

HOW PEOPLE LIVE
IN SOVIET RUSSIA:
IMPRESSIONS FROM A JOURNEY

Mendel Osherowitch



Edited by **Lubomyr Y. Luciuk**

Translated from the original Yiddish edition by **Sharon Power**





ווי מענשען
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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
Chair of Ukrainian Studies



Kashan
Press

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: How people live in Soviet Russia : impressions from a journey / Mendel Osherowitch ; edited by Lubomyr Y Luciuk ; translated from the original Yiddish edition by Sharon Power.

Other titles: Vi mentch(e)n leben in Sovet-Rusland. English

Names: Osherowitch, Mendl, 1889-1965, author. | Power, Sharon, 1980-translator. | Luciuk, Lubomyr Y., editor.

Description: Series statement: Holodomor : occasional papers series ; 3 | Reprinted with corrections. Originally published 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20220146691 | ISBN 9781777930615 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Osherowitch, Mendl, 1889-1965—Travel—Ukraine. | LCSH: Ukraine—History—Famine, 1932-1933. | LCSH: Ukraine—Description and travel. | LCSH: Soviet Union—Description and travel.

Classification: LCC DK267 .O713 2022 | DDC 914.7704/84—dc23

Map: *Ukrainian lands during the interwar years*. Reprinted and revised with permission from *Ukraine: A Historical Atlas* by Paul Robert Magocsi, cartography by Geoffrey J. Matthews (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985)

Design, layout and printing: Allan Graphics Ltd., Kingston, Ontario

The reprinting of this book was made possible with the support of the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium and the Temerty Foundation.

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Holodomor: Occasional papers series #3

Printed in Canada. All rights reserved.
ISBN 9781896354439

*Let others sing of the hungry pain of love,
Let others sing of the hungry pain of life,
I will sing of the hungry pain of hunger.*



Excerpt from *The Hungry Pain of Hunger*
A poem by Moishe Nadir (translated from the Yiddish by Philip Rahv), *New Masses*, VII,
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Forverts – Too Many Decades Too Late

In February and March 1932 Mendel Osherowitch visited the Soviet Union on assignment for the Yiddish-language newspaper, *Forverts* (*Forward*). Boasting a daily circulation of 275,000, this influential New York City-based newspaper was socialist in content but not Bolshevik in form.¹

How Osherowitch got this assignment was revealed in the memoirs of David Schub, another Jewish Ukrainian working at *Forverts*: “A short time earlier I had advised Cahan to send Osherowitch to Russia for a couple of months. ‘What are you thinking of?’ Cahan responded. ‘What can Osherowitch find out for us there?’ I replied: ‘I don’t mean for you to send Osherowitch over there to research the political and economic situation – to find out whether Stalin’s Five Year Plan is a success or a failure, or who has the upper hand in the Politburo and the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and what kinds of changes we can expect in the near future. For those purposes *Forverts* has plenty of competent writers, such as Y. Yurevski, S. Ivanovitsh, R. Abramovitsh and others. Osherowitch should go to visit the theatres, cabarets, taverns and marketplaces, the Soviet shops and Jewish houses of study, to speak with common people in the streets, Jews and non-Jews. Afterwards, he’ll describe everyday life in Soviet Russia. I’m certain this would be more interesting to the average reader of *Forverts* than articles about Stalin’s Five Year Plan.

Cahan thought it over and then said: ‘That’s a good idea. Do you think he’d like to travel to Soviet Russia? Would he be able to get a visa?’ I answered: ‘I am sure he’d willingly travel to Russia and I believe he’d easily get a visa. He is not known as an anti-Bolshevik

and Dr. Dubrovsky, the Soviet representative in New York, is an old friend of his.' To that Cahan responded: 'Good. Let's go and ask Osherowitch right away.' So, right after we finished eating, we went to my office, where Osherowitch was working. Cahan told him: 'Shub has recommended I send you to Soviet Russia for a month or more. Would you like to make the trip?' Osherowitch responded: 'Why not? With pleasure.' Cahan then went on: 'Do you think you can get a visa?' To which Osherowitch answered: 'I think so.' At that Cahan said: 'So make the arrangements as quickly as possible. But don't tell anyone you're going. Someone could ruin the whole plan.'

Within two weeks Osherowitch got the visa and departed for Russia. He went first to Moscow and from there immediately left for his home town in Ukraine, where his old mother was still living. Osherowitch's two younger brothers, who had been small children when he left home, were now Communists and had high positions. Osherowitch himself later told me that they were officials in the *Cheka*. Thanks to them he had the opportunity to visit places where other foreign tourists were not allowed to go. He also spoke with many people, Jews and non-Jews, Communists and non-Communists. The series of articles about what he saw and heard in Soviet Russia, later published in *Forverts*, was very successful, and made a name for him as a capable and serious journalist...Osherowitch returned from his trip to Soviet Russia a changed person. He became much more serious...more politically aware."²

Osherowitch's book, available for the first time in English, was based largely on experiences he had in Soviet Ukraine. Although ready for publication by December 1932 it did not appear until 1933, after his series of articles had first appeared in *Forverts*.

In his writing Osherowitch took pains to insist he was sympathetic toward the Russian Revolution, and not a stranger come from abroad with no connection to Ukraine. He had been born and raised in Trostianets' and his mother, brothers, and sisters were still living in the Soviet Union. And while he was naturalized as an American citizen, in 1924, Osherowitch firmly believed his emigration in no

way distanced him from a love for his Ukrainian homeland, his people, and the ideals of socialism.

Osherowitch spoke Yiddish, Ukrainian, and Russian like a native. He was able to converse more intimately with people than most Western visitors. Over the course of his journey he accumulated a cache of personal stories, many shared in confidence, allowing him to record accurately the features of a Bolshevik system he regarded as markedly dysfunctional, sometimes criminal. Guardedly, so as not to expose the identities of those he spoke with, his text nevertheless laid bare the very harsh realities of daily life under Soviet rule.³

He writes about the pervasive fear of the *GPU* secret police, recounts how parents were scared their own children might be informing against them, and tells of great hordes of peasants clambering onto trains trying to escape into the cities, in an anguished search for bread. He hints of rural uprisings brutally suppressed, of how Western reporters, self-sequestered in Moscow, were failing to report on the famine, and of the growing tensions between those benefitting from Bolshevik rule and those for whom “life in Soviet Russia” was an enervating nightmare. What perhaps puzzled him most was how his beloved Ukraine, known from ancient times as the breadbasket of Europe, was being reduced to a land without bread. Poignantly, he reported:

Ukraine was already experiencing an appalling famine. Millions of people had been driven to the greatest desperation, to a life sometimes even worse than death. Plagues circulated in villages and in the towns. People died because they could no longer endure their terrible hunger. On many roads, covered with snow, lay dead horses, withered away from hunger. At the train stations, thousands and thousands of peasants wandered around, covered in bodily filth and dirt, waiting for trains they hoped would take them into the cities, where they could perhaps sell something, maybe get bread. The dreadful misery of these people, this harrowing state of affairs, tore at one's heart. Everywhere I was told conditions had already been like

this for a few months and that since the Five Year Plan began, emphasizing heavy over light industry, the situation in the country had gotten worse and worse (pp. 204-205).

The situation did indeed worsen, very much so. Although Osherowitch did not know it, he had arrived in Soviet Ukraine just as the Great Famine of 1932-1933 was metastasizing into the *Holodomor*.⁴ Demographers estimate that in February and March 1932, when he was there, the excess death rate was around 600 people a day.⁵ About a year later another intrepid and righteous observer, the Welsh journalist Gareth Jones, spent a few days wandering through Ukrainian villages near Kharkiv. By late March 1933 the excess death rate had grown exponentially, to around 9,000 people per day. More than 4 million Ukrainians were starved to death between the autumn of 1932 and late spring of 1933, some 13% of the country's total population, making the *Holodomor* one of the greatest genocides to befoul 20th century European history.⁶

When Osherowitch's book appeared its reception was mixed, despite his commendatory descriptions of how Jews had gained from the Bolshevik Revolution. Pogroms were a thing of the past. Previously unheard of educational and career prospects had opened up. There was almost unrestricted social mobility, including opportunities for membership in the Communist Party, even service in the ranks of the Soviet secret police.

Osherowitch also recognized the negative side of these much-touted gains. With regret, he saw how the Jews were being assimilated. Not only were their religious practices and cultural institutions steadily being undermined but the secular Yiddish press and arts had become little more than tools for propagating Soviet ideology. Even the Yiddish language was being abandoned as young Jews left their towns and *shtetls* for the cities. Those who stayed behind were elderly or less able to adapt to the "new order." Osherowitch met many Jews of the latter sort during his travels. As they recounted tales of unrelenting misery and despair, he listened, almost to the point of himself suffering mental exhaustion. Everywhere he went

people implored him to alert their relatives abroad to their plight, begged for aid to be sent, shed tears of anguish and shame.

The only exceptions he recorded were among some younger Jews who hailed the Revolution's purported achievements. They proclaimed the Soviet Union was overtaking and would soon surpass the USA. They declared an even-better future was soon to come. What separated these advocates for Communism from left-leaning American Jews and fellow travelers who took a rosy view of "life in Soviet Russia" was that Osherowitch's Jewish interlocutors in Soviet Ukraine had little choice but to admit their present circumstances were dire. How could they do otherwise when he was right there among them? Yet still they avowed their sacrifices, the disappearance of their Jewish faith and culture, were necessary losses, offerings expected from all engaged in the messianic chore of building socialism.

More ominous portents were starting to appear, for those willing to see. Jews in Soviet Ukraine were always a minority, their numbers in rural areas and smaller towns reduced even further by outmigration to the big cities. Many who moved away, including Osherowitch's brother, Buzi, took up positions as agents of the Stalinist regime. His other brother, Daniel, who stayed home, became an armed enforcer of collectivization, a grain collector taking food from the starving.

Osherowitch's account makes plain how Jews who remained in the villages and smaller rural towns suffered destitution and hunger. Some would perish during the famine. Yet it was the Ukrainians, the peasant majority, who were the principal victims of the *Holodomor*, fated to starve in their millions. Already, by the early winter of 1932, they had begun to question on whose side their Jewish neighbours stood. In Haisyn, as Osherowitch heard tell, Ukrainians had called upon Jews to help them break down the gates of a government granary. If they refused these Jews were told their treachery would be remembered and someday would surely be avenged.

Osherowitch's jeremiad was largely ignored, all but forgotten. While Yiddish was not then an obscure language it was inaccessible to

most North Americans, including Osherowitch's fellow Ukrainian immigrants. Aware of the famine they would have welcomed his first-hand account, recognizing it as an independent confirmation of how this catastrophe was intentional. Yet the Ukrainian diaspora never seems to have heard about what Osherowitch saw.

Despite the reporting of Malcolm Muggeridge, Rhea Clyman, Gareth Jones, and others who attempted to alert the world to the famine laying waste to Soviet Ukraine more powerful forces were determined to stifle all such news, dismissing these accounts as alarmist, exaggerated, or nothing but anti-Soviet propaganda. The most effective of the famine deniers was the duplicitous Walter Duranty of *The New York Times*.⁸ While Duranty's reports were challenged in the letters-to-the-editor page of that very newspaper, he managed to obfuscate the causes and consequences of Ukraine's Great Famine. The truth was buried.⁹

But what about Mendel Osherowitch? The colleague who had advocated for his trip to Soviet Ukraine later wrote of how Osherowitch came back "a changed person...much more serious... more politically aware." Certainly, he published articles exposing what he had seen, available for readers of *Forverts*. He next followed up with a Yiddish-language book, further elaborating on what he uncovered during his journey. This is all a matter of record. Yet these writings were only in Yiddish.

Why, given what he observed and what he claimed he could never forget, did he not provide his eyewitness testimony in English, to reach a broader audience? No record exists of him ever trying to. His voice was heard only by kith and kin, among whom there were more than a few who elected to stay ignorant, were indifferent, or even hostile to Osherowitch's *cri de coeur*. Was he shocked into silence after he was denounced by his brothers and those within the Jewish diaspora still enraptured by the Stalin cult? Did he grow reticent after receiving news that his family members had been repressed, fearing they would suffer even more if he spoke up?¹⁰ We will never know. All that is certain is that he did not. Though Osherowitch was living in

New York City, working for a socialist newspaper, and serving on its Soviet/Russian desk, he remained conspicuously silent throughout 1933, even as Walter Duranty and Gareth Jones contested the very existence of a famine on the pages of *The New York Times*.¹¹ We do not know why. Nor can we judge Osherowitch today for why he chose to do nothing more public back then.

In the end we are left with a remarkable and moving chronicle of what Mendel Osherowitch saw on a journey across Soviet Ukraine in the early winter of 1932. His witness was shared only with Yiddish-language readers, a chosen few. He exposed the mounting misery facing Jews and Gentiles, non-Ukrainians and Ukrainians, and saw the truth of what was happening on the very eve of a politically engineered famine that would soon consume millions of lives. Its consequences later overwhelmed many of this famine's survivors — perpetrators, victims, and bystanders alike. Now Osherowitch's words have finally reached a wider audience. We can only lament that they came to us too many decades too late.

*Lubomyr Luciuk, Professor
Royal Military College of Canada
5 March 2020*

¹ Founded in 1897, *The Jewish Daily Forward* (*Forverts*) was headquartered in its own ten-story building at 175 East Broadway, on the Lower East Side, in New York City. The Belarussian-born Abraham Cahan, who emigrated to the USA in 1882, served as the editor-in-chief of this daily newspaper for 43 years.

² See David Shub, *Fun di amolike yorn: bletlekh zikhroynes (From Years Past: Memoirs, 1919-1970)*; New York: Tsiko Bikher Farlag, 1970), Volume 2, pp. 795-797. Dr. David H. Dubrovsky was the director of the Soviet Red Cross in the USA until he broke with the Soviet regime, in 1935.

³ Similarly, in April 1928, Nachum Chanin had returned to the USSR. Involved with the Organization for Rehabilitation Through Training (*ORT*), then in negotiations with the Association for the Settlement of Jewish Toilers on the Land (*GEZERD*), he travelled extensively, met representatives of the Jewish Section of the Soviet Communist Party (*Evshektiyya*), and even attended the May Day Parade in Moscow's Red Square. Reportedly, the Kremlin approved his visit because it hoped to secure large sums of money from American Jews and was aware such aid would be forthcoming only after an *ORT* representative was first convinced it would benefit Soviet Jews. Instead, after his return to America, Chanin wrote a series of critical articles for *Forverts*. He did not identify his confidantes, nor even disclose where he met them. Yet soon after Chanin's *Forverts*

articles appeared almost all of them — men and women alike — were arrested and many were exiled to Siberia. Evidently, the *GPU* had followed Chanin to every town and city he visited. News about his friends' fate left Chanin embittered and possibly informed Osherowitch's own cautious behavior years later. For Chanin's experiences, see David Shub, *Fun di amolike yorn: bletlekh zikhroynes (From Years Past: Memoirs, 1919-1970)*; New York: Tsiko Bikher Farlag, 1970). Another Yiddish socialist, Harry Lang, writing to Cahan from Paris, 6 November 1933, explained he understood he "must take care of the people who have spoken to me" since what happened to Osherowitch's family was "self-evident."

Lang's wife, born into a Jewish family in Kyiv, penned her own account of the famine in Soviet Ukraine. See Chapter 24, "Soviet Nightmare," in Lucy Robins Land, *Tomorrow is Beautiful* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948). Lang recalled: "This was September, 1933, the year of the great famine. There was no movement in the countryside. At every station we saw scores of peasants, men and women, huddling together on the wet ground, their mud-stained bundles scattered about them. Mud-encrusted rags covered their feet, and filthy pieces of sacking clothed their bodies...I tried to talk to my fellow passengers, but I was met with numb indifference. Among themselves they talked constantly of bread...I had many aunts, uncles, and cousins on my father's side who were still living in the Soviet Union. Some of them had participated in the revolution, joined the Communist party, and risen into the higher ranks of the oligarchy. Three of Reb Chaim's grandchildren were in the OGPU. Others were army officers, administrators of collective farms, or supervisors of factories..."

In the office of a Moscow functionary there was a picture of a mother in distress, with a swollen child at her feet, and over the picture was the inscription, "The eating of dead children is barbarism."

I spoke of this poster to the official. "It is one of our methods of educating the people," he said. "We have distributed hundreds of these posters, especially in the villages of the Ukraine."

"Are conditions as bad as that?" There was a moment of painful silence. "Some of our people are very unenlightened," he replied somberly.

We saw for ourselves the misery in the Ukraine...Through a member of my family, we met a high official of the Ukrainian Soviet, who, like many other Ukrainian Communists, had nationalist inclinations and was constantly at odds with Moscow. He talked frankly, advising us to visit the villages. "Six million people have perished from hunger in our country this year," he told us. "Six million."

We hired an automobile for the suggested trip, paying the local Intourist \$50 a day, and the official accompanied us. No one was to be seen in the fields. Although it was late in the fall, the hay had not been taken in, nor had the grain been threshed, and crops were rotting everywhere... We visited one wretched village after another, and finally we came to the village of the dead. There were a few score homes, but the doors were boarded up, and there was not a living creature in the gardens and fields. Then, out of one of the dismal shacks, a soldier appeared. Our escort questioned him and he said that more than half the inhabitants of the village had died from hunger and the others had fled. It was the same, he said, in many of the surrounding villages. What was he doing in the village? He shrugged his shoulders; he had been ordered to guard it, and he would stay until he was ordered elsewhere. He took us to a place where there was a depression in the ground. "Here is where most of them are," he said. Some dozens, he told us, had been buried in this common grave, which was not marked in any way...

As we left the village, we noticed a photograph of Stalin over the gate. It seemed symbolic: Stain enthroned over a dead world.

We went onto Kiev, my native city... While visiting the grave of my grandfather, Reb Chaim, we saw hundreds of new graves. There were no headstones, only wooden sticks with numbers. Sometimes corpses lay on the grass of the cemetery for days, waiting to be interred, while mourning relatives stood guard against the vast armies of crows. One of the grave diggers came up to us, and, with a searching glance of fear, started a conversation. "You are looking at fresh graves," he said. "You see Kiev has made its contribution to the second five-year plan. Tell my brothers in America about it."

We took a motor trip from Kiev into the country, and we came across a field in which the crops were burning. Here, as elsewhere, the grain had been left to perish, but sunshine had dried the stacks, and rebel peasants had set them on fire to prevent the government from harvesting the

wheat. While soldiers fought the conflagrations, peasants looked on with a show of indifference. Here was a new form of revolt. Again and again we had seen peasants working under the eyes of armed soldiers. These people had chosen death rather than slavery. This was the explanation of the famine. It was not an act of God. It was man-made...

As we returned to our hotel one midnight, after a secret rendezvous with relatives and their friends, we were amazed to discover that the streets were being washed by an army of men and women. My OGPU cousin provided the explanation: Édouard Herriot, the French statesman, was to arrive in the Ukraine the next day, and orders had been given to eliminate every trace of the famine... When Herriot arrived, the city was spotless, and the streets were filled with cheering throngs... How could the visitor know that the people who cheered him were fearfully acting under orders? How could he know they were hungry, as always, and even more tired than usual because of the extra exertions they had been forced to make to conceal their misery from his eyes?...

We saw the gruesome consequences of the famine. There could be no question about it: millions of peasants deliberately chose death in preference to the slavery of the collective farms. They had fought for the land in the revolution, and they refused to submit to this new kind of serfdom. Millions resisted passively even to the death, but others waged a grim and silent war with arson, theft, and sabotage as their weapons. Crops were destroyed, livestock slaughtered, machines wrecked.

We talked with group of veteran revolutionaries, who had all played prominent roles in the days of Kerensky and later of Lenin. One of them summed up the great change in this sentence: "Our dream has vanished." I have never heard more poignant words."

Concluding this chapter, Lang reflected: "I was deeply dejected, and not merely by the physical suffering I had seen, terrible as that was. Men and women of my generation had dreamed a beautiful dream. Out of that dream had come a horrible, bestial system for the enslavement of the human spirit."

After her husband's articles about Soviet Ukraine were published in *Forverts*, between November 1933 and February 1934, all "hell broke loose," precipitating deep mental anguish, even thoughts of suicide, a situation ameliorated somewhat by support the couple received from Abraham Cahan and Fred Beal.

⁴ Academic studies, including documentary collections, eyewitness accounts, and demographic analyses about the Great Famine include; Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (New York: Doubleday, 2017); Jerzy Bednarek *et al*, eds, *Holodomor: The Great Famine in Ukraine, 1932-1933* (Warsaw/Kyiv: Institute of National Remembrance of Poland and National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2009); Marco Carynnyk, Lubomyr Y. Luciuk, and Bohdan S. Kordan, eds, *The Foreign Office and the Famine: British Documents on the Great Famine of 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine* (Kingston: The Limestone Press, 1988); Serge Cipko, *Starving Ukraine, The Holodomor and Canada's Response* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2017); Declan Curran, Lubomyr Luciuk, and Andrew G. Newby, eds, *Famines in European Economic History: The last great European famines reconsidered* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Miron Dolot, *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985); Andrea Graziosi and Frank Sysyn, eds, *Communism and Hunger: The Ukrainian, Chinese, Kazakh and Soviet Famines in Comparative Perspective* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2016); Bohdan Klid and Alexander J. Motyl, eds, *The Holodomor Reader: A Sourcebook on the Famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2012); Bohdan Krawchenko and Roman Serbyn, eds, *Famine in Ukraine 1932-1933* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1986); Stanislav Kulchytsky, *The Famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine: An Anatomy of the Holodomor* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2018); Leonard Leshuk, ed, *Days of Famine, Nights of Terror: Firsthand Accounts of Soviet Collectivization, 1928-1934* (Washington: Europa University Press, 2000); George O. Liber, *Total Wars and the Making of Modern Ukraine, 1914-1954* (University of Toronto Press, 2016); Lubomyr Luciuk, ed, *Holodomor: Reflections on the Great Famine of 1932-1933 in*

Soviet Ukraine (Kingston: Kashtan Press, 2008); Victoria A. Malko, ed, *Women and the Holodomor Genocide, Victims, Survivors, Perpetrators* (Fresno: The Press at State University of California, 2019); Athanasius D. McVay and Lubomyr Y. Luciuk, eds, *The Holy See and the Holodomor: Documents from the Vatican Secret Archives on the Great Famine of 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine* (Toronto/Kingston: Kashtan Press and Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto, 2001); M. Wayne Morris, *Stalin's Famine and Roosevelt's Recognition of Russia* (University Press of America, 1994); Christian Noack et al, eds, *Holodomor and Gorta Mór: Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine in Ukraine and Ireland* (Anthem Press, 2014) and Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

⁵ Statistical analyses of population losses in Soviet Ukraine during 1932-1934, particularly information about direct losses in numbers, losses per 1,000 population by *oblast*, and average daily excess deaths by month were provided by Professor Oleh Wolowyna. For more information see O. Wolowyna, S. Plokyh, N. Levchuk, O. Rudnytskyi, A. Kovbasiuk and P. Shevchuk, "Regional Variations of 1932-34 Famine Losses in Ukraine," *Canadian Studies in Population*, 2016, Volume 43, No. 3-4. The political geography of the *Holodomor* has been mapped by Harvard University's Ukrainian Research Institute at <http://gis.huri.harvard.edu/historical-atlas/the-great-famine.html>

⁶ The case for the famine being a genocide was made in a 1953 speech in New York City by "the father of the UN Genocide Convention," Dr. Raphael Lemkin. See Raphael Lemkin, *Soviet Genocide in the Ukraine* (Kingston: Kashtan Press, 2014) and Norman Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton University Press, 2010). Commenting on the fate of the Ukrainian peasantry, Lemkin began: "What I want to speak about is perhaps the classic example of Soviet genocide, its longest and broadest experiment in Russification — the destruction of the Ukrainian nation." Then he continued: "... the Soviet plan was aimed at the farmers, the large mass of independent peasants who are the repository of the tradition, folklore and music, the national language and literature, the national spirit, of Ukraine. The weapon used against this body is perhaps the most terrible of all — starvation. Between 1932 and 1933, 5,000,000 Ukrainians starved to death, an inhumanity.... a famine was necessary for the Soviet and so they got one to order, by plan, through an unusually high grain allotment to the state as taxes. To add to this, thousands of acres of wheat were never harvested, and left to rot in the fields. The rest was sent to government granaries to be stored there until the authorities had decided how to allocate it. Much of this crop, so vital to the lives of the Ukrainian people, ended up as exports for the creation of credits abroad. In the face of famine on the farms, thousands abandoned the rural areas and moved into the towns to beg food. Caught there and sent back to the country, they abandoned their children in the hope that they at least might survive. In this way, 18,000 children were abandoned in Kharkiv alone. Villages of a thousand had a surviving population of a hundred; in others, half the populace was gone, and deaths in these towns ranged from 20 to 30 per day. Cannibalism became commonplace" (p. 13). On 20 September 2018 a multilingual plaque (English, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew) commemorating Dr. Lemkin's address was unveiled at the Ukrainian Institute of America in New York City.

⁷ That Mendel Osherowitch was otherwise known to the Ukrainian-American community is evident. His passing was marked with a front page notice in the leading Ukrainian-American newspaper, *Svoboda*, 27 April 1965. That story, however, made no mention of his 1933 book, implying the editors of a newspaper which had itself reported on famine conditions in Soviet Ukraine were unaware of his eyewitness account. Likewise when his death was announced in *The New York Times*, "Mendel Osherowitch Dies at 78: Was Prolific Writer in Yiddish," 17 April 1965, there was no mention of *How People Live in Soviet Russia*. For an example of *Svoboda* reporting about the famine see the 1 December 1933 edition which included press stories about a mass demonstration in New York City on 18 November protesting "Moscow's starvation of Ukrainians" and America's diplomatic

recognition of the Soviet Union. Reports about this protest were published in *The New York Times*, *The New York American*, *The New York World Telegram*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The Sun*, and *The Sunday Mirror*. An excerpt from *The New York Times* recorded: “Five persons were injured and nine arrested in street disturbances that lasted for two hours yesterday morning, when 500 Communists attempted to break up a parade of 8,000 Ukrainians from Washington Square to the Central Opera House at 67th Street and Third Avenue...Three hundred policemen, including a score of mounted men, were called out to enable the marchers to reach the opera house and to conduct a meeting there in peace.”

⁸ Gareth Jones’s first-hand account has been published as ‘*Tell Them We Are Starving*’ - *The 1933 Soviet Diaries of Gareth Jones* (Kingston: Kashtan Press, 2015). For more on Jones, see Margaret Siriol Colley, *Gareth Jones: A Manchukuo Incident* (Newark on Trent: Privately Printed, 2001); Margaret Siriol Colley and Nigel Linsan Colley, eds, *More Than A Grain of Truth: The Biography of Gareth Richard Vaughan Jones* (Newark on Trent: Privately Printed, 2005); and Ray Gamache, *Gareth Jones: Eyewitness to the Holodomor* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2013). On Walter Duranty, see James William Crowl, *Angels in Stalin’s Paradise: Western Reporters in Soviet Russia, 1917 to 1937, A Case Study of Louis Fischer and Walter Duranty* (University Press of America, 1962) and S. J. Taylor, *Stalin’s Apologist - Walter Duranty: The New York Times’s Man in Moscow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). On the campaign to have Duranty’s Pulitzer Prize revoked, see Lubomyr Luciuk, ed, *Not Worthy: Walter Duranty’s Pulitzer Prize and The New York Times* (Kingston: Kashtan Press, 2004). According to William Strang at the British Embassy in Moscow, Duranty opined “it quite possible that as many as 10 million people had died directly or indirectly from lack of food in the Soviet Union during the past year.” See Document No. 50, “Tour by Mr. W. Duranty in North Caucasus and the Ukraine,” 26 September 1933, *The Foreign Office and the Famine*, p. 313. Why the British never broadcast this information was revealed in minutes penned by Laurence Collier, head of the Foreign Office’s Northern Department, 30 June 1934: “The truth of the matter is, of course, that we have a certain amount of information about famine conditions...and that there is no obligation on us not to make it public. We do not want to make it public, however, because the Soviet Government would resent it and our relations with them would be prejudiced. We cannot give this explanation in public...” See Document No. 71, “Famine Conditions in the Soviet Union,” 2 July 1934, *The Foreign Office and the Famine*, p. 397.

⁹ See, for example, the letter of Katherine E. Schutock, “Hunger in the Ukraine,” 6 April 1933, *The New York Times*. She wrote: “I note the denial of the starvation of those in Ukraine, North Caucasus and Lower Volga regions by your correspondent Walter Duranty, in this morning’s issue of THE TIMES.” She continued: “Private letters from persons in these regions indicate that thousands have already died and more are dying from starvation....The people who write such pathetic letters are not looking for help, because it cannot reach them...Most of the letters I have seen end thus: ‘If you do not hear from us again, you can be sure we are not alive. We are either getting it for this letter or we are through. The agony of living and dying of hunger is so painful and so long. What torture it is to live in hunger and know you are dying slowly of hunger.’ The Soviet Government is repeating the deeds of 1921, when the famine situation was not known until it was too late to help those five millions in the Ukraine, who died of starvation just on account of false information.” On 8 May 1933 a letter by Gareth Jones appeared in *The Manchester Guardian*, “The Peasants in Russia: Exhausted Supplies.” He confirmed the accuracy of articles written by an anonymous correspondent [*Malcolm Muggeridge* –ed] published in that newspaper on 25, 27 and 29 March 1933. Jones wrote he had been in “about 20 different villages in the Ukraine” in March of that very year. In each settlement he “received the same information – namely that we are dying of the famine and that about four-fifths of the cattle and the horses had perished. One phrase was repeated until it had a sad monotony in my mind, and that was: “*Vse Pukhili*” (all are swollen, i.e. from

Hunger), and one word was drummed into my memory by every talk. That word was 'golod' – i.e. "hunger" or "famine." Jones congratulated *The Guardian's* correspondent for being "the first journalist to have informed Britain of the true situation" and cited the latter's summation of what he had seen: "To say that there is famine is to say much less than the truth...The fields are neglected and full of weeds; no cattle are to be seen anywhere; and few horses; only the military and the G.P.U. are well fed, the rest of the population obviously starving, obviously terrorised." Gareth Jones was honoured with a multilingual (English, Welsh and Ukrainian) plaque at his *alma mater*, the University of Aberystwyth, Wales, 2 May 2006.

¹⁰ In "Back to the Future: American Jews Visit The Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s," Daniel Soyer wrote: "Pro-Soviet organs also tried their best to undermine the testimony of critical witnesses. In fierce polemics, Communist writers accused their opponents of both theoretical poverty and personal dishonesty. In response to Osherowitch's reports, the *Freiheit* released a furious rebuttal by workers in the writer's hometown, together with an angry letter from his brother, a Soviet official. Osherowitch's *landslayt* accused him of being a "capitalist lackey" whose eyes were "sealed shut with dollars." His brother charged that Osherowitch had praised the Soviet Union in letters to the family, while attacking it in print. In 1937, Pesach Novick accused Osherowitch, Lang, Vladeck, and Pinski of theoretical blindness. Even when they did not lie outright about what they had seen, he charged, they failed to see that the problems that did exist were ones of transition and class struggle. Tellingly, Novick relied heavily on other eyewitness accounts, including his own, to counter the claims of his opponents. Just as significantly, Novick explicitly criticized reports that had appeared as much as five years earlier, indicating that the political impact of these accounts outlasted the specific conditions that may have been prevalent when they were written." The source for the above information, referenced as a reprinted pamphlet, *Forverts blofs vegn dem Sovetn Farband oyfgedekt*, and said to be in U.S. Territorial Collection, RG 117, Box 80, YIVO, was not found. Shub also reported that Osherowitch's "...brothers were later arrested because of his 'counter-revolutionary' articles in the *Forverts*. They were accused of having given him all the information about the sad state of life in Soviet Russia, which was not true. Osherowitch's brothers happened to have made a great effort to present life in Russia to him in a favorable light, and to defend everything the Soviet government had done and was currently doing."

Other visitors to the USSR at the time were more forthcoming. See, for example, Will Durant, *The Tragedy of Russia: Impressions from a Brief Visit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1933). On page 47 he observed: "The starving peasants of the Ukraine sent a delegation to Stalin in the summer of 1932 to beg him to reduce the demands made by the ruthless *Gosplan*, or State Planning Commission, on their supply of grain, and to beg, indeed, for the transport of food back to the Ukraine so that unhappy region (which would give billions to be free from Russia) might eat; but the Man of Steel refused; instead, he continued to ex-*port* grain. For after all, there were many Russians; their birth rate was still the highest in the world; grain was more important than people, for grain could be sold. The cities had to be fed, or industry would stop."

See also Chapter 22, "Famine," in Fred E. Beal, *Proletarian Journey: New England, Gastonia, Moscow* (New York: Hillman-Curl, 1937). Hiking out of Kharkiv in the autumn of 1932, Beal saw "numerous fresh graves marked with crude Greek crosses pushed into the earth, and skeletons of horses and cows," then came across a man's decomposed body, "the first dead human being in the open we saw that day." As "far as the eye could see, the land was barren save for weeds...Yet at this very time the *Moscow News* was telling Americans that Ukraine was one hundred per cent cultivated!"

In the spring of 1933, Beal took a train out to a collective farm near Chuhuyeve, then walked further east for several miles: "We met not a living soul. We came up a dead horse and a dead man upon the side of a road. The horse still lay harnessed to the wagon. The man was still holding the reins in his lifeless stiff hands. Both had died from starvation, it seemed...The village we reached was the worst of all possible sights. The only human there was an old woman who passed us on the village street...She was stark mad...There was no other life. The village was dead. Going up to one of the shacks, we looked into a window. We saw a dead man propped up on a built-in Russian stove.

His back was against the wall, he was rigid and staring straight at us with his faraway dead eyes. I shall always remember that ghastly sight. I have seen dead people who had died naturally, before. But this was from a cause and a definite one. A cause which I was somehow associated with, which I had been supporting. How that deathly gaze pierced me! How it caused me to writhe in mental agony!

As I look back, I think that unforgettable scene had more effect than any other in deciding me to do what I could do to rectify my horrible mistake in supporting the Stalinists.... We found more dead people in what had been their homes. Some bodies were decomposed. Others were fresher. When we opened the doors, huge rats would scamper to their holes and then come out and stare at us... Many of the houses were empty. But, in the rear, the graves told a story of desolation and ghastly death... signs were stuck up on these graves by those who buried them: I LOVE STALIN. BURY HIM HERE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE!... I had seen enough of villages and collectives and communes. On our way back, near the station, people told us that *that* village was to be burned. Three or four others in the vicinity had already been burned. Not a trace of the houses or of the dead bodies in them was left...

The Stalin dictatorship has one thing which works in its favor: the horrors of Soviet life are such that few people in the Western World could be brought to believe them... In 1933, I had occasion to call on Petrovsky, the President of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic... Comrade Petrovsky," I said, "the men at our factory are saying millions of peasants are dying all over Russia. They see poverty and death all about them. They say that five million people have died this year... What are we going to tell them?"

"Tell them nothing!" answered President Petrovsky. "What they say is true. We know that millions are dying. That is unfortunate, but the glorious future of the Soviet Union will justify that. Tell them nothing!"

Reviewing Durant's book for *New Masses* ("Five Days That Shook Durant," August 1933, pp. 20-21), H. W. L. Dana observed, "Unfortunately there are some who confuse the name of Will Durant with that of Walter Duranty. Walter Duranty, the Moscow correspondent of *The New York Times*, is obviously no Bolshevik, but he is too well trained an observer and too honest a reporter to indulge in the sort of bunk which Will Durant is trying to feed the American people."

¹¹ On 31 March 1933 a despatch from Walter Duranty appeared in *The New York Times*, titled "Russians Hungry but Not Starving." Specifically referring to Gareth Jones, Duranty questioned the latter's "hasty judgement" about famine conditions in the USSR, describing it as a "big scare story." While admitting he knew of hunger in "not only some parts of the Ukraine but of sections of the North Caucasus and lower Volga regions, and, for that matter, Kazakstan, where the attempt to change the stock-raising nomads of the type and the period of Abraham and Isaac into 1933 collective grain farmers has produced the most deplorable results," Duranty went on: "But --- to put it brutally --- you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, and the Bolshevik leaders are...indifferent to the casualties that may be involved in their drive toward socialization." Claiming to have made his own "exhaustive inquiries," he observed: "There is a serious food shortage throughout the country, with occasional cases of well-managed State or collective farms. The big cities and the army are adequately supplied with food. There is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation, but there is widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition... In short, conditions are definitely bad in certain sections - the Ukraine, North Caucasus and Lower Volga. The rest of the country is on short rations but nothing worse. These conditions are bad, but there is no famine."

Jones responded to Duranty's dodge, 13 May 1933: "...at the end of March, I stated in an interview in Berlin that everywhere I went in the Russian villages I heard the cry: "There is no bread, we are dying," and that there was famine in the Soviet Union, menacing the lives of millions of people." Jones also described how he gathered evidence from multiple sources including German colonists, foreign diplomats, journalists, and technical experts who had ventured into the country while also relying on his "talks with hundreds of peasants...not the "kulaks" - those mythical scapegoats for the hunger in Russia - but

ordinary peasants.” Fluent in Russian, speaking with people in private while jotting down their conversations, Jones heard the famine “was worse than in 1921 and that fellow-villagers had died or were dying.”

Duranty also attempted to undercut Jones’s testimony by insisting the latter had done nothing more than take a forty-mile walk through a few villages in the neighbourhood of Kharkiv. While Jones had “found conditions sad,” Duranty acknowledged, the former had also admitted he had not seen any dead or dying animals or human beings.

Jones’s rejoinder was acerbic: “One does not need a particularly nimble brain to grasp that even in the Russian famine districts the dead are buried and that there the dead animals are devoured.” He concluded his riposte: “May I in conclusion congratulate the Soviet Foreign Office on its skill in concealing the true situation in the U.S.S.R? Moscow is not Russia, and the sight of well fed people there tends to hide the real Russia.” Osherowitch would have agreed.

Introduction

It has become fashionable to brand anyone an “enemy of Russia” who doesn’t conceal the truth about how life there is now very difficult, who doesn’t voice a ready-made “enthusiasm” for everything being done and accomplished there.

This fashion has been led by Communists and others who flirt with Communism. They presume only they – exactly they and no one else – have some kind of a monopoly or “patent” on love for Russia and devotion to a revolutionary ideal.

This is false, at its very foundation, false.

Telling the truth about the reality of life for people in this country, in which the entire world has become interested, is just the opposite of being an enemy of Soviet Russia. It means being a friend. Enemies are those who conceal the truth, who try to drown reality in a sea of phrases and theoretical speculation. They are enemies and also traitors who play a considerable role in seeing to it that thousands and thousands of visitors from other countries return from Soviet Russia disappointed and deceived.

Only foreigners can indulge in the pleasure of claiming Soviet Russia is a great laboratory where an “interesting experiment” is being conducted on 160 million individuals. This very approach is enough to deaden human feeling. Many writers – Jewish and non-Jewish alike – who have visited Soviet Russia over the last few years have done just that. Suddenly they somehow became, out of thin air, “experts” about machines and factories, writing about what they call “The Song of Steel and Iron,” otherwise completely forgetting and overlooking the living and suffering people who work at those machines of iron and steel.

When I travelled to Soviet Russia in 1932, I went there not as a foreigner but as one of their own. For the entire 22 years I have been in America I have not ceased being interested in Russia, have always felt close to everything connected to Russian culture and Russian idealism.

My dream was always to return to Russia – if not forever then at least for a short time. I always longed to go there. Partly this was a sentimental desire. I left behind a mother, four sisters and two brothers. I had not seen them for 23 years since, having spent 2 years in the Baltic provinces far from family before I left for America. In those 23 years children have become adults and adults have become old, my mother even older. In the letters she wrote my mother always complained: “Who knows whether I will see you again in my lifetime?” So there was personal longing.

However it was not only family sentiment that drew me to Russia. It was not only my mother and my sisters and brothers whom I wanted to see. I also wanted to see the country where not only a political but also a social revolution had taken place. I wanted to see the country which bears the name “The Republic of Workers and Peasants,” the country where they proclaim so loudly about how they’re building socialism. Being a socialist myself I wanted to see how socialism is being built in the country I was born in, in the country I have always loved so much.

And so I went. Went with the best of intentions, with the best of wishes. I didn’t go with any illusions. It was clear to me that life in Soviet Russia couldn’t, as yet, be a paradise. I knew that while 15 years means a lot in the life of a single individual it represents very little in the course of history. And so I imagined life there would still be difficult. The reality I saw in the few weeks I travelled across Soviet Russia, that grey, hard and sad reality, far exceeded anything I had imagined beforehand.

I would consider it to be a great crime if I did not tell the truth, if I did not portray what I saw, if I did not report what I heard.

Yes, surely, it would be much more pleasant and nice if I could just bring a happy greeting from Soviet Russia. But I cannot suppress any facts, will not conceal the truth. And that is because I have always been, and still am, a friend of Soviet Russia!

Writing about Soviet Russia is not easy because the present situation there is such that everything – besides the terrible poverty and great need – is a half-truth. And an old proverb says that speaking a half-truth is much worse than telling a complete lie.

They're building a great deal? Yes, however...They're spreading education amongst the people? Yes, however...They're abolishing the distinction between races and peoples? Yes, however...There isn't any unemployment in Soviet Russia? Yes, however...Newspapers are being disseminated amongst the masses in millions and millions of copies? Yes, however...For everything one must add a "however" because Soviet Russia has become a country of half-truths. And – I say this again – a half-truth is much worse than a complete lie!

Even with respect to the terrible want so prevalent in Soviet Russia becoming worse and worse, one must add a "however," for, as they tell you there, "in this respect, future generations will live better." They speculate about tomorrow although there are no signs of improvement in the daily life of the people today. On the contrary, their situation is getting even more desperate. That is what people told me when I travelled across Soviet Russia. From the latest news we're getting it is clear conditions now are even worse than when I was there.

In writing about Soviet Russia I've tried at every opportunity to be as objective as possible. Instead of criticizing I have portrayed. Avoiding politics as much as possible I have tried to paint pictures and scenes depicting what I saw in cities, in towns, in villages, on the streets, in the houses, in train stations and onboard trains. Instead of theoretical polemics, the sort that sometimes drown the main point in a flood of words, I have reported the facts, what I saw with my own eyes.

In Soviet Russia I was above all interested in the individual and about how life is lived there. And because personal life in Soviet Russia is very sad, I have written as I have – not concealing the truth, not hiding facts, not disguising reality with boisterous images like you see on wall posters. In writing this way I also didn't overlook the good and the positive sides of Soviet Russia. Indeed I have dwelled on them. And so I am certain that those who read this book carefully will not say that during my trip to Soviet Russia I saw only the bad and entirely overlooked the good.



*Mendel Osherowitch
Brooklyn, New York
December 1932*

CHAPTER

I

In Moscow

1. A mixture of old and new

I had never been to Moscow before and couldn't say whether the city was more beautiful and vibrant in the times of the Czars or more beautiful and more vibrant now after 15 years of Soviet government. Today's Moscow made a strange impression on me personally and the more I became acquainted with the city the more I felt there a special, unique combination of musty oldness and backwardness combined with boisterous novelty and rapid momentum – a sort of strange union between the time of Czar Ivan Grozny¹ and the great American inventor, Thomas Edison.

This musty backwardness and noisy modernism bump into each other at every step, wrestle with each other, one trying to prevail over the other yet unable to do so. And it was like this not only in important things, in the very marrow of life, but also in the little things.

Take the new names of Moscow's streets. They're hung on the walls of houses and shine out from the tin plates that have been nailed up. Yet these new street names almost don't exist in the minds of the city's residents. So it happens that two friends met and very much rejoiced at seeing each other. "Oh, how are you? Haven't seen you for a long time. Come to my place this evening. You hear? You must come. I will wait for you."

¹ First Czar of Russia from 1547 to 1584 and commonly referred to as "Ivan the Terrible."

“And where do you live now?” the invited friend asked.

“On Karl Marx Street.”

“Where?”

“On Karl Marx Street,” adding the number of his apartment.

But the friend didn’t know where Karl Marx Street was, even though he was a long-time Moscow resident. So, with a smile, he asked again: “Perhaps you would give me the address a bit more clearly so that I could actually know where and how to find that street?”

And as soon as he was told the old street name he remarked – again with a smile: “You should have said so from the beginning because then I would have known right away where you live.”

Such things can be seen and heard not only in private houses but also in government institutions. Many of the government officials in Moscow don’t know and don’t remember the new names for the old streets. The new doesn’t want to adhere to the old, or perhaps cannot. On my first evening in Moscow I went looking for one of my friends. According to the address I was given this friend of mine lived on Frunze Street - named for the deceased military commissar². I walked for a long time around an empty, uninhabited neighbourhood, where the Moskva River stretched along one side, with the old and rather dirty walls of the Kremlin on the other. From time to time I stopped a person and asked where Frunze Street was located. I knew it wasn’t far from where I was walking. But nobody knew where such a street could be found or even if such a street existed in Moscow. The only person who did know was a policeman, standing at a street corner. “Frunze Street,” he said, “is the former Znamenka. Turn left and walk up one block and there you should ask where the former Znamenka is, they’ll show you...”

² Mikhail Frunze, a Bolshevik, headed the Red Army’s Southern Army Group. He was responsible for suppressing Nestor Makhno’s anarchist movement and Symon Petliura’s nationalist forces in Ukraine.

Everything is “former.” Not only the street names but also the names of cities, of the *guberniias* (provinces) of the entire country. And it has come so far that the word “former” has already become part of that which is current.

And that’s how they speak and even how they address letters: “The former city of such-and-such, located in the *guberniia* which was called such-and-such, to the citizen so-and-so, who lives – let’s say – on the First of May Street, which was once known under such-and-such a name...”

Due to this there is very often a great deal of confusion, and more than anywhere else, this confusion is felt in Moscow because the city is very big and has countless streets and alleyways which have received new names, although their old appearance has changed very little. And, besides this, the Russian in general has a strange quality to his nature, holding stubbornly onto the old even when all around him life has been transformed into a new form.

At every step in Moscow one sees the conflicting languages emerging out of this strange union between the old and the new.

In an expensive hotel, where you pay so much to stay that even in the best New York hotels it would be called a lot, the washroom was neglected, dirtied and soiled, lacking the necessary amenities, the sorts of things one can’t do without.

There is a telephone, and, naturally, an automatic and beautiful one, according to the latest word in technology. But it broke down perhaps 20 times a day and nobody knew why and how. When it wasn’t broken and actually “worked” a person sat down by it, one of the guests at the hotel, and spoke and spoke and spoke, seemingly without end! It didn’t concern him that many people were standing and waiting nearby, also needing to use the telephone. It bothered him very little that others were hurrying, that they hadn’t any time. He continued his monologue and nearly always said the same thing: “What do you say, Olga Mikhailovna? Do you really think that things

must stay like this? Ha? What? Speak, speak, I hear you...”

Like that, without end.

When someone calls for you on the telephone they don't hurry to let you know. Sometimes they make the effort to call you from your room, sometimes not. And there's no point in complaining to anyone. There can be no discussion. All of the employees work in such a way that you can clearly see they don't have, and don't want to have, any personal initiative. The girl who registers you into the hotel when you arrive, who takes your passport and orders you to sign your name on a piece of paper, is smoking a cigarette. She speaks English, French, German and Russian, and knows everything about the high skyscrapers of New York. But she's dressed without a crumb of taste, walks like an old grandmother, is careless and shabby. Her mastery of languages somehow doesn't suit her.

You turn the hot water tap, clearly indicated as such, but only cold water comes out. And the reverse: the tap labelled “cold” gushes, naturally, with hot water. But very often, something is broken somewhere and so the water, both hot and cold, stops entirely. Naturally, this happens just when you need it most.

The scenes and images one sees in the Moscow streets cannot be found in any other city in the world. People are dressed there in whatever they want, in whatever they can get, so long as they're not going around naked, so long as they shouldn't be cold. Nobody is bothered by their bizarre appearance. Some are wearing fur coats, although very tattered and worn ones. Others are wearing peasant *svitas*³ and *koz hukhs*⁴. Some are wearing boots with galoshes and some boots without galoshes. Above all, one is struck by the unsightly knee-high felt boots (*valenki*) people have on. Not only men but women too wear these felt boots on their feet and this includes a considerable portion of those whom the “corrupt lazy bourgeoisie” of the capitalist countries bestow with such qualities as “women's

³ A woolen outer garment worn by men and pulled over the head.

⁴ A traditional Ukrainian sheepskin coat.

grace” and “femininity.” In Moscow, they say, nobody is concerned with such things: there people don’t dress for beauty but simply in order to cover their bodies.

Most women in Moscow, both young and old, don’t wear hats, only shawls on their heads. This makes them all look like peasants. In general, it’s difficult to find a woman in Moscow who dresses like women generally dress in other great cities in Europe or in America. When you sometimes see such a woman it’s a novelty, a wonder that draws great attention. The men, too, are no exception in this regard. From everyone emanates a greyness, a rustic hardness. At this time, when people are speaking about rapid industrialization and urbanization, they still carry with them the hardness and greyness of the old Russian village, as remembered from former times. This is a rather strange union between the Russian village of old and a city which considers itself to be the centre of the global revolution, which must abolish the old order and introduce a new one.

Many trams run in Moscow and there is much talk about speed and “tempo.” But, of course, the tram cars go very slowly, making it generally very difficult to travel using one in Moscow. Almost always these streetcars are so packed that it’s impossible to even pass a needle between the people. Not only are they crowded and stuffy inside, so much so that you’re nearly suffocated, but it’s also the same outside, on the steps. People are hanging onto these stairs, and this is much more difficult to do than on a New York streetcar because a Moscow tram’s stairs aren’t spread out but run together like the rungs of a ladder. So when you step out onto them you must bend forward with your entire body and hold on tightly to something or someone. People actually latch onto each other, crawl over each other and everyone mixes together in one grey, dirty mass, racing along somewhere, angry and nervous. And everyone is shouting out loud, everyone getting agitated, everyone rushing because if you arrive at work even a few minutes late, this will be called a *progul*, an absence from work without good reason, perceived as a sign of laziness or of a bad attitude. For such an infraction you won’t just get a pinch on the cheek. No, much worse, for they may suspect you’re out to

harm the work of building up the country. So everyone's nerves are stretched thin and terribly strained. It's a momentum, a gallop – to chase and overtake America!

Regardless, the streetcar drags itself along slowly and with difficulty. The conductor, usually a woman with a scarf on her head and wearing a dirty quilted shirt, sells tickets made of little bits of the kind of paper that disintegrates between your fingers. The passengers inside are speaking loudly, asking each other whether they're stopping at this or that station. And meanwhile other people are shoving and pushing so much that those standing at the sides become pressed to the walls and are nearly suffocated. And from all sides you hear voices:

“Hey, Citizen, are you stopping at the Petrovski Gate?”

“Hey, Citizen, are you stopping at the Zamoskvoretskii Bridge?”

“Comrade, don't block the way!”

“Comrade, make a path!”

“A little faster, Citizen!”

“Hurry up, Citizen!”

Whenever the tram stops the shoving and chasing become even greater. Everyone wants to get out fast because the car often starts moving before exiting passengers have gotten off. As for stopping the tram car before it arrives at the designated station, simply so passengers can get out where they might need to – such a thing doesn't exist in Moscow.

People actually tell how, very often, accidents happen on these Moscow trams. People fall off the steps or underneath. Some get maimed and wounded and it also happens that people get killed or become crippled after such an accident. Yet the newspapers don't

report on any of this. In general, Soviet newspapers don't chronicle daily events in the ordinary lives of people. Such trivialities as the accidents of people travelling on a streetcar or other misfortunes that don't have a connection with the construction of the country, particularly when there is no basis for suspecting anyone of being out to undermine the plan, for which the punishment can even be death – such trivialities are not reported in the newspapers. The only ones who know about them are the people close to those who experience a misfortune.

On many occasions I happened to travel on the Moscow tram cars. I became convinced that when they're not taking workers to work they go much more slowly than usual, such that you don't save any time by using them. Likely you'd get where you were going just as quickly on foot. So I spoke with acquaintances about this, and almost everyone gave me a unique answer. One friend said: "In America, people can go on foot because they have the strength to. Here, however, you can't walk because we don't have the strength to go on foot." And another one said: "I would go on foot but it's a waste of shoes. Shoes wear out very quickly on the stones of the Moscow streets and I've been wearing the same pair of shoes for 5 years already."

"So why not just buy new ones," I responded. A bitter smile spread on this person's face. "Do you know how much a pair of shoes costs here?"

"How much?"

"There are various kinds. For a pair of shoes, you have to pay 100, 150, perhaps even 200 rubles. And you can't always get them."

However, setting aside the fact that one must conserve one's shoes because they get worn out on the stones of Moscow's streets and that the minds of most Moscow citizens are occupied every day with such questions as where to get bread, butter, kerosene, milk, a piece of meat and other necessary items, not even one day goes by when hundreds and thousands of people aren't standing in Red Square,

by the mausoleum where the embalmed body of the deceased great leader of the Russian Revolution, Vladimir Ilich Lenin, lies. For hours people stand outside in the cold, all arranged in a long line, and wait for the opportunity to have a glance, a one-and-only glance, at the deceased great leader whom they truly idolize. Many of them, if not all, believe with complete faith that if he were still alive life would be better now, life wouldn't be so hard. That's how people often speak among themselves. Such a belief is expressed with authentic Russian naïveté and yet, because of this heartfelt belief, thousands and thousands of people queue every day and wait for the moment when they'll be allowed inside and will succeed in seeing the face of the deceased Ilich, who lives on in their memory like a saint.

On the first day of my trip to Moscow I went to the mausoleum. It was very cold outside and when I was standing together with everyone in the long line in Red Square, a woman approached me and said: "You, Comrade, as a foreigner, don't need to stand in the line. You can go inside directly." And leading me to the two soldiers standing by the door she said: "Let a foreigner through." They let me through directly. Inside, I fell in with a long line of people walking slowly and quietly. A heavy mournfulness, mixed with a spirit of holiness, seemed to emanate from the stone walls. With baited breath we walked, step by step, silently, not uttering a word, and in this manner approached the great glass box where Lenin's dead body lay, with an open face and with closed eyes – the same face the entire world had already seen in pictures everywhere, in various poses. Over the body hangs a large mirror, which shows Lenin in full size and brings out even more sharply the yellowness, the dead yellowness of his face. At both sides, by his head and by his feet, two soldiers stand with rifles, and the expression on their faces was frozen; it seemed as if they themselves were also a part of the deadness and holiness pervading this place. But if you observed them closely you saw how intensely they looked at the people moving around the glass case. They are there to ensure no one pauses, to make certain the line slowly and carefully moves around the case, then out to the exit.

Upon leaving the mausoleum I felt confused and strange. I wasn't thinking about how I had seen Lenin's dead body but only about how

they had taken me into the mausoleum as a “foreigner.” Above all, I could not forget these words: “You, Comrade, as a foreigner, don’t need to stand in the line. You can go inside directly.”

This wasn’t pleasant for me. Firstly, what kind of a “foreigner” was I in Russia? Have I then, in my 22 years in America, not lived with Russia, with Russian literature, with Russian history? And, even if I am now a “foreigner,” why do I get more privileges than a Russian citizen in Moscow? Even at Lenin’s dead body, more privileges!

A heavy feeling gnawed at my heart. This was all somewhat disagreeable for me. Because of this, I was in a bad mood the entire day and couldn’t go anywhere. But in the evening, when a great snow fell outside, and a strong frost settled in, I went out, all by myself, onto the streets of Moscow.

My American clothes were not appropriate for a Russian winter, which is usually exceedingly gloomy and cruel. I was very cold, and in addition, it was very slippery. I had to return to the hotel, having decided the evening should be devoted to recording in my notebook everything I had seen and heard over the course of the day. At the door of the hotel, however, I paused. I simply had no desire to go in. I wanted to see even more of Moscow’s people, even more scenes and images. Moscow was teasing me. Moscow didn’t let me rest. So I stood for a long time at the door, looking at the people walking in the street, picking up words from the conversations they were having and at the same time also listening to the sounds of the music drifting out from the hotel’s restaurant.

Most of the passersby were speaking about meetings, about work. Such words as “R.K.I.” (*Raboche-krestianskaia Inspektsiia*), *yacheika*⁵, *Raipartkom*⁶, *Tserabkoops*⁷, *Mostorg*⁸, *Maslotrest*⁹, *tekhruk*¹⁰,

⁵ A cell of the Communist movement.

⁶ District Party Committee.

⁷ Central Worker’s Cooperative.

⁸ Moscow Trading Administration.

⁹ Administration for Vegetable Oil Production.

¹⁰ Technical supervisor.

*Sovnarkom*¹¹, *Raikom*¹² and *Fabkom*¹³ drifted into one's ears. And further along, people in torn fur coats and tattered fur hats were clearing the snow from the streets, throwing it onto sleds, at the same time cursing each other out loud in a very authentic Russian style. Between them they uttered three and four and even five-part Russian 'blessings'...

“Ei, ty...Mat.”

And more and more of the same, exchanged between them in various versions and ways. Just like in the old days, as if nothing had changed. At that very moment two people, dressed in very poor clothing, in torn pelts, their feet wrapped in rags and bits of cloth, passed near me. Upon hearing the sounds of the music drifting out from the hotel they stole a glance through the frozen windows. Then one of them remarked: *A im to teplo tam* (it's warm for them in there). To which the other replied: *chto tam – burzhuaziia* (who's there – bourgeoisie). And he spoke this word *burzhuaziia* with a pinch on the “a.” His tone betrayed a world of contempt.

2. Jewish youth in Moscow

Very often one hears it said that Moscow has recently become a Jewish city. This is not the case. Moscow is not a Jewish city. The truth is that if there still is a city in the Soviet Union deeply stamped with an authentic Russianness that would certainly be Moscow.

Even without the forty-times-forty churches, whose bells once deafened the air with their ringing, even without the crosses whose fine gold once reflected the rays of the sun – Moscow has remained an authentic Russian city. And when the clock of the Kremlin rings out the hour in the quiet night, when it is late and people sleep, it seems as if a bell was ringing in a church somewhere, and I am certain that more than one Russian so awoken crosses himself, mumbling a prayer quietly. Yes, nearly no church bells ring in Moscow now. Yet

¹¹ Council of People's Commissars.

¹² District Committee.

¹³ Factory committee.

when something does ring it seems to contain the echo of a church bell. And everything around – the streets, the houses and the people, even the air – everything recalls the old, church-filled Moscow.

Moscow is, however, the centre of the Revolution. Moscow is the city with broad opportunities for a striving, ambitious youth, for those who want to study and work. Therefore it is no more than natural that young Jewish men and girls, who want to learn and become people, strive with all their strength to get there.

The desire of Jewish youth in Russia to study is now even stronger than it once was. Now Jewish youth in Russia have every opportunity to study, not like how it was before the Revolution when a young Jewish man or a Jewish girl had to undergo a terrible trial of suffering until they passed an exam, until they received their diploma. Whoever wants to continue studying after ending elementary school can do so. The Soviet government provides the student with an apartment, gives him what he needs to live, pays him, and all because he's learning. Eventually, even, the government creates opportunities for him to practice the trade he's studying. So students learning to be engineers are sent to the factories and industrial plants to become familiar with the work and acquire the necessary experience. Students studying medicine are likewise sent to the hospitals for the same purpose. And they are paid for the work they do while in the factories and hospitals. It is a successful combination of learning and working, of theory and practice. Since the majority of students are children of workers and peasants this has created a new type of student in the Soviet Union, entirely different from the type of student one remembers from the old times.

One must have engineers in Soviet Russia, because, of course, factories and industrial plants are constantly being built, and they're always speaking about technology that will, in time, overtake America. So Jewish young people are learning to be engineers. One must also have teachers because they're doing everything possible to entirely abolish *bezgramotnost*¹⁴ in the country, so Jewish girls are

¹⁴ Illiteracy.

learning through pedagogy courses how to be educators. Meanwhile everyone is striving to get to Moscow, everyone is rushing to try and get there, because that is the great centre of education and work. Once they get there, and begin living in Moscow, they throw off the stamp of the small town they came from. They blend in with the general population, both externally and internally. It doesn't take long before they become true Moscow residents and nobody can say that they aren't.

In the 2 days after I first arrived in Moscow I was surprised when I found out that about half of the people from the town I was born in, Trostianets,¹⁵ were living in Moscow. Several young people, whom I knew 22 years ago as small boys, now occupied very prestigious government positions, were playing major roles. If not for the Revolution they would surely not have gained such standing. If not for the Revolution they would certainly still be wandering around our small hometown, working as servants, brokers, sons-in-law *af kest*¹⁶ or plain unbaked intellectuals with broken hopes and clipped wings. They knew it and therefore it was no more than natural that they should be devoted with body and life to the new order. I met with most of them, spoke with them, was at their homes. Not a single one complained about the current order although they were dressed very poorly and frequently suffered from a lack of basic necessities. Still they were certain America was a great deal worse off than Russia.

In one of the “Communal Houses” I was led to on my first day in Moscow a small girl of about 13 years of age grew attached to me. She was clearly quite pleased to meet me and felt even more comfortable when she heard me speaking Russian. She did not leave my side during my entire visit. Instead she held my hand and went about examining my clothes – my hat, scarf and the walking stick I was carrying were all wondrous things for her. She was always asking questions, addressing me as none other than “Uncle.” She wanted to know whether there were schools in America, whether children there had to study as hard as they do in Russia, whether there were

¹⁵ A town in Ukraine's Vinnytsya *oblast*, in the historic region of Podolia, some 315 km southwest of Kyiv.

¹⁶ A Yiddish expression for receiving room & board with in-laws.

Young Pioneers and groups like *Komsomol* in American schools¹⁷. She complained about how the Scottsboro Negro boys¹⁸ were being held prisoner in America. After I answered all her questions, in the way one usually speaks with a charming child obviously curious to know everything in the world, she gave me a look of great regret: “Uncle,” she said, “you are greatly to be pitied!”

“Why, child?” I asked: “Why am I to be so greatly pitied?”

She replied: “Because it is so bad there in America, of course!”

It was pointless to try to change her mind. From everything she had been taught or heard it was clear as day to her that in America people in their thousands were dying from hunger in the streets, that workers went around naked and barefoot, constantly being beaten by the police, that no one was permitted to speak a free word – that America was a hell on earth and the Soviet Union a heaven.

That same day I also went to another “Communal House.” As I was being driven there in an automobile, children ran up to me, and one, a small boy of 7 years old, shouted loudly: *Mama, anglichanin priekhal!*¹⁹. Why he thought I was an Englishman, I don’t know. It’s possible that according to his understanding every person dressed differently and a little nicer than a Russian is none other than an Englishman.

