Twenty Years in Underground Russia

Memoirs of a Rank-and-File Bolshevik

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I.

My Parental Home. I Go To Warsaw

My father was a small, sickly, grey-haired Jew with lively, kindly eyes. I can picture him bending all day long over huge ledgers in which he counted up the profits of his masters, lumber merchants, who were also his distant relatives and "benefactors," for whom he worked as bookkeeper at 40 rubles a month. In the evenings and far into the night he would also bend over no less voluminous books, the Talmud, in which he vainly sought the meaning of life, the beginning of all beginnings, the blessings of God and other no less hazy things. Buried in his Talmudic and philosophic researches, without so much as raising his eyes from his monumental book, my father would reply awkwardly to the extremely concrete and extremely pertinent complaints of my mother as to how she was to feed and clothe our family of six on 40 rubles a month as well as be burdened with the care of a psychopathic step-daughter, the offspring of my father's first marriage.

My mother was 20 years younger than my father. She was a healthy buxom woman, but illiterate — a true daughter of the soil — interested only in narrow, material, family questions, and her husband's soaring into the clouds often aroused her to the verge of frenzy. The inevitable wrangle usually ended with father taking

his "holy" book under his arm and escaping into the next room, slamming the door behind him. The lock clicked, and through the keyhole one could see his shabby figure bent again over the Talmud and hear the scratching of his pen as he wrote Hebraic hieroglyphics — commentaries on the text. Thus he sat, far into the night, often until dawn. Mother often wept bitterly; I pitied her, but my sympathies were with father, even though I had long ago lost faith in the holiness of the Talmud, and my belief in God had vanished.

Books, which fortunately were brought into our remote little town, Velizh, in the Vitebsk province, some 80 versts[1] from the railroad station, by the neighboring liberal landlords and the local teachers, who played the part of Kulturtrager,[2] had helped to wipe out the last traces of my belief in God. These were teachers at the elementary schools, there being no high schools in our town.

I had more than enough time for reading, for I had nowhere to go to gain any further school knowledge. There was no urgent need for my learning a trade since there were more tailors and shoemakers in Velizh than there ever could be buyers. Neither was I overburdened with housework. All the household duties my mother voluntarily took upon herself. Thus I had 24 hours a day at my disposal, the lion's share of which was spent in reading Pisarev, Shchedrin, Chernyshevsky, Gleb Uspensky, Nekrasov, Dostoyevsky, and many others.

[1] A Russian measure of length, about 0.66 mile (1.1 km). — *PFP*

[2] "Carriers of Culture" — those who concentrated on peaceful educational work in contradistinction to revolutionary work. — *Ed.*

Under the influence of books, principally Chernyshevsky's novel, *What Is To Be Done?*, which made a great impression on me, I in my early youth, without education, trade, or training and penniless, decided to leave my parental home and go to Warsaw where I dreamed of studying, working and, most important of all, meeting the kind of people Chernyshevsky wrote about. This happened in the winter of 1894.

I remember that during the first few days in Warsaw I met two of my country-women, young girls like myself, semi-workers and semi-intellectuals. They worked in a lace factory and were at that time connected with illegal workers' circles. After some unsuccessful attempts at learning to sew and to cut, I decided to follow my friends' example and go to work in a factory. The task proved to be far from simple.

Unemployment in Warsaw was very great at that time. Near the factory gates there were crowds of other girls willing to work for the most meager wage. Eventually, after jostling with the crowds of unemployed near the gates of lace, tobacco, cigarette, chocolate and other factories, I had to content myself with work in a small shop. My work was very monotonous: I prepared the pieces from which the more skilful workers made elegant ties. The work day, which was not regulated by any laws at that time,[3] was very long, and the wages

[3]The first law regulating the work day (reducing it to 11-and-a-half hours) appeared only three years later, in 1897, as the result of the big strike movement which swept all the large industrial centers of Russia. But this law pertained only to the larger mills and factories and not to small shops. — *Cecilia Bobrovskaya*

did not exceed eight rubles a month. There were only 20 workers in the shop. Most of the shop girls were obliged to walk the streets in order to earn enough to clothe and feed themselves.

My first attempts at arousing and enlightening my shop-mates came to a lamentable end. I was discharged because, as the mistress of the shop put it, I exercised harmful influence upon the other shop girls. Once more I had to hunt for work. I found a job in another shop where the conditions were even worse than in the first. In general, I had a pretty hard time earning a living. We used to go hungry quite often, even though the cost of living in Warsaw was so low that students we knew who received 25 rubles a month from home were regarded by us as bourgeois.

