

MATRYONA'S HOUSE
by
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Translators notes and introduction begin on page 27

Some one hundred and eighty-four kilometers from Moscow, and a good half year after the incident, all trains slowed down their march almost as if groping. The passengers clung to the windows, went out into the vestibule. Were they repairing the tracks or what? Was the train off schedule?

No. Having gone beyond a crossing, the train picked up speed again and the passengers settled back. Only the engineers knew and understood what it was all about. And so did I.

During the summer of the year 1953, I came back at random from the hot, dusty desertlands -- simply to Russia. No one was waiting for me or had invited me anywhere, because I had been detained from returning for a little stretch of ten years. I simply wanted to get back into the heart of the country -- out of the heat, into woodlands with rustling leaves. I wanted to cut myself loose and get lost in the innermost heart of Russia -- if there were any such thing -- and live there.

For a year afterward I might perhaps get a job on this side of the Ural mountains merely pushing a wheelbarrow. Already after considerable construction work had been completed, they had turned me down as an electrician. But I really had a longing to be a teacher. Well-informed people told me that I had wasted my money on the ticket and had stopped there in vain.

But some things were changing already. When I went up the stairway of the District Board of Education and asked where the cadre section was, I noted with astonishment that here the party officials were no longer sitting behind dark leather-upholstered doors, but behind glassy partitions, as in a pharmacy. I went hesitatingly up to one of the little windows, greeted the person on the other side, and inquired, "Tell me, don't you need mathematics teachers somewhere farther along the railroad line? I want to settle there permanently."

They probed through every letter of my personal documents, went from room to room, and called somewhere. For them this was a rare switch -- someone asking to get out of the city and into the boondocks. Then suddenly they found a spot for me in Vysokoe Pole [High Fields]. I felt good just hearing the name of the place.

The name did not lie. Set in hills and hollows and then more little knolls, covered with heavily tangled woods, ponds, and embankments, Vysokoe Pole was the one place I was looking for where it would not be an insult to live and to die. There I could sit on a stump in the woods and think for a long time about whatever I wanted to, without worrying about lunch or supper, if only I could remain there and listen at night to the branches rustle in the treetops -- when the whole world was silent, and not one radio was audible anywhere. But, alas, there was no bread baked there. Nothing edible was sold. The entire village carried its food in bags from the one city in the region.

I returned to the cadre section and made another request at the little window. At first they didn't even want to talk to me. Afterward they all went from room to room, telephoned someone, scratched something with their pens, and stamped my orders: "Torf Produkt" [Peat Products].

Torf Produkt? Ah, Turgenev never knew what such an expression could include.

At the Torf Produkt station, a gray, wooden barracks aging with time, hung the stern warning: "For trains sit only on the waitingroom side"; and scratched with a nail on a board beneath: "And without tickets." But at the ticket window, displaying the same melancholy ingenuity, someone had carved out permanently with a knife: "No tickets." I was to appreciate the precise significance of those additions later. It was easy to arrive at Torf Produkt, but not to leave.

And here in this place had stood, and had remained long after the revolution, thick impenetrable forests. Later they were cut down by the peat exploiters and the neighboring kolkhoz [collective farm]. Its manager, Shashkov, razed quite a few acres of timber and then profitably sold it in the Odessa region.

In the midst of the peaty lowlands the little settlement had grown up haphazardly -- monotonous barracks dating from the thirties, and little houses with carved facades and glassed-in verandas, built in the fifties. But one could see that the insides of these little houses were not cut up by partitions reaching up to the ceiling, so that I could not rent a room with four regular walls.

Above the village smoked the factory pipes. Here and there throughout the settlement the narrow-gauge had been extended, and its engines, also belching thick smoke and whistling sharply, drew trains of brown peat, peat slabs, and briquettes. I could assume without error that in the evening over the door of the club the loudspeaker would blare forth, and on the streets drunks would whoop it up a while, not without thrusting at each other with knives.

That was where my dream of a quiet little corner in Russia brought me. But, of course, I could have stayed where I was and lived in an adobe hut, with a view of the desert, with a fresh breeze blowing at night, and the starry vault of the heavens opened wide overhead.

I couldn't sleep on the station benches and at daybreak I strolled through the village again. Now I saw the tiny little market. A solitary woman was there early selling milk. I took a bottle, stood by her, and drank it down at once.

Her speech struck me. It wasn't actually speech, but rather a pleasant singsong. Her words were the kind I had longed to hear, a longing which brought me back from Asia, "Drink! Drink to your heart's content! You dear soul, you're probably a newcomer, aren't you?" "And where are you from?" I asked, already feeling better. I discovered that not all the inhabitants in the vicinity were peat workers, that behind the railroad was a small hill, and that behind the hill was a village. This village is called Talnovo, and has been there, surrounded by dense forests, since time immemorial, from the days of the former landed gentry. Then follows a whole region of villages -- Chashlitsy, Ovintsy, Spudni, Shevertni, Shestimirovo -all deeper in the woods, all a little farther from the railroad and closer to the lakes.

These names drew me like a soothing breeze. They promised me the very core of Russia. I asked my new acquaintance to take me to Talnovo after the market was over and try to find an izba [peasant's hut] where I could find quarters.

It appeared profitable to have me as a tenant. In addition to the rent, the school also promised me a truckload of peat for the winter. The woman's pleasant expression changed to one of concern. There was no place for me at her house (they, she and her husband, were taking care of her aging mother). That's why she took me over to one of her relatives and then to another. But there were no separate rooms at either house, and they were crowded and noisy.

Thus we came to a dammed stream which was drying up and had a little bridge over it. This place caught my fancy more than any other in the village. There were two or three willows, and a crooked little izba which leaned far over toward the ground, while ducks were swimming in the pond, and geese, which had gone up the bank, were shaking themselves off.

"Well, perhaps we should call on Matryona," said my guide, already tiring of me. Only it isn't very clean at her place. She neglects things and is often sick."

Matryona's house was standing there not far distant with four little windows lined up in a cold, ugly wall, its roof shingled on both slopes, and with an ornamented garret window below its tower room. However, the roof was rotting out, the logs of the framework were turning gray with age and although the gate had once been stronger, its pales were thinning out.

The wicket gate was bolted, but my guide did not stop to knock. She slipped her hand under the bottom and turned the latch bolt, a simple device to keep the livestock out. There was no cover over the yard, but most of the house was under one roof. Behind the entrance door an inside stairway rose to a wide landing which was shaded by the roof high overhead. On the left more steps led up to the gornitza, a separate structure without any stove, and steps led down to the storage chamber. To the right was the izba itself, with garret and cellar.

It had been built long ago and of high quality materials for a large family, but now a solitary woman of sixty lived there.

When I entered the izba she was lying down on the Russian stove right there at the entrance, and was covered with nondescript dark rags of the kind which are invaluable in the life of the workingman.

The spacious izba and especially the best portion near the windows was strewn with stools and benches on which were earthenware pots and tubs full of rubber plants. They filled the loneliness of the proprietor with a mute but living company. They grew up untrammled, capturing the feeble light on the north side. In the meager light, the roundish face of the landlady peering behind the stove pipe seemed sallow and sickly in tone. From her eyes which had grown bleary, one could see that illness had exhausted her.

As she talked to me, she was lying up there, face downward on the stove without a pillow, her head toward the door, while I stood beneath. She did not show any enthusiasm at getting a lodger, and complained of the black illness through the paroxysms of which she had just now passed. The illness did not strike her every month but when it did, was so overpowering that, as she said, "For two or three

days I won't be able to get up or wait on you. But I'm not particular about the izba, and you can live here if you want to."

And she named off for me other landladies where it would be more restful for me, and where I would be more welcome, and sent me round to them. But I had already seen that it was my destiny to lodge in this dimly lit izba with its lusterless mirror in which it was quite impossible to see oneself, and, hanging on the wall for decoration, two garish posters brought for a ruble each, one advertising books and the other the harvest.

Matryona made me look elsewhere in the village for quarters, and on my second visit she made long excuses, quoting one of her sayings, "If one neither cleans nor cooks, how can one please?"

Nevertheless she met me standing up, and already something like pleasure struggled to express itself in her eyes because I had returned.

We came to an understanding on the price and on the peat which the school would supply. I learned only later that year after year, for many years, Matryona Vasilyevna had not earned a ruble from any source, because they didn't pay her a pension. Occasionally her relatives helped her out a little. In the kolkhoz she used to work, not for money, but for "credits" in the dog-eared account books.

So I lodged in Matryona's house. We didn't divide off a room. Her bed was near the stove in the corner by the door. I fixed myself a primitive cot by one window, and pushed aside Matryona's beloved rubber trees to set up a small table in the light from another. There was electric lighting in the village -- it had already been extended from Shatury in the twenties. At the time, the newspapers wrote about "little Ilyich [Lenin] lamps" and the peasants, their eyes goggling, called them, "The Tsar's lights!" Perhaps to one of the more wealthy villagers, Matryona's izba may not have seemed habitable; nevertheless, for that fall and winter with her it was fine. It still didn't leak from the rains, and the cold winds did not blow the warmth from the stove at once, but only towards morning, especially when it blew from the other side.

Other things lived in the izba besides Matryona and myself, such as a cat, mice, and cockroaches.

The cat was elderly, and more important -- lame. She had been picked up out of pity by Matryona and had struck roots. Although the cat walked on four legs, she limped badly, and favored one leg, since that foot or leg had been injured. When the cat jumped down from the stove, the sound of her contact with the floor was not a soft feline sound as with other cats, but a powerful, instantaneous strike with the three feet -- "toop!" -- such a powerful blow that, not being accustomed to it at first I would wince. She placed the three feet together under her in order to protect the fourth.

The mice were in the hut but not because the lame cat couldn't cope with them. On the contrary, she sprang at them like lightning from the corner and carried them out in her teeth. But the mice were inaccessible for the cat, because someone in better days had papered the izba for Matryona with a figured greenish wallpaper, and not with just one, but with five layers. When these layers stuck together the paper worked fine, but they had peeled from the walls in many places, and formed a sort of internal skin for the hut. Between the wood frame of the izba and the skin of the paper the mice had made themselves passages, and rustled about brazenly, as they ran through them even under the ceiling. The cat angrily followed their rustling with her eyes, but was unable to reach them.

Occasionally the cat ate the cockroaches, but they didn't agree with her. The only thing the cockroaches respected was that line of the partition separating the mouth of the Russian stove and the kitchen from the clean area of the hut. They did not creep into this area.

On the other hand, the cockroaches swarmed over the kitchen at night. Whenever I went there for a drink of water late in the evening and turned on the light, the entire floor, the big bench and even the wall were almost solid brown and astir with them. I brought home some borax from the school laboratory and by mixing it with dough, we almost got rid of them. The number of cockroaches decreased, but Matryona was afraid of poisoning the cat along with them. We stopped pouring the poison and the cockroaches multiplied again.