My escort, the official “interpreter” who needed to show me the wonders and the achievements of the new Russia, took me to a workers’ apartment of 3 rooms. Before she led me in she explained this was a typical example of a workers’ apartment. Then we went inside. Before anything else my nose was struck by a stifling and very unpleasant smell. This was, however, only at the start. After the first few minutes, you got used to the odour and started to think of it as natural. In the kitchen, they were washing laundry, so steam and

¹⁷ Children were Little Octobrists until age 9, then became Young Pioneers between ages 9-15 and, finally, Young Communists, up to age 28.

¹⁸ Nine African-American teenagers, aged 13 to 20, accused falsely in Alabama in 1931 of raping two white women on a train.

¹⁹ “Mother - an Englishman has arrived.”

smoke seeped out from there. In the other 2 rooms, where about 6 people were living altogether, it wasn't very clean. Two women were sitting at the table. One was 40-something years old and the other was younger, about 30 years old. Both were dressed in very poor and dirty clothing. That made it near-impossible to determine who was older and who younger. Only when I had a chance to look at them more closely, after we began to speak, was I able to sort that out.

On the walls hung posters and placards with various Communist inscriptions and slogans. In one corner there was a "holy icon," near which a small lamp was burning, and in another stood Lenin's portrait. There was also a radio in the house. From somewhere in the ether someone was speaking on and on about how the entire capitalist world was more than ever before out to defeat the "Republic of Workers and Peasants," meaning everyone had a duty to stand on guard. The voice from the radio also spoke about the great achievements and feats of the Soviet regime which had erected great factories and industrial plants and given everyone employment at a time when in other countries millions of people were going around without work, with nothing to eat.

"Do you like to listen to the radio?" I asked one of the women. Throwing a glance now at me and then at my interpreter, the younger one answered: "Yes, like, not like – one hears." It's not difficult to understand this answer. I already knew a radio was installed in every apartment. For it you paid the government 1 ruble and 70 kopeks a month. This is, as they refer to it in Russia, an "imposed voluntary act."

"Well, do you occasionally also listen to concerts on the radio?" I asked. "Yes, once in a while we hear concerts, but very seldom." At this point another woman, who had been silent otherwise, spoke up. With a shrug of her shoulders she said: *Tselyi den' to i delo chto oriot i oriot* (As the day is long it never stops going on and on).

For all the time my "interpreter" led me around to various institutions and museums I was duly impressed by what I was shown. I came

away with the feeling that a majority of Moscow's residents, if not all, speak only about the great feats and impressive achievements already made, which, of course, future generations will benefit from, more than the present-day one. All this enthusiasm was inspiring, even for me.

That evening I had to meet with a certain lady, to whom I had been given a greeting to pass along from America. From what I had heard beforehand I knew she came from a very fine family, was very educated and had once been active in the revolutionary movement. On this basis I imagined in advance what kind of woman she would be but when she met me I was left amazed. Dressed like a beggar, with a pair of frumpy and torn felt slippers on her feet, this lady appeared so pathetic and beaten down that it was a pity to look at her as she greeted me. By her looks it was also difficult to guess how old she was. Just when I convinced myself she was 45 years old I realized she could also be 75. In her demeanour, however, one could still detect the telltale signs of a cultured upbringing. She was ashamed to be so poorly and tastelessly dressed. Perhaps because of this, she tried hard to speak in a fine, polished and nice-sounding Russian way.

I passed along a greeting from her relatives and friends in America and afterwards asked her to tell me about her life. On her face a bitter smile appeared. After carefully looking all around she said, quietly and with a deep sigh: "This is not a life, only a nightmare, an evil dream!" And while she was speaking about this distressing topic, she said: "All of you over there," she said, "don't have the slightest idea about how we live here! We're all putrefying under the banner of a beautiful ideal. We're drowning, we're going under, lost in a sea of beautiful phrases!"

There was a time when she had believed. Now, however, she had entirely lost faith. She no longer hoped for anything. She knew her life would have no good fortune. Her husband, once also active in the revolutionary movement, was now, just like her, terribly disillusioned. He was an employee in a government business, received a small salary, barely enough to live on. The rationed goods they received

were not enough. One had to buy more if one wanted to sustain one's soul. Workers received one pound of meat eight times a month. Employees, however, got no more than a half-pound of meat. This was too little. Yet, everywhere, people were obliged to work very hard. "The cost of goods," she added with a sigh, "is very high lately. A kilo (a little more than 2 pounds) of butter costs 20 rubles and you have to stand in the *ochered*²⁰ for hours before you receive it. A litre of milk costs 1 ruble and you pay 8 rubles for a dozen eggs." She listed the prices of many and various products and items – prices sounding like the digits of telephone numbers in America. At the same time she added that if you wanted to get any of these things you had to stand in line for hours. That meant getting up before dawn to get a spot in the queue. Very often, even after standing for hours, nearly frozen from the cold, you got nothing at all because there wasn't anything left once you made it to the front of the line. So you went home with empty hands.

"We have children," the dejected woman continued. "It sometimes happens a child isn't well and you need to nurse him with an extra piece of meat. But there isn't any meat!"

"Well, surely you can get a piece of chicken," I said. Again a sad smile appeared on the woman's face. Looking at me, she said: "I don't know whether you are really so naïve, or are simply not familiar with the conditions of life here in Soviet Russia. Your words remind me of the remark made by the French Queen, Marie Antoinette. You know, surely, that when they said to this Queen, before the outbreak of the French Revolution, that people were dying of hunger because there wasn't any bread, she answered: 'Well, if there isn't any bread, let them eat cake.' It's the same with you. You speak about nourishing a sick child with a piece of chicken but you know, my friend, a chicken costs us not less than 12 rubles!"

"This isn't a life," she added, "only a nightmare, an evil dream!"

²⁰ A queue.

The same woman, however, used an entirely different tone when she later introduced me to her children. She spoke about how ‘door and gate’ were now open for them in education, and said: “In the old times it was different. I know this from my own upbringing. The quota for Jews was not only oppressive but also insulting. Now, however, Jewish children in Russia have a free path to studying. There is no high level which they shouldn’t be able to get to and that is a joy, a great joy.”

That was how this dejected woman spoke about her children. She had a good basis for this. Her children were learning. They were in the *Komsomol*. They believed in a better future. A considerable portion of the younger generation in Soviet Russia share just such a belief. They, the young people, were so drawn into the new momentum that they weren’t concerned over how their parents could not adapt to the new order and difficult living conditions. They have completely different concepts and an entirely different approach towards life.

Here I want to bring forward a case that was very typical: a young Jewish man of 21, born in my town, met me in Moscow on several occasions. He always loved to speak about international politics and American technology – two things the new generation in Russia are strongly interested in. On one occasion he boasted to me about how his father was now in a *kolkhoz*²¹ and had been officially registered on the list of the poor²².

“Why are you so happy about that?” I asked. And the young man answered that now, with his father duly recognized as a poor man, a true pauper, he, the son, would no longer have any difficulties getting into a high school. Indeed a higher education would now be available for him because his social pedigree was flawless; his lineage was the highest someone could aspire to in the “Republic of Workers and Peasants” – for his father has been confirmed as a truly poor peasant.

²¹ A collective farm.

²² Bedniaks, poor peasants.

3. A day of life that doesn't make sense

Sometimes there's a day when all sorts of things happen that don't make sense and even seem unbelievable when you recall them later on. I once had a day just like that in Moscow.

The day began with a man banging on my door early in the morning, when I was still asleep. After he had apologized for disturbing me, he introduced himself, mentioning a name entirely unfamiliar to me. He had heard I was in Moscow. He knew who I was and had a request for me. He had a sister in America who hadn't written for a long time. He asked me to meet her when I returned, to tell her things weren't good for him in Russia. In fact things were very bad and she should help him however possible, without making any excuses, because he and his wife were truly starving, in the literal sense of the word.

The man was wearing a dark blue suit, quite glossy from age and wear. I even noticed the sleeves of his jacket weren't of the same colour: one was black and the other a dark grey. In the beginning I hadn't noticed because the darkness of the colours mixed together. Then the man himself drew my attention to it: "You see," he said, "this suit will give you an idea of how we live here. Look closely and you will see. The jacket is dark blue and the sleeves – one is black and the other a dark grey."

The man spoke for a long time about his situation and about how necessary it was that his sister in America should help him. He told me he was a civil servant in a government institution where he had occasion to meet foreigners. He received no more than 18 rubles a month, and in such a time of high costs this wasn't enough for him to live on. Good fortune came his way only when, on occasion, a foreign guest rewarded him with a coin for doing some task for him. As he was speaking the man took a little notebook out of the chest pocket of his jacket, from which he removed a pressed American dollar. "You see this American dollar? An American gave it to me some time back. My wife and I have been hungry more than once since then. But we haven't used this dollar. We're taking care of it. We're keeping it."

“What are you keeping it for?” I asked.

“You see,” the man explained: “my wife is in her time, she will soon give birth to a child. At that time a few guests will have to be invited, we’ll have a little celebration, and we’re keeping this American dollar for that time. We’re taking care of it. We’re not giving it away.”

I felt a great pity for this fellow. The things he told me about his life moved me so much that I gave him one of my extra shirts. He thanked me heartily. When I also gave him a piece of soap, for I knew there’s a great scarcity of soap in Russia, tears welled up in his eyes.

After he left, I thought about him for a long time and about the jacket with the sleeves of two different colours. Something in this was both comical and tragic. Something in this didn’t sit right in my mind even if it reflected a piece of reality in the current life of Soviet Russia.

Later, I met with another person, at a different place. He was also dressed very poorly and since I was still reflecting on the impressions I had from my earlier visit, I closely observed the suit of this new acquaintance. Sure enough, his jacket also had sleeves of different colours. While speaking with him I also found out some very strange things about the way in which one gets and buys a suit in Moscow. “Take me as an example,” the man said: “I am a worker in a factory, and as a worker I have an opportunity to get a note, which gives me the right and the opportunity to buy a suit for 50 rubles. Without a note I would have to pay 150 rubles. However, you get such an opportunity only once a year or even every 2 years. It depends on circumstances and also on how capable you are in using your elbows to push your way to the front. Now look at the suit I’m wearing. Surely in America you would give it away to a poor man? Yet for this suit, with a note from the factory where I work, I paid 50 rubles. Then, afterwards, I had to pay a tailor 75 rubles to adjust it to my measurements because the sleeves were too short and the trousers too long and the width in the armpits was such that it was impossible to lift my arms.”

The man also spoke about how his wife stood every day in a line for hours just to get bread, a little milk, a piece of butter and other

necessary food items. “The prices are high, very high,” he said, “and because of that, one very often has to go hungry. That’s how we live in Moscow!”

After this new acquaintance left I went in to the restaurant at the hotel where I was staying. Inside it was bright and lovely and the sun shone in through all the big windows. People were sitting at cloth-covered tables. Most of them were foreigners. At one table I saw several Hindus, dressed in their national costumes, with turbans on their heads.

Still under the impression of what these 2 people had told me about need and hunger, I sat deep in thought, didn’t even notice when the waiter approached me. He, just like waiters in all countries and in all cities, stood near me, bent over, ready to serve, very proficiently and very skillfully listing the dishes that could be prepared for me: “Perhaps a fried chicken?”

“Perhaps some smoked pork?”

“Perhaps *sudak*²³ served with white wine?”

He spoke the names of all the items on the menu using their diminutives, as if doing so made them all the more appetizing or as if it were his duty to show me, the foreigner, that everything was available in Moscow, that there was no dearth of food here in Moscow. On the table, on a large platter, I was offered not only black but also white bread. Besides that, on a little dish, there was a large piece of butter, certainly no less than a quarter-pound.

To eat a fried chicken at 10 o’clock in the morning for breakfast was a pleasure I declined. That surprised the waiter no small amount. He couldn’t understand anyone in Moscow could refuse a fried chicken. For my part I couldn’t understand how one could offer one to a foreigner in Moscow when the residents of the city had to stand for hours in line ups to get even most basic foodstuffs. There was

²³ Pike perch.

something strange in this, something that didn't fully make sense.

During the day I went to the Moscow *Gosbank* (government bank). I needed to exchange a cheque into American dollars. I was in a big hurry because I needed to get to several places to meet with several people. I was certain such a triviality as cashing a cheque of \$10 would surely take no more than a few minutes. It turned out completely differently – the process of exchanging a cheque in the Moscow *Gosbank* lasted for some 2 hours. Yet on the walls and above the little windows behind which the employees worked posters were displayed, proclaiming in large letters how everyone needed to work well, extolling them to get things done quickly. This situation wasn't just annoying, it was downright painful. Why should things be like this? Why had some kind of curse befallen the Russian people, leaving them speaking wonderfully and so often about the need for working quickly yet actually moving so laggardly, so sluggishly when actually at their jobs? Why should it be like this? This was painful!

Finished in the bank, I went into the Moscow Art Theatre. They were giving a midday concert in honour of International Women's Day, March 7th. The theatre was packed. The largest part of the audience consisted of women, nearly all were dressed in shawls, not only older women but also younger ones. Among these women were many who looked as if they had just left a kitchen or the washing board. They were sitting in the front rows, bonnets on their heads, some wearing aprons, their hands folded across their chests. One could see they were all very tired. So this concert was a great pleasure because not only were some truly fine artists performing on stage but the women of the audience could get some much-needed rest.

On the stage appeared famous artists from the Moscow theatres. It was truly a delight to see such great artists bringing joy into the lives of poor women workers. But soon afterwards there began a series of rather bombastic recitations, mainly talk about how the women in Russia would show the world they were capable not only of sweeping with a broom but also shooting with a *pulemiot*²⁴, with a cannon,

²⁴ Machine gun.

with an artillery gun, and – with anything! Even one of the very old and very famous Russian actresses, a solid dame with a grizzled head of grey hair, recited a poem about how Russian women will shoot guns and fire artillery, a pulverizing poem she found it necessary to announce she had authored. On and on in this way the actors harped on and on about shooting and more shooting. Meanwhile, the women of the audience, those with the bonnets and shawls on their heads, napped, their hands folded across their chests. All this talk about shooting was far removed from their lives, just as they were distant from those reciting at them.

I sat in a corner of the theatre and shrugged my shoulders. I couldn't understand why they had to have all this talk about war at an International Women's Holiday and why on such an occasion such a fuss and racket was made about death, about killing and slaughtering people. Not having any other explanation, I attributed this to the peculiar way life is lived in today's Moscow. It's strange and doesn't quite make sense.

In the evening when I returned to the hotel, I asked one of the staff to deliver a telegram to the post office. It was to be sent to my birthplace of Trostianets', in Ukraine, addressed to my mother, whom I hadn't seen for 23 years. In the telegram I wrote I was in Moscow but, in several days, would be coming home to see her in Trostianets'.

I had already started to think about how my mother would receive and rejoice over this telegram, would cry from joy at this news. In the middle of these reveries I got the news that my telegram could not be sent to Trostianets'!

“Why?”

“Because there is no such town in Russia.”

“What! How can there be no such town when I was born there, when I receive letters from there, letters that go all the way from there to America?”

After locating a book in which all the cities and towns of Russia are written I turned to the page where the name of my town was supposed to be listed – Trostianets'. But it wasn't – to the name of the *guberniia* was again added the Russian word "former." My town was no longer found in the province of Podolia but was shown as being in the "former Podolia *guberniia*." Obviously, the employee at the Moscow telegraph station didn't want to bother looking for where my town might be. It was much easier for him to answer simply that there was no such town in Russia.

So ended a day in the life in Moscow – a day filled with events and experiences which seemed strange, which made no sense, not even to someone like me who came to Russia as one of their own, not as a foreigner.

4. At night in theatres and restaurants

This is a very popular story in Moscow. Once one of the soldiers standing watch by Lenin's dead body in the mausoleum came running out, terrified. "Comrades," he said, "Lenin winked with one of his eyes... I saw it myself."

They thought this soldier's nerves had frayed because he had already stood watch by Lenin's dead body several times. They were certain he was out of his mind. But the soldier assured everyone that he remained fully in possession of his faculties and saw, not once, but several times, how the dead Lenin winked.

So they sent a Red Army officer to stand watch by Lenin's dead body and closely observe the face of the deceased great leader Ilich. How surprised everyone in the Kremlin was when this Red commander also came running out, terrified, and told the same story as the soldier: "Comrades, Lenin winked with his eye... I saw this myself." There was no reason to doubt the words of the officer, so a special conference was held in the Kremlin and it was decided that none other than Stalin himself should, at least for a few minutes, stand watch by Lenin's dead body. Perhaps the deceased Ilich was trying

to communicate something which could not be entrusted to just anyone? As Stalin stood watch in the mausoleum, staring intensely in Lenin's direction, he, too, saw the same thing – Lenin was winking. Not losing control of himself, however, Stalin exclaimed loudly, in a full voice: “Comrade Ilich, what does this signify? Why are you winking? What do you want?” Out of Lenin's dead, sealed lips could be heard a voice, full of anguish: “I request, Comrade Stalin, to be turned with my head face down. I can no longer bear to witness the suffering of the Russian people.” Such a story is told in Moscow.

They also tell this one: Stalin and Bukharin²⁵ were talking amongst themselves about how everyone was suffering so much in Russia. Bukharin said there was a danger that even members of the Party would lose their patience. Stalin disagreed, saying he could not imagine such a thing. He said he was more than certain every member of the Party was ready at any time to give his life, if only he requested it. Bickering in this way they decided that each of them, Stalin and Bukharin, should try a test to find out who was right. So they went for a walk by the banks of the Moskva River, where a long alley of trees stretched out, where on one side you saw the old and dirty walls of the Kremlin. As they walked along they observed a worker standing by the riverbank, deep in thought. “Comrade,” Stalin turned to the worker, “you must throw yourself into the river and end your life. The Party requires this of you!” Not questioning this order the worker immediately threw off his jacket and made ready to jump into the river, to end his life. Even for Stalin it proved very difficult to hold him back: “Don't do it, Comrade,” Stalin said, as he used all his strength to pull the worker back: “The Party doesn't demand this of you!” Pleased with the results, Stalin turned to Bukharin and said: “Well, what do you say now, ha? We have devoted people. Even now, in such a terrible time, people are ready to give their lives.”

Bukharin, the man who sometimes had his doubts, didn't agree: “This wasn't proof,” he said: “Just because there happens to be one lunatic that doesn't mean all of them are the same. Let's test some more.”

²⁵ Nikolay Bukharin, a Bolshevik Comintern leader who aided Stalin in ousting Trotsky during the 15th Communist Party Congress in December 1927 was himself then expelled in 1929 and executed in March 1938.

It's not difficult to find a worried worker by the banks of the Moskva River. So the two leaders, Stalin and Bukharin, approached another man standing deep in thought. Not losing any time, Stalin said: "Comrade, you must immediately throw yourself into the river and end your life. The Party requires you to!" And the same thing happened as before. As soon as the worker heard what the Party demanded he immediately threw off his jacket and made ready to throw himself into the water. "Wait a minute, Comrade!" shouted Stalin, trying to save him: "This was just a test. We need you alive, not dead." Yet the worker didn't allow himself to be saved. Jumping into the waters of the Moskva he cried out: "Leave me be! Let me go for even death is better than this life!"

These 2 stories are very characteristic of the current situation in the "Republic of Workers and Peasants" and are very popular not only in Moscow but also in the other cities of Soviet Russia.

However, setting aside the fact that times are bad and the needs so great, even in Moscow, it is nevertheless difficult to find a theatre where it is easy to get a ticket. All the theatres are packed every evening. The Yiddish Chamber Theatre, on Malaya Bronnaya Street, is also full every evening. You just can't get any tickets to a show.

During the time I was in Moscow I went out to the theatre often. In the Moscow Art Theatre alone I saw 3 performances - the famous play *Dni Turbinykh* (The Days of the Turbins), *Strakh* (Terror) and *Khleb* (Bread). If I had only had more time I would have gone to see a few more performances, with pleasure, for when it comes to true acting, to truly artistic, soulful interpretations performed by a living person on the stage, Moscow has the best theatre in the world.

It wasn't all that easy to get tickets to the Moscow Art Theatre. If it weren't for my personal connection with several of the eminent actors and managers, I would certainly not have been able to get tickets. When some of my acquaintances in Moscow found I got tickets to see 3 such performances, so quickly and, moreover, without

paying, they said it was because I was some kind of a *bal-moyfes*²⁶, a man who could work wonders. I truly almost started to believe them when, at the theatre, I was offered large sums of money to sell my tickets.

Regarding the performance of *Dni Turbinykh* it's necessary to say at least a few words because recounting something about this play highlights some of the characteristics of the current Russian reality. The author of the play, Mikhail Bulgakov²⁷ is not a Communist but is a very talented playwright. In his play, which depicts the period of Civil War in Ukraine, most of the heroes are officers of the White Army, which led a war against the Bolsheviks. Bulgakov does not portray his heroes in conformity with the so-called Bolshevik "ideology." Instead he shows them in a sympathetic light even though they waged war against the "Republic of Workers and Peasants." In other words he painted them as people, not as demons, bringing out their finer traits, the better qualities of their characters. For this reason the play was banned.

After Bulgakov's *Dni Turbinykh* was removed from the stage the same theatre presented one of Afinogenov's plays, titled *Strakh* (Terror). Afinogenov²⁸ is a Communist and so his play was full to the brim with Communist propaganda. On one occasion Stalin came to the theatre to see *Terror*. Afterward, when one of the managers asked how he liked the play, he answered: "It is not a bad play. It is also acted very well. But *Dni Turbinykh* is, of course, a better play. I like *Dni Turbinykh* better than *Strakh*." And that was enough. Stalin's remark was taken as permission to perform a play that had earlier been banned. Right away, it was announced that on the following evening Bulgakov's *Dni Turbinykh* would be performed. Soon all of Moscow knew what Stalin had said about that play. The next evening, when they again performed it, the theatre was so packed that people were simply standing head-to-head. It was impossible to pass even a

²⁶ A miracle worker.

²⁷ A Russian writer born in Kyiv and best known for *The Master and Margarita*, published posthumously, an indictment of Soviet society and one of the masterpieces of the 20th century.

²⁸ Alexander Afinogenov, a Russian playwright, most famous for this 1931 play. He was expelled from the Communist Party in 1937, rehabilitated in 1938, and died in a German air raid in 1941.

needle between them... on the strength of a word from Stalin²⁹.

From then on this play has been one of the most popular and most marketable, not only in Moscow but also in other cities of Soviet Russia. I doubt, however, whether it is being performed elsewhere so beautifully, so capably, so wonderfully, and in so artistically a convincing manner as in the Moscow Art Theatre. Remarkably, not one of the older and more famous theatre actors performs in this play – not Kachalov, not Moskvina, not Leonidov, not Vishnevskii. Not one of the older generation who grew together with the famous theatre. All of the performers are young, representing new strengths and talents, who grew up and developed in a time of need and hunger and scarcity – in a time when it might seem art would be abandoned as an entirely superfluous thing. Here is the strength of the Russian people, a resilience always manifest in the domain of art, even in the worst of times.

Russia is above all a land of riddles and contradictions. On one side – high art. On the other side – hunger. On one side great stature and on the other side – backwardness and laziness. A land of mountains and valleys, even in its spiritual life.

In Moscow a performance begins at half past 7:00 in the evening and ends at about half past 11:00, sometimes even at midnight. The Russian doesn't hurry when he comes to the theatre. Yet he goes straight home after the performance. In Moscow, they don't think about such a thing as going to a restaurant after a performance. Only a few people can afford such a pleasure.

Nevertheless, one can't say there is no such thing as a nightlife in Moscow. There are several hotels where the nightlife doesn't lag behind the café chantants and cabarets of Paris, Berlin and New York. And I went into one of these hotels with several people after the performance of *Dni Turbinykh* at the Moscow Art Theatre. To my great surprise, in the restaurant of that hotel, I saw wealth and glamour such as you don't see even in the wealthiest restaurants and

²⁹ *The Days of the Turbins* premiered on 5 October 1926. Stalin reportedly saw it at least 15 times.

café chantants of Europe and America. In the middle of the restaurant stood a large fountain with water spraying from several beautiful statues. The illumination was of a type conveying a romantic and sentimental mood. By the beautifully covered tables attractively decked-out men and women sat, and near them were bottles of wine, in nickel buckets. From time to time a bang was heard at a table, which meant a bottle of champagne was being opened for the guests. To one side, secluded in a little room off to a side that stretched lengthwise, was a bar where various expensive liquors and flasks and bottles gleamed and sparkled. Even such rare “luxury items” as oranges and apples could be seen. The waitresses by the bar, all nicely dressed, elegant and charming, skilled professionals, artfully flirted with the men who allowed themselves a fling, who kept providing these ladies with drinks and something to snack on. On the large cabaret stage an orchestra was playing and in the middle of the hall couples were dancing.

I had thought the orchestra in such a restaurant in Moscow would surely play Russian music. However, I was quite wrong. The entire time we were there, for a few hours, the orchestra played only American jazz. Not one Russian melody. Not one Russian tune. It was all jazz and jazz and jazz! The couples danced to the beat of this jazz music with the same movements and the same expressions on their faces you would see in America. So I thought these dancers must certainly be American tourists. I knew that the majority of the visitors to such restaurants were foreigners. It became evident only the men were. The girls were Russian. Clearly, they were there to amuse foreign guests, appointed by the government to dance and drink with foreigners, actually to ensure they spent more money, because the government must, of course, get *valiuta*³⁰.

These women, plainly put, were “hostesses.” That’s how they’re called in American “speakeasies,” in the secret bars where the “lazy bourgeoisie” allow themselves a fling. They get money for their false smiles, for allowing a stroke here or a kiss there from a guest who’s not entirely sober. In Soviet Russia the professional abilities of such

³⁰ Hard currency.

girls are used on another level, on a broad, national scale – they work for the government. They entertain foreign guests and do everything possible to get even more *valiuta* out of them, more dollars – not, God forbid, for themselves, but for the government. They are a brand-new type of government employee in this “Soviet Republic of Workers and Peasants.”

Very few Russians in Moscow enter such restaurants or hotels. This is not only because it's very expensive and not every Russian can afford such luxury. Even those who could perhaps afford to – and there are such people in Moscow – would be afraid to amuse themselves there because one might well encounter *GPU* agents³¹. These agents keep an eye on everyone who comes in. If they see that this or that person is a frequent guest, that he has been there perhaps 2 or 3 times, then the next day he might well be called in for a strict cross-examination, to give an accounting of how and when he had opportunity to spend so much, to explain how could he afford such things as eating a meal and drinking a bottle of wine in such a restaurant?

Only foreigners in Moscow can feel free in such a restaurant. Only they can dance and flirt with the Russian girls, whom the government employs to smile and act the coquette, so long as they extract more dollars.

The clock had already reached around 3:00 am when I called the waiter to give me the bill. I needed to pay for a bottle of wine, several glasses of cognac and also for bread with black caviar. The waiter presented me with a bill that happened to be more than 200 rubles. This meant more than 100 dollars in American money, because in Russia, you're given 1 ruble and 94 kopeks for one dollar. I didn't become upset, however, and looking the waiter straight in the eyes, just said: “I'm paying with *valiuta*, with American dollars!” Right away the bill became an entirely different one - \$4.85. How the two separate bills corresponded I didn't try to calculate. I also didn't attempt to explain the difference myself. But it all did seem strange.

³¹ Formed from the original Soviet secret police, known as the *Cheka*, the State Political Directorate, GPU, was established 6 February 1922. It eventually came to be known as the OGPU, then the NKVD, and KGB.

I paid, and just like in the restaurants of this type in other countries, the waiter bowed, in the hope of getting a good tip.

When we went outside, we were immediately seized by a strong, true Moscow frost, and the snow scraped under our feet. We wanted to take a *droshki*³² to get to the hotel, about a 15-minute walk from the restaurant, but the *izvozhik*³³ wanted no less than 15 rubles. When we asked him why he asked for such a high fare he answered that a *pood*³⁴ of oats for his horse now cost no less than 14 rubles. We decided it would be better to go on foot.

One of our party was a little intoxicated. While walking he tottered somewhat and, at the same time, tried to sing a Russian song he had heard in a Russian restaurant somewhere in New York or in Berlin. He, the *mentsh*³⁵ of our group, had really hoped to savour a little “Russian atmosphere” in Moscow but instead had been stuffed all evening with American jazz. So he sang out loud: “*Karie ochi da belaya grud’, Po tselym nocham mne spat’ ne dayut’*”³⁶. As he didn’t know all of the lyrics he kept breaking off in the middle of the song. Just as we were walking by Red Square, where the mausoleum with Lenin’s body stands, several sleighs laden with freight passed by, right across from us. The drivers of the horses, evidently amused by seeing a foreigner at dawn wavering drunk across the streets of Moscow, started making jokes at his expense, one loudly crying out: “Hey, Comrade Foreigner, you’re drunk, ha? It doesn’t matter. All of us are drunk here! Well, yes, we’re all drunk!” There was something symbolic in that remark.

5. Meeting a brother from another world

I had stayed in contact with my family in Russia, more or less, for all the years I had been in America. In Russia I had a big family – a

³² A low four-wheeled open carriage.

³³ A cabman.

³⁴ A Russian unit of measurement, roughly equivalent to 16.38 kilograms (about 36 lbs).

³⁵ A person of honour and integrity.

³⁶ The lyrics of a Russian soldiers’ song.

mother, 4 sisters and 2 brothers as well as other relatives and friends. I didn't write to everyone. I knew, however, where they were and that one of my two younger brothers lived in Moscow. For 23 years I hadn't seen him, this younger brother of mine. When I left my hometown he was no older than 9, and that's how he stayed in my memory – a small boy with black eyes, agile, always moving and restless.

I knew, however, that life had not spared him in the years since I had last seen him. He had gone through one of the most terrible pogroms in Ukraine. He had been through the Revolution and the Civil War. He spent 6 years in the Red Army and later almost 3 more years in the Border Guards.

From the letter I had received from my mother before I left for Russia, I knew that he, my youngest brother, had already been married for a long time, had a wife and 2 children and was living in Moscow. However, I didn't know his address. I was told that didn't matter because in such circumstances you could readily find the person you were seeking: "You need only go to the *Spravochnoe Biuro*³⁷ I was told, "and there they will give you the correct information in no time." It turned out, however, that this was easier said than done, as is usually the case in Moscow. Everywhere, in all the institutions created supposedly for the convenience of the citizens, it's not particularly easy to find a person who works conscientiously and promptly. Why that is I do not know. But that's how it is. Perhaps it's because they've taken personal initiative away from people. Perhaps it's simply a kind of trait deeply rooted in the Russian citizenry, who don't move from a spot while, simultaneously, speaking so enthusiastically about overtaking America.

I thought that the *Spravochnoe Biuro* would be an office, where you went in to get information. It was only a wooden booth, located outdoors. Many people were standing in a queue around this booth because in Moscow people are always looking for one another, not

³⁷ Information Office.

only because the names of the streets and alleys have changed but because not a day passes by without a new person arriving from some other city or village. Outside a blizzard was taking place. The frost burned. The line up around this wooden booth moved very slowly. When you finally got to the small open window where you saw the face of a person, you were given a piece of paper, on which you had to write the name of the person you were trying to find, his age, employment, and where he came from.

I paid 30 kopeks for the little piece of paper on which I was to write those details. It was rather difficult to write because the board I was writing on was covered with snow, a strong wind was blowing, and my hands were so frozen it was difficult to even hold the pen in my hand. After providing all the required particulars I was told to return in several hours for the results. When I did the answer was short and simple: “In Moscow there is no such person called Buzi Osherowitch.” There isn’t was the answer. That supposedly finished the matter. Of course, I couldn’t understand the reply as I knew very well that my youngest brother had already been living in Moscow for several years. Since my days in Moscow were few it truly bothered me to think I wouldn’t find him. Imagine my surprise when, after I came back to the hotel, I found a note informing me I had been called to the telephone by a Buzi Osherowitch!

He, my youngest brother, whom I had left behind as a boy of 9 and whom I had not seen for 23 years, learned entirely by chance that I was in Moscow, and through the *Intourist*³⁸ found the name of the hotel I was staying at. He couldn’t come right away because he was very busy with important work. The earliest I could meet him would be later that night.

He recognized me. I didn’t recognize him. We kissed each other but before we exchanged even a word both of us began to cry. We burst into tears. Neither of us could have expressed in words exactly why we were crying. Somewhere in our minds there were fragmented.

³⁸ The official state travel agency of the Soviet Union, founded in 1929.

memories about our father who had died, about a mother who lived far away in a small town that had been completely destroyed, about a terrible pogrom which had cut down the lives of our father's brothers, our sister's husband and many others near and dear and beloved. So many feelings raged in our hearts as those tears streamed down our faces. It was somehow so difficult, terribly difficult, to find any appropriate or correct words to match what we were feeling, to be able to begin speaking with each other.

Again and again we called each other by our names: "Mendel." "Buzi." Yet this entire time neither of us knew how to begin speaking to the other. When we finally tried it seemed as if we were not talking about what we needed to share, weren't touching on the feelings roaring in our hearts. Moreover, we both soon felt as if a thick wall stood between us. He, Buzi, was the dedicated Communist, committed with body and life to the Soviet government, immersed in his work day and night, having no doubts about anything he did, acting with the certainty of someone who believes he has already found the only true means for solving all of the world's problems. With no little gall, he suddenly began lecturing me about the Social Democratic Mensheviks in Europe and in America. He couldn't understand how I, one of his brothers, was not a Communist. He went on at length about the paths that had divided us over the course of the 23 years we had been apart. He didn't spare me any moralizing. He expressed the hope that once I had seen with my own eyes what was taking place in Soviet Russia, how the Soviet regime was building socialism and this country, that I would change. Yet, in the middle of all this, he stopped. Sitting quietly, looking at me with love and with tears in his eyes, he said: "But, Mendel, we're saying nothing! Why aren't we speaking?" So I embraced him: "Buzileh, tell me something about our mother. How is she? How does she look? Tell me." I also spoke the names of our four sisters and of another brother of ours, whom years ago, I had left behind as a small boy of 11 years of age: "Tell me, Buzi, how are they?" Then Buzi briefly talked about how this one was doing and how that one was doing. When he mentioned our other brother's name he spoke with pride and dwelled on what he was doing: "Our Daniel must serve as an example for others. He occupies a very high office in the villages around our hometown. He supervises the work

of preparing the grain for the fields and conducts his duties very conscientiously. Not long ago, the newspapers reported our Daniel had performed his task at 120%.”

“When you see him,” he went on, “you will be surprised. He speaks Yiddish so poorly now that it’s almost impossible to understand a word. But if he starts to speak Ukrainian he’s right at home. And he carries not only a revolver but a rifle as well. He is always armed.” It was difficult for me to imagine Daniel with a revolver and a rifle, speaking Ukrainian as his “mother tongue.” I couldn’t forget how he, a small boy, modest and quiet, once ran up to me announcing the news that our mother had had a boy, or as he put it, so childishly, so charmingly: “Mama had a puppy!”³⁹.

For a full 3 hours Buzi and I sat and spoke. However it seemed that for that whole time we weren’t touching on the true depth of the feelings this meeting had aroused. Before leaving, Buzi even said: “I don’t know, it’s so strange, we’re somehow not speaking at all.” I, too, felt the same. For me it was if, somehow, we had not been speaking at all. Between us lay not just 23 years but entire worlds. We loved each other, indeed loved greatly, but at the same time we also felt the thickness of the barrier between us. We agreed our conversations shouldn’t touch on political questions although this proved impossible. In Soviet Russia, everything, even the most insignificant triviality, is connected with the politics of the regime. There isn’t a single thing one can explain without reference to politics. Otherwise, things aren’t entirely clear, they don’t make sense.

One time, we were sitting with a group of people speaking about the general situation in the country and daily life of the people. Several Communists and also people who were not Communists were talking. My brother said: “Take this example - people often go to other countries from Russia. They are sent on various missions. They travel to Europe and also to America and it is very rare that someone doesn’t want to return. On the other side, however, we see how many visitors who come to Russia from Europe and America end up staying in Russia for work. This alone,” he said, “demonstrates that

³⁹ The child mixed up the Yiddish word for a boy, ‘yingele,’ with the word ‘hintele,’ meaning puppy.

even if things are not entirely good for us these days the prospects here are much better here than in other countries. There's building going on here, we are creating a better future.”

That was how Buzi spoke. Someone else in the group spoke up next, offering various examples from other countries to support Buzi's position, although it was not very convincing since the only facts presented were those taken from Russian Communist newspapers. Those portray the situation in other countries in the bleakest of colours.

The non-Communists in the group were very circumspect. Yet, from time to time, they blurted out words and comments portraying a very sad picture of the daily life of the people. One told about a pair of shoes he'd been wearing for 5 years already, then showed how his shoes were patched, one piece sewn on top of another. Another person showed how his pants were darned just like socks and were already so worn that whenever he sat down it seemed as if they would fall off. A woman told about a glass lamp cover that broke and how weeks had already passed by without her being able to replace it, even in Moscow. Another spoke about how expensive a piece of laundry soap was, how one could simply not get such soap, and how once, when she went into a *Torgsin*⁴⁰ with a friend from America, and saw pieces of good soap for washing laundry, she had begun to tremble, nearly bursting into tears. A third said she was envious of her husband, who had died some time ago, adding that not one day passed by when she didn't wish for the release that comes with death.

Everyone had something to tell about the difficult everyday life of people, adding to a general picture of fear, horror and need – something you can by no means forget because you see it yourself everywhere, because it bothers you at every step, wherever you go. When the Communists had left and only non-Communists remained, they started to speak more freely. The picture then became even darker, even more troubling. One of the women mentioned the name of the Communist who had so determinedly supported my

⁴⁰ State-run hard-currency stores in the USSR. They were in operation between 1931 and 1936.

brother in arguing in favour of the regime, saying: “He can speak that way because things are good for him!”

I was interested to find out just ‘how good things were’ for him. So I decided to make use of the opportunity he had given me by inviting me to come to his home that evening. Not until then did I see ‘how good’ things truly were for him! This man lived in a room, which wasn’t big enough for one person – with 5 other people. So, in total, 6 people lived in this room. The table at which they ate was used at night as a bed for sleeping. They had no modesty in front of each other. They undressed and dressed and it didn’t bother anyone that of the 6 people in the room two were man and wife, because what is shame if not a “bourgeois prejudice”!

“As you see,” the Communist said to me, “we now have a very fine apartment. We’re not even lacking a place like where the Czar himself used to go.” He showed me this “place,”⁴¹ which other neighbours in the building also used. Going inside was not easy as it was so dark one might easily fall and break one’s back and hip. The “place” also wasn’t distinguished by any particular cleanliness, say less about the “atmosphere” in there: “To have this in one’s apartment building is no small thing,” the Communist told me. On this occasion I entirely agreed with him.

He explained how he had been assigned this particular apartment, “with all the conveniences,” only a few months previously. Before then, every evening, when he needed to go to where “the Czar himself used to go on foot,” he had to take a half-hour tram ride. Very often he had to wait for a long time because Moscow trams don’t go often and moreover, could be so packed that it would be impossible to climb into one.

One of his children, a small boy of 5 years, a fine child with bright eyes, was delighted with me and sang a little song: “My mother is an

⁴¹ Toilet.

udarnitsa, my father - a Bolshevik.” About himself this boy also sang a song, about how, when he grew up, he would go into the *Komsomol*⁴² and afterwards the Red Army, to fight against the bourgeoisie. “And what else will you do when you will grow up?” I asked: “I will see that our house at night is bright, very bright,” the child answered: “I love it so when it’s bright!” I understood why this child felt this way. The apartment really wasn’t very well lit.

This man couldn’t boast of any other necessary conveniences. He was dressed very poorly and not only he, but also his wife. The bread they served at their table could barely be brought to one’s mouth and the air in the house was stifling. Yes, I persuaded myself, things are truly “very good” for him.

It was already late when I returned to the hotel. There I received an answer to the telegram I had sent to my mother in the small Ukrainian town of Trostianets’. So I began thinking about setting out on the road and spoke about my plans with other people. One of them counselled me: “If you’re travelling to your mother in Ukraine you should take bread from here because there isn’t any there. People there are dying from hunger.” I couldn’t understand this. What could this mean? Had Ukraine not always been the breadbasket for all of Russia? What did this mean, having to take bread with you to Ukraine?

All night I couldn’t sleep because of this – there isn’t any bread in Ukraine!

⁴² Young Communist League.



Top Row (L to R)
 Buzia (brother)
 Shayva (sister)
 Sima (sister)
 Daniel (brother)

Seated
 Bassia (aunt & sister
 of m's mother)
 Mendel's mother
 Riva (sister)
 Daniel's wife.

CHAPTER

II

On the road to Ukraine

1. *“It’s all set!”*

One of my acquaintances believes that while much has been written about Soviet Russia it’s still not enough. He feels the world hasn’t yet been told the entire truth about the country, where they mean to do good, but aren’t. He had a complaint when I came to Moscow: “The problem with all the Jewish writers who come here from America,” he said, “is that they settle in Moscow and afterwards quickly visit a few cities such as Kharkiv, Kyiv, Odesa, Nizhny-Novgorod and – finished. They look at the big factories and industrial plants, those already built and also those in the process of being built; they visit the museums, the great government institutions, the Kremlin, where one sees many historical things which truly do make an extraordinary impression. Afterwards they go back home and write enthusiastic articles, sometimes good and sometimes bad, or plainly neither here nor there. This isn’t worthwhile,” my acquaintance said, and in his tone could be felt a deep angst: “This is not the way! You can’t just stay in Moscow. You need to travel to the countryside. You need to pay attention to life in the far-flung, small towns in Ukraine. Only then will you really understand what’s happening here.”

That was how my acquaintance, himself born in a small town in Ukraine, spoke. And when I told him I was going there soon, out to those small towns, he was very pleased. “There,” he said, “you will see things that will make the hair on your head stand on end. There you will see such destruction, certainly nothing you could ever have imagined.”

However, my brother, the Communist, who spent 6 years in the Red Army and who also occupied other important offices – he was, it seemed to me, not pleased I was getting ready to travel to those provincial towns. Then, on one occasion when he came to my hotel, he announced: “You know, I’m also going with you to Trostianets’ to see our mother.” This was naturally very pleasant news, about which I was very glad. His coming with me to our hometown meant giving our mother even more happiness, because with him there we would have a true reunion of the entire family. We would all be with our mother for several days – all the children, 3 brothers and 4 sisters. “How did you succeed in arranging this?” I wondered: “and so quickly?”

“Very easily,” he answered. “The leave I was supposed to take 2 months from now I have scheduled earlier. It’s all set.” This was his beloved expression, generally used when he didn’t want to speak more or get sentimental: “It’s all set! I’m travelling with you to Trostianets’ to our mother!”

It was also pleasant to think that perhaps the wall standing between us might not be as thick as I had imagined. We were, after all, brothers, born from one mother. So a few days later I left Moscow. I began my journey to Ukraine, to my hometown of Trostianets’ where my mother was waiting impatiently for my arrival. My brother, Buzi, accompanied me. We travelled together in a comfortable train compartment. First we had to get to the town of Vapniarka¹. From there we would transfer to another train going to Uman, and afterwards again catch yet another train going in another direction entirely. Together we carried flour for our mother to bake bread and other food items I bought in a Moscow *Torgsin*.

The train went slowly, the hours dragged on, and when you looked out the window you saw little more than snow and more snow. The fields, the mountains, the valleys, all were covered with snow. All of Russia appeared to be covered with snow. Other passengers in the railway car told us about trains being 4 hours late here, 6 hours late there, sometimes even more.

¹ Located in Ukraine’s Vinnytsya *oblast* and known as a railroad station since 1870.

The railway carriage itself was stuffy, closed in, grey. Every passenger carried a bit of food in a separate package. Eating usually inspired a strong thirst for a drink of water and there wasn't any to be had. Those who had brought along a bottle of *Narzan*, a type of mineral water, trembled over it as if over a precious gem. Whenever their thirst became too strong they would take a tiny sip from the bottle. From time to time, when the train stopped, there was a dash to the train station – for soda water, for a little milk, for whatever could be found to sate one's thirst. Whenever we stopped a grey mass of people pushed off the train while another equally grey mass pushed itself into the train's carriages. From all sides all one saw was a grey dirtiness. This lay heavy on one's mood. When the train stood still it seemed it would never move again. When it did get going you listened attentively to the noise of its iron wheels and grew anxious whenever someone said: "It seems as if the wheels are shrieking. I'm afraid they may have to detach our car." Then others spoke up, saying: "There have been such cases." I heard how "on the way from Moscow to Kyiv, they detached a train carriage." Another added "on the way from Kyiv to Odesa they detached 2 cars because the wheels were squealing." Then someone else said: "Wait. Be quiet. It seems as if the wheels of our car are screeching." Everyone was uneasy.

I was soon recognized as a foreigner, picked out as an "American." This made me feel rather strange. For the 22 years I'd been in America I had been regarded as a "Russian." Here now, after I'd come to Russia, I was thought of as an "American"! This evoked a somewhat odd feeling. I didn't want to be seen as a stranger in Russia. And then, as if to spite me, a young man with a worn jacket, torn trousers and a dirty black shirt sat down next to me. He started to say, taking a tone of great authority, that in Soviet Russia the trains were equipped with many more conveniences than American trains. When I tried to prove he was wrong, telling him details about a trip I had taken from New York to California and back, what I said made entirely no impression. He held firmly onto his opinion: "About other matters I will not argue with you. About the railways, however, I can speak with authority, even if I have never been to America. That said I know what is true, quite definitively, because I am a Russian railroad

engineer.” When he said that I couldn’t help but steal a glance at his patched trousers, although I didn’t want to embarrass him.

For our entire trip my brother saw to it that I lacked nothing. At every train station he got mineral water for me to drink, even milk. When he did so he’d say: “There, you see, you can get everything you want here!” Just then I couldn’t bring myself to get into a long conversation about the truth of whether or not one could get “everything” when travelling in Russia. Most of the time, whether by day and at night, I could not stop myself from thinking about where I was going, whom I was travelling to see. I often wanted to speak to my brother frankly, for I had not seen him for 23 years, much less the town where I was born and had passed my childhood years. But he avoided every opportunity to start up a personal conversation, interrupting me whenever I tried to, always using that well-used expression of his: “It’s all set!” Whenever he used that phrase you knew you couldn’t speak with him about whatever you may have wanted to. That’s how he was. The war, the pogroms, the Revolution, then the Civil War and many more things, had hardened him. Yet beneath his tough exterior I knew he still felt things deeply. Even as we journeyed, he let me know, several times, that in Trostianets’ and in other towns I would see and hear things likely to weigh heavily on me: “Never mind, however,” he counselled: “such is the course of history.”

We arrived in Vapniarka several hours later than scheduled. There we had to change trains for travel on to Demkivka. The trip there should have taken no more than an hour but we ended up having to wait for several. This remnant of the old times, these long *peresadkas*² were still a common occurrence in Russia. People had to wait for a train, sometimes for hours and hours, even an entire day. And this at a time when they were all going on and on about keeping up a fast pace!

There were many people in the train station, peasants in fur coats, in *kozhuks* and *svitas*, Jews in threadbare *tulups* and coats. All their faces appeared sad and dejected. Nobody was hurrying to get

² Transfers to another rail-line.

to someplace else. Trains arrived from various parts of Russia at the Vapniarka station. Yet not a single person I could see arriving appeared any different from those wandering around, everyone looked despondent and miserable. That is why my arrival drew as much attention as it did, why everyone looked at me and the suitcases I was carrying with such curious and avid glances. For them my luggage and I were wondrous things to behold, something seldom seen.

My brother went into the town to look for a place where we could pass the several hours we had to wait for the next train. I stayed in the station. Upon entering the “Hall” for First Class passengers, where it was just as dirty and untidy as in the “Halls” for the other classes, I began to wander back and forth, looking at the people sitting on the long benches and at the tables. Some young people shuffled up to me and started to ask questions about America, while at the same time carefully glancing all around. Later, when they noticed how I was looking curiously at the Ukrainian posters and murals hanging on the walls, highlighting the great achievements and feats of Soviet Russia— depictions of great factories, industrial plants, and *kolkhozes* – some Jewish youths began to explain the significance of these posters to me.

“You see, we’re building here.”

“Look see how we’re now working the fields with tractors!”

They pointed out many more things. Meanwhile, the peasants sat nearby on the long benches, like shadows, staying silent. Not one of them spoke a single word, not one of them said anything. Only their eyes, such deadened, hardened eyes, looked from me and then to the Jewish youths busily explaining the significance of what the wall posters depicted. Suddenly a peasant stood up and, addressing one of the Jewish youths who had been talking to me, said in Ukrainian: “Why are you telling him fibs about what these wall posters show, talking about tractors in the fields? Why are you filling his head with nonsense? Better to tell him we don’t have any bread in the house!

Better to tell him that our wives and children now eat beets, potato skins! Tell him we're getting swollen from hunger, here in Ukraine!" After saying what he did the peasant sat down again, looking at the other peasants who, with mute glances, signalled their agreement with what he had said. It was obvious to me he had uttered words from the depths of his heart. They, these naïve people, naturally thought I was some kind of an emissary from somewhere else; that "the world" had sent me to see how they lived. They were determined I should not be deluded. It was a matter of life and death for them. I, the man with suitcases of a sort seldom seen in Vapniarka, needed to learn the truth, to know how they were now eating beets and potato skins, were swelling from hunger. None of the Yiddish youths from Vapniarka had to translate or tell me what the peasant said. I understood him well because I speak Ukrainian.

2. Coming home

After being in Vapniarka for several hours we finally boarded a train that was supposed to take us to Demkivka. The carriages in this train were 'hard' ones, that is, Third Class. When I entered one of them I saw scenes I could never have imagined before. Wherever there was even a small bit of space a person had squeezed himself in. On the benches, behind the benches, between the benches and also on the shelves above, where baggage is usually stored – everywhere people were lying, sitting and standing, everyone carrying bundles and packages, everyone wanting to be one of the lucky ones who got to snatch one of the best spots.

"We won't travel on this train for long," my brother comforted me: "Soon we'll be in Demkivka and it isn't far from there to Trostianets." The air in this carriage was heavy. It could literally choke you. Yet nobody complained about it and it occurred to no one to do something as simple as opening a window.

I looked at the peasants and at the heavy bundles they were carrying and my heart felt very heavy. Above all, I could not forget the words of the peasant who had told me how in the villages of Ukraine people

were eating beets and potato skins and becoming swollen from hunger. So I wanted to hear what the peasants in this railway car were saying amongst themselves. But they mostly remained silent, for nearly the entire length of the trip. Only rarely did someone speak, just a word or two, to then fall quiet again. Naturally, they regarded me with curious glances. Only after they heard me speak in Ukrainian did they become more courageous. One of them, a young peasant of 20-something years old, moved closer, and right away, without any superfluous conversation, said he was utterly surprised they had allowed me to travel in these railway cars and in this region.

“Once,” he started to tell me a story, in his naïve peasant style: “once, not long ago, a Communist from America visited us here in Russia. They kept him the whole time in Moscow, in Kharkiv, in Nizhny-Novgorod and in other big cities. He was sent around in cushy carriages and actually in sealed ones (he used the word *zaplombirovannyi*), so he was very pleased with everything and even said it was better here than in America. On one occasion, however, he broke away from them and travelled on his own to visit one of his relatives, actually here in our region, in Ukraine; he, too, went into the same ‘hard’ cars you have and saw what you see here. So he went back to America a different person, very disillusioned, entirely different. “And no wonder,” the young peasant said: “This fellow, this American Communist, lives in New York and has an apartment of 3 whole rooms! You hear? Three rooms! Well, how could he be pleased once he saw how we live!”

In one corner several Jews were huddled together in a little circle. They knew who I was and that I was travelling to my mother, having come all the way from America. They spoke about this as if about an extraordinary event and about me – as if about a person from an entirely different world. Pointing to my suitcases, one of them said: “We don’t see such things here at all.” So I started up a conversation with these Jews: “How are things for you here?” I asked. “Bad, very bad,” one answered for all the others: “There isn’t any bread, people are dying of hunger.”

“How do you survive, nevertheless?”

“We struggle.”

My brother from Moscow kept finding things to distract my attention: “See,” he’d say to me, pointing to various fields we passed by: “Do you still recognize these places? There is the forest, and a little further we’ll travel into a valley.” He had many experiences and events to recall about all of these places, connected with his actions during the time of the pogroms and Civil War. When he had nothing more to recount or to point at through the window, he drew my attention to another thing: “Watch out for your baggage.” Then, rather unexpectedly, he became very sentimental: “You know,” he said, “if you start to consider this situation, it’s truly a big deal! We were 7 children by our mother, 4 sisters and 3 brothers, and of them, you are the only one in America! We haven’t seen you for 23 years but now we will all be together with our mother again. I tell you, it’s truly a good thing I decided to travel with you! Isn’t that so?”

“Well certainly,” I agreed. Soon, however, he apparently regretted these sentimental words and returned to praising our brother, a responsible Communist leader in Trostianets’ and the surrounding villages. “He, our Daniel, can be taken as an example of honesty and devotion. He knows almost nothing what it is like to have a personal life. He is occupied day and night with his work in the villages so much so that the peasants have learned they can’t hide anything from him.”

He also told me about my younger sisters, who were still small girls when I left home. “Altogether,” he said, “it will seem strange to you; you will see different brothers, different sisters, people from another world.”

Just then the conductor came in to punch the passengers’ tickets. But his punching tool didn’t work. The gadget wouldn’t take in a ticket to be punched, which made some passengers smile. That was the first time I saw a smile on the faces of these dejected people.

In one car you could hear people speaking, almost without pause, about the prices of bread in this town or that town, in this village or that village. They were also speaking about how the horses and cattle were dying because they didn't have anything to give them to eat. They said that in several regions of Ukraine dead horses were lying around on all the roads. Someone else would always say: "It will be even worse. A lot worse than it is now."

The further we travelled and the closer we came to my hometown the heavier my heart became. Tears filled my eyes and I grabbed my brother's hand. "Buzi!" I tried to speak, searching for words to express what my heart was feeling. But I couldn't say anything beyond his name. We arrived in Demkivka. There we had to change to another train. This railway station was terribly neglected and dirty and looked like a speck with snow-covered fields all around.

There was no train going to Trostianets' at this time so we had to travel by sleigh. Before setting out we called our mother on the telephone. The person who came to answer the telephone at the station in town was my youngest sister, who was no more than 6 months old when I left home, 23 years ago. When I heard her voice and she told me who she was my throat suddenly choked up and I could no longer speak. She began sobbing too. It is impossible to express in words what I felt in that moment, as I was getting closer and closer to my hometown and my mother, whom I had not seen for so many years. This was not only a feeling of joy but also of deep sorrow and pain. Only someone coming home to a mother in today's Ukraine can truly feel and understand this.

At the Demkivka train station people ran up and began kissing me. I didn't know who they were. I was told they were from my town and remembered me very well. Some of them were hurrying to travel onward so they called out their names in a rush, reminding me of how they had once studied with me in the same *cheder*³ although I couldn't remember them because they looked so very old and gloomy. Often someone else would take me to one side, saying what

³ A school for Jewish children where Hebrew and religious knowledge are taught.

they all did: “You must speak with me for at least a day and a night. I have whole mountains of things to tell you.”

Each of them was dejected, bitter and felt like confiding in me, a person who came from another world. It was, however, perhaps not fully necessary to hear what each one of them had to tell. One glance at them – and you detected how they lived and in what kind of situation they found themselves.

Buzi was not very pleased about how they were pulling me from all sides, telling me about all of their troubles upon troubles. “In any case, we’re going!” he said as he hurried me along.

We settled ourselves in a very wretched sleigh, with 2 small horses even more wretched. Near me sat a representative of the GPU who also happened to be travelling to Trostianets’. Then the driver, a Jew with a peasant fur coat and a grey beard which hadn’t been combed for a long time, gave a whistle in the air with his whip and off we set on the road. We didn’t see the road, however, because everything all around was covered with snow. It seemed as if the driver was travelling directionless into the world, with the only certainty being that we’d have to arrive somewhere, if not in Trostianets’ then in another town. What’s the difference anyhow? Was the situation not the same in all the towns? Very often, the sleigh went off the road and we lagged along. The emaciated horses, quite starved, dragged themselves slowly and lethargically, barely moving. Yet the driver drove them on as they used to do in the old days: *Hattya, mali!* And when this worked and the horses started to go a little faster the driver encouraged them: “*Koni ne voly!*” (Horses are not oxen!).

It was hard to imagine it had been 20 some-odd years since I had last been on this road. Just like long ago you still heard: *Hattya, mali!* and *Koni ny voly!* You still slogged down bad roads along which even horses could barely move. You still feel a heaviness that suffocates and doesn’t allow you to raise your head. If not for the GPU agent sitting near me, dressed in his warm fur coat, you could have thought that

in all of these years no changes at all had taken place, that nothing had happened.

The agent from the *GPU* was very curious about America. “For you in America,” he turned and said: “do you have such roads?”

“No. In America, the roads are better ones.”

“*Nichego*”⁴ he responded, “in time we will have exactly the same roads as you have.” He was silent for a while but then asked: “What do they say there about us?”

“Various things,” I answered: “Some say good things, others bad.”

“*Nichego*,” he said, “we will force everyone to say good things about us.”

We passed through several villages and I observed the peasant houses and the fences surrounding them. Poverty and neglect radiated from everything I saw. It seemed as if these weren't houses anymore, only ruins. The storehouses, where peasants once used to keep grain, had been demolished and pieces of wood and boards were lying around on the ground. No cows or sheep could be seen anywhere. Destruction was all about. A gloom lay over everything.

We stopped in the village of Lepkivka. There we had to wait for my brother, Daniel, who by then knew I was coming. We waited for a long time but he didn't appear. Apparently, Daniel was very busy somewhere in another village. And when Daniel was busy with his work a brother was nothing to him, even if he hadn't seen that brother for 23 years. So we had to travel onwards without Daniel, although I had so wanted to meet him. He finally did come but only late in the evening. I was amazed when I saw how he jumped down from a horse, fully armed, with a large revolver at his side. In his face I couldn't detect even a trace of the Daniel I had carried around in my memory for so many years. Before me there now stood a man,

⁴ “It's nothing!”

as strong as iron, hardened, armed. Only barely, at the corner of his mouth, did you notice a smile, showing a small trace of the good nature our family was known for. Yet when I embraced him, and began to kiss him, it seemed he wasn't at all pleased about how I was kissing him so much. "So we meet, it seems!" he exclaimed before going into another room, coming back out without the revolver. At that my younger brother, Buzi, who had a sense of humour that showed even when he was being very serious, made a joke: "You see," he said, "Daniel has given you a great honour. He came to meet you carrying only a revolver. Of course, he was carrying a rifle as well. He took both off to honour you."

Travelling out of Lepkivka, the road became ever more difficult, muddy. The emaciated horses barely dragged themselves along, the driver continually shouted *Hattya, mali!* although this helped very little. As they did the GPU man, sitting beside me and dressed in his warm fur coat, kept speaking about Russia and America, several times repeating the same thing: "*Nichego*, we won't just catch up with, we will surpass America as well." *Hattya mali!*

From a distance, you could start to see the 2 tall stone smokestacks of the Trostianets' industrial plant, once famous as the biggest sugar plant in southwestern Ukraine. So many recollections from those years started to intrude in my mind that my eyes again filled with tears. These tall smokestacks were no longer a silent witness to life but more like mute gravestones standing over a large grave, with everything below decaying.

No matter how embarrassing it was I cried when we got into town. It was impossible not to. My birthplace greeted me with such complete poverty, seemed suffocated, was all but destroyed. What had been concealed out of shame, all the wounds previously disguised, all of it burst out before me, greeting me in its full horror. Into the streets flowed men and women, old and young, grown and small children, all of them in filthy rags and tattered clothes, dirty and blackened, beaten down, wretched! It was terrible to behold!

Tears kept running from my eyes as we crossed town. When finally we arrived at the house where they were waiting all I could do was fall into my mother's embrace and sob, so violently it was impossible to calm me: "Ma-ma!"



Mendel Osherowitch and his mother, 1932

CHAPTER

III

The ruins of my hometown

1. A lament on a quiet Ukrainian night

From what I had heard about how people lived in the provinces I understood I shouldn't expect much when I returned to my hometown of Trostianets'. To ready myself I tried to forget the happier days of my former life there, over 20 years ago. Instead I tried to inure myself to encountering scenes of want and poverty. What I found in reality exceeded any desolation I could have previously imagined.

Before I had even begun to try to enjoy this reunion with my mother, sisters and brothers, people began to come from all sides, each always voicing the same complaint: "You don't recognize me?" I so wanted to give them joy and pretend I did. It was simply impossible. Most of them had become old well before their time. Their faces were wrinkled. They were dressed in torn and shabby clothing, in rags and tatters. Among the peasants who came to see me many wore ragged boots bound together with straw and string. Only among the younger people who remained in the town, even if against their will, did one see a few people not dressed too badly. That was a joy for the eyes and it softened the general picture of gloomy greyness and dreadful dejection which otherwise bore down so heavily on one's mind.

Amongst the first who came to see me was someone I had once studied with in *cheder*. He came from a fine pedigree, although his parents never had the distinction of any particular wealth. When he was still a small boy he had a reputation for being something of

a saucy brat. He liked to throw stones and once even tried to hit the top of the church. His father never gave him a smack, afraid doing so might at some point bring misfortune to the entire town. Other boys were certainly afraid of him. They said you mustn't pick a quarrel with him because he was such a talker, a "firebrand." His father, a pious Hasid¹, gave this boy the name of none other than one of the most famous and great "Righteous Jews" who, many years ago, had in his unique way laid the cornerstone for a democratic movement amongst Ukrainian Jewry and was amongst the first to create heartfelt Jewish folk-melodies that quickly became popular, tunes still being sung to the present day.

It was this former friend of mine, who carried the name of a great and famous rabbi, who came to see me. Just like many others he wanted me to recognize him but that was impossible for before me stood a man with a face darker than death. Only the eyes, just barely, showed signs of life. He was dressed in a dirty fur coat, from which here and there pieces of cotton were sticking out. On his feet were torn boots, wrapped in rags, and on his head an Astrakhan *kuchma*² of which only the lining remained.

He didn't speak. Downhearted, he stood quietly and looked now at me and now at the other people gathered in the house. When I called him to the side and began to speak to him as if with a close friend, recalling several things from our childhood years, his eyes began to glisten and soon filled with tears. Claspng me by the hand, he uttered painfully: "Yes, you still remember all of these things, but I'm dying of hunger here, with my wife and children. I want food!"

