

NOTES & VIEWS

In Russia's Insane Asylums

By Laszlo M. Tikos

In 1892 Chekhov published his literary masterpiece *Ward No. 6*, launching one of his heaviest attacks against Tolstoy's philosophy of non-resistance to evil. In praising the story, Chekhov's contemporary, V. G. Korolenko, pointed out that Chekhov "investigated the question of the aim of life" and "condemned social indifference."¹ This comment corresponds to Chekhov's credo that life has meaning, and that in order to realize a "better future" a certain amount of struggle and positive action is necessary.

In *Ward No. 6*, Chekhov declares that no one can afford to be indifferent to social problems. Although he took into consideration such views

as the inherent weaknesses of man and the futility of any action in view of the inevitability of death, Chekhov felt that the essence of life was to be found in man's reaction to change. As his hero, Gromov, puts it:

I react to pain with tears and cries, to baseness with indignation, to vileness with disgust. And that, in my opinion, is life! . . . to despise suffering would be tantamount to despising life itself, for man's whole existence consists of sensations of hunger, cold, mortification, loss and a Hamlet-like fear of death. . . . Christ reacted to reality by weeping, smiling, mourning, flying into a rage and grieving; he did not meet suffering with a smile, he did not despise death, but prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup might pass.²

¹ Quoted passages translated by the author from Notes to Vol. X of A. P. Chekhov, *Sobranie Sochinenii* (Collected Works), Moscow, Goslitizdat, 1962, p. 525.

Mr. Tikos is Assistant Professor of Russian at the University of Massachusetts. His "Hungary: Literary Renaissance" appeared in the May-June 1964 issue of this journal.

² A. P. Chekhov, *Short Novels and Stories* (translated into English by Ivy Litvinov), Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, no date, pp. 187-89.

Chekhov's short story concerns the doctor in an insane asylum, one Andrei Efimovich Ragin, who practices non-involvement. A stoic who reads voraciously, drinks excessively, and indulges in an occasional conversation with the only local intellectual, a retired army officer turned postmaster, Ragin manages to exist in this self-imposed vacuum for over twenty years. His insulated way of life provides not only an excuse but a justification for his indifference to the deception, fraud, corruption, and brutality which transpire daily in the hospital under his direction. It takes a fateful meeting with one of the inmates of Ward No. 6 to rouse him from his twenty-year-old apathy. Ivan Dimitrievich Gromov makes Ragin aware for the first time in his life that, for those who suffer, non-involvement is unthinkable. For them, there is a difference between sadness and joy, justice and injustice, freedom and enslavement.

But Chekhov is not content simply to have Ragin become aware of Gromov's condition; he has him actually experience injustice, poverty and humiliation. Ragin is fired

from his job and judged insane by those in power; he loses all his savings in an unnecessary and futile trip undertaken on the advice of his "friends"; and finally, completely penniless, his nerves shattered, he is committed to Ward No. 6 by his former friends. Here he personally experiences the stupidity of the system, the brutality and injustice, which, in his conversations with Gromov, he had once belittled. Facing violence himself, he realizes that Gromov was right. Just before he dies—after being humiliated and brutally beaten by the ward's vicious male nurse, the retired soldier Nikita—Ragin, the atheist, suddenly yearns for the existence of some absolute truth to distinguish between good and evil, for some infallible justice to avenge the martyrdom of the innocent. In describing the evolution of Ragin's thought, first through his relationship with Gromov and later through the agony he experiences before his death, Chekhov voices his uncompromising hatred of apathy and indifference, inertia and non-involvement.

Some seventy years later, in 1965, Chekhov's masterpiece has found an unexpected echo in a story which first appeared in the Russian émigré literary magazine, *Grani*, published in Frankfurt-am-Main.³ Written by the novelist Valery Yakovlevich Tarsis, it is a barely fictionalized account of the

author's actual imprisonment in a Soviet insane asylum from August 1962 to February 1963. Shortly before his incarceration, Tarsis had written a letter to Khrushchev, then Soviet Premier, calling the Soviet Union an unbearable place to live and asking the Premier to grant him a visa to Italy. He had also sent some of his earlier manuscripts (which he had been unable to publish in the Soviet Union) abroad, where they were published under a pseudonym. Khrushchev replied to the letter by sending two policemen disguised as hospital attendants to the author's home. They delivered Tarsis to an insane asylum, where he was pronounced mad and kept in custody for the next six months, thus sharing the fate of other nonconformist Soviet writers such as Yessenin-Volpin and Valentin Ovechkin. Some time after his release from the asylum, Tarsis sent his new manuscript abroad for publication.⁴ Its title, *Ward No. 7*, obviously derives from the Chekhov short story. (As recently as last June, a British journalist, Gloria Stewart, visited Tarsis in Moscow and reported [*New Statesman*, June 18, 1965] that he was living at liberty, though without employment and financial means other than limited remittances from his works published abroad.)

