Whistler’s Father
By Arnols Schrier

The title of this paper is: Whistler's Father? Why the question mark, you may ask. My answer is quite simple. Mention Whistler's mother and most Americans would recall the famous sentimental portrait painted by her son, James McNeill Whistler, in the mid-nineteenth century. But mention Whistler's father and those same Americans would be hard put to tell you who he was or what he did. Hence the question mark. Yet in his own lifetime the father did accomplish some noteworthy things besides siring a painterly son. Indeed, his most recent biographer refers to him as America's Forgotten Man. He then quotes a humorous tribute to the memory of the father that was published in a Chicago newspaper in 1938:

> Metropolitan and rural
> Parenthood is always plural.
> Therefore, Whistler must have had,
> As you might expect, a Dad.
> Naturally, Whistler's other
> Parent was his famous Mother.
> While she posed, serene and quaint,
> Someone had to mix the paint,
> Write the cheques and build the fire,
> Who, but Mr. Whistler's Sire!

The father's name was George Washington Whistler and this is his story.

George Washington Whistler was born on May 19, 1800 in Fort Wayne, Indiana, a military outpost which his father, John Whistler, had helped build. At age nineteen George Washington Whistler, whose nickname was Mac, graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and served as a Civil Engineer in the Ue Tsar wanted to be sure that such a railway was perfectly safe. So he had a narrow-gauge line built from St. Petersburg to Tsarskoye Selo, Imperial Village, the Tsar's summer home, only a short distance outside the capital. The line was completed in 1837. Locomotives of British make were imported and assembled by ten Englishmen and two Belgians. Nicholas, a stern autocrat, absolutely refused to employ any Frenchmen, so fearful was he of their spreading French revolutionary ideas. At first, steam was used on Sundays and high holidays; weekdays, horses were harnessed to the two railroad cars.

The following spring there was so much traffic that steam was used throughout the week. Crowds came to gape at the wheeled wonder that carried fashionable passengers so smoothly and speedily. To keep the tracks clear, the Russians needed something to make a loud noise. They had no loud whistles or horns available, so they improvised. A hand-cranked organ was installed on each locomotive, in front of the chimney. A conductor turned the crank to play loud tunes. Nicholas was heartened by the success of this small railroad and was now more determined than ever to have a railroad built between St. Petersburg and Moscow. But first he wanted to know more about the American experience, so he decided to send two army officers to the United States to find out about American railroads.

In the summer of 1839 two Russian colonels named Paul Melnikov and Nicholas

Kraft were detached from the engineering troops and embarked for the United States. They both spoke English and spent the summers of 1839 and 1840 traveling the railroads of America, visiting stations and shops, climbing locomotives, gathering blueprints and figures. They were very thorough; the mission took them three years to complete. Early in 1842 they reported their findings to the railroad committee in St. Petersburg. A long-distance railroad in Russia, they said, was feasible and the best man to help build it was a U.S. Army major named George Washington Whistler. This Whistler, they pointed out, was considered America's brightest pioneer of railroads. At one time as many as six lines were said to have been under his charge or supervision. The Russian Committee voted to appoint Whistler. A special agent , a Major Ivan Bouttatz, was sent to bring the American to Russia. Bouttatz offered Whistler a salary of 60,000 rubles a year, which translated into $12,000, American money. That was four times what Whistler's salary at Lowell had been. Whistler accepted the Russian offer.

Once in Russia, Whistler carefully traveled the distance of some 420 miles between St. Petersburg and Moscow. He found no major obstacles that would impede the building of a railroad track. In January of 1843 he was summoned to the Winter Palace and was formally presented to the Tsar to make his report. Nicholas I, an extremely conservative ruler, was deeply suspicious of people from democratic countries. But as Whistler spoke and answered the Tsar's many questions, it was clear that the American was well informed. The Tsar's suspicions abated. Whistler described to Nicholas the whole of the projected route, its principal difficulties and how they could be overcome. The Tsar was impressed by the American's competence. On parting, Nicholas shook hands with the American and reportedly said: "I am sure, sir, you will do it right." Whistler replied: "You are very kind, sir, and if you think it well done when it is done, I shall be proud of your approbation."

Whistler reported all of this in a letter to his wife, Anna, and proudly told her that not once in the entire meeting did he say
"Your Majesty." Indeed, Whistler resisted all efforts by tsarist officials to have him formally enroll in the tsar's service and don a uniform. In Russia the uniform was a mark of servility, both for military and civilians. Whistler refused to assume that role. Service to the Tsar, yes, but not servility. The Russians, needing his skills, finally stopped pressuring him on the uniform.

