

Letter from NEW YORK

At a *Vecherinka*

THE other Saturday night, I went to a *vecherinka*. I was invited by S. M. Levitas, who had been an active Socialist in Russia before the Revolution and is now executive editor of the New York weekly, *The New Leader*. "A *vecherinka*," he explained, "is a little evening." (*Vecher*, the Russian for evening, and *inka*, the diminutive.) "No heavy banquet, no heavy speeches, just a light evening, some little sandwiches, some *chai* (tea), some good talk—what the French would call a *soirée*."

"What is it for?" I asked.

"The *vecherinka*," he replied, "is for the thirty-fifth anniversary of the *Sozialisticheskyy Vestnik*, the organ of the foreign delegation of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party."

"You mean the Mensheviks?" I said.

"Of course," replied Levitas.

Well, of course. *Everybody* knows that the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was the working-class party in Russia, in contradistinction to the Russian Social Revolutionary Party, the so-called S.R.s, who spoke for the peasants. In 1903, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party had split into two factions, the Bolsheviks or majority-ites, and the Mensheviks or minority-ites. By 1912 the Bolsheviks had split into three additional factions. So had the Mensheviks. (So for that matter had the Social Revolutionaries. But the Social Democratic Party of Poland and Lithuania split only into two factions.) When Lenin and the Bolsheviks went on to overturn the Russian democratic Republic, they abandoned the name Social Democrats and called themselves Communists. The Mensheviks picked up the banner of Social Democracy and, in 1921, carried it abroad.

In Berlin, the foreign delegation of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (the bulk of the party, still in Russia, was to be hunted down and decimated by the secret police), now under the leadership of Fyodor

Dan and Raphael Abramovitch, launched the *Vestnik*, the "Courier." Now, thirty-five years later, after an exciting career in Berlin, in Paris, and since 1943 in New York, the *Vestnik* was celebrating an anniversary of unbroken publication. An enviable record for any magazine, and an astounding performance for a periodical launched in foreign seas and held afloat by the pfennigs, centimes, and pennies of several hundred émigrés, many of whom, despite their cultured background, could obtain only menial jobs, yet whose dedication had kept the *Vestnik* going. So now, thirty-five years later, there was to be a *vecherinka* for the *Vestnik*.

THE *vecherinka* was being held in a small hall on the upper west side of Manhattan, in a building labelled, appropriately enough, the Free Sons. It was, actually, a centre run by the Free Sons of Israel, and apparently was used by a liberal congregation for services, but there was little in the hall to suggest any religious theme. The main room itself was about sixty feet long and thirty feet wide. The long walls, divided into three large panels, were painted a dull yellow. The only decorations in the room were two large paintings, about six by nine feet, facing each other on the first panels as one entered. Each picture was of George Washington. The one at the right, of dull reddish hue, was a copy of the familiar Gilbert Stuart portrait, but showing a standing figure, finger pointing to some document. The other, thickly brown, almost black, and difficult to make out, was a Washington standing alongside a dark grey horse whose head was curved low, as if in tribute. The other four panels were bare. At the back, on one side, was a long table on which were piled some dishes, mounds of small sandwiches, and little heaps of lemon. In the room itself were about sixty to seventy small round tables pushed close together, leaving but a

narrow aisle down the centre of the hall; on the tables were cups and saucers. At the front of the hall was a raised platform, and on it, a long pine table, covered with a white cloth. The wall behind it was bare. But on the table was a small ceramic vase with a burst of gorgeous red roses. One table, in front of the platform, also had a vase with magnificently large red roses. These were the only marks of colour to relieve the slight dinginess of the hall.

When we entered there were about three hundred or more persons already crowded into the room. They were equally divided into men and women, and all seemed to know each other. The men were almost all elderly, in their sixties and seventies, grey-haired, white-haired, and bald, but the number of finely modelled heads and finely shaped white beards was striking. One needed only the large white blouses and red sashes to put them back into Russian fields. At this *vecherinka*, however, almost all wore conservative business suits, while the women had on mainly quiet, often well-tailored, clothes. (A seamstress, after all, is a traditional émigré vocation.) Occasionally one would see a more youthful face, a son or daughter perhaps, but there were not many. Yet the crowd was gay, the buzz of conversation was loud. Almost everyone talked Russian, and though I don't speak or understand the language I could make out words like *organizatsiya*, *Amerikanski*, *Stalin*, *naznya*, *Noo Leeder*, and either some clearing of throat or some syllables which sounded like *Khrushchev*. No one was drinking *chai* yet, or eating sandwiches, but the "little evening" was young.

