

These two stories by leading Soviet writers depict Russia before and after the Revolution. The first deals with school life in the old days, the second with the city life of the present.

RUSSIA Old *and* New

TWO SOVIET
FICTIONEERS

I. SCHOOLDAYS IN OLD RUSSIA

By A. ZORICH

Translated from *Izvestia*, Moscow Organ of the Central Executive Committee

EARLY in the morning I felt that the day held unusual happenings in store. The entire school wore the tense expression that always preceded a visit from the highest authority. The porters bustled about, the watchmen fussed, the barefooted floorwashers ran up and down the halls, and Inspector Zimin, a nervous, high-strung, and unusually cruel person, who had received the nickname of 'Psych,' walked about inspecting door knobs and other metal fixings. His thin, evil face twitched more than usual, and his cold, empty, sadistic eyes reflected unrest. In the dressing room, a huge

dingy cellar, which was always damp and dark, the beadles met us. To-day they wore their medals and were carefully shaved.

To help them in their task, the class supervisor with the gastronomic name of Korjik (sweetmeat) came down to the dressing room. He was a drunkard and a thief, and the school poets wrote quatrains about him, which appeared from day to day on the blackboard. His eyes roved incessantly as he quickly inspected our pockets and made us take off our hats to see whether we had regulation haircuts. It was he who told us that the new

governor, who had arrived just the day before, was expected to visit the school.

We hurried to our classes. At the turn of the stairs Director Iasinevski displayed his gorgeous black beard, which he had generously doused in expensive perfume. As we walked past him we had to bow and shake hands solemnly. This dandy, an urban gentleman, who for some not-too-pretty offense had been transferred to the provinces, felt unusual scorn toward poverty and the 'cook's children.' He was a stickler for good tone and external politeness, and he hated everything plebeian. One did n't have to know anything about history, not even chronology, in order to get a high mark in this subject, which he taught. One merely had to walk up to the desk in trim collar and cuffs and a blouse of the finest cloth. Then he would sniff contentedly, always ask the identical question,—how Peter's boy-soldiers were dressed,—and send the pupil back to his seat without even listening to the answer.

We all knew this, and, since we could tell in advance when we would be called on, for the professor adhered strictly to the alphabet, we borrowed collar and cuffs from our schoolmates. And once we even took up a collection and bought these appurtenances for common use, so that during that semester, while the cuffs were still new and the trick undiscovered, the entire class received Five in history, Five being the highest mark. The 'cook's children,' on the other hand, no matter how hard they tried, could never get more than a Two or Three. He no sooner noticed worn-out shoes or a patch on a boy's blouse than he frowned fastidiously

and sent the pupil back to his seat, muttering through his teeth, 'Boy, come to see me after class.'

He called everyone 'boy,' never condescending to remember proper names, though there were plenty of long-legged imbeciles, sons of wealthy parents, in the upper grades who already wore mustaches.

'Boy,' Iasinevski would say in his study, frowning and smoothing his dazzling beard with a well-groomed white hand, 'if you can't dress respectably, you may as well leave the school. Go learn a trade. I simply cannot understand why everyone wants to attend a secondary school these days. And who, pray tell, are going to be plumbers, shoemakers, and carpenters?'

The entire school paid back Iasinevski's cold, high-handed scorn of manual labor with whole-hearted hatred. Stones systematically bombarded the windows of his apartment, and someone always managed to daub tar on the doors and walls of his official residence.

II

Wearing a coat by a Petersburg tailor and shining patent-leather shoes, with the gold order of Anne suspended from his neck, he was unusually magnificent on the day of which I write. By his side rose the purple-robed figure of Father Khrisanf, preceded by an enormous belly. He was a fat glutton and an exceptional ignoramus. Though he had by some miracle graduated from the Academy, his knowledge and culture placed him on a level with the illiterate, pathetic country priests. One day, someone showed him several quotations from Darwin that might lead to atheistic conclusions. He

read them, thought so long that perspiration stood out on his brow, and finally replied, 'What a fool that fellow is. If there were no God, how could holy water stand in a bottle for three months and not become putrid?' That was his only argument.