At night when Matryona was already asleep, but I was busy working at the table, the thin, quick pattering of mice under the wallpaper merged with and drowned out the rustle of the cockroaches behind the partition, like the distant sound of the ocean. But I grew accustomed to them. There was nothing evil about either the mice or the cockroaches, and they told no lies. Their rustling was simply for them their life.

And I also became accustomed to the advertising poster beauties which, stuck on the wall, offered me Belinsky, Panferov, and reams of other books -- only these were silent. I got used to everything in Matryona's hut.

Matryona used to get up between four and five in the morning.

Her clock was twenty-seven years old, and had been purchased at the village store. It was always fast, but Matryona was not worried so long as it did not lose time and make her late in the morning. She would turn on the little lamp behind the kitchen partition, and quietly, courteously, trying not to make any noise, heat up the Russian stove. Then she went to milk the goat (it was all the stock she had, this one, dirty-white, crinkly horned goat). She fetched the water and cooked breakfast in cast-iron pots -- one for me, one for herself, and one for the goat.

She brought up potatoes from the cellar -- the smallest ones for the goat, little ones for herself, and egg-sized ones for me. As for large potatoes, her sandy garden plot had not been manured since the war and, although she was always planting potatoes, potatoes, and more potatoes, it never produced any big ones.

I hardly heard her bustling about in the morning. I slept long, woke up in the late winter light, stretched myself, and stuck my head out from under the blanket and sheepskin. The latter, plus my prison-camp jacket covering my legs and a sack padded with straw underneath, kept me warm even on those nights when the hard frost from the north pushed through our puny window.

When I heard her restrained clatter behind the partition, I always said in measured tones, "Good morning, Matryona Vasilyevna!"

And she always greeted me from behind the partition with the same kind words which began with a low, warm gurgle of the sort grandmothers make in fairytales: "M-m-mm . . . the same to you!" And a little later, "Your breakfast is ready."

She never announced what was for breakfast, but that was easily figured out: boiled potatoes, or "poh-tah-to" soup (the way everyone in the village pronounced it) or fineground barley gruel. That year you couldn't buy any other kind of groats in Torf Produkt except barley, and you had to fight for it at that, because it was the very cheapest, was used to fatten pigs, and was bought by the sackful. Even this was not always salted, as it should have been, was often burnt, and after the meal left a thin coating on the palate and gums, and caused heartburn.

But all that was not Matryona's fault. There was simply no butter in Torf Produkt, the margarine went like hot cakes, and only mixed fats were sold on the free market. Besides, the Russian stove, as I found out, was not suitable for cooking. The cooking took place in the interior hidden from the cook himself. The heat approached the cast-iron pot unevenly. I suppose the stove came down from our ancestors in the Stone Age since once it had been stoked early in the morning, all day long it kept fodder and mash warm for the livestock, and food and water warm for man. It was also warm for sleeping.

I submissively ate everything that was cooked for me, and patiently put aside anything that fell in it and didn't belong, like hair, a bit of peat, or a cockroach leg. I didn't have the heart to scold Matryona.

In any case, she herself always anticipated me by saying, "If one neither cleans nor cooks, how can one please?" "Thanks," I said, simply. "For what? Thanks for nothing?" she smiled, disarmingly. And with an ingenuous glance of her faded, pale blue eyes, inquired, "Well, now, what shall I fix you for dinner?"

"For dinner" meant for the evening meal. I ate twice daily, like at the front. What could I order for supper? Always the same thing -- potatoes or poh-tah-to soup.

I reconciled myself with this because life had taught me not to consider food the point of daily existence. I placed a higher value on the smile in her roundish face, which I finally tried to capture with a camera, but in vain. When she saw herself in the cold eye of the camera lens, Matryona took on either a strained or an abnormally severe expression. Only once did I get a picture of her as she looked out of the little window toward the street smiling at something.

That fall many injustices were done to Matryona. Her neighbors advised her to try to get her pension. She was all alone and when she became very sick, they had dismissed her from the kolkhoz. Many injustices were heaped on Matryona's head: she was sick, but did not count as an invalid; she had worked for a quarter of a century for the kolkhoz, which, however, was not a factory so the pension was not supposed to be paid out on her account, but on account of her husband, that is, against loss of the breadwinner. But her husband had been dead for twelve years -- since the beginning of the war. And now it was not easy for her to obtain certificates from the various places where he had lived, and papers showing how much he had earned. It was a lot of trouble to get these certificates stating that he used to earn at least three hundred rubles a month, testifying that she lived alone, received no help from anyone, and was born in such-and-such a year. Afterward she had to bring all that to the Social Security Office and, having made corrections, discover that it wasn't done that way. So she brought it back again, and tried to find out whether they would give her the pension.

These troubles were made even more difficult by the fact that the Talnov Social Security Office was twenty kilometers to the east, the village Soviet ten kilometers to the west, and the settlement Soviet an hour's walk to the north.

They drove her from office to office for two months -- to one for a comma, to another for a period. Each trip meant a day lost. She would arrive one day at the village Soviet, only to find that the Secretary wasn't in, or simply that he was out somewhere in the village. So "come again tomorrow." Now the Secretary is in, but he doesn't have an official stamp. "Come again" a third day. "Come again" a fourth day because, by mistake, they signed the wrong form -- Matryona had pinned all the papers together in a single sheaf.

"They're murdering me, Ignatich," she complained to me after such fruitless trips. "I'm worn out with it."

But her face did not remain clouded for long. I observed one thing: she had a sure means of putting herself back into a good mood -- work. She immediately either grabbed a shovel and dug up potatoes or, with a sack under her arm, went out to dig peat. Or else, with a wicker basket, she went out to pick berries in the distant woods. Having bent over bushes instead of an office desk, and carrying a back-breaking load, Matryona would return to the izba beaming again, satisfied with everything, and with a pleased smile on her face.

Talking about the peat, she said, "Today I struck it rich, Ignatich. I found just the right spot, and now I know where to take it from. It's a pure joy!" "But, Matryona Vasilyevna, don't you think my peat supply is enough? A whole truckload?"

"Pooh! Your peat! If we had as much as yours and as much again -- then, perhaps, there would be enough! When winter strikes and the wind battles at the windows, the heat escapes as fast as you can stoke up the stove. Last summer we laid in a supply of peat by the pile. I would have brought in as much as three truckloads by now if they weren't after us. They've already started to drag one of us old women through the courts!"

Yes, that's the way it was. The frightening breath of winter was already beginning to blow. Excavators growled through the peat bogs, but did not provide peat for the inhabitants, only for the authorities -- the teachers, doctors, factory workers -- everything for the authorities by the truckload. Fuel was not authorized for Talnov -- and no one was supposed to inquire about it. The kolkhoz chairman walked through the village, looked at you with either demanding or ingenuous eyes, and talked about whatever you wanted to except fuel, because he had already laid in a supply for himself. But winter wouldn't wait. And so, just as they had formerly stolen wood from the landowners, now they hauled off peat from the Trust. The old women gathered together in groups of five or ten to give each other courage. They went during the day. During the summer the peat was piled up everywhere and arranged in stacks for drying. That's the good thing about peat, once dug up it can't be hauled off immediately. They let it dry through the fall and even into winter if the road was not clear. About this time the old women took it. At one stroke they carried away in bags six peat bricks if they were still damp, ten if they were dry. One of these sacks was enough to stoke up the stove once; it had to be carried as far as three kilometers and weighed two poods. [One pood equals about 36 pounds.] There were two hundred days of winter

and we had to have heat -- in the morning with the Russian stove, in the evening with the tiled "Dutch" stove.

"We've sunk this low!" Matryona exclaimed angrily at some invisible person. "Since we have no more horses, unless you cart stuff home on your own back, you don't have it. My back will never heal. During the winter I pull toboggan loads by myself, during the summer bundles -- and that's the God's truth!"

The women went during the day -- and not just once. On good days Matryona brought back as many as six bags full. She stacked my peat in the open; hers she hid under the landing, and each evening covered the opening with boards.

"Unless the devils just happen to guess where it is," she said, wiping the sweat off her forehead, "they won't find it for the life of them!"

What could the Trust do? They couldn't free enough staff to post guards all over the peat bogs. Since they had officially reported ample production, they were probably able to write it off as a loss due to crumbling and rains. Occasionally they tried to gather a patrol and catch the women at the entrance to the village. The women threw away their sacks and scattered. At other times, when someone informed, they made a house-to-house search, drew up a report on the stolen peat, and threatened court action. For a while the women would stop bringing peat, but winter approached and drove them to it again -- with sleds at night.

Generally speaking, as I got accustomed to Matryona, I observed that, quite apart from cooking and housework, she had to take care of a number of other things every day. She kept the regular order of these things in her head and, rising early in the morning, always knew what she would do. Besides the peat, she collected old stumps wrenched out of the peat bogs by the tractors, and red cowberries which she preserved for the winter in quarter-litre bottles ("Try your teeth on them, Ignatich!" she used to say as she treated me to them). Besides digging potatoes, and running about on account of the pension business, she had to get fodder from somewhere for her one and only, dirty-white goat.

"But why don't you keep a cow, Matryona Vasilyevna?" "A-ah, Ignatich," explained Matryona, as she stood in her soiled apron at the passageway by the kitchen stove, and turned round toward my table, "the milk from the goat is enough for me. And if I were to get a cow, it would eat me out of house and home. They won't let me mow on the embankment because it belongs to the railway, nor in the woods, which are under the forest service. And since, alas, I'm no longer a member of the kolkhoz, they won't allow me there. All the grass goes to the kolkhoz until late fall, and even the women of the kolkhoz have to scrounge for it after the snow begins. What kind of grass can you find under the snow? In the old days we cut grass from the end of June to the end of July. We used to clear it away -- when the meadows were as sweet as honey."

So, gathering grass for her one scraggly goat was hard work for Matryona. She took a sack and a sickle, and went out in the morning to places where she remembered it grew in tufts along the roadside or on islands in the peat bogs. When she had stuffed a sack full of fresh, heavy grass, she dragged it home and spread it out in layers in the courtyard. From each sack she obtained a pitchfork full of dried fodder.

The new Chairman, recently sent out from the city, cut off the kitchen gardens of all the invalids as his first official act. Fifteen sotok [about .37 acre] of sand lot was left Matryona, but ten sotok lay idle beyond the fence. On the other hand, when there were not enough hands on the kolkhoz, when the women made really stubborn excuses to get out of work, the Chairman's wife went to see Matryona. She was a city type -- determined. She wore a short, gray jacket, and a threatening look, as if she were in the military.

She entered the hut without a greeting and looked sternly at Matryona. The latter was uneasy.

"So-o-o," said the Chairmans wife, dividing the word into syllables for emphasis, "Comrade Matryona, you've got to help at the kolkhoz! You've got to go out tomorrow and haul manure!"

Matryona's countenance took on a half-apologetic smile -- as if she were ashamed for the Chairman's wife because the latter would not be able to pay her for the work.