Tarsis had many reasons for imitating Chekhov's title. On the face of it, *Ward No. 7* is an obvious sequel to *Ward No. 6*. It shows that the brutish stupidity, cruelty and

violence which existed in prerevolutionary Russia still exist in the Soviet Union today, albeit in modified form. "We've advanced beyond Ward No. 6; Ward No. 7 has better amenities," remarks Nezhevsky, a psychiatrist in Tarsis' story.⁵ But except for the modernized and enlarged setting, everything that existed in Chekhov's Ward No. 6 also exists in Tarsis' Ward No. 7. In both stories the ward is actually a prison—only an imagined one for Chekhov, but a very real one for Tarsis. The latter writes:

*Nezhevsky knew, of course, that mental hospitals were being used as prisons, and he was deeply shocked by the hypocrisy of the device which enabled the authorities to claim that there were no political prisoners but only "lunatics" receiving "treatment."*⁶

After Ragin's purge, Chekhov's Ward No. 6 is run by the ignorant and villainous Dr. Khobotov; in Tarsis' "hospital," the "doctors" in charge are policemen in disguise, or secret agents. In Chekhov's institution, the retired soldier Nikita is assigned the task of brutally beating the inmates if they rebel. In the Soviet asylum, the recalcitrant are transferred to a so-called "Section 5" whose "inmates could be beaten into unconsciousness without any questions being asked."⁷ In both stories, the "illnesses" of the inmates are fictitious, but what they really amount to is an inability to

³ *Grani* (Izdatelstvo "Possev", Frankfurt-am-Main), No. 57, 1965. This issue also carries a photo of the author of *Ward No. 7* and some biographical notes about him. Valery Yakovlevich Tarsis was born in Kiev in 1906, son of a Greek father and Ukrainian mother, and studied history and philology at the University of Rostov-on-Don. He began his literary career in 1929 with the publication of an anthology of contemporary foreign writers and also worked until 1937 as editor of a publishing house. *Novyi mir* published one of his short stories in 1935 and his short novel *Desdemona* in 1938. During World War II, he served as an army war

correspondent with the rank of captain, participated in the Battle of Stalingrad, and was wounded. While in the hospital, he met his future wife, Rosa Yakovlevna Alksins, whose brother, a Soviet air force officer, had been shot in the 1937 purges. Of some 26 works by Tarsis, it is mainly his three recent short novels which have made him famous in the West: *The Bluebottle* (London, Collins & Harvill Press, 1962); *Red and Black* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1963, also containing *The Bluebottle*); and now, *Ward No. 7*, recently published in English translation by Collins & Harvill Press. (All quotations in this article are taken from the English edition.) These novels all

appeared originally in *Grani*, Nos. 52, 54, 55, and 57.

⁴ As a description of the author's own actual experience, *Ward No. 7* has documentary as well as literary value, providing the West with first-hand evidence of the new post-Stalin method of dealing with nonconformist writers and intellectuals in the Soviet Union. About the similar treatment of Yessenin-Volpin, see Marc Slonim, *Soviet Russian Literature*, London, Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. 339-40.

⁵ Tarsis, *Ward No. 7*, (English edition), p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

remain indifferent to the injustices of everyday life. In the Chekhov story, there are also "patients" without even any "official illness," who have been locked up anyway. As Ragin explains, "moral values and logic have nothing to do with it. Everything depends on chance. Those who are put here, stay here, and those who are not, enjoy their liberty, that's all."⁸

Chekhov's cast of characters—the harmless old Jew Moseyka, the sad patient with tuberculosis, the indifferent peasant, the former functionary Gromov, and later Ragin himself—form a small and pitiable collection in contrast to the numerous patients and variety of "illnesses" present in Tarsis' ward. In the Soviet institution, the inmates are divided into three main categories: 1) the "Suicides," *i.e.*, those who had sought death in preference to Soviet life, but whose suicide attempts had failed; 2) the "Americans," Soviet citizens who had tried to make contacts with foreign embassies in Moscow in the hope of emigrating abroad; and 3) the "Nihilists," mostly young people who refused to serve in the armed forces or found themselves in conflict with the moral principles of the older Soviet generation. Then, too, as in the Chekhov story, there are others who do not fit into any category, but all of them have one thing in common—as one of the inmates puts it, "in one way or another we are all here thanks to the Soviet regime."⁹