He stood at the turn of the stairs as enormous and motionless as a monument, paying no attention to our greetings and gazing over our heads. His festive cross sparkled with jewels, and his robe reflected all the colors of the rainbow. When we had filed by, the professors hurried to their classes. They wore full dress and swords. Twenty years have elapsed since then, but I can still see them as though it were yesterday, in all their decorated ignorance. Uncultured people of the lowest order, dishonest and lazy, they seemed to have been specially chosen to crush and pervert the nature and minds of the young boys whom they were supposed to teach. Of course, all this took place in the country, but even for a country school our assortment of professors was extraordinary.

III

Take, for instance, the professor of Russian language and literature, Kalashnikov, a weak, liverish fool who regarded everything from the point of view of title and importance. The only thing that mattered to him was the attitude of the authorities toward a particular man. For years he taught us only Krilov's fables. And, when someone spoke of the classics or contemporary writers, he made a grimace and said, 'Chekhov? What nonsense! Simply a non-practising physician. Lermontov? What kind of a writer is he? He never got to be more than a

petty official. And Pushkin? If the Tsar had n't taken pity on him, he would be an ordinary tramp. No, my young friends, I do not recommend these people.'

And our German professor. She always began the lesson by saying that suffixes play a large rôle in Russian whereas they must be forgotten in German. And, when someone in the upper class asked her whether she knew Heine, she was silent for a moment and then replied, 'I remember buying live crabs in Heine's shop. First-rate crabs, they were. If I'm not mistaken the shopkeeper's name was Heine. But I never had the honor of meeting him personally.'

The geography teacher, Kravitski, whose great passion was dogs, managed to make the most interesting subject a terrible punishment. We had to learn the names of rivers in alphabetical order, and when speaking of mountain passes we had to divide them into two categories: those with dog rescue-teams and those without that wonderful institution. The nature teacher Gurski brought insects to class and tore out their wings during the instruction period, driving the whole class almost into hysterics, and the French professor made us learn grammar by memorizing a couple of hundred questions and answers that he had made up. Some of these questions were amazingly stupid: 'Question: Why do we learn grammar? Answer: We learn grammar so as not to sadden our parents by writing ungrammatically.' Of course, not all the professors were as bad as these, but I cannot recall a single name the memory of which is pleasant to me, not one who was kind and tactful in his contacts with young people, not one who

started us thinking or awakened our hearts.

Our first lesson on that memorable day was Latin, and the professor in charge was Titov, an insane, seventy-year-old man who was serving off his last years in order to get a larger pension. His name was Alexei Yakovlevich, but behind his back and even to his face we called him Odyssey Yakovlevich, and sometimes just 'Odyssey.' Being somewhat blind and almost totally deaf, he could n't tell the difference. In fact, his sight and hearing were so poor that one pupil could readily answer in place of another, and, bending over his book, read any kind of trash—popular lyrics and quatrains about the three Chinamen or the wet crow under the bridge—instead of Latin. All one had to do was recite the piece without stopping, and with a nod of his head Titov would send one back to one's seat.

For some reason or other he nourished a passion for all things of unusual size. Everything he used was huge—his watch was the size of the palm of your hand, and he wound it with a huge key; he had an unbelievably long, fat, colored pencil, the kind that you see only in show windows. If he ever caught a pupil with a crib, he would beat him over the head with the pencil. Generally speaking, the blows were quite tame and were greeted by laughter. But that day a young boy named Grenner had the brilliant idea of turning the professor's habit 'to the general benefit of studious youth.' The day before, Odyssey had called on him to translate a text about the battle between the Numidians and the infantry of Quintus Fabius Maximus, and Grenner was caught with a crib,

which he exhibited too daringly and from which he read in such a self-assured tone that one might think that his whole life had been devoted to a study of the wonderful Numidians. Consequently, he got a One, and Odyssey came down on him with the giant pencil.

IV

At the time when it happened, Grenner laughed along with the rest of us, but the next day he decided to capitalize on the situation, and, as he sat in the front row with the aristocratic boys, he demonstratively wound a handkerchief around his head. His estimate was correct. Odyssey no sooner entered the classroom and arranged his utensils than he asked, 'Grenner, what's the matter with you?'

'You should ask,' the boy answered in a loud voice, sighing and putting his hands up to his head. 'You beat me most to death, and now you ask.'