"Well, ah . . . but . . .," she drew the words out. "After all, I'm sick, and I'm no longer officially a member of the kolkhoz." And then hastily correcting herself, she asked, "What time should I be there?"

"And bring your own pitchfork!" added the Chairman's wife as she went out, her stiff petticoat rustling.

"How about that!" Matryona exclaimed reproachfully afterward. "Bring your own pitchfork!" she says! There's not a shovel or a pitchfork anywhere on the kolkhoz. And I'm living without a man! Who's going to do my planting for me?"

And she pondered over it all evening, "Well, what can you say, Ignatich? After all, they've got to have help -- what kind of harvest would there be without manure? And what a hell of a way to run a kolkhoz, anyhow! The women stand around the kolkhoz leaning on their shovels and wait for the factory whistle at noon. Then there's still some business to take care of. The accounts have to be settled as to who came and who didn't. I prefer to work as if there weren't any whistle, only 'oy-oy-oyinki', before you know it, it's evening, and time to fix supper!"

In the morning she went off with her pitchfork.

Not only the kolkhoz, but also a distant, favorite relative or simply a neighbor would come to Matryona in the evening and plead, "Come help me a little while tomorrow, Matryona! We'll dig up some potatoes."

And Matryona couldn't refuse. She abandoned the normal course of her chores, went out to help her neighbor, and returning, would say without envy, "Oh, Ignatich, what big potatoes she has! I dug them up freely. I didn't want to leave that piece of land! And that's the God's truth!"

They never passed over Matryona, especially when it came to plowing anybody's garden plot. The Talnov women had arranged things so that it was harder and took longer for any one of them to dig up her own garden plot with a shovel than if all six harnessed themselves to a wooden plough and tilled the six garden plots collectively. For this reason they called on Matryona for help.

"Well then," it occurred to me to ask one of them, "did you pay Matryona for it?" For an answer I got, "Oh, she doesn't take any money for it! You have to hide it on her when she's not looking!"

Still another commotion occurred when it was Matryona's turn to feed the goatherds. One of these was healthy, but a deaf mute, and the second was an urchin with a slobbery little cigar stuck between his teeth. Her turn to feed them came around only every six weeks, but it drove Matryona to a great deal of expense. She went to the village store, bought tinned fish, and splurged on sugar and butter, which she never ate herself. It seemed that the women outdid each other trying to see who could feed the goatherds best.

"Everyone is afraid of tailors and goatherds," she explained to me. "They'll give you a bad name all over the neighborhood if something doesn't suit them."

And into this life, already crowded with anxieties, burst periods of serious illness, when Matryona would lie flat on her back for two days and nights without so much as a complaint. On such days Masha, Matryona's closest friend since her earliest childhood, often came over to take care of the goat and to fire the stove. Matryona herself never ate, nor drank, nor asked for anything. To call the doctor from the village medical center to the house would have been unheard of in Talnov. And her neighbors would have thought it inconsiderate -- behaving like one of the upper classes. When they did send for the doctor on one occasion, she arrived very annoyed, and ordered Matryona, as soon as she could get up, to come to the medical center. Matryona went, against her will. They put her through various examinations, sent the reports to the regional hospital -- and there the matter died. Matryona, herself, was partly to blame.

But her affairs called her back to life. Soon Matryona began to get up, at first moving slowly, but later briskly again.

"You didn't get to see me in the old days, Ignatich," she said, to justify to herself her having been sick. "I could lift any old sack, even one weighing five poods! My father-in-law used to yell, ' Matryona, you'll break your back!' My brother-in-law didn't have to come help me lift logs on the wagon. We had a big, strong horse by the name of Volchek which we got from the military. It was a war horse."

"What do you mean, a war horse?"

"Because, together with the healthy horses which they took to the war, was this wounded one, which they left us. He was a highspirited animal, and once he pulled our sled into the lake from fright. The men jumped off, but I held on the reins and stood fast, so help me! He was full of oats, that horse. Our men liked to feed horses well. A horse that is full of oats doesn't feel a heavy load."

But Matryona was by no means fearless. She was afraid of fires and of lightning, but most of all -- no one knows why -- of trains.

"Once I rode the train to Cherusti as it came from Nechayevka. Its bright lights blazed and the rails hummed. Ah-h, what a fever it gave me! How my legs shook! -- and that's God's truth!" she said, astonished with herself, and shrugged her shoulders.

"You don't suppose you were frightened because you didn't get a ticket, Matryona Vasilyevna?"

"At the little window? They try to shove first-class tickets off on you. But the train was already moving. We dashed here and there saying, 'Please help us!' The men climbed up a ladder onto the top of the car. Then we found an open door and shoved straight ahead without tickets, and the cars were

empty, all empty. You could even stretch out on the benches. Why the unfriendly parasites at the window never gave us tickets, I don't know . . ."

Nevertheless, that winter Matryona's life eased as never before. At last they began to pay her a pension of eighty rubles, and she also got a hundred-odd from me and the school.

"Pooh! A fat chance Matryona has of dying now!" some of her neighbors began to say, enviously. "They pay a lot of money to her, the old woman, and she doesn't know what to do with it!"

Matryona had new felt boots made for herself. She bought a new quilted jacket. And she had a coat made out of a railroad worker's leather overcoat, which was given her by an engineer from Cherusti, the husband of Kira, Matryona's foster daughter. A hunchbacked tailor from the village lined it with cloth batting, and Matryona got a nicer coat out of it than she had been able to sew for herself in the sixty years of her life.

In the middle of the winter Matryona sewed two hundred rubles into the lining of the coat for her burial expenses. For a moment she was happy, "I feel a little better about things, Ignatich."

December passed, and then January -- for two months her illness had not struck. In the evening Matryona often went over to Masha's house, sat for a while, and chewed sunflower seeds. Matryona never asked guests over in the evening to her own house out of respect for my work. Only once on Epiphany, when I returned from school, I found people dancing in the izba, and was introduced to three of Matryona's own sisters, who, since she was the oldest, called her nyanya or lyolka [nannie or nurse]. After that occasion, we rarely saw the sisters again. Perhaps they were afraid that Matryona would ask them for help.

Matryona's holiday was clouded by only one event or premonition. She had walked five versts [about three miles] to church for holy water, and had set her pot down among the others. When the blessing of water was over, the women rushed in to get it, pushing each other. Matryona was too late to be among the first, and came in at the end. She couldn't find her pot, and no other piece of tinware had been left in exchange for it. The pot had disappeared, as if carried away by an evil spirit.

"Ladies!" Matryona cried, as she walked among the praying women. "Did one of you take, by mistake, somebody else's holy water? In a tin pot?"

No one acknowledged her question. They say that one of the little boys filched it--there were some boys there. Matryona was sad when she returned. However, this doesn't mean to say that Matryona was a fervent believer. Rather she was superstitious. She was always coming up with superstitions, such as: you shouldn't go into the garden plot during Ivan Postno [Lent], otherwise there would be no harvest in the coming year; if the snow whirled during a storm, someone had hung himself somewhere; or, if you pinched your foot in the door, there would be guests. As long as I lived in her house I never saw her pray, and not once did she even cross herself. But all important affairs began with "God bless!" and she insisted on saying "God bless you" every time I left for school. Perhaps she did pray, but gave no sign of it either because she was shy in my presence or feared it might annoy me. There were icons hanging in the hut. On weekdays they were left dark, but at times of vespers and matins, and on the morning of holidays, Matryona used to light icon lamps under them.

Her sins, however, were less than those of her lame cat -- the latter throttled mice.

With the past difficulties of her life somewhat eased, Matryona began to stand and listen attentively to my radio on occasion. (I didn't waste any time in turning on the knob -- the "kh-nob" as Matryona called it.)

When she heard over the radio that some new machine had been invented, Matryona grumbled from the kitchen, "Always new machines, new machines! They don't want to work with the old ones, but where will they put all of them?"

When they broadcast a report that clouds had been seeded by airplanes, Matryona shook her head over the stove, "Oy-oyoyinki! They're going to do away with either the winter or the summer!" Once Chaliapin was singing Russian songs. Matryona stood and stood, listening, and then remarked thoughtfully, "He sings strangely, not the way we peasants do."

"But, of course he does, Matryona Vasilyevna, just listen!" She listened a little while longer, pressed her lips together, and said, "No. That's not it. That's not our way. Besides, his voice quavers."

However, Matryona made up for it. Once they were playing a concert of Glinka's love songs. Suddenly, after the fifth song, Matryona, holding on to her apron, came out from behind the partition, deeply moved. Astonished, she whispered, "Ah, that's it, that's our way!"

Thus Matryona became accustomed to me, and I to her, and we got along together. She never annoyed me with questions. Either because she was naturally discreet, or because she lacked the usual curiosity of old women, she never once asked me whether I had been married. All the women of Talnov importuned her with questions trying to find out about me. She always answered them, "If you need to find out something, ask him. I know only one thing about him--he's from far away!" And when long afterwards I told her that I had done a lot of time in prison, she merely shook her head in silence as if she had earlier suspected as much.

I saw only the present Matryona, failing in her old age, and I in turn did not disturb her past, nor did I imagine that there was much to be searched for in it. I learned that Matryona had been married even before the revolution, right in the same hut in which we were living now, and right "at the oven." (That meant that there were neither mother-in-law, nor older, unmarried sisters-in-law around, and on the first morning of their marriage, Matryona started baking.) I found out that she had had six children, all of whom died, one after another, very early, so that no two were ever alive at the same time. Later, there was a sort of foster daughter, Kira. Matryona's husband never returned from the war, but there had been no death notice. Villagers who had been in his company said that he might have been taken prisoner or killed, but they never found his body. Eight years after the war even Matryona herself decided that he was no longer alive. And it was good that she thought that way -- better than if she thought he were still alive and married somewhere -- say in Brazil or Australia, and the village of Talnov and the Russian language had been blotted out of his memory.

Once, returning from school, I found a guest in our izba. A tall, old man, his hat on his knee, was sitting by the "Dutch" stove on a stool which Matryona had brought out for him into the middle of the room. His entire face was framed with dark hair, which was only lightly touched with gray. A thick dark

mustache blended into his broad beard so that his mouth was barely visible. Continuous dark sideburns, almost concealing his ears, merged into his dark, matted, drooping hair. His even broader, dark eyebrows grew together like a bridge. The bald dome of his forehead blended into the hairless top of the skull. The entire appearance of the old man indicated great wisdom and dignity. He sat stiffly, his hands folded on top of his staff, which was resting plumb with the floor. He sat in an attitude of patient expectation, and it was evident that he had hardly spoken to Matryona who was busy behind the partition.

When I came in, he slowly turned his majestic head toward me and addressed me suddenly, "My dear fellow! . . . I can't see you clearly. My son is a pupil of yours -Grigoriev, Antoshka."

