# DMITRI BORGMANN, FATHER OF LOGOLOGY

It has often been said that an institution is merely the length-ened shadow of a man. Logology in general, and **Word Ways** in particular, owes much to Dmitri Borgmann; this issue, consisting entirely of his handiwork (except for this article and Colloquy), is a salute to his long-lasting devotion to the cause of wordplay.

Dmitri is the one who, in a letter to Howard Bergerson in the early 1960s, wrote "I don't believe that the word 'logology' has ever appeared in a book devoted to words or puzzles. I dug it out of the unabridged Oxford while searching for a suitable name for my activity." (The OED and the Century Supplement define it as the "doctrine of the Logos," a theological concept; the OED also defines it as the "science of words.")

His first book, Language on Vacation (Scribner's, 1965), is a logological landmark, defining the field as the manipulation of words viewed as collections of letters. The bulk of this book is devoted to long-established letterplay such as the palindrome, the transposition, the anagram, and the word square, drawing exten-sively on sources as diverse as Notes & Queries and the National Puzzlers' League publication, the Enigma, he exhibited a dazzling variety of special types. Two other wordplay books, Beyond Lan-guage (Scribner's, 1967) and Curious Crosswords ((Scribner's, 1970), soon followed; all are now out of print.

Of course, books on wordplay have been published for many cen-turies, from Tabouret's Les Bigarrures et Touches in the sixteenth century to Bombaugh's Oddities and Curiosities at the end of the nineteenth. Yet, they were different in format, either presenting word oddities as puzzles to be solved or as literary creations like the unrhymable word, the acrostic and the lipogram. Dmitri's essen-tial contribution in Language on Vacation was to demonstrate that wordplay is an intellectual discipline in its own right, with new discoveries building on earlier work. This idea came to fruition with the founding of Word Ways in 1968 by Harold Schwartz, owner of the newly-established Greenwood Press. Looking around for ideas for a new journal, he approached Martin Gardner for suggestions. Martin was quite familiar with Dmitri's logological interests, hav-ing picked his brains a few years earlier to update Bombaugh's book (see the Appendix to the 1961 Dover reprint); he proposed that Dmitri be made the editor of a journal of recreational linguis-tics – and Word Ways was born. (Dmitri resigned after one year because Greenwood was financially unable to pay him a $5000-per-year salary for his editorial duties.) Although the circulation of Word Ways has remained small – Greenwood decided to abandon it for economic reasons after only two years – I think Dmitri would agree that it has succeeded in his goal of codifying and system-

atizing wordplay, revealing the incredible number of ways in which words can be studied.

Since Dmitri is a somewhat reclusive man – I know of no logologist who has met him face-to-face – it may not be amiss to give a capsule biography here. Born in Berlin on October 22, 1927, he fled with his parents to Chicago in 1936 when they feared that the Nazis would uncover his mother's Jewish ancestry. He was graduated from the University of Chicago in 1946, and spent the next nineteen years working in the actuarial field. However, nis real interest lay in free-lance writing and research; in 1971, he founded Intellex (originally RC Research), a company now employing a dozen researchers and writers who create or revise short stories, TV and movie scripts, resumés, bibliographies, articles and even full-length books. To avoid the crime and congestion of Chicago, he moved to Dayton, Washington in 1972. He married Iris Sterling in 1962 and they have one son, Keith Alan.

Few people know that Dmitri is the one who created the trade name Exxon. Hired by Standard Oil as the result of Language on Vacation publicity, he generated some 1200 names according to various criteria laid down by his employer; details of the quest can be gleaned from three 1968 **Word Ways** articles. (In hindsight, the choice of Exxon appears almost inevitable – a word similar enough to its predecessor, Esso, to retain brand loyalty, but substituting the dynamic, technologically with-it X-sound for the soft sibilance of S – but Dmitri was the one who saw this first.)

In his younger days, Dmitri entered a number of contests for money, winning twelve thousand dollars from 1946 to 1973. Not surprisingly, he views contests with a jaundiced eye. Even when the contest is honestly run, the average entrant has little chance against syndicates of professional puzzlers. He wrote "To achieve solutions of prize-winning caliber you must, for all practical purposes, lock yourself in a soundproof room with whatever material and clerical supplies you may need for the contest, and slave over those puzzles as many hours a day, every day, as you possibly can without collapsing .. Winning a major prize without backbreaking, mind-wrenching efforts would border on the miraculous." His greatest single contest success, $3,800, was achieved in 1958 when he defeated 22 challengers on a word-building quiz show, It's In The Name, which consisted of anagramming the letters of famous names to produce as many words as possible. He learned that prior preparation was important, anagramming and memorizing lists of words for nearly 125 likely names. This drudgery paid off when some of the names actually came up – "I devastated my challengers."

A man with a passionate love of words, Dmitri holds strong opinions about them which on occasion have ruffled the feathers of his readers. He has long argued that mathematics and logology do not mix, and more recently has asserted that the computer is ruining logology by taking creativity out of it. (The creativity he refers to is the ability of the human mind to look for coinages

or other non-programmable solutions to linguistic problems.) He has claimed that "all words are interesting" and when challenged can torture a far-fetched oddity out of the most mundane collection of letters. His willingness to stretch what constitutes a "word" to its outer limits has often exasperated readers, yet he has provided a useful viewpoint by reminding the reader of the essentially vague boundaries of language. (Each person must draw his own limits, and in so doing it is easier for him to reject outrageous claims than to add words which the author has been too squeamish to include.) Still others have been disturbed by his hubris, regarding Dmitri as the Muhammad Ali of logology. But is anything worthwhile achieved by a man who underrates his own talent and ability?

His capacity for work is legendary. If the spirit moves, he will shower a correspondent with a blizzard of letters reporting his latest linguistic discoveries. As an example, he generated 17 **Word Ways** articles of three to nineteen pages on a great variety of topics in less than five weeks. And, one must realize that these were offered gratis from a man who earns his living from writing, and whose company (four years ago) charges $15 to $27.50 per page. Whatever else one can say about Dmitri Borgmann, his generosity is above dispute. Long may his support of logology continue!