Odyssey sniffed anxiously. The governor was expected any minute. What would happen if, coming into the classroom and seeing the bandage, he should ask what it was all about.

'Take it off, Grenner,' the old professor said, more as a prayer than a command.

'I can't take it off,' Grenner whined. 'I have a bump the size of a cucumber.'

Odyssey blinked nervously and cast an anxious glance at the door. 'Come on, take it off; take it off, and we'll be friends again.'

'That's easy to say.' In Grenner's tone we could foresee victory. 'But what about the One you gave me? Change it to a Four, and I'll take the bandage off.'

This was too much even for Odys-

sey. Though he was used to mockery, he was completely overwhelmed and did n't know what to reply to such a daring idea. Obviously, however, the odds were against him. He thought for a minute, cleared his throat, took the pencil, and added a triangle to the One of the day before. But Grenner was not content. He walked up to the desk to see if the Four stood in the right place. Then he took off the handkerchief. Of course, there was no sign of a bump on his head.

Just at that moment, Psych ran down the hall, stuck his twitching head through the door, and cried, 'He's coming.' Odyssey rose quickly, gathered his goods and chattels, and led us downstairs.

V

There was a great bustle below. The inspectors ran back and forth straightening our ranks, returning to their own positions, tugging at their coats, swords, and medals; the teachers and the beadles fussed, the musicians tested their instruments. Solemn and glorious, giving orders only with his eyes, Iasinevski stood above this troubled sea on a high platform, like a general watching a parade, his head slightly tilted back and his hand in a Napoleonic pose.

At last the dark-bay team of horses belonging to the governor flashed by, and the postilion Kozachok, the owner of fantastic mustaches, the ends of which he could easily tie at the back of his neck, jumped down to open the door. Everything was quiet. The musicians raised their brightly polished trumpets, and Father Khrisanf, taking a step forward, bellowed out the opening line of the hymn, 'Enter, thou dove!'

Later on the whole thing was cleared up. The new governor, a passionate gourmet who was rather suspicious of provincial supplies, had brought with him from the capital a great many bottles of olive oil. On the road one of the bottles had broken, and the oil had soiled the lining of his dress uniform, which lay in the same trunk. This misfortune came to light on the very morning he was supposed to visit our school. Sussman, the town tailor, was immediately called to change the lining.

This Sussman was known for his eccentricity and the originality of the notices that decorated his poverty-stricken little shop. When he set it up, he ordered a picture on which two tigers were ripping a pair of pants. The picture bore the following caption: 'It tears, but not along the seams.'

But even the tigers were of no avail, and hard competition oppressed Sussman. Almost all the tailors in the town lived on the same street and vied with one another by the claims set forth on their signboards. The doors of the workshops were decorated with superlatives. 'The best tailor of St. Petersburg.' 'The best city tailor.' 'The best tailor in the entire province.' Sussman thought for a long time how to outdo his neighbors, who had already used up all the epithets and all the geographic terms. Finally, he ordered the following notice: 'The best tailor on this street.'

A week before the governor's visit Iasinevski called upon Sussman's son Isaac in history class. Isaac was an unusually pleasant, retiring, and gifted boy. No sooner did he walk up to the desk than Iasinevski frowned and sent him back to his seat without even

asking him a question. Later he sent him home with a note to his parents saying that their son smelt of *borsch* and that this fact required immediate attention. When he received the note, Sussman became very angry and wrote the following reply, 'I sent you a boy, not a rose. Teach him, don't smell him. Sussman.' There was a terrible scandal. Sussman was called to explain. He had to go through lengthy apologies, and, to clear up the incident entirely, he promised to renovate the director's old bathrobe with the torn tassels free of charge.

That day, having at his disposal the governor's team of horses in order to hurry to his shop and get the silk to reline the soiled uniform, he could n't deny himself the pleasure of parading through the entire town, to the mad jealousy of his competitors. And, while he was at it, he decided to visit his most influential clients, for he thought that such a display of luxury would help him in his business.