With these last words he looked at me so hungrily that I became frightened. His voice resounded in my ears like an echo from a grave. When I gave him a little money for bread, he left. Yet I could not forget the expression on his face, not for a long time, nor his strangled voice, which still rang in my ears. They say this about him in town, about this friend of mine who once burned bright and bore the name

¹ A follower of Hasidism, a movement of ultra-Orthodox Jews founded in 18th century western Ukraine by Yisroel Ben Eliezer, the "Baal Shem Tov"

² Sheepskin hat.

of a great and shining personality in the history of Hasidism, they say you will often hear his strangled voice, emerging as if from a grave: “I want food!” “I want food!” From one street to another, from one alley to another, he wanders around, all the time, his dark face unshaven and overgrown, wearing his dirty and torn fur coat. But you hear nothing from him other than the words: “I want food!” “I want food!” In this he doesn’t shout. He doesn’t have the strength. He is weak but can’t stay silent. He gives voice to what is tormenting him, a need stronger than any other: “I want food!”

Until late at night the door didn’t close. People kept coming in. Most of those who came were older women and nearly all brought a little piece of paper: “You see, this is the address of one of my daughters in America.”

“You see this is the address of one of my sons.”

“And this, pardon me, is the address of one of my brothers.”

“While you’re writing things down please copy this address too. One of my uncles lives there.”

“Write, write,” they all pleaded, “and when you return to America, see to it that they’ll help us.”

Amid the people who came to meet me on that first evening was someone who said he remembered me well from the time when I was a young boy although I had no idea who or what he was. I also had no idea if he was a Jew or not. He was dressed like a village peasant. He drank vodka like a soldier back in the old days. He spoke a half-Goyish and half-Slavic Yiddish, quite difficult for me to understand. In the beginning, he didn’t speak with much confidence. You could see he wanted to say something but couldn’t decide whether or not to. As soon as he sensed I was speaking to him as an equal and didn’t refuse to take a glass of vodka with him, he grew more confident and became more talkative: “It’s not good for us. Not at all good,” he began: “There isn’t any bread, there isn’t anything to wear. We’re

hungry and we look like beggars. Nowhere is it as bad as it is for us here in this country. But nevertheless...” Here he drank another full glass of vodka, then continued: “Here, I will give you an example. Many years ago, even before we had the Revolution, I was a poor man, a Jew. However, I wanted to have my own little house for myself, simply a place to lay my head down. I calculated building a small house would cost 200 rubles. You hear? Two hundred rubles! I didn’t have that much money so I went off to our *protsentrik*³. I mortgaged and pawned myself to him, and he loaned me 200 rubles, so I started to build a little house for myself. At the time I was building that house I had to starve myself. I couldn’t afford to eat much. I didn’t have enough bread for myself or for my wife and children. Not to speak of a piece of meat. We simply went without. While we suffered, however, I knew one thing: I’m building a house. Later, I will have a home for myself. Because of this, it was worth being hungry. You understand?”

“Yes, I understand, but what are you getting at by telling me this?”

“I say this with regard to the fact,” and here the man looked at my brother with a glance full of meaning: “I say this with regard to what is now taking place in this country. You understand? It is true we are starving, that we go around dressed like beggars. Why is it like this? It is because our State is building the country. Understood? Well, *lekhsaim, lekhsaim!* To a long life!”

My brother liked this example very much. “You see,” he said, “this is how the people feel and speak!”

When the house was full of people and we weren’t lacking even an important guest, a certain Soviet activist from town, a peasant came in wearing a torn *svytka*⁴, his torn boots bound together with straw. Looking first at me and then at the guests in the house he smiled, but in great embarrassment. Everyone stood still and one of my people asked me a question: “Don’t you remember who this is?”

³ Literally a percenter, a loan shark or usurer.

⁴ A long coat made from coarse homespun materials.

“No,” I answered, looking closely at the peasant, whose face was very heavily wrinkled and dark. “This is, of course...” And they told me a name. This peasant had been a cheerful person for most of his life. He loved to hear and tell jokes and make up witty sayings. To the present day the good-natured character of a Ukrainian remained in him. Even now, out of the blue, he could speak and recite witticisms in rhyme. He could even find the comic side to anything and speak about it in such a way as to provoke laughter. He was also quite a serious person, a deeply feeling person. At the time of the great pogrom in Trostianets’ he was amongst the few who risked their lives to save Jews. He always lived among the Jews and spoke Yiddish freely and fluently. When I spoke to him in Ukrainian, he made a point of answering in Yiddish although, at the same time, he complained about my language: “What has become of you? Now you can’t speak any Yiddish.”

When I asked him how he was doing, how life was treating him, a smile spread across his face, such a bitter smile. He answered in a plain, good Yiddish, indicating with his eyes the Soviet activist: “You ask me how I’m doing and how life is treating me? Ask him to tell you. You see, the truth rests entirely with him, not me. He knows when I have too much bread and so when they have to take some of it away. He knows what I possess and what I need to possess. So the truth of how I am doing and living rests entirely with him.”

While saying this he kept a smile on his face, the entire time. You might think, of course, that he was being cheerful, making a joke. Suddenly, his tone changed. He stopped in the midst of what he was saying, then laid his head on the table and began sobbing, so much so that it tore at your heart to look at him. Here, people were not only speaking, but also crying.

It was already late, well past midnight, when everyone dispersed. I was quite tired from the trip, quite exhausted by what I had seen. In the house the air was heavy, so I stepped outside to have a look at how my hometown appeared on this wintery night, when everything was covered with snow. Outside all was still - as only a night in

Ukraine can be calm. The streets and alleys were covered with snow. The air was fresh and clean. It was enjoyable to look at the starry sky and a beautiful moon. It was also cheerful and good to hear a dog unexpectedly barking somewhere in the distance. I began to recognize my town. I began to recall those wintery nights when I used to walk with my friends late at night and dream about a free life in Russia.

So I set off, by myself, on a long walk to the market, then on to the *Torhovytzia* near the church and the *kaplychka*⁵ located alongside the creek, and to other places closely connected with my childhood years, to some of the loveliest memories in my life. I tried to forget the scenes of need and desolation I had seen, I tried to free myself, at least for a while, from the oppressive impressions I had already gathered. Instead I wanted to immerse myself in memories from long ago. Abruptly, I heard the cry of a distressed woman coming from inside a darkened house, a wail expressing such fear, such a frightful urgency, that you immediately sensed this woman had lost control over herself, that her heart was broken; her lament was simply terrible to hear.

I didn't know then who was weeping from that dark house and only found out some 2 days later. Once upon a time, many years ago, the girl who lived in that house had been one of the prettiest girls in town, her parents' only child. Now she was an old maid. Her mother and father had always worried about her but had not arranged an appropriate *shidekh*⁶. Years went by. The Great World War broke out. Afterwards came the Revolution and after that the bloody pogroms in Ukraine. The pretty girl's father was murdered. Her mother later died of worries and hunger. The girl was left alone – desolate, broken. Just as shattered as the hopes she must have had, as the dreams she had once woven in her imagination. Now she remained in the same house where her devoted father and mother had once worried about her, by herself, in a place where every corner brought to mind memories of something past. Nobody came to see her and she didn't

⁵ Chapel.

⁶ Wedding match traditionally arranged through a *shadkhen*, Jewish matchmaker.

go out to visit anyone. From the work she did she sometimes earned enough for food although, frequently, she went hungry. Very often, her heart and mind grew heavy and she cried in such anguish that you could hear her over the entire street. Nobody stopped when they heard her weeping. They had become used to it. So many people were crying now. Why trouble yourself over anyone who did?

2. *By a mass grave*

It has already been 13 years since the great pogrom happened in Trostianets⁷. It has gone down in history as one of the most terrible and bloody pogroms in Ukraine. Understandably, this pogrom was still fresh in the memory of the townsfolk. It served as a kind of dividing line, marking the end of a chapter not only in the history of the town but also in the history of the Civil War in Ukraine more generally.

“This was before the catastrophe.”

“This happened after the catastrophe.”

“This took place during the catastrophe.”

That’s how Jews spoke amongst themselves when they tried to establish precisely the time of an event in their personal lives, or of an event in the life of the entire country. Everyone understood that when they used the word “catastrophe” they meant the great pogrom in Trostianets’.

One of my close female relatives came from another city to Trostianets’ to meet with me. When a piece of meat was served at the table she began to tremble: “Believe me,” she said, “it has now been 13 years since I have experienced the taste of a piece of meat.”

“How, my dear, do you know it has been 13 years?” I asked: “I

⁷ Between 1917 and 1920, Jews were attacked by units of the Red and White Russian armies, criminal bands, local warlords, peasants, anarchists, Polish troops and soldiers of the Ukrainian Directory. One of the most notorious pogroms occurred 9-10 May 1919 in Trostianets’, with several hundred victims.

remember this well,” she assured me, “because from the catastrophe onwards I have not eaten a piece of meat.” One may believe her. She remembers when the catastrophe happened because her husband, a quiet and good man, who hadn’t bothered anyone at all throughout his life, was one of the victims. He was murdered in a terribly brutal way, leaving her a widow with 2 small children.

It is difficult to find a Jewish family in Trostianets’ that did not suffer in the great pogrom, which Petliura’s gangs carried out in the town during their “uprising” against the Bolsheviks⁸. In total around 500 Jews were murdered at that time. The unfortunate ones were driven together into a large building next to the industrial plant (in Goldenberg’s house) where they were slaughtered like sheep. Old and young alike – no one was spared. As the desperate cries of the victims rang out, several “intelligent *barishnyes*” from the industrial plant played on a piano, muffling through music the laments and screams of the victims, which spilled out along with their blood.

Afterwards, all 500 murder victims were buried in one large grave. The doctor of the town – and here Shcherbinsky, for this was the name of this *pogromshchik*, which should be recorded – had earlier ordered a large grave to be dug out. He also commanded that this burial pit be sprinkled with lime as a protection against a potential plague. Many victims were buried alive in that large grave. Later, when the Soviet regime drove out Petliura’s gangs, and all the other White gangs from Ukraine, they erected a large stone *matzeva*⁹ at this mass grave of the Trostianets’ pogrom victims, occupying a whole quarter of its length. Beside this large *matzeva*, which shocks those who see it from a distance, there also stands a smaller grave marker. Here lies buried a father whose son was murdered at the time of the great pogrom. The father died later, of heartbreak, but

⁸ Symon Petliura was the supreme commander of the Ukrainian Army, president of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, and leader of the Directory from 11 February 1918 until forced into exile, 5 December 1919. Allied with the Polish army of General Józef Piłsudski, his troops retook Kyiv, 7 May 1920, but were compelled to withdraw by the Red Army. Petliura was assassinated in Paris, 25 May 1926, by Sholom Schwartzbard, allegedly an NKVD agent acting in revenge for pogroms perpetrated by troops under Petliura’s command. Petliura is considered a Ukrainian national hero while Schwartzbard is honoured as the *nokem* - the avenger of Ukrainian Jewry. He is buried in the Moshav Avihayil cemetery, in Israel.

⁹ A stone pillar or headstone marking a grave.

before his death begged to be laid next to the mass grave, close to where his son lies buried with the other victims. So 2 graves stand there. One is large, marking where 500 Jews lie buried, and one is small, where only one lies buried – a father who died of heartbreak after his son was tortured to death.

From a distance you only see where the mass grave is because of the tall and broad *matzeva* of red and grey stones. As soon as you go out of the gate of Trostianets' and set out on the road leading to Ladyzhyn and other surrounding towns, you see, immediately on the left, and a little set off from the road, the large stone *matzeva* marking the final resting place of 500 Jews – a *matzeva* which nothing in the world can obstruct or conceal. In summer, when the trees all around are in bloom and the entire area is covered in greenery, and in winter, when everything is covered in snow, this tall stone *matzeva* remains visible. Grey, solid and mournful, it juts out through the green trees of summer and climbs out of the whiteness of the snow in winter – it doesn't allow itself to ever be hidden. It reminds everyone, tells everyone without words, be they locals or strangers, about the catastrophe.



Trostianets' pogrom memorial (2019)

Going out to “the basin,” as the people in Trostianets’ call the place where the mass grave is located – is a common and understandable thing. Widows and orphans, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters go there – everyone has someone to mourn and something to lament there. I, too, had someone to mourn there. Many of my own lie in that large grave, many friends and comrades. So I went to “the basin,” to the large *matzeva*. Several Jews from town came with me. It was difficult to get there because the road was covered entirely with snow. You couldn’t even travel there by sleigh. We all had to dress in heavy felt boots and crawl through deep snow, reaching up to our knees. From the fields all around a strong wind blew, the frost burned, so much so that it was difficult to catch one’s breath. Yet in this way we dragged ourselves in the cold and in the deep snow until we arrived at the large stonewall. There it seemed as if the cruel wind blew even more strongly. We stopped by the large pillar. It was so very mournful. A fear, mixed with a deep sorrow, embedded itself deep in my soul. I looked for a long time at the large *matzeva*, only partially covered in snow, and saw my uncle, Uri, who lies there, my brother-in-law Yisroel and my friend, Shlomo Rabinovitch, who was buried alive together with his father. I saw the faces of all of the 500 Jews whom I knew so well. As I remembered them, I pressed my face to the cold stones of the *matzeva* and cried, sobbed aloud so much that it was quite impossible to calm me. The tears poured from my eyes as if from a spring. If ever there was a time when death pleased me more than life it was in that very moment, when I fell with my face pressed to the cold stones of the large *matzeva* at this mass grave in my hometown, where 500 Jews lie buried, slaughtered like sheep, all in one day.

None of the Jews who accompanied me to the large grave tried to calm me: “Let him cry himself out!” they said: “He has a sizeable share of his own people here!” That was how we Jews spoke among ourselves. I cried aloud the entire time. Later, when I had calmed myself down a little but was still standing in the same spot, not yet able to speak a word, I heard one man say: “Such a catastrophe could truly happen only when the wild gangs ran rampant. Such a thing couldn’t happen under the Bolsheviks!”

“Well, they can say what they want – at least we’re certain of our lives!”

Then another man pointed at the large *matzeva* and, shaking his head, said: “Perhaps it’s better for them than us. They have already been punished and are spared from suffering as we do.” A living man jealous of the dead. Then he started to tell sorrowful facts about the dismal life in town: “So-and-so now doesn’t have anything to make it through the day. He’s chopping wood and carrying water and doing other dark and difficult work, just to qualify for the category of those with voting rights, but he still remains excluded and his children have great difficulties getting an education because of this.”

“So-and-so doesn’t have a piece of bread in the house so he sent his wife away to Haisyn where she goes from house to house begging for a piece of bread.”

“So-and-so, a woman, who was once one of the most distinguished, is obviously dying from hunger. Just yesterday she went to a peasant she knows, a neighbour, begging for a piece of bread. The peasant woman herself didn’t have any bread either but gave her a little flour and that saved her life.”

“So-and-so has become so wild from want that when she sees someone buying bread, she runs up, grabs it and flees.”

Many more horrifying stories were told. I was told the names of the persons being talked about. I heard about people who quietly died from hunger, whom nobody knew about and about others who simply rotted in bodily filth, suffering from illnesses that could not be healed.

A curse has been poured out on my town and on many more towns in Ukraine!

Although a strong wind was blowing and it was frightfully cold, I didn’t hurry to leave the mass grave. Knowing I will never again see

my hometown in my lifetime somehow riveted me to this spot. I wanted to brand a picture of this large *matzeva* into memory. So I examined it from all sides, looked into its every corner, studied it carefully. That is when I noticed that, here and there, stones had been torn off of it. That was obviously not an easy task, could be done but only with considerable difficulty, pieces of masonry being pried out with iron tools. I asked some of the people standing beside me to explain what this all meant. One of them would only say: "There's a whole story there."

I inquired of others, Jews and Christians, and so later learned more. Stones were indeed being torn from the monument. This is connected with a remarkable fact, which until now has not been mentioned anywhere. So here I am going to report what I was told, in the same manner as I heard it.

The peasants from the town and also from the surrounding villages, the younger peasants especially, are ashamed that such a terrible pogrom happened in Trostianets'. They would like to forget about it but how can they forget what happened when, standing before their eyes, stands such a *matzeva* of cemented stones! The memorial is silent, of course, but in that very silence it screams out to the whole world about the great and the terrible injustice, the bloody crime one people committed against another, neighbours against neighbours, men against men. Whoever comes to the town goes right away to "the basin" to see the mass grave and among the visitors there is occasionally someone from another country. The peasants are ashamed of this, especially the younger ones, those already under the influence of these new times. So very often it happens that they come late at night with axes and other pieces of iron. With all their strength they tear stones out of this cemented wall. They would tear it down entirely if they could, leaving no trace of it, ensuring it no longer screams out to the world about the bloody crime committed here. But they cannot break down this *matzeva*. It stands steadfast, is for them an eyesore, not allowing itself to be hidden nor to be obstructed, not by the greenness of the trees in summer or the whiteness of the winter's snows.

3. Signs of new life

The signs of the new life and of the new “building up” in Trostianets’ can be found – however strange it may be – in the destruction of the *botey midroshim* and *shuls*¹⁰ that once existed. In their downfall, one can see the rise of the new way of life.

Trostianets’ was never distinguished by a particular piety. The town always had a studious youth, both Jewish and Christian, and also its radical intelligentsia. This was because of the influence of the “plant”¹¹. Around this factory a sizeable group of enlightened people concentrated, with entirely passable educations. Even in the poorer Jewish and non-Jewish families people did whatever they could to send their children off to the big cities to learn. In summer, on the streets of Trostianets’ and also by the train station, you could see a sizeable number of *gimnaziia*¹² students and course-takers speaking Russian with the correct inflection. In those days nobody grew too upset or felt the world had been turned upside-down if they saw a young Jewish man with a cane on *Shabbes*¹³ or with a cigarette in his mouth besides. And nobody was upset, nor was the world turned upside-down if someone spotted a Jew from the industrial plant travelling in a carriage on the Sabbath or riding a horse. The town was free and *apikorsim*¹⁴ were no novelty there.

Nevertheless, they weren’t lacking in synagogues either. In the old days there was a *shul*, a *besmedresh*¹⁵, a *kloyz*¹⁶, and also a *klayzl*¹⁷. And since the Jews of Trostianets’ were always great lovers of religious

¹⁰ Yiddish word for a Jewish synagogue.

¹¹ In 1834 a sugar producing plant was built in Trostianets’. By 1853 the Jewish community there had a synagogue and prayer house with 450 members. In 1861 the Company of the Trostianets’ Sugar Plant, owned by Kyiv’s Brodskii family, took control over the economic life of the town. A school and hospital were built and this plant became one of the largest sugar producers in Ukraine, employing 800 workers by 1875. A railroad, built in 1864, connected the town with the Demkivka station on the Uman railroad branch, further enhancing local economic growth by linking it with the Odesa-Kyiv rail line.

¹² A high school.

¹³ The Jewish Sabbath.

¹⁴ An unbeliever who does not adhere to Jewish religious practices.

¹⁵ A Jewish study hall in an Orthodox synagogue.

¹⁶ Private study hall.

¹⁷ A religious study hall.

song, every holy place had a permanent *khazn*¹⁸ with *meshoyreim*¹⁹ and not only one *khazn* but actually two *khazonim*, a *bal-shakhres*²⁰ and a *bal-musef*²¹. Sometimes, when they wanted to enjoy themselves on a truly grand level, on a *Shabbes* or a *yontev*²², they brought in a great *khazn* from a distant city. I still remember how, many years ago, when I was just a young boy, they brought none other than the world-famous cantor, Nissi Belzer, down to Trostianets' for the Sabbath²³. At his *omed*²⁴ Belzer brought up an entire generation of artists who afterwards became famous as great actors on the Yiddish stage. The entire town buzzed with excitement that day. Not only Jews but also Christians came into the *shul* to hear this famous *khazn*. For a long time afterwards, his melodies were sung in various settings. Shimen the tailor, a Jew who was a talented musician although without a good singing voice, was so delighted with Nissi's *Ono be-koyekh* that he would sing it at work. And not alone but accompanied by all the other journeymen who worked alongside him. As soon as Shimen took his shears in his hand Nissi's tune was already singing within him, and then, giving a wink with his eye at the journeymen, so his wife, Malka, shouldn't notice, he quietly started speaking like this:

*"Ono, ono be-koyekh gdules yeminkho, Oy, tatir tsuroy, Kabel rines amhko – Oy, amkho"*²⁵.

The prestige of the synagogue was greatly elevated by the fact that Nissi Belzer had davened there²⁶ on the Sabbath. The *besmedresh* and the *kloyz* were jealous of the *shul* and so also tried to bring in *khazonim*, but those musicians didn't come close to Nissi. There's no point in speaking about the *klayzl*; the leaders there couldn't even dream about a Nissi Belzer, and their permanent cantor, Yankev

¹⁸ A cantor, leading prayers in the synagogue.

¹⁹ Members of the synagogue's choir, usually Jewish boys.

²⁰ Cantor officiating at morning services.

²¹ Prayer reader at additional Sabbath services.

²² A Jewish religious holiday on which work is prohibited.

²³ Nissan Spivak, known as "Nissi Belzer," was a Lithuanian Jewish cantor who later served in Kishinev and, from 1877 until his death in 1906, in Berdichev.

²⁴ Pulpit.

²⁵ "Please, by the great power of thy right hand, O set the captive free, Revered G-d, accept thy people's prayer," – an ancient Jewish liturgical song recited during morning and evening religious services and on the Sabbath.

²⁶ Recited liturgical prayers.

Leib, son of the synagogue's treasurer, tried to console them with the fact that no one was his equal when it came to *Lecho dodi*²⁷, not even Nissi Belzer himself.

On the weekdays there weren't many people in the holy places and very often it was simply difficult to "bang together" a *minyán*²⁸. For this reason, however, on Sabbath and holidays it was packed. One time it also happened that the "aristocrats" from the town rented a special house with a special *khazn* for *yontev*, and this meant that they, the *apikorsim*, who didn't recite prayers the entire year, were now doing so in a "club."

Every holy place in the *shtetl*²⁹ was not only a centre of piety but also a place of celebration. People came there dressed in their nicest clothes. There they didn't just pray but also spoke about secular matters, and afterwards went home in the full certainty that on that day they, their wives and children, would eat a nicer and better meal than yesterday and the day before yesterday.

Now, however, everything has changed, has taken on a different shape. The *besmedresh* was made over into a school for children. There they're teaching Yiddish and also Ukrainian and Russian. One of the Ukrainian language teachers there is my youngest sister, who was 6 months old when I left home 23 years ago. She has a lectern from where she reads lessons in Ukrainian about Ukrainian literature and history. I don't know whether that lectern stands in the same place in the *besmedresh* where our father once prayed with his *talles*³⁰ over his head, rocking by the *shtender*³¹ with great fervour. I tried to figure this out for myself when I was there but the *besmedresh*, now a school, is so changed that it was impossible to find there the *shtot*³² where our father once recited prayers.

²⁷ "Come my beloved," a Jewish liturgical song recited Friday at dusk in the synagogue to welcome Sabbath prior to the evening service.

²⁸ A quorum of 10 men over the age of 13 required for traditional Jewish public worship.

²⁹ A small Jewish village or town in eastern Europe.

³⁰ A large rectangular shawl whose four corners bear strings tied in a particular pattern called tzitzit.

³¹ A reading desk with a slanted top.

³² A permanent personal place of prayer found in east European synagogues, reserved for an annual fee.

My sister, the Ukrainian teacher, introduced me to other teachers. They were very curious to hear some news about America. For my part I was even more curious to hear news about the *besmedresh* that is now a school. I soon turned the conversation, hoping to speak less and hear more. What I heard was this: “In the Yiddish subjects we acquaint the pupils with the works of our Yiddish writers.” On saying this, they mentioned the names of several Soviet Yiddish writers. When I made a remark that Yiddish literature is being created not only in Soviet Russia but also in America and Europe, they answered me: “Bourgeois Yiddish literature does not concern us. We believe literature must serve the revolutionary proletariat. We don’t recognize any other Yiddish literature.”

There was no point in debating them. Just as one can’t find any traces of the old *besmedresh* in this school one could not detect in most of its teachers any signs of doubt about anything. Listening to them you sensed they were possessed of the certainty of people who had already persuaded themselves they knew everything there was to know and didn’t need to know anything else.

I went into the kloyz³³. But it no longer is a kloyz. Now it is a small factory making straw covers for wine bottles. A few dozen Jewish girls and several young men work there, for which they receive very small wages. They work quickly because the more covers they produce the more money they receive. This is no small thing because most of them are standing hungry as they work. Here I will report a case, very characteristic of the current conditions in the Jewish towns of Soviet Russia: in this kloyz, now a small factory for making straw kolpeks³⁴ there is a Jew who was once the Gabe³⁵. He is a man in his older years, with a grey beard and peyes³⁶. But he is still full of life, one of those people who generally don’t like to fall behind. He must always be with those who stand in the first rank – a Gabe according to his nature. Yet in this small factory he can’t be a Gabe and must instead take on the role of an udarnik³⁷. That means he is

³³ Small synagogue, prayer and study house.

³⁴ Bottle covers.

³⁵ A shamash or warden who helps run synagogue services.

³⁶ The Hebrew word for sideburns or sidelocks worn by Jewish boys and men.

³⁷ Shock-worker.

one of the best and quickest workers. He makes more straw bottle covers than the other workers and so has a little book where it states he is an udarnik. These days that is no small thing. The little book recognizes his great pedigree as a worker. He prides himself on this just like he once did with his duties as Gabe in the kloyz. You can see this right away, because as soon as he was introduced to me he immediately showed me this little book, proving he is an udarnik. Still, when the Sabbath comes, he, the former Gabe, sometimes gets an urge to recite a little, actually in a group, and at the omed³⁸. He feels certain he still has a voice and can recite at the pulpit. So he goes off in the morning to the shul, where he still finds a few Jews. The shul doesn't bother the new order because it is several hundred years old. There, in the shul, he davens, sings and trills, just like he used to when he was still a Gabe and had great authority. Later he goes off to work in the kloyz, where the once-upon-a-time Gabe is now a shock-worker making straw bottle covers.

The klayzl, too, where simple Jews without pretensions once used to recite prayers, where Khoneyahu, the talles maker, used to tell wonderful stories for hours, has entered into the spirit of these new times. The klayzl is now a kino-theatre where they show movies to entertain and enlighten the town's residents. I was there. Before I got there my galoshes filled with mud. As I went inside, I again walked through deep mud. Opening the door, I wanted to see what this Trostianets' movie theatre looked like. But just as I couldn't find any signs of the old klayzl there so too could I not find much of a movie-theatre. I was assured, however, that movies are sometimes screened there.

This is the sum total of what has happened to the *shul*, the *besmedresh*, the *kloyz* and the *klayzl* in my hometown. Seeing their downfall you bear witness to the rise of a new way of life. Only on *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*³⁹ will you find the old synagogue full of people. Older Jews come to daven and weep copiously, even more than in the old times. The women's *shul* is also packed and from there can be

³⁸ The cantor's pulpit.

³⁹ The Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year in Judaism.

heard mournful crying, for there are certainly enough old women in the town. As they are not counted among those able to work, aren't participating in the building up of the country, they receive very small portions of bread to eat, are simply regarded as "unnecessary people" – *lishnie liudi*⁴⁰. Society has no obligations with respect to them so, in consequence, their situation is truly dire. They certainly have something to weep about, something to complain over. To their problems entirely new worries have been added, about which many an old and pious mother laments – troubles with children who have entirely abandoned *Yiddishkeit*⁴¹. Some of these women told me how at last year's *Yom Kippur* an old mother cried inconsolably over how her son, a Soviet official, a Communist, had gone to work on that holy day. Rocking over her *makhzer*⁴² and thumping her chest for *Al-Khet*⁴³ her tears flowed as she begged God to forgive her son, the Communist, for working on *Yom Kippur*. "You, *gotenyu*,"⁴⁴ exclaimed the old woman, "know well he does this because of how little we have."

It also happens that pious Jews in town don't go into the *shul*, even on *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*, because they are afraid doing so will harm their children who belong to the Party or occupy positions in government. Now it is true that nobody prevents a pious man from going into the *shul* and davening as much as he wants. However, going into the synagogue can have consequences for one's life, in thousands of important ways given the new way of life but also through creating unpleasant situations. If someone risks going to the synagogue on *Rosh Hashana* or *Yom Kippur* they could well experience unhappiness at home. They might, for example, find themselves being mocked by their grandchildren. Being taught in Soviet schools these grandchildren, certainly fine ones, are nevertheless children, who parrot everything spoken to them. They tease and taunt their grandfathers and grandmothers by calling out:

⁴⁰ Literally meaning 'superfluous people,' likely the author's allusion to *lishentsy*, former clergy, small traders and others considered unproductive and deprived of their electoral rights, social assistance and food provisions, a category including over 1 million people in the USSR by the 1930s.

⁴¹ The quality of being Jewish, the Jewish way of life or its customs and practices.

⁴² A prayer book including blessings for Jewish holidays.

⁴³ The long confession of sins repeated 10 times during *Yom Kippur* services.

⁴⁴ Endearing form of the Yiddish "got" or God.

“There is no God in this world! There is no God in this world!” Or: “Your God is dirty!” or “Your God is a pig!” When the beliefs of a pious Jew are spat upon in his own home he cannot defend himself. He is afraid to. Observing a Jewish religious holiday, a *yontev*, has become a hardship for a pious Jew in Soviet Russia, in the small towns especially. If he suffers because of his faith every day of the entire year he feels it even more on a religious holiday.

In my town I continually looked for signs of how a new way of life is rising. I sought to understand the rise of the new but not necessarily through the downfall of the old. I genuinely did find several new things that are good. For example, the Jewish population is certain pogroms are no longer possible under the Soviets. Jews in Russia are aware they have moved beyond having absolutely no rights to having full civil liberties. They can now learn and study as they wish and occupy some of the highest and most important offices of the state. I met and spent long hours in interesting conversations with more than a few truly intelligent people, all of poor descent, the children of workers and peasants, who are occupying senior positions in government institutions, even in the *GPU*. It was also satisfying to learn about a Ukrainian newspaper being published in my hometown, edited by a young Jewish man strongly devoted to this work. I noticed good relations between Jews and Christians and many other things that evoked a warm feeling. Yet everywhere I also saw much destruction, such a difficult and sorrowful life that I simply couldn't understand how people find the strength to endure so much! At a time when I looked for signs of progress, I found signs of downfall to be more plentiful. This hurts the eyes and heart of any person who would want to see more happiness and a better life in Soviet Russia!

4. *Drowning one's sorrows*

There was once in Trostianets' - as I recounted earlier - an industrial plant. It was a large sugar factory, one of the largest in southwestern Ukraine. Villages and settlements all around, indeed the whole town, earned a living from this factory. It provided *melits* (granulated

sugar) for use in Russia and even for export. In the summer, during the time of *proyzvodstvo*⁴⁵ as they called it, life in the plant pulsed with a momentum you could feel, see, and hear, from miles away. For entire days and nights, on all the roads, peasants drove wagons loaded with sugar beets into the plant. Inside the machines worked day and night. The whistling of the two tall stone smokestacks sliced through the silence and the air for miles and miles around and filled many hearts with joy because that meant people were working, earning money. In the town it was difficult to find anyone who wasn't connected somehow or other to the plant. There were contractors and commissions to be had, along with ordinary employees. The plant produced millions of *poods* of granulated sugar. It brought life into the entire region.

The factory still stands on the same spot, exactly as before, except that it doesn't work. Its machines stand silent. The warehouses are empty. The smokestacks whistle no more. The roads to it are muddy. The apartments are dark. Everything is abandoned, dirty and filthy. The plant is not entirely closed. One section still does work. In total, 24 people work in 3 *smenes*⁴⁶, with 8 people to each work shift.

Do you know what they make? An item very much in need because without it, God forbid, one would not survive – they make vodka – everything else may be lacking in the region, but not vodka.

There was once in my hometown a large and beautiful building, with a broad gate on one side and also on the other. The building stood in the very centre of town and was called the *Rot-Hoyz*⁴⁷ although no one knew the significance of the word. Many families lived in the *Rot-Hoyz*. They were all called by one name – Milgrom. And all the Milgroms had many children, mostly boys, and all their boys had one name – Shmil. So there once was a world of Shmiliklekh in the *Rot-Hoyz*. So you didn't need to ask any of them what they were called. Everyone knew that when a boy came from the *Rot-Hoyz* he was called Shmil.

⁴⁵ Production.

⁴⁶ Work shifts.

⁴⁷ Town hall.

A piece of the town's history was connected with this and it began like so: a rich Jew, an owner by the name of Shmil Milgrom, settled in Trostianets' many years ago. He constructed the *Rot-Hoyz*, at that time the nicest and largest building in town. Shmil Milgrom ran big businesses and had many children – sons and daughters. He gave his daughters large dowries and every wedding was celebrated in an expansive and wealthy manner with satin ribbons spread for the bride and groom all the way from the *Rot-Hoyz* to the *besmedresh*. The name of Shmil Milgrom was caught up in all sorts of legends and exaggerations. When he died, he left the *Rot-Hoyz* to his sons and daughters. They weren't capable of continuing his businesses, did not have their father's acumen. Instead they immortalized him by naming all new-born boys after him – Shmil. Eventually, the entire *Rot-Hoyz* was filled with Shmiliki, each of whom went his own way because there was no longer a strong hand holding them together. So the family tradition which old Shmil Milgrom, the wealthy owner and founder, had upheld so steadfastly, had cemented together however he could, ceased to exist. As the Shmiliklekh grew up they dispersed, going out around the entire world.

Once the *Rot-Hoyz* was the centre of trade in Trostianets'. Along both sides, long rows of shops of all sorts could be found. What couldn't you get in those shops then! Groceries, haberdashery, manufactured goods, ironwork, flour – and everything else besides! There were even butcher shops. On the day of a market fair it was difficult to squeeze into the *Rot-Hoyz*. It sounded like the buzzing of a beehive in the stores, next to the stores, and all around the stalls. People bought and sold, shouted and made a racket, paying out money and making money, blessing and cursing – the whole place boiled with life, not without its ugliness but also not without a little beauty. Much might be bad but there was also more than a little good.

Now there are no more shops around the *Rot-Hoyz* even though the government could have used them for its own purposes. All of the shops were pulled down. The *Rot-Hoyz* is the first thing you see as you arrive in town for it stands on a hill, appearing in the distance like the body of a big black bird, the wings of which have been

chopped off. It is pitiful, the *Rot-Hoyz*, its decay and darkness a sign of just how much the town has declined. It seems ashamed, as if it is somehow trying to shrivel up entirely, dig itself deeper into the earth, anything so as not to be seen by people who might remember it from those days when it swarmed and teemed with life, with Shmiliklekh.

The *Rot-Hoyz* does contain something of the new. To one side of it a new building was added, with brightly painted walls, the headquarters of the *Raipartkom* (Regional Party Committee). There isn't a single Shmilik in the *Raipartkom*.

Many houses which once played an important role in the life of my town are no longer standing. Some were torn down, broken into pieces, with no new buildings put up in their place. Of them nothing is left but piles of debris. Piles of garbage lie about, rotting and befouling the air. People have become so used to this that they have stopped caring about what their eyes see – a small ruin or a pile of garbage marking the spot where a house once stood. Just as the memory of the dead is fresh in the minds of the living so too one can still find *matzevas* sharply etched in small houses, where today people live who are sometimes jealous of the dead. I looked for the house where I was born, where my childhood years passed by. Nothing remained of it, other than a pile of garbage.

Everywhere there are piles of garbage and debris. On top of the piles of garbage stray dogs and emaciated goats rummaging here and there, seeking anything edible to quiet their hunger. They, these homeless creatures, are so skinny they barely stand on their feet. The dogs don't bark, the goats don't bleat. They look at you only with half-witted, pitiful glances, as if begging: "Don't bother us. Leave us to rummage in the piles of garbage. Perhaps we'll still find something to eat."

One time, striding across a muddy street, I saw a peasant woman in the distance. I went up to her, wanting to ask about people whom I remembered from my past. When I approached closer she looked at me and began to cry: "It's you!" She called me by my first name and made as if to embrace me but then immediately held herself

back, having lost her courage: “It’s you! Here they’ve been saying an American has come. But it didn’t occur to me at all that you were that American! *Oy, my tatelekh!*⁴⁸. So how are you? How are you living? And why have you returned here so unexpectedly?”

She recognized me, this poor peasant woman. She still remembered me from the times when I was a boy. For many years she had been living on this side street. She had already experienced a lot in her life but never had she gone through bad times such as these: “Why is God punishing us like this?” the old, poor peasant woman complained: “Why?” When I asked her about several people who had lived on this street, years ago, her answers were short: “Suffering” or “Dead.” It was like this for everyone – those who still lived were suffering, those who weren’t suffering were dead.

On the same street I found another family I had once known well. The husband, formerly a very eminent person, had died some time ago. The wife, a very intelligent lady with greying hair, occupied a small and very dark house along with their deaf-dumb son. He could utter only a few very unclear sounds. She no longer thought about the days when she had travelled in carriages and phaetons, when she supported children in the *gimnaziia* and universities, when she had enough money to help not only her own children but those of strangers as well. For now, for the most part, her mind was occupied every day with only one question: “Where to get bread?” When her hunger became too great to endure, she would set her pride aside and go to a neighbour, begging for a piece of bread. Her heart burned with shame but she could not help it. Her deaf-dumb son was also hungry. He would utter strange and tormenting sounds, so wild, and abnormal as to instill fear: “Ma-ma... Br-r-r-ea-d!” To hear such noises, rattling from his throat, was horrific. No wonder his mother ran out, begging for food. She might even be driven to kill, anything, just so long as she got a piece of bread to stave off her poor child’s hunger.

Remarkably, this woman did not complain. She did not criticize the

⁴⁸ A common Yiddish endearment meaning my dear fathers.

[Soviet] order; did not speak a single bad word about it. She only described what she was experiencing or, better said, told me about how she lived. The short words she used sketched out a picture of fear and terror, although she added people in Russia had to suffer because the government was devoting all its strength and resources to building up the country's heavy industry: "We hope it will be better for us, later," she said. "It will have to be better!"

A thing that truly surprised me, over the several days I was in town and spoke with so many people, and visited so many homes, was the fact that Jews had begun to drink a great deal. Everyone took every opportunity that presented itself to find a pretext for drinking "a little vodka." In the morning – vodka. During the day – vodka. In the evening – again, vodka. This was not just when people were eating but simply drinking on its own. Folks would sit to talk and out-of-the-blue someone would say: "Ah, you know what? Let's take a little vodka!" It never took long before a bottle of vodka appeared on the table, because it can be gotten very easily, at any time. Just as quickly as it appeared the vodka would also be quickly gone because the Jews don't drink from small glasses, like they used to. Now they use substantial tumblers. This happens not only on a Sabbath, or a holiday, when it's a *mitsve*⁴⁹ to make a *Kiddesh*⁵⁰ but also on an ordinary Wednesday – Jews drink vodka whenever they can and look for opportunities to drink more.

This was a big surprise for me. I wanted to discover why it was happening. In the end I didn't succeed for I keenly felt the need to be very careful and not pose any questions that would leave someone feeling insulted. Several times I tried to find a way to draw out a word, or a remark, that would provide the key to this strange situation, to explain why Jews were drinking so much. I was always unsuccessful and was left with a question that didn't have an answer.

Among the Jews who often came to meet me was one whom I remembered from the old times as a fine gentleman, a trustworthy person. He once had an honoured *shot* in the *besmedresh*, was

⁴⁹ Precept or commandment.

⁵⁰ A blessing recited over wine to sanctify the Sabbath.

involved in community affairs, and was influential. Others listened to him because he made sense of things and understood people. In the town they used to say that when he placed his *pechatke*⁵¹ on something, or someone, it stuck, it fit, for it had been well measured. In those days this Jew used to be dressed neatly and stately, appropriate for a gentleman of his standing. Even during the week, he wore a pressed collar and cuffs, a fine-looking man.

Now, however, this Jew was entirely different. The first time I saw him he was dressed in a peasant's fur coat, dirty, tied with a belt. On his head he had a shabby sheepskin hat with earflaps, dangling as if fastened on. He was still dressed like this when he came the second time, a third time and the fourth time. Whenever he showed up, he would start shouting, drowning out others. He was always complaining that he couldn't meet with me alone, for at least a day and a night. What he had to tell me, he claimed, nobody else could. He said it would fill an entire book. No, even more than that – anyone listening to him would have enough material for writing 2 books, 3 books, several books!

This man's heart ached. You saw that right away. So much so that he could not carry on a normal conversation – he had to shout. It was also obvious that whenever he came, he was drunk. On one such occasion I asked him, although delicately: "Tell me, I beg you, why is it that whenever you come here to see me you are not entirely sober? I remember you well from the old days. I know you were always a fine gentleman, a respectable Jew, who never drank. Why do you now drink so much?"

It was immediately apparent that I had taken too much liberty, had perhaps caused him too much pain, so I tried to smooth over my mistake: "You will forgive me," I said, laying my hand amicably on his shoulder. "You mustn't be angry with me. I certainly did not mean to offend you. But, you understand, this is all very strange for me. I just can't make sense of this. A person like you and also others like you: why are you all drinking so much, all of a sudden?"

⁵¹ An official seal.

The man's eyes filled with tears. Grabbing my hand, he burst out: "You're surprised," he gestured, shaking his head, "you wonder why we Jews drink so much vodka, why we are drunk? Ha? My fine fellow, it's simple. A loaf of bread costs 12 to 15 rubles. A litre of vodka costs only 2 rubles. So if you buy a litre of vodka, get drunk and pass out for a day, sometimes for two, you forget you're hungry."

Finally, I understood why Jews in my hometown drink so much. I saw the same sad situation later in the other towns I visited. By then, of course, I already knew why it was like this. A loaf of bread costs 12 to 15 rubles. A litre of vodka costs only 2 rubles. So, Jews buy vodka and get drunk and pass out for a day, and sometimes two, to forget they are hungry.

This left a very strong impression on me. I thought about it a great deal. Once, when I was at home with my family, I told them what I had heard. A passionate debate broke out. It pitted the older generation against the younger generation. We spoke of the achievements of the Soviet government in industry but also about socialism and Communism, dictatorship and democracy. My brother, Buzi, ever the ardent Communist, and I, challenged each other, grew more inflamed than the others, each trying to convince the other. It was only after my mother gently approached us and laid her hands on our shoulders, saying tenderly: "My children, you haven't seen each other for 23 years. Who knows whether you'll ever see each other again? So I beg you, my children, don't quarrel." That did it. As was his way, my brother brought an end to this volatile argument by using his favourite expression: "In short, it's all set!"

5. A fair and a Sabbath in town

In Soviet Russia they don't know days, only dates. Some say an evil prophet's curse – that a time would come when the people's despair would be so great that they would not even know what day it was – has now been fulfilled. Certainly, it's like this now in the big cities.

In the small towns, however, people still know which day it is. This is not because the despair there is less than in the larger cities. On the contrary, their distress is even greater. What is different is that in the small towns you find more mothers and fathers than sons and daughters. In other words most of the younger people have left, have scattered to the larger cities. Older people, the mothers and fathers, are left behind. They don't forget what day of the week it is. Knowing that is part of their religious life. So they keep track of the days in every week and remember when the Sabbath occurs and on what day a religious holiday falls, even if keeping the Sabbath or knowing when the holidays occur no longer brings them much pleasure.

I found out what day it was in the real world only after I left Moscow and returned to my hometown in Ukraine. I must confess it was pleasant to do so. It felt exactly like meeting up with an old and dear friend, someone whom I hadn't seen for a long time but had really missed. My 2 brothers, Buzi and Daniel, laughed when I told them this. Neither of them missed the names of the days. They could go on without them, just as they went on without the most necessary conveniences of life. It is like this as well with the other virtuous Communist activists, who are always absorbed in their work. Why do they need to know the names of the days? It's all the same to them, just as it was for that pious *Maggid*⁵² who said in his *droshe*⁵³ that it's not Sunday or Monday, not Tuesday or Wednesday and not Thursday or Friday and not the Sabbath: "But do you know which day it is today? Today is *Rosh Hashana!*"⁵⁴. For them, for these truly devoted Communist activists, every day is *Rosh Hashana*. That is how deeply absorbed they are in building up the country, how piously they believe in their ideal.

There is almost nothing left in town that does not bear the stamp of the new regime, including the destruction, the squalor, and the terribly oppressive nature of life. Nevertheless, the new regime has left several things behind. They continue to exist exactly as they did in the past. So, for generations upon generations, a market fair has

⁵² Itinerant Jewish preacher.

⁵³ Sermon.

⁵⁴ Jewish New Year.

been held every Thursday in Trostianets' and it still takes place to the current day, unchanged, although only God knows why they need a fair or how useful it is.

On the second day after I got home there was a fair. Understandably, I couldn't pass up the chance to see what it looked like these days. Outside the frost had subsided. As the sun was shining the snow was beginning to melt and little streams of water were flowing down from the hills and fields around the town, dragging along dirt which gathered onto the road. But the air outside was clean and fresh and pleasant - Ukraine! At the *Torhovytzia*, and around the market, there were sleighs and wagons. People were jostling each other but there was no longer the noisy Ukrainian colourfulness that once caught your eye. The horses standing by the sleighs and wagons were shrivelled, small, terribly emaciated. The fair lacked the vibrancy it had in the past. Everyone seemed sorrowful, as if they were all being bent under an entire mountain of burdens. Nobody spoke loudly, nobody shouted, nobody felt sure of themselves. What was immediately apparent, if you looked with open eyes, was how the old order had been entirely turned upside down. Instead of how it once was, when Jews were the dealers and peasants the customers, now the peasants were the dealers and the Jews the customers.

The Jews were wearing torn and dirty fur coats, just like the peasants, and exactly the same shabby sheepskin hats. The Jewish women, too, went around looking as shabby and ragged as the peasant women. They were wearing the same kind of shawls, whether patterned with flowers or without, along with the same heavy felt boots or torn shoes. Seldom did one see a person, be it a man or a woman, who wasn't dressed like this. It would have been refreshing to the eye to see something different.

The peasants at the market sell almost nothing but food. They sell stale bread for 10, 12, and 15 rubles a piece. They also sell radishes, dried-up pears, eggs, onions, garlic and other things. However, everything is very expensive, priced as if it were gold. When a woman can afford to buy a chicken for 10-12 rubles, she first looks around carefully to

ensure no one will steal it when she sets out on the road for home.

Although it was snowing outside, I saw people without shoes, standing entirely barefoot. At one house I saw an emaciated peasant, clearly very cold, quite frozen. He kept shifting his feet, stretching one out against a wall while his other foot remained planted in the snow. I looked at him with pity. I was apparently the only one doing so. Around me other people didn't regard this man with compassion, nor did they show any surprise. By then it was apparently a rather normal thing to see a person standing barefoot in the snow on a cold winter's day.

Walking around the market I encountered many people I knew. Every time I met someone I would pause, then a whole group would gather around. I would always ask: "How are you?" The answer was always the same: "How should I be? We're rotting!"

Everyone wanted news about life in America. Everyone had stories to tell about life in town. Friends asked me: "Do you still remember Volodya, the tall fellow whose father was a writer for the *starosta*⁵⁵ of the town?"

"Well, sure I remember him. I would actually like to see him."

"You can't, not anymore," they answered: "They found him dead this morning, in the street. He died of hunger." They talked about this as if dealing with a completely ordinary thing, as if starving to death wasn't news at all.

At the market, you could see many of the new officials in town - people from the *GPU*, a few militiamen, presidents, *nachalniks*⁵⁶ and secretaries from the various Soviet institutions in town. The old and the new mixed together as one but didn't really associate with each other.

As if nothing had happened, as if nothing had changed, I noticed a beggar, actually a wandering Ukrainian minstrel, sitting by the

⁵⁵ Elder.

⁵⁶ Chiefs.

road on a bag of straw, in the dirty snow. Just as in the old days he was playing and singing Ukrainian *dumy*⁵⁷, just as his grandfather and great-grandfather had likely once done. He performed *Sviatyi Lazarus*⁵⁸ and other beggar's songs, giving voice to these words:

*Hospody, mii myloserdnyi
Z vysokoho neba
Dai zhe meni bublichka
Bo tse duzhe treba.*

*Merciful Lord
From heaven above
Give me a bagel
It is very necessary.*

In the past, a minstrel at the fair could sit all day on a sack of straw, singing and begging. Back then, he beseeched passersby but asked them not for a bagel, for those were round in shape and might roll away. Nor should they offer him flour, for it came in a little sack and might spill. Instead, he'd implored, that they should please give him a *kopek*, for with coins he could buy whatever he, his wife and children might need.

In our times, however, the minstrel, like the one I saw at the market, wasn't begging for coins. One couldn't buy anything with a coin, the prices of food being so high. So instead he implored "God the Merciful in Heaven on High" for someone to give him a bun or a piece of bread, which he needed desperately.

Peasants, men and women, paused to listen but couldn't give this minstrel bread, nor flour, for most had none to give. Instead they threw small coins into the old glass bowl placed next to him. And, just as he begged them for alms, so they begged him to pray to God for them. May God have mercy on all of us!

In town they remember when it's Thursday and time for the market fair. They remember, too, when it is the Sabbath. In the street,

⁵⁷ Ballads.

⁵⁸ Lazarus - a traditional Kobzar psalm.

however, the Sabbath isn't felt. Rarely does a Jew dress differently on this day, compared with the rest of the week. There simply isn't anything else to put on. In their homes there isn't even a trace of such Sabbath delicacies as a white *challah*⁵⁹. People have long forgotten what a *challah* tastes like.

The *shul*, the old synagogue, locked nearly the entire week, is opened on this day. This is done by the *shames*, an old Jew who served as the synagogue's servant. He is quite downtrodden, with not even a crumb of hope left smouldering in his heart. I was told he cries every time he takes the lock off of the *shul* and even more when he locks it up again. On the Sabbath Jews come to the *shul*, pray quickly, then go home quietly. Once home they grab whatever might happen to be there and try to rest a little from their hard work. It's not easy to find a Jew who doesn't work hard nowadays. If he is not working on the collective farm, he is at the *artel*⁶⁰ and if he is not involved with the *artel* he is doing something else in order to earn just enough for a piece of bread. When he rests just a little from this hard work, that is how he's keeping *Shabbes*.

On one such a Sabbath I visited the homes of several old acquaintances. For many reasons, and especially because I didn't want to embarrass these poor people, I did not come to them for any special purpose. Instead I gave the same excuse everywhere. I said I just happened to be passing by and so dropped in. It was a pity to look at these people, how they felt a terrible embarrassment when they greeted me in their homes: "We don't have anything with which to welcome you, with which to honour you." I heard this in all the houses I entered on this particular Sabbath. All I saw was great poverty, darkness and despair, depressing to look upon. The only ray of light in the lives of these unfortunate people was the hope they had for future of their children. Their children were learning, were getting ahead and so surely would achieve something better.

These children will probably not stay in town. They all hope to go to Moscow. One needs to know that today's Jewish children in the

⁵⁹ Jewish braided bread eaten on Sabbath and other ceremonial occasions.

⁶⁰ Cooperative association.

provinces are not like Chekhov's provincial *barishnyes*⁶¹ who woke up at night and longingly cried out: "To Moscow! To Moscow!" yet remained stranded in a backward province. These days, whenever a young Jewish man or girl decides to leave for Moscow, an opportunity is created and then they get up and off they go. Fathers and mothers place their hopes on their children. As for themselves? They know their fate is to go under, starve, to be devoured by filth and foulness.

When the Sabbath comes, when people are even more embittered and depressed as they see there's nothing at all to be had in their homes, they sometimes comfort themselves by, at least, covering their tables with an old tablecloth. Not everyone has one. When, unexpectedly, I arrived at one house I saw how the people there quickly, and in great embarrassment, covered their table with just such an old tablecloth. They served up bread. It was black bread and stale. Vodka was also put out, along with a plate of *tsimes*⁶². The man of the house, who had just come from synagogue, rejoiced at my company. He had known me in the days when I was just a young boy. He had lots he wanted to speak about, about the old times, about how he survived the pogrom. He lamented at how very poorly he lived, apologized for his house looking like a pigsty, said he and his family sometimes starved a little. While speaking like this, however, he said: "Nevertheless, believe me, if only I had the authority to do so I would see to it that several times a week *klezmer* musicians played in tribute to the Soviet *vlast* (Soviet regime). You hear? *Klezmer* musicians should play. Because without Soviet power it would be a thousand times worse."

"You understand," he gestured, continuing to speak: "whatever happens – at least under the Soviets we aren't afraid of any pogroms. They've restrained the wolves, wild wolves. And this, in itself, is worth something. Don't you think so? Yes, it is true, things are bad now, really quite so, but much of that is the fault of the 'country'. The 'country' works relentlessly. The 'country' doesn't sleep. The 'country' is doing everything possible to sabotage the work, to undermine our efforts."

⁶¹ Young ladies.

⁶² A Jewish stew typically made from carrots and dried fruits such as prunes or raisins, often combined with other root vegetables.

This Jew used this word “country” many times. I couldn’t grasp what he meant by it. In the beginning it seemed possible he got hold of this word from letters he received, surely from relatives in America, and had somehow misconstrued this word in his own way. Or he might not know the correct meaning of the English word “country.” Perhaps he was using it to refer to the villages or to the peasants who were opposed to the Soviet regime, who could not adapt to this new life that had been forced upon them. However, as I kept listening to him, I realized I still didn’t entirely comprehend what he meant by the word “country.” It became obvious he was not speaking only about the “country” in Russia but also about the “country” in Paris, in Berlin, in Manchuria and also in New York. Realizing I would never guess his meaning I just stopped and asked him to explain. “What!” he marvelled: “You don’t know what ‘country’ means? That cannot be. It means country-revolution. Now do you understand? The ‘country’ lies within us, it does us *kol-haroes-shebe’olam*,⁶³ obstructs us at every step, always strives to undermine our foundations, doesn’t allow us to raise our heads, pesters us, drives us into the ground. That is why it’s so bitter and dark for us and why we don’t have anything to eat and nothing to wear. Only after we finally defeat the “country,” internally and externally, will a totally new life begin for us. You’ll soon see! And don’t forget this. Whatever you may see nowadays we’re still building and nobody can deny it. Our newspapers report the entire world is marvelling at how we’re getting ahead here. Well, the world is surely not crazy, ha? They know we’re building! It’s really true, even if here and in other small towns you don’t see as much of it. But in the big cities, look what is happening there! Therefore, the main task before us remains the defeat of the ‘country!’”

As he spoke, this Jew paced back and forth across the room, until he finally took a pause by a window. He stood there for a while but then, without explanation, suddenly jerked away, running over to the table to quickly snatch everything away, even covering the bread with the tablecloth. At just that moment the door opened and a pitiful-looking peasant came in. He stopped just inside, standing by the door and said something to the Jew about wanting to work. He soon left. After

⁶³ All imaginable evil.

he did the Jew looked for a while through the window, then came back to the table and uncovered the bread. I couldn't understand what all this meant so I asked: "Tell me, I beg you, why did you cover up the bread?" The Jew answered: "It tears at one's heart. This isn't pleasant. The peasants don't have bread." Then he added, sighing: "They are to be pitied! Greatly pitied!"

6. Meeting my own and strangers

The last few days I had at home were passing quickly. I had to begin getting ready to set out on the road, continuing my trip across Soviet Russia.

My mother asked: "My son, stay for at least another day! The entire time you've been here you were always busy; either people were coming to you, or you were running around. I've almost not spoken with you!"

She had a great deal to tell me, my mother. Over the 23 years I hadn't seen her she had probably talked with me, in her mind, and not just once, imagining she could see me, was sitting beside me, was looking into my eyes. Now, however, when I actually was there and she was embracing me, her eyes just filled with tears. She could barely speak more than two words: "My son..." before she'd burst into tears again.

She wasn't the only one who cried in front of me. During the few days I was in town many people did. Later, when I visited other towns, as well as the villages, I saw how crying in Soviet Russia was now completely usual. If you talked with a man for several minutes, inquiring about how he lived or what he was doing, he'd just burst into tears. That's how it was with men and women too.

I couldn't refuse my mother and so said I would stay for another day. When I promised to, she was overjoyed. Determined to finally have an opportunity to "enjoy herself" with me, as she expressed it in her Ukrainian Yiddish, she spread a rumour around town that I had already left: "At least for the last day they won't come to you," she said. It didn't turn out as she hoped. You couldn't deceive the

town. So, on the last evening before my departure, the house was again full of people – my own and strangers. Everyone wanted me to remember their truly sad situations, how they now found themselves and looked. Everyone wanted to make sure that when I got back to America, I would meet their relatives and friends and make sure they sent help.

At this time my brother, Daniel, let me know he wouldn't be accompanying me to the train come the morning. He wouldn't have the time. He was very busy in the villages and needed to keep watch as the fields were sowed, to ensure there would be enough bread. An ardent Communist like him couldn't tear himself away from such important work just because of me. Instead he came over in the evening, seemingly in a great hurry, riding on a horse, again armed with a revolver. Even then he didn't stay long before he stood up, turning to me as he tightened the leather belt on his black shirt: "Well, let's say our goodbyes!" We kissed. Then he left. I didn't see him again.

My brother, Buzi, who had escorted me from Moscow to visit our mother also went off somewhere that evening, even though I had wanted him to spend this last evening with me. My younger brothers were always going somewhere else, were always busy with something. Instead several distant relatives and even a few complete strangers remained in the house. They talked and talked. Again my mother was left unhappy for "they were taking me away" from her.

On the table, as appropriate for such an occasion, there was stale black bread. We also had tea to drink, served with sugar. I had brought that from Moscow. I watched as my mother, an old woman with very few teeth in her mouth, chewed on that black and stale bread. I couldn't bear to even put it in my mouth. As she ate my mother said, shaking her head: "You know, my son, they're already saying in town that since you've come, we've been enjoying fine meals all the time, baking white *challahs*, roasting ducks and geese."

My mother didn't say this without reason. In the town, where most people were hungry, rumours of this sort truly were spread. Even

I happened to hear someone saying: “Just the kind of luck we have now! When a person finally comes here from the outside world, he ends up in the kind of house where people already have plenty of everything.” Live in plenty – apparently that meant having dried out black bread. I didn’t ever see any other kind of bread in my mother’s house.

On that evening, I realized how, even in the worst of times, a Jew doesn’t abandon his long-standing appreciation for a witticism or a good joke. People that night were discussing how Soviet Russia intended to catch up to and overtake America. Just then one Jew, sporting a rather clever smile on his face, sighed and said: “America, poor thing, deserves to be pitied. My heart aches when I think about America!”

“Why?” he was asked, to which this Jew answered: “For a very simple reason, of course. We are celebrating how we have caught up to America. Since you all know how bad and bitter it is for us here imagine how bad things must be over there in America! Well, tell me, why wouldn’t we feel sorry for them?”

Trying to keep a serious expression on his face another Jew said this: “Don’t keep such a fast pace up over there in America. We don’t have the strength anymore to catch up to you. Don’t forget that once we catch up, we’ll still have to overtake you.”

Another Jew interjected: “No matter,” he said: “it won’t be too hard for us to catch up with or overtake America. We already go around barefoot and it isn’t hard to run in bare feet.”

There were also a couple of Christians in our company. When they heard how people were speaking about catching up and overtaking America one of them told us of the new plans we should expect, which he had heard about in Moscow. He reminded us of how during the first Five Year Plan we were supposed to chase and overtake America. In the second Five Year Plan we were to extend ourselves further, move further ahead. Then, during our third Five

Year Plan, we'd rot and over-rot. In Russian, this sounded very good, fine wordplay.

Hearing how they were talking about a second and even a third Five Year Plan someone else called out: "I believe and imagine there will be a second Five Year Plan. But a third – certainly not! That would be against the law."

"Why?" he was asked: "Because in the Soviet law books," he answered: "it is clearly written that 10 years is the maximum sentence a person being punished can be given. So don't try to persuade me our government would go against the law and give us a third Five Year Plan. We've already had two Five Year Plans."

All these sarcastic remarks, the intent of which everyone understood very quickly, were nothing new to me, not by then. I had heard similar banter in Moscow, in various circles of artists, writers, engineers, Soviet officials and ordinary people, all of whom loved a joke. When I heard them in Moscow, however, they hadn't the same poignancy I noticed here, amidst these simple people, for these were the actual victims of the great changes being made, a transformation which had uprooted, had erased almost every memory of the past.

As they were joking around, saying things that people who don't have or want to have a sense of humour, might misinterpret, one Jew suddenly stopped and gave a wag of his finger: "Shhh! Be careful!" Indicating the children lounging around at our feet, he cautioned: "One must be on guard around young people. Enough already!" And it was. No one made any more jokes. No one gave voice to any more witticisms. These fathers and mothers feared their own children. With that comment the mood entirely changed.

Someone, an older Jew, sighed: "Well, to live to see such times!"

"Now you aren't permitted to say a word."

"Whom must we be on guard against? Our own children!"

“Ekh, ekh, ekh!”

Just then a mother decided she wanted her child, a girl of 8 years, to show the American guest how smart she was. The little girl stood on a chair and began immediately, in the highest pitch, to recite:

*Ya leninskii tsvetochek,
Ya stalinsii buket.*

She didn't get any further. In the middle of her presentation she burst into tears, then climbed down from the chair. This wasn't the end of it. The other children started laughing and that made her cry even more. She sobbed so much her parents had to carry her home in their arms. Other children, whose fathers and mothers were afraid to speak around, took over. One after another, whether girl or boy, and standing on the very same chair where the first girl had so pathetically failed, they proclaimed themselves to be a “Lenin blossom” and a “Stalin bouquet.”

By the time everyone left it was already very late. My mother was pleased there were no longer strangers around. She sat next to me and seemed about ready to speak. But one glance at me was enough to change her mind: “My child,” she said, “you are so tired. They've exhausted you. Go to sleep!”

In the morning no one was certain whether the train would arrive or not. At the station they couldn't find out for sure. They said the train might arrive or might not. It would be best, they advised, if we just waited until we heard the train's whistle. When that happened, we'd know it was arriving. We waited for a long time, until we heard a whistle coming from the train station and then all went there.

At the train station there were many people, Jews and Christians. It seemed as if the entire town was accompanying me, just as they had all met me – with all of their poverty and dirtiness, with all of the darkness they bore. Again, they crowded me, handing me addresses for relatives and friends in America. Again, they begged me to not

forget the sad situation they found themselves in: “May they help us! We will rot here!”

My mother stood next to me. Knowing our minutes and seconds together were numbered, she was angry at every person who spoke even a word to me, drawing my attention away. When the first clang of the bell at the train station sounded, she burst into tears: “My son, I haven’t even spoken with you!” She was certain she would never see me again and began sobbing ever harder: “My son! My son!” I wanted to soothe her but couldn’t speak more than one word: “Mama!” Tears choked me. I too was certain I would never see her again. The train began to move. From a distance I could still hear my mother crying. I saw how my sisters were holding her up so she wouldn’t collapse.

I left together with my brother, Buzi. He came along but only for one station. On the way, I spoke of my impressions about life in the town. He listened attentively, then replied: “Such is the march of history! The old generation needs to die away, to make room for the younger one. The Soviet Union is not a country of today but of tomorrow.” I tried to convince him that, even when such a massive transformation was being carried out, taking a humane approach was not only possible but necessary. He, however, held fast to his opinion about how the march of history would unfold. As he had done many times before he brought our conversation to an end with these words: “It’s all set!”