At about 8 p.m., Levitas, who it turned out was to be master of ceremonies, mounted the platform and called the crowd to quiet. He spoke in Russian, and my neighbour translated for me. While this was a *vecherinka*, he said, naturally there were a few individuals, various friends of the *Vestnik*, in the room who would be called upon to say a few words of greeting before bringing in the *chai*. Thereupon he called up to the platform Professor Michael Karpovich of Harvard, one of the foremost Slavic scholars in the country; Mark Vishniak, the former secretary of the Russian Constituent Assembly, and now head of the Russian desk at

Time magazine; Norman Thomas, the American socialist leader; Nathan Chanin, of the Jewish Socialist *Verband*; and Irakli Tseretelli, one of the legendary figures in the struggle against the Tsar and a leader of one of the three Menshevik factions in the Second Duma.

KARPOVICH had been a Cadet (a conservative) and Vishniak an S.R. (Social Revolutionary). Once, a dozen years ago, I had said to Vishniak familiarly, "Hello, you old Menshevik," and he had replied, quite seriously, "Oh, no, I am an S.R." These differences remained—after all, in exile, what is there left but political identity? I settled back in my chair. Five greetings to listen to. Well, one had to have some sentiment on such an occasion, and thirty-five years was no mean achievement.

Levitas began his introductions. The sentences rolled forth. He speaks quite well, I thought. My mind wandered back to the quarrels Melvin Lasky and I had had with Levitas when we were on the *New Leader* together and how the hot-tempered arguments would end with Levitas stalking out of the room muttering "Dan-ists" (not for my first name but for Fyodor Dan who had led a left-wing faction out of the *Vestnik* group). Through the haze of my memories, his speech rolled on. When Levitas finished, the audience began applauding for the first speaker, but nobody on the platform stood up. In fact all the speakers were applauding too. From a table in front of the hall, and out from behind the large bouquet of red roses, a small erect man, with thick glasses and trim beard, stepped forth. It was Raphael Abramovitch, the editor of the *Vestnik* and acknowledged doyen of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

On the night of Wednesday, November 7th, 1917, when the Bolsheviks had seized the Winter Palace to begin their insurrection, Abramovitch had stood up at the meeting of the Second Congress of the Soviets of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies, and trembling with rage had declared: "What is taking place now in Petrograd is a monstrous calamity!" And, as John Reed, tells the story, in his *Ten Days That Shook The World*:

"Abramovitch raised his voice and hand. 'Our duty to the Russian proletariat doesn't

permit us to remain here and be responsible for these crimes. Because the firing on the Winter Palace doesn't cease, the Municipal Duma together with the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, and the Executive Committee of the Peasants' Soviet, has decided to perish with the Provisional Government, and we are going with them! Unarmed we will expose our breasts to the machine guns of the Terrorists. . . . We invite all delegates to this Congress—.' The rest was lost in a storm of hoots, menaces, and curses which rose to a hellish pitch as fifty delegates got up and pushed their way out. . . ."

Outside, Abramovitch, Avksentiev, the venerated spokesman for the peasants, and several hundred socialist and peasant deputies began their march, four abreast, down the Nevsky, raising lanterns and singing the Marseillaise, moving toward the Winter Palace. At the corner of the Ekaterina Canal, a group of sailors, guns in hand, barred their way. There was argument and commotion. But the menacing guns held the corner, and the marching column, dispirited, turned back. Inside the hall of the Soviets, as Reed describes the scene, the shouting had continued.

"Kamenev jangled the bell, shouting, 'Keep your seats and we'll go on with our business.' And Trotsky, standing up with a pale face, letting out his rich voice in cool contempt, 'All these so-called Socialist compromisers, these frightened Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, Bund—let them go! They are just so much refuse which will be swept into the garbage-heap of history!'"

Kamenev died in the cellars of the Lubianka, with a bullet at the base of his brain. Trotsky, hunted and pursued, was murdered with a pick-axe in his skull. And there was Abramovitch in New York, vigorous and trim, his eyes snapping behind his thick glasses, speaking of his still living hopes that Russia would find a democratic path.