VI

And so, when everything was quiet and the priest intoned, 'Enter, thou dove!' instead of this dove, Sussman, holding the renovated directorial bathrobe, appeared. He stepped in quickly, with a businesslike bearing, and stopped, amazed by the unusual festivity of the reception. Perhaps he did n't understand what it was all about and acted as in a trance, or perhaps he understood in a flash and decided to pretend that there was nothing unusual about the occasion. In any case, after a dignified pause, he marched up to the platform and, with the classical gesture of all tailors the world over, he spread the bathrobe

wide and said, 'Gaze upon this, worthy director. Test my workmanship. I cannot guarantee the material, for it is very old, but I substituted tassels of my own, and these tassels will not surrender even if the heroic knight Kojemiaka should tear them.'

It is difficult for me to imagine Iasinevski's emotions, for he was a dandy, an aristocrat, and a stickler for high tone in the school. A wave of laughter ran through our ranks, and curious passers-by stuck their heads through the windows that opened on the street. Then we all knew that in one hour the whole town would hear about it. Iasinevski blushed, turned pale, and muttered something through his teeth to Psych. Then he about-faced and disappeared. The porters shoved the frightened tailor out the door, and the teachers took us back to our classrooms.

Five minutes later, wiping his brow with a handkerchief the size of a towel, Titov, the Latinist, laid out the huge pencil that the whole school hated and opened the fat tome of the Punic Wars. No one listened. Laughter rang in Odyssey's class. And Grenner's face was radiant. He was particularly delighted by the idea that the governor had n't come after all and that he still had a Four. But Odyssey cast a sarcastic glance his way and dug into his pocket. 'Grenner,' he said, 'do you think it behooves a worthy young man to worry his instructors? *Dixi!*' He took out an eraser of unbelievable proportions that bore the picture of an elephant and, with a single stroke, erased the triangle he had drawn only a few minutes ago. Freed from this decoration, a large fat One stood out on Titov's enormous ledger.

II. THE THREE WATCHMEN

By VSEVOLOD IVANOV

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ABOUT ten years ago I lived in a street opposite Clear Ponds. The editorial department of *Krug*, to which I belonged at the time, occupied a large house on that street. I not only worked in the office; I slept there in a yellow and green room, in the centre of which stood a hard blue couch. I never pushed it against the wall because innumerable bedbugs rushed madly up and down there although some strange laziness kept them from crossing the room. To tell the truth, I always brushed the floor and walls with a mop dipped in kerosene before going to bed. My manuscripts, covered with linen, were on the window-sills and inside the couch. An old blackboard lay forgotten in the corner.

Because I was young and because Sergei Esenin was a friend of mine, I often came home at daybreak. That was the time when I conceived the plan of writing a novel about the Kremlin. But I had so little time to read up on my subject—also because I was young—that I used to read on the way home. The early morning light and freshness helped me in my task.

One day I was studying the *Holy Life of Sergei Radonejski*. I finished the book while I was waiting for the watchman to open the door, and, having no tendencies toward becoming a bibliophile, I threw *Sergei Radonejski* into the gutter.

‘What’s the book about?’ the watchman asked, opening the gate. ‘About God, perhaps? For surely, if it

had been about women, you would n’t have thrown it away like that.’

‘It’s a holy book,’ I replied carelessly. ‘But you, uncle, who are so young, should be ashamed to be interested in religion.’

Without a word the watchman picked up the book. That afternoon when I walked by his lodge I saw the young watchman through the window. The pink paper cover of *Sergei Radonejski* had opened its wings in the young fellow’s hands, and he was peering into them. Unbelievably large tears were streaming down his face.

‘What’s happened? Has your sweetheart been poisoned?’ I asked.

He looked at me gently and pointed to a paragraph. ‘The Lord sent you my way, citizen, and you must have been drunk to skip this beautiful description. For surely, had you read it, you never would have reached the gate. Your very soul would have run out in tears.’

I entered the lodge through the window with a single bound. ‘What’s it all about?’

Nikolai, the little watchman, slowly and clumsily read me the story of how Saint Sergei was so religious that even in his infancy he refused to suck at his mother’s breasts on Wednesdays and Fridays. ‘And here we are guzzling,’ Nikolai exclaimed sorrowfully.

Three cots completely filled the lodge. Two of the watchmen slept, and, instead of being on duty, Nikolai read the *Holy Life*. The watchmen were all young fellows who had not yet