

HERO'S WELCOME FOR MAJOR GAGARIN

London greets down-to-earth spaceman with near-hysteria

CROWD UPSETS SPUTNIK

BY OUR OWN REPORTER

"I am still an ordinary mortal," Major Yuri Gagarin said at his press conference at Earls Court yesterday. But London took a different view. It greeted the Soviet space hero with enthusiasm bordering on hysteria: a genuinely warm welcome combined with the sort of excesses of behaviour normally reserved for visiting royalty and film stars.

His open Rolls arrived at Earls Court to the roar of police motorcycles and shrieks of feminine pleasure. Just after one o'clock, half an hour late because of the traffic and the crowds, he was swept into the forecourt of the exhibition hall, where a large crowd had been gathering all morning. Stepping from the car on to the red carpet he looked the prototype Russian hero—the Soviet equivalent of the "all-American boy."

He is smallish, dark, upright, clean-cut. He wore a waisted khaki jacket, air force blue trousers, a khaki cap with blue band, the Gold Star of the Soviet Union and a permanent, good-natured smile. A bouquet of red carnations, white michaelmas daisies and orange gladioli was thrust into his arms as he was embraced and shaken by the hand. "The most kissed man in Europe" said a man in the crowd.

Lift to lunch

Police linked arms to keep back the crowd. Foreign students chanted "Gagarin, Gagarin, Gagarin." A Soviet photographer was struck in the chest by a policeman when he moved forward to get a shot; he did not appear greatly surprised. Then the spaceman was hustled by police through the hundreds in the foyer; he reached the lift and safely ascended to lunch.

But this was nothing to what happened later. Reporters had to fight their way to the stairs to the fashion theatre where the press conference was held at three o'clock. By 4.15, when Gagarin emerged to attempt his tour of the exhibition, thousands had gathered around the stairs, in the Cosmic Hall and along the route he was to follow. Repeated announcements were made asking the public to clear the way but no attention was paid.

Gagarin was mobbed on appearance. A path was forced into the Cosmic Hall where a large model sputnik toppled above the heads of the crowd. Luckily it was righted before anyone was hurt. He saw nothing of the exhibition. It soon became clear that a tour was impossible and he was hustled out, still smiling, by a dozen grim-faced constables standing head and shoulders above him.

As a result of this hurried exit his car was not ready and the police had to force his way across the forecourt and lift him bodily into the vehicle. Then they set about pushing it through the mob until it managed to get under way along the Warwick Road back to the peace of the Soviet Embassy. Helmets had been shed, frightened children were crying, shins were bruised and feet trodden on.

By comparison, the press conference which intervened between these turbulent scenes was a quiet affair. Not much information came out of it: there were too many journalists, from too many countries, interested in too many special "angles." Only two questions of scientific interest managed to get asked; for the rest it was how he felt, what about women in space, what his wife said, could he speak English, what did he think of England? Obviously a serious young man he must have been surprised by the trivia which the reading public was deemed to want to know about the first man in space.