He wouldn't have had to say anything more. Along with my impulse to help this venerable old man, I knew in advance and rejected all the useless things he was now about to say. Antoshka Grigoriev was a round-faced, high-colored stripling in the eighth grade, with a look like a cat that had finished off a canary. He came to school as if he were on a holiday, sat over on one side, and smiled lazily. Moreover, he never prepared his lessons at home. But, most importantly, the schools of our district, province, and neighboring provinces were noted for passing a high percentage of students. For this reason he was passed year after year. He clearly understood that no matter how much his teachers might threaten him, he would pass anyway at the end of the year, so there was no need to study. He simply laughed at us. He sat in the eighth grade, although he had never mastered fractions, and couldn't tell one triangle from another. For the first two quarters he had a hard struggle with failing grades, and the same fate awaited him during the third quarter.

The half-blind old man looked more like Antoshka's grandfather than his real father. He came to me humbly, his hat in his hand as they would say today, to complain. How could I tell him that the school had been deceiving him year after year? That this could go on no longer, otherwise the whole class would go to pieces, and would turn into chatterboxes? If I did so, I would be reflecting unfavorably on my work and on my own prestige as a teacher.

So I patiently explained to him that his son had been badly neglected, that he lied both at school and at home, and that he should check on the boy's grade book more often. The boy should be taken severely in hand by both of us.

"But, my dear fellow, I've already roughed him up," my guest confirmed. "I already beat him once a week, and I have a heavy hand!"

During the conversation I recalled Matryona herself had once interceded for Antoshka Grigoriev. At the time I hadn't asked whether he was a relative of hers and declined to do what she requested. Matryona stood at the kitchen door, a silent suppliant on this occasion too.

When Faddei Mironovich left, saying that he would call and check up on things again, I said, "I don't understand, Matryona Vasilyevna, how Antoshka is related to you." "He's the son of my brother-in-law," Matryona answered stiffly, and went out to milk the goat. When I had figured it out, I realized that this dark, persistent old man was the brother of her husband who had disappeared without a trace.

The long evening passed. Matryona didn't refer to the afternoon's conversation again. Only late in the evening when I had forgotten about the old man and was working in the quiet of the hut to the rustle of

the cockroaches and the ticking of the clock, suddenly from the darkness of her corner Matryona said, "Once upon a time, Ignatich, I almost married him."

I had forgotten about Matryona herself, that she was there, and didn't hear her, but she spoke out of the darkness in agitated tones, as if the old man were still wooing her. Obviously, that was all Matryona had thought about all evening.

She got up from her wretched, raggedy bed, and slowly came toward me, as if she were following her own words. I leaned back and for the first time saw Matryona in an entirely new light. There was no overhead light in our room as it was filled with a forest of rubber trees. From a table lamp the light fell in a circle only on my notebooks. To eyes distracted by this light, all the rest of the room appeared in rose-colored semidarkness. Out of this darkness Matryona came forward. For a moment I imagined that her cheeks were not yellow as usual, but rose-colored instead.

"He proposed to me first . . . even before Yefim . . . He was his older brother . . . I was nineteen, Faddei twenty-three. They lived right here in this very house. It was their house. Their father built it."

I involuntarily looked around me. Suddenly throughout the old, gray, rotting house with its two faded-green skins under which the mice were running, oozed the cheery, resinous smell of fresh pine logs, as yet undarkened, still unplanned.

"And you . . . loved him? Well, and then what?"

"It was during that summer. We went for a walk and sat down in the grove," she said in a whisper.

"There was a grove there where the stables are now. They've since cut it down. I almost got married, Ignatich, but war with the Germans was beginning, and they took Faddei off to the war."

As her words fell, there flashed before me the deep white and yellow July of the year 1914 -- a peaceful sky, drifting clouds and people bustling about in the ripe stubble. I pictured them beside each other -- he a black-haired Hercules with a scythe over his shoulder, and she, a blushing girl with her arms around a sheaf of wheat. And there was singing, singing under the open sky the way people no longer sing in this machine age.

"He went off to war -- and fell. For three long years I kept silent and waited, but not a line, not a word from him."

Matryona's senile, roundish face, wrapped in a faded little shawl, looked at me in the soft, indirect light of the lamp. It seemed suddenly detached from her everyday, slipshod dress, and free from wrinkles, like the face of a frightened young maiden before a terrible choice.

"Yes, yes . . . I remember . . . The leaves were flying everywhere; the snow fell--and later melted. They ploughed again, they sowed again, and again they wept. Once more the leaves were flying, and again the snow fell. Then came one revolution; then another, and the world turned upside down. Their mother died, and Yefim asked me to marry him. He said, 'If you want to come to our house, then come and live with me.' Yefim was a year younger than I. We have a saying: 'The wise girl marries after Michaelmas Day [in the fall] -- the fool after St. Peter's Day [June 29th]!' They didn't have enough hands at their house, so I came to them. The marriage ceremony took place on St. Peter's Day, and on St. Nicholas' Day that winter, Faddei returned . . . from a Hungarian prison camp."

Matryona closed her eyes. I kept silent. She turned toward the door, and spoke excitedly, "He was standing on the threshold. How could I shut him out? I wanted to throw myself at his feet! But that was forbidden . . . 'Well,' he said, 'if Yefim weren't my own brother, I'd cut you both down with this axe!'"

I shuddered. I could vividly imagine her anguish and fear, as he stood there, dark, in the shadow of the door, and threatened Matryona with his axe.

But she quieted down, and leaning on the back of the chair in front of her, continued in a singsong voice, "Oy-oy-oyinki, the poor dear man! There were so many girls in the village, but he married none of them! Faddei said, 'I shall look for another Matryona to take your place!' So he married Matryona from Lipovka. They built a separate log izba for themselves where they are living now. You pass by their place every day as you walk to school."

Oh! So that was it! Now I realized that I had seen the second Matryona more than once. I didn't like her. She was always coming over to my own Matryona to complain that her husband beat her, that he was niggardly, and that he was working her to death. She would cry for hours, and her voice was always full of tears. But it turned out that my Matryona had nothing to regret. Faddei had always been that way to his own Matryona all his life and had always kept a heavy hand on the entire household.

Speaking of Yefim the old woman continued, "He never once beat me. He used to take after men on the street with his fists, but not once after me. What I mean is, there was one time when I had been quarreling a while with my sister-in-law, when he smashed a wooden spoon on my forehead. I jumped up from the table and shouted, 'I hope you choke to death, you drones.' I ran off in the woods and he never touched me again!"

It appears that Faddei had no reason to complain. His second Matryona had borne him six children and they all survived. Among them was my Antoshka; he was the youngest, the runt. But no children remained to Yefim and Matryona -- they never lived as long as three months, and though none was sick, each died.

"I remember one little daughter, Elena, when she had only just been born. They had just washed her body when, as she was lying there, she died. That spared the washing of the dead body. Just as my wedding was on St. Peter's Day, so I buried my sixth child, Alexander, on St. Peter's Day."

So the whole village decided that Matryona was "hexed."

"A hex on me?!" Matryona shook her head with conviction. "They took me to a woman who used to be a nun, for treatment. She poured something down my throat and waited for me to cough out the hex, like a frog. Well, nothing ever came out!" Years passed, like water flowing. On the forty-first [in 1941] they didn't take Faddei for the war because of his poor sight. However, they did take Yefim away. And like the older brother in the first war, the younger one vanished in the second. And this one really didn't return. The once noisy but now deserted izba was rotting away and advancing in years, and growing old within it was Matryona, forgotten and abandoned.

So she asked the second Matryona--whom everybody persecuted --for her youngest daughter, Kira, for a child of her womb (or was it a spot of Faddei's blood she wanted?)

For ten years Matryona took care of Kira like one of her own children who never survived. And not too long before I came she had given her in marriage to a young railroad engineer from Cherusti. Recently she had been getting a little help from Cherusti, occasionally sugar, or when a pig was slaughtered, some of the fat. Since she was suffering from ailments and expected her death in the near future, Matryona announced her will. After her death the separate wood frame of the big room, the gornitza, which was connected with her izba, was to be given as a legacy to Kira. She said nothing at all about the izba itself, and her three sisters still hoped to get hold of it.

Thus, it was on that evening that Matryona completely opened up her heart to me. And it so happened, as the connections and meaning of her life had been made somewhat clear to me--during those very days--things started moving. First, Kira arrived from Cherusti, and the old man, Faddei, became worried. It seemed that in Cherusti the young couple would have to put up some kind of a dwelling in order to obtain and hold a plot of land. The gornitza, that is, the wood frame of Matryona's house, was just right for this purpose. There was no way to put up another, because they couldn't get hold of the wood for it anywhere. Not only Kira and her husband, but especially old Faddei, were eager to get that strip of land in Cherusti.

So Faddei became a constant visitor at our house. He came again and again, spoke to Matryona in an authoritative tone, and demanded that she give away the gornitza, immediately, while she was still living. On these visits he did not give the appearance of an old man, leaning on a cane, who might fall to pieces at the first shove or harsh word. Although he was slightly hunched over with backache from disease, this impressive old man, more than sixty years old, who had kept his hair lush, dark and youthful, pressed his claim hard, and with fervor.

Matryona didn't sleep for two nights. It was not easy for her to make up her mind. She didn't mind giving up the empty gornitza, since it wasn't being used anyway, just as she had never minded giving her care, work, and property to others. In any case the gornitza had been willed to Kira. But she was terrified at the idea of tearing down the roof under which she had lived for forty years. Although I was only a tenant, even I felt sick at the thought of their tearing off the boards and pulling out the logs of the house. And, for Matryona, it would mean the end of everything. But the others insisted on it and knew that Matryona's house would have to be torn apart while she was still living.

One February morning Faddei arrived with his sons and sons-in-law, and the five of them began working with their axes, setting up a squealing and creaking as they ripped off the boards. Faddei's eyes flashed with businesslike efficiency. In spite of the fact that his back would not straighten out entirely, he climbed dexterously up under the rafters, and bustled vigorously about, shouting occasionally for helpers. As a little boy he himself had helped his father build the house. That gornitza belonged to him, the eldest son, and had been put up so that he might move in with his bride. Now he was feverishly tearing the gornitza apart, to carry it away from Matryona's yard. After numbering the logs and marking the ceiling boards, they dismantled the gornitza, including the storeroom underneath. The izba itself, with what was left of the landing, they boarded up with a thin, temporary wall. They left chinks in the wall, and everything indicated that they were wrecking the place, not building it, and that they did not suppose Matryona would be living there much longer.

While the men were breaking things up, the women were making home-brew for the day of loading. They made their own liquor because it would have been too expensive to pass vodka around. For the makings, Kira brought a pood of sugar from the Moscow district, while Matryona Vasilyevna, under cover of the night, carried over the sugar and the bottles for the home-brew.

The logs were carried off and stacked outside the fence, ready for the engineer to arrive with the tractor from Cherusti.

On the same day a heavy snowstorm began -- a "blower" as Matryona called it. It howled and whirled for two days and nights piling huge snowdrifts on the road. Afterwards, when the road had just been treaded down, another truck would drive past. Then there was a sudden warm spell, and in one day everything thawed at once. A gray fog formed; streams broke through the snow and babbled forth; and you got stuck up to the top of your kneeboots.