At the Demkivka train station we parted, kissing like two brothers who love each other but come from different worlds. He went on to Moscow. I turned off in another direction to continue my journey across Soviet Russia. Our paths had separated, once again.



Taken in 1932 during visit to Russia
for Jewish Daily Forward

Top row:

Zisel's daughter

Ziel (Mendel's sister) (died 1934)

Mendel Osherowitch

Riva's Husband Mayer

Mendel's mother (seated)

Riva's daughter Fania

Sister RIVA (seated)

CHAPTER

IV

In the villages

In many cities of Soviet Russia, and not necessarily only in the circles where people oppose the politics of the government, but also in truly kosher Communist circles, you very often hear a typical story about just how difficult conditions are in the country. “A peasant from a village,” you’ll be told, “came to a large city, attending as a delegate to a Soviet conference. He wasn’t an educated man but had great respect for educated people. So during the conference sessions he listened very attentively to the speeches of the leaders. It wasn’t all that easy for this peasant to understand everything they said although he got the main points. One word, however, confused him, leaving him not entirely certain whether he had really understood everything. And the word he didn’t understand was ‘tempo.’ And, almost as if to spite him, it seemed every speaker on the platform had endlessly used this word: ‘rapid tempo,’ ‘fast tempo,’ ‘American tempo,’ ‘swift tempo’ – everything was ‘tempo’ and ‘tempo’! Since every speaker used this word so many times, indeed emphasized it, the peasant figured it must be a very important word. So, after the meeting, he approached one of the leaders and asked him for an explanation for exactly what a ‘tempo’ might be. ‘I must know this, Comrade,’ the naïve peasant said: ‘for when I return to my village I will, naturally, have to deliver a report.’ Wanting to be certain the peasant understood, the leader thought the best thing in such a case would be to provide a real-life example. So he led the peasant over to a window. Pointing out a large factory, he said: ‘You see, Comrade, that factory over there? It’s a big one, eh? Smoke comes out from its smokestacks. Inside, several thousand people work by day and by night. To build such a factory

under another order would have taken 10 years, at least. However, under our Communist order, it took us just 1 year and the factory was built! And that means – tempo! Understood?’

After the conference, the peasant travelled home. Speaking at a gathering of his fellow villagers he repeatedly used the word ‘tempo.’ The peasants didn’t understand what such a thing might be and so, after his speech was over, several approached, asking him to help them understand what a ‘tempo’ might be. The peasant followed the example of the leader in the city. He led these naïve and simple people to a window, trying to see if he could spot a factory to help him make his point. In the village, of course, there was no factory to be seen. The peasant found himself facing a great dilemma. But then he saw, off in the distance, a cemetery. Rejoicing, he explained: ‘See that cemetery over there, Comrades? It’s a large cemetery, right? You can barely see the fence at its far end. To fill such a cemetery under another political system would certainly have taken 10 years, not a day less. Under the Communist order, however, in just 1 year the entire cemetery has been filled. And that’s what tempo means! Understand?’

You very often hear variations of this story in Russia. It’s told with a wry smile. Some people laugh over the peasant’s stupidity and naïveté. However, when you travel out to the villages, when you actually speak with peasants, listen to what they tell you about, then you understand this story has a basis in truth. “I was never a socialist revolutionary,” someone once said to me in Russia. For years this man had been, indeed still is today, a Social-Democrat, a Menshevik: “I always placed more emphasis on the workers than on the peasants, was always more interested in them than peasants. However, I look with open eyes at what’s happening in this country and have to say that one of the greatest crimes the Bolshevik government is committing is in the attitude it has taken toward the peasants. If anyone is suffering in Russia, more than all others, that is none other than the peasant.”

This person is right – that’s what I realized when I began travelling

around the villages. The first thing you see when you come into a village is the *kolkhoz*, the collective farm. You definitely don't need to ask whether this is the *kolkhoz*. You can figure this out yourself. The collective farm is the only place in the village surrounded by a good fence, reminiscent of how a manor estate looked in the past. That's where you'll see a couple of well-fed horses, not the famished and dried-up mares one more typically finds. That's how it is in Ukraine, that's how it is in the central part of Russia, and also how it is in the Don region. The *kolkhoz* is the gem in the village. It is the first thing you notice and so the widespread poverty, the general decay otherwise so pervasive everywhere else in the village, stands out all the more sharply.

The small peasant houses with painted benches and brightly coloured walls you once saw in Ukrainian villages are no more. All the *khaty*¹ and smaller homes have been neglected, have grown filthy. The peasants are not interested in tending to their homes because they can never be sure how long they'll be allowed to live in them. They are simply afraid to maintain their houses properly because doing so might result in them being categorized as *kulaks*. If that should happen then everything they own would be taken away from them.

This fear of being branded a *kulak*, a rich peasant, has created a situation where every peasant feels dejected, where personal initiative has been lost. Just as he isn't interested in producing a lot of grain because when he does it is taken away from him anyway, so too the peasant is not much interested in cleaning up his house or keeping it in order for one can never be certain whether it too will be taken away.

The peasant regards the *kolkhoz* as he once thought of the nobleman's estate. In the past he was forced to work there out of necessity, to earn a few coins. Nowadays he cannot be persuaded to believe the collective farm is somehow his. He doesn't feel that and doesn't spend time considering the theoretical side of the whole question, how supposedly a collective economy will lay the ground for creating a

¹ Farm homes.

better new order. When he looks for tangible results in his daily life none of this adds up. What he knows for certain is this - his wife, his children and he are being left with nothing.

“Why are you speaking to me about the *panshchyna* from long ago,” a peasant said in one of the Ukrainian villages I came to: “The *panshchyna* was a paradise compared to the life we have now even though they’re always trying to convince us that everything belongs to us.”

I showed this peasant a drawing in a Russian magazine. One image portrayed a small peasant dwelling, broken down, surrounded by an old fence, with pieces falling off. Next to that fence stood an emaciated cow and a little further off a peasant, his eyes wild, his arms outspread, stubbornly trying to defend this bit of what he owned. Under this illustration there was a one-word caption: “Mine!” Beside that was another drawing showing large *kolkhozes*, with many tractors and modern agricultural machines doing the farming. Factories with large smokestacks were shown in the background, belching smoke. Front and centre, looking quite content and fortunate, cheerful and happy, healthy and strong, stood 3 people – a peasant, a worker, and a Red Army soldier. Under this picture there was also just a one-word caption: “Ours!”

“You see,” I explained to the peasant, showing him these 2 magazine pictures: “You see the difference?”

The peasant looked at me. His gaze was quite penetrating. Shaking his head, he said: “We draw and write very nicely here. But what’s shown in this magazine is only like that on paper.” Then he told me some facts about his own life. Just like many other peasants from his village he was a member of the *kolkhoz*. He said he worked hard, exhausting his strength. After the grain was harvested from the fields, and an accounting made, his share, just like that of many other peasants, consisted on average of around 60-something kopecks a day. They were paid, however, in bread, according to this accounting of 60-something kopecks a day. The bread so earned must last for

a year. It actually wasn't enough for more than a few weeks. What, he asked, was he supposed to do? The fact that his children could study and had more opportunities than they would have had in the past, could perhaps do better in life, was no consolation. He was more interested in the land than in anything else. While he was truly willing to devote himself to the state he had needs not being met. He wanted, moreover, to be allowed to live like a human being, not be made into a beggar. "And tell me, if you please, what good is teaching our children in schools when these children are starving?"

That was true. The children in the villages, just like the children in the small towns, were mostly hungry, although the government watches over them much more than it concerns itself with adults. Still, even the children almost never get enough to eat. One look is enough to confirm this. The majority were anaemic, weakened, scrawny, quite lacking the zest for life one usually sees in children in other countries. Here I will point out a fact, which, in my opinion, is very telling. When a train passes by a village or a hamlet, and children are standing at a distance, they usually wave to the passengers looking out of the windows. It's like this everywhere. Something in the passing of a train captivates the imagination of children, sparks a warm feeling in them toward the strangers they can see on board, people coming from someplace and going somewhere else, each caught up in their own thoughts and dreams. As if by magic the faces of strangers in the windows of a moving train seem close to these children, standing at a distance, so they wave their little hands, greeting them with delight. It's like this in all countries. I saw this on my train trip in America, from New York to California, on another trip I had in Egypt and Palestine years ago. I also saw this in Germany, in Austria, in France, in Belgium, and even in Poland. However, I did not see this in Soviet Russia! I journeyed hundreds and hundreds of miles during the several weeks I was there. I passed countless villages and hamlets but nowhere did I see children waving their hands at the passengers on a passing train. Instead they just stood off at a distance, downtrodden and pathetic, sometimes on a hill, sometimes on a bridge, or just along a road. Not one of them raised a little hand. For these village children are as dejected as their fathers. The pressure of this difficult

time lies on their shoulders. Yet they don't know any other life, don't remember another time, so they think the world was created like this. Their fathers, however, do remember what was and so feel even more acutely their disillusionment with the new order, with the hope they had invested in it. While they have already become used to suffering, sometimes they break, lose their patience and start to protest. By doing so they risk their lives. When these villagers grow agitated, when the peasant straightens out his bent back, then the danger of rebellion flares up. *Volynki* are what they call them in Ukraine, local rebellions that flare up in the villages. The newspapers write nothing about these revolts. Not only is the Moscow press silent, as if such things were entirely unimportant, but even local newspapers don't mention them, not a word. The public must not read about such revolts, just as it doesn't need to know how, in this or that region, there is a smallpox epidemic or some other sort of infectious plague. Of course, the government's men know about these revolts. They know what methods must be adopted to stifle them, know how to restore order quickly while ensuring not even an echo of what is done as these rebels are suppressed ever reaches a broader audience.

When I arrived in Ukraine I heard in several places about revolts in the villages, although they had occurred some time ago. Most often I was told about so-called *babi volyn'ki*, women's rebellions. From what I was told, if only in a few words, and only here and there, it became clear that even if the world didn't know about them, and the foreign correspondents in Moscow haven't reported anything, insurrections had taken place in many Ukrainian villages. When they did the peasants placed their wives, holding small children in their arms, into the front ranks, hoping they wouldn't be shot. All of these rebellions were suppressed, however, and with an iron hand – so now the countryside is calm and quiet and nobody is permitted to speak about what happened.

Very often one also hears about fires in the villages. A village fire was never a novelty in Russia. In the old days it was quite a frequent occurrence. Everyone knew that when the bells of a church rang “violently” that meant something was burning, probably started

because somewhere a wind carried sparks away from where a peasant was roasting a pig. Now, however, fires in the villages are an even more frequent occurrence than before. The difference now is that everyone knows these fires aren't occurring because somewhere a peasant is cooking a pig. There has to be some other cause for these fires because the peasants don't have any pigs left to cook.

Sometimes a fire starts burning rather abruptly at the collective farm. Rumours quickly spread about how peasants set the fire. Almost never, however, can anyone point to a particular peasant and say he did it. When the *kolkhoz* burns the peasants also don't run to put out the fire, not unless they're driven to do so. When some do try to help douse the flames the other peasants look at such people askance, even chastise them for it. For the peasants hate the *kolkhoz*, even more than they once hated the nobleman's estate. When they see the collective farm burning, they make no effort to put out those flames.

Several times I went out to villages familiar from my childhood years, or went to visit others for the first time. Everywhere I heard stories about fires, about conflagrations, about the people who set them. In one village I went walking with an older peasant. I had to listen attentively. He only spoke using hints and insinuations, making his point as only a Ukrainian peasant can when he wants to say something, but not openly.

I had noticed smoke and flames off in the distance. "What is burning over there?" I asked. The peasant squinted with one eye and then, meaningfully looking toward me while using his cane to point all around us, he said this: "*Horyt' teper vskriz', po vsim selam, til'ky poky shcho ne vydko*" which means: "Nowadays it's burning everywhere, in all the villages, but you can't see it yet." He knew I understood what he meant. Then, as if he need say no more, or couldn't, he took his leave.

Dragging myself out in the cold, travelling on sleighs and on wagons along roads leading from one town to the other, from one village to another, I saw stray horses rambling over the snowy Ukrainian steppes. Shrivelled and withered, with protruding bones, tattered

and filthy hides, they dragged themselves over those fields, singly, sometimes in pairs. I could see them searching with their muzzles in the snow, looking for something to quiet their hunger. Many could barely stand and indeed I saw horses that had fallen down and lay dead where they had collapsed. *Bezpryzorni* horses, they were called. When you asked a peasant where all these wild horses had come from and why their dead bodies lay scattered across the steppes, he answered: "There isn't anything to give to the *khudoba* (the Ukrainian peasant calls horses and cattle by the term *khudoba*, livestock) to eat nowadays. A *pood* of oats costs 40 *karbovantsi* (rubles). And what is a *pood* of oats? Before you move, it's no longer there. They've taken everything away from us. We have nothing. There's no bread in the house. We eat beets, potatoes, and also the peels from beets and potatoes. The bread, which the government leaves us for the year after we work in the *kolkhoz*, barely lasts a month. The peasant doesn't have any bread for himself or for his wife and children. Well, so what should such a man do when he sees how the animals are suffering, how they're withering up? His heart hurts and he can't help himself. He can't bear to see his horse dying from hunger. His sorrow is heavy as he watches this. So he abandons his horse, giving it over into God's care. Let it go! If it is destined to fall and die then at least let that be somewhere far away, in a field, or on the road, as long as not in front of one's own eyes. To watch your horse die in front of you would rip apart your heart!"

Often, when a peasant needs to pay someone at market for a little flour or a dozen potatoes, he will pretend to search through his pockets for his money and then he will say he has somehow forgotten it. Then he says: "Hold onto my horse. I will go and get your money. A *kum* (friend) of mine is not far from here. I'll get the money from him. Hold my horse in the meanwhile." Then he goes away, taking that little bit of flour, or those dozen potatoes, leaving the horse behind, with no intention of ever coming back. He wants his horse, dying from hunger, withering and shrivelling up, to end up in the hands of another peasant who still has some oats. He burdens someone else with it, then just walks away. Sometimes this even happens when a poor mother can no longer bear to watch the agonies of her hungry

child and abandons it near a house, hoping better-off strangers will give her child a better life than she could, sparing it further misery.

On the road to the city of Tulchyn, which played a large role in the famous Khmelnytsky Uprising, and also in the revolt of the Decembrists, in 1825, I happened to travel from the train station on a sleigh for eight *versts*². The coachman was a peasant who liked to talk but had also learned when it was best to stay silent. There were 3 passengers in all on that sleigh with me. One was a young Christian 30 years of age, with a good fur coat and boots. He had a rather stubborn-looking face. The second passenger was a young Jewish man with a quilted coat, once black but now of a colour usually called in Ukrainian Yiddish “dark-green-*popelyate*.” On his neck, around the collar of this short and thick quilted coat, he was wearing an old scarf of red and blue colours. On his head was an Astrakhan hat, not yet entirely tattered. He was also wearing boots with iron plates on the heels. Although the skin of his face was coarse and hard-looking he seemed to be of a cheerful disposition and his eyes smiled, even if the tone of his speech betrayed the certainty of someone who believes he is always correct, can say what others can’t. There was also another passenger on this sleigh, a woman. Her age was difficult to determine, as is the case with many women in Russia. Covered and wrapped in a thick shawl, a warm one, she sat on the sleigh, repeatedly complaining: “Oh, it’s not good for me!” This was distressing yet also rather comical. The young man with the quilted coat suggested to her that perhaps she should have something to eat, that maybe she wasn’t feeling well because her stomach was telling her she was hungry. Taking his advice, she drew a thin piece of bread from a lead box she carried, then began to chew it. Once finished she said: “Upon my life, how right you were! Apparently, I really was hungry.”

The road was quite a bad one. We kept falling into ruts, our sleigh sliding down into the mud, causing us considerable difficulty for we kept having to get pulled out; it seemed as if we would never reach the city. All along this road I saw dead horses, lying about on the

² A Russian measure of length, about 0.66 mile or 1.1 km.

snow. Nobody seemed bothered to see how they were lying there, as if this was already a completely and entirely common and natural thing to see. As the peasant drove his skinny and starving horses onwards, he spoke, all the while, about the terrible times he was living in: “It has already been more than 2 weeks,” he said, “and there hasn’t been a piece of bread in my house. That’s how it is for all the peasants now. They took away our seed from last year. They gave us 18 kopecks a *pood* for it. That’s the price the government set. Now we’re being ordered to sow our fields but we don’t have any seed to do it with even though they don’t believe us. Even when they do and provide us with seed for planting, they charge us 17 rubles for a *pood*. Well, so how can one live? How can one survive? It’s not possible like this. It cannot go on like this! It speaks for itself, right?” That was how the peasant spoke, sitting on the sleigh, keeping his feet pointed down towards the earth. He also spoke like this when, out of pity for his poor, starving horses, he got down and walked beside the sleigh.

The young Jewish man in the quilted coat was having none of it. He disputed everything the peasant had said: “It’s not all like that,” he insisted: “Many of you actually hide the seed and the bread and other things the state needs. Strict measures must be taken against this. And it won’t always be as bad as it is now, you know. They’re already planning a second *piatyrichka* (in Ukrainian the *piatiletka* or Five Year Plan is called *piatyrichka*). When they carry it out, then everything will be better and we will no longer suffer so much.” The peasant, however, wasn’t about to allow himself to be contradicted. Without stubbornness, without anger, but calmly and sedately, he clung to his opinion, saying: “You admit it’s now bad, very bad. You claim, however, that someday it will be better. It won’t. I’m telling you that later, well, let’s say, a year from now, it will be even worse. Much worse than it is now.”

“Why not?” the young Jewish man asked the peasant, in a mocking tone.

“I will tell you why,” the peasant answered. He still spoke tranquilly although one could tell the sneering tone he had heard in the young

man's voice had annoyed him, that he was exerting an effort not to become angry: "I will tell you why. Two years before, at this time, and also a year ago at this time, the manure was already spread on the fields, was warming the ground. Now, however, the manure is lying on all the roads, spreading plagues and blights in the villages and in the cities. Nothing warms the ground now and it lies frozen and cold. Our livestock are dying. So, soon, there will no longer be any horses in the villages. They are scattered everywhere, dead or dying. And the people are also already half-dead from hunger. Well, how will we work, with what? With what and with whom will we plough and sow?"

Listening I felt a shudder pass over my body. You saw and felt this man was not choosing his words in order to speak nicely. He was speaking from his heart, and moreover, about a matter he knew, because not just he, but his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, had all grown up on this very soil and, from childhood on, had breathed in its air. The questions he posed rang in my ears: "Well, how will we work? With what and with whom will we plough and sow?"

The young man in the quilted coat did not relent. He immediately had an answer ready for these difficult questions: "Why we will work with tractors!" he said with pride. "Yes, we will work with tractors!"

The peasant maintained his composure, made an effort not to grow angry. He only gave a shake of his head before he used his whip to point to the bad road, a mixture of snow and mud, then said: "Could you travel on this road with an automobile? Ha? Certainly not. The same thing is true in the fields. You couldn't manage the fields with tractors alone. Out on the fields there are corners and spots where you can't work without a horse, without an ox, without our farm animals. Soon we won't have any left. Our horses are dying. So I tell you again. In the villages it won't be better a year from now. It will be worse."

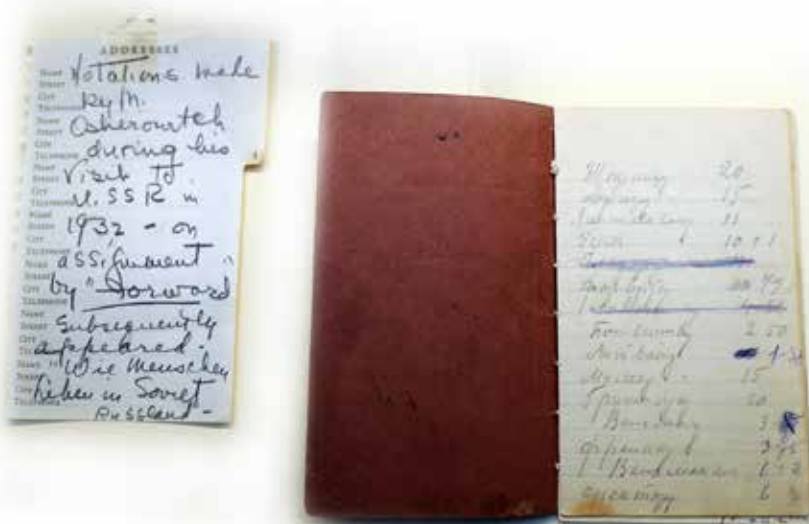
The young man wanted to reply again but the peasant, who had apparently finally lost all patience, interrupted: "Eh, what do you

know? Just how to *balakaty* (chatter). You know nothing more.”

The sleigh dragged on slowly. And the shrivelled horses barely walked. And you couldn't see the road anywhere. And, from afar, everything seemed weighted down with a Russian heaviness. Whenever you stared out into the distance, all you felt was how you were being crushed, were lost and helpless.

Ah, you misfortunate wretched one, lonely, morose, Dead!
(Alexander Blok)

And these words came to me: “One cannot measure Russia with an *arshin*³, one cannot comprehend it with one's mind – one must believe in Russia!”⁴



³ An obsolete Russian unit of length, corresponding to a forearm or cubit.

⁴ Paraphrasing the popular quatrain of the Russian poet, Afanasii Tiutchev, expressing the idea of an enigmatic and distinctive Russian character.

CHAPTER

V

With peasants on the trains

After I left my hometown and the poor villages where I had seen so much trouble and want, I set out for the city of Rostov, located by the Don River.

For around 10 hours I went in a 'hard' train car, where peasants or even poorer people with heavy packages and bundles usually travel. What I heard and saw I will never forget, not for the rest of my life. In this car there wasn't a single, tiny spot left open, not even a space small enough to pass a needle through. The stuffiness was so great you thought you would choke. People were sitting in various curled-up poses – not only on benches but also on the luggage shelves and floor. Everyone, the majority being peasant men and women, were dressed in grey and torn fur coats, in ragged clothing, in old sacks from which pieces and patches were hanging down, dirty and stained – they were all scratching, rubbing their backs and shoulders on whatever surface they could. All the while they also spoke about typhus and smallpox and other diseases going around in this or that region.

Intentionally or not you tried to move away from them, to another side. You pressed yourself up against a wall, or against whatever you could, trying as much as possible to move yourself away from these poor people, scratching themselves, perhaps carrying the traces of all the diseases they spoke about. This was not at all pleasant, and so you tried, naturally enough, to distance yourself. But where will you move, where could you press yourself, when everywhere you turned you ended up touching a poor person wrapped in an old grey fur coat or dressed in a sack from which pieces and patches were falling!

It was so confined in this train wagon you felt you were being smothered. You could barely catch your breath. The air was saturated with a mouldy aroma, recalling smells I remembered from the old days in Russia. The panes of the car's windows were jammed shut. From a distance, you saw clear, white, snowy fields but not even a tiny bit of fresh air from the outside made its way inside, not into this carriage.

I overheard the peasants speaking in Ukrainian. "In our village," one fellow said, "someone slaughtered a calf. The last calf he had. He slaughtered it at dawn, so nobody would see. He quietly took the meat into the city to sell. He also left behind a little for his wife, children and himself. When the children saw this meat they nearly danced from joy. Their father and mother had to warn them not to blurt out even a word to anyone about how they had eaten meat."

"It's good for the person who still has a calf," another peasant remarked: "Where we live all the calves and the pigs were slaughtered long ago. No peasant has any calves or pigs left!"

"The peasant no longer even has any bread!" a third exclaimed.

"And we're eating beets..."

"And we're eating potato peelings...just like our animals once did."

"We're getting swollen from hunger..."

"We're dying of hunger..."

"If you have anything in your house they come and take it..."

"There's already nothing left to take..."

That was how they spoke, in broken-off words, almost as if from between clenched teeth. A little later someone said: "They say that in the larger cities bread is cheaper."

“Yes, in the larger centres it’s a little better.”

“There you can still get bread.”

Rattling off the names of big cities, located very far away, someone said: “A loaf of bread costs no more than 10 rubles there.” In another “a loaf costs no more than 8 rubles.” As for Moscow: “in Moscow – they say – you can even get white bread.” Someone answered him: “So what if you can get it in Moscow? Around here, in our villages, it’s bad.”

“Yes, peasants are now living through direct times. Very hard times. Only God knows what will be!”

At every station where the train stopped more and more peasants came in, many carrying bundles, sacks and packages on their shoulders. Not bothering to take off their heavy burdens, they just lay and seated themselves wherever they could, pushing into each other, crawling over each other. Nobody seemed angry about these people pushing in, nobody complained, as if all realized that things couldn’t be otherwise, didn’t need to be. Such remarkable patience and endurance is really only seen in the Russian peasant.

Looking at how crowded it was, finding myself in this crush of people, it seemed as if I would never be able to get out of there. Worse, at every new station, I saw more and more peasants, men and women, carrying bundles and sacks, cramming into the train’s wagon. As if by some sort of miracle, they all seemed to find a spot for themselves, even as they all kept scratching themselves while going on and on about the many diseases spreading in the villages, about how people were getting swollen from hunger. Meanwhile the train kept going, farther and farther, carrying Russian poverty, this Russian want, this Russian patience, past fields and forests.

I felt my stomach nagging. I wanted to eat but my heart wouldn’t allow me to open a satchel and take out the little bit of food my mother and sister had provided for me. I couldn’t eat. I was ashamed

to when all around me there were so many hungry people.

The night had fallen and it began to get dark in the carriage. This only made the grey picture of need and poverty seem somehow worse; an already too-heavy mood grew ever-more depressing. Somewhere, over a door of the car wagon, a candle burned in a lantern made of a black smoky glass, throwing its shadows onto people who were themselves little more than shadows. And the conductor kept coming in, his lantern adding other shadows to this scene of people who appeared shadowy. Whenever he cried out, far too loudly, too sharply, "Citizens, give me your tickets!" it seemed as if he wanted to make certain he was not among the half-dead but still among the living.

"Citizens, who boarded in Talna?"

"Citizens, who got on in Smila?"

"Citizens, who's travelling to Uman?"

These grey-clad citizens quietly gave the conductor their tickets and answered his questions softly. After he left, after all you heard was his voice in the distance, some of them complained: "Why was he shouting so?"

The overcrowding tired me out. I began to doze off. Whenever I started awake all I saw was the same scene. It seemed this difficult journey in the 'hard' wagon of this train would never end.

Once, when I woke up, a dirty, greyish mountain appeared to be blocking everything in front of me. I didn't know when and how this mountain had come into existence and I also didn't know whether it consisted of bundles and packages or was comprised of living people dressed in grey clothes or dirty sacks. There was one particular piece of this foulness that protruded out, here and there, pointy and angular. Yet it didn't stir, it didn't move. Only when that shouting conductor with his lantern came around again, and began to demand

that they produce their tickets, did this grey mountain, this dirty whole, stir. From somewhere within it, citizens began crawling out, bearing bundles on their backs, their tickets in their mouths, held in their hands or tucked into their bosoms. It was all a frightful thing to behold!

Amongst the recent additions the ‘hard carriage’ was one very talkative fellow. He told many stories about life in the villages of the Kyiv and Podolia *guberniias* – all accounts of great need and hunger. While talking he gave a sigh and said: “And today it’s already the 8th of March!” Unintentionally, I glanced at him, quite surprised. Did he not know that the date was not the 8th but rather already the 21st of March? Before I could correct him, a younger peasant did, saying: “Today is actually the 21st March!”

“No,” the older peasant shook his head: “It may be the 21st for them. But for us this is the 8th March.”

In Soviet Russia the old calendar¹ had long since been abolished and replaced with the new one² but this peasant still lived according to his memory, measuring the passing of time against what he had known before. When he spoke about “them” he meant, of course, the Communists. That is why this peasant spoke of the date being the 8th March “for us” and the 21st “for them.” He did so not without reason. For soon there would be holy days to be observed. “Yes, yes,” he said, sighing: “they’re coming soon, the holy days.” I could no longer remain quiet and so joined into their conversation, speaking to them in their language – Ukrainian: “How, Uncle, do you know when a holy day comes?” I asked the peasant who had been speaking. “I keep it all in my head,” he answered: “It’s already been like this for years. There are many others like me in Russia. We keep it all in our heads.”

Upon hearing me speaking Ukrainian the peasants grew more comfortable and when they found out I’d come all the way from

¹ Julian calendar.

² Gregorian calendar.

America their first question was: “How much does a pound of bread cost in America?” This interested them more than anything else. When I told them the truth, that, unfortunately, I didn’t know the price of a pound of bread because I don’t usually have occasion to buy it, they were extremely surprised. It was difficult for them to understand how a person could live in a country and not know how much a pound of bread cost there. Then one of them said that if this was indeed the case then: “that proves things in America aren’t as bad as they are here.”

I asked the peasants where they were going and why and all of them gave the same answer: *На хліб!* (For bread!). This was so very strange. From Ukraine, from the breadbasket of the country, peasants and agricultural workers were going hundreds of miles by train to distant cities – for bread!

At the Tsvietkovo station I had to change trains and obtain a berth in a ‘soft’ train carriage. I didn’t think this would be difficult to arrange because I already had a ticket to Rostov. However, as soon as I got out of the ‘hard’ wagon, and started to go into the station, peasant men and women, carrying their bundles and packages and sacks, swarmed out all around me. All of a sudden, this milling crowd got thicker and thicker. Tearing myself out of this mass, all pushing stubbornly onward, proved impossible. I just couldn’t get to where I wanted to go, was instead being carried along in the direction this crowd was pushing me. My heavy suitcase was also pulling me to the ground. I felt as if I was about to fall. Somehow, I managed to tear myself away. Since it was impossible to obtain a porter to help, I had to manage with a heavy suitcase in hand as I struggled to get into the hall where the ticket window was. I soon realized I would not be able to reach it. In any case, I saw, the ticket window was closed, no matter that countless people were standing near it. I was told some of them had been waiting there for a good few hours already. Who knew how long anyone must wait? They said tickets were no longer even being sold.

When I explained to one man that I already had a ticket and was

only lacking a berth in a 'soft' train wagon, he smiled: "No berth cards are left," he responded, "those are all sold. There are no more seats in the 'soft' cars. All of them are overfull." In great perplexity, I began looking around, to all sides. Perhaps I would somewhere spot a person whose face would show a willingness to help me. I didn't see anyone of the sort, not anywhere. Everyone seemed to be focused only on themselves. Just then I remembered the advice one of my friends in Russia had given me: "When, at some point, you find yourself facing a problem," he counselled, "especially in a train station, since it's now very difficult to travel in Soviet Russia, go straight-away to the GPU. They will quickly rescue you from all your cares."

And so I turned to the GPU. "You are a foreign journalist?" the GPU man asked, examining my passport. "Good." Soon, sure enough, I was in their "steadfast, secure hands." As if from beneath the earth a porter sprung up. I was led into a large room, where a kerosene lamp was burning on a bare table. At that table sat several, well-armed young men. They invited me to sit and began quite informally chatting with me: "Now, you don't need to worry about anything," one of them said: "You'll be given a berth, seated in a 'soft' train wagon and will travel straight to Rostov." Truly, no more than a few minutes passed before someone from the GPU, a young Ukrainian in a uniform and long greatcoat that reached right down to the ground, brought me a berth card, even before I asked how much it cost.

In that half-darkened room with the armed men I truly felt I was now "in steadfast and secure hands." There was only one thing I couldn't understand: Why was I being delayed? Why was I repeatedly being asked questions about various things and not being shown my seat on the train? I asked one of the armed men about this. "You don't need to worry," he assured me: "The train to Rostov is late. It will arrive, but not for a few hours yet. We will tell you when it does because two of us are also travelling, although only for a couple stations in the same direction as you. We will all be going in the same car."

From how the men from the GPU spoke to me, it was clear they

wanted to undo any bad impressions I may have gathered after travelling with peasants in the 'hard' train wagon and observing what went on in there. "What do you think about what you saw, where do you think all those peasants are going?" one of them asked, then immediately answered his own question: "They're going to the Donbas (Donets Basin), for work. From all around Ukraine, peasants are moving to the Donbas to get work." He spoke about this for a long time, emphasizing it over and over. While saying all this he kept looking at me with his piercing eyes. He also spoke a great deal about how the Soviet government was building large factories and industrial plants and about how a generation of idealistic youth were sacrificing themselves for the future. Then he added: "Yes, it's true we still have a lot to learn, but it seems to me that nobody can deny we're building socialism in this country."

Our conversation was interrupted several times as some of these armed *GPU* men would leave the room then soon return. For a while, however, I was left in this half-darkened room with just one of them. I knew one of his old friends, now living in America, quite well. He grew more relaxed with me, and later, when he was talking about the large number of peasants filling all the train cars and sprawled about in the train stations, he asked: "What kind of impression does all this have on you?"

"A terrible one!" I answered, speaking truthfully: "In my opinion, this 'migration of peoples' recalls the time of the *myeshotchnikes*, when peasants, in those hunger-years, used to drag themselves around with sacks to sell and buy bread."

"You're familiar with that time?" he asked: "Yes, I read about it in the newspapers."

"Listen to what I am going to tell you," he said, moving closer and looking keenly at me: "In my opinion, it's even more terrible now than in those times." He emphasized the words, "more terrible," although he spoke quietly. As he was speaking, I could also hear voices carried in from outside, coming through a frozen window. It sounded as if

someone was communicating from another world. These were, in fact, the peasant men and women who were waiting patiently for a train, passing their time talking their comings and goings and the trains. From time to time you could even catch the cry of a child.

When the train to Rostov finally arrived, I no longer had to worry about a porter. The *GPU* took care of everything. When the baggage carrier took my suitcase, 2 armed men set out with me to the train car. It was not easy to push through the crowd. The arrival of this train had roused up this mass of peasant men and women, many of whom had been waiting at the train station for days and nights, even though they had tickets. From all sides they ran, shoving forward, pushing along with their heavy bundles. Voices and shouts rang through the air. I again heard the cry of a small child.

I pushed through and made it. At the car's entrance a conductor stopped me. He didn't want to let me into the carriage. He said he couldn't understand how I could have been sold a berth when there weren't any places in the car! One of the armed men said to the conductor: "Let him in!" That was enough. I was immediately admitted into the 'soft' passenger car and a spot was found for me, right away, in one of its special compartments. All this happened thanks to the orders of an armed man.

As the train did not move I went out onto the platform to see what was happening. I saw this: down the entire length of the train, which stretched a considerable distance, numberless peasant men and women were standing, along both sides. They were shoving with their sacks and packages, everyone trying to get into the train's 'hard' cars, hanging onto the stairs on each side, clinging to the pieces of iron set next to the stairs, even as conductors moved about trying to hurl them off. "Where are you crawling? There's no room!" Of course, they were not permitted to approach the 'soft' carriages. "Hey, where are you going, Citizen? Don't you see, these are 'soft' cars!"

The peasants were desperate, however. Many of them, even those who already had tickets, were exhausted, having waited for days and

nights in the train station, in the cold and all that filth. They ignored the shouting conductors. They just kept on shoving into the carriages, from both sides, along the entire length of the train. It was a terrible thing to watch. It tore at your heart. As I was standing on the platform one of the armed men approached and said: "Better go inside. You don't want to catch a cold." I went inside but took a place by the window. I couldn't tear myself away from the terrible scenes outside. The conductors kept tossing peasant men and women off the train's stairs, even as the crowds kept pushing back on, carrying their sacks and packages. Voices and shouts carried on the air. Then I heard glass shattering. Desperate peasants had begun throwing stones, breaking train windows. Just as quickly as the sound of shattering and broken glass rang out, one of the armed men next to me dashed outside. The sound of blows was soon heard. There was turmoil and a stampede and I heard the peasants shouting in Ukrainian: ЧОМУ? (Why?). They couldn't understand why they were being thrown from the wagons, why they were being beaten. Pitifully, they kept lamenting "Why?" No one answered. The train slowly began to move, leaving 2 long rows of peasant men and women behind, standing on both sides, along the entire length of track. It also left behind their voices and the cries of their children who had been huddling in the train station with their fathers and mothers for days and nights, all out in the cold. Meanwhile, in the 'soft' coach, there were people, armed and unarmed, sitting and speaking beautifully about the great building-work now being done in this "Republic of Workers and Peasants."



CHAPTER VI

In Rostov by the Don

1. The yeshiva student from Liady

I arrived in Rostov on a cold winter's early morning. This city, located by the River Don, was still half asleep.

On a rather decrepit horse-drawn cart, made more uncomfortable because you had to hold your feet stretched down toward the ground and sit crosswise on a sort of sackcloth, I set out to visit one of my acquaintances. My hat and my clothing attracted the curiosity of the coachman, who began talking with me: "You don't look like one of us," he said. "Obviously, I can tell that by your clothing."

"Yes, I come from far away."

"From where?"

"From America."

"Aha, all the way from America! So, tell me, how much does a pound of bread cost there?" This was the first question he asked after learning I came from America: "How much does bread cost there?" Then he wanted to know the price of flour and of oats and about whether people there stand in lines when they need to get something for money. When I answered all these questions he said: "Obviously, you don't have Soviet rule there."

He was certainly not trying to make a joke. This naïve Russian person,

in his own way, had simply compared what he knew about Russian reality with what he heard about other countries. It was apparent to him that if in America the cost of bread wasn't as high as in Russia, and if they didn't have to stand in line whenever they wanted to buy something for money, then, obviously, Soviet rule did not exist in America.

I couldn't stay long at my friend's house. I immediately saw how destitute it was and how crowded. So I went to the *Intourist* to order a hotel room, where I could also get something to eat. I was met by a young man. He spoke a not-bad English. He carefully and precisely looked through my passport but told me to return to my acquaintance's place – saying they'd send for me later, that everything would be taken care of but that I had to wait a while. Later they did indeed send a good automobile with a nicely dressed chauffeur, a delight to behold.

When I came back to the *Intourist* office I was received by another man, not the same fellow as before – he was a young man of 30-something years of age, with a dark face reflecting a hard character. He spoke Russian with an authentic Russian accent. For me that confirmed, clearly and distinctly, that he was a Jew, trying a little too hard to speak Russian just like a real Russian. Every word he uttered was clipped, as if chopped by a hammer – hard, certain, clear, to the point. Further, for the entire time he was speaking with me, not once did he take his eyes off mine. He scrutinized me sharply, not failing to catch even the slightest expression appearing on my face.

When he heard I had come to Rostov all alone, out from the very deepest regions of Ukraine, his expression revealed he couldn't believe this was even possible: “You came here alone, all the way from there!” He began looking at me even more carefully: “How did you manage that? How did you get a ticket, a berth, and all without the help of *Intourist*?”

“With the help of the *GPU*,” I answered, permitting myself a light smile.

Hearing this reply this man's concerns seemed to lift. Quite soon after that he rather skilfully changed topics and began to speak about how I must have seen all the trains and railroad stations packed with peasants. I didn't have to ask how he knew. "They're travelling for work," he said, giving the same story the GPU man had provided at Tsvietkovo. For him, however, this was apparently an insufficient explanation, so he offered more details: "We're building. We're continually constructing. Factories and industrial plants are springing up here, one after the other. Here, people work. There is no unemployment, not like what you have in America. Everyone works and nobody is sitting around idle. Well, just so you understand me, this has created the current situation. The city cannot provide enough workers for these factories and industrial plants. We have had to turn to the villages. All the packed trains and railroad stations you saw along the road from Ukraine are that way because the peasants are getting to work."

I didn't argue. I listened attentively to every word he said and, all the while, observed the expression on his face. Of course, I didn't forget the answer those peasants themselves gave me when I asked them where they were going and why. Their answer had been quite a different one: "We're going to get bread!"

It didn't take long before I was provided with a room in a good hotel on Friedrich Engels Street. I no longer had to worry about food. In the hotel restaurant you could get the nicest and the best things to eat.

I had occasion to meet with this same *Intourist* man several times while I was in Rostov, and from what I saw I determined he was not only the head of *Intourist* but the boss of the entire city. He was involved with the management of the hotel where I was staying, where his opinion was always heeded. In the *Torgsin*, where they sell things only for foreign money or gold, his word was law. When something did not go entirely smoothly he liked to say, speaking of himself: "When the boss isn't around everything goes topsy-turvy." Truly, he was obviously in charge, could impose order and discipline;

not only would he command but he also made sure his orders were carried out, exactly.

Others spoke of him as being the man in charge, the *upolnomochennyi*¹ but I couldn't sort out exactly what he had authority over, or from whom – over *Intourist*, over the hotels of Rostov, over the *Torgsin* or was it over the *GPU*? About him, you could truly use the expression *yodo-bekhol*. He was involved everywhere, had a say everywhere, was listened to and obeyed everywhere.

One time I went with one of my friends into the Rostov *Torgsin* to buy a few items. I didn't happen to have any American cash and they didn't accept Russian money in this Soviet government store. So I went up to the girl sitting at the cash box and asked her whether they would take an American cheque. The girl looked at the cheque and answered with one word: "No!" This really surprised me because I knew these cheques were accepted everywhere. When I asked the girl why she wouldn't accept the cheque she replied: "Because the bank is closed today." This was another answer I couldn't at all understand. After all, if the bank were closed today, so what? It would obviously be open tomorrow. Making such points proved superfluous. The girl sitting at the cash box simply did not want to accept the cheque. Not even bothering to keep dealing with me, she went on doing her work, writing numbers on coloured bits of paper, the latter of such poor quality that it crumbled in your hands when you touched it with a pencil lead. She could care less about me being angry. I soon left, quite dissatisfied. None of this was her concern! What really surprised me was how she had paid so little attention to me being an American – a thing they usually don't do in Soviet Russia. They're usually far more interested in obtaining as much money as they possibly can from an American.

Only later did I find out the true reason for her indifference. I had spoken Russian to her. If instead I had spoken in English, she would have shown more respect, would surely have given me better service. In general, for an American tourist in Soviet Russia, it's usually much

¹ A responsible official, the official in charge.

better and more helpful to speak English, even if you can speak Russian well. Officials and Soviet government institutions have more respect and give you special treatment.

I left to look for the 'responsible official' I had met previously and found him at the hotel. When he heard they didn't want to accept one of my American cheques at the *Torgsin* he got angry. "So that's how it is now," he said: "When the boss doesn't scold there isn't any order and they do what they want." He went with me directly to the *Torgsin* and there scolded the girl sitting at the cash box. Then he issued orders to this and that person. Everyone listened. Whatever he told them to do was law. On his orders 2 chairs were immediately produced for my friend and me. Although this *Torgsin* was packed with people, and all the salesclerks were obviously quite busy, everything we asked for was brought out to us. We didn't have to wait, not even for an extra minute.

On another occasion I had an encounter with the same fellow in the hotel where I was staying. He was frequently there and behaved rather like an owner. One time, when I was sitting in the hotel's restaurant, eating breakfast, he came up, sat down at my table and, after first requesting a glass of tea, engaged me in a chat: "Well, are you pleased with how we're treating you?"

"Very pleased."

Then, after he went on about all the building going on in Rostov and other cities, he asked me to tell him about anything that was, in my opinion, not being done well. I didn't want to go into details about the general situation in the country. Instead I pointed out several things that were, in my view, not correct with this hotel's management. "Here," I said, "take this for an example, a little thing such as serving butter at every meal. In the wealthiest hotels and restaurants in America they serve a small piece of butter or perhaps two, at the table, although we don't have any shortage of butter. Here in the restaurants, every time, they serve up such a large slab of butter that it's quite impossible to eat it all. It's like that here in Rostov, it's

like that in Moscow, and it's like that in other cities, in all the hotels where foreign tourists stay. This is not only an extra expense but also a Russian *faux-pas*." Hearing this, the director, this man with the authentic Russian accent, interjected a verse while pointing at me: *kol Yisroel areyvim zeh ba-zeh*². Then he added: "It's good you draw my attention to such a thing, saying this is a Russian mistake. I will see to it that, over time, they start bringing less butter to the table. This will be a great saving. I truly thank you for this observation!"

He wanted to know if there were any other things not being done right, asking me to call any such problems to his attention. Answering him I said: "Many American tourists come to Soviet Russia. The majority of those who do are not the type of Americans you might imagine. Most visitors are drawn to Russia because they love Russian literature and music. At home they are the ones who fill the concert halls whenever Russian musical programs are conducted. They also fill restaurants where Russian songs are sung and Russian melodies played. They are amongst those who connect in their minds the Russia of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky with today's Russia. They are the finer type of American, people who long for something, who dream about something. When they come and you lead them into your hotels and restaurants, where orchestras play every evening, why do you stuff them with jazz instead of playing the Russian music they love? They don't like jazz, not even in America. Would it not be better if you would, for example, carry out the following: in Moscow play Russian music for foreign tourists, in Kharkiv, Kyiv and Odesa Ukrainian music should be heard and here, in Rostov, Caucasian melodies."

The director with the authentic Russian accent listened very attentively to what I said. On his face, which expressed a great deal of character, a satisfied smile appeared. Again, he looked me straight in the eyes: "Not for no reason did the sages say *mekol melamday hiskalti*. Here I sit and listen to what you're saying and I am learning a great deal. You are correct. We will take this into consideration. You will see what our orchestra, here in this very hotel, will play this

² "All Jews are responsible for one another."

evening! One need only be a boss!”

That same day a change truly did take place. When I came into the hotel restaurant that very evening the orchestra was playing Caucasian music, fitting for the city of Rostov on the river Don. The boss with the authentic Russian accent and the Hebrew sayings had ordered this. Whenever he ordered something, others obeyed.

I was interested in learning more about this man’s past. I wanted to know what he had been before and where he had come from. However, no opportunity presented itself that would allow me to steer him along this desired line of questioning. My chance came but only a few days later. This was in the *Intourist* office. We were sitting at his desk. On it stood a telephone, which always seemed to be ringing. The director, dressed in a pair of boots and a woollen sweater, was asking me many questions about what I intended to write about Soviet Russia. He wanted to know how I intended to describe what I had seen after I returned to America.

“In this case the question,” he said, “must be posed like so. Have we Jews gained from the Revolution or not? It seems to me there can be only one answer. We Jews gained everything. Under the Czar we had no rights. The Revolution gave us our rights. In the Soviet Union there is no high position a Jew is not permitted to occupy. We are citizens with equal rights. All doors are open for us, in the schools and in government. In the army you find Jewish commanders. In many cities you find Jews in the highest offices, taking up positions like those of the former governors.” Here he offered his own experience up by way of an example: “Take me,” he said: “I am from the town of Liady³. I was once a *yeshiva* student and was considered to be an *ile*; I had a ‘good head.’ They thought I would become a rabbi. But my father was a poor Jew, a dyer in the town. He couldn’t maintain me in the *yeshiva*. As I had to earn a living for myself, I became a furrier. When I did so I consoled myself with an aphorism of the sages: *Pshojt neveyle ba-shuk veal titstorekh le-bries*⁴. I worked hard but did not

³ A hamlet in the Dubrovna district of Vitebsk, in Belarus.

⁴ A medieval Jewish admonition - work in any profession, even the lowest one, and you will never be dependent on the charity of others.

have much of a future. Now, however it's different, entirely so. You can see for yourself how the both of us are well dressed and clean. We have become somebodies!" With these last words he pointed to himself and then to me. In this he was right. We were quite well dressed and quite clean.

After I left, I thought for a long time about this man of authority and others like him who had embraced the Revolution not only because of their ideals but also out of self-interest. At the same time I compared the present with the days when the bloody Czars of the Romanov Dynasty ruled over Russia. I walked for a long time over the wide and narrow streets of Rostov and looked at the passersby. They were dressed very poorly and were quite unclean. On one street I saw a large queue, stretching over the entire length of a large square. Old and young, men and women, stood there in line, pressed up against one another. I moved closer and listened to what these people were saying. It turned out many of them had been standing there since 4:00 o'clock in the morning but still hadn't reached the little window where they could buy something.

"What are they giving today?" I asked, using the Russian way of speaking in such circumstances: *Chto segodnia daiut?* I learned they were distributing a precious item, which the people seldom get – today there was herring! Apparently, this news had quickly spread throughout the entire city. Today was not a day like other days in the year because today "they're giving" herring. For that people got up in the middle of the night, at dawn, then went to stand in line to receive this precious item, which the government was selling for 4 ½ rubles a kilo (2 ¼ pounds). They stood for hours and hours with a patience only the Russian people possess. Those who finally reached the store and saw herring with their own eyes were so delighted it was only natural they bought not just 1 but 2 or even 3 kilos. After all, they reckoned, by tomorrow this herring might no longer be available. If you wouldn't be able to get any more soon it would be best to buy up as much you could afford now.

Then the militia arrived and started to drive these poor people away.

They dispersed the crowd, chastising them for being nothing other than “speculators,” the “polluters” of the Revolution! With such folk the police didn’t need to stand on ceremony. They arrested several people. Others shouted at, chased away: “Hey, why are you standing there? *Razoidis’* - Get lost already!

2. *White hands*

While I was in Rostov I had occasion to visit many houses and meet many people. On a certain evening I was invited to a house where a Christian couple lived. I had met the husband by chance while on the road to Rostov and he invited me to his home. He wanted me to meet his wife and 2 children and to speak about America. Even before I visited, I knew his wife was a very intelligent and genteel woman for that was how he described her. In general, he spoke of her with great respect, so much so that you saw he esteemed her much more highly than himself. He had told me his wife was once very active in the revolutionary movement and had also written very beautiful and tender songs. She never tried to publish them, he said, because she believed that if one were a poet one must write like a Pushkin, or not at all.

When I arrived at the couple’s apartment the man had not yet come from work. I had to introduce myself. I immediately noticed how my arrival, although not unexpected, embarrassed the wife greatly. She didn’t know what to do, how to conceal her own wretchedness, the terrible poverty of their house. Four people, the husband, wife and their 2 children, lived in a small room, where their utter destitution and despondency could not be concealed. Everything was kept clean and tidy but the room was dark and the air stifling for certainly the sun never reached into their quarters. And, wherever I sat, I couldn’t find a comfortable place to do so. I tried one chair but it was broken, its cover having fallen off. I went to a covered divan by the wall but its springs were sticking out and I sank into its depths, which then held me as if I was in a vice. Watching all this the poor woman grew even more ashamed. Walking back and forth across the room she was flustered and kept apologizing for it all although only the One

God knows what she might have been guilty of.

Furthermore, her appearance and her clothing! This wasn't a human being but only a shadow of one. Her eyes showed a deep sorrow. Her face, which still showed traces of a former beauty, had become sunken and bleak, her lips appearing but faintly. The corners of her mouth betrayed anxiety and pain. The torn skirt and dirty blouse she was dressed in hung off her. As for her old shoes they were barely held together, their leather having all but peeled off. Your heart ached just looking at her!

When the husband arrived, the wife became a little more comfortable. As we sat down at their table she came over, making almost no sound, her shoes being so ragged. Drawing a little sack out of a box she drew out a black, stale bread. Her hands were trembling as she cut thin slices off this withered loaf. I didn't have the heart to eat their bread. Then we began to converse about the situation in Soviet Russia. The husband started by complaining about how America hadn't yet recognized the Soviet Union⁵. If America recognized the Soviet Union and gave it credit, he was certain the situation in the country would become better. He candidly described how sorrowful life in Rostov was. He had plenty to say not only about his own difficulties but those of strangers as well. His wife, indeed a quiet, genteel woman, added something from her perspective from time to time: "It's been a long time since I've read a book. I don't remember when we were last in a theatre. Every morning, when I get up, the first question before me is: 'How will the family be fed today? If, in order to get the tiniest thing, one has to stand in line then one's entire life passes by, just standing in a queue.'" She moaned: "All our years will pass by, just like that!" In what she said, and how she said it, she seemed not to have even a crumb of hope. The last few years had all but broken her. She foresaw only an even more melancholy future. She was no longer afraid, however, for life and death had become one and the same thing for her.

The husband went on: "Over in America," he said: "they're always

⁵ The USSR was recognized by the USA, 16 November 1933.

writing about Russia. Yet this writing, in my opinion, cannot present a correct picture of how we truly live in Soviet Russia. Why do they write? Instead they should photograph a queue and caption it 'Waiting to get herring!' or 'Here they're giving potatoes!' Our Russian reality should be reported in pictures, in photographs of the life we truly lead – pictures of the long lines where we stand for hours to get a herring or a little milk; pictures of hungry people in rags and tatters; pictures of want and poverty, and everything shown by real photographs, not tinted and painted images. That would show the truth about what life in Soviet Russia is like – a more honest idea than one gets from the dozens of articles and books written by people who come to Russia as strangers, not even knowing the language or much about this country.”

I sat with this couple for a few hours. Their 2 children, a boy of 10 and a girl of around 13, became very comfortable with me. They, two fine children, didn't know any other kind of life but were both very curious to look at everything I had with me – the American “fountain pen” which “writes without ink,” the pencil with its attached eraser, the watch with dials that glowed in the dark and my cigar holder, which comes apart when it needs a cleaning. All of these American items represented a great wonder for them. They had never seen such “rarities” and so enthusiastically examined them, exclaiming: *Kakaia krasota!* (How nice!).

I came to love these two truly fine and dear children. I was pleased I had brought joy into their lives just by visiting. I felt good in their company as they didn't complain about anything. In Soviet Russia today it's truly refreshing to be with people who aren't constantly complaining. You can usually find this kind of company only among Communists, or children. When I had another opportunity to see this family again, I brought a gift for the children – a piece of soap. Quickly, a bowl of water appeared and was set up on a chair. Then the children, the little boy and the little girl, diligently washed. Their mother stood to the side and looked on. From the expression on her exhausted face one could see that, even though she was ashamed, she was at the same time, pleased. When the children had washed

themselves well using this American soap, which filled the entire bowl with white suds, the girl ran to her mother and joyfully cried out: “Mama,” holding her little hands before her: “look see, my hands are white! I had thought bark had grown on them. But look see, Mama, look everybody – I have white hands!”

3. Where does one find a village with a little cow?

In Rostov I went into a house where a girl of around 16 years of age lay sick. The mother, a widow, whose husband had died about 2 years ago, was very desperate. Her poverty was such that she couldn't nurse her daughter, not in the way the latter needed. The girl suffered a great deal because they couldn't even give her as much food as was necessary. Covered with a tattered blanket, left over from before the Revolution, from which dirty pieces of cotton stuck out, this sick child writhed from cold sweat and pains. The mother didn't know what to do.

“It's already been like this for several weeks,” she complained: “They're always sending another doctor but none of them can find out what's wrong with the child. They write out more prescriptions but that doesn't help. The child cannot get out of bed.” An intelligent lady, with a fine education, this woman had not lived in poverty before the Revolution. Although she originally came from a poor family, she had achieved her goals in life. She had always been an independent person. She worked and earned enough to live on. Even when her husband was still alive, she had never been idle. She had worked and liked having a job. Never pretentious, the main thing for her was to lead a life of useful work, to have fine company and read good books. She was a true example of an amiable and intelligent Russian woman.

In her sympathies she was inclined towards Communism. She didn't criticize the Soviet government. Still, when she spoke about how she lived, and what she was experiencing, you were seized with terror. It's difficult to imagine how a person can endure as much as she did.

Quite often there wasn't any bread in the house because the portion she was given didn't suffice and it was not always possible to buy bread on the free market. The price of staples in Rostov was also very high. Tea with sugar could not always be obtained. When they did sometimes get some sugar the atmosphere in the house would be almost like that on a holiday. This woman had not tasted a piece of meat for a long time. "Only once," she told me, "an acquaintance, once a servant of mine, quietly brought us a gift, a piece of pork. Her father in a village had, quietly, so that no one would see, slaughtered his last little pig. That pig was singed at night so that none of his neighbours would see the smoke. The meat was also eaten in secret so no one should see. As I always treated this peasant well when she was a servant of mine, she brought me some meat, because she knew my daughter and I were starving."

She couldn't dress like a person since she didn't have anyone in America who could help her out from time to time. She went around dressed like a beggar, not even able to change her dress. She valued cleanliness but several months had gone by since she had last bathed. There was no tub in her quarters so one couldn't wash oneself as necessary. "We're disgusted with ourselves!" she told me, pointing out just how shabby her clothes were.

Yet somehow this person worked for the Soviet government, not for some private enterprise of the sort that greedily exploits its workers and cares not at all about whether they have something to eat or not.

She would, she said, be able to endure these hardships were it not for her daughter's illness: "This has made me very desperate." As for doctors whom the government sends to the sick, usually free of charge, they had come and gone, leaving prescriptions which didn't help or suggesting diets which couldn't be followed. Either there wasn't any money to buy what they ordered for the patient or they prescribed things that could never be obtained, not just in Rostov but in all of Russia.

On one occasion, when I just happened to be sitting in that

house, a new doctor came to examine the sick girl. Apparently, a previous doctor had reported this was a serious case and so they sent a specialist. This great doctor was dressed very poorly – if you encountered him on the streets of New York you would surely think he was a beggar. He sat longer than the other doctors who came previously. He examined the sick girl thoroughly and carefully, and afterwards, began to pose questions that left one suspecting he thought the girl had perhaps inherited this illness from her parents. He asked how old her father was when he died and about his medical history, and afterwards, glancing at the mother, asked: “Tell me, if you please, were you always so thin and frail?” The mother answered bluntly: “No, doctor, not always; I was reduced to this by the first Five Year Plan.”

The doctor wanted to smile but restrained himself. In general, he behaved professionally. You couldn't say he went beyond the call of his duties, although in the tone of his speech he was sympathetic and considerate. Recognizing that he was dealing with an intelligent person in the mother he explained where such an illness comes from and how it could be treated. He spoke for a long time, using medical terminology, but he explained it all quite plainly and right away. Afterwards he said: “The best thing would be if the patient were sent away at least for a few weeks to a village, where there is still a cow.” He spoke Russian and used the word *korovka*, which in Yiddish refers to a ‘little cow.’ He emphasized those words even if his facial expression showed a certain hesitation, as if he was concerned that what he was saying should not be taken as a joke. Not being able to take back what he had just said, he emphasized it again: “Yes,” he said, knitting his brows, “milk! She needs to drink milk. That will put her back on her feet. See to it that she is sent to a village where there is still a little cow.”

A tremor passed over the mother's anxious face and her eyes filled with tears: “Doctor,” she went on, “there aren't any villages anymore where there might be a little cow.” He could say nothing in reply. With a lowered head, he sat quietly, not uttering a word. He was as helpless as the mother.

In the evening, when I was there again, an event took place that even more clearly demonstrated the sorrowful reality of today's Russia. Someone came calling. The mother went to open the door yet nobody came in. What I heard was someone, at first, speaking normally but, very soon, they began to talk in whispers. I wanted to ask what was going on but didn't. Later I learned what had happened. A certain professor was a friend of the widow's husband. Later, after her husband's death, he remained a friend of the family. He had come to visit them, from another city. He had hoped to see the woman and also the sick girl. He was very fond of her, since you might say she was raised at his hands. When he learned there was a foreign writer visiting, he would not, under any circumstances, come in. He was simply too afraid. He was certain I was being watched; was fearful they were keeping their eyes on me. Now this man was an old tried-and-tested revolutionary. In the times of the Czar he had sat in prison, had even been exiled to Siberia. This is how far fear reaches these days! He was, I might add, no exception. Like most of the older revolutionaries, who once devoted their lives to the struggle for a free Russia but had not been members of the Party in power today, he felt he was under suspicion. He was afraid to do anything to make his situation worse. You couldn't even look at him sideways. Several times already, he'd had a 'taste' of sitting in a GPU prison.

The sick girl was deserving of the greatest sympathy. She was very fond of this professor. She wanted to see him. Lying, sick in bed, she cried when she learned he was there but wouldn't come in. Several times she tried to get up from her bed, hoping to run after him, to call him back. She couldn't manage it. As she did her mother stood next to her, in tears: "Calm yourself, calm yourself, dear one," she stroked the head of the sick girl, "calm yourself, child. He will come again. He will come."

As you can imagine this whole episode was very unpleasant for me. I felt like the odd one out and regretted I had been there. In great embarrassment I began to make myself ready to leave. The woman wouldn't let me: "Stay sitting. Stay sitting here," she said, in a tone that let you know she was trying hard to preserve her human dignity

yet was ashamed, humiliated: “Stay sitting. Don’t leave.” One of her brothers, his head bowed, seated on a half-broken chair nearby, quietly added: “Now you have seen for yourself what our new way of life in Russia is like!”

4. *“May my blood flow, my socialist blood!”*

By a remarkable chance, while I was once travelling out from Rostov to the surrounding villages near the Don, I became acquainted with a worker who was now living in one of those villages. He came from a big city in the central part of Russia and made a very positive impression because, in his speech, you detected a truly authentic Russian open-heartedness and a capacity for speaking the plain truth. He was also a genuinely class-conscious and enlightened worker, one of the kind whom I remembered from the revolutionary times, from the days when people freely risked their lives for ideals they believed in. About him you could say, as they generally do in Russia when they want to underscore how great someone is, that he was “a friend since the fifth year.” As early as 1905 this man was active in the revolutionary movement. After the 1917 Revolution he had been inclined to join the Bolsheviks but became disenchanted and instead remained what he had been before – a Social-Democrat, a Menshevik.

He was proud of this. He did not conceal it. When he spoke about his political beliefs he openly and unhesitatingly declared: “Yes, I am a Social-Democrat, a Menshevik!” This last word he spoke rather tensely. He knew the uselessness, and even the danger, of conducting any Social-Democratic work in Soviet Russia. As such he remained without a party he could believe in, had little choice but to withdraw entirely from all political activity. Yet this was a fellow who was naturally full of energy. He could see how life around him, his own included, was not as he had wanted it to be, absolutely not. Things had certainly not worked out, not as he had once imagined they would when he, and many thousands more like him, had dreamed about a social revolution. These frustrations had left him rather eccentric, seemingly always agitated. When he spoke about

something from the past he would immediately get carried away and go on as if what he was talking about were happening again in the present day. He was a bundle of nerves, from head to toe, although he exuded genuineness and constancy. You could not help but feel a great respect for him whenever you heard how steadfastly he uttered: “Me, I’m a Social-Democrat, a Menshevik!”

Once he was arrested in a large city in central Russia and brought before the GPU. This was the first time he had fallen into their hands. As he was led in, he saw a portrait of Karl Marx on the wall. That upset him, made him very angry, so much so that he entirely lost control over himself. Jumping onto a chair he tore down Marx’s portrait from the wall: “Here, in this police station,” he roared between clenched teeth: “you must not hang the portrait of my great teacher!” You can probably guess how they “quieted” him down. He was given a strong smack to his head by a GPU agent, applied with the butt of a revolver, drawing blood. It poured over his face and onto a table. The GPU man didn’t like that, yelling: “Wipe up that blood!” But this Russian worker, who could in no way square in his mind the portrait of Karl Marx and his socialist teachings with the methods of the GPU, refused. He sat silently, defying their command. When they continued shouting, insisting he wipe up his own blood he defiantly cried out, from between clenched teeth: “*Puskai tieklot krov’ moya sotsialisticheskaia – May my blood flow, my socialist blood!*”

CHAPTER VII

In a large Soviet factory

If I were writing about machines rather than people it is likely the tone of what I have written would be entirely different. However, I don't write about factories and industrial plants. I write about people's lives. I am not at all versed in machinery. I understand very little to do with it. Frankly, I doubt how much those who go on about the construction of factories and industrial plants in Soviet Russia, about the "Song of Steel and Iron" as they call it, really know about the subject. They seem to be trying to create impressive imagery, even as they forget or entirely overlook the lives of the people.