WHEN he finished speaking, Abramovitch sat down among his friends, and Levitas turned to the business at hand of introducing the fraternal greeters. It was

quite clear now. Naturally Abramovitch could not be among the greeters to his own magazine, so he sat in the audience. He had responded, as is the custom, to the first warm words of the chairman. So, still five speakers ahead before the *chai*. First came Karpovich. He spoke quietly, seriously, his theme, apparently, the vulgar interpretations of Marxism by its critics. Then came Vishniak, commenting on the changes in the Soviet Union and pointing to the tensions that exist. An eloquent tribute from Norman Thomas: it was an affirmation of a socialist's faith and a warning that America could not hope to win over the people of India and Indonesia by parading pictures of American wealth since many of the intellectuals of those countries were convinced that only by disciplining the masses, in Soviet fashion, could their countries gain the wealth that America displayed. Chanin, whose first tongue is Yiddish, got the sympathy of the audience by reading his talk in Russian; it was not, one gathered, a bravura performance, but a good try nevertheless.

Four speakers had finished and it was ten o'clock. Well, the evening was young, and it could still be a light one. Only Tseretelli remained as a speaker. Levitas began a new introduction. Tseretelli turned and gazed out at the rear of the room. Most of the audience turned, too. Then Levitas finished, and a man stood up at the rear and began talking. "Who is that," I asked a table companion, Wacław Solski, the noted Polish novelist, in bewilderment. "It is a delegate from the Latvian Socialist Party speaking from the floor," he replied placidly. "There was not enough room on the platform. If there is time," he continued, "there will be greetings from the Lithuanian Socialist Party and the Polish Socialist Party."

I settled back, dismayed. But the audience looked fresh, and certainly it was attentive. Following the Latvian, Levitas began a long story and seemed to be crying Wolf, but it turned out to be Bertram D. Wolfe, the author of *Three Who Made a Revolution*, who paid tribute, as an American, to the fortitude of these exiles. Then a balding man in his mid-thirties, introduced as the "youngest American Menshevik," spoke briefly on the contributions of the *Vestnik* group to thought and scholarship in the U.S.

Finally it was clear that Tseretelli was to

speak. (With the *chai* getting cold, Levitas had decided, apparently, to forgo the Latvian and Polish greetings.) "It's a pity you can't understand Russian," whispered a neighbour. "He speaks such a beautiful, pure Russian." I regarded Tseretelli curiously. At the age of twenty-six, he had been the leader of the Social Democratic Deputies in the Second Russian Duma of 1907. "*A madman*," wrote the arch-conservative Novoe Vremya, "*a madman, but the most brilliant Deputy in the Duma*." The Tsarist government had so feared this "madman" that when the Second Duma was peremptorily dissolved, it had jailed him. For ten years he had lived in Siberia, writing articles from exile. When he returned in March 1917 from Irkutsk, a workers' delegation had greeted him, band playing. Sukhanov, writing in his diary, reported that he had grumbled over this large turn-out, and Uritsky, a leading Menshevik, had answered, "*Well, you know, Tseretellis don't arrive every day*." (Uritsky joined the Bolsheviks three months later, became an official of the secret police, and was assassinated in August 1918.)

Tseretelli had been a Zimmerwaldist, that is, one of the group of international socialists who had opposed the war. But in his first speech on his return, and as Sukhanov notes, "*of course it became the centre of the subsequent debates*," he called for extended mobilisation for defence against the Germans and the protection of the revolution. "*Up to then*," Sukhanov writes, "*we had not heard such trenchant and plain-spoken speeches along these lines*..." Tseretelli had become one of the spokesmen for the Menshevik party. At the first conference in April, when an attempt was made to unify the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions, he was the one chosen to answer Lenin. In the first coalition cabinet, with Kerensky as Premier, he had become Minister of Interior as well. After

October, he had gone to his native Georgia where he became one of the leaders of the short-lived Menshevik Caucasian Republic; and after 1920, once again into the long night of exile.

The crowd itself was hushed. Tseretelli, his fine, close-cropped head held high, his eyes, deep-set and dark, gazing straight ahead, spoke slowly, his voice, rich and resonant as the strong Russian "r's" vibrated in his speech. He spoke for about a half-hour. At one point when the phrase "mania of leftism" broke harshly from his lips, a buzz swept his slightly leftish audience. Both he, and they, seemed to be back thirty-nine years. He finished abruptly, with no advance warning, with no oratorical wind-up.

THE audience, happy, relaxed. Every night in the week, among these Russians, there were endless debates and talk. But once a year, at least, there had to be a respite from these interminable disputes, one evening had to be a light one, one evening had to be a *vecherinka*. A score of women began bustling down the aisle, carrying plates of sandwiches and pots of *chai*. It was eleven o'clock, and the *vecherinka* was in full swing.

