

## **R. G. Compton, A. S. Kabakaev, M. T. Stawpert, G. G. Wildgoose, E. A. Zakharova: A. G. Stromberg: first class scientist, second class citizen**

**Imperial College Press, London 2011; €87.99**

**Fritz Scholz**

Received: 25 November 2011 / Accepted: 26 November 2011 / Published online: 11 December 2011  
© Springer-Verlag 2011

This is a book about the physical chemist Armin Genrikhovich Stromberg (1910–2004) who founded a large school of electroanalytical chemists at the University of Tomsk, USSR/Russia; but it is much more than only a biography. Stromberg's ancestors migrated from Germany to Russia, probably to what is now Estonia, and at a so distant time that it can no longer be known exactly where. Not only that his three names revealed his German descent, it was his fate to be born in the then German city Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) where his parents accidentally happened to be when Armin was born because his father, as a young physician, visited several clinics in Germany before returning to St. Petersburg in 1911. This collectively stamped him as a German—not good for a life during Stalin's reign and WW II. The Oxford electrochemist Richard Compton, when becoming acquainted with Stromberg's life, decided to write this book together with some colleagues, a researcher from Tomsk (Kabakaev) and Elza Arminovna Zakharova, the daughter of Armin Stromberg, which gives the book a special authenticity. The result is a most remarkable book which can be recommended to anybody who likes to get insight to science history in USSR and how it was coined by the tragedies of the twentieth century. The book starts with an excursion into the history of German migration, which was so welcome by Russian Tsars like Catherine the Great and Peter the Great, and which had considerably added to the development of Russia, not only by the diligent and disciplined and organized work of German farmers in the

Volga region, but also by the contributions of German scientists, merchants, and entrepreneurs. Germans formed a considerable part of the Intelligentsia, not only in the Baltic region (Estland/Estonia, Livland/Livonia) but also in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Compton and co-authors recognize and value these contributions of Germans to the wealth and culture of Russia, and they cannot be accused of having a biased view, which makes their presentation especially convincing. A large part of the book contains translations of the letters which Stromberg has sent during his detainment in the GULAG to his wife, his daughter, and his mother. These are most moving documents of high literary value, witnessing how he kept his spirit and that of his relatives despite the hardships of malnourishment and hard work in a brick factory. Luckily, Stromberg could return to science and establish a large and effective research group at Tomsk Polytechnic University. There he concentrated on the development of stripping voltammetry, a topic for which he was best prepared by his earlier work on polarography, and specifically, amalgam polarography. It is highly interesting to read what Stromberg writes about the reasons why he missed inventing stripping voltammetry and it were Barker in the UK and Kemula in Poland who did this (see also [1]). His contemplations about that topic beautifully mirror his honesty and clear sight. Similarly impressive are his own explanations of how to run a research group and how he coped with the different characters of colleagues. The author of this book review had the great fortune to meet Stromberg in 1996 in Tomsk, and he still remembers vividly that Stromberg told him he had just started working with a new PhD Student, at the age of 86! His unassuming, sincere, and human character was obvious from each word and gesture. Compton's book exactly paints that picture of a great scientist and humanist, finishing with

---

F. Scholz (✉)  
Universität Greifswald, Institut für Biochemie,  
Felix-Hausdorff-Straße 4,  
17487 Greifswald, Germany  
e-mail: fscholz@uni-greifswald.de

the following words: “He may have lived his life as a second-class citizen, and become a first-class scientist, but he was above and beyond all a first-rate man.” Thus, the book is not at least a plea for humanity reminding us to the not-negotiable common values of man. The book can be read by anybody interested in getting a picture of USSR science, and the hard struggle of its people to reach word significance. It does not need special background knowledge in science, and it will be valuable for historians as well as for the science community. The latter may regret that the authors had to compromise by

skipping a detailed discussion of Stromberg’s scientific merits, but this is compensated by having achieved writing a deeply impressing and insightful text on Russian science history of the twentieth century.

### Reference

1. Scholz F (2011) *J Solid State Electrochem* 15:1509–1521