In my journey across Soviet Russia I was interested largely in the personal, not in the machines, sought out the language of living creatures, not the whistling of smokestacks roiling with smoke. That is why I must write as I do. The reality, what I saw of the lives of people in Soviet Russia, was painful to see. I came to Soviet Russia not as a curious American traveller, not as someone showing up to accumulate experiences I could then pack into my luggage and take away. I came not as a stranger but as one of their own. That doesn't mean I wasn't interested in what they call *stroitelstvo* (construction) in Soviet Russia. In the cities I went to I did visit newly-built factories and industrial plants. In Rostov, for example, I heard a lot about the large Soviet factory, *Selmash*, where various kinds of modern agricultural machines are manufactured. Wherever I went in Rostov I was asked whether I had already been to see this factory and was repeatedly told I should by no means fail to do so. Actually, they didn't have to keep telling me because I really was interested enough to want to see it and indeed made my way there.

The *Selmash* factory is located in Nakhichevan'-on-Don, a few miles from Rostov¹. Some time ago the "border" was located there, dividing the Armenian Soviet Republic from the Russian Republic. In Rostov these days they joke about how it is not very hard for any Soviet citizen to leave the country since, as soon as you cross the bridge over the Don, you are already "abroad." So this "border," which should have demarcated the independence of the Armenian Republic, has been entirely removed, leaving Nakhichevan' as nothing more than just a part of the Russian city of Rostov.

The road to the *Selmash* was paved but not very easy to travel by automobile, not being of the highest quality. One or another of our car's wheels repeatedly fell into a pothole, making it hard to drive. As the road also happened to be muddy it was even more difficult to travel. Fortunately, Russian chauffeurs are not as spoiled as American ones. They are very skilled and dodge the worst parts of even the worse roads.

The closer you came to the *Selmash* the more you got the impression you were going to visit not a factory full of workers but a military garrison, where the spirit of war dominated. You travelled between two rows of trees and when you looked to the right as you approached this large factory you could see cannons sticking out through the trees along one side, with Red Army soldiers nearby. Closer to the factory, and even inside, you also saw armed soldiers, at almost every step. The feeling that this was a military garrison was pervasive.

The gigantic *Selmash* plant had been built in an area which only a few years ago had been a wilderness. Now people had settled the entire region. Over the course of a short period of time a large city had actually grown up there – with houses, schools, clubs and places of amusement. This imparted a certain vibrancy to the area all around. In total, about 20,000 people work in this huge factory.

It takes a long time to see all of the departments of the *Selmash* and

¹ Originally founded by Armenians ,who moved there from Crimea in 1799, this town on the right bank of the river was incorporated into Rostov-on-Don in 1929.

a long time to receive the necessary permission to do so. After I was approved, I set out on my tour of this giant factory. I went with a man who was there to explain how this large factory was managed and what kinds of machines were made there. At the entrance, not far from a short tunnel built so that people wouldn't have to walk where the vehicles drove, so as to prevent accidents, I saw a large wall. It was made of black-painted boards. On it were hanging pieces of steel and iron, wheels and screws of all types, large and small. Above this wall was an inscription: *Brak po vine rabochikh*. In Yiddish that means: "Broken through the fault of the workers."

Near every damaged piece the name of the worker guilty of having broken it was inscribed. In this way a long "blacklist" of workers' names had been produced and underneath it, in large letters, they put up another caption: *Pozor im!* (To their disgrace!)

I didn't need to ask what these signs referred to because I could read the Russian and so knew what they said. However, a group of foreign tourists came in, just behind me. I was told they were a delegation from the German Communist newspaper, *Rote Fahne*². Their group was comprised of 10 people, most of them young except for one older man, around 50-something years old in my estimation. They were dressed up like "responsible" Russian commissars, only a little nicer. They had even put leather belts around their waists, the only difference being that instead of revolvers they were carrying cameras. In actual fact this particular delegation was not entirely unfamiliar to me. They were staying in the very same hotel as I was in Rostov. I knew by now how, every morning when I went down to have breakfast in the restaurant, they'd already be at their table, eating tasty fried chickens and drinking sizeable, foaming beers. That happened only in the morning but whenever I came into the restaurant I would see them at a table, eating and drinking. The only time I didn't see them doing that was when I ran into them "observing" the *Selmash* factory.

They also paused by the "blacklist." They wanted to know what it was

² Red Flag.

and were provided with an explanation, immediately: “This,” they were told, “is an exhibit of defective items. It shows how goods are damaged when one works with old-fashioned machinery as opposed to the modern machines used here at the *Selmash*.” One person in the delegation jotted all this down in his notebook.

Next to the same tunnel there was a large kiosk selling newspapers and books. Most of the books were about technology and machinery. Only here and there did you see a literary work by a Soviet writer. Among all of these books, printed on very bad paper, I even saw Karl Marx’s *Kapital*. However, I didn’t notice anyone buying a book there. None of the workers, walking back and forth, approached that kiosk.

When you start going around to visit the various departments of the *Selmash* you can’t help but be captivated by the momentum evident there. It is immediately perceptible. It seems as if you’ve fallen into an authentic American factory, where the work doesn’t stop, not even for a minute. Sparks spray from all sides. Everywhere hammers are banging and machines with sharp teeth are sawing through steel and iron. You see workers carrying buckets of flowing and fiery molten metal, pouring it into the open steel mouths of giant machines, which hiss and clamour and disgorge steel, as wheels spin continuously. Everyone is working. Someone over there is making small screws and someone over here is bending large iron bars with a machine. They’re filing and sharpening, they’re banging and hammering. Among those doing this heavy labour you see many women. They work as equals alongside the men in this factory, producing threshing machines, ploughshares, grain binders and other modern agricultural machines. These women receive no less than what a man gets paid at the same trade. Some receive 80, 90, even 100 rubles a month. There are also a few who receive 200 rubles a month, even more. The cost of basic commodities is, however, so high that even with that salary one cannot survive on what you earn. When you need to buy things, when your government-issued supplies run out, it’s very difficult to do so.

The pace of production is very fast. There are a hundred and one

inscriptions hanging from the ceiling and plastered on the walls calling upon the workers to work quickly. The entire system exhorts its workers to work harder and faster, to race ahead. Everyone is nervous and frightened. As they rush about doing their work God forbid that anyone should ruin something. If that happened, a person would be found guilty and end up having their name posted on the wreckers' blacklist, the one captioned: "Shame on them!"

I was left truly fascinated after my visit to the giant *Selmash* factory. I don't know how much can be deduced on the basis of my outsider's observations, for I am not an engineer. It seemed to me as if everything was running smoothly, productively, and at a high pace. I was shown completed agricultural machines. It was explained to me how they were made, then sent across the country. But, as I say, I'm no expert, I understand very little about machines and so can't undertake to express an opinion about all of this. Later, experts – truly specialists who are also friends of the Soviet Union – told me that, unfortunately, everything at the *Selmash* factory did not run quite as smoothly as it might appear, suggesting the momentum and productivity there was more apparent than real. I didn't make much sense of this because I am no master of technology. I've decided to leave these kinds of issues to those who are knowledgeable about these sorts of things. Like I said before, I don't write about machines. I write about people.

Passing through the departments of the *Selmash* I became acquainted with several American engineers working there. They were pleased to meet a fellow countryman and "refresh the language." They were also curious to hear news from America. Several became friendly with me and we spoke for a long time not only about America but also about Russia. While telling me about his experiences one of these American engineers said: "The trouble with the Russian man is that he cannot work, or better said, he can work hard, but his work is undisciplined, disordered." He recalled one such case in particular. After he first came from America, he was given work not at the *Selmash* plant but in another factory. He was appointed a department chief almost immediately, was set up in a comfortable

apartment and even assigned a secretary who spoke English. One time he asked one of his assistants, a Russian engineer, to prepare a specific drawing. This Russian engineer listened to his instructions and replied: *Khorosho* (All right!) – meaning he agreed to get this drawing done and return with it. “When will he have it ready?” the American engineer asked, making use of his translator. To which the Russian engineer replied, without even a pause: *Cherez tri dnia* (in 3 days). “What?!” the American engineer exclaimed, quite amazed. You see this American engineer wasn’t kidding around. He was used to what they dub “efficiency” back in America. He couldn’t understand how anyone needed 3 days to draw up what he needed. So he shouted: “Damn it! This is a job that shouldn’t take more than an hour!” Hearing this the Russian engineer paused. He wasn’t used to such a “tempo” at work, even if he himself often spoke about the need for getting things done quickly. Meanwhile, the American engineer actually did the job – and had what he needed within an hour.

There was no intention here on the part of the Russian to hinder work or cause harm, as some are inclined to believe. In this instance this wasn’t what is referred to in Russia by the term *vredytelstvo* and in Ukraine by the term *shkydnydstvo*. There was nothing going on here that might see someone get exiled or severely punished. What was on display, however, was a rather typical Russian character trait. The Russian is still as lazy as Russians were many years ago, an *Oblomov*³, no matter how much everyone proclaims they are maintaining a rapid, American-style, pace of production. If anywhere there is a people who continually say one thing but do another it is the Russian people. Certainly, those familiar with Russian history and Russian literature know this. “Work,” says the Russian, “is not a bear; it won’t flee into the forest.” Lenin himself acknowledged Russians were lazy, adding how even his mind was rather lazy. In speaking to Maxim Gorky Lenin said: “We are a people who consist for the most part of talented men. But our minds are lazy ones. If, once in a while, we do have a man whose mind is not lazy he is almost always a Jew or descended from Jews.”

³ A symbolic figure in Russian literature, the central character in a novel by Ivan Goncharov.

The Russian person cannot work like a person from another nation. They admit this in Russia, even in the most correct of Communist circles, however much they also regret it. Wherever 8 or 10 Russians work you could probably get by easily with 1 American or 1 German. When the Russian is spurred on to work more quickly, to which he is not accustomed, he becomes totally confused, getting so muddled that his work has no order whatsoever. This is a sad fact but a fact nevertheless.

It is said, completely openly, that in factories where American engineers are involved in the work, and where they succeed in overcoming this typical Russian laziness and Soviet *kantseliarshchina*⁴ there is where the work goes well. Where things are entirely left in the hands of their own people, for whom politics is more important than work, something, somewhere is always going off the tracks – it doesn't work! And when things aren't working they talk even more about how they will soon be overtaking America.

Of course, there are exceptions. For example, I visited the “bread factory” in Rostov, one of the best in Soviet Russia. The factory truly makes a very positive impression. A visiting foreigner is dressed in a white robe and led across all of the factory's departments, shown how hygienically bread is baked these days in Rostov. After the tour the guest is offered a book and asked to write down his impressions. It was heartening to listen to the speech of the manager and see bread being baked in modern ovens, then packed in boxes. Yet not once did I see any bread as good or as fresh as what I saw in this factory in any of the places I visited in Rostov. No matter how hard the people might work they were eating dried-up rusks, some even starting to go green with mould.

On the day after I visited the bread factory someone knocked on my door. This happened in the morning. When I opened it an old man of around 60-something years of age came in. He introduced himself, then apologized several times for coming so early. Then he

⁴ Bureaucracy.

began telling me this story. He was a very passionate smoker. He didn't go anywhere without a cigarette in his mouth. In the old days he had grown accustomed to good cigarettes but had long since forgotten what they tasted like. Now he smoked only shag tobacco, plain and of a rather poor quality. As much as possible he'd gotten used to this. Then just yesterday he happened to be standing not far from the "bread factory" as I was smoking a cigarette. The smoke drifted past him and he inhaled with great pleasure. He was left with the feeling that he would just die if he didn't get to smoke a good cigarette again. Then he asked me to do him a favour. Could I buy him some proper cigarettes in the *Torgsin*, Russian cigarettes of the sort one gets by paying with American money? Even if they cost a dollar, he said, I should buy some for him. He said he would never forget me if I did him this favour. And he gave me the address of one of his relatives in the Bronx saying that when I returned to America this relative would pay me back the dollar. This was the request of a man working in a government job.

CHAPTER VIII

The Red Army

Without a doubt one of the better things one finds in Soviet Russia is the Red Army. In it one can truly see the signs of the great social upheaval that has occurred, can feel the pulse of a new life, utterly divorced from what once was.

The Red Army man has not even the slightest connection to the Russian soldier of the past. The latter was the embodiment of coarseness, indiscipline, and malignancy. Today's Red Army Man is utterly different. People were once frightened when they encountered a soldier, particularly since many of them would not be entirely sober by nightfall. Now people feel quite safe when they see a Red Army man, even at night, even in some remote and sparsely populated neighbourhood. Whatever happens they know the soldier will rescue them from any unpleasantness. He is entirely the opposite of what a soldier was like in the past.

Discipline is strong although it is a very different kind of order as compared with what was enforced before the Revolution. Now soldiers are taught so that each of them feels a responsibility for how they behave, not only in the barracks but also out in public – they recognize how they must always remember they are members of the Red Army, whose duty it is to conduct themselves well, behaving in a dignified and proper way, to serve as examples for others.

Not everyone is accepted into the Red Army. A person's "social pedigree" must be the correct one. Only children of workers and peasants, or other 'legitimate people,' are accepted into its ranks.

Given the hardships of daily life, being accepted into the Red Army is, in a certain sense, fortunate. In the Red Army a person is provided with food, a good bed, clothing and other amenities. In addition, you also receive a decent education, something which comes in very useful later in life. The soldiers are taught not just shooting and marching and how to conduct military manoeuvres but also, more generally, listen to lectures on political, economic, and other important questions. In addition, the path to advancement, even to a high rank, is open to every soldier. If someone is capable and ambitious, and studies diligently, he can take the necessary exams and go on to become an officer, even a general.

In the Red Army no distinction is made among the soldiers in terms of belief or race. From the very poorest and very lowest strata of society people are elevated. They are brought into a completely different world, are trained, and become very different people. Nowadays, when you speak with a Russian Red Army man – whether in a big city or a small town – you won't detect even a trace of the type of Russian soldier one remembers from before.

On the street, too, as they're marching *en masse*, these Red Army men don't make the same impression as the companies and regiments of the Russian army once did. In the old army you could sense the dejection of the troops. You saw the sadness of men longing for home, sharing their unhappiness through the sorrowful melodies they sang as they marched along. Now, however, it's entirely different. In the Red Army they don't sing about some old forest and a dead Ottoman being carried away to be buried along with his rifles and swords. They don't sing about Balkan valleys turned into cemeteries for those fallen in battles. Instead they sing about struggle and work and their steadfast steps as they march along echoing to the beat of new kinds of revolutionary songs.

In order for the soldiers to remain in close contact with the workers there is always a barracks attached to a factory. This means workers from a factory consider the soldiers of the attached regiment to be their own. The factory even designates a holiday to honour its

regiment. When that date comes around the workers join together with the soldiers, spending time and celebrating together. Afterwards, speeches are given. In the larger cities of the Soviet Union there isn't a single factory without its Red Army regiment and there isn't a single regiment not connected to a factory. The workers and the soldiers are as one family. They give each other banners and medals. When a revolutionary holiday occurs they celebrate it together. Barracks and factory stand together.

I spoke with many soldiers from the Red Army. Doing so was gratifying. Many were rather enlightened people. This was surprising because I was well acquainted with the soldier type in the Russia of old. One can no longer say that "he swears like a soldier" or is "as coarse as a soldier" because Red Army soldiers don't swear, aren't coarse, indeed use polite language. More than once, I even overheard a soldier reprimanding someone who was demonstrating a great mastery of swearing in Russian: "Citizen, don't use that kind of language. That is not nice!"

I also met with many commanders. They are also not like the average Russian officer used to be, the kind one remembers from long ago. Most Red Army officers – often the children of workers and peasants – are intelligent people. They have read and learned a great deal. Not having to stand in queues they naturally have more time than others to study and learn their profession. They are not as corrupt or degenerate as many Russian officers and officials used to be. Indeed they are amiable men of the people. Spending time with them was quite agreeable.

On the way from Moscow to Kyiv I made the acquaintance of several Soviet officers on the train. They recognized me as an American from my clothing and one even tried to speak English with me. As he didn't know more than a few English words, I replied in Russian. When they realized I could speak Russian they were delighted and we enjoyed a fair few hours chatting together. These Soviet commanders bombarded me with questions about America and I answered them all. It was never enough. They wanted to know more and more. And,

always, one or another one of them posed a new question, usually beginning like this: “But it would be interesting to know...”

I befriended one of them more than the others. According to the stars on his uniform he held the rank of a *polkovnik*¹. He was a young man of around 30 years of age, with a very amiable face and lovely blue eyes, of a strong childlike quality. He spoke quite nicely and in tone of great warmth. In conversation he displayed a fine knowledge of both old and new Russian literature. Later, when we were speaking about the Russian theatre, past and present, he was as comfortable as a fish in water. He was also well acquainted with the history of Russian theatre and well versed in its accomplishments after the Revolution: “Even when life has been bad, very bad here in Russia,” he said, “our theatre does not stand still. It develops, it grows, seeking out new paths and finding them.” By way of example he spoke of the Moscow Art Theatre: “There was a time,” he said, “when it was thought the Moscow Art Theatre was going under, that it had played itself out. See what kind of place it occupies now! New and younger talents have arisen and the old ones have rejuvenated.” This led to a conversation about theatre in Russia, about which all these officers demonstrated a great deal of understanding and knowledge.

Later, when we spoke about politics, one of them asked: “What kind of impact do Communist demonstrations make in America?” My answer did not entirely please him. He suggested that because I was a theatre person, perhaps I looked at things from too theatrical a standpoint. This was because I had explained that, before Communists in New York held a demonstration, they first obtained permission from the police. They were quite amazed at that bit of news: “Where is their revolutionary spirit?” Another added: “If that’s how it really is then I’m afraid these Communists in America will become so used to holding demonstrations only after getting the consent of the police that when the Revolution finally happens they won’t know how to stage a demonstration without permission.” They all smiled.

¹ Colonel.

On another occasion – this was also on a train – I had 3 neighbours in my compartment and all were Red Army officers. One of them, a sturdy man of 40-something years old, with a closely barbered head, held a general's rank. In the beginning, they held themselves rather aloof, so it was difficult to get to know them. Eventually, I succeeded, very much aided by a clothes brush I had brought from America. This brush, made of straw, actually proved to be very useful for making acquaintances throughout my odyssey across Soviet Russia. For as soon as I took it out to dust myself off a little these men began to look at each other. One of them, actually the general, hesitated, and for a long time but finally he seized up his courage and turning to me said: "Allow me, I beg you, to brush myself off with that 'little broom.'" He truly rejoiced, this general, after he dusted his clothes off with it. He brushed not only the clothes he was wearing but other items he was carrying with him, frequently expressing his enthusiasm by remarking: *Zdorovo chistit sukin sin!*²

Then the other officers asked if they could use the 'little broom' and were likewise delighted after brushing themselves off using it. Soon everyone in the coach knew about this great American "wonder." Many other passengers then gave it a try. Even two GPU men in the train car, both carrying weapons, didn't hold back from taking a turn. The last person in line was a young Soviet professor. This fellow was dressed very poorly. His shabby black trousers he wore didn't match his scruffy, dark-blue jacket. But when he brushed himself off with this American 'little broom' he looked somewhat more civilized, even bigger in stature. He sensed this and thanked me profusely. That is how I became acquainted with all the passengers in this train car – thanks to a 'little broom' from America.

The 3 officers were all of the type called "common folk" and took great pride in it. "If not for the Revolution," one of them said, "we wouldn't have reached such a position and certainly would not be travelling with you in a 'soft' coach."

These men were very interested in America, like everyone in Soviet

² "It cleans well, this damned bastard!"

Russia generally is. One of them asked, a little carefully: "It would be interesting to know, what do they say over there about Trotsky?" They were surprised to learn Trotsky had written several books, even before he was expelled from Soviet Russia, for they had only heard about Trotsky's autobiography, *My Life*. They hadn't read it but were very curious to hear what he had written in that book. Later, when I was alone with one of these Red officers, he leaned in close and said quietly: "Ach, if only there was some way I could get Trotsky's book! I would pay a lot to be able to get that book!" Then, even more quietly, he asked: "Do you have a copy with you?"

On one occasion, on a train heading to the city of Dnipropetrovsk,³ formerly known as Yekaterinoslav, I woke from a sleep and saw that my new neighbour in this particular compartment was a young man, wearing a military uniform. He was stretched out on the upper bunk, fully dressed, smoking a cigarette. When he heard me speaking with the other two passengers in the car, whom I had already met, he stuck out his head and listened curiously. For the first few minutes he didn't mix in with our conversation. Then, somewhat abruptly, he turned toward me and said: "What interests me about America is why don't they free the Scottsboro Negro boys?" He spoke as if it were my fault the Scottsboro Negro boys were being held in prison. Heatedly, he added: "In the Soviet Union such a thing would be impossible!"

This young man was an officer in the air force, a pilot. He assured me that Soviet Russia would eventually overtake America, not only in industry but also in the field of aviation. In fact, in his opinion, Soviet Russia had already surpassed America industrially, in many areas. Although he acknowledged he had never been to America, he was sure this was true because he had read it in the Soviet press. And while conditions might still be bad in Soviet Russia, he was quite certain life here was much better than it was in America. He took his own story by way of example: "Take me! Before the Revolution I was a village shepherd. Now here I am wearing a very nice uniform, an officer in the air force, travelling in a 'soft' car. There are many others like me and they know how to value the gains of the Revolution."

³ Now known as the city of Dnipro.

When I mentioned how during all the time I'd been travelling around Soviet Russia I had yet to see any sailors and soldiers in a 'soft' coach, had only ever seen officers from the army and air force, he replied somewhat indignantly: "Well why would you want simple sailors and soldiers to travel in 'soft' train carriages? They travel, of course, but in the 'hard' cars." Later, on this same train, we both happened to walk through a few 'hard' coaches. The crowding in them was terrible. Starving and dirty people were spread out on dirty sacks and packs. The air was so stuffy that it was difficult to catch your breath. This officer, once a shepherd, scowled at the sight of it all. Returning to the 'soft' car I heard him say, contemptuously: "Where are all these people dragging themselves off to?" He had no inkling of the contradiction or irony of his words. Nor did he catch the glance I threw at him. There is a new aristocracy. Its members may have started off as "common folk" but, little by little, they are growing ever more removed from the masses. They don't notice that.



CHAPTER

IX

In a First Class coach

I left Rostov in a rather sombre mood. Somehow, despite my best efforts, I had begun to feel the pressure that bears down like a heavy mountain onto the heads of people of Soviet Russia. Everything I had seen and heard upset me, so much that whenever I was in one city, I was already thinking about leaving for another, hoping I might find something somewhere else to gladden my heart – not, of course, in terms of machines and factories but in the lives of people.

That was my hope when I set out for Kharkiv.

Kharkiv was then the capital city of Ukraine. The large tractor factory located there was famous over all Russia, indeed around the entire world. Kharkiv is the second major centre after Moscow and, like Moscow, is a city continually growing, the size of its population always increasing.

Leaving Rostov proved to be exactly the opposite of how I had come into Rostov. I got there only after making part of the way in a ‘hard’ train carriage, observing scenes of need, desolation, hunger and terrible suffering. In contrast, when I left, I was seated in a First Class train wagon, where everything gleamed and sparkled and where each separate compartment had a washroom with hot and cold water. Even tea was served to the passengers, although without sugar.

My neighbour in a nearby compartment was a reserved and quiet man. Most of the time he was stayed silent, speaking very little. Although I tried, I was quite unable to draw him into a conversation.

It appeared he was afraid to speak. To stay safe, he buried himself in the reading of a French book, rarely raising his eyes from its pages. When he finally did, and I thought that I'd now be able to speak with him, he actually asked me a question: "Do you play chess?" When I responded that I didn't he had no further need of me at all and returned to his French book.

Seeing no prospects for forming any kind of acquaintanceship here, I left the compartment and began walking around the train car. Over the course of about a half-hour's time I met most of the passengers there and also several from a neighbouring one. I sat with one of them for a long time. Nobody bothered us because he was by himself in a compartment. An affable and talkative person, he spoke about anything that came up. From what he said it was apparent he was a great man-of-the-world. He had been to Europe many times and to America. He was exceptionally well acquainted with Paris, Berlin, London, and also New York and he spoke several languages. "Yes, once upon a time I had a life," he said, after he first closed the door of his compartment: "That is a bit of a consolation for me in these current and difficult times. It's good to remember how one used to live. But my children! What will they have to remember?"

This man was obviously very disconsolate. He griped a lot, not only about his personal situation but, more generally, about the difficult nature of life in Soviet Russia. He went through an entire list of basic goods that couldn't be found in the country: "What makes this hard to bear is that it is impossible to understand why we shouldn't have these things in this country." He added: "There is no good reason for what we're going through. For example, take an item like fish. I can understand why we don't have any bread because our grain must be exported abroad, because otherwise no one will give us any credit. And, moreover, the peasant doesn't want to plough and sow, because everything is taken away from him in the form of taxes and under other pretexts. But fish! Fish don't need to be sown, don't grow in the earth, they reproduce and multiply in the waters and more or less climb all by themselves into a fisherman's nets. So why don't we have more fish? In a city like Rostov, where we have water all around

– the Sea of Azov, the Don – when you need to get a herring, a small fish, you have to stand in a line up for hours, rise in the middle of the night just in order to get a spot.” After he listed all of the many things now completely unavailable in Russia, I asked: “So what do you have?” The man gave me a penetrating look and answered: “In this country we have one thing and one thing alone, Soviet power. Otherwise, nothing at all!”

This man spoke with me, freely and openly, and admitted he wouldn't talk like this in front of another Russian citizen. “Here,” he said, “we no longer trust each other. Fear hangs over everyone's heads and you suspect even your best friend. However – to the devil! Sometimes you have to say what's weighing upon you! Here I find myself talking with you, a foreigner, with a man who looks everyone straight in the eyes, not like it is between those of us who live here. So I will tell you what causes me pain.”

This was a man with an open Russian soul, an authentic Russian intellectual, of the type one remembered from former times, from the days when education, intelligence and knowledge were still valued. A genial man, he had long stood close to the masses although he was not himself one of them by origin. Yet he didn't pine for the days when he used to be an eminent person, had played an important role in society. This was a man who loves Russia and genuinely wants the Russian people to live happily under the new regime. That isn't how it is, however.

“We imagined the building of socialism differently,” he said: “We thought socialism meant eliminating poverty amongst the broad masses, those who were always being wronged. In the end what happened was that wealth was eliminated but then all of us were made into beggars. Look at this suit I'm wearing! It is already 5 years old. A whole 5 years. You will find many people like me here, wearing shabby *piatilietskas*¹ because there's a lack of merchandise, you simply can't get a suit.”

¹ A sarcastic expression referring to how people had worn shabby clothing for 5 years.

He sank deep into thought, glancing all the while at me, then at the clothes he was wearing. He then said: "You know, this meeting with you has led me to a thought, which has not been in my mind for a long time now, has inspired in me a feeling I thought had died away long ago. I am starting to feel ashamed about how I'm going around dressed like a beggar. I am sure you can understand how, when everyone goes around looking like a beggar then no one is ashamed to look that way. When, however, you see someone dressed like a man, like you are, you can't help but become downhearted. You're ashamed."

This man, I learned, was one of those who actually earned a good salary. A distinguished Soviet employee, he got around 1,000 rubles a month. Yet, for several years' time, he couldn't afford to have a new suit made. He even showed me an accounting of how he spent the 1,000 rubles he earned monthly, taking into account the high prices for goods, with everything seemingly comparable to gold in value. I started to feel a bit uncomfortable myself. It is not pleasant going around dressed respectably when everyone around you is wearing rags and clothes that are in tatters.

On this journey I also befriended another man who surprised me a little. He spoke and looked like a true Russian. Indeed, he spoke Russian in an authentic Moscow manner. He was dressed better than others and carried himself in a way that let you know he was someone who occupied a high position and suffered neither hunger nor want. He spoke at length about things unconnected with politics and always threw in an enjoyable Russian witticism, or made a joke, getting everyone to laugh. While dining, he drank vodka, and did so like a true Russian, demonstrating great efficiency in pouring the contents of the glass directly into his mouth. After he got a little tipsy, when his cheeks started to flush as if burning, he became even more talkative, actually the centre of attention since he was telling such interesting stories about Russian life, very beautifully and animatedly. In just such a jocular manner he wondered aloud over how I had managed not to have my suit stolen, was still wearing a rather nice one, had not had 'admirers' make away with my "fountain

pen.” Suddenly changing subjects he exclaimed: “You know, I have a request for you. When you return to America please pass along a greeting to my uncle there.” It came out this “true Russian” was actually a Jew whose uncle was one of New York’s more highly distinguished rabbis: “Give him the message that you saw me,” he asked.

In the same carriage I also got to know a young man wearing a strange sort of half-military uniform. From his speech you could see he was a fervent Communist. While admitting the current situation was very bad, he held to an unwavering belief that, in years yet to come, everything would improve, that Soviet Russia would come to be seen as a model for all countries. Hearing how people were sending greetings to America through me he smiled and, tightening his leather belt, said: “If I wanted to, I could also send a greeting to America.”

“To whom?” I asked, getting ready to write down an address in my little book: “To my father,” he replied. “But don’t hurry to write down the address. I don’t know where he lives, don’t know him at all. He abandoned my mother many years ago, when I was only a year old. He went to America and might as well have fallen into the sea!” The young man with the half-military uniform next ‘honoured’ his father in America with an authentic Russian ‘blessing.’ Everyone laughed.

I overheard a heated debate among several people about the Five Year Plan and the current situation in Soviet Russia. One of them, a Russian man with a black shirt and a red face, complained: “Our trouble stems from the fact that we don’t have any balance in our economic plans. If we start on one thing we support it with all our resources and strengths but then almost entirely neglect work still needing to be done in other sectors.”

“What do you mean by that?” another man asked, and I could see he was angry, speaking Russian but mingling in Ukrainian words. “I mean very simply,” the man in the black shirt replied: “We Russians don’t have any order or discipline to our work. The first Five Year Plan

was dedicated to building up our heavy industry. What happened? Other industries were neglected entirely. Now there's a shortage of even the most basic necessities. We go around in rags and tattered clothes. Why not work out plans that balance our needs against what we hope to achieve? Why not see to it that at the same time we're doing all this building we, the people, are still able to live normally and go around dressed like human beings? Understand?"

This man with the black shirt demonstrated great deal of skill in how he spoke to the others. He referenced whole sections from resolutions adopted at Party congresses. He quoted Karl Marx and from Lenin's writings. You saw he was a person with a mind, who thought independently, and moreover, the kind of fellow not afraid of expressing his opinions openly. Several people were obviously listening to him attentively and although they said nothing you could see they agreed with him.

Others did not. More angered than all the rest was that man who spoke Russian with a Ukrainian accent. "Do you know, Comrade," he shouted, "what your arguments show? They demonstrate you are an opportunist!" He pronounced that final word in a tone that sounded as if he were cursing his father or was perhaps in no doubt that using it would stifle his opponent. The man with the black shirt was not, however, put off, even despite the title he had just been crowned with. "Opportunist," he mimicked, repeating that word: "See how this man has branded me, stamped me, hung up a poster as it were, and that's it, that's how he wants to shut me up! Tell me, what have I got to do with opportunism? Speak logically!"

"I do speak logically!" the other man exclaimed, having lost his temper: "We're building socialism, which nobody can deny!"

"Yes, we are," the first man agreed, although quietly, now sitting back down. You could see he had lost some of the courage he had shown before: "We're building... so many factories are constructed but when anything hits a snag, they stop in the middle, don't get anything done... here there's a lack of raw materials, over there they

don't have good mechanics and someplace else they lack for basically everything... There's no order. We're always chasing something but always remain sitting on our tails." I could see this man wasn't just saying all this just because he wanted to be contrary. He was actually upset over how nothing was getting done.

Something else I noticed made me think. The man with the black shirt was supposed to be taking this train all the way to Kharkiv. Yet after this exchange he sat in silence for a time, was very quiet, seemed deep in thought. For some reason, he abruptly then changed plans and got off the train at a station far from Kharkiv.

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A NIGHT AT THE KHARLOV DEPOT

A Graphic Account of Present Life in Soviet Russia

By M. OSHEROVITCH

Copyright, 1932, by M. Osherovitch

Pop. - A truly unforgettable ex-
perience, which, it seems
to me, if properly translated
into English, could pack a
wallop! -

E.

CHAPTER

X

A night at the Kharkiv railway terminal

Based on what I saw journeying from Rostov to Kharkiv it became much more obvious to me that although they say classes have been abolished in Soviet Russia you don't see scenes of need and hunger in the 'soft' wagons of First Class, not like what you encounter in the 'hard' wagons of Third Class. A new "aristocracy" travels in those 'soft' First Class coaches, sometimes in the company of members of the old aristocracy, those who have somehow ingratiated themselves with the new order. Meanwhile the majority of people travel in the 'hard' carriages. That is where you actually see them, see scenes of need, suffering and learn of their everyday problems.

The people in Russia, the peasants especially, have not seen their quality of life improve; it is not at all what we might think of as a humane level. If today's Russian writers could write whatever they wanted, what they really feel, surely not one of them could be found who would not, like Nekrasov¹, lament all the suffering of the Russian peasants.

However, Soviet writers can't write what they feel or want to express. Their literary works are supposed to support the "ideology" of the state. When a literary work doesn't conform to that official "ideology," as strictly determined by those who judge all matters having to do with literature, then it is rejected, absolutely. "Seventy-five percent of what is written here," a prominent Russian writer told me, "is not published because it does not reflect the official party line and 100%

¹ Nikolai Nekrasov was a Russian poet born in Ukraine. His deeply compassionate writings about the peasantry made him a hero of liberal and radical circles.

of what needs to be written is not written at all.” Any voice raised that bewails the suffering of the people is repressed, just as was done in the past to those Russian writers whose works once inspired entire generations of dreamers and fighters. You can’t learn about the suffering of the Russian people in contemporary Soviet literature. You can only find that out by seeing how people live in the smaller towns and villages and by travelling on the trains, although not in those ‘soft’ carriages, only in the ‘hard’ ones.

It was as late as one o’clock at night when I arrived in Kharkiv. I was certain I would be met at the train station, then escorted to a hotel where a room would already have been prepared for my use. When I got out of the ‘soft’ car I looked around for the person supposedly assigned to welcome me but saw no one. This surprised me. No one was waiting even though the director from Rostov had sent a telegram in advance instructing I should be met there.

As usual, I couldn’t get a porter. There wasn’t one to be had, even in the great Kharkiv railway terminal. Only later did I find out that there were porters there. However, they don’t look for passengers like me or anyone else. Doing so simply wasn’t profitable for them. For the one ruble they earn carrying a suitcase they can’t even get a half-pound of bread. Everything you need just costs too much. So, instead of looking for passengers with suitcases, they do their work among the peasants, some of whom have been hanging around the train station for days and nights. The porters find tickets for them and then help squeeze them into train wagons. For that service they are, discretely, sometimes being paid 5 rubles or even more. This had become their new way to earn a living. It all started after the village started forcing itself stubbornly into the city, as the peasants came flooding into the cities from the countryside, to sell anything they could, to get bread, to get something to eat.

Just like at Tsvietkovo station on the way to Rostov, I again found myself trudging through a spacious terminal building, this time in Kharkiv, hauling heavy suitcases and the other things I had with me. With difficulty I managed to somehow get to the office of the assistant

stationmaster. He couldn't help me at all, although he seemed to want to, if possible. So I phoned *Intourist* in Kharkiv, several times. No one answered. I also called several hotels, asking if they had a room reserved for a person with such-and-such a name. The answer everywhere was the same: "No!"

"Can one perhaps get a room?"

"No!"

Whether I wanted to or not it became clear I would have to remain at the railway terminal and walk around all night, until at least 7:00 o'clock in the morning. This I knew was going to be exhausting, terribly so. There was nowhere to sit down in the terminal. Still I must admit that later, when the night had passed and the morning came, I wasn't sorry for how I spent this night. What I saw in the Kharkiv railway terminal I would surely never have witnessed if I had been escorted away to spend that night in some comfortable room in one of the large city hotels. For on that night I saw so many scenes of need and desperation, dark pictures of misery and dejection, of poverty and discouragement, that I will surely never forget them, not for as long as I live.

The entire railway terminal, inside and out, was overcrowded with people, most dressed poorly, covered in such rags and tatters. It was all actually hard to look at. The heavy burden of Russian life – an oppressive weight that dumbly yet systematically squeezes the life out of a person – permeated every corner, was present wherever you turned, wherever your eye landed. All about me people were lying around like heaps of worms, on bundles and packs, as grey and heavy as their lives. When you entered a waiting hall you actually couldn't pass through it. There was nowhere to sit, barely a place to even stand. On all the benches, on all the tables, and by all the entrances people were jammed in, lying, standing or sitting, dirty people, a fright to behold. Their faces displayed a typically Russian patience and downheartedness. Yet nobody spoke a loud word, nobody complained.

Those on the ground made the heaviest impression. Among them were men and women, young and old, even small children. They seemed not to be living but rather dead people, sprawled about as if asphyxiated by suffocating gases, more like mice who fled from somewhere to save themselves from an earthquake or a flood than human beings. When you saw how, here and there, someone was moving, how a hand, a head or a shoulder was raised, a shudder would pass through your body, a fright befell you. When you heard a quiet groan, a deep sigh, or the echo of a spoken word coming from somewhere deep inside this place it seemed to arise out of the darkness. You felt as if you were standing in a kind of a gloomy cemetery, watching people clustered before graves, petrified, still alive yet only dimly aware of where they might be, unsure even if they still were of this world, wondering what had happened to them.

Two men in rags stood near a round iron stove. It had long been as cold as a corpse's head. Their half-bare feet were wrapped in straw. Scraps hung down from the rags they wore as clothing and here and there the naked flesh of these poor and starving people peeked out. One held his hands in his pockets, his feet pressed together, leaning his body on the cold stove, propped up in a corner. His eyes were closed. You couldn't tell whether he was sleeping or just didn't want to open his eyes, knowing that today, just like yesterday, and the day before, and all the days of the year, he would only see what he had seen before and didn't want to see again. The other man clung to the stove with both hands, pressing up against it with his belly. One of his eyes was open, the other closed. He kept rubbing one knee against the other, and was always scratching, both with his hands and his feet, wherever he could.

These two didn't speak to each another. Diverted from wherever they had come from, they certainly met only by accident as they came to stand by this round iron stove on this cold night. The one with one open eye was always glancing at the man whose eyes were closed – in him I think he saw his reflection, as if in a mirror, contemplated all his dejection and dirtiness – and as he did his face became even more twisted, bitter. In total silence, as if there was no point to saying

anything, he continued scratching, using his hands and feet, rubbing one knee against the other.

In another corner a woman was lying on the ground, a large bundle at her head. Dressed in a heavy fur coat and curled up, she slept, snoring heartily. Leaning to her side was another woman, apparently very cold. Burrowing her head into a piece of fur she tried to sleep but the snoring of the other woman disturbed her. So she lay on the ground with open and half-asleep eyes watching those who shuffled by, back and forth. She didn't lift her head and saw only their feet, their heavy boots, those ungainly felt slippers, feet covered in torn rags, feet wrapped in wet straw. When she saw two intact shoes, so very different from those she been seeing for so long, she was quite amazed and actually raised her head to look – at me. What kind of person was this? Who could he be? How did he end up here?

There wasn't a single spot where people weren't lying about even though the place was damp, wet, dirty, crowded and chaotic. Over here, you saw sacks and bundles piled on top of people. Over there, you saw people camping out on top of sacks and bundles, everything twisted together in one lump, the whole of it crawling as hundreds of heavy feet moved yet seemed to go nowhere. In another spot people were standing in a long line to get tickets even though the little window where they give "the good ticket" was closed. As for the people who had tickets, they were standing by an exit door but were stopped there, not allowed to go out to the trains. There wasn't room on any of the trains anyway.

By large double doors leading out to the platform countless people were pushing both from the inside to get out and from the outside to get in and all of them carried heavy loads. Trying to impose some kind of order on all of this chaos was the responsibility of a shabbily-dressed man with an unwashed face and untrimmed beard, wearing a heavy sheepskin hat, a *kuchma*, on his head. He stood by the door, seemingly dazed, perhaps indifferent, as if he had no will of his own. Whenever he had to open or close these doors to let people in, or out, he made use of an old spade. There was simply no other way

to open or close the door for it had no lock, had no handle. Think about this - in the railway terminal of Ukraine's capital city there was an impressive door but this door did not have a handle. It had to be opened and closed using a spade. This may seem a trivial thing but it made such a frightful and depressing impression! Meandering around the terminal I frequently went past that door. Looking at the man with his spade I felt a kind of shame for him. While I could see great suffering all around, dejected and misfortunate people nearly devoured by lice and worms, what I kept thinking about was how in the railway terminal of Ukraine's capital city they didn't even have a door handle. There was something very symbolic about that.

To allow myself to move more freely and see every corner of the Kharkiv railway terminal I had checked my luggage and other things at the baggage room earlier. There, too, although not without difficulty, I had managed to find and make my way to the place where they accept your luggage. To do so you, basically, had to step over people scattered on the floor and surrounded by heavy packs and parcels. When I finally got to the man who took my luggage, he didn't give me a receipt, at least not immediately. Instead he spent some time admiring my American suitcase, as if it was a remarkable rarity. After that he had a request: "Give me one of your cigarettes. They don't give us the kind of cigarettes they give you." Immediately, a circle formed around me. More hands began reaching out: "Give me something!"

I didn't stay in any one place for too long although I often returned to this assistant stationmaster's room since there always seemed to be something to see and hear there. All sorts of different people turned up at this room, each telling a different story about how many days and nights they had been wandering around the train station with a ticket in hand yet never able to board a train.

"Comrade stationmaster, when will there be room on the train?"

"Comrade, when will the trains go?"

“Comrade Stationmaster, what should be done?”

“Comrade, sign my ticket.”

From all sides came these calls, always prefaced - “Comrade Stationmaster” this or “Comrade Stationmaster” that.

This “Comrade Stationmaster” was still a rather young man, so nervous and confused that it was almost impossible to speak a word with him. He couldn’t offer any solution, was terribly incompetent, obviously didn’t know what he should do first. He kept calling someone else on the telephone. That didn’t help him, not at all. After every such conversation he was left sitting in a kind of quiet desperation for the other stations gave him the same answer: all trains were packed full, the peasants kept coming in from everywhere, all of the villages were pushing into the cities. It couldn’t be stopped! It was impossible to stop!

“And where are they going?” this “Comrade Stationmaster” asked out loud, not really speaking to anyone, his face betraying his anxiety: “Where are they going!” He grew so desperate as to be rather pitiful to look at. When people again started coming to his little window, each asking something, everyone wanting something, he broke down, angrily berating them, screaming: “Help! Leave me alone! I’ll go out of my mind here!”

Then, and this happened suddenly, a thought occurred to him. He issued a command: “Write down where you are going! Everyone in the entire terminal needs to do this! We should know how many people are leaving and how many people are coming.” I think he certainly knew writing all this down wouldn’t help anybody – not him, certainly not the passengers. But he had to do something, had to boss somebody around, if only in order to relieve himself, at least for a short time, of the burdens pressing down upon him. So, he insisted: “Write it all down!”

Actually, he seemed to be the only person in the terminal who made

his way through these crowds, rapidly. He simply couldn't sit still because, as soon as he did, he would become exasperated. He ran here and there save for when he paused, as he always did, by the electrically illuminated display boards, where, while scratching the nape of his neck, he would read how this-and-this train was 3 hours late or that-and-that train was 5 hours late. All the trains were late, for hours and hours.

Time crawled. All of Russia was covered with snow. Time dragged. The hours in the night passed slowly by, as if they would never end. Outside it was cold. So the "Comrade Stationmaster" screamed out, desperately: "Hey, there! Close that door. Use the spade! The wind is coming in off the tracks!" Again, that spade, an old Russian spade, proving useful because in the railway terminal of Ukraine's capital city there wasn't a door handle. There's something symbolic in this.

I need to record that the assistant stationmaster, although nervous and confused, often found time to speak a few words with me. From what he said it was clear he wasn't very pleased to see me walking around the terminal. He would have preferred to find some way to get rid of me. "Do you know what," he said, "we have a room here for tourists. You will be able to spend the night there, even rest a little. Surely you must be very tired." That said he delivered me quickly into the hands of a man with an elongated face and a yellow beard who began to guide me down long corridors and past many entryways until he came to a door with glass windows. He used a large key to open it and said: "Here is the room!"

My eyes went dark as I looked in. Hard benches were placed along the walls and in the middle of the room, and on these benches some men and women were sleeping, while others lay with half-open eyes, looking out into the gloom. Several people were covered with old and tattered furs and coats, with pointed ends hanging down to the ground. Others were fully uncovered. The air was so muggy you could barely catch your breath. As I entered several people lifted

their heads to look at me through half-asleep eyes. They apparently couldn't understand where such a strange passenger, someone wearing a proper hat on his head, had suddenly appeared from. They regarded me curiously, from all sides. Soon, however, they grew weary of that. Their heads went down, their tired eyes closed, and almost no one bothered to look my way anymore. There was one exception, a fellow with vigorous eyes, grey hair and a nervous face. He kept his head up, continued to stare at me. He apparently wanted to see how a man with a hat and a respectable coat would stretch himself out on a hard bench. He didn't take his eyes off me. When I showed myself to be unwilling to stretch out on one of those hard and dirty benches, just kept pacing back and forth, he seemed disappointed, even called out: "Why don't you lie down?"

Groans, sighs and lazy yawns filled the air. The room was filthy. Everything was dusty. A bleak sadness hung over everything. A light peeked in through shut windows. Voices carried in from somewhere else, along with the sounds of people walking by on the snow outside. Shadows spread on the walls. Everything, whether outside or inside, contributed to a general gloominess. Then a child began coughing, soon waking several others. Frightened, they began crying. Even thinking about sleeping in such a room was quite impossible.

Besides, there was the stench! It was awful. So I went to the door, wanting to leave. I found it had been locked, from the other side. You couldn't get out. The thought that I would have to stay in this closed and depressing room until morning alarmed me, I think it would have driven anyone to desperation. The stuffy air, the disagreeable odours, the groaning, the sighing, the coughing of a sick child, the wailing of alarmed children – everything, all around, was just too hard to endure. I just had to get out, as soon as possible: "Open up!" I yelled as I began banging on the glass panes of the door. From the other side the man with the elongated face and yellow beard soon appeared. He opened the door and asked: "What is it?" He was astonished that I wanted to get out. "You can't sleep here? Why not?"

Escaping that confinement left me feeling freer. Again, I began to

meander through this large terminal. I saw that new passengers had arrived in the room where the cashier was. You couldn't tell this so much from their faces as by the fact that they weren't yet sleeping, were still walking around. Those who had come in earlier were the ones lying or sitting about on the ground. Along with these new arrivals I spotted a young couple, their small child and large dog. Both the child and the dog introduced a bit of joy into the otherwise prevalent gloom that filled this place. The little boy, charming although rather sleepy, was dressed so well he couldn't move. Riding on a suitcase, puffing out his cheeks as if they were just about to burst, he drew kind smiles from several people. People were always coming up to the child, trying to speak with him, stroking his puffed-out little cheeks. Meanwhile, when someone came up to the child, the dog, whom the couple kept on a chain, jumped up and began to bark: "Hav-hav!" This scene was repeated again and again. Not surprisingly, the noise woke up some of the people sprawled out here and there. They threw half-witted glances around them, scratched, scowled fiercely.

The bleak greyness of the place matched the darkness of the night outside, barely visible through thick glass windowpanes. It all merged together, a heavy greyness seemed to engulf everything, allowing no one, not one thing, to escape its embrace. No lightness or movement, not a single colour, could be seen, nothing to refresh the sight or rejoice the spirit. At every step all you saw were people in rags, people with heavy bundles – lying, sitting, standing, crawling. It was difficult to imagine I was in a country in Europe, in a country once possessed of the most refined and cultured intelligentsia in the world. You could sooner believe that, through some sort of magic, you had been carried off into the very deepest darkness of the Middle Ages, had fallen into the Muscovy of Ivan the Terrible, were back in the era of a harsh ruler, a wild Asian with a weakness for Europe. There was even an *Oprichnik*², the armed GPU man, for that is who the *Oprichnik* of today's Russia, of the Revolution, is. Everything connects to the past, not to the present.

When you pay attention to the people, to those scattered about on the

² A member of the bodyguard corps established by Ivan The Terrible.

ground or trudging by, loaded down with heavy packs and sacks, to those waiting days and nights for a train that was supposed to come but didn't, there's no way you can possibly convince yourself this is a country that will soon or quickly overtake Europe and America. Something about that notion is just not right, just isn't believable.

The people are deserving of pity. They bear heavy packs but can't shoulder the burden of weighty ideals. They endure a lot but are accomplishing little. For while they're being chased and driven from every side, told to keep up a rapid tempo of industrialization, they are actually more like that man with a matted beard that had not been combed in a long time, the man wearing an old fur hat and standing by an ostentatious door in the railway terminal of Ukraine's capital city, a door lacking something as simple as a handle.

When I had exhausted myself walking around the terminal I went back into the stationmaster's room. Everyone there recognized me by now so I was free to come and go. I could also use their telephone whenever I wanted. Even the young woman sitting beside it, although she smoked the entire time, seemed ready to help although she spent most of the time chattering away with the other officials.

The stationmaster was quite surprised to see me: "You're not sleeping?" he asked. "No, I don't want to sleep," I answered.

It seemed this night would never end, that the dawn was stuck somewhere and would not come, just like these Russians carrying heavy bundles on their shoulders, still waiting at the Kharkiv terminal, would never leave. Would it be dark forever, would we always have to wait for a dawn to come, just as these people stood by for trains that were always late?

While I was sitting in this room an armed *GPU* man came in, bringing along a frightened man who had a red ribbon attached to one sleeve of his fur coat. The armed officer tore it off. Three peasants came in behind them. One was a tall man with a black moustache and black Astrakhan hat. The second was a short man with large protruding

eyes, wearing a grey fur hat. The third was, simply, a rather dull-witted peasant, trudging along and giving off the impression of someone who was happy simply because he was not the one being bothered.

The armed *GPU* man, a tall, sturdy and young man of around 30 years of age, with a long greatcoat and large revolver, explained his prisoner was a “doorman,” usually stationed at one of the terminal’s entrances. Apparently, this fellow had demanded 5 rubles each from the 3 peasants standing here, promising that when a train arrived, he would help them get places in a carriage. In return for that they had given him their money. But he hadn’t kept his word. Angry, they had pointed him out to the *GPU* man, who promptly removed him from his post and escorted him to this office. The assistant stationmaster was now required to prepare the necessary report. Once that was done they’d see to the rest quick enough.

The accused man’s face was very pale. His head bowed, his hands hanging down, he stood looking lost, making no movement. When asked whether he took 5 rubles each from the peasants, he replied so quietly that you could barely hear the one word he uttered: “Took.”

Next they questioned the 3 peasants. The one with the black sheepskin hat acted as if he would be very happy to get revenge. As is usual when a Ukrainian peasant relates a story, he spoke a great deal, relating all the particulars of how and what and where and when. While speaking, he glanced at the accused, rather triumphantly. The latter remained standing, slouching as if already executed, always in the same pose – his head bowed, his hands hanging at his sides. The second fellow, the one with the grey hat, didn’t say much. He stood with spread feet, looking directly to his front through his half-witted and protruding grey eyes, betraying nothing of what he might be feeling. He simply waited for questions to be asked. Had the accused taken 5 rubles from him? His voice had the quality of an echo coming out of an empty barrel being banged upon: “*Pevno vziav*,” (Certainly, he did). The third man just kept over to the side, as if he already regretted this entire business. When asked whether

the accused took his money, he answered, somewhat reluctantly: “These men are telling the truth.”

After the questioning was over a familiar Russian process began – the writing out of lengthy affidavits. The stationmaster put together a detailed document. After that he called the 3 peasants over for each to sign. The one with the black hat and the one with the grey one signed, although with great difficulty, tracing what appeared to be chicken scratches on the paper. The third man was illiterate and couldn’t even sign his name. As this was going on, one of the railway workers sitting nearby upbraided the peasants: “You should be ashamed! Turning this man in. They won’t give him just a pinch on the cheek for this!” The accused man’s shoulders began shaking when he heard that. The peasant with the black hat tried to answer: “But he took 5 *karbovantsi* from each of us!”

“Well, who told you to give him the money?” the worker responded, angrily.

The peasant had his answer for this too: “What, what should we have done? We’ve already been wandering around here for 2 days and nights. We have tickets but can’t get into a train car.”

Watching everything and listening to what was being said and hearing these complaints it was difficult to figure out who was truly guilty and who was not. They were all to be pitied.

“Now,” the man wearing the long greatcoat and the large revolver said as he stood up: “everyone come with me, we’re going over to the GPU!” He then led the 3 peasants away, together with the accused, off to the GPU office in the railway station. Everything was going to be figured out there.

I very much wanted to know the fate of the accused man and the peasants. I waited for about 15 minutes and then made straight for the GPU office. I had been told it was not far away. All I needed to do was walk along and turn left at the first platform where I’d see a door

with a sign marked in large letters: *DPU*. Why *DPU*? “Because that is what the *GPU* is called in Ukraine,” - *Derzhavna Politychna Uprava*.

Entering the *DPU* office I saw the accused again, seated on a chair. His face was even paler than before, his head sunken. It seemed as if he was no longer a living person, just a corpse with open eyes. Behind a table sat a *GPU* man, a handsome young man of 23 or 24. The skin of his face was delicate, even girlish. His eyes seemed to have a soft expression but there was a fierce sharpness to them, piercing you through and through. His hat with its red band was pulled down to one side and he was armed with a large revolver.

My entrance caused some surprise. The man standing by the door stopped me. I began to speak in English. He certainly didn't understand more than a word of what I said and that was “America.” He inspected my passport. Thinking I didn't understand a word of Russian he indicated where I should sit down. It was difficult, actually very much so, to sit and observe the wretchedness and plight of the accused, who still did not show much sign of life, uttering not even a word nor making the slightest movement. From another room, the door of which was open and where I could see the peasants were sitting, a man with an implacable face, whom I noticed also had a lame foot, was always coming and going. Limping but taking broad steps he'd approach the accused man, scowl through those sharp and piercing eyes of his, then pull the seated man's hat down over his eyes and ears, yank it back up, then shove it down again. The accused was terrified. He didn't defend himself. He said nothing. He barely moved, as if he no longer had his own will, as if he were no longer a person, had become just a thing, something one could do whatever one had to.

It was pitiful to hear the accused man admit, as he did quietly, through trembling lips, that he had taken money from the peasants. He explained he had done so only because he earned very little for his work and had no bread at home.

This tableau left a very sordid impression. The telephone rang several

times during the interrogation. The young agent with the red banded hat kept telling someone on the other end of the line how he didn't have enough *strielok*³. Several more were needed, he said, although he didn't fully say the word *strielok* while he had this conversation on the telephone.

After the questioning of the accused and the three witnesses was over the typical Russian process of writing out a long testimonial began again. This one was even longer than the affidavit the assistant stationmaster had compiled. When it was drafted, he read it out loud. It was a rather strange mixture of Russian and Ukrainian expressions, which didn't entirely work together. The entire story, which could have been recorded in just a few lines instead became a long testimonial, interspaced with more than a few ungrammatical sentences and phrases, repeated countless times. That done, the accused, together with the 3 peasants, were led away into a special room.

"Now I can hear you out," the agent turned and said to me, having delivered the four other men into the hands of armed officers and those of that limping man with the unreadable face. "Now I can hear what you want." He indicated I should take the chair near his desk. Offering him my American passport, and other documents, I immediately began speaking in Russian. When he heard this, he was amazed: "What!" he stared as he said: "You speak Russian?"

"Yes, as you can hear, I speak Russian."

I told him how I had been left at the train station and asked for his assistance in getting me a room. He heard that but I could see he was very confused. He was obviously more than a little displeased that I, a man who understood Russian, had been sitting there for much of the interrogation. Turning to one of his "shooters," another man with a long greatcoat and a large revolver, he said: "A room should be obtained immediately, here at the train station!" The armed man told me to follow him and so off we went. I soon realized he was leading

³ Riflemen.

me right back to the very room I had barely extricated myself from once already: “No, I won’t stay in there!” I said: “Take me somewhere else but not into that room!” So he led me into the First Class Hall. Several people with brushes attached to their bare feet were washing the floor. This was a rather primitive way to wash a floor, especially in such a large room. To me it seemed as if the people with brushes on their bare feet were just skating around not really working. Certainly, it took a very long time for one of them to finish washing a long strip from one end of the room over to the other.

The darkness outside the station matched the heavy sadness drifting inside. Here too the scene before me was dark. Men wearing heavy boots were lying near every window in this large hall. One fellow seemed to be a train-conductor, sleeping with his hat on his head. Over in a corner, not far from the door, I overheard several people who were talking about the price of bread, about how people were dying from hunger in the villages. The atmosphere was frightfully heavy, a specifically Russian heaviness that seemingly persisted from the era of Ivan the Terrible. To add to the gloom of it all, the armed GPU man, this *Oprichnik* of the Revolution, was always coming in, then going out again. Meanwhile a girl clad in torn shoes, with a feather duster in her hands, was cleaning off the Russian newspapers, journals and books laid out on a long table, while singing to herself:

*“And perhaps for you it’s a question of dowry,
Your mother will sell the house,
And we will both get married,
Because I love you so...”*

And then again:

*“Oh, and we will both get married,
Because I lo-o-ve you so...”*

Everything was altogether strange. Nothing I saw made sense.

CHAPTER XI

In Kharkiv

1. Not momentum but a stampede

Kharkiv is growing. Kharkiv is becoming larger and larger. Kharkiv is building. A large tractor factory famous all over Russia and around the entire world is located in Kharkiv.

You hear this everywhere. Even before you get to Ukraine's capital city. After you do arrive you are persuaded of all this because you can see how the city is growing and how they're building everywhere.

However – as strange as it may be – you also end up feeling all this building of factories is connected with the people only to the extent that it makes their lives more difficult. These machines are not made in order to make people's lives better. On the contrary the person is there for the machine and must sacrifice his life for it.

This is actually your sense in all the larger and smaller cities of Soviet Russia. They're building – nobody can deny that. But the foundations for it all are human lives. In ancient Egypt, Pithom and Ramses were both built just the same way¹. Whenever a brick or a stone was lacking they just mortared a living person into the wall. This is how the borders of the Russian Empire were enlarged at all times – not sparing any person! That is how they are building in Russia now.

This is a typical Russian way of doing things, continuing in a direct

¹ Ancient Egyptian cities, the first was also known as Heroonopolis. According to the Bible both were built by Hebrew slaves.

line from Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible. Whenever they want to imitate a country standing higher than in culture or civilization, whenever they want to civilize Russia, they use barbarian means! Even if their goals today really are different, the means to those ends remain the same. Perhaps this explains why one doesn't feel the same kind of momentum behind development in Russia as one detects in other countries. What exists here is more of a stampede. This stampede is observable not only in their workplaces but even when you watch people going to work. People don't make their way to work. They race, and in such confusion, so tumultuous a crowd of people, that you would think someone was driving them along with a thousand lashes.

I saw something of this rush one morning at the Kharkiv railway terminal. The general lassitude of the place was suddenly disturbed by the sound of heavy footsteps. Hearing that tumult the people there, none well-rested, all disheveled and upset, filthy and dirty, young and old, men and women alike, carrying boxes and baskets in their hands, all ran like poisoned mice toward the large door. Toward the very same portal that was earlier shut with a spade because it had no handle. As they ran, they pushed and jabbed each another. Everyone wanted to be first to get out, to then squeeze into a packed tram car as quickly as possible, to arrive at work exactly on time. If you were even a little late that might be seen as deliberate, a violation, meaning you could end up coming under suspicion as a wrecker.

All of these people had come to the railway terminal by train, arriving from a region located far from the city. They couldn't find a place to room in the city because it was growing, getting larger. So, every day, these people had to wake when it was still dark outside and then use a train to get to the railway terminal. After all that they still had to travel by tram. And these streetcars were themselves terribly congested. People hang onto their stairs, to whatever they can. It's very airless, close. Indeed it's really a miracle people are not killed.

Everyone is nervous, everyone feels as if they are in a harness, being driven and chased without mercy, without an ounce of sympathy.

When it happens that they have to wait for a long time, because there aren't enough tramcars in service, they become increasingly nervous. They start to watch each other, grow angry and annoyed, are overcome with rage.

In such situations the older people are deserving of extra sympathy, be they Jews or Christians. They arrive at the railway terminal earlier than other people because they are very afraid of being late to work. Cold and tired, they line up in the corners, pressed up against the walls, speaking quietly amongst themselves. When the rush to the tramcars begins, they must also enter that fray, trudging along with packs and baskets in their arms. One of them, an old Jew with a trimmed grey beard, said to me, shaking his head: "You see, this is how we live here! Such times we have here!"

No pity is shown for old people! When you speak to a young Communist about the elderly he usually answers, very placidly, apparently because he thinks striking such a pose suits someone who doesn't need to show any sympathy: "Here our approach must be like this. When a person becomes old and loses the ability and strength to work then nobody needs him anymore, so just let him die."

It was 7 o'clock in the morning when I decided I'd seen enough at the railway terminal. I set out into the city on a *droszky*. Although it was still early you could already see, here and there, long queues forming up. When I asked the driver what kind of queues they were he gave a short answer: "The usual ones."

The streets were covered with ice and snow. It was slippery and horses, bearing heavy loads along the road, were constantly falling, as their drivers kept shouting "giddy-up" and "go" until they got up and went on. The cold was frightful. Everything was completely frozen. The windowpanes of houses and stores looked blind in this grey dawn and the people out and about were shivering from the cold. The tiredness of the hard night and of another grey day lingered until it was interrupted by a fresh, healthy, and vibrant tumult – a long

row of large express trains, packed with Red Army men. These young men were speaking loudly amongst themselves, were happy and lively. On the express trains, which had upset the quiet of the street with their arrival, large inscriptions had been painted in bold letters, easily seen even from a distance: *Nie khotim voiny - Vsiegda nacheku* (We don't want war - We're always on guard). Similar scenes are nearly everywhere seen in Soviet Russia. A fear of war hangs in the air.