Take, for example, the homespun philosopher-writer Fioletov, declared an "insane invalid of the first class" because his favorite pastime consisted of reading the Apocalypse and applying its prophecies to everyday occurrences in the Soviet Union. Or the geologist Zagulin, locked up in the hospital because he had expressed dissatisfaction with his wife's rapidly

growing number of lovers. Since she had influential political "connections," Zagulin suddenly found himself "ill" and had to be taken to the "hospital" by two "nurses." Then there is Moriony, a 29-year-old university lecturer in history, who joined the company because he had read too much Soloviev and Nietzsche and, as a result, had begun to find fault with the Soviet philosophy of history. Small wonder that two of his students soon joined him in the ward, where they felt free to expound their anti-Soviet ideas! (One of the students even expresses a preference for life inside the asylum rather than "outside" because of the possibility of free speech and the presence of intelligent, well-read companions.)

Another young inmate of the ward is Kolya Sikin, the son of a former Soviet diplomat. He had grown up in Italy, but had returned to the Soviet Union with his father upon the latter's recall. He found conditions in his home country appalling and soon was expelled from the university because of remarks about the lack of freedom in Soviet life. He took to drink, tried to commit suicide, and eventually landed in Ward No. 7.

One of the "Americans" is Vasili Golin, a young man in his twenties, who had previously spent six terrible years in a concentration camp. Released after Stalin's death, he had at first maintained that the regime was not responsible for its "mistakes," that "bad advisors" were to blame for ruining everything, and that communism was the only ideology that mattered. Later, however, he had come, little by little, to realize that the whole regime was corrupt, and had decided that it had to be destroyed. To this end, he wrote a letter to President Kennedy asking for United States intervention. Of course, the letter was intercepted, and Golin was locked up in the insane asylum.

The central character in *Ward No. 7*, however, is Valentine Almazov, a man whose philosophical outlook on life is similar to that of Chekhov's hero, Gromov. Both

Chekhov and Tarsis describe in detail the transformation of their heroes from law-abiding, "normal" citizens, into rebellious, outraged men, judged insane by their respective societies. Gromov, witnessing the lawlessness in his own provincial town, loses his balance, becomes withdrawn, and feels that "all the violence in the world had accumulated behind his back and was chasing him."¹⁰ Seeing no way out, he "goes mad." Almazov, a writer, is over fifty at the time of his arrest. At the start of his career, he had tried to be a good "Soviet writer," but some twenty-five years before his arrest, he had suddenly realized that he could no longer go on selling his soul, that he must stop being a party hack and begin "to write the truth."¹¹

Deeply influenced by Dostoevsky, Almazov's transformation had become complete during the last few years. Exalted, abandoning all his fears, he had finally decided to express his ideas openly, at last. In so doing, he is not unlike Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, who feels that the fate of the world depends upon him, or Gorki's hero, Danko, in *Danko's Heart*, who tears his burning heart from his chest to rouse the people who are hesitant and unwilling to follow him through the wild forest toward a better future. Almazov, experiencing the joy and pain of decision, makes up his mind that the time has come to sound the call to fight for freedom. Accepting what he now regards as his "enviable lot," he proceeds to commit an act that he knows must have grave consequences:

... it was then that he handed over a batch of his manuscripts to a visiting British journalist whom he met by chance. His publishers urged him to use a pseudonym, but he refused although he knew what awaited him. He cared nothing for the official version of public opin-

⁸ Chekhov, *loc. cit.* (note 2), p. 180.

⁹ *Ward No. 7*, p. 62.

¹⁰ Chekhov, *loc. cit.*, p. 162.