For two weeks the tractors couldn't reach the disassembled gornitza. These were two weeks of perplexity for Matryona. One of the heaviest burdens she had to bear was her three sisters, who came over and with one voice called her a fool for giving the gornitza away; they said they never wanted to see her again, and then left.

On the same day the lame cat ran out of the courtyard and disappeared. The first event went with the other. This also depressed Matryona.

Finally the road, which had been melting away, was hardened by frost. A sunny day came, warming the heart. Matryona had had pleasant dreams the night before. In the morning she learned that I wanted to take a photograph of someone standing beside one of the old-fashioned looms which remained in two izbas in the village, and which had been used to weave coarse rugs. Bashfully, and smiling ironically, she said, "Why not wait a little, a couple of days, Ignatich, until they take away the gornitza, and snap the picture then? I'll put up my own loom; I've still got it, and that's the God's truth!"

Clearly, she liked to picture herself in an old-fashioned setting.

The red, frosty sun flooded everything with an almost rosecolored light. As it streamed through the frost-covered window of the enclosed passageway, which had been partly cut down, this light cast a warm glow over Matryona's face. Such people always have fine faces, in tune with their consciences.

Later, as I was returning from school, just before twilight, I saw movement around our house. A big new tractor-drawn sledge was already loaded with logs. But there was no room for a lot of the timbers, so the family of old Faddei, and others who had been invited to help, had nearly finished knocking together a second homemade sledge. All were working like mad, almost with desperation, as is so often the case with people who have caught the scent of big money, or who anticipate an orgy of food and drink. They were yelling at one another, and arguing among themselves.

The argument was about how the sleds should be pulled -separately or together. One of Faddei's sons, who was lame, and the son-in-law engineer kept harping that they shouldn't try both sleds at once, because the tractor couldn't pull them. But the tractor driver, a lusty, self-opinionated, bull-faced lout, shouted that it was obvious that he was the driver, and that he would pull both sleds together. His calculation was clear -according to the plan, the engineer would pay him for the transportation of the

gornitza, not by the trip. Two trips in a single night were out of the question. It was twenty-five kilometers each way and one return journey. And by morning he had to be back with his tractor in the garage from which he had secretly taken it for this job on the side.

The old man, Faddei, couldn't bear not to move the whole gornitza in one day, and so motioned to his sons to give in. The second sled, put together in a slapdash fashion, was hooked on to the stronger one.

Matryona ran among the men, bustling about, and helping roll the logs on the sledges. I then noticed that she was wearing my quilted coat. She had already smeared the sleeves with icy mud from the logs, and I spoke to her about it with displeasure. I had a sentimental attachment to that padded coat; it had kept me warm during my troubled years.

And so for the first time I got angry at Matryona Vasilyevna. "Oy-oy-oyinki, my poor old head!" she exclaimed, taken aback. "Why, I simply grabbed it on the run and forgot it was yours! I'm sorry, Ignatich."

And taking it off, she hung it up to dry. The loading was finished and all who had been working, about ten men in all, thundered past my table, and dived behind the kitchen curtain. There was a muffled clinking of glasses. Occasionally a bottle tinkled. The voices grew louder, bragging and laughing. The tractor driver was especially boastful. The heavy odor of homebrew rolled toward me.

But they didn't spend much time drinking -- the darkness compelled them to hurry. They began to leave. Self-confident, with a brutal face, the tractor driver left first, and then, in order to accompany the sleds to Cherusti, the engineer son-in-law, Faddei's lame son, and one of the nephews. The rest of them dispersed and went home. Faddei, brandishing his staff, hurried to catch up with someone and set him straight about something. The lame son lingered at my table for a smoke, and suddenly began to speak, telling me that he loved Aunt Matryona, that he had recently gotten married, and that his wife had just given birth to a son. Then the others called him, and he left. Through the window I heard the tractor roaring.

Last of all, Matryona darted hastily out from behind the partition. She shook her head anxiously at those who had gone. She was wearing her quilted coat, and had put on a shawl.

From the doorway she said, "Why didn't they reckon on two tractors? If one broke down, then the other could pull the load. But what will happen now -- God only knows!" And she ran off after the others.

After the drinking, the arguments, and the departure, it was especially quiet in the abandoned izba, which was chilled from the frequently opened door. Outside the windows it was quite dark. I also put on a quilted jacket, and sat down to check over some examination papers. The tractor could no longer be heard in the distance.

An hour passed; another, and then a third. Matryona had not returned, but then I wasn't surprised. After seeing the sledges off, she must have gone over to see her friend, Masha.

Another hour passed, and still another. It was not only dark, but a sort of deep quiet prevailed. At that time I didn't grasp the reason for this stillness, or why, as it happened, during the whole evening not one train passed by on the tracks, which were about a third of a mile away from the house. My radio was

silent, and I noticed how much -- more than ever before -- the mice were romping, how impudently and noisily they ran around under the wallpaper, squeaking and scraping.

I fell asleep and when I awoke, it was one o'clock in the morning and Matryona had not yet returned. Suddenly I heard several loud voices from the direction of the village. Although they were still distant, something told me they were coming to the house. And sure enough, soon a sharp knock sounded at the gate. A powerful, strange voice shouted for me to open up. I went out with a flashlight into the pitch darkness. The village was sound asleep. There wasn't a light visible in any window. Even the snow, which had started melting in the past week, reflected no light. I turned the lower night latch and let them in. Four men in greatcoats entered. A very unpleasant sensation that -- when men burst into your house at night, noisily, and in greatcoats.

I examined them in the light, however, and recognized that two of the men in the overcoats were railroad officials. The elder, a heavy-set man with a face like that of the tractor driver, asked, "Where's the owner, the old lady?"

"I don't know."

"Did the tractor with the sledge leave from this courtyard?"

"From this one."

"Were they drinking here before leaving?"

All four were looking around and screwing up their eyes in the half-light from the table lamp. I realized that either they had already arrested someone, or wanted to make an arrest.

"Why, what happened?"

"Answer our questions!"

"But. . ."

"Did they go away drunk? Were they drinking here?"

Had they killed someone? Or was it forbidden to carry away the gornitza? They were pressing me very hard. Only one thing was clear: Matryona might have to do time for making the homebrew. I stepped back toward the partition and thus screened off the kitchen area.

"I really didn't notice. I didn't see anything."

(I actually hadn't seen anything -- I had only heard.)

And as if perplexed, I gestured with my hands, indicating the furnishings in the hut: the peaceful light of the table lamp on the books and notebooks, the crowd of startled rubber plants, the severe cot of an anchorite -- no trace of debauchery. Then they themselves disappointedly observed that there hadn't been any kind of carousing going on. They turned to go out, saying among themselves that even if a drinking bout had not taken place in the izba, it would be a good idea to report that it had. I followed them, and tried to find out what had happened.

Only when he reached the wicket gate, one of them growled at me, "It raised hell with all of 'em. They can't even pick up the pieces!" Another added, "But that's a small detail. The one o'clock express nearly jumped the track -- that's what happened!" And they all left hurriedly.

Stunned, I turned back into the hut. Who were "all of 'em?" Where was Matryona? I drew aside the kitchen screen. The stench of home-brew struck me. The place was a shambles- tables and benches overturned, empty bottles lying around, one of them halfempty, glasses, half-finished herring, onions and sliced fat pork.

Everything seemed dead, except for the cockroaches crawling undisturbed on their battlefield.

They had said something about the one o'clock express. Why? Perhaps I should have showed them all that mess behind the screen. I still had my doubts about the whole business. But what kind of damned manners did they have? Not to explain anything except to officials!

Suddenly our wicket gate squeaked, and I quickly ran out toward the bridge. "Is that you, Matryona Vasilyevna?" The door to the courtyard opened. Wringing her hands and unsteady on her feet, Matryona's friend, Masha, entered the house.

"Matryona . . . Our Matryona, Ignatich!" I had her sit down, and, hampered by her tears, she told the story.

At the railroad crossing there was a little hill after a steep approach. There was no barrier. The tractor had pulled the first sled across when the rope broke and the second sled, the homemade one, got stuck and began falling to pieces. (Faddei had provided inferior wood for it, for the second sled, that is.) The tractor driver and Faddei's lame son managed to pull the first sledge a little way off, and had returned to the second. They were splicing the rope when Matryona -- heaven knows what brought her there -- rushed in between the tractor and the sledge. Now how did she expect to help the men? She was perpetually getting herself mixed up in men's affairs, such as the time at the lake when a horse almost knocked her down through a hole in the ice. And why did she go to the damned crossing anyhow? She had already given away the gornitza, and all her debts had been settled. The engineer kept looking to make sure that the train from Cherusti didn't appear suddenly. He could have seen the lights in the distance. But from the other direction, from our station, two engines coupled together came up -- without lights and moving backward. Why they were running without lights nobody knows. When an engine backs up, coal dust pours into the engineer's eyes from the tender so that he can't see very well. They came flying up, and crushed to a pulp the three people who were between the tractor and the sledge. The tractor was wrecked, one sledge was split into kindling wood, the tracks were thrown off the ramp, and both engines turned over on one side.

"But why didn't they hear the engines coming?"

"Because the tractor ahead of them drowned out the noise!"

"And what about the dead bodies?"

"They won't permit anyone to touch them. They've roped off the area."

"But what was it I heard about the express? Was there one?"

"The ten o'clock express was already moving out of our station and toward the crossing. But when the engines crashed, the two engineers weren't hurt. They jumped free, ran back down the tracks waving their hands, and managed to stop the train."

The nephew was hit by a log which rolled across the tracks. He hid out at Klavka's house, so that no one would know that he too was at the crossing. Otherwise he would be dragged into court as a

witness. As the Russian proverb puts it: "The one who sleeps on the stove never gets bothered -- the others all get caught!"

"Kira's husband got off without a scratch. He tried to hang himself, but they pulled him out of the noose. 'Because of me,' he says, 'my aunt and brother were killed!' Then he went and had himself arrested. But now instead of going to jail, he'll go to the insane asylum. Oh, Matryona, my dear little Matryona!"

Matryona was no more. Someone close to me had been killed -- and only the day before I had reproached her for wearing my quilted coat! From the book advertising poster on the wall, the reddish-yellow figure of a woman continued smiling happily.

Old Masha sat a while longer and continued to cry. When she rose to leave she suddenly inquired, "Ignatich! You remember? Matryona had a large gray knitted shawl . . . She really intended it after her death for my daughter, Tanya, right?"

She looked at me hopefully through the half-darkness. Was it possible that I had forgotten? But, no, I remembered.

"Right -- she really had intended it for Tanya." "Then look here! Maybe you won't mind if I take it with me right now? Tomorrow the whole family will come flying over, and afterward, it'll be too late for me to get it!" Again she looked at me hopefully, pleading -- this friend of Matryona's for half a century-- the only one in all the village who really loved her. Surely she deserved it.

