



BUILDING UTOPIA

ERECTING RUSSIA'S FIRST MODERN CITY, 1930



RICHARD CARTWRIGHT AUSTIN

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ERECTING RUSSIA'S FIRST MODERN CITY, 1930

RICHARD CARTWRIGHT AUSTIN

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FOR COLETTE
You held us together

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PREFACE

Early in 1998 Colette Mylott, personal secretary to my father for thirty-five years until his death, unlocked a desk drawer and handed me a leather ring binder containing letters that he had written from Russia in 1930 and 1931. Allan Austin was the youngest of twenty American engineers who assisted the Soviets in erecting Europe's largest automobile factory, as well as the first new city in Russia since the revolution—a city designed to express the social ideals of communism. Only Colette knew that these letters had survived.

The letters were written to Allan's father, Wilbert J. Austin, president of the Austin Company and at that time America's most innovative industrial builder. Wilbert, a confirmed capitalist and a devout Methodist, had contracted with the Soviet government to design these huge facilities and to supervise their erection on a remote site near the Volga River; to train peasants and young workers in modern construction techniques; and to complete the entire task in two years. It was the most ambitious development project yet undertaken by the Soviet Union, the most challenging construction project ever attempted by the Austin Company, and quite probably the most remarkable project in the history of industrial construction to that time. The letters from a young engineer to his father tell the personal side of the story and offer striking insights into a revolutionary society. They bring this page of history to life.

While I had heard these stories myself from my parents, I now resolved to see the sites for myself. Heidi McCormack, a lifelong friend and chief operating

officer for General Motors in Moscow, invited me to Russia. She made contacts with the Gorky Automobile Factory (GAZ), as the enterprise is now known. (Gorky, the city that became the hub of Soviet industry, has now reclaimed its original name, Nizhny Novgorod.) When my wife and I arrived there in July 1998, we were taken in hand by Natalia Kolesnikova, director of the GAZ Museum of History, and Galina Moleva of the GAZ Foreign Trade Firm. Now a private stock company, GAZ was eager to recover the story of its origins and of its links with the West. We shared all that we knew. The apartment buildings erected under my father's supervision were still standing and in use, and some of the original construction remained in the vast automotive complex.

At the end of our week together, I offered to search for an American museum that might join with the GAZ Museum to mount an exhibition depicting this unique history. My inquiries led me to the Crawford Auto-Aviation Museum at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio, where the principal offices of the Austin Company are located. John Grabowski, director of research, was immediately taken with Allan Austin's letters. Edward Pershey told me that the Historical Society would soon erect a new Crawford Museum of Transportation and Industry, for which my proposal would be a natural venue.

Soon the museums were discussing plans for a sophisticated traveling exhibition to begin at the new Crawford Museum, visit other museums in America and in Russia, and find a permanent home at the GAZ Museum in Nizhny Novgorod. The Austin Company, ownership of which had been recently acquired by its management, was also eager to recover its history. The company loaned Heidi Makela to assist in this exhibition planning. As Makela searched company archives in Cleveland and Kolesnikova dug more deeply into museum and company archives in Russia, they uncovered important documents, artifacts, photographs, and motion pictures.

In September 1999 I returned to Nizhny Novgorod with a delegation from the Crawford Museum and began face-to-face planning with the GAZ Museum. During that week the Nizhny Novgorod Regional Archives were opened to our research. They contain important documents that had been held in secrecy.

On the final evening of our visit, Natalia Kolesnikova, Galina Moleva, and I agreed to attempt an additional project. I would prepare a manuscript on the construction effort in 1930 and 1931, based on my father's letters. Galina Moleva

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Richard Austin greets Fyodor Chinchenko, who as a young man worked on Worker's City construction and then continued in the automobile factory for his working life. *Nizhny Novgorod Worker*, 1998. GAZ Museum of History

would translate the manuscript into Russian. Natalia Kolesnikova would edit it for a Russian audience. We would seek publication in both countries.

All documents used in the preparation of this narrative—originals where possible, copies where necessary—have been deposited at the Western Reserve Historical Society.