¹¹ *Ward No. 7*, p. 44.

ion, and no genuine public was left: for years, no one in Russia had said what he really thought.¹²

Almazov speaks of "... this one-sixth of the world ... this walled-in concentration camp, once the land of Holy Russia's turbulence, her faith, her hopes, her disappointments and her struggles."¹³ He denounces communism as the "bastard son" of fascism, the rule of the ape over man, whose corrupt and tyrannical leaders suppress the only human value on earth, individual freedom. He believes that there is no hope for the future unless man fights against the evils of the present. He seems to think that the battle can be won. In order to achieve victory, which would mean the establishment of democracy along Western lines, some aid from the West, in particular from America, would be necessary. But before the United States could commit itself, the battle would have to be fought from within by domestic forces—first of all, survivors of the Stalinist period and members of the younger generation whose fathers and brothers were killed in Stalinist concentration camps. These forces of freedom inside the Soviet Union are pictured as steadily growing. One of Almazov's fellow inmates declares:

*Haven't you noticed that there are more and more of us? We don't advertise our presence, but we are there. We'll get together and we'll light such a blaze that no policeman on earth can put it out.*¹⁴

Tarsis' hopes for the future of his country will certainly be shared by most non-Soviet readers, but the means he envisages of achieving them may well estrange some. Nowadays, it is fashionable in the West to assume that a long period of

peaceful coexistence will foster tendencies in the Soviet Union which will result in a higher standard of living for Soviet citizens and, more important, in a further liberalization of the Soviet system. Tarsis clearly does not accept such an idea. To him "peaceful coexistence" means "non-involvement," a philosophy and way of life he has come to reject. Thus, he has Almazov say:

*It's nonsense to talk about peaceful coexistence—what is at stake is not a political regime or a system of balance of powers but the one all-important issue: whether man as an individual, as a person, is to exist or not.*¹⁵

Nor does Tarsis appear any more willing to accept the possibility that a solution of Soviet economic difficulties might lead to a greater measure of freedom for Soviet citizens. When one of the younger inmates of Ward No. 7 broaches this possibility, another replies:

*That's where you delude yourself. . . . You want to know why? Because if you happen to be a man, you needn't hope for one shred of pity from the sleek pigs whose kingdom will come as soon as the economic problem is solved. Pigs have their piggish ways—they grunt, and if anyone chooses to sing, they don't think twice about shutting him up. . . . All collective societies are ruthlessly inhuman, whether they are ruled by parties, or dictators, or kings.*¹⁶

Thus, no other solution remains but the total destruction of the Soviet system—a solution which, incredible as it seems, Tarsis evidently believes to be still possible.

It is interesting to note that Tarsis brings the Sino-Soviet rift prominently into his story. The university lecturer, Moriony, voices

the belief that the Chinese Communists are working on a nuclear bomb of their own with the idea of using it as much against the Soviet Union as against the United States. Unless the Chinese regime is destroyed in time, he goes on to say, it will eventually swallow up all of Europe, and even extend across the seas. For the faceless Chinese masses it would be no trouble at all, he argues. They could easily build a bridge of human corpses across the ocean; to cover five thousand miles, they would need only about twenty-five million people, and Mao could easily afford that.

Tarsis' characters do not express any greater optimism about the future durability of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. They believe that the Communist satellite system is disintegrating so rapidly that its existence is already fictional. This time, it is the philosopher, Fioletov, who expresses the author's views:

*. . . the so-called indissolubly united socialist camp is falling to pieces before our very eyes, like an elaborate house of cards. How can you talk seriously about indissoluble unity when there are several socialisms, all slinging so much mud at each other that it amounts to a cold war? . . . It would be equally naive to think that all is well in Poland and Hungary: the Poles and the Hungarians are Europeans, i.e., individualists, and they will never resign themselves to being satellites of the Soviet oligarchy. Nor is everything smooth and calm in Rumania and Czechoslovakia.*¹⁷

Reverting to the domestic scene, Tarsis condemns not only Stalinism but the whole development of the Soviet Union since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. He does not demand "socialist legality" or the "restoration of Leninist norms of party life;" he

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

demands a reevaluation of the October revolution itself and asks for nothing less than the creation of a democracy in Russia. Tarsis has not been alone in expressing such views. Not long ago, in the third of a series of articles entitled "Moscow Summer,"¹⁸ a Yugoslav professor of Russian literature, Mihajlo Mihajlov, wrote about the existence of such a trend of thought among Soviet intellectuals. Pasternak expressed similar views in *Dr. Zhivago*. Thus, startling as Tarsis' ideas might appear, they evidently are part of the intellectual undercurrents now prevalent in the Soviet Union.