I went over to the Krasnyi Hotel, where foreigners typically stay. They told me all the rooms were occupied. The only thing I could do was store my suitcase there and go for a walk around the streets of the city until a room became available. I did just that. I walked from one street to the other until it started to get a bit livelier and people with briefcases started to appear everywhere. People carry leather briefcases, men and women, old and young alike – you see this at every step across Russia. Everyone carries briefcases, although only God knows what they need them for. Whether you want to or not, you are reminded of the scene in the play *Khleb* (Bread), then being performed at the Moscow Art Theatre. Someone complains about the shortage of shoes in Soviet Russia: “They’re slaughtering all the cattle in the villages and cutting up their hides, so where is the leather?” The reply is that it is being used for briefcases. It’s truly heaven and earth and briefcases. Meanwhile, there is a very real shortage of shoes. People are walking around in old and worn shoes. In other countries the shoes they wore here would just be thrown onto the garbage heap.

Strolling around Tevelev Square, where the new “Soviet House” was located, and which from the outside looks quite palatial, I saw a government restaurant, with fine white *challahs*² displayed in its windows. Looking at these loaves I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought this was a dream. The white *challahs* were not a dream, however, but actually more of a “dry reality.” I discovered that when I went inside and picked one up. It was obviously already as old as Methuselah, as dried out as a stone.

² Jewish braided bread eaten on Sabbath and other ceremonial occasions.

“How much does this cost?” I asked. “One ruble and 25 kopecks” I was told.

For a glass of coffee, of a strange and rather horrible colour, looking as if it were made from the soles of old shoes, I paid 50 kopecks. I took a seat at a small table, quite dirty and filthy – as dirty and filthy as the people sitting nearby, indeed as everything else was all around. Eating this *challah* proved out of the question. Trying to would have broken my teeth. You couldn’t drink the coffee either because of its strange and sour taste. Instead I just sat and looked at the people at the other little tables, watching as they chewed away at their dried *challahs*, with considerable enthusiasm. Having paid 1 ruble and 75 kopecks, which comes out to about 90 cents in American money, I went away hungry.

As I still didn’t have anywhere to rest, I continued walking the streets. Although I was tired it was nevertheless quite interesting. At every step one could see things characteristic of what Soviet life is like these days and in a large city.

On many walls and on plank fences there were notices written on paper of various colours. On each of them, in pencil, you could read urgent appeals about how this-and-that person was looking for a room, asking anyone who had a space to let him know so that he could rent it, quickly. It is like this everywhere. The city is growing. They’re building large factories, the latest in modern technology. They’re catching up, even overtaking America. Yet when they try to rent a room they use the most primitive means, very unlikely to bring about the desired results.

In the front windows of government stores (and there aren’t any other kind in Soviet Russia), various items are displayed, but the prices are sky-high, so much so that they nearly make you dizzy. The doors to those stores are open but none of the passersby go inside.

On the street there are children’s toys for sale, laid out on stands identified with an inscription, *Khartorg*, meaning those selling these

goods aren't private dealers but government workers. You didn't see much of anything on these carts besides little toy rifles, pistols, cannons, machine guns and other weapons.

What was much more common, however, was to see all sorts of candies, almonds, marmalades and other sweets, both in the government stores and on the street carts. It was strange how the city was flooded with sweets, at the time when bread was not to be found. An older Jew with a trimmed beard stood beside one stand labelled *Khartorg*. He was selling cheap cigarettes and chatting in Russian with another man standing next to him. That man was selling books promoting atheism, tracts condemning a belief in God, denouncing religion. Looking at them I noticed the Jewish cigarette seller kept murmuring quietly to himself, the entire time I watched. Frankly, he seemed a little too unstable to be working in the market. His mind just didn't seem to be all there. I approached him and bought a pack of cigarettes, using this to start up a conversation: "Do you sell a lot of cigarettes?"

"Et!"

"Do you earn enough?"

"Alas and alack."

"How long do you stand outside like this every day?"

"From 9 until 5."

Then, as if he wanted to show he was not just a Jew, he repeated the times to me in Russian: *ot deviati do piati* (from 9 to 5).

When I walked away, he returned to his corner and again began murmuring quietly to himself. When I again came near him, quite close, I saw him smiling as he said: "You know what's going on – what-who-when – you snatch a Yiddish word and you recite quietly." It was then that I glanced at the other man, the one selling the books

and pamphlets denouncing God and religion. He was staring at one spot and not saying a word. It seemed to me he was reciting *Shmone-Esre*³.

A little later I went into the restaurant of the Krasnyi Hotel, where everything altogether was beautifully polished, was clean, well appointed. At the tables you saw many foreign tourists and Russian men wearing uniforms. Among the foreigners I even saw the Hindu delegation I had encountered before, in Moscow. Everyone was eating and drinking heartily. Music was playing. Tall vases adorned with broad and thick leaves added elegance to this wealthy scene. All the tables had white tablecloths. Even flowers were not lacking.

It was difficult to square the wealth and gleam of the Krasnyi Hotel with the reality of Russian life I had seen, just the night before, at the railway terminal. In this hotel you could get everything you might want even if the prices nearly made you faint. A full meal cost 27 rubles. For a cutlet and a glass of coffee, with bread and butter, I paid 10 rubles and 50 kopecks. You couldn't fault the waiter for these prices. Those were out of his hands, the poor man. So I gave him 1 ruble because how can you give a man less in such a time of scarcity! That was how, in this Kharkiv hotel, I ended up paying almost \$6 American for a meal you could get in New York City for about 50 cents.

How things were priced didn't tally with reality. But then that's how it is now in Russia – the bookkeeping doesn't add up. On the one side there is nothing but a poor and dejected life and on the other there is wealth and high prices, too much even for millionaires.

Later, when I was with an acquaintance whom I looked up in the city, we spoke at length about how Kharkiv was growing and about its large tractor factory, famous over all of Russia. My companion said: "Yes, we're building, we're striving, but I still cannot relate all this building to our daily lives. When I think about their construction

³ The eighteen benedictions, also known as the Amidah and ha-Tefila, a central prayer of the Jewish liturgy and recited silently, morning, afternoon, and in the evening, while standing with one's feet firmly together and facing toward Jerusalem.

it always seems to me as if they're building not here, not for us, but on some distant soil, entirely remote and disconnected from our current lives."

While speaking my friend stared intently at me, yet kept looking all around to be certain no one was eavesdropping. Quietly, he added: "Yes, they're always speaking about giant factories, which stretch up tall and spread out wide. But people must live too, aren't I right? If only I could take you out of the city you would see how people really live. There, out on the hills, people have dug themselves pits, where they live like blind dogs. These are peasants who fled from their villages. They couldn't remain where they were so they ran to wherever their eyes carried them. And what is there here for us, here in the cities! Everywhere people are living in constant fear, always in terror. Everywhere people are dying of hunger, have lost all their humanity. Yet they are still going on about how they are building industrial plants!"

I tried to console him, as one usually tries to comfort a person in Soviet Russia, by suggesting future generations will live better as a result of the sacrifices being made today. This only provoked his anger: "Ach, stop!" he cried out: "It's easy for you to repeat such gibberish because what do you care, as a foreigner, when they're conducting an 'interesting experiment' on 160 million people! What does it matter to you if we are worm-eaten and rotten?" His tone was harsh as he chastised me. I could make no reply, none at all.

In Kharkiv, I met another of my old acquaintances. He was a distinguished officer in the GPU, originally from one of the large cities found in the central part of Soviet Russia. He had joined the Cheka after the bloody pogroms. Once, and still, he was a good *baldikdek*, with an excellent command of Hebrew. Indeed he so loved Hebrew literature that it was always difficult for him to decide who he believed was the greater poet – H. N. Bialik or Shaul Tchernichovsky. When he spoke about how Jews had benefited from the Revolution in Russia you could entirely believe he was a Zionist. He always emphasized the nationalist motif, even if he didn't speak Yiddish but

only Ukrainian, and sometimes Russian. Given an opportunity he would sometimes also throw in a Hebrew witticism.

He had lived through a great deal during the pogroms and after that. When he spoke about those days, over a glass of liquor, and told tales about slaughtered mothers and raped sisters, he grew enraged, his eyes went wild, with red circles appearing around them as if they were filled with blood. Then, through clenched teeth, he'd recite from Bialik's *Be'ir hahariga* [City of the Killings]:

*And I am sorry for you, my children, and my heart goes out to you,
your sacrifices are sacrificed for nothing - and neither you nor I
know why you died, nor who nor what for, and there's no point to
your deaths as there was no point to your lives.*

When he had finished a full glass of vodka, he added, in Ukrainian: *Duzhe vona hirka, horilka, a bat'ko musit' pyty!*⁴. By the word *bat'ko* he meant himself. When you listened closely to what he said, to what he recalled about how he had lived through the pogroms, then when gangsterism was being eradicated, it wasn't hard to understand why he drank; that war, those struggles, had been very bitter.

On one occasion, at the office of the Kharkiv *Intourist*, where one can often come across a mixture of curious foreigners, I saw an old man come in. He had a cheerful, smiling face and wore an old fur coat. He knew everyone in the office and acted like a very good brother to everyone. When he learned I came from America he instantly proclaimed how he had a "great request" for me – I must, once and for all, not just tell him but really teach him as well, how the 2 letters "tee-heyтч" (t-h) were properly pronounced in English. He must know!

This old man explained he was once a conductor. He had travelled across the entire length and breadth of Russia. Had seen a world! Now he was too old, couldn't work anymore, and I could see how the hat he was wearing was one left over from the old days. He often

⁴ "The vodka is very bitter but a father must drink."

happened to be hungry, he said, but had become used to it. Since he had plenty of time on his hands, he often came to the *Intourist* office. He loved Americans. They were fine people, he said, these Americans who smoked good cigarettes. From them, that is other Americans, he had learned to speak a little English. They'd complimented him by saying he was already almost a "perfect American." He admitted, however, he was bad at one thing – he could not correctly pronounce these 2 letters "tee-heyтч." Perhaps I could help him? Where should he hold his tongue – by the palate or by the teeth? How should he shape his mouth meanwhile – open, or closed? He must know! Apparently, he needed nothing else.

I couldn't bring myself to stay very long in Kharkiv. The hospitality one usually feels in a city was lacking. Even its external appearance was haughty, rather cold and distant. I had the impression this city did not live for itself but for something, or someone, far away. Nobody seemed to be a local. Most seemed to be strangers who had arrived here as if by accident. They had run here from someplace else. Even with all the building going on none of it was being done for themselves. It was all for those who needed to get here, more strays, more strangers like the ones already there. I left and headed on to Odesa – to a city I always loved very much.



CHAPTER XII

The fear of the *GPU* across the country

For a person who has never visited Soviet Russia it can be difficult to imagine how great the *GPU* is feared there.

Everything one hears about this from afar, all of the descriptions one reads, give you only a weak, a very feeble, idea of the truth. You have to see it for yourself, you have to experience it personally, feel it directly. Only then can you understand the fear that hangs perpetually, like a heavy mountain, over the heads of the population in Soviet Russia.

My first acquaintance with the *GPU* was in Niogoreloie, at the border. And – however strange this may seem – the first Yiddish word I heard upon arriving in Russia was from the *GPU*. The customs officer who examined my things couldn't figure out what to do with a book of mine, stories about Jewish life in America. Calling over a young man in a military uniform, who was armed with a large revolver, he showed him the book. That man straight away started speaking to me in Yiddish:

“Are you the author?” he asked. “Yes, I am.”

“So, tell me, if you please, what ideology do you promote with these stories of yours?”

After he leafed through the book for a while, glancing at a paragraph here, reading a line there, he granted me permission to bring my book into the country.

Later, when travelling from Minsk to Moscow, I started up a conversation with a Russian man. Right from the beginning he went on about the wonders I should expect to see in Soviet Russia. Sitting in the restaurant car he even indicated, with a quick glance, a group of armed youth, telling me: “You see them, that is our *GPU*.”

I looked at those young men in their green uniforms. I later had the opportunity to speak with several of them. They were all quite helpful and indeed spoke very respectfully. It was difficult to imagine this was the same *GPU* I had heard so many terrible things about in America. Only when I became acquainted with many people in Soviet Russia and with living conditions there, only after I had heard in various cities and towns many things usually whispered in secret, did I begin to develop a better idea about what inspires the fear of the *GPU* throughout Soviet Russia.

This is a fear that cannot be expressed entirely in words – a fear which doesn’t disappear even for a minute, neither by day or night. A fear not only in the mind but also in the heart, in the blood, in all of one’s limbs. A fear that doesn’t permit one to raise one’s head or speak a word out loud. One really doesn’t know who is in the *GPU* and who is not. It’s certainly not just those who wear the uniforms who are *GPU*. In their ranks you’ll find many people who don’t wear uniforms. An agent of the *GPU* could be the waiter who serves your food at the table, the man who carries your luggage, the girl who cleans your hotel room, the lady who answers the telephone, an acquaintance who comes to receive a greeting from America, even a friend who sits with you at the same table and speaks so politely and well that it’s simply a pleasure to hear. And sometimes it will be your own brother or a friend from your youth.

When a foreign correspondent comes to Soviet Russia, someone whom they need to keep their eyes on, the *GPU* makes sure that nearly everywhere he goes this man will be surrounded by *GPU* people, held within their borders even if not obviously so. No spy needs to follow him, as would perhaps be the case in another country. In this field Soviet Russia has not only caught up with but has truly

surpassed all other countries.

In fact, the *GPU* in Soviet Russia is perhaps the only truly industrious organization in the country, most of the time a little too industrious. Of course, it is the strongest pillar supporting the current regime in Russia. Yet at the same time that it demonstrates the strength of Stalin's regime this also exposes the latter's weaknesses and insecurity. A government truly sure of itself doesn't need to have so many overt and covert agents, so many armed guards at every turn.

In Soviet Russia – whether in their quarters, on the streets, in hotel rooms, restaurants or bars, indeed just about everywhere, people don't speak out loud. Instead they murmur softly, always careful to look around, in every direction, when they want to reveal something about how they're suffering, are starving, how they languish. Even in his own home a person is never certain whether someone isn't eavesdropping from the other side of the wall. In one's own place a person may be afraid to say a word out loud, mistrusting his sisters and brothers, close friends, even children. People are afraid of the walls. Always and everywhere this fear hangs over one's head. You can't get away from it anywhere. There is nowhere to hide. So people murmur, quietly move their lips, afraid to utter a word too loudly, especially the kind of word that comes from a person's true heart. One is always wearing a mask.

The fear of the *GPU* is so great that sometimes a person is afraid not only when they are with others but all alone. A story about this goes like this. Two Jews were speaking about their great fear of the *GPU*. One gestured at his friend, next at himself: "This is what we fear. Here we are sitting and talking. But what's the use of speaking when we don't say what we want because one of us is certainly a *GPU* man? Isn't that so? Ha!" The other Jew began laughing: "Is that what you consider fear?" he asked: "That's nothing. My fear is much worse. My greatest terrors occur when I am home alone and something comes to mind that I know Stalin wouldn't want me to consider. When that happens, I go and stand before a mirror and say: 'What's the use? One of us is certainly a *GPU* agent. Best be careful and not think at

all.' That's how afraid I am!"

Everywhere they tell you such terrible things about the methods of the *GPU* that the hair stands up on your head. What they speak about are not episodes from the Civil War, when so-called "war communism" reigned, but things that have happened more recently, in these present days, when they speak so often and so beautifully about building, about construction, not destruction.

In one city I was told about *GPU* jails. In them, I was told, prisoners lie totally naked on the ground, held in such overcrowded and cramped cells that when someone turns over, onto their other side, everyone else must do likewise. People who had been imprisoned in these terrible jails told me personally about the conditions they endured. Several were old socialists who had devoted their best years to the revolutionary struggle for a free Russia.

I heard about people who betrayed comrades and friends, even incriminated totally innocent other people, simply because they could no longer withstand the torture, the suffering, the agony and the terrible insults done them by their *GPU* interrogators. They were interrogated, over and over and over. I was told about people who died in these *GPU* jails, about others who lost their minds. When a suspicion falls on someone and he's taken in for an interrogation they make use of methods and adopt such means that it's no wonder people are often driven to suicide, to insanity, even to betrayal. When a person is imprisoned, they are questioned by a prosecutor. Usually, this will be a skilled interrogator, someone who knows when to speak kindly and when to be harsh. A prisoner will be questioned and harassed for hours on end, hear a thousand and one questions, and those will be repeated a thousand and one times. When the original prosecutor gets tired, he's replaced with a second one, then a third one takes a shift, and after that, a fourth carries on. Every one of them stays fresh and, when his turn comes up again, resumes vigorously questioning the prisoner. Meanwhile, the accused man gets no rest, is increasingly exhausted, to the point that he comes to despise his life, is ready to say anything, do just about everything,

just so long as it brings these terrible agonies and tortures to an end. Otherwise he feels they will drive him to insanity.

One must not forget that in Soviet Russia the situation is such that not only important but also unimportant things are sometimes interpreted as being counter-revolutionary.

When someone refuses to give in then his captors can be very severe and brutal. He's tortured and tormented. When he can no longer bear these brutalities and confesses to something that he did or even did not do, his interrogators suddenly become gentle, even agreeable. They start to call him "comrade" and tell him he should have spoken up, confessed sooner. Sometimes they will even apologize for having had to be so severe. Given the situation, they'll say, they had no other choice. In the cause of the Revolution, they insist, one sometimes must be severe. Next they ask: "So now, Comrade, tell us who helped you?"

The exhausted man again feels a cold sweat cover his body. "Nobody helped me," he answers: "I swear nobody did!" In the blink of an eye the mood shifts again, an entirely different atmosphere. The prosecutor changes his tone accordingly and again begins to curse and insult and torment the man before him. And that tortured man is sometimes driven so far that, in a moment of utter desperation, bordering on insanity, he blurts out the names of people who are guilty of nothing, anything only to be spared further torments.

I spoke to people in cities who had gone through tortures at the hands of the *GPU*. In hushed tones they told me how they had suffered, what they saw and heard, of how others were brutalized. From what they told me I began to understand why the fear of the *GPU* in Soviet Russia is so profound. I began to understand that such a fear, which has no equal in any country in the world, is enough to break the courage of even the bravest person.

In one city I met a friend whom I had not seen for 25 years. This meeting was quite an emotional one. He began speaking about

the unhappy circumstances he found himself in, but in a whisper, carefully looking to every side. Then, abruptly jumping up, quite agitated, he yelled: "What kind of closet is this?" He was pointing to an ordinary wardrobe. "What kind of closet is that? It makes me nervous!" It was pitiful to see how his behavior had changed. In an instant the expression on his face had completely transformed, become that of someone you might think was deranged. "Don't be silly," I tried to reassure him: "This closet is just a closet. It's not an agent of the *GPU*. Here, look see, there's nothing inside!" He stared at me, a forced smile on his face: "I know," he said, "but behind this closet there is a door. See, on purpose!" Behind the closet there really was a door. It connected to a neighbouring room.

"Well, what does it matter that there's a door?" I asked.

"Do you know who's staying in that room next door?" he asked.

"No, I don't," I answered.

"Well that's why I'm afraid." He was very uneasy and went on speaking but even more quietly than before: "Who knows who is in that room?"

He sat with me for a long time but he was always glancing uneasily at the closet and frequently said: "This closet makes me nervous! This closet isn't letting me rest!"

The next day, when he came to visit, he was upset even as he arrived, even more nervous than the day before: "I have come to tell you," and here he kept his gaze down, towards the ground, "that I will not be coming to see you anymore. I have a lot to tell you, a very great deal. But I can no longer come here."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you," he replied: "I'm not permitted to tell you! Let us just say our goodbyes." So we did. His eyes were full of tears as he kissed me, for the last time. He was ashamed to weep but was so

moved that he began to sob. Somehow, he pulled himself together, gathering his strength, wiped his eyes and left quickly. I never saw him again.

Even now, I cannot forget that troubling scene. It remains before my eyes as if I was still there, arousing feelings of deep pain and regret. This poor, misfortunate and depressed friend of mine, in that distant city where people always go around afraid and dejected –he had so much he could have said to me, so much. He needed to speak about many things, connected with the best years of our lives, with our loveliest dreams! Yet when he left, he was crying, distressed, had not said much, could not speak about anything. He couldn't even meet me as often as he would have liked. The fear of the *GPU* hangs over him, as it does over all the other citizens of Soviet Russia, eternal.

In another city I became acquainted with a man whom I came to like very much. He was truly a very sensitive and genial man. I met him several times and knew he was very often hungry as he simply didn't have any food. So I invited him to eat lunch in the hotel where I was staying. He stared with his eyes wide-open: "What???" He refused to because he said he knew that wherever foreigners stayed there were also many agents of the *GPU*.

Here is another case: in a city I was passing through I gave a suit I had brought with me from America to one of my new friends. This person, a dignified and amiable man, had been wearing such shabby and torn clothes it was hard just looking at him. Yet when I gave him a suit, he bit his lower lip as tears filled his eyes. Grabbing me by the hand he said in a trembling voice: "Dear friend, I would be afraid to wear it!"

In another city I invited a young girl, whose parents I knew from the old days, to go with me to a restaurant, a place where foreigners eat and pay with *valiuta*, that is hard currency. She was afraid to go with me. This girl had actually never been in a proper restaurant in her life. She was just a small child when the Revolution broke out. Yet she was possessed of an innate feeling for beauty and cleanliness,

which perhaps explains why she read books by foreign writers whose works described a life very different from hers. She dreamt about someday going into a restaurant where you could get everything, where music played. She had read about such restaurants. Now she was presented with her first and perhaps only opportunity to ever go into such a restaurant. She refused. She was too afraid of the *GPU*. “You’re leaving,” she said, “but I am staying here. And when they see me with you in such a restaurant they won’t just pinch my cheek.” The fear of the *GPU* hangs over everyone’s head!

When, by chance, I stopped in a certain city for a few days, although it wasn’t on the original itinerary for my trip around Soviet Russia, an old compatriot came to see me one morning, although I had not been expecting him. Somehow, he had learned of my arrival. As he was leaving that very day to go to another city, he had hurried over to see me, the reason for why he came so early. He also told me something else. He had been staying with one of his friends. When he began getting ready to come and see me, that very morning, his friend had cautioned him, saying it would be better not to. Being a stubborn and rather proud man he had insisted he would. His other friend told him that if that were the case then he should take his suitcase with him and not return. He didn’t want him coming back after he had visited with me. “You’re leaving town today anyway,” his friend had said, “so you can go directly from the hotel to the train station.” That is just what my old friend did. He came with his packed suitcase and after our chat went straight over to the train station. He did not return to his other friend’s quarters.

In another city an acquaintance gave me the address of one of his friends in a city I had decided to travel to. To make it easy for me I asked him to write the address down on a piece of paper. He was afraid to. “My handwriting could be recognized,” he said, “when you are leaving Soviet Russia perhaps your papers will be examined.” He needed to be careful, he said, because just as he was coming over to meet me, he had spotted a known agent of the *GPU* on the hotel stairs. That fellow had asked him where he was going and intending to see. “Write down the address yourself,” he asked, “and don’t forget

to tear it up when you no longer need it." I began to write down the address of that person, who was living in a certain city at number 68 Lenin Street (in Soviet Russia there is hardly a city which doesn't have a Lenin Street). At that very moment my acquaintance interrupted me again: "Wait," he said, "just memorize the name of the friend and don't write down the number of the street. Just print '*khaim* Lenin.' Since '*khaim*' is 68 and Lenin is Lenin the words '*khaim* Lenin' will help you remember his address is 68 Lenin Street." So all I wrote down in my little book was: "*khaim* Lenin." That is how far the fear of the *GPU* extends.

In Soviet Russia there is hardly a single place where you can feel entirely free from the *GPU*. The *GPU* is not only in the cities and in the villages but also on the trains. In every train in Soviet Russia there isn't a 'soft' carriage on a train where you won't find 2 armed *GPU* agents. More than armed! On trains they're referred to by a nice name, "field hunters." Russian trains are often long. They sometimes have 10 to 15 carriages, even more, so there are always 20 to 30 armed *GPU* men on board. Even when the train is stopped, off somewhere in a far-flung steppe or somewhere in a desert, it's not free from the perpetual watch of the *GPU*. They are everywhere. Not a corner of Soviet Russia, not a person, no one anywhere in this gigantic state, remains entirely free from the *GPU*'s scrutiny. Of course, even though there are *GPU* men on a train it sometimes happens that embittered peasants, who have spent days and nights wandering around the railway station, lose their patience and pelt the train's windows with stones, especially after they've been kept off. When that happens it becomes a matter for the *GPU* to sort out. They manage to do so, in their very own way. You can imagine.

From shore to shore, from border to border, the entire country is encircled, cordoned off with an iron chain, every ring of which is rigid and strong. That is the *GPU*. An unflinching discipline prevails within its ranks. No one is permitted to express any sentiments or feelings. One must have no pity for anyone. One must seek out the enemy everywhere and be ready at a moment's notice to eliminate anyone who blocks the path! Everyone in the *GPU* knows his role.

They use the most brutal methods, deploy the most dreadful terror, likely without equal in history.

I actually got to know many of the *GPU*'s people. Several of them I remembered from before I left Russia, 22 years ago. I went to see them, spoke with them. I must say a *GPU* man very often leaves you with the impression of being someone not entirely normal. You get the feeling something is troubling his conscience, is bothering him, won't allow him to find any peace. This observation intrigued me. So when I saw sanatoria in several cities reserved exclusively for the *GPU*, and named after Felix Dzerzhinsky who had founded the *Cheka*, I asked why separate sanatoria were set aside for the *GPU*, inquiring as to what kind of patients were treated there. I got more or less the same answer everywhere I asked, always whispered: "Mostly the mentally ill are kept there."

This made sense. Every man has a conscience, a moral compass. If he does wrong it doesn't allow him to rest. It troubles him. So this made sense, it was a logical progression: from the *GPU* – to a madhouse!

I'm sure if a Dostoyevsky were alive today in Soviet Russia, a writer who wanted to pen a great novel but one free of the "ideology" imposed on writers, all he would need do is visit a *GPU* sanatorium and there record, word for word, what insane *GPU* men sputter on about whenever their consciences plague them, don't let them rest. After such a visit one could write a great book, a work to evoke a reader's horror and let the world know just how much fear the *GPU* inspire in the population of Soviet Russia.

CHAPTER XIII

What Americans see and don't see in Soviet Russia

There is hardly an important city in Soviet Russia where you won't find American tourists. In the *Intourist* offices, where foreign guests are supplied with all the amenities, they know that in winter visitors come mostly for business purposes. In the summer it's the American intelligentsia who arrive – professors from colleges and universities, male and female teachers and other intellectuals very interested in what's being built and created in Soviet Russia, people who have read all about it in newspapers, journals and books.

These American intellectuals arriving to see the “Republic of Workers and Peasants,” the only one in the whole wide world, are mostly rather sympathetic people. They mean well. Disappointed in the faltering capitalist system, disillusioned by the terrible crisis that has brought millions of people to hunger and need, they come seeking a new ideal. With good intention they have decided that it is here, in this gigantic country, encompassing 1/6th of the globe, that a new political order is being created, one that will perhaps bring happiness for all humanity. Again, I say, they come with good intentions. They come full of curiosity. They arrive with open eyes and souls. They are ready to see the wonders they have heard and read so much about. They want to see with their own eyes a country that has become a laboratory for an “interesting experiment.” They come to see but many actually see nothing. Of course, they get shown many things. But not what they need to see, perhaps not even what they would have liked to. The majority of them are not to blame. The Soviet government places controls over what foreign guests get to see.

Practical and calculating in the methods it uses to draw in as much foreign money, as much hard currency, as possible, the Soviet government has also come up with a rather original idea, one no other country in the world ever imposed – “a visa with bed and board.” What this means is that when someone decides they would like to visit Soviet Russia they must go to a travel office of the Soviet government. There is one found in almost every country. This office supplies not only a visa. It also sells you, on the spot, the entire itinerary for your trip, supplying all of the necessary amenities, even providing you with a special guide to lead you wherever is needed in Soviet Russia while telling you all about it in your own language.

This is certainly convenient both for the passenger and for the Soviet government. Aside from the fact that it brings in more *valiuta*, every foreign guest from America or any other country is always kept under supervision. They show him whatever they want to and don't let him see what they don't want to be seen. If, furthermore, the American tourist cannot speak Russian or Ukrainian or Yiddish he will see only Soviet Russia as it is portrayed in pictures, not what exists in reality. So he gets to see the Soviet Russia as represented in theory, not the one that exists in practice. And one must understand this – there are really two Soviet Russias – the theoretical one, as depicted in pictures and on posters and the other one, which exists in reality, in practice.

This explains why many Americans come back inspired. Soviet Russia in theory is truly remarkable, a vision of the future, a work in progress, just as shown in the pictures. The real one is, however, different. Entirely different.

Let's say a person visited Russia before the Revolution and was hoping to familiarize himself with the condition of the Russian people. Instead of meeting with them, however, let us say this visitor only spoke through an interpreter and only with governors, clerks, police chiefs and city officials, or even simple patriots who were in agreement with everything the government did. If later this person wrote a book or a series of articles about the situation of the

Russian people, solely on the basis of such conversations, each and every honest critic would surely have torn him apart, wouldn't have hesitated to call such a person a charlatan.

There are many Americans who behave exactly like this, perhaps not fully grasping what they are doing. They return from Soviet Russia. They never saw the reality of life there because they have no Russian and so never actually spoke with the people, only with various government officials. They were shown Soviet Russia as it is presented in theory, not what actually exists in practice. Nevertheless, they write enthusiastically about everything as it seemed to them as if the entire Russian people, or at least the greater part of the people, were quite happy and content, that indeed there are now no happier people to be found anywhere else in the entire world.

It's really no wonder that in Soviet Russia they often laugh at their American guests, those who come to "study" the situation although they don't know a word of Russian and don't actually speak with real people. Various anecdotes get told about this. They say that with dollars you can get anything you want in Soviet Russia and if you look at the country through American eyeglasses you'll see nothing but the nicest things in the world there.

Travelling in Ukraine, on the road from Poltava to Kremenchuk, I heard just this sort of story, although it was not really a new one for me. "An American," someone said, "saw a large queue in Moscow. Many people were standing in the crowd waiting for bread or some other food item, of which there is a great scarcity in Soviet Russia. 'What kind of a lineup is this?' the American asked the interpreter leading him around. 'They stand in line like that so that they don't have to push their way ahead,' the interpreter answered. 'But why do they push ahead?' the American asked. The interpreter again had an answer all ready: 'They push ahead,' she said, 'because they are anxious to receive their portion of the 'national loan,' which the government gives out to the people.' And the American, who had come to 'study' the situation in Soviet Russia, promptly wrote this 'fact' down in his little notebook, with its fine gilded edges and good leather covers."

In Moscow, I met an American high school teacher. As is rather common, she was radically inclined and had Communist tendencies. This was this teacher's sabbatical year so she had the privilege of being freed from her duties. She made use of her free time to take a trip across Europe and, as is also fairly typical, visited Soviet Russia to "study" the situation there. She told me this story. She was in a Russian school where she saw and heard a small boy of about 12 years of age answering political questions and speaking with great certainty and conviction about Lenin, Stalin and the October Revolution. "Well, can you imagine such a thing in America?" she asked: "If a child there were to speak like that in school he would be expelled immediately." Another American was sitting nearby. He actually spoke Russian. Smiling he turned to this American teacher and said: "I'm astonished you wouldn't be surprised that a child of 12 in an American school wouldn't speak with a similar conviction about - let's say - George Washington. Just as in America the name of George Washington is connected with patriotism so here the names of Lenin and Stalin are tied in with Soviet patriotism. Is that not clear enough for you?" This American high school teacher was a little bit shamed by that retort: "Yes, if you want, I suppose that's true," she squirmed, "but of course...well, you understand, in the schools here, they can speak freely about Communism, about Lenin and Stalin. It makes such a good impression!"

When a group of Americans is brought in to visit a "communal house" in Moscow they're often led into a room called the library. After the group looks around someone stands near them and in the tone of an orator up on a platform, recounts all of the positive features that come with living in the "communal house." He speaks about the residents assembling regularly to discuss international politics and other problems and of how they read books, newspapers and journals to keep themselves informed. An interpreter, of course, translates all this into English. Later, when everyone is getting ready to leave, the orator makes his goodbyes and then concludes by reciting a standard phrase: "May we soon hear of a revolution in America!"

That's how things are done in the factories, industrial plants, libraries

and various other Soviet government institutions foreign guests are brought to. Just before they leave, they hear this very same phrase: “May we soon hear about a revolution in America!” Just like in-laws wishing each other: “*God willing may you soon be with your children!*”

And so the American, who cannot see reality because he does not understand Russian, so cannot converse with the people, with the masses, is left with the impression that in Soviet Russia everyone burns with great enthusiasm in the flames of the current Stalin dictatorship and doesn't worry about anything other than: “When will the revolution begin in America?” He believes the Russian people have already been provided for, live in satisfaction and joy, are bathing in riches and honour, simmering in pleasure and happiness, their only remaining worry being: “When will the *Geulah*¹ encompass the entire world?!”

Yes, one can see quite a few remarkable things in Soviet Russia, many things truly worthy of high praise. There is something to praise, something to see. And the Soviet government knows just what to show foreign guests who have come to this “Republic of Workers and Peasants.”

It also knows how to receive them. From the moment someone arrives in the capital, especially a person who decries the decadence of the capitalist order and wants to believe Soviet Russia is a socialist society or one that is building socialism, they are greeted well. A large military orchestra plays the *Internationale*, the tones and sounds of which carry grandness and strength, so much so that you feel almost harnessed to it, not even aware of when and how your footsteps begin to fall in with the beat of the music. Over the entire length of Moscow's massive Briansk railway terminal you see huge wall murals and posters in various languages proclaiming:

“Workers of the World Unite!”

“Throw Off the Yoke of the Capitalist Order!”

¹ Redemption or deliverance.

“Lead the Entire World to the October Revolution!”

Many more socialist and revolutionary banners, and Red flags, are displayed. Everything seems set to the beat of revolutionary music, echoing through the air surrounding you, flowing lightly and easily. That’s how foreign guests from America and other countries are met at Moscow’s Briansk terminal. It all makes for quite a strong and lasting impression.

Then a well-thought out process begins. It starts with the theatres. American guests are taken to Moscow’s famous Bolshoi Theatre. They see a fine opera and hear a nice orchestra. Next they are taken to the famous Moscow Art Theatre, attending performances in the theatres of Meyerhold and Vakhtangov. Don’t forget that, even now, Russian theatre is still the best in the world. In no country can one see theatrical performances as great as in Soviet Russia. The stages there showcase not just art but life, a soul and heart. In recent years – even in these times of hunger and want – young actors have emerged. They possess so much talent and stage-charm that watching them is one of the greatest pleasures anyone can imagine. In talent and artistry the stage in Soviet Russia stands on such a high level that those of Europe and America will have to try very hard to even begin to catch up, much less overtake it. In Russia the main theatrical principle is not just mastery of a technique but a display of the heart and soul – the sharing of qualities the Russian people have always possessed. So when an American comes to Moscow, and attends a performance on the Russian stage, he cannot help but be inspired, even if he doesn’t know the language. At a performance of Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Dni Turbinykh*, at the Moscow Art Theatre, I remember meeting an American who understood not a word of Russian. Still he had been so moved by what he had seen that he simply lacked the words to express his enthusiasm. He agreed that if they started it over again, right from the beginning, he would want to experience it again, would do so with the greatest of pleasure, even though it lasts almost 4 hours. This American credited the current regime for the excellence of the Russian stage, saying it was one of their greatest achievements. He simply did not know the Russian stage was great

before the Revolution, had previously already stood at a truly high level of artistry, just as Russian literature had with its Dostoyevskys, Tolstoys, Turgenyevs, Chekhovs and others. One didn't credit the greatness of those artists to the "spirit" of the Czarist government. In literature and art Russia was already at a high level even before the Revolution. What the Revolution did, however, was make it accessible to the broad masses.

Many of the Americans one meets in Moscow, and in other Russian cities, have rather strange ideas about the country, take a rather peculiar approach toward it. You hear this whenever you speak with them or listen as they relate their impressions of what they have seen. This type of American seems convinced he is a man of civilization and culture, come to observe a barbarian country, a land that has always lagged behind others. Travelling to Russia is akin, in his mind, to going to India or Brazil or to the other side of the *hore hoyshekh*². The main thing for him is to collect experiences so that, as it were, he can adorn his luggage, plastering it with stickers gathered up in various cities and countries, confirming him as a great and experienced traveler. He comes bearing what might be described as a "psychological" approach to Soviet Russia – arriving not as an equal but as someone looking down from above. When he comes across a factory in this unfamiliar country, one actually no different from any factory he might see in America, he is nevertheless quite taken aback, as if such a thing was completely not to be expected: *Izn't dhat vonderful!* (Isn't that wonderful?)

Everything he sees comes as a great surprise, for example the hotel where he stayed, where music was played not only at night but also during the day. And those Russian girls employed in the hotel to dance the "fox-trot" with American guests. The tasty Russian caviar he ate at the Savoy Hotel and the gypsies who sang late into the night. He is delighted with everything he gets to see and so concludes: "this is how they live in Russia." This really is not how they live in Russia, at least not how the Russian people live. It is how Americans and other foreign guests who have hard currency get to live in Russia.

² An expression from Yiddish folklore meaning to the ends of the world.

However, it doesn't matter to the average American guest how the Russian people actually live. He doesn't interest himself in that very much. He remains indifferent, quite unaware, of their reality, never summons the courage to look further because, quite simply, he already has more than enough stories to tell back home, even enough material for an article in one of those liberal journals that flirt with ostensible radicalism. So he gets all inspired by what he sees, enthusiastic, about everything.

I spoke with plenty of Americans of this kind in Soviet Russia. I also spoke about them with Russians. Talking about them a Russian man said: "These American guests are all so 'inspired.' They are actually perfect examples of how the more indifferent a person is to the actual fate of the Russian people, to what is being done to socialism here, the more captivated they seem to be by the current regime. The person truly interested in the fate of the Russian people, the man for whom Russia is dear, the one who really wants with all his heart for socialism to succeed in Soviet Russia so that it will serve as an example for other countries – that person could never be inspired by Stalin's dictatorship, by the methods that have brought such a terrible famine to our country, reduced us to such a dreadful state of want." That's what an old Russian socialist-revolutionary told me, a man who devoted many years of his life to the struggle for a free Russia.

During the few weeks I travelled around Soviet Russia, Ukraine was already experiencing an appalling famine. Millions of people had been driven to the greatest desperation, to a life sometimes even worse than death. Plagues circulated in villages and in the towns. People died because they could no longer endure their terrible hunger. On many roads, covered with snow, lay dead horses, withered away from hunger. At the train stations thousands and thousands of peasants wandered around, covered in bodily filth and dirt, waiting for trains they hoped would take them into the cities, where they could perhaps sell something, maybe get bread. The dreadful misery of these people, this harrowing state of affairs, tore at one's heart. Everywhere I was told conditions had already been like this for a few months and that since the Five Year Plan began, emphasizing heavy

אייזערנער סטאַלין־דיקטאַטור און פאַר די מעטאָדען, וואָס האָבען דערפיהרט דאָס לאַנד אונזערס צו אזאָ שרעקליכען הונגער און צו אזאָ מורא'דיגער נויט...

אזוי האָט מיר געזאָגט אַן אַלטער רוסישער סאַציאַליסט־דעוואָלוציאָנער, וועלכער האָט אַ סך יאָהרען פֿון זיין לעבען אוועקגעבען אינ'ם קאַמף פאַר אַ פרייער רוסלאַנד...

אין די עטליכע וואָכען וואָס איך בין אַרומגעפֿאָהרען אייבער סאָוועט־רוסלאַנד, איז שוין אין אוקראַינע געווען דער שרעקליכער הונגער, וואָס האָט מיליאָנען מענשען געטריבען צו דער גרעסטער פאַרצווייפֿונג און צו אַ לעבען, וואָס איז אַמאָל נאָך ערגער ווי דער טויט; אין דערפֿער און אין שטערטלאַך זיינען אַרומגענאַנגען מנפּות; מענשען זיינען געשטאַרבען, ווייל זיי האָבען שוין מער דעם שרעקליכען הונגער ניט געקענט אַרײַן בערטראַגען; אויף אַ סך וועגען, וואָס זיינען געווען באַדעקט מיט שניי, האָבען זיך געוואָלנערט גע'פֿר'טע פֿערד, וואָס זיינען פֿון הונגער פֿאַרטשאַכניעט געוואָרען; אויף די וואָסזאַלען האָר בען זיך אין שמוץ און אין קויט געוואָלנערט טויזענטער און טויזענטער פּויערים, וואָרטענדיג אויף באַהגען, וואָס זאָלען זיי פּיהרען אין די שטערט, וואו מען קען נאָך אַפּשר עפעס פֿאַרקויפֿען און אַפּשר קויגען ברויט. די לאַגע איז שוין דאָן געווען אזאָ שרעקליכע, אז ס'האָט פּשוט גערויסען דאָס האַרץ צוקוקענדיג זיך צו די שווערע און מורא'דיגע ליידען פֿון די דערשלאָגענע און אומגליקליכע מענשען. און מען האָט מיר אומעטום געזאָגט, אז אזוי איז דאָס שוין פֿאַר די לעצטע עט־ליכע חדשים און אז זינט מען האָט זיך גענומען דורכפֿיהרען דעם פינף־יאָהריגען פֿלאַן, אוועקלייגענדיג די נאַנצע וואַג אויף דער „שווערער אינדוסטריע" און פֿאַרנאַכלעסיגענדיג די לייכטע, ווערט די לאַגע אין לאַנד וואָס אַמאָל אליץ ערגער און ערגער. אזוי האָט מען מיר געזאָגט און איך האָב דאָס געקענט זעהן.

און דאָך האָט מען אין אויסלאַנד וועגען דעם ניט גע־וואוסט, כאָטש עס זיינען דאָן אין סאָוועט־רוסלאַנד געווען אמע־ריקאַנער און אנדערע אויסלענדישע קאָרעספּאָנדענטען... זיי, די אמעריקאַנער און די אנדערע אויסלענדישע קארעס־פּאָנדענטען, וועלכע זיצען שטענדיג אין מאַסקווע, האָבען וועגען

over light industry, the situation in the country had gotten worse and worse.

That's what I was told. It was true.

What was happening wasn't generally known abroad, despite the presence of American and other foreign correspondents in Moscow at this time. These journalists just "didn't know" about the terrible famine in the country. They only found out about it later, after the Soviet government itself began sounding the alarm about a "particular condition" created by the "errors" of local officials who had been "too strict" with the peasants in the villages. Even those Americans who did travel around at the time, as opposed to just staying comfortably in Moscow, also knew nothing about what was happening. Why should they? They travelled only in First Class train cars, where they experienced a *riel rushn etmosfir*³, one in which they could drink tea from a samovar. In the cities they visited they also saw nothing. Their hotels were always well prepared, stocked with anything they might wish for.

Among the American guests arriving in Soviet Russia one also encounters delegations, sometimes entirely comprised of Communists, others half-Communist in composition. These groups represent an entirely different type of visitor. Although you do find people among them who speak and understand Russian, they can't and don't want to see the reality of life in the country. When they arrive, they are content to instead be taken to factories and industrial plants and various cultural institutions, everywhere received very nicely. Banquets are held for them. As their hosts take their leave they always do so exclaiming "may we live to see a revolution in America next year!" Sometimes such a delegation will include an eccentric and hysterical lady, the kind who has a weakness for curtsying while uttering fancy, contrived phrases. For a woman of this sort the main thing is the phrase, not the fact, the gesture, not the feeling. Later she'll record and share her "impressions" in a tone

³ "A real Russian atmosphere."

suggesting she was being very daring, flirting with decadent poetry, using starched oratory like this:

Flowers and tables. Tables and flowers. Flowers everywhere. Flowers on the tables. Flowers in the windows. On the stairs. And on the pillars – flowers everywhere.

And someone else in such a group is a member of the Communist Party. He slid into the Party almost by accident, owing mainly to the fact that he was, in general, a rather slippery fellow. Always holding onto the fence with both hands whenever he takes a step, he shows no shame while pretending to be a great hero, shouting: “See how steadfastly I walk, see how courageously I go forward, how independent I am!” Yet this is the sort of man who shoves his conscience into a corner, casts whatever talents he may have aside, onto a shelf, as he reports his impressions of Soviet Russia by writing something like this: “We entered into a large, a gigantic, factory and were captivated by its momentum. Hammers banged, sparks sprayed, wheels turned, the beams shook. Then we heard a powerful voice, the firm and hearty voice of a Russian worker: ‘Comrades,’ this voice reached us over the banging of steel and iron: ‘when will you bring the revolution to America?’”

A Soviet citizen would be afraid to say anything in front of American guests of these sorts. To them he would not dare reveal the bitterness in his heart. Before them he would not complain about his unhappy fate. And even should someone blurt out a word these delegates don’t listen, don’t believe. Instead they will immediately turn upon such a person, branding him a “counter-revolutionary,” labelling him a “speculator,” a “White Soldier,” an “enemy of the working class,” and even worse besides!

There is another thing, moreover, which makes it difficult for a stranger, much less a fanatic, to see the sad reality of Soviet Russia under the present dictatorship: the Soviet citizen is afraid. He doesn’t speak aloud. He only murmurs in your ear, all the while carefully looking around, in every direction. Even when he does speak, he

often mingles the truth with lies and lies with truth, all at the same time. Such a jumble emerges that not everyone is able to sort out which is which.

The extent to which the Soviet citizen has, in recent times, become a master of co-mingling the truth with lies and lies with truth, mixing things up so much that one is left uncertain about what is real and what is not, is the point of the following tale. I was told it in Moscow. It illustrates rather well how Soviet citizens under Stalin's regime have learned to speak and write guardedly, disguising whatever they are up to.

The story goes like this. A Soviet employee was going to take a summer vacation in the countryside, in the Caucasus. When he was about to leave home, his wife made him promise her that when he wrote he would tell her the whole truth about what he was up to. Conceal nothing, she had asked. 'I know you well,' she said: 'you are by nature a romantic person. When you see a beautiful woman you will immediately fall in love with her and when you do I know full-well how you will finish the job. I am not going to even attempt to restrain you. That would be futile. Instead let me say this: 'Go ahead, fall in love, do whatever you like. But I beg of you! Do not conceal anything from me. When you write I want to learn the full truth.'

So this fellow went on vacation, taking a "soft car" on the train. It was already late at night when he lay down to sleep. In the morning, when he woke up, he saw a woman's foot hanging down from the top berth. It really was a very attractive and slender foot. Looking up he saw a face and it really was a very pretty face too. Being a man quite experienced in such matters, the Soviet employee immediately formed a liaison with this pretty lady, delivered to him as if by God Himself. So, instead of travelling on as planned, directly to Kislovodsk⁴ in the Caucasus, he got off the train with this pretty lady in Rostov, where she lived. Since he also had to keep his word to his wife, he immediately sent her a telegram, that very night, from Rostov. It read: "Left safe and sound. On the road, turned under a foot,

⁴ A spa city located in the Stavropol region.

so I got off in Rostov. I embrace and kiss.” And he signed it: “Yours.” That’s how a Soviet citizen behaves when he is hiding something. He has learned to mix the truth and the lie, not only when dealing with private matters but also when it comes to politics. Not everyone can win his trust, certainly not to the extent that he would ever speak freely and openly about his unhappy life in front of strangers, particularly ones who don’t know his language, much less when true believers come around, the sort who don’t care about his suffering but demonstrate a ready-made “enthusiasm” for everything they are shown. When he must speak with such delegates he simply does not tell them the truth.



CHAPTER XIV

In Odesa

1. A city with a reputation from long ago.

It is difficult to find another city in the entire world where local patriotism is as strongly felt as in Odesa. The Odesan has always been devoted to his city. He brags about it like the fellow who is certain the girl he loves is the prettiest and cleverest in all the world. An Odesan tells you of his city's wonders, about how the acacia trees along the streets blossom in summer and about how fresh and robust the air becomes in winter, once the snow falls. He gladly takes you down to the shore of the Black Sea, showing off its expanse, a vista that fosters longing and dreams. Accompanying you for a walk along an Odesan boulevard, or through a park, he delights over everything he sees, proudly proclaiming: "This is Odesa!"

Pious Jews once used to say the fires of *Gehehenem*¹ burned seven miles from Odesa. For them this meant Odesa was a rather decadent and dissolute city, whose residents lived each day to the fullest. And Odesa truly was one of the most vibrant and beautiful cities in Russia. It possessed a kind of magic, so much so that whoever went there, even once, always yearned to return, drawn as if by a magnet. Young people with ambition and energy were always migrating there from other cities and towns. For those for whom life was too restricted at home, Odesa was thought of as a city of beautiful dreams and bright hopes. Being actually attractive the city was popularly referred to as "The Beauty of the Southern Region."

¹ Hell.

Today Odesa lives off of its former reputation. Curious tourists don't neglect to visit. But, in general, Odesa these days leaves you with the sort of impression you get when you met a woman well past her prime, one about whose beauty and successes in love you heard a thousand and one tales, only to be rather disappointed with what you now encounter.

During the Civil War the city often passed from one side to another. Many battles took place here, with Odesa's rulers changing frequently. The stamp of destruction from those days still lingers over the entire city, is felt everywhere, wherever you go, wherever you stay. Of course, they keep telling you Odesa is rebuilding, that Odesa is growing, becoming ever larger and larger.

Odesa is like the other cities where the Civil War was fiercely fought. Signs of destruction are still more evident than evidence of building. However, there is something different about Odesa, which you sense almost as soon as you enter this city. You detect this not only in people you know but also in the strangers you meet. The fact is that a typical Odesan is more affable, informal and hospitable, indeed livelier, than most people you meet elsewhere. Even now, in these difficult times, the Odesan has also not lost his sense of humour, can see the comic side to even the greatest tragedy. So Odesa, in a certain sense, has remained Odesa.

I did not have to linger at Odesa's railway terminal, as I had in Kharkiv. I was met at the station with an automobile, then taken directly to the Hotel Bol'shaia Moskovskaia, located on the famous Deribasovskaia Street, once Odesa's pride. Once, but not today.

The first thing they wanted to show me after I got to the hotel was how everything there had been built to conform to the most modern standards. Right away I was told to get into the elevator and use it to go up to the 4th floor. There, they said, a room had already been prepared for me. The elevator certainly was a very nice one, all painted white. The trouble was it didn't work. However much they 'tortured' that poor machine it just didn't work. It simply would not

move off its spot. Finally, they had to walk me up to the 4th floor, on foot. Later, I heard this hotel elevator remained still more than it ever moved. This was my first direct encounter with the very same modern Russian technology they keep telling me will soon catch up with and overtake America. In fact, this hotel elevator never moved, not once during the days I stayed in Odesa.

The electricity was also quirky. Very often it shut down at night, leaving the city's streets dark. When I asked what was wrong with the city's power grid I got the answer usually provided in Soviet Russia in such circumstances: "The city is growing!"

That evening I went walking on Deribasovskaia Street. I wanted to see how this street, once the pride of Odesa, now looked. It used to be full of life, of colour, of movement. I found it hard to locate even a trace of what had been. The street was very badly lit and the people you met on it were very poorly dressed. Only from time to time did you happen upon a person dressed a little better and nicer than the others. Most of the women's dresses weren't colourful or bright. Mainly they wore heavy black or grey tunics and old black or grey coats. Several had even donned heavy men's boots and covered their heads with old, dark shawls. Only occasionally did a woman come by who was dressed a little nicer than the others, who had a spring to her step.

A kind of weight seemed to press down upon the people walking along Deribasovskaia Street. It could not be concealed, even if someone had tried to. Faces were sullen. There was a deep sadness emanating from everyone you saw. As far as I could tell, these were not people out for a pleasant evening stroll after having worked all day doing useful things. Instead it felt as if they had just torn themselves away from someplace else, grabbing whatever clothes came to hand and then went trudging along, tired and exhausted, without purpose, not really knowing where they were going or why. You didn't hear anyone speaking loudly or laughing. Mostly what you heard was the echo of people's footsteps, people apparently trying to get somewhere quickly, to be alone, even if they didn't know where that might be.

The front windows of government stores along this street were poorly illuminated, looking as wretched and sad as the people walking outside. Seldom did I see anyone stopping to look. These seemed to be not stores where things are sold so much as exhibitions of items collected somewhere else, haphazardly and tastelessly arranged for people to look at, that is if anyone wanted to.

Walking like this on Deribasovskaia Street I found myself coming to the famous Passage, which I remembered from the days when, in the evening, one saw wonderfully beautiful plays of light and colours there, where everything all around shone and sparkled. I went into the Passage through Deribasovskaia Street and came out on the other side, where the front door of the Passage Hotel is. Then I walked back and forth several times, pausing by the large glass windows and mirrors of the shops, stopping wherever one could. It seemed as if everything in the Passage had been choked, was deep in mourning over a great destruction. Everywhere I looked was dirty and neglected. The people inside the Passage looked like mourners, none of them smiling or laughing. The sadness of their faces matched the frozen, quiet sorrow emanating from all the unkempt corners and stones of the Passage. Yet – however strange this may be – despite how wretched those storefront windows looked to passersby inside you saw displayed all sorts of liquors and wines, perfumes and sweets. This, by the way, is true not only in Odesa but in other cities across Soviet Russia. Lacking bread, lacking food they certainly are. But their stores are packed with liquors and wines, perfumes and sweets, as if the population wasn't lacking for anything.

It was already late in the evening when I went up onto Rishelievskaiia Street, where the monument to Duke Richelieu stands, his finger pointing to the sea. I wanted to take a walk by the shore of the Black Sea, over to where a monument to Alexander Pushkin, the famous Russian writer, stands. I saw that at least this part of Odesa still remains the Odesa of my memories. Loving couples, even if truly poor and dressed in old, dirty clothes, still stroll near Pushkin's monument. Even in torn shoes or wearing men's boots these young girls, who looked like children, still enjoy taking a promenade with

their young lads. Here you could still hear a girl laughing somewhere, another one giggling somewhere else. “These are members of *Komsomol*,” a friend walking along with me said: “They have been raised to not know anything about what’s happening in the outside world. They believe people here live much better now than in all the other countries of the world. So they laugh and enjoy themselves. They think it’s alright for them here.”

“But why are they so petit? They look almost like little children.”

“Here, they don’t grow.”

That same evening I went over to a small park located just near the Passage Hotel. It was noisier there. People in this park were not entirely sober, were talking loudly between themselves. Someone kept trying to sing, not entirely successfully. I also saw drunks who could barely stand on their feet. One man was lying on the ground, cursing aloud for no apparent reason: “Yes, well, I ik...”

He kept trying to get up but couldn’t. A friend of his, also pretty drunk, was nearby, also barely standing on his own two feet. Yet he was scolding the prone man, angrily muttering something, stammering away. The fellow on the ground didn’t hear what was being said to him, perhaps didn’t even really know in what world he was. He couldn’t say much other than: “Yes, well, I ik...”

Not far from those two men I saw a street-girl walking about, an Odesan wonder since prostitution has been entirely abolished in Soviet Russia, meaning you don’t see street-girls anywhere. Past her prime, with a very wrinkled face and threadbare clothes, she paraded back and forth in this little park, talking aloud but only to herself. You could see she was also quite drunk, laughing then complaining out loud, making sure others could hear. Although what she went on about didn’t entirely make sense, she seemed to be recounting a story about the lover who had left her. Without shame, quite loudly, again so everyone could hear, she used very vulgar words to describe the relations she had with the man who left her, always beginning

her story in the same way: “My lover was an old revolutionary, a Bolshevik...”

The man I was with heard her laments and remarked: “Even in what this misfortunate creature is going on about, you can get a feel for these new times. In the old days she would have prattled on about an officer being the lover who left her. Now she’s bemoaning how she was abandoned by a revolutionary and not just any old revolutionary but a Bolshevik.”

At night, one sees the destruction of the city on the streets of Odesa even more than by day. You can walk for a long time on the streets only seldomly encountering another person.

Fear descends over the Moldavanka at night. You feel rather dispirited. All you see are numerous demolished buildings, old and dirty houses looking like nothing so much as ruins. You walk along badly cobbled streets and alleys. Large piles of stones and bricks lie about; blackened panes of glass are everywhere, meaning you seldom see a light from behind a window, something that might let you know there are still people living inside. In the streets, too, there are almost no people. It feels as if you have found yourself in a cemetery or in a city where the living have taken shelter in holes, afraid there is an enemy lurking somewhere in the dark, waiting only for a signal to attack. You come away with the same impression when you walk at night on the Peresyp’ as well as in several other neighbourhoods. Everywhere it’s dark, sinister. Everywhere you sense poverty, neglect and see people walking around looking gloomy and worried. Even if someone is able to dress a little more respectably, wants to enjoy life at least a little, doing anything of the sort is simply not pleasant. Let me explain.

On the first evening I had in Odesa I visited with friends and also made some new ones. Among these new friends there was a young lady. She came to see me along with one of her brothers, with whom I once studied. This young lady had on old clothes but they fit her well, showing she had excellent taste. Her head wasn’t covered up

with a shawl. She wore a hat and she wasn't wearing men's boots but rather a pair of half-shoes, even if they needed repair. In general, she had a charm very few women in Soviet Russia still possess, enough for her to attract attention whenever she went out in public. She was also wearing some sort of a trinket on a string, around her neck. Later, when we all went out onto the street, I noticed how she lifted the collar of her overcoat up, anxious to keep people from noticing that she was wearing something nice around her throat. She was also afraid to walk home alone because her coat, which she still had from better days, looked respectable. As other people in Odesa would tell me, they generally don't like it when they see someone going around better dressed than the rest of them.

My first day in Odesa was memorable. The people I got to know told me about need and hunger, about a life hard to endure. Only a few didn't complain. Late at night I sat with one of these new friends. I liked him very much. He was truly a very genteel and sympathetic man. He spoke about how sorrowful and difficult his life was, ending like this: "Only imagine such a picture. A man doesn't get more than three-quarters of a pound of bread for a day. When he gets up, he cuts this bread into 3 small slices: one for the morning, the second for eating during the day, and the third for an evening meal. He slices carefully. He doesn't want to be hungrier later than he is now. This man – that's me! Nowadays, there are lots of people just like me!"

2. Kohanim in the family

The more you travel across Soviet Russia and listen to what people say about their lives the more you come away with the impression that, with the exception of loyal and devoted Communists who truly believe theirs is the true path to socialism, the greatest part of the Russian population regard themselves as being in bondage to the current regime, in a situation without equal in history.

In Odesa I spoke with people from various professions and trades. I became acquainted with workers, engineers, doctors, pharmacists, teachers, and various Soviet employees. From what they told me, it

was clear a majority felt they were living under a great burden, so stifling that they couldn't even begin to make decisions for themselves. It was as if they were always trapped in a vise, or harnessed to a heavy wagon that had to be dragged out of a pit but couldn't be because its wheels had been chopped off, even as its driver never ceased lashing them with a great whip, cutting bloody strips of their flesh away.

On the streets of Odesa I saw many people doing all kinds of degrading and dirty jobs. Women and men, young and old, working in the streets, were all gloomy and dejected. One glance was enough to let you know they felt the work they were doing had been forced upon them, that they had been driven there. The same thing was true in factories and industrial plants. People feel they are under duress, being forced to work rapidly, to maintain a high pace. This just doesn't fit with the Russian way of life.

Now it is true that in some factories and industrial plants you did find people whom it would have been difficult to tear away from their workbenches when the time came for them to go home. There are loyal and devoted Communists, people who believe every extra bit of energy they put into their work is actually helping to build up this country.

One evening I was invited to the house of a family that included several sons and daughters. One of the sons took me to task for the offences of the capitalist world against Soviet Russia. He spoke about politics like an ardent Communist. He held up his own life and those of others like him as examples of how good things are under the Soviet regime. "Take these cases," he said: "A lad from my town is now a doctor in Odesa, even though he came from a poor family. Another boy, also from an impoverished family, is a Red Army officer, a *polkovnik*² and a third, someone who used to run around town barefoot, with the ends of his shirt hanging out, is now an important engineer – imagine that, of all things." He provided a long list of such cases. According to him these examples were sufficient to show why everyone should bless and praise the Soviet regime.

² Colonel.

To the side sat his father. He was man of around 60 years of age, a clever Jew who knew when to be silent and when to speak. He didn't interrupt his son. But every time his son stopped speaking, he interjected a short remark, which always undercut completely whatever his son has just claimed. "Boys from poor families became doctors, engineers and officers?" he said, in a tone suggesting he was posing a question: "Well, so what? This is an achievement of the Revolution, not just of the Soviet regime."

The son couldn't come up with an answer to that. So he tried to get around it by pointing to a young man in the room and saying: "Well then take this young man. He isn't married but gets 120 rubles a month. How is this bad for him? Ha?" Propping his elbows up on the table the old man heard that and immediately came up with this reply: "And for the 120 rubles he gets every month can he even buy a pound of flour... not true, perhaps, ha?" Again, the son didn't know how to answer.

Regardless of whatever sum might be mentioned as the conversation turned around the wages that this or that person was paid, he, the father, immediately countered by citing the price of some essential food item, without which it would be difficult to get by, or else commented on the price of a suit or coat or pair of trousers. He always spoke using the language of facts, without embellishment. As he made his points, related succinctly, always calmly and without a fuss, it seemed obvious to anyone listening that, regardless of how much a man might earn, it would still be exceedingly difficult for anyone to actually live on even a high salary. The prices of even the most basic necessities were high already, and kept increasing, never mind the fact that so much of what you needed in daily life simply couldn't be obtained anyway.

"But, nevertheless, we live," one of the younger people exclaimed! "Quite true," the old man admitted: "We live. But I can tell you a story about this too." This is what he told them: "In the days of the Czar a Jew was arrested in Moscow because he didn't have the right to live there. The city's governor cursed him, saying: 'Don't you know a

Jew is not permitted to live in Moscow?’ Do you know how that Jew replied? ‘Mr. Governor,’ he said, ‘I don’t live in Moscow, I just suffer here.’ It’s the same now with us. We don’t live here, we suffer here.”

The young people smiled and one of his daughters said: “Papa, you are never satisfied.”

“True, my daughter,” the old Jew admitted, sedately, but with certainty in his tone: “True, I am not satisfied. Do you know why? It is because I am a revolutionary.” At that one of his sons burst into laughter. “You were a revolutionary once, before the Revolution, I remember that. Now, however, you aren’t a revolutionary.”

“You’re mistaken, my son,” the father said, still calmly: “I was and still am a revolutionary. You, however, are not. Those who always stand with the government, who say yes to everything it does, even when it acts against the interests of the people, well people of that sort aren’t revolutionaries. If I weren’t afraid to say so, I might even tell you that, in a certain sense, you are exactly like those who once stood with the “Black Hundreds,” although you’re on the Left.”