The longer Whistler stayed in St. Petersburg, the more he became interested in matters other than the railroad. He could not speak Russian and only understood French. Much to his surprise he discovered an English-speaking world around him. The inhabitants were British people, mostly merchants and their families, collectively known as the Factory. Within walking distance of where he lived was an English bookstore. The same street was filled with boarding houses for British travelers. There was even a boarding school that had a top-rank standing in the capital. Sons of English and German traders were enrolled there, and even some Russian boys. An English church was not far away. Altogether some sixteen hundred British people lived in St. Petersburg at this time. Whistler befriended a number of them and from them learned about the Russians and their ways. He also learned that there was very little intermarriage between Factory people and Russians.

As his stay in St. Petersburg continued, Whistler became better acquainted with the city. He often took long walks along the main streets of the capital, particularly

Nevsky Prospekt, the major thoroughfare, and marveled at the palaces, churches, theaters and bronze monuments that lined both sides of the street. There were also large, stately houses where the ground floors had fashionable stores and the upper floors had apartments for noblemen and foreign merchants. St. Petersburg at this time had a population of half a million people.

When Whistler decided to stay in St. Petersburg until the railroad was completed, he made up his mind to bring his family to Russia. They sailed from Boston in mid-August of 1843. The crossing, by steamship, took twelve days. Whistler's wife Anna, who was thirty-nine, brought all three of their sons. Jimmie, the eldest and future painter, was then nine; his younger brother was seven and the youngest brother was still an infant. Jimmie was the only one of the Whistlers who learned to speak Russian.
Anna also brought along a nurse named Mary who helped look after the children. As it was, on the way over the infant caught a fever and died.

Early in 1843 the main surveying of the route between St. Petersburg and Moscow was completed. Then began the work of preparing a roadbed. The railroad laborers were mainly serfs who were conscripted to do this work. They labored fourteen hours a day and were often deprived of their Sunday rest. Their food was bad, living conditions were miserable. The men lived in sod huts, tents, jerrybuilt wooden barracks, or in shacks put together of birch bark and tree branches. They slept on the ground.

Scurvy and rash developed early. Typhoid fever ravaged them and ended many of their lives. To treat these illnesses, the Russians deemed vodka to be the best medicine. Many makeshift taverns sprang up. The only restriction was that taverns could crowd no closer to the line of work than one verst, or about two-thirds of a mile. Whistler had no control over the serfs or their working conditions.

Meanwhile Whistler filed a report in favor of a broader gauge for the railroad. This was approved by the railroad commission and to this day Russian railroads use the five-foot rail gauge. Rolling stock now had to be built for the railroad. In December 1843 the Russian government signed a contract for rolling stock for Whistler's line. It was to be built by two American firms, one from Philadelphia and the other from Baltimore. The work would cost three million dollars and was to be done in five years. The Americans were to build 162 twenty-five-ton locomotives and as many tenders; 5300 iron trucks for eight-wheel cars; 2500 eight-wheel freight cars; seventy passenger cars; and two especially improved cars, each eighty feet long and on sixteen wheels.

The Tsar was to furnish workshops, but the Americans were to equip the buildings with their own machines and tools shipped from the United States and provide experienced machinists to operate them. These crown shops were six miles from St. Petersburg in a town named Alexandrovsky. The Americans were to teach the Russian workers this new craft of making rolling-stock. Therein lay a problem. There were five hundred workers at the Alexandrovsky shops, which included Swedes, Germans, Englishmen and Americans. There were also Russians who were called mechanics but in fact knew almost nothing about making locomotives or railroad cars, so they had to be trained. After a while some three thousand artisans were busy making two hundred locomotives and seven thousand cars. The majority of the Russian workers were peasant serfs who had to turn over most of their wages to their owners. The serf-workers were beaten, overworked and distrusted. But the work went on.

Nicholas was so impressed with the productivity of the Alexandrovsky shops that

he decided to see for himself. In March 1847 he made an official visit. He marveled at the machine shops and what was made in them. He decided that Whistler deserved a special commendation and decorated him with the prestigious Order of St. Anne of the second degree. It was a massive gold medal.

The line that Whistler undertook to build was to run for 420 miles. The Russian serf-workmen who were arbitrarily assigned to the project were treated just as abominably as those in the shops. Men died of scurvy in their damp, cold sod huts. They were continually flogged and systematically underfed and underpaid. The building of this first important Russian railroad was facetiously referred to by the serfs as An Experiment in Training People Not to Eat. Their bosses were all Russian. Whistler had no control over these serf workers. In later years the total human cost of building Whistler's line was estimated at five thousand serf lives. The Russian official in charge of this workforce was a brutal man named Count Peter Kleinmichel who, it was said, wanted to show the Tsar at what a smart pace the railroad could be built. All the while he himself was stealing, cheating and blundering but made sure there was no publicity.