Another important aspect of Tarsis' reevaluation of Soviet history is his outright equation of fascist and Soviet totalitarianism, of Nazi Party functionaries and Soviet Communist Party officials, of the Gestapo and the NKVD. In fact, Almazov even tells one of his fellow inmates:

*It was in Russia that a fascist totalitarianism was first set up. Understandably, when the rest of the world saw what we were doing, they took steps to protect themselves. In the more reactionary countries, this led to other fascist regimes, in reaction to ours. Obviously, it's high time to finish with all of these fascists, liberate Russia, and restore democracy.*¹⁹

Again, Tarsis is not the only Soviet writer to have voiced such ideas. In Yuri Bondarev's *Silence*,²⁰ published in Moscow in 1962 (at approximately the same time that Tarsis began to formulate his ideas), Sergei, the son of an unjustly imprisoned man, compares the methods of the MGB with those of fascism. When he is asked to inform against his innocent father, he shouts at the party officials that they are worse than fascists.

Tarsis' reevaluation of Soviet reality also touches on such complex problems as the origins of Stalinism, the scale and limits of destalinization (and the rehabilitation of past victims), and the guilt feelings of former Communists. Concerning the origins of Stalinism, Tolya, a history student who had been committed to Ward No. 7 after trying to cut his own throat, thinks to himself:

*How did a hideous tyranny arise in place of socialism? . . . What had changed? Had men degenerated? And did the worst of the degenerates push their way out of the mob and, filled with its lust, violence and greed for power, rule it, giving the name of justice to whatever they pleased? Stalin was the classical type of such a tyrant. And the fact that the party had followed him, had put up silently with his crimes and helped to commit them, proved that the party was no better than Stalin. Nothing Khrushchev said could explain this away.*²¹

On the subject of the rehabilitation of Stalinism's victims, a woman doctor who interviews Almazov on his way to the asylum makes this sarcastic comment:

*You're lucky to be sent to an asylum. My husband was shot. . . The other day the regional party secretary came and consoled; he said the party would never forget what my husband did. . . That's what they all say. . . It's astonishing, isn't it? . . . Do they really think that we widows and orphans, hundreds of thousands of us, will forget what the party did to us?*²²

In another passage, Tarsis writes of Almazov's feeling of guilt for having worked for the party:

It was with bitter shame that Val-

*entine recalled his years as a party member. Why had it taken him so long to realize that his "comrades," particularly those who were officials, secretaries, members of the party bureau, were nothing but policemen?*²³

Most readers of *Ward No. 7* will experience a feeling of letdown, of dissatisfaction. The story seems incomplete; the author's ideas lack finality. The "sophisticated" reader in the non-Communist world, in particular, will have difficulty swallowing its message, which is basically one of hatred. The characters in the story completely reject any form of compromise. Their desire is to fight for the total destruction of the society they once were part of, and now violently negate. To most of us such ideas will appear naive, absurd, and crude. Whereas Chekhov is convincing and the reader can identify himself with his striving for a better life, Tarsis remains—at best—controversial. Dr. Ragin's torturous journey along the "road to Calvary" which terminates in his death is Chekhov's great protest against the philosophy of non-resistance to evil. The Christ-like concept of the redemption of man through suffering and death is not to be found in the Tarsis story. Had Chekhov omitted the last six chapters which deal with Ragin's fate, his story also would have been incomplete.

The feeling of disappointment with the Tarsis story is accentuated by the drastic solution it presents. In contrast to Chekhov, who was in the final analysis extremely pessimistic about the nature of man and humanity in general, Tarsis believes in positive action, that men can change the world. While Chekhov put his faith in an infallible, undebatable, final proof of justice—a divine force as it were—Tarsis believes in salvation through total de-

¹⁸ *The New Leader*, July 7, 1965.

¹⁹ *Ward No. 7*, p. 105-06.

²⁰ *Novyi mir*, Nos. 3-4, 1962.

²¹ *Ward No. 7*, p. 86.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

struction and claims that the revolting intellectuals, with the help of the Western world, can achieve their goal—democracy. The Western reader, more familiar with the political realities of his own world, cannot help but feel sadly skeptical.

Despite the many fine observations and brilliant insights in Tarsis' story, it impresses the reader as being simply an inverted or reverse version of the standard socialist-realist novel, whose essence has been succinctly summed up by Abram Tertz in these words: "A large part of Soviet literature consists of 'educational novels' showing the Communist metamorphosis of individuals and entire communities. Many of our books turn around the representation of these moral and psychological processes, which aim at producing the ideal man of the future."²⁴

Like his earlier *Bluebottle*, Tarsis' *Ward No. 7* is mainly autobiographical, the confession of a man who has gone through a painful, yet spiritually rewarding experience in achieving independence of thought. One could compare it to Tolstoy's *Confession* in its sincerity, its fanaticism, its biting irony, and total exclusion of compromise. Many people found these very features hard to endure in Tolstoy and declared them incompatible with art. Doubtless many will have the same feeling about Tarsis' *Ward No. 7*.