"All right -- take it!" I confirmed. She opened the small trunk, took the shawl, thrust it under her skirt, and left.

Some sort of madness had seized the mice. They were running so furiously up and down the walls that the green wallpaper seemed to move in almost visible waves over their backs.

In the morning I had to go to school. It was three a.m. There was nothing left for me to do except to bolt the door, and lie down to sleep. Lock the door because Matryona wasn't coming back!

I left the light on and lay down. The mice were squeaking -- almost groaning -- and running -- running all over the place. I had to rid my tired, incoherent mind of an involuntary anxiety -- a feeling that Matryona had returned invisibly to say farewell to her house. And suddenly in the darkness on the path in front of the entrance, I imagined that I saw the young, dark-haired Faddei with his axe raised, "If he weren't my own brother, I'd cut you both to pieces!"

Forty years had flown by since his threat had been made from the corner there. The threat had hung like an old broadsword -which had struck at last!

At daybreak the women, using a sled, brought back all that remained of Matryona, which had been covered with a dirty sack. They took off the sack in order to wash her. Everything was jumbled together. The feet, half of the trunk, and the left hand were missing. One of the women said, "God left her little right hand so that she can cross herself where she's going!"

The whole crowd of rubber plants which Matryona had loved, was taken out of the izba. She had loved them so much that once when she had been awakened in the night by smoke, she didn't rush to save the izba, but to turn the plants over on the floor so they wouldn't suffocate. The floors were swept clean. They curtained over Matryona's lusterless mirror with a wide towel of old, homemade cloth. They snatched the cheerful posters from the walls. They moved my table. On stools by the window, under the icon, they set the plain, unadorned coffin, which had been hastily knocked together.

Matryona lay in the coffin. Her lifeless, mangled body was neatly and simply covered with a clean sheet. Her head was enveloped in a white kerchief, but her face, undamaged and peaceful, seemed more alive than dead.

The villagers came to stand around for a while and have a look. The women brought their children to stare at the deceased. When anyone began to cry, the women, as if obliged to do so -even if they had come out of empty curiosity -- all stood around the walls and the door and wept as if they were an accompanying chorus. But the men stood silently at attention, their caps in their hands.

It fell to the lot of the relatives to do most of the mourning. I observed in the weeping a coldly thought-out, ages-old established order. Those who were somewhat distant relatives came up to the coffin for a short while and lamented softly over it. Those who considered themselves part of the dead woman's family began weeping while still on the pathway, and having reached the coffin, bent down and wailed in the face of the deceased. There was a different, homemade melody for each mourner, and each set forth her own thoughts and feelings.

Then I realized that the mourning over the deceased was not simply mourning, but a kind of political contest in its own right. The three sisters had flown in together. They had seized Matryona's izba, her goat, and the stove. They had closed the trunk and locked it. They had also dug the two hundred rubles saved for burial expenses out of the lining of Matryona's coat. They tried to prove to all who came that they alone were the closest to Matryona.

Over the coffin they mourned, "Ah, nanya, nanya! Ah, lyolka, lyolka! And to think you could have lived so quietly, so peacefully! And we would always have taken such tender care of you! Oh, why did your gornitza lead to your destruction? The cursed gornitza dealt a final blow to you! Why did they break up your things? And why didn't you listen to us?"

The laments of the sisters were indictments of Matryona's husband's family. Obviously they were meant to prove that there was no need to break up Matryona's gornitza. While the underlying thought was: "The men have grabbed the gornitza and we're not about to give up the izba itself!"

The husband's family, Matryona's sisters-in-law (i.e., the sisters of Yefim and Faddei) and a few assorted nieces, then went up to the coffin and mourned in this fashion: "Ah, auntie, little auntie! Why didn't you guard yourself against them? And now they most likely take offense at us! To think that you, our dear relative, that it was all your fault! And the gornitza had nothing to do with it! But why did you go there, where death rubbed you out? No one called you there! And the way you died! Unthinkable! Why didn't you listen to us?" And behind all this lamentation the real reason stood out clearly: "We're not responsible for her death, and we're still going to talk about who gets the izba!"

By then the gross, broad-faced "second" Matryona, the substitute Matryona whom Faddei had taken only because of her name, had gotten into the contest, wailing simplemindedly, and crying hysterically over the coffin: "Yes, you there, my darling little sister! Is it possible that you could take offense at me? There was a time when we two talked and talked together. Please forgive me, a poor, unfortunate creature! Oh-ma! You went to your dear mother, and surely you will return for me, too! Oh-ma-ah!"

With that "Oh-ma-ah" she literally exhausted all her breath, and began beating, beating her breast against the side of the coffin.

Then, since her wailing had exceeded the accepted norm, all the other women, as if they recognized that her mourning had succeeded only too well, advised in a friendly tone, "Cease! Cease!"

Matryona stopped, and afterward went up and sobbed again, even more fervently. Then an old woman from the village came out of the corner. She placed her hand on Matryona's shoulder and said solemnly, "There are two riddles in this world: How I was born -- I don't remember; how I shall die -- I don't know!" Matryona fell silent at once, as did all the others, so that there was an interlude of absolute quiet.

But this same old woman, who was much older than all the others present, and almost a total stranger to Matryona, after a brief interlude, also wailed, "Oh, you, my poor sick one! Oh, you, my Vasilyevna! Oh, I'm growing tired of saying farewell to all of you!"

And somewhat unusually, with the plain sobbing characteristic of our own age (which has had plenty of practice at it), the illstarred Kira wept -- Kira, Matryona's adopted daughter from Cherusti, for whom they had broken up the gornitza and moved it away. Her wavy curls were pitifully disarranged. Her eyes were red, as if they had been wiped with blood. She didn't notice that her scarf had slipped to one side in the frosty air and her coat sleeves hung down past her arms. Beside herself, she had gone from the coffin of her foster mother in one house to the coffin of her brother in another. They also feared for her reason because her husband would have to stand trial as well.

It appeared her husband was guilty on two counts -- he not only removed the gornitza, but he was also a railroad engineer, who knew the regulations about unguarded railroad crossings, and should have gone to the station to give advance notice about the tractor. A thousand human beings were on the Urals express that night, sleeping on upper and lower benches in the half-light shed by the train's lamps. They could have all been killed! Back of the whole affair was the greediness of a few people to get hold of a strip of land, or to spare the expense of making a second trip with the tractor. And behind all that was the gornitza, on which a curse had lain ever since Faddei's hands had seized and broken it up.

As for the tractor driver, he was already beyond human justice. But the railroad administration itself was also guilty because they had not guarded the busy intersection, and because the coupled engines were running without lights. That was why they tried to switch the blame on the drinking, and then to keep the case out of court.

The rails and roadbed were so badly torn up that for the three days during which the coffins rested in their respective houses, the trains did not run. They were rerouted on another branch line. All Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, from the end of the inquest to the burial, the tracks were repaired night and day.

The repair crew were freezing. For warmth by day and for light at night, they built a fire out of the boards and logs which they picked up for free from the second sled, scattered near the crossing.

But the first sled, loaded and intact, stood not far from the crossing and it was precisely this which tormented the soul of the dark-bearded Faddei all day Saturday. One sledge was waiting there with its ropes ready, teasing him, and perhaps Faddeus might still save the second from the fire. His daughter's mind was disturbed, and the outcome of the trial hung over his son-in-law. In his own house lay his son, killed by himself on the same street on which he had killed the woman he once loved. Faddei had come and stood by the coffin, clutching his beard, but not for long. His high forehead was clouded by painful thoughts, but the thoughts were about how to save the logs of the gornitza from the fire and from the crafty designs of Matryona's sisters.

As I thought about the townspeople of Talnov, I realized that Faddei was not the only one in the village with such thoughts.

As for our property -- either personal, or the people's -- it is strange that the language calls it "goods." And yet losing any of it would be considered disgraceful and stupid by the people!

Faddei rushed about, now in the settlement, then at the station, from authority to authority, without stopping to take a seat anywhere. Capitalizing on his back, which he couldn't straighten up, and leaning on his staff, he asked each authority to make allowance for his old age and to decide that the gornitza should be given back to him.

Someone handed down a decision in his favor. Faddei gathered together his surviving sons, sons-in-law, and nephews, borrowed horses from the kolkhoz, and hauled back the remains of the gornitza into his own yard along a winding road which passed through three villages. He completed the job during Saturday night and Sunday.

The burial took place on Sunday. The two coffins met and went down the center of the village, with the relatives quarreling over which coffin should go first. Afterward the old woman and her nephew were placed in a single, wheeled rozvalni [a sort of wide sledge]. Over the February snow crust, which had recently thawed, under a cloudy sky, they brought the deceased to the church graveyard, which was two villages away from us. The weather was windy, very unpleasant, and the priest with his deacons waited in the church without going out to Talnov to meet them.

The people followed slowly to the edge of the village and sang in chorus. Afterwards they fell back.

The bustling of the old women had not quieted down even on Sunday evening. One old woman purred the psalter over the coffin. Matryona's sisters scurried around the Russian stove with the oven prongs. Out of the mouth of the stove blazed heat from the peat which had been fired up--peat which Matryona had brought in a sack from a distant bog. Using some wretched flour, they baked tasteless patties. It was already getting on toward evening when they returned from the burial and gathered for the funeral banquet. They seized the tables, putting them in line in the place where the coffin had been that morning. First they all stood around the table and an old man, husband of the sister-in-law, read aloud the Lord's Prayer. Then they poured out for each of us just enough honey and hot water to cover the bottom of a small wooden bowl. Using spoons, we ate this slowly without anything to go with it. Afterward we ate a little something, drank vodka, and the conversation became livelier. Before eating

the kissel [a jellylike oatmeal porridge] we all rose and sang "Eternal Memory." (They explained to me that it was obligatory to sing this song before eating the kissel.) There was more drinking, and the talk became even louder, but it was not about Matryona at all.

The husband of the sister-in-law boasted wildly, "Did you notice, orthodox believers, that the funeral service was conducted slowly today? That's because Father Mikhail noticed me. He knows that I know the service. Otherwise he would only have waved the incense censer, and, 'Saints defend us, homeward wend us,' that would have been the end of it!"

At last the supper ended. Again all rose and sang, "She is worthy!"

And again, with three repetitions, they sang, "Eternal Memory." But the voices wheezed, and were discordant. Their faces were drunk, and no one put much feeling into this "Eternal Memory." Afterward, the special guests left and only the nearest relatives remained. They pulled out their cigarettes and smoked, laughing and joking.

There was some mention of Matryona's husband, who had disappeared without a trace. The sister's-in-law husband, beating his breast, assured me and the bootmaker, who was married to one of Matryona's sisters, "Yefim died! He died, I tell you! Otherwise why couldn't he come back? Why even if I knew they would hang me when I returned to my native land, I'd come back all the same!"

The bootmaker nodded his head in agreement. He had been a deserter who had never left his native land at all. He had spent the entire war at his mother's house, hiding in the cellar.