This remark caused quite the commotion. Several of the younger people became very angry and told the old man in no uncertain terms that he had permitted himself too many liberties. To that he just shrugged his shoulders and answered: “Well, so be it, I didn’t say it.” He wasn’t going to argue anymore: “Let it be.”

In that house, to my great surprise, they decided to honour me and set out a table on which they laid “everything good” – black rye bread, herring, even wine. An acquaintance who was with me said he had not seen such a spread in Odesa for a long time, adding all of it must have cost no less than 50 rubles. I felt awkward over how much these people had spent on me, rather lost my appetite. My friend did not. He was not apparently hungry, he actually was very hungry and ate with great enthusiasm. Watching his face, and how he devoured the black rye bread, made it obvious. Pausing as he chewed, he would keep a bite in his mouth even as he would already

be reaching out for another piece of bread. Subtly, from under his brows, he kept glancing around to see if the others were looking at him. I noticed they were. Whenever my friend stretched out his hand to take another piece of bread the members of this household glared at him. Pretending not to see what was happening at their table, perhaps trying to distract me from it, one of the sons, the same fellow who spoke like an ardent Communist, turned to me and said: “See, they say we have shortages and can’t get anything! But right here you have bread, herring, pickles, even wine.”

“Yes, tonight, we certainly have everything we need in our house,” the father agreed, looking directly at me: “And do you know why it’s all here? Because I have three *kohanim*³ in the family. You understand? *Kohanim!*”

At that moment I didn’t understand what he meant. It simply didn’t make sense. What kind of connection did *kohanim* have with having bread, herring, pickles and wine at your table? More generally what did he mean when he said he had 3 *kohanim* in the family? Who, then, were the others? Levites and Israelites? Puzzled I asked the old man: “Tell me, I beg you, what does this mean when you say you have 3 *kohanim* in the family?”

“It means,” the old man answered, smiling at me, “I have three Communists.”

So it became clear that only ‘blessed’ families in Odesa, those with 3 *kohanim*, could afford the pleasure of entertaining a guest and providing such “refreshments.” Other families – those who didn’t have any *kohanim* – could not allow themselves anything of the sort.

I was further convinced when I later was in other homes. One afternoon I came to the quarters of one of my acquaintances, whom I remembered from years ago, when he was getting ready to start his career. The man grew very flustered when he saw and recognized

³ Hebrew priests deemed to be direct descendants of the Biblical Aaron. They served in the Temple at Jerusalem until 70 AD and are still subject to special ritual regulations, differentiating them from other Jews.

me. He didn't know where to seat me and was embarrassed because of the terrible poverty of his house, about how everything appeared gloomy and bleak. After speaking to me for no more than a few minutes, this man, a father of grown sons and daughters, burst into tears, began crying like a small child. It was heartbreaking to see him sob so, to hear him say: "You see how we live in this dark burrow? I have always worked hard, have worked hard all my life, and I still work very hard. Yet I have nothing. I am always hungry."

He wanted to treat me with something but had nothing to offer. There simply wasn't a piece of bread in the house. He was so dejected that he couldn't find even the words to hide his distress somehow. "Do not take offence," he asked, keeping his eyes focused toward the ground: "I would treat you with something, however... however, I don't have anything. You see this piece of radish? I don't have anything more than this in the house." Not knowing what to say after that he tangled himself even deeper in his embarrassment: "If you want," he gestured, "so... so – eat a piece of this radish."

It was pitiful to see this man, to observe his bewilderment, his dejection. He was dressed in a very greasy and short quilted coat. He also wore quilted pants, shiny from age and wear, along with heavy boots, torn here and there. On his head was a shabby and small hat, its original colour long since lost. Around his throat he had on a dirty, striped scarf. "I'm ashamed to stand before you," he said, "however this is how we live! I work for 8 hours a day. They're driving the soul out of me. The worst boss wouldn't push as hard as they work us here. They rush us along. And look here. Because of the pace they work us at I've already cut all the fingers on my hand with the machine. In total for the work I do I get no more than 80 rubles a month. Well, what can I do with that in a time of such high costs? In the house it's cold because there isn't anything to heat with. Every time I return from work, I drag a bundle of wood back with me, all the way from the Peresyp'. I'm exhausted. But what can I do? You have to heat your house, let it be at least a little warm."

Indicating his wife, walking around the house like a shadow, holding

both hands folded on her sunken bosom, he continued: “You can see she is sick, can barely walk around the house. She must take care of herself, must have a little broth, must eat a piece of chicken if she is to revive. But where can one get any?”

Afterwards, the man spoke about his children. One of his daughters was studying in another city, far from Odesa. She wrote letters home about how life was treating her. In one such letter she had thanked her parents very much for the little jar of plum jam they had sent her. She was simply delighted by it. However she asked them not to send any more because after she had taken this plum jam out at a meal she saw how other students didn’t have any, saw how little bread there was to quiet their hunger. So she felt very awkward, quite uncomfortable. Their gesture had done her no good. She asked them: “Don’t send any more plum jam!”

I read this letter. Both the father and mother wanted me to see how beautifully their daughter wrote – and indeed her letter demonstrated the refinement a daughter of a poor worker in Soviet Russia could now achieve. It also spoke to the sad and terrible condition thousands and thousands of other young children were facing as they studied, how they were starving and weak, had looked with envy at a school friend fortunate enough to spread a small portion of bread with a little plum jam sent her by her poor parents, all the way from Odesa. “What will happen to her?” the desperate father wondered about his daughter: “When will things ever be better?” That’s how a man lives in Odesa if he doesn’t have any *kohanim* in the family!

On the streets of Odesa, and also in the houses, everywhere, there are countless scenes of need and poverty. On the Deribasovskaia, the Pushkinskaia, the Mala Arnauts’ka, the Ekaterininskaia, and other streets, you often see people begging for alms. Courtyards are neglected, filthy and bleak. So, too, are the houses. It seems as if this entire city weeps with suffocated tears over its devastation, as deep as the sea and as large as the world. You can walk about for an entire day on the streets of Odesa, which you remember from the times when they were full of life and movement, and all you see are the

ruins, the desolation, the petrified sorrow, pressing upon you from all sides. Later in the evening, as you recover in your lonely hotel room, you think about your beloved, about those dear to you, even about the strangers who live in this city and deserve great pity. Alone with your thoughts you always return to the same question asked by the desperate father after his daughter begged not to be sent more plum jam. See how hungry her fellow students were she had nearly choked. He could only ask: "What is going to happen? When will things ever get better?"

One day when I was walking the streets of Odesa, and growing rather weary of seeing scenes of need, I was stopped by a man who said: "You will forgive me for disturbing you but is it true you are from America?" Speaking first in Russian, he soon switched to Yiddish. When I told him I was, he asked me for a favour. Could I read a letter he had received, written in English, and tell him what it said? He explained it was from his niece, a schoolteacher in New York. She had written but he didn't know what. Since I could obviously read English would I please tell him what she had written, word for word, omitting nothing? He was very curious about what she wrote from America.

It turned out this teacher from America was very jealous of her uncle because, she wrote, he lived in a truly free country. From what she had read in the newspapers, she wrote, it was clear the situation in Soviet Russia had become a great deal better, that prospects were altogether splendid. She imagined everyone living in Soviet Russia must be very happy!

Our gazes met as I gave the letter back to this man: "What's going on over there?" he asked, shrugging: "Have they lost their minds?!"

For him, for this man who lived in Soviet Russia, her words seemed to mock him. He just couldn't understand them. He was pained, struck to the core. He began to tell me about himself and what he was going through. He said he was a very capable tailor who earned what might seem to be a good wage. He worked for himself and said

there were times when he brought in between 800 and 1,000 rubles a month. Yet he never had enough to eat. Everything was extremely expensive and since he had to buy everything privately, as he worked for himself and not the government, there wasn't a *kopek* left before he knew it. "It just doesn't suffice," this tailor complained: "You can't imagine what kind of a life this is!"

He told me such another story. His brother in America kept begging for him to mail a photographic postcard, understandably wanting a picture of his brother, whom he had not seen for many years. How could he have a photograph taken and send a picture to his brother in America when here he was, walking around without a jacket? Then, unbuttoning his old overcoat, the man showed me he actually did not have a jacket. What he had on was a pair of trousers, an old overcoat, a vest and a small fur hat. No jacket. How could he, a tailor, send his brother a photograph when he did not even have a jacket? He added: "But that might be bearable if there were at least something to eat!"

The tailor without the jacket had another request. When I had returned to America could I go see his brother, who lived in the Bronx, and ask him to send help? He asked me to promise him I would. He said he could no longer endure life. Then he again began speaking about the letter from his niece, the New York schoolteacher, about how she wrote she was jealous of him because he lived in a truly free country, about how obvious it was to her that the situation in Soviet Russia was better, how prospects were altogether splendid. Again shrugging his shoulders, he said he just couldn't understand her: "What's happening over there? Have they lost their minds in America!" For this man, who was actually living in Soviet Russia instead of reading theoretical or speculative works about how people supposedly lived there, the letter felt like a mockery.

3. "Mister Shain" and "Mister Kendi"

Although in Odesa they are still very far from overtaking America, one does encounter signs there of its "Americanization," if not in

the domain of heavy industry then in “light industry,” chiefly in the domain of shining shoes. Around the hotels where foreign tourists stay, on Deribasovskaia Street, on Ekaterininskaia, and also on Rishelievskaia, there are boys hanging around, carrying brushes and little stools. As soon as they spot an American tourist, identifying him right away by his clothing, they run up and start crying: “Mister Shain! Mister Shain!”

They learned these 2 English words from somewhere and this phrase certainly helps them as they go about doing “business.” Even when a man’s shoes don’t need to be polished it’s not easy for an American to refuse a little boy who runs up to him in Odesa with 2 English words in his mouth: “Mister, shiny.” There’s no point in trying to speak more English with such a boy in Odesa because, beside those 2 words, he knows only one other and that is – *Olrailyt!* (Alright!). He doesn’t need more than that.

Other little boys, however – all active in Odesa’s “light industry” sector – know other English words, necessary for conducting their “businesses.” These are the boys who sell chocolate and candies on Odesa’s streets, another sign of “Americanization.” On the street where the famous Brodsky synagogue used to be, there is a club now, named after Rosa Luxemburg. Just there a boy carrying a little box in his hands stopped me. His first word was: *Kendi!* (candy!). Poor and quite shabby, yet agile, with two lively eyes he didn’t allow to rest, not even for a minute, this boy regarded me with the absolute certainty that he had just picked the right “customer.” Indicating a few pieces of candy in his small box he said “Mister, kendi” then quoted its price in Russian – 5 kopecks a piece.

Even before I had time to look 2 other little boys with boxes were already standing next to me, both of them also shouting: “Mister, *kendi!*” Then the first one, certainly not more than 14 or 15 years old, had an idea about how he could get hold of a really great “bargain.” He asked me for an “American cigarette.”

“Me too,” the other 2 boys shouted. When I took out 3 cigarettes, the

first lad tried to grab all of them. For a moment you could forget you were in Odesa. This could have been a scene from New York, somewhere on an East Side street. “Well, that is not nice,” I scolded the first boy: “What kind of a Communist are you when you want all 3 cigarettes for yourself? A Communist must share with his comrades. Isn’t that so, eh?”

“Yes, it is,” the boy said, a little ashamed. “However...”

“However what?”

“It’s a shame to give away such cigarettes.”

After that he couldn’t stay calm. He was bothered. He just couldn’t stand still. Inhaling his smoke with great relish he came running after me, calling out: “Mister, take another piece... free! Take another piece!”

Life in Odesa, and in many other cities, often leaves you with the feeling that someone is playing a joke at the expense of the population. People don’t have bread. In their rooms even the most basic and necessary amenities don’t exist, by which I mean the sort of things a living human being simply cannot get by without. Yet a radio has been installed.

Women go around in torn clothes, in torn shoes, and look like slobs, neglected and dirty, and yet here in all the government shops, they’re ready to sell them perfume and Eau de Cologne.

People no longer remember the taste of a piece of meat, butter, milk and many other basics yet government stores are full of wine and vodka. What one needs isn’t available while what one doesn’t need is. This all seems like a great joke at the expense of the population and a trick played on the foreign guests who can’t speak with the locals.

In a house where they were talking about people starving, about how they were even suffering in Odesa now someone remarked: “Salami

is of course one of the most ordinary things in the world. But in Odesa a piece of salami is a like a poem... Yes, you heard right. A piece of *kovbasa*⁴ is like a poem for us.” And now, in many houses in Odesa, drinking tea with sugar is only something you can dream of. There isn’t any sugar! There are delicacies but no sugar. Everything seems like some kind of joke played at the expense of the people!

This is vexing, it deeply offends, it hurts so much! Why should it be like this? Why isn’t there any order? Willingly or unwillingly, one is reminded of the Middle Ages, when the Russians themselves had enough courage to admit: “This land of ours is large and there is more than enough of everything, but we’re lacking order.” Yes, that’s it. It’s lacking order. In this great and beautiful and beloved land they still have not learned how to run an economy!

4. Laden with bicycle pumps and hung with bells

Just as there is always a crowd in and around Odesa’s *Torgsin* store, where people buy goods with American money, government stores, where people buy things with Russian money, are nearly always empty. One seldom goes into one because most of the time you won’t find what you need and even when they do have something the prices in rubles are so high you almost get dizzy. Just about anything you need is difficult to get. And not only when you’re buying something for yourself without a note, meaning you have to be prepared to pay a lot more than the price would usually be, but even when you’re buying something with a ration coupon, which gives you the privilege of being able to buy it and at a cheaper price.

It’s a muddle of a system and doesn’t go smoothly. Indeed things often happen amid this confusion that are tragic and funny at one and the same time. Here is an example: a man had been dreaming for a long time about getting himself a thin “sweater,” or what they call a “jumper” in Russia. However he couldn’t buy this “jumper” without a note. Not only would it be hard to get but he would have to pay a lot more than he could afford. So he waited a long time. Finally,

⁴ A Ukrainian smoked sausage.

he got the “good note” and joyfully went off to the co-operative to buy himself a “jumper.” He expected to pay no more than 12 rubles and was quite ready to do so. However they wouldn’t give him a “jumper.” If he wanted one, they said, he must also buy a bicycle pump. Otherwise no “jumper.” Why?

Here begins the muddle. In the eyes of people who witness this sort of thing it is bizarre and incomprehensible. Those who don’t see it for themselves find it simply unbelievable. What happens is this: in Soviet Russia they have “deficit merchandise” and what they call “non-deficit merchandise.” When there is a shortage of some items there is often a surplus of others. So in one city you might find a particular item in abundance, indeed more of whatever it is can be found than could ever be used. But whatever this item happens to be there is no need for it there, so nobody asks for it.

This is how they get rid of things nobody asks for or wants. When someone comes in with a note, allowing them to buy something they have been waiting a long time for, they are told they must also buy an item from the stockpile of the unwanted item, regardless of whether they have any use for it. If you won’t buy what they are trying to get rid of, you won’t be sold what you want. What a system!

It so happened that, at this time in Odesa, there was a surplus of bicycle pumps. A large shipment had been sent to the government shops from somewhere although only the One God knows why they were needed there. Who in Odesa needed or lacked a bicycle pump? No matter. They had to get rid of the pumps they had been sent. They didn’t worry themselves overly much about how to do so. They simply decided that whoever came in with a note to buy something else would also be buying a bicycle pump.

“But I don’t need a pump!” the man argued: “I don’t even have a bicycle!”

“You must, however, buy a pump,” he was told: “Otherwise, you don’t get the jumper.”

Not having any choice the man paid several rubles for the extra item so foisted on him and started for home with his “jumper” and a pump. He was dejected for he didn’t know what he’d do with the pump and regretted having been made to spend the extra few rubles for something he certainly didn’t need. When, walking along, he met up with other people on the road and saw they were also carrying bicycle pumps, he couldn’t restrain himself and burst into laughter. Perhaps not very joyful laughter but what they refer to in Odesa as “laughter with lizards”⁵.

In general Odesans have a sense of humour. An Odesan can laugh even when he’s hurting badly. He can see the comic in the tragic and can speak about this in a way that makes others laugh.

Here is another case: a large transport of bells was brought to Odesa. Nobody knew who needed these bells and in truth nobody did. But in the government shops they had to get rid of them. So whoever came in to buy something was made to buy a bell. They simply refused to sell anyone anything they might request unless they also bought a bell. So people were walking out on the streets of Odesa ringing bells. If a foreigner, who regards Russia as if it were a laboratory where they’re conducting an “interesting experiment” had just happened to be there and had seen this he would surely proclaim all is well in Odesa, that everyone is happy in Odesa and here was the proof of it – the city’s people were going about on the streets, ringing bells.

What more evidence does one need? Bicycle pumps and bells aplenty but there isn’t any bread! Pretty speeches about bringing good fortune to the workers of the entire world – yet workers in their own country have nothing to eat.

It has already been like this for years. The situation is continually getting worse and worse. The population is now so desperate they cannot bear to hear those trite words of consolation, repeated a thousand and one times, about how, someday in the future, everything will be better. Yet when their desperation seems so great,

⁵ A picturesque Yiddish idiom meaning “to laugh through tears.”

when helplessness cuts so deeply and weighs so heavily that no one sees any prospect of hope at all, the entire city suddenly begins laughing through its tears, seeing how there are men hung with bells out marching around the streets – let them ring! So people in torn clothing, starving and faint, exhausted and weary, walk around on the streets, ringing bells and laughing. They look around and laugh at others, not at first realizing they are actually laughing at themselves too. When it seems as if, just like in Gogol's *Revizor*⁶, someone is about to figure out the essence of what's really happening, is about to begin screaming: "Hey, you there, why are you laughing? You're laughing at yourself!" just then everyone goes quiet and they all start weeping. This was how I felt after I saw how people walked on the streets of Odesa with bells a-ringing.

On that same day I met with many acquaintances. All spoke about the bells and the ringing in the streets. One said: "It's like a madhouse!" He was actually a person whom one could in no way consider an enemy of the Soviet government. On the contrary, he believed the Soviet Union was, fundamentally, advancing a great ideal. However, he opposed the methods being used to do so, believing it was a catastrophe for the world that a rather backward Russia was trying to promote such ideals. "When one undertakes to do a good thing," this man said, "it's not enough to have the right intentions. One must also have the ability to do what you set out to do and do it well. We Russians, unfortunately, do not have such abilities."

5. *By the shore of the Black Sea*

The shore of the Black Sea in Odesa leaves a sorrowful impression. Once Odesa's harbour was full of life. Ships came, ships left. All kinds of merchandise was brought in and taken out. Things were packed and shipped and people worked there, people ran all about. The whistling of ships was a lively sound heard all over the city. Odesa was connected not only with the rest of Russia but with the entire world. Whenever you stood at the shore of the Black Sea in Odesa – whether during the day when work in the harbour moved at

⁶ *The Government Inspector* or *The Inspector General*, a satirical play by Nikolai Gogol (1836).

breakneck speed, or at night, when you gazed wistfully at the lights of ships at sea, not losing their bearings even on a dark night – you felt the allure of distant lands, sense the presence of the whole world.

Once the seashore in Odesa was one of the nicest in the world, among the most vibrant anywhere. At dusk and in the evenings people went down to the sea from every corner of the city. Countless people strolled along a broad promenade, raised over the water. They sang songs, had fun and laughed, filling the atmosphere with love and joy. Young couples liked to lose themselves in the crowded avenue near Pushkin's monument. Some said this great and clever Russian poet, himself quite experienced in love, who even fell fighting a duel, looked down with a knowing smile as these couples strolled by his monument. Happy and content they might be for not yet knowing just how bitter the taste of love can sometimes be.

It was common knowledge in those days that whenever a young Odesan girl or boy felt moved by love they would come to this boulevard by the shores of the sea, adding their eyes to those of others gazing wistfully at the lights of the ships at sea, not losing their way even on the darkest of nights.

On holidays, and in the evenings, people climbed up and down the wide stairs over near the Duke Richelieu monument. These carried down almost to the water. A little further over, just to the right, there was even a kind of wheeled machine that lifted people down and back up from the shore.

This whole area was always full of young voices and laughter. By day and night, in summer and winter, the Odesa shoreline was lively. Now it's dead. Dead by day and dead by night. Everything is neglected and bleak. When you look at the monument of Duke Richelieu, standing with his hand raised, facing the sea, it seems he is pointing to something off in the far distance, to someplace else where life still exists. For here there is no life.

On a day when they don't work in Odesa – not a Sunday or a Monday,

not a Tuesday or a Wednesday, not a Thursday, Friday or a Saturday, because, just like in other cities they don't know the names of the days, only the dates – I was standing by the seashore, near those grand, broad steps I remembered still from the days when I was one of those who walked up and down, just here. There was an emptiness all around me. Even on the sea there were no more than a few ships. Wretchedly, they rocked on the water, without a sound or a peep coming from them. It seemed as if they had been moored a very long time and would remain where they were from now on, as if someone had abandoned them, had entirely forgotten about them. They were empty, sad, and quiet.

Still, Odesa's shore remains beautiful, enchanting to the eye. Blue waves are broken by white stripes of rippled foam, the blueness of those waves drawing the eye further and further away, until sea and sky blend together, indistinct, creating an expanse. And what an expanse! What beauty! By the stairs and stone pillars by the shore I could see a few people standing and taking this scene in. They may have been poor, garbed in old and shabby clothes but they stood there, each on his own, separated from the others, maybe focusing on the sorrows of their own hearts and souls. Still, they were looking out, off into the distance, where there is another kind of life. Perhaps that is why they choose to be by themselves. When I went up to any of them and asked a question they spoke only a few words in reply. All they wanted to do was look off into the distance, where there is another life, and not be distracted. Many people in Russia now look toward the seas and borders. They look and think.

People are always hoping the situation will get better. Things have gotten so bad they simply don't have the strength to endure much more. When they speak about how bad things are, they often mention two names – Lenin and Stalin. Many people believe that if Lenin were still alive everything would be better because he, Ilich, would not have lead the country to such a famine, to such a state of terrible need. About Stalin, however, they speak differently. Very much so. They don't call him by name, they only sound out an "S" which comes out "Ess." Everyone knows whom they mean yet, even

so, they look around carefully, to all sides, ensuring the walls don't have ears. And there's always someone who then tells a story like this, which begins with a question: "What could one do in Soviet Russia that wouldn't cost much, would be the salvation of the entire Russian people and a gift to the workers of the world?"

That is the question. The answer is quickly spoken: "Hang Stalin." Then the joke is explained. It would cost very little because a rope in Soviet Russia isn't expensive. And hanging Stalin would certainly be a gift not only for the Russian people but for the workers of the world as well. I had heard this joke well before I got to Odesa; it wasn't new. It's more or less the same joke I heard tell in other cities. Indeed it was very popular everywhere, was repeated even in circles inclined towards Communism.

About the only place you do hear a good word about Stalin, generally, is in Communist circles. Otherwise you don't. Even in the villages, where people in their naïveté are inclined to attribute almost legendary stature to all who have ruled over Russia, they speak of Stalin with bitterness, with gall, although always in whispers. They regard him as someone who has brought the country to the edge of the abyss and they even go so far as to think even worse things about him, things certainly not true. For the great majority of the Russian people the deceased Lenin lives in their hearts, not so the living Stalin.

Again, but only in whispers, many speak well of Trotsky. I heard such talk in many cities, in various circles, even military ones. I heard it on the trains and in Odesa too. Just like Lenin in death so too Trotsky in exile has come to be glorified. And this, in itself, underscores just how desperate the majority of the Russian people have become. They cannot find consolation in what is so they seek at least a little comfort in what can't be.

Standing by the sea in Odesa, my heart aching as I considered the emptiness around me, I didn't want others to see me as a foreigner. Yet even when I tried to dress down, hoping to blend in more with

the general greyness and dirtiness around me, it didn't really help. Wearing even my most completely ordinary clothes I still stood out. I could see how people looked at me, too much, how they recognized me as a stranger come from another country. This was not an agreeable feeling. Just as it wasn't pleasant to eat when I could see so many hungry people all around.

I set out for a long walk. You couldn't see a thing anywhere, not a single scene, that was pleasant on the eyes. Over even the loveliest streets of Odesa a kind of heavy and oppressive melancholy had settled. Wheels seldom sounded on the streets. Nowhere did anyone seem to be going anywhere else hurriedly or with purpose. The atmosphere was deeply sad.

As I went along, I happened across one of the interpreters I knew was employed by the Odesa *Intourist*. A young woman, agile and vivacious, she was walking quickly, like most of those who work for *Intourist* offices in Soviet Russia do – wanting to be seen as someone in a hurry. She invited me to join her, if I had the time, so we walked together. As we did she spoke a great deal but really only around one theme, namely: “Odesa is building. Odesa is constructing. Odesa is growing!” When I asked whether she remembered Odesa from before she fixed her eyes on me, as if I was insulting her: “Do I look that old?”

“How old are you?” I asked: “Twenty-one,” she answered.

When the Revolution broke out this girl was just 6 years old. Obviously, she didn't remember how Odesa looked before. She certainly knew, however, one thing, and that was that whenever she spoke with a foreign traveler she must say: “Odesa is building. Odesa is constructing. Odesa is growing.” That is what she did.

It was already late afternoon when I went into the Londonskaia Hotel to get something to eat. I was supposed to have stayed in this hotel. But it so happened that just then it was in the middle of renovations, all of its rooms being prepared with all the necessary amenities

for foreign tourists. Therefore I was instead taken to the Bol'shaia Moskovskaia Hotel. To eat, however, I still go to the Hotel London.

They already knew me well. The "doorman" at the restaurant's entrance greeted me like an old acquaintance and always helped me take off or put on my coat. As he did so on that particular day, I noticed they were still working on the same piece of marble floor by the entrance they had been working on yesterday. Everything seemed in the same spot as the day before and indeed the day before that and probably 3 years ago. A man holding an iron rod in his hand, with a heavy hat on his head, lazily hammered away, always in the same spot. At that pace it was difficult to imagine he would ever finish the job.

There weren't many people in the restaurant. Only a few tables were occupied although I could see the people sitting at them were eating heartily. They were also drinking beer and vodka and behaving in such a way that let you know, right away, that things were good for them. An acquaintance sat with me at my table. He glanced over at one member of the group that was having a good time, then said softly: "You see that man? I know him very well, and he knows me very well, but he behaves as if he doesn't know me at all."

"Some kind of snob?" I asked. "No, something else. Simply a careerist for whom yesterday has nothing to do with today, just like today could have nothing to do with tomorrow, not for him."

To make sure I understood my acquaintance began to speak more clearly, although still quietly, carefully looking around at all sides: "Before the Revolution," he said, "that fellow always spoke with hatred about 'the boys and girls who don't want the Emperor.' Even for a time after the Revolution he was still going around with a contemptuous little smile on his lips and, just like a small-town Jew who shrugs his shoulders when he sees a train for the first time in his life, he used to say: 'Oh, it won't last!' He never lost the smug smile of the cynic. He was always jeering. But now? Well now he is an ardent Communist. He occupies a distinguished position. It's all good for

him, he is quite happy. He sits contentedly at a table, gets to eat a full meal and drinks his fill of beer and vodka.”

There are many people of this sort, not only in Odesa but also in other cities. Once they were cynics. Now they feel they must demonstrate how they are ‘even more pious than the Pope,’ and so act strictly when dealing with others, not taking into account such “trivialities” as human feelings. Indeed they don’t even acknowledge their good old friends because doing so might remind someone of who they were in the past. These are the kind of people who always support whoever is in power. They’re just like the army “patriots” who placed Peter the Great’s widow on the throne: “Our side is victorious!” – those “patriots” shouted joyfully when the former maidservant was made ruler of all Russia. When they were asked: “Who are these people whom you call yours?” they replied: “those who won, those are ours.”

In Odesa, just like in other cities in Soviet Russia, a hotel has nothing to do with the reality outside, where the population lives. One often has the impression that the hotels are not even Russian, surely have no connection whatsoever with Russian life as it is lived in the present.

The population in Odesa is in need of bread. On the streets you see long queues to get food. Yet in the hotel restaurants you get anything you might ask for to eat, along with the best wines and liquors, the most expensive desserts. The people do not get to eat in these restaurants, only foreign tourists and people of privilege. Special places of rest and places to eat have been built, and rebuilt, in this “Republic of Workers and Peasants” but no workers or peasants are ever seen in them, just like you don’t meet ordinary people in the ‘soft’ First or Second Class train carriages.

“And you speak about equality in Soviet Russia,” a man chastised me, strolling late at night along the Ekaterininskaia, or as it is now called, Bebel Street: “What kind of equality is there when the people are starving, when the people don’t have bread, when in the villages

they're eating potato peels, and people and horses are dropping from hunger? I can show you, right here in Odesa, buildings whose doors and windows are bolted shut, where unimportant people cannot enter, where the 'employees' of the *GPU* sit down to eat and drink the nicest and the best. Passing by such a place it wouldn't occur to you what's going on inside. You see nothing from outside, save for a portrait of Stalin inside a curtained window. Nothing else. Stalin's portrait conceals everything."

It was already after midnight when I returned to the seashore. The night was bright, the sky full of stars. It was quiet and no people could be seen anywhere. Then I heard footsteps, just behind me. Two women with shawls on their heads were crossing the boulevard. One was carrying a pail and the other a brush. Both were apparently coming from a government institution where they had been washing and cleaning. Thinking I didn't understand them they began to speak about me. From how they were speaking Russian I could immediately detect both were intelligent women.

"Consider that man there!" one said. "Obviously, you can tell right away, he is a foreigner."

"Yes, you see that from his clothing."

"What a hat he's wearing! You don't see such things here."

"What do we have here? All of us are dressed like beggars."

"Those who come from abroad are totally different."

One then said: "Yes, somewhere, people live and breathe freely. They walk. They enjoy themselves. They meet other people. Here, however – eh, what kind of life do we have!" Then she began to cry.

Seeing or hearing someone suddenly bursting into tears in Soviet Russia was not a novelty for me, not by then. Yet the subdued crying of this woman that night by Odesa's seashore, even though she was

a stranger, really shook me. I just couldn't keep pretending I didn't understand Russian. Turning to her I asked: "Forgive me but is there anything I can do to help you?"

The woman quickly got away. This is how people live in Odesa!



Masthead from the Monday, 24 June 1929 edition of the Soviet Yiddish newspaper, *Der Odeser Arbeter* (Moscow Yiddish Theatre Collection, Blavatnik Archive, www.blavatnikarchive.org/item/21482)

CHAPTER

XV

Communist Jewish culture-bearers

1. In a Yiddish editorial office and at the Mendele Museum

Odesa has always been a city not only of life but also of culture. Newspapers published in Odesa had no reason to feel ashamed when compared with newspapers from Petersburg or Moscow, neither in terms of content nor in the influence they had on political life.

Theatre and opera were always loved in Odesa. The greatest artists of Russia and of many other countries performed there, with great success. To the present day the Odesa Gorodskoi Theatre is one of the best in the world. Only the Vienna Opera House equals the loveliness of Odesa's Gorodskoi Theatre.

Odesa's Jewish population never lagged behind in terms of culture. The city had a cultured and studious Jewish youth and intelligentsia. In the domain of Yiddish literature, even before the war, Odesa competed with Warsaw and Vilnius – the two cities regarded as the greatest centres of Yiddish creativity.

These days you hear a great deal in Odesa about Yiddish literature and culture. You're told how there is a Yiddish newspaper in the city, *Der Odeser Arbeter*. And there's a Jewish museum named after Mendele Moykher Sforim¹ as well as a street honouring his name.

It is rather difficult to find. Only a few people know where it is.

¹ One of the founders of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature.

Early one morning, I went to the editorial offices of the *Odeser Arbeter*. I was prepared not to be treated well and that is just how it turned out. At the start, when I was introduced as a Yiddish writer from America, it seemed they thought I was a Communist and so the reception wasn't bad. When I told them my name, however, the tone immediately changed and they began speaking to me in an entirely different manner.

The assistant editor was a young man. At first he tried just a little too hard to speak as if everything he had to say was vitally important. As soon as he found out who I was, he spoke quite differently. He cursed and condemned those Yiddish writers whom he blamed for having "sold out to the bourgeoisie." He called for a plague upon all non-Communist Yiddish writers, all those whose writings did not conform with Stalin's *shulkhn-orekh*². He was enraged, just wouldn't keep calm.

This very same Yiddish "culture-bearer" was not only the assistant editor of the *Odeser Arbeter* but also in charge of a Yiddish "radio newspaper" in Odesa. While his name remains entirely unknown to Yiddish literature, he had absolutely no compunction about scorning the greatest of Yiddish writers, mocking them to such an extent that you almost had to marvel at his *chutzpah*. That's how a man without a crumb of culture feels he can speak.

Later, the editor himself arrived. The way his curly hair was combed made it look like a typical wig of the old type. He had a mouth full of gold teeth on display. Sitting down on his editor's stool after being told who I was, he laid both hands on his table, then adapted a pose suggesting he was there to judge me for all the sins I had committed in my life. In his opinion my past must plague and torment me, day and night.

"So, so," he uttered, a full mouth of golden teeth sticking out, "you are the one who writes in *Forverts*?"

² An allusion to the codex of Jewish laws published in 1550-1559.

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m amazed,” he sharply pronounced his ‘em’s, tapping his fingers on the table at the same time: “I’m amazed you were even allowed into the Soviet Union.” He continued in this tone, as if he was a GPU man and I an accused person he was interrogating. So I took out my American passport and said: “Perhaps you need to examine this. See, I didn’t sneak in. I came on a visa.”

It made no difference to this man, the editor of the *Odeser Arbeter*. He didn’t change his tone. Looking at how I was sitting calmly, with a smile on my face, he replied: “Yes, yes, we need your dollars. It’s only your dollars we need.”

His tone was cynical. So I told him: “Listen to what you’re saying. Around here you all speak like shopkeepers. You must have dollars and nothing else matters to you at all!” He didn’t like that remark. So he began addressing me as if he were standing on a stage, delivering a hackneyed sermon. It seemed almost as if he was no longer a man but instead a machine someone just turned on. Grinding his golden teeth, emphasizing every word, he spouted: “Soon enough we will get even with the enemies of the revolutionary proletariat. We know how. Right now we’re keeping an eye on all of them. When the hour comes we will strike and let them feel our might and they will be held accountable for everything... yes, for everything!”

He seemed quite pleased with his sermon, apparently indifferent that others might find his tone unnatural, his words stilted and contrived. He went on: “I read the American Yiddish press carefully because, as Comrade Ilich (Lenin) taught – ‘Recognize the enemy so you will know how to combat him.’ So I read, for example, an article, a feuilleton, admitting there is now a crisis in America but going on about how even a poor girl can still dress respectably, because clothing costs very little. Well, I ask, is this not a betrayal of the working class? Instead of calling the girl to the revolutionary struggle they want to convince her that, even in a crisis, she can dress well. Can there be any better evidence of how the revolutionary proletariat is being betrayed?”

Altogether, in tone and word, he came across as a bit unhinged. His bombastic phrases and oratorical excesses certainly didn't belong in what was, after all, a private conversation between the editor of Odesa's Yiddish newspaper and a visitor. It was really quite unpleasant for me as well because, after all, I hadn't come to this editorial office to have them "agitate" against me. I hadn't come to quarrel. I only wanted to see what the editorial office of the Yiddish newspaper in Odesa was like, in part because nowhere that I went in Odesa had I seen even one copy of their paper, not on the street, not in any of the apartments or buildings I had been in. Yet here sat the editor with his golden teeth and curly fringe of hair, cursing away, likening to filth all the Yiddish writers who weren't Communists, denigrating them as "bastards" and "bumpkins."

"You see this Comrade right here?" this hot-headed editor with the golden teeth said, pointing to a freckled young man sitting at the end of a long bench and holding both hands spread on the table: "You see this Comrade here? He is an *arbkor* (worker correspondent), one of our writers!"

"All very fine," I said: "but the question is – can he write?"

"That is not important," someone from the editorial board spoke up: "We have *litredn* (literary editors) in the house. They review and correct what the *arbhorn* write."

I wanted to ask who corrected the *litredn* but didn't.

Arbkorn, *litredn* – these are the people who put together a Yiddish newspaper. But nobody is concerned about how the newspaper is written or bothered that it doesn't get read, that in Odesa itself few Jews even know it exists. The main thing is only who curses and insults all the non-Communist Yiddish writers the best, who shouts "Hooray" the loudest and recites chapter and verse as required, always adding for this is "how Comrade Ilich taught us" or "what Comrade Stalin has determined" – that is the person who mounts the horse, meaning he becomes a Jewish "culture-bearer."

For a good hour, if not more, I sat in the editorial office of the Yiddish newspaper in Odesa. I thought I would at least hear a few words connected with Yiddish creativity, with Yiddish culture. All I heard was their scorn for everything created in Yiddish outside Soviet Russia's borders. Not one of this entire gang demonstrated even a crumb of respect for such a thing as knowledge, for such a thing as talent. None of them voiced even a single word to show they valued the Yiddish writers of old. On the greatest of Yiddish writers they threw mud and spat bile. I never heard any of the Soviet Russian journalists and writers I spoke to heaping such contempt and scorn on a Kuprin³ or a Bunin⁴ or others as these Yiddish writers had in the Yiddish editorial office of the *Odeser Arbeter*. Truly cultured people respect talent and know how to value services to literature, even if they personally take a different political position. I could breathe better after I left the editorial office of the *Odeser Arbeter*.

On the same day I went to a Jewish museum named in honour of Mendele Moykher Sforim. The person who curated it clearly had a feeling for culture and history. There were many well-done displays, documents and photographs explaining the history of Yiddish literature and recalling the pogroms that occurred during the Civil War in Ukraine. The room dedicated solely to Mendele made a particularly good impression. Many items on display were closely connected to the life and creations of this man, the grandfather of Yiddish literature. Some of the photographs I had seen before. Others were rare, not known. It was obvious that whoever had collected and assembled these things not only knew what he was doing but was an honourable person who had a fine appreciation of what needed to be done in this museum. Altogether, I liked what had been accomplished there, truly felt like blessing the hands that brought all these things together, the hands of the person who would very likely still gather in even more.

When I ventured into other rooms at this museum, however, I had a contrary sensation. The content of those other rooms was utterly

³ Aleksandr Kuprin, a Russian writer.

⁴ Ivan Bunin, awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1933.

at odds with the spirit of Mendele Moykher Sforim – with the way he lived life, with what he created. If the “grandfather” were to rise from his grave and could see what they put into a museum bearing his name then – but if only he weren’t afraid of the GPU – he would surely bang his cane and demand that his name be taken down, immediately. These other rooms had nothing to do with how he lived his life or the temper of his writings.

Recent Jewish history was the ostensible theme of several of these rooms but it was represented without a sense of culture or understanding. Rather these rooms shouted and shrieked with such *chutzpah* as to grate upon the ears, what was supposed to be a museum instead having been transformed into a kind of platform, a place in the market. Over there, for example, was a section agitating against religion. Many artefacts connected with the Jewish faith were displayed. Hanging on the walls or laid out in glass display cases were *poroykheses*⁵. Elsewhere I saw embroidered scroll covers, *tallith*⁶, amulets, *mezuzah*⁷, long men’s frocks and *shtreymels*⁸, items all taken from pious Jews. And there were Hanukkah *menorahs*⁹, *hodeslekh boxes*¹⁰, ceremonial bowls and other items. When a visitor is being taken around to see it all the guide lets loose, fervently offering up all sorts of “explanations” to show how the rabbis and scholars had been in cahoots with the Czarist government. Supposedly they had no other mission in their lives.

Pointing to a curtain hanging on a wall one of the museum’s managers insisted: “You see this *poroykhes*? See how it is adorned with a crown, a *keser-toyre*? Well that means – darkness. To both sides there are lions. Right? Those are symbols of power. Together what do these symbols mean? – the power of darkness. This proves Jewish clericalism stood with the Russian monarchy.” He apparently wanted his words to have even more significance so he added another

⁵ The curtain over the Ark holding Torah scrolls in a synagogue.

⁶ A cloth bag for holding prayer shawls.

⁷ Parchment rolls inscribed with Torah verses and attached by observant Jews to their doorposts inside a small wooden tube.

⁸ A round hat edged with fur, usually worn by Orthodox Jews on the Sabbath and holidays.

⁹ Seven branched candlesticks.

¹⁰ Perforated containers used for holding spices for the *Havdalah* ceremony that ends the Sabbath.

detail he thought was important: “This curtain was removed from an *ornkoydesh*¹¹ in the Shalashner Synagogue.”

Then he pointed to another curtain over on another wall – it was made of black velvet and decorated with yellow blossoms. It had been removed from a Holy Ark in the Brodsky *shul* in Odesa. The combination of colours on this *poroykhes*, he “explained,” was also evidence, as “clear as day,” that when it was made the rabbis had been on the side of the Russian monarchy!

A good portion of the Mendele Museum in Odesa was devoted to Hasidism. It wasn't treated as a democratic movement which, at the start of the 18th century, and in accordance with the spirit of that time, had expressed itself in a unique way, the rebellion of a simple man of the people against a scholarly aristocracy. In this museum they instead displayed a collection of Hasidic men's coats, *shreymels* and amulets, describing them all as examples of paraphernalia intended for no other purpose than “deluding and misleading the Jewish proletariat,” even though no such proletariat even existed in the world at that time.

Under glass lay a piece of parchment taken from the Torah scroll. When I was led up to it, I was given this “explanation.” This was part of the Torah, the *Toykhekhe*¹². Why, I wondered aloud, was only the *Toykhekhe* displayed, out of the entire Torah? This very question was soon answered by one of the guides: “The *Toykhekhe*, in *shul*, in the *besmedresh* and in the *kloyz* is read not to condemn the rich and important man or the business owner but instead curses the poor man, the labourer, the worker. That is why we show this.” Clear and plain! The Torah contains nothing but curses and execrations. Nothing other than the *Toykhekhe* need be displayed in a Jewish museum named after Mendele Moykher Sforim.

In this museum in Odesa I was also shown a wooden platter, a carved one. In October 1905 a Jewish delegation had reportedly carried

¹¹ The Holy Ark and repository of Torah scrolls found in a synagogue.

¹² A portion of the Torah that curses those Israelites who do not follow God's commandments.

bread with salt on this very platter, presenting it to Czar Nikolai II, begging him to stop pogroms. This was said to be evidence of how Jewish business owners and rabbis stood close to the Czarist government. When I said I saw things otherwise, could imagine how painful it must have been for these Jews to carry bread and salt to Czar Nikolai, begging him, even though they knew he was a *tsoyrer-hayehudim*¹³ to stop the pogroms, one of the managers fixed his eyes on me and said: “If that is what you think it would seem you have an entirely different ideology.”

“Well, I certainly do,” I answered.

The Mendele Museum in Odesa is, incidentally – as far as I am aware – the only institution where visitors are registered by nationality. That leaves a very curious impression. In a place where nationalism is so *treyf*¹⁴ visitors must identify themselves by nationality. So I had a look at the books where visitors signed in. I saw a significant number were Christians. Not many Jews came here. In general, in fact, few people did. Over the 2 hours I was there I didn’t see any other visitors. My companion, a young lady born in Odesa, knew very little about the Mendele Museum. She was there for the first time and had to be given “explanations” in Russian because she understood Yiddish only very badly. She accepted the “explanations” as they were given to her because she knew very little about Jewish history and even less about Yiddish literature. People like her probably leave the Mendele Museum feeling the entirety of Jewish history before the Revolution amounted to nothing more than one long period of darkness, a time when the Jews stood with the Czarist government. Where in the Mendele Museum were the names of those Jewish revolutionary heroes who gave their lives in the struggle for a free Russia – names that possessed a distinguished place in the history of the *Narodnaia Volia*¹⁵ in the 1870s and 1880s, names that shone in the Revolution of 1905 and again in 1917? Their names were not displayed anywhere. The museum’s directors were afraid, God forbid, that they might be

¹³ An enemy of the Jews.

¹⁴ Non-kosher.

¹⁵ The People’s Will – a 19th century revolutionary organization that attempted to overthrow Alexander II.

suspected of something as non-kosher as having national tendencies.

Where in the Odesa Mendele Museum were the Yiddish writers on whose works generations were raised? They were not there. Instead they were cursed vehemently and spat upon with bile and venom in the Yiddish editorial office of the *Odeser Arbeter* and in other Yiddish editorial offices across Soviet Russia, where *arbkorn*, *litredn*, and *chitmanusen* (manuscript readers) put together newspapers, although newspapers not actually seen anywhere on the streets.

Supposedly, these people are Jewish “culture-bearers”! Where in Odesa’s Mendele Museum can you find Mendele’s spirit? Only in one room. If Mendele were alive today he would likely be too afraid to protest. Probably he would remain silent, painfully thinking to himself: “No, no, this is not what I meant!”

2. A Russian ballet and a Yiddish performance

Odesa’s Gorodskoi Theatre – as I said earlier – is one of the nicest in the world. It stands on a very lovely spot. With its size and height it reaches taller than all the other buildings around it. The drive up to it is a grandiose one, made for horse-drawn carriages and coaches, whose wheels clap pleasantly on the cobblestoned roadway. When you enter the theatre you immediately perceive you are in a true temple of art. You are certain the performance you are about to see will be an artistic one.

During the time I was in Odesa they were performing a ballet by the name of *Ferendzhi* in the Gorodskoi Theatre. I had already heard a great deal about this ballet in the city. Everyone was saying the performance was very fine and in many houses people were even singing lovely melodies from the ballet. So, as soon as I could, I got myself a ticket and on a certain evening went off to see *Ferendzhi*.

The theatre was packed. All seats were occupied. Military men were sitting in most of the theatre boxes, dressed in their heavy greatcoats, with pointed hats on their heads. The audience was dressed a little

nicer than usual. You could see people felt celebratory. And it was pleasant to see workers in the best seats of the theatre. The only pity was that, from time to time, and of course always at exactly the moment when a quiet scene was playing out on the stage, you heard, here and there from the audience, the sounds of people cracking nuts or *semechkas*¹⁶ with their teeth. Sunflowers are as popular in Russia as chewing gum is in America. In America they chew, in Russia they crack. Apparently, many people just couldn't resist cracking seeds, even when they found themselves in a true temple of art.

The ballet *Ferendzhi* was actually quite good. The dances were pleasant on the eyes and the music for the ears. If you allowed yourself to be drawn into the magic of this graceful dancing and the sweet sounds you could forget for a while about the need and the poverty outside, what you saw at every step in a city once famous as the "Beauty of the South."

The Russian theatre retains its magic. It always stood, and still does, at the highest level of art. It's like this in drama, in opera, and at the ballet. In this respect Soviet stage-artists find themselves in a better situation than Soviet writers. They can artistically create images even from roles writers and playwrights are obliged or want to infuse with an "ideology," one that often doesn't conform with reality. Just as you can create a theatrical image from a living person so too you can shape a theatrical image from someone who is a 'proclamation on two feet.' To do so you only need to have one "trifle" – talent. That is something many actors in Soviet Russia possess. Not only the old ones, raised on a repertoire of Ostrovsky, Sukhovo-Kobylin, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov and others but even the young ones influenced by the new repertoire with its "ideology."

The same can be said about Russian ballet artists. They have also been drawn in by "ideology," although not as much as the dramatic artists. Such a famous Russian dancer as Yekaterina Geltser¹⁷ still holds true to her belief that ballet must be imaginative, far from reality,

¹⁶ Sunflower seeds.

¹⁷ A prima ballerina of the Bolshoi Ballet, 1895-1935.

feels it wouldn't be demonstrative enough to produce a ballet about collective farm workers dancing with each other. Still the "ideology" of the ruling Party has been introduced into modern Russian ballet. So now the majority of Soviet ballets are of the type that might be called *agitkas*. They promote the "ideology" of the state.

The ballet *Ferendzhi* was just such an *agitka*. It told the story of a Jewish prince torn between two worlds, concluding with him conquering feelings of kinship and lineage and going over to the side of the masses, from whom he had been kept secluded, as if in a foreign land. And when he sides with the masses he tears off his epaulettes, throwing them to the ground, trampling them with his feet, all to the beat of the music. His example is followed by the officers of his retinue. They too tear off their epaulettes, dash them to the ground, tread on them, dance to the beat of the music.

I was certain a round of applause would begin just then, as certainly would be the case in any American theatre where Communists were present. But nobody applauded. In general, they don't applaud in Soviet Russian theatres when the scenes are so blatantly propagandistic. They're already rather tired of that sort of thing, aren't inspired by it. So even though *Ferendzhi* was staged with taste and was a pleasure to see, its message was too obvious, competing too assertively with the artistic side of the performance.

It was also nice to see how people strolled in the "foyer" (lobby) of the theatre between acts. They walked in pairs, as if strolling on a boulevard, in a long half-circle, and weren't crowded all together. This was how people spent time between the acts in most of the Russian theatres I visited in the larger cities. It was obvious they took great pleasure in doing so.

I had a completely different impression, unfortunately, when, on another evening, I went to the Odesa Yiddish State Theatre. They were then performing a play titled *The Comrade Engineer*. Although I had heard of it I knew very little about the Odesa Yiddish State Theatre or about the actors and actresses who performed there. But,

naturally, I expected to see an interesting theatrical production. After all Odesa is so closely connected with the history of Yiddish theatre! Even before Avrom Goldfaden founded Yiddish theatre in Romania, in 1876-1877, they were already staging Yiddish performances in Odesa. The first truly talented Yiddish actor, Yisroel Grodner, began his career in Odesa as a *ceder* singer, laying the cornerstone for Yiddish theatre there some 50 years ago. So Odesa was always a centre of Yiddish theatre. More than a half-century ago great artists performed there, such as Mogulesko, Dovid Kessler, Jacob P. Adler and other Yiddish actors, who still occupy places of honour in the history of Yiddish theatre. It would be no more than natural to anticipate that in a Yiddish State Theatre one would experience a better quality of theatre, based on legacy of the pioneers of Yiddish theatrical art, shaped over the course of so many years.

Isn't it just so with Russian theatre? Setting aside the new repertoire with its "ideology," Russian theatre is artistically connected with the traditions inspired by Shchepkin and Mochalov, with those of Prov Sadovsky and Karatygin, and all the other artists who laid the cornerstone for the modern theatre scene, so many years ago.

And so I thought it must also be this way with the Yiddish State Theatre in Odesa, because in the history of Yiddish theatre Odesa is not of less prestige than, let us say, Moscow is in the history of Russian theatre.

My desire to see a Yiddish performance in Odesa was even greater because in Moscow I hadn't been able to catch any Yiddish performances in the Chamber Theatre, which has a very good reputation in Soviet Russia.

I was received very kindly at the Odesa Yiddish State Theatre, located on Karl Liebknecht Street. The director himself invited me to his office and gave me a seat in the first row, sitting down next to me. That proved to be a problem. Who knows whether I would have sat through the entire performance if he hadn't been right there, keeping an eye on me.

Before I go on let me describe the theatre itself. It was more stable than theatre. All the benches were on one level, meaning spectators not sitting in the first row could almost not see what was happening on the stage. The place was also dark, neglected and very dirty, creating a very uncomfortable feeling. The audience jostled. Nobody wanted to sit in the seats they had purchased but instead tried to take those they had not. In the middle of everything stood a pair of Red Army men, near the orchestra, itself concealed behind wooden boards. These Jewish Red Army men were certainly from a small town where they had only heard about *triiater* (theatre). Wanting to see where the sounds were coming from they stood to a side and looked. They stood and kept their pointed military hats and heavy, long greatcoats on because it was cold in the theatre. There wasn't any corner where you felt warm or cozy. It was just grey, commonplace and dark with not even a sign of any gaiety, nothing to hint this was a theatre, a temple of art! I thought about how Yiddish theatre used to be performed in stables of this sort, 40 or 50 years ago, not in the larger cities but in small towns.

The printed program was in Ukrainian. There wasn't a single Yiddish word in it. In the program it stated this play, *Tovarishch inzhener* (*The Comrade Engineer*) written by Y. Dobrushin and Y. Nusinov, was a *Drama na try dii j sim vidmin*, which in Yiddish means a drama in three acts and seven scenes.

And what a drama it was, what appeared on stage! Not a one of these actors demonstrated talent. Even the comedian of the play, who played the role of a sort of "Uncle Misha," engaged in such cheap and clownish *shtik*¹⁸ that it was disgusting to watch. There was no taste or moderation, neither in the production or in the acting. Everything was coarse, clumsy, pounding and heavy. And on top of that the actors and actresses didn't speak how Yiddish had been typically spoken on the stage for many years. As "revolutionaries" in theatre they had abolished the Ukrainian Yiddish dialect that sounds so nice on a stage and instead spoke a Lithuanian Yiddish. If this were only Lithuanian Yiddish it would still have been bearable. But it was a

¹⁸ Tricks.

Lithuanian Yiddish with a Russian accent. It became apparent these actors were not Jews but Russians. They laboured to speak Yiddish rather like they struggled to act.

It was difficult to believe, indeed quite impossible to imagine, that this was how Yiddish theatre is performed in Odesa, in a city so closely connected with the history of Yiddish theatre, in the city where a Mogulesko, a Dovid Kessler and a Jacob P. Adler once performed. It was apparent the authors of this *Drama na try dii y sim vidmin* had no idea of even the most elemental rules of drama but instead took an ideological line, thrashing out a clunker without soul or life, a play which made not even a crumb of sense.

The main heroes of this “drama” were vacuum cleaners, telephones, movie-pictures, radios and “loudspeakers.” You didn’t see any real people because everyone on stage was just someone on two feet making proclamations rather than acting. On top of that they moved about as if they were on stilts and spoke their lines in such a way as to grate on the ears.

It’s not easy to even explain what the story line of this drama was but I will try. It seemed to be about an engineer who was set to travel abroad on behalf of the Lebensboi Trust; it manufactured vacuum cleaners and other rarities much admired wherever they might be exhibited. Other employees at the Lebensboi tried to obstruct his plan and one of them, himself not very kosher, even spread rumours about how this “Comrade Engineer” could not be trusted. Young men and women of the *Komsomol*, shock workers, and all sorts of other, shall we say, “prominent” folks, then crowd around, making such a fuss that you simply didn’t know what kind of world you were in.

In the middle of everything they screened a *moovi* (a movie) on a bed sheet – a picture about how children are cared for in the Soviet children’s homes. You saw the children in cradles and a young woman of the *Komsomol* getting all enthusiastic and shouting loudly: “Women, see! Now we can have children three times a year!”

Afterwards, they showed a picture of a house with white walls. And again the same woman yelled out – this time addressing the men: “See, this is how the proletarian man lives nowadays!” A mish-mash of bed sheets and boards, pictures and phrases, shouts and alarms, nonsense and rigmarole, indecipherable.

After this they judge a comrade whom they have discovered was once a socialist, a Menshevik who, before the Bolshevik Revolution, had published a tract calling for freedom. Another woman from the *Komsomol*, Comrade Shura, stamps her feet hard whenever she walks, and always gestures with her hands when she speaks – as if she is about to serve the entire counter-revolution a slap in the face – goes through a long list of the accused’s offences. She hurls into his face the words he once wrote, her voice filled with venom and mockery as she lists what he had called for:

“Freedom of speech!”

“Freedom of conscience!”

“Freedom of assembly!”

Her tone implies this man had been the greatest of criminals for making such demands, treating him as if he had slaughtered people in the middle of the street. The man accused of these “terrible crimes” writhes and paces about, looking for some place to hide.

The entire story takes place against the background of the famous Ramzin trial¹⁹ when a large group of engineers were accused of being wreckers – this presents another opportunity for the “loud speakers” and radios on stage to sing and make a racket while those behind stage yell at the top of their lungs, shrieking and shouting with voices seemingly possessed: “Death to the wreckers!”

The “Comrade Engineer,” a man, poor thing, completely naïve in his manner of performing theatre, is frightened terribly by all this. He

¹⁹ A reference to the Industrial Party Trial of 25 November – 7 December 1930.

seeks a way to prove his loyalty. Just then the play's authors contrived to have a package of letters come into his hands. They are from a close friend, another "Comrade Engineer." From them he learns this other "Comrade Engineer," a certain Romov (whom we don't see on stage at all because he's sitting in prison even though we hear people speaking about him continuously), is a wrecker, a *vreditel* in Russian or *shkidnyk* in Ukrainian. So the first "Comrade Engineer" without so much as a thought, runs up to one of the main heroes of the play, to a telephone that is, and – calls up the GPU. That is the climax, the ending of the play. One cannot reach any higher "artistically" than this. Because what can be higher "artistically" than the GPU? That is what they're presenting in the Odesa "Yiddish State Theatre." That's how they perform in a city so intimately connected with the history of Yiddish theatre, where some of the greatest artists of the Yiddish stage once lived and created! Is this perhaps also Yiddish culture?

CHAPTER XVI

The two Russias

From no city in Soviet Russia, besides my hometown of Trostianets,¹ was it as difficult to leave as from Odesa.

Old friends and comrades I met there, as well as the new friends I made, had become very close to me. Born and raised in Ukraine, they shared an amiable character, a quality that was personally always dear to me. They were very courteous and affable. It was always enjoyable spending time with them, even with those who complained I didn't really understand Russian reality because I refused to accept that the great hunger I saw must exist, that things could not be otherwise while they rapidly industrialized, preparing the soil for the new life to come.

When someone expressed such an opinion, and tried to prove it, another person spoke up: "We speak so well about how we're building. All of a sudden all of us have become highly enthusiastic about industrialization and manufacturing. This could only happen in Russia. We sacrifice lives, human lives, for every brick mortared into a factory wall. It seems as if we're building not for the people but, in contrast, at the expense of their lives. This building is, in and of itself, a good thing. Nobody denies the usefulness of it. Nobody doubts its necessity. However, I am certain the Russian people wouldn't object, let us say, if it took 20 years instead of 5 to construct the Dnieprostroy or any other such giant *stroy*¹, as long as they didn't have to die from hunger for it, in the literal sense of that word. As

¹ The construction of the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station began in 1927. The plant began producing electricity in October 1932.

long as they didn't have to live in such a state of need and poverty, in such filth, for it."

The man who said this was actually not an opponent of the Soviet authority. On the contrary, he admitted how, under the Soviet regime, a great deal of useful things had been accomplished, truly deserving of praise. He spoke very warmly, for example, about the significance given across the entire country to the eradication of *bezgramotnost'*. He also spoke approvingly about the attitude the Soviet authority took toward the smaller nationalities of Russia and their cultures. In this regard he felt much had been accomplished. In general, he spoke very sympathetically about the many good things he felt the Soviet government had done. He said, however, that he could in no way agree with the manner in which they were trying to carry out the Five Year Plan, how they were using the living to build up the Plan's foundations. He was a decent man. That was enough, in and of itself, for him to be considered a counter-revolutionary.

I was with the same man on another occasion, in a house where I had to deliver a greeting from America. There he presented himself as a defender of the Soviets when another person tried to say there wasn't anything good about life in Soviet Russia. "The only bright side," that person said, "is in how they interpret things, when they speculate about what will be, about how the Messiah will come. Sure they can say that at some time after they have carried out this Plan, or completed those plans for industrialization, that we can expect *Geulah*², will receive equal portions at the great table and will eat the *Shorabor*³ and the Leviathan and drink the Wine of the Righteous. But others say that even then the portions will not be equal. It's all a question of interpretation and interpolation, of speculation and conjecture. It all sounds very nice but it is all in the future. The reality of today, however, is bleak, desolate and grey. In no other country in the world would people be able to live under such conditions. On no other people in the world could such experiments be made."

² Redemption or deliverance.

³ The wild ox eaten by the Righteous after the coming of the Messiah.

The first man did not agree and presented an entire series of facts about the many positive sides to life in Soviet Russia. One of his principal arguments was how the government did everything possible to educate the people. “This has, of course, already been achieved to a significant extent,” he said. “In the large network of schools and various learning institutions, spread over the entire country, the people are taught how to conduct themselves and how to live. This is being done not only with the help of teachers and books but also with placards and posters displayed everywhere people gather together.”

Soon a conversation began about the various wall murals and posters that can be seen hanging in Russian train stations and other Soviet institutions. People began talking about the Soviet Russia shown on those posters and placards, the Soviet Russia in pictures, comparing it to the Soviet Russia of daily life. That was when a quiet man, who only contributed a pertinent remark from time to time, said the following: “You’re speaking about placards and posters. This leads me to the thought that in order to fully understand the situation in our country you don’t need to be a politician but rather a theatre person. Yes, yes, that’s what you heard me say – a theatre person! Why? Because since they began to carry out the Five Year Plan this entire country of ours has become just like a theatre, one in which the management doesn’t at all consider the audience, the people. Simply put: they don’t give a hoot about their audience. On the placards and posters they announce they’re performing *Hamlet*, a heroic play from the classical repertoire. Actually they perform *The Two Kuni-Lemels*⁴. What they do is not what the placards say they are going to do.”

His comment went over well with some people but others attacked him for it. One exclaimed: “You have remained an intellectual!”

“And I’m not ashamed of it,” the other man replied: “You’re the one who needs to be sorry since, apparently, the word ‘intellectual’ has become a swear word for you.”

⁴ *The Two Fools* – a classic Yiddish play from the 1880s by Abraham Goldfaden, the founder of modern Yiddish theatre.

Reproaching a man for being an intellectual – this is a very common thing in Soviet Russia these days. They pronounce the very word “intellectual” itself with scorn, with contempt. When they hurl the word into someone’s face they make a facial expression as if they were cursing the other person’s ancestors. Instead of saying “an intelligent person” they use the expression “a cultured person,” the Russian word “intelligent” having become as *treyf* as pork. This is remarkable in a country that always had the most cultured and sympathetic intelligentsia, known worldwide as sincere and devoted idealists! In this alone, is there not something symbolic?

During my time in Odesa I almost never heard people having a reasonable conversation among themselves. Either they spoke about the price of bread and other food articles or else they quarreled about politics. They didn’t speak about books, literature, theatre, art or music. In this respect Odesa is no exception. It was like this in other Russian cities as well. They don’t speak. They only quarrel. People are full of anger and animosity towards each other. They hate each other. They don’t trust each other. They dislike each other when they stand in the queues to get something to eat. Anyone would willingly throw someone else out of the line given the chance. They hate each other when they need to grab a spot and everyone is shoving – they’re always ready to argue. They see only the bad side in everyone, never the good. At one lineup in Odesa I saw just such a scene. A poor woman ran up, distressed, begging another woman to let her go in front so that she wouldn’t need to wait as long. She could not wait, she said, because her child was sick and alone.

“Do me this favour, Citizen,” she pleaded. “My child is sick.” The other woman refused: “Sure, sure,” she said, “don’t expect us to fall for that trick.” The desperate woman then ran from one person to the other, always pleading for someone to give her their place in the queue, repeating how her child was sick, that she could not stay very long. But everyone drove her away, everyone said they wouldn’t fall for this story. Not a single person showed even a little humanity, even a little pity. They are so embittered they just don’t trust anyone. Living under difficult conditions for years and years they have become

so self-obsessed that they think only of themselves when it comes to getting a piece of bread, a little milk or another bit of food with which to quiet their hunger.