In addition to those mentioned earlier, two people deserve particular thanks. When Allan Austin became president of the Austin Company, Marvin Epstein assisted him with public relations and became the unofficial company historian. His reflections on my father and on the company have been invaluable.

I thank the editors at the Kent State University Press for their patient attention to this manuscript, and particularly Christine Brooks for her imaginative book design.

Anne Leibig, my wife, is the first reader of all that I write. Her thoughtful suggestions and her dependable support add to my joy in writing.

Dick Austin
Dungannon, Virginia
November, 2003

BUILDING UTOPIA



THE AUSTIN METHOD

In 1930 my father, Allan S. Austin, was the youngest of the American engineers who guided the construction of the first new city in the Soviet Union, a project that also required building the largest automobile factory in Europe. His letters home provide the day-by-day narrative at the heart of the remarkable story told here. My mother, Margretta Stroup Austin, was younger still when she accompanied him—she was twenty-two. Allan passed his twenty-fifth birthday on the trip to Russia. (I would be born several years later.) Despite their youth, these two embodied the skills and the values that this team of Americans brought to their work with the Russians.

My grandmother, Emma Stroup (pronounced *Strowp*), loved to tell the story of Allan and Margretta’s “first date.” It was the summer of 1919 when Allan was fourteen, Margretta not yet twelve. Allan arrived on a Saturday afternoon to take Margretta to a moving picture show. He drove his father’s huge Packard Twin-Six (twelve cylinder) automobile. He was not a tall boy. From the window, my grandmother watched Allan escort Margretta to the high car, open the passenger door, and assist her up into the seat. Then he went round to the driver’s

Margretta took this snapshot of Allan Austin on their honeymoon, just eight months before they embarked on another ocean voyage, to Russia. *Margretta Austin Jamieson Album*

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side. After he seated himself, Allan could barely see out the windshield. Emma would release a fond, soft laugh as she brought this scene to mind. “Babes in the woods!” she would exclaim, and then again, softly to herself, “Babes in the woods.”

The Austin and the Stroup families had met at the Windermere Methodist Church in East Cleveland, Ohio, and they became close friends as they worshipped together year after year. There were quite a few Methodists in the

team that went to Russia in 1930. Methodism is an English Protestant church, founded in the eighteenth century in response to the hardships of the early industrial revolution. The Methodist movement appealed to dislocated families—those forced from their farms into England’s coal mines, iron furnaces, and cotton mills, as well as those who left England for America. The early Methodists believed that people came to God through a “heartwarming experience” of personal discovery. To assist this process Methodists held emotional “revival meetings” in churches or even in the open air. Ministers organized those who responded into groups for mutual support and discipline—this was the “method” that gave the church its name. Methodists became thrifty, hardworking, and sober—alcohol, tobacco, and gambling were forbidden to them. These habits helped Methodist working families to prosper, so by the nineteenth century their children became the backbone of the English middle class, and also the American.

Margretta’s father, Ner Stroup, was the minister who led the Windermere Methodist Church, while her mother, Emma Cartwright Stroup, was the evangelist, whose preaching helped to draw new people to the congregation. Emma’s father, Elijah Cartwright, had been an ironworker. He emigrated from England to America in 1845 and worked thirty years tending blast furnaces—twelve hours a day, seven days a week. As Elijah treated the wounds of ironworkers during frequent strikes, he became famous for his healing touch. He also assisted with childbirth, delivering all of his own children and many others in the poor neighborhood. When new steel technology closed the iron mills, Elijah became a shopkeeper and a Methodist preacher.

His daughter Emma was not only a Methodist evangelist but also a leader in the struggle to secure for women the right to vote. She was a Christian socialist. Inspired by the New Testament, not by Karl Marx, she believed that government must represent the needs of common people and not favor the rich.

When my mother Margretta was six years old, she was riding in an automobile with her parents and her two older brothers when their auto was struck by a trolley car. As the auto was hurled down the track the three children were thrown free, but when it burst into flames the parents were trapped. Ner died from his burns, and Emma lost her left leg. For the remainder of her ninety-five years Emma walked with crutches. Nevertheless, she raised three fine children: a poet, another Methodist minister, and my mother.