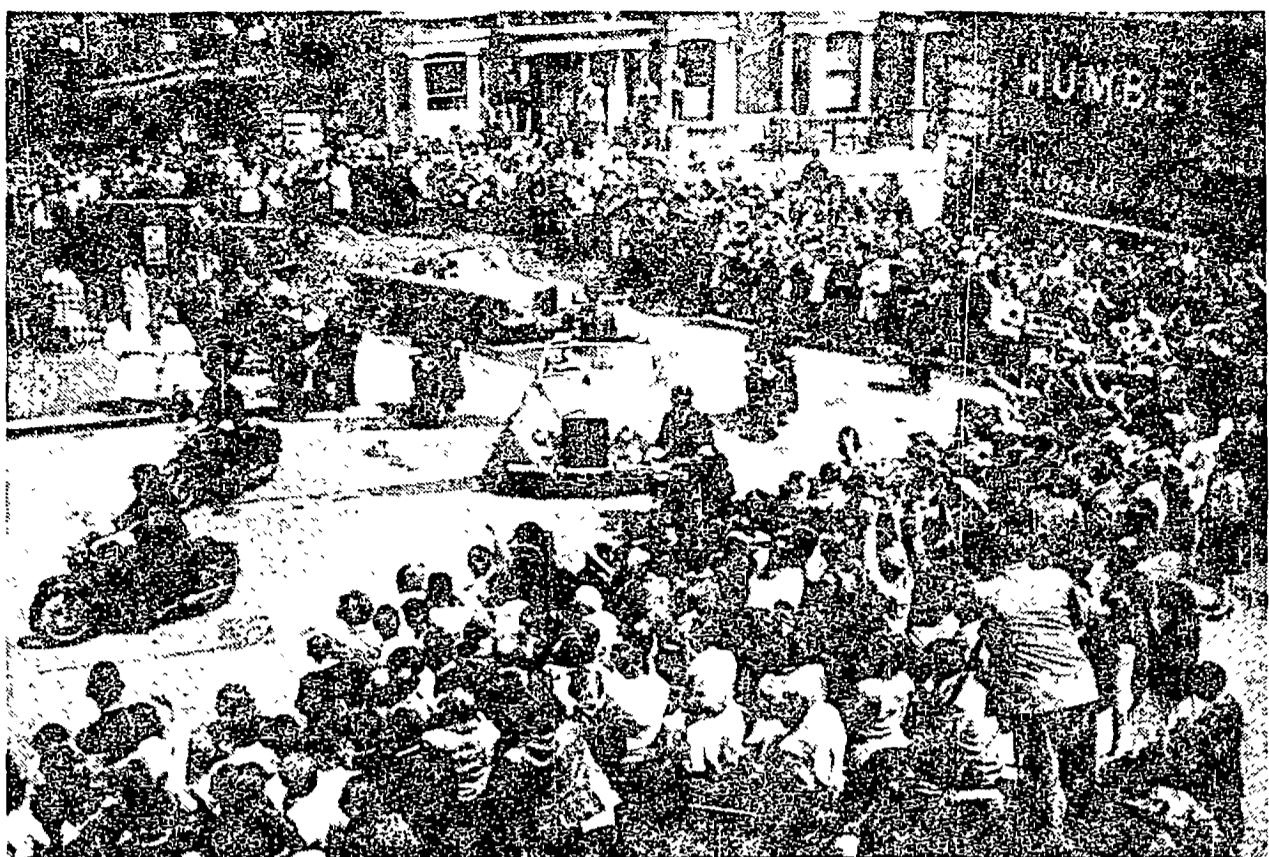
No sense of infinity

The personality of the man emerged, however, under this treatment. He is not given to speculative thought, not a very imaginative man, a pleasant sense of humour but not a master of repartee. A down-to-earth fellow one might almost say had not the march of science made the expression entirely inappropriate.

What were his personal feelings in space? He was too busy to have personal thoughts. What did he think of science fiction? He had read a lot but regretted the authors made supermen of their astronauts; they were just ordinary men; it was "just a case of thorough training and a certain amount of knowledge." Did he have nightmares after his experience? No; he had never been "much of a dreamer." Did he experience a "sense of eternity" asked an oriental journalist thinking of his readers. He experienced no sense of infinity or anything of the kind—"Perhaps I fail to understand it."

He is a firmly but naturally modest man. He refused to be regarded as a celebrity and looked forward to the day when his profession would number enough to escape the glare of publicity. His Gold Star of the Soviet Union was numbered 11,175, he pointed out. This meant 11,174 accomplished something notable before him.

When given a chance to speak about the practical aspects of space flight he was much more in his element. He



explained carefully that he had landed inside the rocket although an alternative system was available by which he could have been ejected to descend by parachute. He told a questioner that a spaceman could not be an observer only. He was bound "to take an active part and to direct the flight." He was hoping for another trip if he was again "entrusted."

New Columbus

The spaceman was welcomed at the airport, when his silver Aeroflot TU 104 touched down just after 11 o'clock, by Mr Francis Turnbull, secretary of the office of the Minister for Science, Sir Ronald Lees, Deputy Chief of the Air Staff and Lord Drogheda, chairman of Industrial and Trade Fairs, the company organising the exhibition. Mr Turnbull said: "I have the honour on behalf of her Majesty the Queen to welcome you on your first arrival to Britain. Your courage and daring in undertaking the first manned space flight has been greatly admired by the people of Britain."

At the lunch given for Major Gagarin at the exhibition by its organisers, Mr Julian Amery, Air Minister, said "I know I shall be speaking for the whole nation in expressing our unbounded admiration of the coolness, skill, and yet modesty with which, like some new Columbus, you ventured out into the unknown and returned."

Mr Amery said that Britain too proposed to launch out into space and follow the trail that Major Gagarin had blazed. He referred to proposals to form a space club with France and other European countries around the Blue Streak rocket. Although this was a long way from the stage reached by Russia and America there were many young men in the Royal Air Force who were only waiting for a chance to follow his example.

Last night, to complete perhaps the second most hectic day in his career, Gagarin attended a reception given in his honour at the Soviet Embassy.

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