Meanwhile Major Whistler looked forward to finishing his job in three years and returning home in 1848. It was at this time that his son Jimmie, who was almost eleven, was enrolled in the Imperial Academy of Arts to study drawing. His first art instructor was a Russian named Alexander Ossipovich Koritsky who, among other things, taught James McNeil Whistler how to speak Russian.

While the son was busy with art and language, the father was convinced that never was a country more in need of improved transportation than Russia. He admitted that the difficulties of climate were great, but they were more of an excuse than a handicap. Russia had great mineral resources, not only in the south, but even more in the north and northeast. These could best be reached by railroads and he thought the Russians should seriously consider extending railroads to those areas as well as to the south. Indeed, the iron horse, he felt, should cross the southern steppes at the earliest opportunity.

One of the troublesome problems Whistler had was finding Russian contractors to take on various projects. Their usual complaint was lack of experience. This was especially true when it came to building railroad bridges. Altogether Whistler needed to have two hundred bridges and seventy aqueducts constructed. When no builders came forward, Kleinmichel's men, in desperation, pounced upon a petty nobleman who was only looking to buy some gravel. They told him he would be the bridge builder. When the nobleman protested that he had no experience, he was told he didn't need any because the Americans would supervise his work. When he said he didn't have the necessary capital, Kleinmichel's men placed before him an advance of one hundred thousand rubles; the nobleman fainted. Shortly after that he started the business and was soon handling work amounting to more than one million rubles. Before long he became the biggest contractor of Whistler's line. But the serf workers were so inefficient that it took them three times as long to build a bridge as it took Americans to build a similar bridge in the United States.

Meanwhile, whenever a problem arose, the Tsar would consult with Whistler. The chiefs of construction did nothing without Whistler's sanction. The legend of his ability spread in all directions. According to his biographer, after a while Whistler was said to be the most popular American in Russia of his time, certainly the most respected

one since John Quincy Adams had served as the American minister to Russia from 1809 to 1812. The Tsar came to think of Whistler as a know-all oracle, a wonder-worker, a machine-like genius who had a solution for everything.

Whistler himself did not let this flattery go to his head; he was determined to return home once the Tsar's railroad was completed. It was at this time that his wife, Anna, gave birth to a baby boy in St. Petersburg in August 1845. But the baby did not live long. It developed dysentery and died two months later. The dysentery was caused by the bad drinking water in St. Petersburg.

Worse was yet to come. In 1848 a cholera epidemic broke out in Russia. It spread rapidly and in the summer of that year reached the capital, St. Petersburg. Whistler quickly made arrangements to send his wife and sons off to England. They got there in July 1848. Whistler himself stayed behind to finish the railroad project.

A million people died of the cholera in Russia in 1848. It struck St. Petersburg particularly hard, where in six weeks fifteen thousand persons perished. No one was immune, but most victims were plain folk. Cholera raged all along Whistler's line. The serf workers died in droves. Work on the railroad lagged. In a futile attempt to stop the disease, soldiers filled graves with lime. Serfs who survived ran off in all directions. Those who stayed avoided eating fruit and vegetables; they shunned smoked and salted foods. But the disease swept on.

On a Sunday early in September of 1848 Whistler himself was stricken. He got progressively weaker. By the end of the year he was too weak to stand up. By the following spring it was clear that Whistler was dying; he was not quite forty-nine. The end came on April 7, 1849. Shortly after Whistler's death, the Tsar offered to have Whistler's sons enter the Imperial Corps of Pages, which was considered one of the most aristocratic schools in the Empire. But Whistler's widow Anna would have none of it. She wanted the boys to return to their native land to finish their education in American schools. She was sure that Whistler himself would not have wanted his sons to grow up as pages of the tsar..

Meanwhile Kleinmichel decided that Whistler's successor should be another American military man. He hired a Major Thompson S. Brown, who was reputed to be as good as Major George Washington Whistler. Brown was promptly brought to Russia.

In the fall of 1851 the railroad between St. Petersburg and Moscow was completed and opened to the public. Tsar Nicholas himself journeyed from St. Petersburg to Moscow to celebrate both the completion of the railroad as well as a quarter-century of his coronation. Were he still alive, George Washington Whistler would have been pleased and proud to have witnessed the event.

There is an epilogue to this story. Today, the line that Whistler helped plan and build is still being used. Indeed the Russians now run luxury trains between St. Petersburg and Moscow. One of them is the Nevsky Express, the most famous luxury train in all of Russia. Recently the line has become a target for Chechen separatists. In November of 2009 a homemade bomb was surreptitiously placed on the tracks about 200 miles northwest of Moscow and was exploded when the Nevsky Express crossed over it. The train crashed and twenty-five of the more than 650 passengers on board were killed. Train service was restored four days later but the perpetrators were still at large. Thus has Whistler's proud achievement become a setting for tragedy in our own day.