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Borrowing, perhaps unconsciously, from a Christian symbol for Christ—the alpha and the omega, “the beginning and the end”—Wilbert Austin designed in 1907 this symbol for his “Austin method.” The method and the symbol are still in use a century later. *The Austin Company Archives*

The Austin heritage had its own drama. My great grandfather Samuel Austin learned the carpenter trade in England and then, in 1872, emigrated to Cleveland, Ohio, to find work. In 1881 he started his own construction company. Samuel was so skillful and honest that he never lacked for work. Samuel was also a strict Methodist. When the ridgepole was erected on one of his early buildings, the carpenters tied a small fir tree on top as a signal that they were ready for the customary reward of a bucket of beer. Samuel saw the signal, but instead of beer he would bring them a more expensive gift, a basket of oranges. His workers soon learned that Austin employees did not drink alcohol on the job. This standard, and many more of Samuel’s principles, survived in the Austin Company for nearly a century. During his early years Samuel Austin built houses and stores. In the 1890s, he built some of Cleveland’s first factories as well.

Samuel’s only son, Wilbert J. Austin, as a child watched the family business grow. Wilbert secured a degree in mechanical engineering from the Case School of Applied Science in Cleveland, and then he studied architecture in Europe. After Wilbert joined his father’s business in 1900, he developed a management strategy that would revolutionize the industrial construction industry in the United States. Relying upon the reputation for integrity that his father had earned, Wilbert offered to clients a single contract, which would include design of a building, all construction, and the installation of machinery and equipment. He called this “the Austin Method of undivided responsibility.” Those willing to trust the Austin Company for an entire project would receive a better building in a shorter period of time, at a reasonable price agreed to in advance.

Thomas Edison’s new electric-light industry was the first to respond. Between 1908 and 1913 the Austin Company built lightbulb factories all over the United States to meet the rising demand for electric lamps. Then Wilbert Austin designed the first wide-span steel trusses, which allowed modern assembly lines to be set up in factories with no pillars in the way. With the approach of the First World War, many industries hired Austin to build factories and railroad facilities, as well as the first airplane assembly plants, hangars, and airports. As projects spread across the United States, Wilbert Austin innovated again. He willingly negotiated labor contracts with the unions representing workers in the various construction trades. Workers were assured good wages

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Wedding portrait of Margretta Stroup
Austin, July 17, 1929. *Margretta Austin
Jamieson Album*

and working conditions; the Austin Company was assured a quality workforce wherever it needed to build.

In the 1920s the Austin Company became America's best known construction firm. In 1927, in Michigan, the Austin Company built the world's largest automobile factory to manufacture the "Pontiac Six" for the General Motors

Corporation. The Austin Method worked so well that this huge factory was completed in just seven months.

Russian specialists were among those who took note of this remarkable achievement. They had come to America to learn how the Soviet Union might acquire the technology to manufacture cars and trucks for itself.

That same year, Allan Austin graduated from Yale University with a degree that combined architecture, engineering, and building management. His ambition was to follow in the footsteps of his father and his grandfather. A few months later Margretta Stroup graduated from Stanford University in California—its youngest graduate up to that time—with a degree in English literature. Since Allan also had an ambition to court Margretta, Wilbert Austin assigned his son to construction projects in California. The couple announced their engagement on Margretta's twenty-first birthday, and they married the following summer, on July 17, 1929. Eight months later they were on their way to Russia.

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Allan Austin's and Margretta Austin's letters and photographs have been deposited with the Austin Family Papers at the Western Reserve Historical Society. The originals of other photographs will be found at the GAZ Museum of History or at The Austin Company, as indicated in the text and notes. Original manuscript materials may be found at these locations and also at the Nizhny Novgorod State Archive and at the Russian State Archives of the Economy, Moscow.

Copies of nearly every item used in the preparation of this book have been deposited both at the Western Reserve Historical Society and at the GAZ Museum of History. Researchers in both Russia and the United States may have convenient access to them.

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GAZ Museum of History, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia
Nizhny Novgorod State Archives, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.
Russian State Archives of the Economy, Moscow
Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
The Archives of Walter and Victor Reuther
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