On one side – idealists, so preoccupied with humanity that they don't see human beings, and on the other – poor, starving and bewildered creatures, so preoccupied with themselves and their own needs that they see nothing else.

Seeing people working in a factory, where hammers bang and sparks fly, where machines rush and iron bars bang, is far from everything. The main thing is seeing how the working person lives at home. At home the working person lives in poverty, in need, in unsanitary conditions and is very often starving. I saw this in Odesa and also in other cities because I went not just to the factories where people work but also to where people lived.

As I was taking my leave from Odesa, I could see how my coming and now my preparations for leaving upset my friends and new acquaintances. Each of them wanted me not just to hear but also to absorb the tragedy of their difficult lives, wanted to make sure I did not forget any of it after I returned to America. Everyone wanted to get in another word, to go over something they had already said, to ask something about something they had already asked about before. They kept repeating: "Do something! See to it. Get them to help us!" One dear man, whose heart ached because he felt he had not spoken to me enough about the dark life he led, an existence he could no longer endure, stood near me for a long time, keeping quiet. His eyes were full of tears. Biting his lower lip, bewildered and very nervous, he said: "It's so good that you came, and of course, so bad." Apparently, he thought I hadn't understood him very well. So he tried to make himself clearer: "Before," he said, "we had grown used to our troubles. Cut off from the world, we forgot about it, even came to think that how things are was how they must be. In our desperation we sought consolation in thinking there wasn't an alternative. Then you came. We got a breath of fresh air, another world, saw signs of another life. When you are gone, we will remember you as a person

who, of his own will, came to Soviet Russia from America and then left of his own free will, as someone who has gone on to travel to cities such as Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, will see more of the world before he returns to America. Yes, you understand, in you we perceived that other world, another life, and this has really confused us. And so, you understand, it's not just good that you came but also bad." I knew what he meant. I could see that another friend of mine wasn't too pleased about how everyone had complained as much as they were. But then this other friend of mine was on the verge of becoming a *Kohen*, a candidate for membership in the Communist Party. He had to be very careful with his words.

Before leaving Odesa I went to the *Intourist* office. There were quite a few posters hung up on its walls, all quite charming to the eye. Some were of factories and industrial plants already built or in the process of being erected. Other images showed attractive landscapes and various places travellers could visit; the people in these pictures looked healthy and happy, were shown attending celebrations of various kinds, all of it portrayed in rich hues and colours.

Later that evening, having taken my leave at the train station, seen off by people dressed like beggars, I sat and began to think a great deal about the pictures hanging at the *Intourist* office, about the realities I had seen. I couldn't forget how people, living people, told me what they were going through, how they were suffering hunger and deprivation ever since the Five Year Plan began. All the emphasis was placed on "heavy industry" as everyday needs were neglected. In thinking about what the posters portrayed as compared to the reality of the life I saw all around me, I was reminded of what that quiet man in Odesa – the one who mostly kept silent and only made do with the occasional pertinent remark – had said: "Since they began to carry out the Five Year Plan this entire country of ours has become just like a theatre where the management could care less about the audience, about the people. Simply put, they don't give a hoot about us. On the placards and posters they proclaim they're performing *Hamlet*, a heroic play from the classical repertoire but then they give us *The Two Fools*. What they do is not what they say they are going to do."

My heart was heavy when the train moved out, when we began travelling away from Odesa. I gazed into the darkness outside, for a long time.



CHAPTER XVII

The man with the sack and the man with the shovel

From Odesa I travelled out to Tulchyn¹ – a city I still knew well from the time before I went to America; a city which played a significant role in the famous Khmelnytsky Uprising in Ukraine² and also in the revolutionary struggle of the Decembrists in 1825.

It was already late at night when I embarked on the train. My heart was heavy. I still couldn't forget the great destruction I had seen in Odesa. It was also difficult for me say goodbye to the people there who I knew remained in the iron vise of a dark life, with no today and nothing but speculation about tomorrow.

I couldn't sleep the entire night. I kept waking up, hearing the clanging of the wheels when the train was running and the voices of people at the train stations whenever it stopped. When the light of dawn came I got up and, resting my face against the sealed window, looked out at harvested fields. Off in the distance, I saw a man on another road, dragging himself along somewhere. He was carrying a heavy sack on his shoulders. A man with a heavy sack on his shoulders is the first thing you see in Soviet Russia, as soon as you open your eyes in the morning and take a look outside. You saw someone just like him everywhere, in the streets, at the train stations, on all the roads and lanes.

¹ A town in Ukraine's Vinnytsya *oblast*, about 350 km to the southwest of Kyiv.

² A Cossack rebellion against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1648–1657 which led to the formation of a Cossack Hetmanate on Ukrainian lands, under the command of Bohdan Khmelnytsky.

As soon as night ended and morning arrived, on a distant road, you'd see a Russian man walking, with a heavy sack on his shoulders. You knew that somewhere, in some small, crowded house, he had woken up from sleep even while it was still night, had picked up the sack and then set out on the road. Where was he going? Where was the man with the sack dragging himself? That was not entirely clear, probably not even to him. But he went, because hunger drove him. He was looking for something because he had nothing.

The train stopped at the small station in the town of Kodyma³. From a distance, in the grey dawn, it looked even bleaker and darker than it used to be. Passengers with heavy packs and bundles hurried to the train wagons. Then, just after the train began to move, I heard the groaning of a woman and then a man's voice, coming from the next compartment.

Their door was open so I went in to see what was happening. A peasant woman in a heavy fur coat and with a shawl on her head was lying on the bench seat, which serves by day as a place to sit and by night as a place to sleep. Next to her stood a peasant man – flustered and upset since he didn't know what to do for his sick wife, who kept groaning, so obviously in pain that it practically tore your own heart out.

This was the first time in Soviet Russia, in this “Republic of Workers and Peasants,” that I saw a peasant in a ‘soft’ carriage rather than a ‘hard’ one. It was sad to look at this sick woman. She really was suffering badly, groaning and drawing her breath but only with difficulty. Her husband was helpless: “Lie down, lie down!” he said, trying to comfort his sick wife even as she tried to get up, writhing in agony: “Lie still...it will pass.” The sick woman couldn't be still. She kept groaning, breathing heavily, her face as pale as a corpse.

As all of this was going on a conductor came by. Seeing the peasant woman and her man in a special compartment of a ‘soft’ train car he was quite shocked. He apparently hadn't ever expected such a thing,

³ A town in central Ukraine's Odesa *oblast*, part of historic Podolia.

certainly wasn't used to it. He checked their tickets and said: "This is not where you need to be, Citizen...you must move to the 'hard' coach."

"But it's full there," the peasant said, quietly and submissively, then tried to explain: "There isn't any room to sit down there. And see, Citizen, my wife is very sick. Even lying down is difficult for her. She can barely breathe."

"I can't help that," the conductor said, strictly: "Your tickets are for the 'hard' carriage. There is where your place is."

"But, man, find God in your heart," the sick peasant woman rasped: "Can't you see I'm done for?"

"I can't help that," the conductor replied, keeping his eyes turned down, perhaps ashamed of himself. Maybe he too found it hard to witness the suffering and pains of this sick woman. Still, he repeated, and in a commanding tone: "Take your packages and come!" They did, following the conductor off to a 'hard' car, where it was so crowded one could barely find a place to stand. There probably wasn't a single person in that railway coach who would show her much pity. Everyone was used to seeing others struggling, suffering, even dying. Such things didn't just bother anyone, not anymore.

I travelled through Rudnytsia, Kryzhopil and other towns. I still remembered them from long ago. They all looked desolate, dark and neglected – dirty flecks on an unending expanse of Russian broadness. And everywhere, on all the roads and lanes, you saw yet again another man, with the sack on his shoulders, going somewhere. At the station in Zhuravlivka I got off the train. From there I had to travel by "autobus" for 8 *versts*⁴ to Tulchyn. I was told we would "make" this journey in three-quarters of an hour. Then I learned the "autobus" wasn't running because the entire road was covered in snow. Apparently, the barriers placed along the road's edges to keep out the snow had proven to be too low. Although this "plan" for keeping the

⁴ About 8.5 km.

road open had been considered and discussed for a long time, and despite the assurances given about how taking these measures was a certain way for keeping the snow from covering the road, it hadn't worked. I would have to continue my journey on a sleigh, pulled along by 2 starving and shriveled horses that repeatedly paused, too weak to carry on. Yet, here again, I had Russians telling me how they were "catching up with" and would be "overtaking America," as a shabby peasant drove shriveled horses along a difficult and bleak road, all the while shouting: *Hattya, mali!*

"In America," one of my fellow passengers remarked, steadfast and certain of his convictions, "they're surely very envious of us. Right? Over in America, of course, you're not even permitted to speak a free word." The man who said this was not much older than 22 years of age and had never once in his life read a foreign newspaper. Nevertheless, he was certain he knew what was happening in every other country of the world. He continued in this vein: "When an American comes here and wants to share his opinion about our regime he's allowed to write whatever he wants for our newspapers. But when one of our people goes there and wants to submit his opinion about the capitalist order he's not allowed to. They don't even want to listen to our side. Isn't that true, ha?"

When I told him it was not true, he refused to believe me: "You want to persuade me?"

We travelled the entire time on a side road. A little further over, on the left side, you saw two long and tall walls of snow, between which you saw the heads of men carrying shovels on their shoulders. "Where are they going over there?" I asked. "They're going to clear the road for the autobus," was the answer I got. "For several days now they've been bringing people out from the city and villages to clear away the snow."

The men with the shovels, I saw, were walking slowly, showing no eagerness to work. It seemed as if they weren't walking as much as they were just shuffling beside those walls of snow. With such

“momentum,” with such a “tempo,” it would certainly take more than a day to get the road cleared enough for the “autobus” to be able to run from Tulchyn to Zhuravlivka and back. And that’s exactly how it turned out. When I was leaving Tulchyn, 3 days later, the “autobus” still wasn’t running, the men with shovels on their shoulders were still shuffling along and the road remained snow-covered. Speaking about these men with their shovels one of the passengers, a Jew with a short, trimmed beard, said: “You have to admit one thing. In 1919, in the year of the pogroms in Ukraine, we wouldn’t be able to sit calmly on a sleigh, watching peasants coming with shovels on their shoulders.” Someone else agreed: “Yes, the Soviet government restrained them!”

I looked for a long time at the men with the shovels and thought about the large mass grave in my hometown, where 500 Jews were buried – victims of the terrible pogrom Petliura’s gangs made in 1919. In the village of Marusyne, not far from Tulchyn, the road became even worse. We passengers often had to get down and make our way on foot through the mud. When we got to the village you couldn’t see a single house that wasn’t neglected. The peasants we met on the road made an equally unpleasant impression. They wore old, torn and shabby clothing, with straw and rags wrapping their feet. They walked along, gloomy and downcast, most carrying a sack on their shoulders. Everywhere – people with sacks on their shoulders!

Not far from the city the sleigh began to slide downhill. Streams flowing along both sides of this muddy road had carved 2 deep ruts as they dragged along dirt and filth mixed into their waters. Again, we had to disembark the sleigh and walk along the roadsides. At a distance, though, we could just see the city. When the sun came out and began to shine I relished the fresh and healthy air of the countryside and the pleasant sound of these gurgling streams, in otherwise silent Ukrainian fields.

Tulchyn! How many recollections this city dredged up in my memory! Then, just as I arrived at the house where I was going to stay, I heard the shriek of a woman coming from inside. My mother

was the first to run outside. She threw herself on my neck: “My son!”

She knew I had plans to visit Tulchyn but didn't know when. Nonetheless, she had come to wait. “I was heartbroken,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes: “I couldn't sit still, couldn't sleep at night. I felt I must see you again. You see that window over there? I sat there yesterday and was sitting there today, always looking outside for you! My heart told me that today you would come!”

When I was finally sitting with her in the house she laid her head on my shoulder: “My child! My child!”

CHAPTER XVIII

In Tulchyn

1. Workers and their earnings

Tulchyn is one of the towns where you see signs not only of destruction but also of construction. On Lenin Street there are 2 memorial columns, a larger and a smaller one, both still standing to this day¹. In more recent times they've built a lovely "Soviet House" nearby where the activity of various government institutions is concentrated. In Tulchyn there is also a bank, a "Museum of the Revolution," Jewish and non-Jewish schools where all the children learn for free and some small factories and *artels* for all sorts of trades falling under the category of Soviet "light industry."

I was in a few of Tulchyn's factories and *artels* and spoke with the workers. This was actually what I did in most of the cities and towns I visited during my trip across Soviet Russia. I went to see factories and workshops because I was interested in the lives of the people who worked in them. Many factories, especially those in the big cities, made quite the impression. I haven't dwelt on those visits in detail, however, because I am no expert when it comes to industry unlike some other writers who, out of thin air, cast themselves as being knowledgeable of such matters when they write about Soviet Russia. I was interested not so much in how people worked in Soviet Russia as in how the working people lived there.

In a small factory I went to in Tulchyn they make white overshirts.

¹ The larger column was erected in honour of Count Stanislaw Potocki, a local magnate who died in 1805 and the smaller one to mark the visit of a Polish King, Stanislaw II August Poniatowski, in 1787.

When I was there only a few machines were occupied. The others stood empty. The 2 pressers didn't have a lot to do. They were both standing at a long table and waiting until enough completed shirts had accumulated and were ready for pressing. Altogether, this Soviet small factory reminded me of a small "sweat-shop" in New York in the "good old days" when workers didn't have strong unions. The atmosphere was not so much "in season" as more like "in slack."

I asked why all the machines were not occupied, especially since I kept hearing, all over the country, about how everyone was working. They answered this was because they had not been sent enough material, adding this was quite a regular problem. For more than any other reason work stopped entirely in this little factory because they weren't sent sufficient quantities of raw materials on time. Sometimes when there was enough linen they lacked thread. When there was thread there wasn't enough linen. And when they had both linen and thread something else they needed wouldn't be available. It was no novelty for them when their little factory stopped working, sometimes even right in the middle of things being made. It was like this not only in this factory but also in other workshops I visited. Needed materials weren't sent on time. What was required was not supplied. Whenever that happened the workers were ordered to go home as there was nothing for them to do. When that happened the workers received only a very small portion of their wages. Those were not much to start with, certainly not enough to live on, even for those used to poverty. In Tulchyn I met workers who got 60, 70, 80 and even 100 rubles a month. In American money that amounts to between \$7.50 and \$13 a week. Now when I was in Tulchyn the cost of even the basic necessities was very high, with a loaf of bread costing between 12 and 15 rubles!

It also happened, quite often, that weeks went by when the workers didn't get paid wages at all because there wasn't any money in the government bank. The money just hadn't been sent from the Centre. And one must also not forget that from the meagre wages a worker earns a certain percentage is deducted in the form of taxes and national loans. So it's not hard to imagine how a man who works

actually lives in Soviet Russia.

The quantity of bread issued to the workers at a lower price (between 7 and 8 kopecks a pound), for which they still have to stand in line and wait, are insufficient. They have to buy more bread on the so-called “free market.” There a loaf of bread costs between 12 and 15 rubles. Even then bread can’t always be obtained, irrespective of whether you have the money to buy it with.

For a worker in America or in another country the portion of bread given to a worker in Tulchyn or in the other cities of Soviet Russia would perhaps be sufficient. For a Russian worker, however, the ration provided is not enough. Bread is his main food. There’s also a great shortage of other nutritious foodstuffs. The Russian worker doesn’t get enough meat, butter, fat, vegetables or other foods. Bread is sometimes the only thing keeping him alive. When a worker’s wife goes into the Tulchyn hospital, located on Lenin Street, not far from the famous memorial, and sees a wall poster showing all kinds of foods, painted in rich, beautiful shades and colours, captioned with a reminder about how everyone should eat as many vegetables as possible because that is good for one’s health – when she sees that how can she not think of her life as anything but wretched and poor? She feels she is being mocked, something she can’t endure: “As many vegetables as possible!” – where should she get them? Where will she get the money to buy them?

Yet again the same story: bright wall posters and the grey reality of everyday life. That’s how it was in Tulchyn and also how it was in other cities. People lived in two separate Russias: the one shown on posters, the other experienced as reality.

On the walls of the train stations I saw posters reminding people not to litter yet it was difficult to find a single corner that wasn’t dirty. Over a green-painted barrel, standing off to one side, I read a notice saying one should only drink boiled water to protect one’s health. The barrel held not even a drop. The bottom of the barrel was covered in a green mould, teeming with worms.

Another poster portrayed a little wagon being lugged by a shriveled-up horse, barely dragging itself along on a road full of pits and bumps. Underneath a caption read: "This is how people travelled in Russia long ago." On the right side of this same poster a large picture showed an "autobus," with a good-looking and sturdy chauffeur dressed in a smart leather tunic sitting at the wheel, ready to drive you down a broad and well-paved road, nothing impeding your way. Underneath was written: "This is how people travel now!" In truth, when you have to travel these days, you still have to drag yourself from one town to another on carts pulled by skinny, shriveled and starving mares, barely shuffling their feet. Travelling now is often worse than what was depicted on the side of this poster illustrating how people got around in years long past. Actually, much worse these days for the people and their horses are starving. You see the thin bones of the horses poking out and the same on people, barely clothed in tattered rags. Their faces convey desperation and a strange kind of apathy, an emotion all but indescribable. Here they speak and write so nicely about humanity yet they are little concerned, indeed they all but entirely neglect human beings.

I spent an evening at the residence of a worker in Tulchyn. It was so terrible I couldn't understand how anyone could stay there. The most necessary sanitary amenities, without which a person cannot manage, were lacking. In the house it was crowded, dirty and stuffy, the poverty so great it practically screamed out of every corner. There wasn't a piece of bread to quiet one's hunger and everyone, the father, the mother and their children, were dressed in such torn, old and dirty clothes that it was frightful to look at them. "You see," the poor man told me, "this is how a worker lives!"

I knew this poor man well from the days when we both dreamed about a revolution in Russia. For his whole life he had been a worker, as was his father before him. His "social pedigree" was therefore entirely acceptable. He was not descended from the bourgeoisie and one would never think he was, God forbid, an intellectual. There wasn't a mark against him, he was "kosher" in every respect, and once had thought he would live like a human being in a country known as

the “Republic of Workers and Peasants.” Had he not suffered enough, before the Revolution? Did he not dream about how the Revolution would bring him a better life?

“So what happened?” he asked: “Take a look!” He said his wages were 77 rubles a month. Why exactly 77? – he didn’t know. It was not workers who set the wages but management. A worker didn’t have the right to demand more than management determined he would get. “How can I manage on 77 rubles a month?” this worker asked. He told me how raw materials were often lacking at the factory he worked at, were not delivered on time. When that happened, as it often did, he didn’t even get work for the full month. Then they would deduct the time he wasn’t working from his wages, leaving him with even less than the 77 rubles he was supposed to earn in a month. “And that is still not everything,” he gestured: “Sometimes you finish up the month but don’t get paid. You have to wait a week, sometimes even several, because they didn’t send money from the Centre to the Tulchyn bank. There is no one to complain to when that happens.” Other workers told me more or less the same thing. An enlightened Christian, an old revolutionary with whom I spoke about the situation of the workers in the provincial cities and towns of Soviet Russia, shared his views when I was in Tulchyn: “In another country the way they work us and pay wages would be denounced as exploitation. The organized unions wouldn’t just protest, they would fight. In a country where they claim all the factories are running, and talk so much about keeping up a rapid pace of industrialization, about maintaining a high ‘tempo,’ the workers would definitely not tolerate how we are worked and paid. Under the Stalin dictatorship, however, we put up with it because everyone is afraid. You fear if you protest you will be branded a counter-revolutionary.”

As in Trostianets’ so too here, in Tulchyn, many people came around to see me. Everyone pretty much had the same request: “Tell them to save us! Let them know in America that they must help us!” People came to see me from the cities of Ladyzhyn, Bratslav and Haisyn. Wearing tatters and rags, dirty and dejected, poor and downfallen, they begged me to ensure Americans did not forget them. They

needed help. They shouldn't be left to die of hunger. Looking at them, witnessing their downheartedness, I felt these people were almost animal-like. They had been sheltering in lairs for a long time. Now they were showing their wounds to me, a person from another world. Soon, however, they would return to their dens, to wait for someone else to come again, someone before whom they would again expose their suffering.

Among the people I met in Tulchyn there were fully committed Communists and what I would call half-Communists. The Communists were all young people. They didn't complain, quite the opposite. Even though they admitted the situation had grown very difficult in the country, that their needs were great, even that famine held sway, they still expressed the firm hope that everything was someday going to get better.

One evening, when I was sitting in such a circle I was assured that, by the time I got back to America, a social revolution would have broken out there. For them this was as certain as a day is long. They evaluated conditions in America based on what they read in the Soviet press. They couldn't understand why I didn't share their prognosis. One of them, a young man of 30-something years of age, was more emphatic than the others. He always wanted to prove how, in comparison with other countries, the situation in Soviet Russia wasn't bad, certainly was nowhere near as dire as some might say. I was certain he was sincere and truly committed and so I heard him out.

The next day I met him on Lenin Street, not far from the large memorial column where Tulchyn's coachmen still gather to await passengers going to the train station. He seemed overjoyed to see me and insisted I come to his quarters. "Come over," he said: "When else will I have an opportunity to speak with someone from America!" To my great surprise, this man talked entirely differently in his home compared to the previous evening. He spoke about the great famine in the countryside and about his own situation: "I don't live like a human being at all," he complained: "Every day here is a torture for me. My entire life here is hell. Anyone who can get out of here is lucky!"

I let him go on speaking for a long time but later asked: “Tell me, however, I beg you, why did you speak differently yesterday?” He grimaced, smiling bitterly as he answered my question, quietly, looking around carefully to all sides: “My good man,” he said, “how else could I have spoken yesterday, when 2 of the people at the table had been sent intentionally to meet you, to overhear what others were telling you. Now do you understand?”

2. A city of rumours

In Tulchyn, as in many other provincial cities in Ukraine now, it's no novelty to hear someone saying: “Today, 4 people died of hunger” or “yesterday 3 people starved to death.” By now this kind of news barely bothers anyone. They're used to it.

In the few days I was in Tulchyn not a single day passed when I didn't hear such tidings. Wherever I walked, wherever I went, people talked about hunger and want, about sickness and death. They told awful things about a life that had become unendurable, about suffering worse than what one might expect to find in hell.

On the streets I was always bumping into yet another beggar, standing with an outstretched hand: “Give me something! I want to eat!”
“Give me a piece of bread! I'm hungry!”

The majority of these street beggars were women, Jewish and non-Jewish. The Jewish ones stood on Lenin Street, by the walls and fences. They stood quietly, ashamed of their decrepitude, covering their faces with old and torn shawls, seldom speaking a word. Only when someone passed by, dressed a little better than others, would they stretch out a hand to implore. The non-Jewish beggars sat on the ground, some on straw, others on sacks. They pleaded with anyone who walked past. Among them I saw one woman who, in the cold, held a half-naked child on her lap, wrapped in some sort of a torn tunic, pieces of which were coming off.

To see beggars in the streets is not a novelty in any country these days. There are millions of unemployed people and many are driven to beg in the streets. But in Soviet Russia this weighs on you more than anywhere else because you are told there is no unemployment here, that everyone has work. Indeed they assure you of that, wherever you go. So then where do so many beggars come from? And the most terrible thing is that even those who don't beg look like beggars. They are hungry. They want. They are suffering, even those of them who work hard.

You cannot live in Soviet Russia unless you take hope from theories. Simple folks are told that, however harsh these current conditions are, they must bear up so that future generations will not have to suffer, will be much better off. That is the theory. What a person actually knows is that daily life is very hard. He doesn't see any way out of it, not by tomorrow, nor anytime soon. In fact, things seem to be getting worse, ever worse. When he tries to understand the theoretical explanations they keep trying to bang into his head a question takes shape in his mind: "This new order was supposed to abolish poverty. They certainly have abolished wealth. Why has that made everyone poor?" That is just the sort of straightforward question a simple Russian fellow poses. People of that sort are the great majority of the population of Soviet Russia. They live in the villages, in the cities, everywhere, and they are dying of hunger everywhere. They don't want to starve. If it wasn't for this push to build, if work was just kept within the limits of the possible, if so much grain was not being exported, then they, the people, would be spared from dying of hunger, wouldn't be having the very skin peeled from their backs. Who can reprimand them for not wanting to starve to death?

Someone came from a nearby town to Tulchyn to receive a greeting I had brought from his friends in America. "I was once a Bolshevik," he said "and I still believe the world is heading towards socialism. But the way this is being done here is criminal. The methods used don't conform with the ideals. They've brought misfortune to the entire country. All of us have been led to the threshold of an abyss.

Yet before the world they still speak about the beauty and greatness of the Communist ideal and of socialist construction. With their talk all they are doing is deluding people who are true idealists. They are being deceived here and abroad too.”

You could see right away this person wasn't only resentful but disappointed, disillusioned. He believed the path to socialism should humanize, not brutalize, the world. He knew there were many obstacles on the road to socialism. Those would have to be overcome. However, just like millions and millions of others in Soviet Russia, he could not agree with the methods being taken there to achieve socialism. “This is not the way!” this man said emphatically: “The way they are going about things is possible only in Russia, certainly in no other country. Peter the Great tried to civilize Russia using savage means. Now Stalin is doing the same, trying to socialize Russia with barbarian means.”

Someone else present, a man familiar with the history of revolutions, made this remark: “History takes its own path and it plays pranks. The ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau were delivered into the hands of Robespierre, the ideals of Karl Marx into the hands of Stalin. History is mischievous!” You can't fault these men for speaking this way. Not only have their hopes been dashed but they have become mad. Hungry people can't be otherwise.

In Tulchyn, by day and night, people fear thieves. This isn't because the city is full of criminals. It's because there are so many hungry people. The city is also rife with rumours, passed mouth to mouth. Nobody can say anymore what is true and what is not. This hearsay always revolves around one main theme: hunger. People are lonely and desperate, they think of themselves as being lost in a dense forest, stumbling around, searching for a path out, fearful.

Someone stops someone in the street and tells them how they heard from someone else that “In Bratslav, hungry peasants blew up the grain storehouses at night and took as much as they could.”

Another one claims: “In Haisyn, starving peasants called upon the Jews to blow up the grain storehouses, just like happened in Bratslav.” “Yes, yes,” someone adds: “This really happened in Haisyn. The peasants said to the Jews that if they didn’t do as asked it would mean they wanted things to remain as they are. If so they’d get revenge on them when the time came.”

“And there’s unrest in Ladyzhyn.”

“There have been protests in Nemyriv.”

That’s how rumours circulate, perhaps true stories, perhaps not. Nobody knows for certain and nobody can figure things out. The newspapers simply don’t write about such things, don’t report any of this at all. So, not surprisingly, the people talk, tell each other what they’ve heard. Everyone is desperately trying to find some way out of the terrible situation they are in, conditions they can no longer endure. They feel something must happen soon, indeed will soon happen, and thus they cling to rumours about blown-up grain warehouses in Ladyzhyn, Haisyn, Bratslav, Nemyriv and other cities. Bread is the only thing they can think about for they are all starving. Meanwhile in Tulchyn soldiers march and sing songs along Lenin Street.

3. Little things that make life miserable

In Tulchyn, and other provincial towns, you can see how difficult life has become for people, and not just the big picture but in the little things of everyday life.

Just like in the old days, sanitary conditions are unimaginably bad. There isn’t any place to wash or bathe when necessary. Simply put, there are also no public toilets. Willingly or unwillingly one is reminded of how the Russian poet, Sergei Yesenin, observed that the trouble with Russia was that it had far too many palaces and far too few outhouses.

People get ill because of this. Their most intimate lives grow ugly. They feel ashamed before themselves and others. They feel like pigs. They are embarrassed. It is quite unpleasant to become aware of the stench surrounding your own body. This offends and humiliates a person, evokes a disgust one cannot free oneself from. People come to regard themselves as being little different than cattle and pigs. So when a foreigner comes, from a civilized country, and sees that the most necessary sanitary facilities are not available, yet there is a radio in the house, he is puzzled. A foreigner just can't understand why people don't have what they most need while something they don't really need as much is readily at hand.

When the visitor then hears someone speaking on the radio about the need for "voluntary work without pay," how this must be done in order to catch up with and overtake America in both technology and civilization, things seem even stranger, what he's seeing becomes even less understandable. He simply cannot match the grey reality of daily life with the grand vision being boasted about. When he asks why there isn't proper plumbing in the city at a time when there is a "Museum of the Revolution," a "Soviet Palace" and a "Lenin Monument," he's told they haven't got time to attend to such trifles. He cannot understand this. He is puzzled about why they keep forcing starving people to work at a rapid pace in order to overtake America and the rest of the world.

I came across small things I found odd and incomprehensible. In one place I saw a large wall mural. Its message was that people shouldn't throw away their old and torn shoes. Instead, those should be handed in to the "Scrap Department." The mural was richly coloured and portrayed someone throwing old, torn and worn-out shoes into a kind of machine. At the other end, new, intact and beautiful shoes were coming, a delight to see. This was, of course what you saw on this poster. On the street very few people actually had shoes that were whole. Wherever you went, you saw people wearing split, old and well-used shoes or boots that should have been thrown away long ago but hadn't been. There aren't any to replace them with.

In the post office I saw how people came in to make use of a little brush with glue to seal the letters they had written. Russian envelopes, made from very bad paper, don't seal themselves. So you go down to the post office and get a little brush and some glue and do it yourself. Very often one has to wait for the use of that little brush because others are also there to do the same thing. Of course, only the One God knows why they even bother to seal letters, especially those being mailed to America or other countries. Everyone speaks quite frankly about how the majority of such letters are opened and examined. Every little thing is a problem, nothing is easy, even as simple a matter as posting a letter.

The powers-that-be do not consider, indeed don't make any effort to think about, the convenience of the individual. So, at every step, one bumps into a thousand small things that make life difficult and sorrowful.

Another example: In Tulchyn, as in other towns, the *Tserabkoops* (Central Workers Cooperatives) had all sorts of winter merchandise available in the summer while in winter they had a great deal of summer merchandise. So the wintertime shelves were well-stocked with thin cambric² while in the summer there was lots of thick baize³ that nobody needed at that time of year. They told me another story. In a town not far from Tulchyn people had been waiting a long time for galoshes. When, after a lot of fuss and bother, and a long wait, a container of galoshes finally arrived they weren't of any use. They were all for the left foot only. Someone, apparently, had received an order from somewhere else to send out such-and-such a number of pairs of galoshes to such-and-such a city and to also send another city the same number of pairs of galoshes. So he sent the one city galoshes for the left foot and the other city galoshes for the right foot.

They claim, in Tulchyn and also in other cities, that this is the work of *shkidnyks*, of wreckers determined to undermine the Soviet system. Sometimes this may be true. The Soviet government does have enemies, even in its own ranks, even among those who cover

² A lightweight, closely woven linen or cotton fabric.

³ A coarse woollen material resembling felt.

themselves with a Communist mantle. Yet one need not blame *shkidnyks* for everything. Very often what happens does only because of what is referred to in Russian as *khalatnost*'. It is ordinary Russian incompetence, a Russian disorder. They don't have any connection with the work they're doing. So they toss everything together, a hodgepodge, then just shrug and say "someone somewhere else will make sense of it." To this add also the fact that personal initiative has been taken away. A person doesn't have any interest in doing their work well or with any precision. The main thing is only how he behaves at meetings. As long as he is certain of that he's not worried about how he works. He only needs to pretend he is doing something. So he rushes around and issues a command: "Send a container of galoshes to this city and ship another one out to this other city!" He doesn't bother to check these galoshes are actually sent out in pairs. So one city ends up getting a container of galoshes – all the right ones while another city gets a container of galoshes – all the left ones. There is no order or oversight to any of it.

Even Soviet newspapers complain about this lack of order and discipline. What is harder to comprehend is why Communists in America, and none other than those who have worshipped all sorts of false idols, don't work themselves up into a great rage over just how incompetent the current order is?

When you see the little things that make the life of a person in Soviet Russia unhappy you get the feeling that somewhere there must be a malevolent joker of some sort, peering in through a crack, delighted with the tricks he is playing, and the ones he keeps thinking up, leaving people shaking in a cold sweat, toiling and suffering. That's the kind of impression you're left with.

4. Mothers

Among those who came to meet me in Tulchyn, there was an old Jewish woman who had children in America. Dressed like a beggar, despondent, she explained her children wanted her to come to visit them in America. "They insist I go there," she said, "but I'm

not allowed out of here.” She told me the same thing several times, adding: “Do you wonder why I’m not allowed out? Ask. They say I am ‘urgently needed’ here. Does anyone really need me here? I’ll be damned if I know why I’m not allowed out!”

This poor mother, with her children in New York, couldn’t understand why she had to remain behind in Tulchyn. Other mothers felt the same way. They were hungry, dragged themselves around the streets like lost souls. When a letter came from America they’d run to get someone to read it for them, once, or twice, even three times. They sent their blessings over the sea to their distant children: “May they have long lives there! May they never know from anything bad!”

They were resigned in the knowledge that their lives would pass by without joy or happiness for they were not allowed to leave Soviet Russia. So they wished their children in faraway lands would be happy and not experience anything bad. Yet they were uneasy. They had heard these were not the best of times in America, not anymore. When anyone from America actually showed up they’d run to ask: “Tell us,” they’d plead: “is it really true that in America people are dying in the streets of hunger, just like here? Is it really the case that it’s even worse over there than here? If they can’t send any money now, then – at least a small letter! Let them write! Let them never know from anything bad!”

In Tulchyn there were not only mothers who had children in America but also children who had mothers in America. A couple came to visit me one evening. The husband had a request. Without fail I must meet his mother, in Brooklyn, and do everything possible to “knock the madness out of her head.”

“What kind of madness?” I asked. “You understand,” he began, then told this story: “My mother has already been in America for many years. She has children and grandchildren there. Life is quite good. Now just take a look at this card she sent. She is dressed like a noblewoman and looks so pretty and healthy it’s a pleasure to look at her. However she has somehow become obsessed with the idea

that she must return here. You understand? This is madness – she actually wants to return here! She thinks she’s urgently needed! She writes that in America she doesn’t have a home but thinks she would have one here. I beg this of you. You have seen everything here with your own eyes. You have seen how we’re suffering. Please tell her the truth. See to it that she never comes back.”

Several older women were in the house as he was speaking. They had brought the addresses of their children in America. Listening to what the man was saying they shook their heads as one of them said: “What a world – here mothers are trying to go there and over there mothers want to come here.”

It’s no longer the case that mothers in America are held back if they want to travel to their children in Soviet Russia. They’re allowed to come if they want. Mothers from Soviet Russia, however, are not allowed out. They can’t go to see their children in America because of the hard times that supposedly exist there. When you hear that it is quite impossible to forget the naïveté of the poor mother who believed she was prevented from leaving because she was “urgently needed” where she was.

5. A truth felt only later

I once spent an evening in Tulchyn in the company of some very interesting young people. Several Communists were present and everyone listened attentively as I spoke about the impressions I had after journeying through various regions of Soviet Russia. They admitted there was widespread incompetency, said this was a characteristically Russian trait, and even agreed the present-day situation was very bad.

“All this is true,” said one of them. He appeared to be a very honest and serious person. “This is the reality of our day-to-day lives. We have, however, another truth. We know this from theory. Even foreign guests who leave and get away from the sorrowful reality of what they see here begin to understand. You see those of us who are truly

loyal and devoted Communists know and have grown used to what is not right about the here and now. However, we don't live for that, we don't live for today. We are here for what will come tomorrow!"

This man spoke a little too abstractly but continued to further elaborate on this perspective: "This," he said, "explains why many people who left Russia, who fled from the Revolution and went to other countries, have since become strong supporters of ours. Even from afar they feel the truth of our theory, the truth of socialism. It is, of course, your truth as well. You just don't agree with our methods, with the way in which we're building socialism. Well, let history judge us!" That's how he ended his remarks, perhaps because no one responded. Later, while we were taking a long walk on Tulchyn's main street, he said to me: "One thing I will admit to you. I believe in your friendship, and that of others like you, for Russia. I know how you anguish over the sorrowful realities of life here. I don't, however, believe that those who come here and seem utterly inspired by everything they see or hear are our genuine friends. The truth is that the fate of Soviet Russia actually doesn't mean much to them. Generally, they aren't really concerned about what happens to us."

This man spoke sincerely. Something in his pleasant character, in his tone of voice, drew him to you. When we parted company he shook my hands warmly and said: "Let's hope a time will yet come when we realize that it's precisely those people who criticized us but did so constructively who were our real friends. Someday we will realize this: that those who felt pain at seeing how we live our lives, who called out the truth about it, were our true friends."

I met with this man several times. I very much liked to hear his views. Yet every time we spoke he would only talk theoretically. He seemed to be afraid to touch on reality. He avoided speaking about it. Just like his pious grandfather of long ago he was preoccupied only with the *oylem-habe*⁴. As for the *oylem-haze*, the world in which he lived, it seemed not to matter, not for him.

⁴ "The world to come."

On one occasion we were together with a group talking about how everything was being taken away from the peasants in the villages. Someone said: “This is the fault of Soviet officials who are too zealous about demonstrating their ‘energetic work.’ This kind of official gets sent into a region. He has no clue about agriculture. So he asks how much grain was exported from this region a year ago. Then, all by himself, he decides that if the locals are just ‘urged on a little’ they can surely export twice as much from the same region this year. So, to show off, he reports to the Centre, submitting doubled-up figures that he has set, all by himself. On the basis of such exaggerated reports from local Soviet officials a declaration is then issued to the effect that the country will export such-and-such an amount of grain that year. When it later turns out that reality doesn’t correspond with the submitted figures it is the peasants whom they skin alive.”

Another man told this story: “Not long ago a friend of mine in the *Komsomol* was sent together with others out into the villages. She was to speak with the peasants, to convince them to give away whatever they might still have and to then get to work sowing the fields. She saw terrible scenes of want and poverty and hunger in the villages and told me all about it. In nearly every house, she said, people were lying about, swollen from hunger. In one house where she began to speak about how they should be delivering more grain to the State, about how they needed to start plowing and sowing, a poor peasant woman, starving, angry, got down from her bed. Pinching the girl’s cheek and hard, she said: *Harno ty, divchyna, hovorysh, luchshe by tak zhe harno robyla* (Easy for you to say, girl, but it would be better if you worked as well as you talk). The man ended by saying: “This girl returned home with a swollen cheek. She no longer wants to go out to the villages. She cannot bring herself to harangue people swollen with hunger, agitating and trying to convince them to give up more for the State. She no longer wants to go into the villages!”

The young Communist, the one who spoke so well about theory and ideals and about the truth of what was yet to come, listened to all this, but couldn't keep still. You could see he didn't want the reality that was being described to undermine the ideals in which he believed. When someone else tried to say more about what was going on, he interrupted, waving his hands: "Ech, why speak about such things?!" There are many such young people in Soviet Russia. They don't want to know what is going on. They do not want their ideals to be undone by reality. This is the new piety, a new *oylem-habe*, the one in which they live.



CHAPTER XIX

Under the banner of a beautiful ideal

My mother complained: “Why are you running around the entire time? I’ve barely spoken with you. Think about this: I’ve come all the way to Tulchyn just to see you again. For 23 years I haven’t seen you. My son, I have so much to say. Yet everyone speaks with you, except me.”

My mother was right. She really had not spoken very much with me because I was always busy with others. Even when I didn’t go anywhere people came to me at home. When I was sometimes alone with mother, ready to hear what she had to say, she would just sit with her arms folded and tears in her eyes: “My child, I don’t know how to begin.”

Time passed us by. Everything my mother wanted to say after the many years she hadn’t seen me remained unsaid. “At least, my son, let us get a photograph taken,” she said on one occasion: “When you leave my heart is going to break for, surely, we will never see each other again!”

So we took ourselves off to the official photographer in Tulchyn. His studio was located on the main street, not far from the Lenin Monument. This statue presented the great leader of the October Revolution in one of his most characteristic poses – with a half-open mouth and one hand raised as if he were in the middle of a fervent speech, standing before a crowd. This was the nicest corner of the city. On days off many people could be seen there. In springtime, when the acacias are blossoming, it’s a real pleasure to stroll there

in the evenings. Even in winter, when the trees are covered in snow, the air there is fresh, crisp and invigorating. When you gaze at the snow-covered fields in the distance it seems as if you're cut off from the entire world. You're left thinking about a faraway place, not what you actually see but what you imagine, in the company of people with whom you share fond reminiscences of long ago.

I had this kind of feeling on a lovely late-winter day when I went walking with my mother in this very neighbourhood. It was still light outdoors. For at least a while you could forget about all the troubles you'd had your fill of hearing about. When we got to the photographer's "studio," however, everything went dark before my eyes. Inside looked wet, dirty and muddy. The decorations were old, were crudely painted, ragged. The floorboards were broken and you had to walk carefully so as not to, God forbid, stumble. From a canvas tarp hanging up near the ceiling, supposedly arranged to create the right light and "atmosphere" in this "studio," water kept dripping down, although it hadn't been raining outside. I could see it came from snow that had fallen some time ago but was still lying in piles up on that leaky canvas tarp. Nobody in the "studio" had thought it necessary to clean that melting snow off.

The photographer, a young man with a crossed eye and a white dot in his pupil, began to arrange us in a pose. Covering himself with the black piece of cloth as he prepared to take our photograph he slipped, almost fell. When he finally steadied himself and again looked at us with his crossed eye, he commanded: *Raz, dva, tri, snimaiu!* (*One, two, three, I'm taking it!*). But just then, at the very moment he was ready to take our photograph, a drip from above fell on one of us. Our pose disrupted, the shot was spoiled. This happened several times: *Raz, dva, tri, snimaiu!* But it dripped, yet again.

When we returned to the house where I was staying there were people already waiting for me. Again more stories about hunger and need, more stories about unbounded suffering. Everyone was complaining and desperate. Even when they weren't speaking their silence was like a lament, powerful enough to split the heavens. Among the people

who came to meet me was a tailor, once the best in the city. Yet he was dressed very poorly and groaned about how he didn't have any work: "There's nobody to sew for," he said: "everyone is poor, nobody gets new clothes made. So, in my old age, I have become a mender. There isn't anything to eat." While speaking like this he rather unexpectedly, but thoughtfully, examined my suit. Tugging skillfully with a finger at one of my lapels, in a manner typical of a professional tailor, he said: "Hm... what a piece of merchandise! It's a pleasure to touch!" As if he were measuring me for this suit he began to spin me around, every which way, with a tug here, a stroke there. The tailor in him, once known as the city's best, revived. Sighing heavily, he reflected: "You know making a living is a living but it's a pleasure to work with something fine. Oh, to live long enough to again hold such a good quality piece in one's hands!"

These last few days in Tulchyn were difficult. These were the final days of my visit to Soviet Russia. I knew I was scheduled to depart long after midnight. "Get back quickly," my mother said, although it was difficult for her to say goodbye: "I'm afraid the war will trap you here." This, "the war," is yet another fear hanging over the heads of the population in Soviet Russia. Everyone believes a war will break out soon, that the entire world is out to strangle Soviet Russia. They have been thinking like this for years already.

I still couldn't get to the train station by "autobus." The men with the shovels whom I had seen on the road into Tulchyn, several days ago, still hadn't cleared away the snow. That meant I had to hire a sleigh. When I asked my coachman how long it would take to make the 8 *versts* to Zhuravlivka he answered this would depend not on him or his horses but on the condition of the road. "It could," he said: "take 2 hours but it might take 6 or 7 hours...who knows?!"

Those last few hours with my mother and my sisters, who also came to say their goodbyes, were very difficult. We didn't speak much. Whenever I saw the tears in my mother's eyes I approached and embraced her: "Mama, I beg you, don't cry!" My sisters, too – all dear to me even if they were newfound, having been only small children

when I left home so many years ago – I kept embracing and kissing them too. “Don’t cry,” I said: “we will see each other again!” It was so hard, so painfully difficult! My thoughts were muddled. I couldn’t stay calm. We sat inside and listened, aware of every rustle drifting in from outside.

“Shh! It seems the sleigh has arrived!”

It was already past 1:00 o’clock at night when the coachman arrived. “Ready!” he exclaimed, using his whip as he stopped his sleigh by the door. In that moment I heard a powerful sob. My mother couldn’t restrain herself any longer. She lay her head down on the table she was sitting at and burst into tears. She wailed even more as my things were carried out. It was impossible to comfort her. She couldn’t speak. Only a few words remained to her. She repeated them several times: “My child...my child!”

Outside the night was very dark. It felt heavy. The sky was cloudy and a fine rain had begun to drizzle. The entire city was sleeping. No lights shone from any house. All was quiet and dark, a stillness broken only by the muffled cries of mother. When the sleigh began moving, as we went out into the darkness of that night, I kept looking back. I thought I could still see my mother there, standing on the “porch” of that little house in Tulchyn. She was in tears. Next to her were my sisters. They were also crying. They looked toward me as I looked back to where I had left them. We could no longer see each other, not really; the darkness of the night hid us from each other. And the road that took me away from them, just like the road which had brought me to them, was a difficult one – it still hadn’t been cleaned by the men with their shovels.

We travelled for a long time, for a very long time. More than 6 hours went by before we arrived at the station in Zhuravlivka, only 8 *versts* from Tulchyn. We had travelled on snow here, then plodded through mud there. It was a difficult journey, quite strenuous. Yet this Ukrainian night, quiet, yet naturally full of sounds, also brought to mind pleasant memories, even as my heart was filled with a painful longing.

We arrived in Zhuravlivka at 7:00 o'clock in the morning. Just like at the other train stations countless people wandering all about, carrying heavy sacks and packs. Inside, on a wet and filthy floor, lay dirty people – men, women and children. There wasn't anywhere to sit or anywhere to lie down. So they shuffled around the entire night, waiting for a train, with no certainty of being able to catch one because even the trains which did run were already packed up with other misfortunate people – people running wherever their eyes carried them, trying to find a piece of bread. People selling their last possessions, doing anything they had to do to quiet their hunger.

By a table, covered with heavy sacks and parcels, sat exhausted people. Near them stood a man who said that in Moscow you could get bread and not only black but also white bread. He also said it was “not expensive” – no more than 8 rubles for a loaf. While saying so he took a long loaf of bread out of his satchel. It was supposed to be white but was, in truth, rather dirty and black. For this loaf he said he paid 8 rubles, several days ago in Moscow. He was bringing it home to Vinnytsya. When these starving people saw this “white bread” they threw greedy glances in his direction. You might say they ate this “white bread” with their eyes. Almost immediately a young peasant woman, in torn clothing and carrying a half-naked child in her arms, approached the man. Stretching out her hand, she implored him: “Citizen, have pity, give me a piece of bread, I'm hungry and my child is starving.” Taking a small knife from his pocket this good man, although with trembling hands, cut a small slice of bread for this woman and her half-dressed child. Then someone else approached him, and then another, and all made the same request: “Give me a piece of bread!” And this good man did. He cut several more slices from this loaf and fed others. But you could see how his hands were trembling. Realizing just how many people were approaching him to beg for bread he put what was left back in his satchel. “Citizens,” he said: “I am also hungry and I have a wife and children at home who must eat too.”

As usual, it was difficult to get a ticket and a confirmed seat. It was only after I showed the stationmaster my American passport that he

got me both and in a 'soft' coach. Indeed he treated me well. When my coachman accidentally broke a windowpane as he was placing my suitcase into the train carriage this stationmaster assured me, several times, that I wouldn't have to pay for the damages: "You, Comrade Foreigner," he said, "are not responsible. Your driver will have to pay for the broken glass." I didn't listen to him, however, and slipped the coachman some extra money to take care of the damage.

Like most stationmasters in Russian train stations, the one in the Zhuravlivka train station was very flustered and nervous. He couldn't find any solution for taking care of all the people wandering around the station day and night. He always seemed to be telephoning someone else to find out if he could actually sell tickets for the train going to Shepetivka¹, that is to the border. The answer he always got was that all the trains were packed, that he shouldn't sell any more tickets.

When the train arrived, and I went up on the platform to get into the 'soft' wagon I was directed to, I saw the same young peasant woman, still holding her half-naked child, trying to cling to the handle on the stairs of a train car. Desperate, she grasped it firmly while muttering like someone who is very confused: "What may be will be but I'm staying here!" Pitifully, but with the gentleness of a mother, she held her child to her breast. It did no good. An official came by. Spying her there, he tore her from the stairs, using all his strength to throw her off the train: "There are no places here!" he yelled. When she began to cry, he pointed out the stationmaster at a distance and said only he could help her: "Go speak to him, to that man, the one wearing the red hat!" In tears, still clasping her child to her breast, the young mother ran to the stationmaster. At just that moment the train began moving. She and her child were left behind. I witnessed this sad scene. When I then entered the train compartment I was bewildered, couldn't believe my own eyes, for the compartment was quite empty. I was the only passenger in it. "How can this be?" I asked myself, quite alone in this car. I couldn't help but think about all the people I had seen wandering at the train station in Zhuravlivka, and

¹ A town on the Huska River, now in the Khmelnytsky *oblast* of western Ukraine.

at other Russian train stations, spending days and nights waiting to try and get on board. “Is this neglect or Russian ineptitude or just something no person in this world can understand? What is going on? If you aren’t one of the fools or one of the deceived and dazzled ones who just go along with everything that happens or is done in Soviet Russia, how can you explain this?”

This took place on the last day of my journey around Soviet Russia. Sitting as I was in an empty train car I thought about the thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands, of destitute, starving and misfortunate people I had seen spending days and nights in the filth and dirt of overcrowded train stations. I thought about everything I had witnessed and heard during my trip to Soviet Russia – remembering the good and the bad things. Everything came back to my mind, stood clearly before my eyes, I experienced it all again – and as one of them, not as a stranger!

The good and the bad: the good is the ideal, the theory. The bad is the reality, daily life. My heart grew heavy!

I went to Soviet Russia with good intentions. I didn’t arrive with any illusions. I expected life there would be difficult. I knew it was not going to be easy to create a new order in a country not industrially developed. Yet nothing I could have imagined was even one hundredth as bad as what I saw there, in real life! This was no life. This was a nightmare, an evil dream become real!

The further the train raced toward the border the sadder I grew. I wished then, and still do, that I had been fortunate enough to return to America bearing a happy report about the bright lives of people in Soviet Russia. Instead I carried back tales about lives that had grown dark, were sometimes even worse than death.

I asked the conductor when we would be arriving in Shepetivka, at the border. “That depends on circumstances,” he replied: “To our great shame we are sometimes a few hours late. When that happens our passengers must spend the night in Shepetivka because the train

that goes abroad doesn't wait."

The train I was on didn't move. It crawled. And yet someone was always going on about how they were catching up to and would be overtaking America!

I spent most of my time looking out of the train window. The entire time we were travelling I couldn't tear my eyes away from the Ukrainian fields and forests for they had always been so very dear to me. Every city and town, every station and terminal, brought back many memories. I felt so close to all this, was here as one of them. For I grew up here, had lived and dreamed here. We passed Vinnytsya where my father had once served in the army. Even years after his service was over, he often told stories about his army *sluzhba* (service). We, his children, listened attentively even if we didn't fully understand everything he said.

Then we came to Zhmerynka, renowned for its beautiful train station. I had once waited here, in fear, for at that time I was fleeing Czarist Russia. Next came Kaziatyn, where once I had also waited several hours for a train. Then came Berdychiv. A very important episode in my life was connected with this city. So I got off when the train stopped. Walking around on the large platform at the train station I saw 2 people, off in the distance. Getting closer I heard them speaking Yiddish between themselves. So I paused and tried to start up a conversation: "Are there many Jews in Berdychiv? How is their life here?" One of them glanced at me, in amazement, saying: "Listen. We're afraid of you. Why are you asking us questions? What do you want to know? Why do you need to know any of this?" I reassured these men. I told them I was from America and was returning there. They needn't fear me. I also explained how I once had friends in Berdychiv, whose names I mentioned. After I had gradually won their trust I again asked these terrified men what their lives were like. Holding out his hands one of them quietly and sadly said: "You ask how life is? Take a look at us. See for yourself." One look at these men was sufficient for me to see what life was like, how misfortunate they were. Both were dressed in torn sacks, pieces of which were hanging

off. On their feet they had old worn-out shoes, wrapped together with straw and rags. Their faces were wrinkled, dark and sunken-in. In their hands each held an old broom. "Why the brooms?" I asked these poor men. "We work here, in the train station," one answered: "We sweep up the rubbish." As they were speaking one of them burst into tears, crying like a child. He was ashamed of himself for doing so but cried nonetheless. With halting words, which poured from his heart, he spoke of how there wasn't any bread in his house, how he and his wife and their children were dying of hunger. "We're being spent like candles," he said as tears streamed from his eyes: "We have no strength left. We can't endure more. When will this all come to an end? Will things finally, ever, get better?" Then the other man, leaning against his broom, added: "The strings are already too tightly wound. Let just one break and then watch how the people here will cut each other's throats."

I went back into my train compartment and as this train kept on, sped past familiar Ukrainian fields and forests, I couldn't stop thinking about what the man in rags with the broom in his hand had prophesized: "Let just one string break and then watch how people here will cut each other's throats." So much hatred and anger, bitterness and malice, have accumulated. They don't believe each other. Everyone is suspicious of everyone else. Everyone hates the other!

We arrived at the border, to Shepetivka, and were on time. There weren't many people at this train station. The customs agents and armed guards of the GPU inspecting passports were all very helpful and courteous to the foreigners returning home.

Large posters adorned the walls all around. They proclaimed:

"Workers of the World unite!"

"Throw Off the Yoke of the Capitalist Order!"

"Lead the Entire World to the October Revolution!"

Again, I saw a beautiful Soviet Russia, the one depicted on murals and posters. Now, however, I knew that Russia doesn't match reality. These banners no longer made the same impression as they had when I first arrived at the border in Niegoreloie, nor when I go to the Briansk railway terminal in Moscow. They were no longer effective, not after what I had seen of Soviet reality.

The next morning I was already in Warsaw, getting ready to travel onward to Berlin, then Paris. Still, I felt a great weight bearing down upon me. I couldn't speak about anything except what I had seen and heard in Soviet Russia. Before me rose up images of want, hunger, despondency, a world of grey and bleak things, a world in rags. I had absorbed these dreadful scenes, had taken them into my very blood. Perhaps these images will remain within me for the rest of my life. I find it quite impossible to just forget the great tragedy that is the life of a human being in Soviet Russia today. You just can't, not if you have a heart and a soul!

I tried to think about the good side of what I'd seen in Soviet Russia. I thought about the many idealists I met, people who truly are sacrificing their lives because they believe in a better future to come. I thought about great Soviet achievements in the domains of industry and culture and in other fields, accomplishments certainly worthy of praise. Then I remembered what a woman who was once active in the revolutionary cause, who had always been ready to sacrifice her life for the Revolution, said to me in Moscow: "Now we are all rotting under the banner of a beautiful ideal."



Acknowledgements

On 17 December 2018 the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter circulated a commentary by Professor Wolf Moskovich, describing a Yiddish-language book authored by Mendel Osherowitch, *How People Live in Soviet Russia: Impressions from a Journey*.¹ Despite its title, as Dr. Moskovich underscored, this book dealt less with Soviet Russia than with daily life in Soviet Ukraine. More specifically, it reported on conditions in the early months of 1932, just as Great Famine of 1932-1933, the *Holodomor*, was beginning.

Resolving to rescue this rare eyewitness account from obscurity, the first and most obvious ‘problem’ was finding someone capable of translating a book available only in the original Yiddish-language edition. This chore was ably accomplished by Sharon Power, whose work was made possible thanks to the generosity, goodwill, and encouragement of Karen and Russ Chelak.

Welcome assistance was also provided by Dr. Vassili Schedrin, a postdoctoral fellow in Jewish Studies at Queen’s University, who reviewed the Hebrew and Yiddish terms in the text. Professor Victoria Khiterer, at the Department of History of Millersville University, added pertinent details about the Jewish history of Trostianets,² Osherowitch’s Ukrainian birthplace.² Professor Ellen Kellman, of the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University, translated key paragraphs about Osherowitch’s mission,

¹ Accessed at <https://ukrainianjewishencounter.org/en/jewish-american-writer-mendel-osherowitzs-impressions-of-his-trip-to-ukraine-in-the-winter-of-1932/>

² See her entry on “Trostianets, Podolia,” in *Jewish Places in the Ukraine: A Historical Guide*, Volume 2, (Alexander Gherst, St. Petersburg, 200), translated by Petko Petkov, 2010, accessed at https://www.jewishgen.org/Ukraine/PTM_Article.asp?id=21

found in David Shub's Yiddish-language memoir, *From Years Past*, and Ms. Rivka Schiller provided additional information from relevant files found at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, in New York. Fordham University's Professor Daniel Soyer obligingly answered questions about Jewish-American interest in the Soviet experiment during the interwar period and kept helping as the project unfolded.³ David Mazower, a bibliographer and editorial director of the Yiddish Book Center, in Amherst, Massachusetts, suggested additional sources of information about Osherowitch's life and career. And, in the autumn of 2019, Mihail Potuptchik and Solomiya Khoma visited Trostianets' to photograph (p. 65) the memorial hallowing victims of the 1919 pogrom, on the very site where Osherowitch paid his respects in 1932. For more information on the Trostianets' program see Elissa Bemporad, *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms, and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets* (Oxford University Press, 2019), particularly chapter 3 (pp.57-87), "The Pogroms as Soviet (Jewish) Sites of Memory."

Jennie Perka kindly helped ready this manuscript for publication and Dan Graham saw this project through to publication with his usual attention to detail.

The Mendel Osherowitch Papers are located at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, in New York City (RG 725 - Series VII, Photos 1882-1963, Boxes 37 and 38), including photographs reproduced here (pp. 4, 42, 56, 96, 314) with permission. These files were donated by his wife, Sonia, and their daughter, Edith Rosenberg. Some of the latter's notations, along with facsimiles from the original book, *Vi Menshen Leben in Sovet Rusland*, are included in this edition, (pp. 108, 160, 205) offering readers a glimpse into the now largely-vanished diasporic community Mendel Osherowitch knew and worked within.

Photographs of conditions in Soviet Ukraine found at pp. iii, 118, 152, 186, 210, 264, 288, 298, were taken from Alexander Wienerberger, *Hart auf hart: 15 Jahre Ingenieur and Sowjetrußland*

³ See Daniel Soyer, "Back to the Future: American Jews Visit the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s," *Jewish Social Studies*, Volume 6.3 (2000), pp. 124-159. Helpful historical context can also be found in Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917-1930* (Princeton University Press, 1972).

- *Ein Tatsachenbericht* (Anton Pustet: Salzburg & Leipzig, 1939) and are reprinted through the courtesy of Samara Pearce, his great-granddaughter.

The original Yiddish-language edition of *How People Live in Soviet Russia: Impressions from a Journey* can be found on-line thanks to the remarkable efforts of the National Yiddish Book Center, one of the holdings of the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library (No. 05995).⁴

The stanza found in Chapter Eleven is excerpted from the poem by Hayim Nahman Bialik, *City of the Killings*, in *Songs from Bialik*, ed. and trans. Atar Hadari (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 5).

Grants from the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter, the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Foundation, the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta) and the Ucrainica Research Institute supported publication of this English-language edition and its distribution to selected libraries internationally. The editor's work was partly supported by the Canadian Defence Academy Research Programme (CDARP). I am grateful to Jars Balan, Marta Baziuk, Irka Mycak, Raya Shadursky and Raymond Wowk for their assistance and, as usual, to Professor Paul Robert Magocsi, Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto, a sage counsel.

The final word of thanks belongs to Professor Wolf Moskovich. His words were the genesis of this project. Unexpectedly, he then found himself asked to shepherd the manuscript along, a chore he accepted and diligently accomplished. Without his assistance it is unlikely Mendel Osherowitch's testament would ever have been heard of again.

Lubomyr Luciuk
17 December 2019
Kingston

⁴ The Yiddish-language edition can be accessed at The Yiddish Book Center's Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc205995/osherowitch-mendel-vi-menshen-leben-in-sovet-rusland-ayndruken-fun-a-rayze>

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About the Author

Mendel Osherowitch was born on 14 January 1888 in the Ukrainian town of Trostianets'. He emigrated to the USA in 1910 where he began writing for various Yiddish periodicals before joining the staff of *Forverts* (the *Jewish Daily Forward*) in 1914, a position he held until retiring in January 1945. Osherowitch was a Yiddish translator, a playwright, and the author of a number of novels and books, including *How People Live in Soviet Russia: Impressions from a Journey* (1933), an autobiography, *Tales of My Life* (1945), a *History of the Jewish Daily Forward* (1947), *Cities and Towns in the History of the Jews of Ukraine* (1948). Osherowitch helped organize the Federation of Ukrainian Jews, served as president of the I. L. Peretz Yiddish Writers' Union and was a prominent member of the Yiddish PEN Club.



He died on 16 April 1965 in New York City, survived by his wife, Sofia, and their daughter, Edith Fayer (later Rosenberg).

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Overlooked by mainstream scholarship for far too long, Mendel Osherowitch's book, *How People Live in Soviet Russia*, is one of the most penetrating and moving accounts of daily life in Soviet Ukraine during the *Holodomor*. Returning as a visitor after having lived in the USA for many decades, Osherowitch expected to witness his cherished socialist ideals being put into practice. Instead he encountered widespread degradation and the fear infusing the everyday existence of Jews and Gentiles alike. Recording his observations with an uncommon level of understanding and insight, Osherowitch produced a book that sheds a new and unexpected light on the history of the Great Famine of 1932-1933. A must-read.

- Professor Serhii Plokyh, Director, Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University

Mendel Osherowitch's account of his visit to Soviet Ukraine in the early winter of 1932 should not be missed by anyone trying to understand the terrible fate of Ukraine at a critical juncture in its history. His mastery of Ukrainian, Yiddish, and Russian, coupled with a winning personality and unobtrusive style of questioning, made it possible for him to talk with a wide spectrum of Ukrainians, Russians and Jews - in the factories and towns, during long train rides, and in causal encounters. He heard Party bosses and newspaper editors defend the horrific conditions people were living under, insisting it was all worthwhile because of the glorious socialist future as yet to come. Meanwhile, the workers and peasants were left baffled and battered by the emptiness of these Soviet promises.

Investigating the regime's ostensible accomplishments, Osherowitch provides heartrending descriptions of broken and starving men, women, and children, Jews and non-Jews alike, all desperate for a piece of bread, all hoping for succour from a sympathetic foreign visitor. His testimony reveals a deeply disturbing picture of the utter destitution of rural and city life just as the Ukrainian nation began suffering the death throes of extinction from an orchestrated famine.

- Professor Norman M. Naimark, Department of History, Stanford University