On the other hand my attempts at studying were very successful. There was an excess of teachers in Warsaw at that time. Many Jewish students came to Warsaw, a big university center within the Pale,[4] in the hope of getting into the university or passing an examination at the gymnasium for four, six, or eight classes. Besides the Jewish students, there were many others who had been expelled from secondary schools on political charges in various Russian cities and who wanted to enter college in Warsaw. These heterogeneous elements flocked to Warsaw because it was easier to enter college there than in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

[4]The Pale of Settlement, or Ghetto — the districts outside of which the Jews were not allowed to reside under the Tsar. — *Ed.*

All these young revolutionary men and women, separated from their native land and unable to participate fully in the surrounding Polish life, owing to their imperfect knowledge of the language, formed a Russian colony in Warsaw. There was a large number of teachers in the colony who were eager for revolutionary work and vainly sought an outlet for their energy. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that I had three teachers at once. One of them introduced me to the theories of Darwin, a second prepared me in political economy, and a third taught me the history of Russian literature. The fact that there were so many teachers to one worker graphically demonstrates what little basis this colony had in Warsaw.

A vast amount of underground revolutionary work was being done among the Polish and the Polish-Jewish proletariat. We knew this work was being carried on, but we were not able to take part in it because the Russification policy of the Tsarist officials in Warsaw was at its height and so everything Russian, even the Russian young men and women who found themselves in Warsaw owing to the vicissitudes of revolutionary life, were regarded with suspicion by the Poles. Hence, to us, underground work was a vain dream for the time being. Nevertheless, despite the unfavorable conditions there was no despondency in our colony; on the contrary, we feverishly groped about for underground-circle activity among the workers and at the same time tried to determine our own "world outlook" as we termed it then.

I remember with what avidity we threw ourselves upon all books and magazine articles which dealt with the controversy between the Marxists and Narodniks. In the colony the majority, and I among them, was on the side of the Marxists. Only an insignificant minority was carried away by the articles in the Narodnik magazine *Russkoye Bogatstvo*.[5] I recollect with what absorbing interest we pored over Struve's book, *Critical Remarks*, which by the way, we read not at all critically. We read and re-read Beltov's (Plekhanov) book, *The Monistic View of History*, collectively and individually. We would sit up late at night at each other's rooms discussing it. A copy of a volume of Marxist essays, containing an article by Tulin (Lenin), which had escaped being burned at the order of the censor and had by lucky chance fallen into our hands, caused a veritable sensation. Since only one copy was available for the entire colony, lots were cast as to who should read it first.

Owing to our estrangement from the Polish underground movement, but mainly due to our lack of organization, we had very poor access to the illegal literature that was printed abroad. Occasionally we would receive illegal literature which had been printed in St. Petersburg, but only single copies. Mostly, this literature consisted of leaflets; very rarely we got pamphlets. Getting supplies of illegal literature in an organized way was out of the question so long as our colony remained a motley, amorphous, and, to tell the truth, a garrulous crowd.

[5] "Russian Wealth." — *Ed.*

The idea of organizing ourselves occurred to us much later. Even then we thought of it in terms of a legal organization, for we thought that the underground and illegal form of organization was only for workers' circles. A small group was formed which set itself the task of organizing our colony. This group organized a dining room which could also serve as a club wherein we could "formulate our world outlook"; it could also be used as the headquarters of illegal workers' circles. We did not disclose these plans to the others, but merely stated that we wished to organize a cooperative dining room because the cheap Polish restaurants served us with bad food dressed with piquant sauces. Our plan was greeted sympathetically. In a few days, 50 members were enrolled, each paying an entrance fee of three rubles.

We found a middle-aged Polish cook who was willing to take over the management of our dining room. We rented an apartment of two rooms and a kitchen in the back of a block on Panskaya Street, bought all the necessary provisions, and began to feed our members with fresh cabbage soup and excellent, buttered buckwheat "kasha" free of all deceiving sauces. Our members were delighted. We waited on our customers ourselves, each one taking his or her turn each day. The person on duty had to report to the cook at 7:00 in the morning so as to help her with the shopping, and also had to wash the dishes, help prepare the meal and finally, serve it. Notwithstanding the innocence of our enterprise the police looked askance at it; they even did us the honor of sending one of their representatives to visit us. But our cook's husband was quite an adept