High on the stove, getting ready to spend the night, sat that stern silent old woman, more ancient than all the ancients. She looked down from above in mute disapproval of the boisterous, unseemly conduct of the fifty- and sixty-year-old young people.

Only the unfortunate foster daughter, who had grown up within those walls, slipped behind the partition and wept.

Faddei did not attend Matryona's funeral supper because he held one of his own for his son. But during the next few days he aggressively entered the hut twice for talks with Matryona's sisters and the bootmaker-deserter.

A quarrel began over the izba--over whom it belonged to, to the sisters or the foster daughter. They almost took the case to the law court but came to a reconciliation, having decided that the court would give the izba away to neither of them, but to the village Soviet. They made a deal. One of the sisters was allotted the goat, and the izba went to the bootmaker and his wife. In figuring Faddei's share, since, as he said, he "had raised every little log with his own hands," the gornitza, which had already been hauled away, went to him. They also let him have the shed where the goat lived, and the whole of the inner fence between the yard and the garden plot.

And once more, although a prey to infirmities and rheumatic pains, the grasping old man revived, and became young again for a while. Once more he gathered together his remaining sons and brothers-in-law. They dismantled the shed and the fence, and he himself hauled away the logs on little sleds, one after another, with only little Antoshka from the eighth grade to help him towards the end -- only on this job he couldn't dawdle.

They boarded up Matryona's izba until spring, and I moved in with one of the sisters-in-law, not far away. On various occasions this sister-in-law recalled things about Matryona, and enlightened me on new facets of the dead woman's character.

" Yefim didn't really love her. He used to say, I like to dress up, like quality folks, but she dresses any old way, and always looks like a hick. Well,' he says, 'in that case she doesn't need anything,' and he began to squander their savings on drink. One time we drove to the city with him, looking for work. Yefim had acquired a mistress there, and he didn't feel like coming back to Matryona."

All her references to Matryona were disparaging--she was slovenly--she didn't care about material things--she was not thrifty--she didn't even keep a suckling pig. For some unknown reason, she didn't like to fatten them. Also she wasn't very smart because she helped other people without getting paid for it. (And indeed, there was cause for her to remember Matryona, because now she could no longer call on her to pull the plough in her garden plot.)

Even Matryona's warmth and simplicity, which her sister-in-law acknowledged, she spoke about with scornful pity.

And it was only thus--through these disparaging comments of her sister-in-law--that an image of Matryona emerged, one which I had never fully grasped while we were still living side by side.

And indeed! Every izba had its suckling pig -- but Matryona's house had none. What can be simpler than to feed a greedy piglet which cares for nothing in the world except food? What could be simpler than to warm its swill three times a day, to live for it, and afterwards to cut its throat and have the fat back?

But Matryona never had it.

She never tried to acquire things for herself. She wouldn't struggle to buy things which would then mean more to her than life itself. All her life she never tried to dress smartly in the kind of clothes which embellish cripples and disguise evildoers.

She was misunderstood and abandoned by her husband, having buried six of his children. Her moral and ethical standards made her a misfit. She was considered "odd" by her sisters and her sisters-in-law--a laughingstock--because, as they said, she was so stupid as to work for others without pay. She never accumulated property against the time of her death when her only possessions were a dirty-white goat, a crippled cat, and rubber plants . . .

We all lived beside her, and never understood that she was that righteous one without whom, according to the proverb, no village can stand.

Nor any city.

Nor our whole land.

Translators Preface and Introduction
by
Paul W. Blackstock

"An Incident at Krechetovka Station"
and
Matryona's House
by
Alexander Solzhenitsyn

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The difficulties encountered in translating contemporary Russian are too well-known to require elaboration. They illustrate only too well the familiar Italian proverb, *traduttore-traditore* (the translator is a traitor). An attempt has been made to retain as much of the flavor of the original as possible in colloquial American English without sacrificing accuracy. Thus for those who may prefer to read the original without use of a dictionary the present translation is literal enough to serve as a useful guide. Unfamiliar abbreviations, such as NKPS (People's Commissariat of Communication Routes) are explained as they occur in the text in brackets. Words which are left in the original Russian, such as *izba* (peasant hut or cottage), are handled in the same manner. Familiar abbreviations, such as NKVD (State Security, i.e. secret police) are left without explanation. A brief glossary of important and/or recurrent terms in the order of their occurrence is appended below.

I am indebted to Mrs. Dorothy Hanson, Professor of Russian at Columbia College, Columbia, South Carolina, for a first-draft literal translation of the Krechetovka Station story, and to Professor Samuel Pevsner of Washington, D. C., for invaluable assistance with unclear and difficult words in both stories. Like others who studied Russian under Prof. Pevsner while serving in the Pentagon, I am indebted to him for his patience, his stimulating teaching, and his encouragement to continue private study after leaving public service. Mrs. Elizabeth Legzdins of New York was helpful in translating certain peasant expressions and vocabulary. But above all, I am indebted for linguistic advice and assistance to Leon Volkov, contributing editor on Russian Affairs of Newsweek magazine, and his wife Galina, who reviewed the final draft of both stories; and to Abraham Brumberg, executive editor of the U. S. I. A. journal, *Problems of Communism*, who reviewed the Introduction. Finally, sincere appreciation is due to Mrs. Cloris Grogan, secretary of the Institute of International Studies here at the University of South Carolina, who typed the manuscript from a very difficult final draft. Also I wish to thank Mrs. Catharine Rembert of the University's Art Department, who made the sketches based on original Soviet source materials.

Paul W. Blackstock

INTRODUCTION

Alexander Solzhenitsyn "Two Stories" appeared in the January, 1963, issue of the Soviet literary magazine, *Novy Mir* (New World), which had previously published his sensational story of life in the Stalinist labor camps, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. In a foreword to this earlier work, Alexander Tvardovsky, Editor-in-Chief of *Novy Mir*, wrote that "it marks the appearance on the literary scene of a new, original and mature talent." He had such a feeling of gratitude for the honesty and candor of Solzhenitsyn's work that his "greatest wish" was that "this gratitude be shared by other readers." Hence the publication of these "Two Stories," or two short novels.

To the reader who lives in an open, unregimented society, this kind of remark may seem puzzling. What, one may ask, is so unusual about appearance of a new Soviet author who writes openly and honestly about life as he has known it? And why should the Soviet reader be grateful for the opportunity to read his works?

There are no simple, direct answers to these questions. The explanation lies deep in the nature of Soviet society and the role which the artist, especially the writer, is called upon to play in it.

The impression created by the Soviet system on the visitor from one of our open, Western societies is one of "togetherness gone mad." The state has created an official ideal image of Soviet society as a sort of grandiose, prize-winning collective in which each private individual heroically overfulfills his plan, no matter how great the obstacles.

For example, in their first-grade reader, all Soviet school children are introduced to an ideal image of "Mother" drawn for them in a story which begins: "My mother works in a factory and makes little electric lamps. Every month she overfulfills the plan." A Marxist-Leninist ideology and an official image of Soviet life and society are thus imposed on the individual beginning in his earliest formative years.

All must pay lip service to these concepts, and, under the doctrine of Socialist Realism, artists are called upon to reinforce them. They are regarded by the state as instruments in the general task of uplifting and indoctrinating Soviet society, and, what is more, are for the most part willing to accept this role. This is especially true of writers, whom Soviet Chairman N. S. Khrushchev, addressing the Fourth Congress of the Union of Soviet writers in May, 1959, described as "a type of artillery. They clear the way for our forward movement, and help our Party in the Communist education of workers." He added, with typical Khrushchevian candor, "You must brainwash the people with your works!"

This is the official literary mission. The doctrine of Socialist Realism has been developed not only to defend this mission, but as a means of condemning all art which, according to official standards, fails to provide the necessary uplift, to sound a call to overfulfill the plan, and to portray life as part of the ever-forward march of Soviet collectivism, which is implicitly held up as the ultimate goal of all humanity.

Since the death of Stalin and the publication in 1954 of Ilya Ehrenberg's novel, *The Thaw*, followed by Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not By Bread Alone*, there has been a tentative unfreezing of the rigid Socialist Realism formula. A random sample of recent Soviet novels and short stories will reveal both the strengths and weaknesses of literature produced under these somewhat improved conditions.

The uninitiated reader is both attracted and repelled by current Soviet literature. He is attracted by the fact that many of the authors have talent. Obviously they can produce what by Western standards would be called good -- perhaps even great -- literature, until the inevitable Communist indoctrination seeps through. The social and political lessons are rarely subtle. In most cases they are as obtrusive as the ubiquitous hammer-and-sickle symbol of Soviet power. Certainly the Western reader, and probably many Soviet citizens as well, find this continuous moralizing and political indoctrination both repulsive and disheartening. What a pity that such talents are employed (or in some cases clearly prostituted) for purely didactic or propaganda purposes!

At least two features are common to most current Soviet writing and image-making. First, work -- almost any kind of work as long as it is hard and unremitting -- is held up as one of the highest individual and collective ideals. Theoretically it is not only an end in itself which gives life meaning, but is also richly rewarded. As a general rule, manual labor is highly romanticized, above all, tireless, "heroic," labor in a pioneer setting, as illustrated by Alexis Malenkii's long novel, *Developers of the Tundra* (*Pokoriteli Tundry*) -- (*Siberskie Ogni*, 1959-60). Thus a large percentage of Soviet short stories and novels falls into what may be called the "production" or "construction" category or genre. Second, the Communist Party and the collective organizations under its influence or control are idealized and romanticized. These range from individual work brigades to collective farms and large Party or bureaucratic institutions. Frequently a story line will concentrate on the individual human being, caught in circumstances beyond his control by an unkind fate, who is miraculously rescued by the Party or by one of its organizations.

He thus achieves "true happiness" in the collective, as illustrated in a story, very skillfully drafted, by Boris Zubavin, entitled "Happiness" (*Radost*) -- (*Moskva*, 1962). It should be noted that in the Soviet moral universe this kind of happiness is the equivalent of "salvation" for the Christian. The basic Western idea that "no man is an island" has been distorted beyond all recognition. The ideal prototype of the new Soviet man achieves inner grace by selfless toil, but his redemption can only come from the collective, when at the decisive moment of his life's struggle, he merges with it and "measures up to the demands of the Revolution, of human society, of history."

The strength of such literature lies in its idealism and optimism. Its writers, frequently with undeniable skill and talent, accomplish the mission laid down for them by the canons of Socialist Realism.

They discharge what a Soviet youth recently called: that great responsibility which has been placed upon our generation -- to preserve the fire of the October Revolution, not to surrender a single position, to rise yet another step in man's ascent toward the sun, toward happiness, toward light. [Stormy applause.]

(*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 5, 1961.)

Soviet writers who accomplish such tasks (or indeed, any who are published at all) are well paid for their work.

