered the escapades and adventures of his youth. The "foreign" schoolboy, from being taught by private tutors, was thrust into a Montreal classroom.

School was St. Patrick's Academy, a Catholic Parochial school outside the public school system of the city. The boys in the school were mostly Irish,

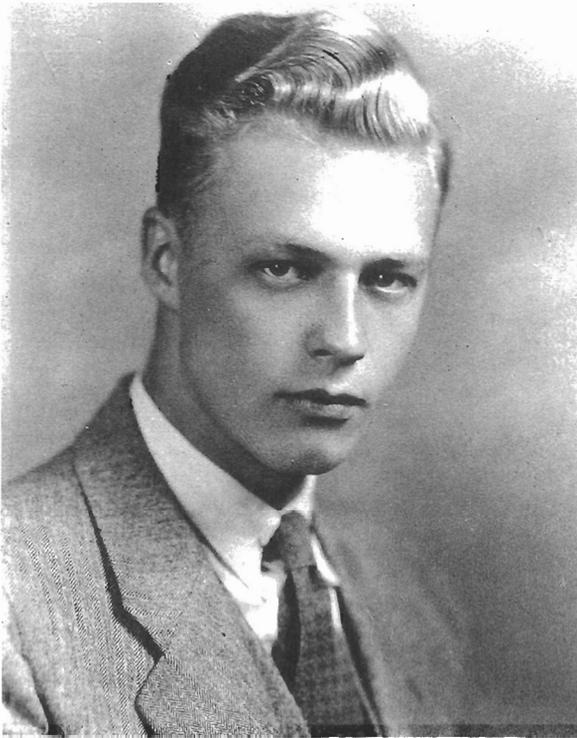


Figure 2.
Anatole Haemmerle, ca. 1926.

and the French they spoke was very different from the the French I had learned. Kids would laugh at me and I got a great deal of teasing because of what the boys called my 'la de da' accent.

The first years in Montreal were difficult. The struggles with poverty and the attempts to re-establish the standards of a former life were followed by the gradual improvement in the family's economic situation and the making of a new social life.

We went through a very difficult time since the only means by which my parents could get any cash was by selling or hocking some of the things we had brought with us... Mother made friends with some of the neighbours who taught her some cooking and showed her a few tricks to make housekeeping a little easier. I must say that poor mother who had never done anything like this before soon became very adept...

No matter how my poor mother tried to learn proper English, all her attempts ended up a dismal failures. However, her speech never failed to amuse her friends... One incident stands out. One Sunday on a particular cold winter day she was due to have tea at Lady Steele's...although the weather was very cold with high winds, she decided to walk...and arrived with the tea party already in progress...all the ladies showed their concern and chided her for walking in such cold... Mother explained it all very simply by saying 'I vas not cold because the vind was in my behind'...

Anatole's social life in Montreal began around 1925 when the friends he had made at school began to ask him to their parties. "The party was a fancy dress affair...we didn't have any

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Figure 3. The twin aunts, Alma and Irma Haemmerle, ca. 1960

special costumes lying about... Naturally I was anxious to go...and Father finally suggested I try his kimono. He had a beautiful grey flowered silk kimono which, of course, was much too big for me...it was a little long but I could shorten it by gathering the kimono around my ribs and pulling tightly so that the kimono did not come down over my shoes... I did not want to appear in public in a kimono. So I folded it up and carried it under my arm on the street car and bus... The party to which I wore the kimono seemed to be the key to Montreal's social doors, and invitations to parties after that came thick and fast."

Anatole confessed that he was never a very good student, lacking the necessary discipline to apply himself to his lessons. His high school performance was so poor that his father borrowed money to send the young man to a private tutorial college for his final year. Finally he was accepted by McGill University but only on probation. But Anatole was more interested in sports, amateur theatricals and the Mounted Squadron of the Officers' Training Corps than in his studies. The latter allowed him to demonstrate the riding skills he had learned at an early age from his father. In 1926, he helped form the McGill Light Aeroplane Club. Riding and flying were both time consuming and far more interesting than formal studies. Old newspaper clippings reveal that Anatole had, as well, a busy social life. He was handsome, a good dancer and interestingly "foreign." Not surprisingly, Anatole never completed his university education.

Throughout Anatole's stories the closeness of this small family unit grows ever stronger. Anatole had the deepest admiration for his father as well as a strong and protective love for his mother. The only letter by Anatole in the collection is a long and moving one written on Father's Day, 1947 when Anatole was 39 years old. In it he tries to express to his father what

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he never felt able to say directly: "...it all adds up to one of the two things or words which have meant everything to me – Mother and Father." In turn this only child remained the central object of the parent's affection, their hope for a secure and happy life in their adopted country.

Some time in the 1930s Anatole joined the 17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars, a regiment noted for its horsemanship. He rose rapidly to the rank of major. With the disbandment of the regiment in 1939 he joined the newly formed Citizens' Defense Corps. Shortly afterwards World War II was declared, and he enlisted in the Canadian Army and was sent to England. For the first time he met some of the members of his dispersed family, notably his twin maiden aunts, Alma and Irma Haemmerle as well as some of his cousins.

After the war Anatole settled in Boston, Massachusetts, finding employment with the Aetna Insurance Company where he remained until his retirement. He specialized in group insurance and pensions.