A woman beside me hailed someone else who was weaving his way through the tables.

"Meet Victor Shimkin," she said to me.

"He is an editor of the *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*."

"No, it's not a Menshevik paper," he said, as if anticipating my question, "but we are democrats, and I bring fraternal greetings to the *Vestnik*." Then, brightening, he said, "Soon, Abramovitch will make his speech."

"But he has already talked, and everybody has already talked," I said weakly.

"Oh, those were just greetings," said Shimkin placidly. "This is a *vecherinka*, of course, but there has to be *one* serious speech."

Daniel Bell

Discussion

Austrian Society Past and Present

IN HIS fascinating article on "Italy and its Aristocracy," published in last January's number of *ENCOUNTER*, Signor Luigi Barzini found a most felicitous phrase when, after discussing the collapse of "the picture-book Italy of the sentimental novels," he wrote: "That Italy does exist it would be foolish to deny." In the case of Austria, however, I feel tempted to deny that it really does exist, except in the realm of phantasy. What the word "Austria" evokes for me and my contemporaries, the people who attained the age of reason just before the First World War, is an abstract idea.

We grew up surrounded by the vestiges of a magnificent past, and we were inclined to see ourselves as the inhabitants of an empire over which the sun never set. Though we had sunk politically to the position of a third-rate power, we still felt that Vienna was the real capital of Central Europe, the actual centre of the Holy Roman Empire. Even the good Empress Maria Theresa still belonged to our daily life, with many boys one knew being educated at the Theresianum, and a mellow piece of inlaid furniture called a "*Maria Theresienkasten*" to be found in every drawing-room. Naturally, when we spoke of the Emperor, we meant Emperor Franz Josef; William II was always referred to as "the German Emperor," and some elderly people still insisted on calling him "the King of Prussia." Less than half a century had elapsed since 1870, and history did not march on as rapidly as it does today.

The very language we spoke had hardly changed since the 18th century, when Maria Theresa had announced the birth of her first male grandchild by calling down from her box at the Burgtheater: "*Hört's Leutln, mei Poldi hat an Bubn!*" ("Listen, folks, my Poldi has a boy"). To the uninitiated, this might seem exactly like the speech of the Viennese populace, but there are vast differences in pronunciation and intonation between that nasal, urban dialect and the *lingua franca* of Austrian society, the so-called "*Aristokratendeutsch*." The latter contained a great number of foreign words, chiefly French, as well as many idioms taken from the dialect, and it was also distinguished by a

marked avoidance of certain grammatically correct forms. Thus—just as in the dialect—the use of the imperfect was eschewed on principle: to say "*ich ging*" instead of "*ich bin gegangen*," "*ich sagte*" instead of "*ich hab' gesagt*," would have been considered insufferably affected, an aping of the North Germans. (It was not considered "quite the thing" to be German!)

Nowadays, many words are pronounced by well-born people in a way that would have been considered definitely "non-U" when I was young—as, for instance, "*nervös*" (nervous) and "*graziös*" (graceful), which had to be spoken without the *Umlaut*. I remember getting a terrific scolding from my mother for not having said *nervos* to rhyme with rose. I have often wondered what the origin of this obsolete taboo might have been: was it because the Austrians had originally taken these words from the Spanish, under Charles V, and not from the French, which would represent a more recent influence? Or might there be a hidden psychological connection between the purposeful deformation of French words and the far more comprehensive outlawing to be found in England of all words of French origin, like *serviette*, *costume*, *perfume*, etc.? Did these words, which surely began by being "elegant," become tainted, as it were, when the lower middle-classes started to use them?

The upper classes in Austria formed a society which, like Cæsar's Gaul, was "*divisa in partes tres*." There was the *Erste Gesellschaft*, consisting of the members of mediatised princely houses whose names are found in the Part II of the Almanach de Gotha, and of all those families who had an automatic entrée at Court by the fact that they had sixteen quarterings (i.e. their great-great-grandparents had all been of noble birth). One did not need to be rich to belong to this "first society," it was purely a question of pedigree. The hereditary land-owners belonged to this class, so there was a patriarchal and friendly relationship between its members and the rustic population.

Conversely, the *Zweite Gesellschaft* usually had no roots in the soil, for it was made up of government officials, army officers, and a few