Such writing has its counterpart in many of the Horatio Alger, success story novels produced in the open, unregimented societies of the West. The "happy-ending" formula literature of the West -- like its Soviet counterpart -- also pays its producers well. In this genre some readers may be inclined to rate Soviet writing (which at least has a well-defined set of social objectives) higher than purely escapist

literature which offers no goal other than the aimless pursuit of pleasure in an idealized affluence-- utterly beyond the reach of the majority of the people. Some readers may also prefer Soviet "uplift" literature to Western products of various "realistic" schools, which apparently regard almost any parade of sex and violence as Art, especially if the product is infused with elements of social protest.

When queried as to "why they do it?", writers who specialize in the Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm or Developers of the Tundra product come up with the counterquestion: "After all, we have to eat, don't you agree?" Talleyrand had an unkind but pertinent reply:

"I don't see the necessity." The pity of it all, as far as Soviet authors are concerned, is that basically there is no market for any other kind of product. There is only one publisher -- the State. The "work conquers all" type of story is what the Government wants and what it buys. There are no private presses, although a few handmimeographed poems or stories are occasionally circulated surreptitiously.

The weaknesses of literature produced by the Socialist Realism formula are too familiar to require extensive elaboration here. As with all the products of "formula" writing, whether capitalist or Soviet, the characters are simply not human. They are stylized caricatures of human beings which move like puppets through a distorted dreamworld. Both the Rover Boys and the heroic figures of the Soviet "production" novels are equally hollow, equally out of touch with the real world.

The basic weakness has been recognized in rare moments of candor by official Soviet sources themselves. For example, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the daily paper of the Young Communist League, in its April 5, 1961, issue, quoted the following candid criticism by a young teacher from the Leningrad State Pedagogical Institute:

The heroes of our literature and of our theatre merely hint at what we see in real life. There is no arguing that our young people have courage and other fine qualities. But whenever we try to show a hero personifying these qualities -- say, a builder on a construction site or in the virgin lands -- what emerges is something rather schematic, sometimes even grotesque.

This criticism strikes home, as anyone with the patience to read through a representative sampling of contemporary Soviet literature can testify. It is precisely because such "heroic" literature is so far out of touch with reality -- either human or Soviet -- that the editor of *Novy Mir*, quoted above, is grateful for the kind of direct, honest portrayal of life found in Solzhenitsyn's earlier work, and in the "Two Stories" translated here. Millions of Soviet readers and others abroad will undoubtedly share that gratitude.

There is nothing sensational about these "Two Stories" except that they were written as literature, i.e., for their own sake. The first, "An Incident at Krechetovka Station," merely describes a typical day at a provincial railroad station during a critical period in the early days of World War II. An unfortunate straggler from a military unit, a former Moscow actor, is denounced by an over-zealous station commandant, who later has some gnawing second thoughts about his action. The situation is familiar to millions in the Soviet Union and in formerly Nazi-occupied Europe who have known life under a police-state regime. Even the moral of the story -- if there must be one according to the rules of the game -- is fully in line with N. S. Khrushchev's concluding recommendation in his address to the

Twenty-second Congress: "It is our duty to go carefully into all aspects of all matters concerned with the abuse of power. . . . This must be done to prevent such things from happening in the future."

The second story, "Matryona's House," has even less plot and action than the first. Apparently it is partly autobiographical, but the story is essentially a character sketch of an aging woman in typical Russian peasant surroundings -- a squalid izba (a one-room peasant hut or cottage) at the edge of a tiny settlement, with her lame cat, scraggly goat, and a lodger, the local schoolteacher who tells the story, and who in 1953, a few months after Stalin's death, returns from ten years of exile in Soviet Central Asia. By a striking coincidence the principal character, Matryona Vasilyevna, when introduced to modern music by way of her tenant's radio, rejects the singing of Chaliapin, the famous Russian baritone, for the songs of Glinka. As recently as March, 1963, N. S. Khrushchev, in a speech censoring formalism in the arts, told Party leaders, writers, and artists that "Whenever I listen to Glinka, tears of joy come to my eyes." In this regard, at least, "Matryona's House" should meet with the approval of the regime's foremost critic.

What emerges from both these stories is an unforgettable picture of what Russian life -- or at least an important segment of it -- is really like. They are in the great tradition of the stories of peasant life written by Turgenev and Tolstoy -- stories which contributed materially to the prerevolutionary scene in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia. They have the same ring of authenticity, pay a similar attention to significant detail, and provide comparable insights into Russian character.

In his March 1963 speech to the Soviet writers and artists, Khrushchev forcefully indicated that the liberal trend in art and literature had gone too far, and that it was time to retreat back into the rigid framework of Socialist Realism. Although Khrushchev mentioned Solzhenitsyn's work favorably, there were rumors in Moscow that Tvardovsky, editor of *Novy Mir*, who published it, would be removed from his post. The rumors proved false, but the March issue of *Novy Mir* appeared a month late, and the last installment of Ilya Ehrenberg's controversial memoirs was much shorter than previous ones. The young poet Yevtushenko's planned visit to the United States was canceled. On the other hand, three Soviet writers (Alexander Yessenin-Volpin, Michael Naritza, Valeriy Tsaris) who had formerly been declared insane and forcibly detained in insane asylums, were quietly released.

All these signs point to a campaign against liberalism similar to the one which took place in 1957 after publication abroad of the late Boris Pasternak prize-winning novel, *Doctor Zhivago*. How far the current "refreeze" will go and how long it will last is an open question, part of the larger problem of how any authoritarian regime handles the emergence of an art and literature of social protest, a subject which merits brief consideration.

It is ironic that the Soviet regime has nursed its present generation of intellectuals on the social protest literature of Western Europe and the United States. Today, forty-five per cent of all Soviet grade school students study English as a second language continuously for six or seven years. In the course of even such elementary instruction the Russian student actually reads more English and American literature than American students at the same grade level. Certainly, most contemporary Russian authors are familiar with outstanding examples of social protest writing ranging from the novels of Dickens and Mark Twain through Dreiser, Faulkner, Steinbeck, and England's "Angry Young Men" of today. (The study of such literature is encouraged since presumably it "unmasks" or exposes the evils and

contradictions theoretically inherent in a bourgeois capitalist system which, according to dialectical materialism, makes its ultimate replacement by Communist society inevitable. It is hoped the Soviet student will form an image of the United States, for example, which is a composite of *An American Tragedy*, *Tobacco Road*, and *Grapes of Wrath*.) Moreover, many of the great Russian classics of the nineteenth century were written in protest against the obvious political and social abuses of the Czarist regime. Under these circumstances it is inevitable that Russian intellectuals writing today should seek some means of protesting against similar abuses which they discern in contemporary Soviet society. However, by definition the Soviet system has none of the weaknesses of previous, capitalist societies and is a near-Utopia in transition to the final Marxist Paradise. Accordingly, the regime attempts to contain the writer's deep-seated urge to protest within the increasingly inadequate doctrinal framework of Socialist Realism. Ever since the 1956 Twentieth Party Congress when de-Stalinization became official policy, the regime has permitted criticism of the Stalinist past. The abuses of that period can be attributed to "the cult of the individual" and have theoretically been corrected with the new course under Khrushchev. For a significant number of "angry" Russians of all ages, however, this minor concession has not been enough. They have sent abroad, for publication under assumed names, works which protest against present abuses. The most familiar example is Abram Tertz's (pseudonym) *The Trial Begins*. For the moment the regime has responded by another official warning from Khrushchev and certain repressive measures. But like open terror (which Khrushchev has denounced as a Stalinist crime) such repressive measures have their limits, and ultimately prove self-defeating. Too many bullets put an end to all cooperation. Similarly, artists and authors cannot fulfill their assigned tasks from jails or insane asylums. Some sort of compromise is called for and may take the already established form of an increasingly flexible interpretation of what is permissible under Socialist Realism.

The USSR has made enormous scientific and technological progress in the last decade since no more than lip service to dialectical materialism is now required of Russian scientists. This is an encouraging sign of growing intellectual honesty and maturity, and if the trend is extended to the humanities, the USSR may yet come of age and take its rightful place among the truly civilized powers in the society of nations. Now that the Soviets have demonstrated that they are no longer "backward" in science and technology, they may seek to demonstrate that they are a kulturny (cultured) nation as well. A first step in this direction would be to show enough self-confidence in their much vaunted "new Soviet society" to permit the free development of a literature of social protest. Obviously the present Soviet leadership lacks this self-confidence. However, a hesitant first step in the direction of cultural emancipation has already been taken with the publication of novels and stories such as these by Solzhenitsyn which are written as literature rather than for the lessons they contain.

It is encouraging that Soviet authorities have permitted the publication of such writing, under the claim that "today there is no aspect of our life that cannot be dealt with and faithfully described in Soviet literature." Let us hope that this claim may yet be proven true, that the regime will someday permit its authors to return to the original sources of Russian inspiration, to the Russian people and to the Russian soil, which somehow stubbornly resists political indoctrination. It may be that with increasing maturity, the USSR, now widely recognized as one of the superpowers in the world today, will outgrow some of its youthful preoccupation with purely political objectives. It may even be that Russia will again return to the main stream of Western civilization. However, one swallow does not make a spring.

On the one hand, the appearance of such stories as these of Solzhenitsyn could mark the beginning of a new flowering of Russian literature. On the other hand, such promising new efforts could be suppressed and the men who produced them could be silenced in a new wave of tyranny and oppression. The latter development is unlikely at this stage under the present Soviet regime. On the contrary, the persistent demand for more, rather than less, artistic freedom is already so strong that it is doubtful whether a narrow strait jacket of Socialist Realism can in fact be reimposed on Soviet literature by those who, like the Stalinist security police, "never make mistakes."

Paul W. Blackstock
Columbia, South Carolina
May, 1963

GLOSSARY

Da: The Russian word for "yes" or frequently "O.K."

"Heated," warm or converted cars: These were boxcars adapted for troop transport.

Izba: Russian one-room peasant hut or cottage, usually with a thatched roof, and frequently attached to a second larger room or gornitza (as in the case of Matryona's house).

NKVD: Soviet State Security Police, i.e., secret police.

Stragglers: At the time of the Nazi onslaught in 1941, literally hundreds of thousands of Russian troops were encircled or surrounded; others were lost or escaped. The word straggler is used to refer to all such persons, whether civilian or military.

Tchkalov - V.P.: Soviet pilot and officer who flew nonstop from Moscow to Vancouver, B. C., in 1937 and died in military service in December 1938, honored as a Soviet "Lindbergh."

Turgenev - I.S.: Nineteenth century Russian novelist famous for stories of peasant life, A Sportsman's Sketches and novels such as Fathers and Sons and Virgin Soil.

Gornitza: The large, unused second room of Matryona's house attached to the izba or hut proper -- valuable for its logs and roof.

Belinsky, Panferov: V. G. Belinski, Nineteenth century Russian critic; F. I. Panferov, Soviet author whose novel Borbaza mir won a Stalin Prize in 1948.

Nanya or lyolka: Nannie or nurse, a familiar term of endearment.