It is unfortunate that Anatole's own memoirs do not continue past 1929. However, further details of his adult life may be gathered from the many letters in English which exist in the McGill Archives' collection, particularly from his paternal aunts. These letters to Anatole cover the period 1945-1961 and are mainly from Alma and Irma. There is, as well, correspondence from some of his English cousins.

Successful in his employment, Anatole was in a position to do more than write letters; he was able to give financial assistance to the elderly twin aunts who had retired from a lifetime of teaching children of the English nobility. Like Alfred, the aunts strove constantly to maintain at least a semblance of their former, grander life-style when they lived in Russia. Timidly and apologetically they asked Anatole for small amounts of money. He, in turn, constantly sent them gifts, delighting both of them with little luxuries that they otherwise could not have afforded. He made regular visits to England to visit them, often twice a year, and after the death of Alfred in 1951, his mother frequently accompanied him. The few letters that exist from the English cousins kept him informed about these delightful and slightly eccentric twins.

A second source of information lies in the letters written in English to Anatole from his aunt Dina between 1957 and 1975. Dina, Amy Haemmerle's younger sister, had remained in Tokyo after the family's flight from Russia and maintained herself by working in a department store. Her letters from this period show that Anatole had assumed responsibility for her financial problems. Dina, like the aunts in England, welcomed Anatole's monetary assistance as well as his advice on business affairs. Indeed, Anatole was instrumental in helping his aunt Mary move to Tokyo to live with Dina. Mary's finances were also a constant worry to him, but one which he shouldered with patience and concern. It is obvious from Dina's many letters that the two sisters depended greatly on this far-away nephew. Even after the death of both sisters, he continued his financial support of Dina's adopted Japanese son.

The character of Anatole that emerges is based solely on his personal recollections and on the many letters that were written to him in English between 1945 and 1975. More than half of the letters in the collection – those from Alfred, Amy and Mary – were written in Russian and must be excluded from this note for want of translation. Even so, a picture emerges of a charming and successful man, who, never able to forget entirely his happy early childhood, seemed to need to restore the sense of family that the Russian Revolution had so abruptly terminated. It is hard to tell whether this came from a sense of guilt that he had survived and succeeded in Canada and the United States or whether there was genuine affection for these newly discovered relatives. It seems ironical that Anatole's success in re-establishing ties with his aunts in England and Japan should end with his death in 1986. The twin aunts remained spinsters as did Dina. Mary, though married, had no children. Anatole married Elizabeth Watt Harris, a Canadian living in Boston, in 1961 and although he had no offspring of his own, he did enjoy stepchildren and stepgrandchildren.

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As noted earlier, the Haemmerles had a strong Danish connection. This side of the family survived the dislocations of the war although various members scattered, resulting, in part, in the English branch that Anatole eventually met and with whom he corresponded. These relatives were successful on their own so Anatole was never directly involved in their well-being. Instead he enjoyed a lively and happy social relationship with them, cemented by a shared concern for the welfare of the twin aunts.

The story of Anatole Haemmerle is only part of the tale of this fascinating family. One can only surmise what the contents of his own letters to these correspondents might have revealed. In this day of telephones, fax machines and computers, the art of letter writing has diminished considerably. The McGill University Archives is fortunate to possess such a large collection of correspondence. Many of these letters await the scholar who can translate the Russian. There is, undoubtedly, a world of social history to be uncovered. Anatole's personal reminiscences provide just a glimpse of the struggles and successes of formerly well-to-do Russian emigrés in various parts of the world.

The McCord Museum's Inaugural Exhibition Programme

by Elizabeth H. Kennell

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The Executive Director of the McCord Museum, Luke Rombout, gave the curatorial staff the mandate to develop over a six-month period the concepts for the inaugural exhibitions for the Museum's re-opening in May 1992. The concepts chosen reflect not only the richness of the McCord's collections, representing the strengths and range, but also the expertise of the curators. Although the research phase only began officially in January 1990, the results attest in many cases to the curators' long term interests and endeavours.

In the creation of the inaugural exhibition programme, much effort went into achieving a balance between thematic exhibitions and those which are collection-based, in deference to the McCord's appellation as a "history museum." In addition, while ensuring that the emphasis was on the McCord's own collections, adequate temporary exhibition space had to be set aside in order to receive exhibitions from outside sources. Therefore, while the inaugural exhibitions were the prime concern, a structure for the future, to build upon and maintain the public's interest, was also considered crucial.

Because the year of the re-opening, 1992, coincides with the 350th anniversary of the founding of Montreal many of the inaugural exhibitions pay particular attention to this fact. However, it is *Victoria Bridge: The Vital Link* that represents the McCord's official contribution to the anniversary celebration. It is one part of a major historical overview, collectively entitled: *Montreal: A History to Treasure*.

With almost 20,000 square feet, or double the previous amount of exhibition space at our disposal, it was felt that we now have the opportunity to accommodate permanent galleries devoted to the presentation of the McCord's collections. The Notman Photographic Archives, Costume and Textiles, Archives, Prints and Drawings, and Ethnology and Archaeology each now have specifically designated areas, including Paintings and Decorative Arts in the newly-renovated Nobbs Gallery (named after the architect, Percy Nobbs, who designed the building