²⁴ A. Tertz, *On Socialist Realism*, Pantheon Books, 1960, p. 47.

Is Tarsis, then, a bad writer? Not necessarily. What one must bear in mind is that the message of the story is more important than its artistry. For this reason, *Ward No. 7* may afford greater pleasure to the historian or politically-minded person than to members of the literary profession. The thoughts expressed in the story should be of interest to more than a narrow circle of specialists.

In sending his story abroad to be published, Tarsis does not appear to have been motivated by vanity or by a desire for personal revenge against Khrushchev and the Communist Party. Rather, he seems to have been driven by a genuine urge to voice openly, before the world, his anguish and the anguish of those around him. This emerges through the thoughts of Almazov as he is being taken to the asylum:

The time came to remind the world that there existed Russians, not just Soviet citizens, and that there existed honest Russian writers. The time came to ring the alarm, to call for the struggle for freedom, for the fight against the new fascist destroyers of souls. The West knew very little . . . even such honest writers as Caldwell and Steinbeck were prepared to believe in the myth of Soviet democracy. Steinbeck actually said that Soviet writers were free to write as they pleased! . . . Yes, it was time to open the eyes of the world, time to let the Steinbecks into this filthy shed, time to let them share this hell with Valentine Almazov and see for themselves whether Soviet

*writers were free. Let them realize that for every word of truth about the Soviet way of life, the Soviet writer could be accused of slander by the Soviet police. . . . Had he [Steinbeck] been born a Soviet citizen, he could never have published a line—he would, more likely, have been killed under Stalin or have shared the fate of Almazov today. (No offense meant, Mr. Steinbeck! A mental hospital is the only place for an honest writer in Russia nowadays!)*²⁵

None of the inmates of Ward No. 7 entertains any hope of an eventual liberalization of the system through peaceful evolution; they have been deceived so many times that they no longer take the party's promises seriously. Instead, they are resolved to fight, and they believe that the West must support their revolt—not out of sympathy or altruism, but because failure to do so may eventually lead to the demise of freedom in the West itself. So strong is Tarsis' apparent conviction that he ends his story on a note of bold defiance—voiced by his hero, Almazov:

*The day will come when it [Ward No. 7] will be the first headquarters in the battle for freedom. Our bells are already ringing on the other shore. I believe that the hour is not far off when the bells of Moscow will ring as well.*²⁶

²⁵ *Ward No. 7*, p. 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Ilya Ehrenburg Takes a Bow

By Victor Erlich

EDITORS' NOTE: In an earlier essay-review written for this journal ("The Metamorphoses of Ilya Ehrenburg," Issue No. 4, July-August 1963), Mr. Erlich discussed the first five parts of Ehrenburg's revealing and wide-ranging memoirs, People, Years, Life, which had appeared up till then in the Soviet literary journal Novyi mir. Here he turns his attention to the concluding section of the memoirs, covering the first postwar decade, which Novyi mir—after an interruption of almost two years—finally published in its issues from January through April of this year. Most of the earlier-published portions of the memoirs have appeared in English under the titles: People and Life, 1891-1921 (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) and Memoirs, 1921-1941 (Cleveland, World Publishing Company, 1964).

Last January, after an almost two-year interval, the Soviet literary journal *Novyi mir* resumed publication of Ilya Ehrenburg's controversial memoirs. In the April issue of the journal, Ehrenburg wrote *finis* to his chronicle. The far-flung "sentimental journey" has run its course.

The last four installments of *People, Years, Life* carry the narrative beyond the end of World War II down to the verge of the "thaw" or, more accurately, of *The Thaw*. On the whole, Ehrenburg's account of the first postwar decade follows

Chairman of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale University (New Haven, Conn.), Mr. Erlich is the author of *Russian Formalism* (Gravegaze, the Netherlands, Mouton, 1955).

the by now familiar pattern. Once again we are treated to fleeting glimpses of "faces, cities, countries;" to disconnected episodes recounted in nervous, if at times monotonous, staccato; to affectionate vignettes of memorable personalities, interspersed with self-conscious meanderings, long-suppressed admissions, and hedged revelations.

Yet, in this concluding section of the autobiography, the retrospective soul-searching and stocktaking loom relatively larger than they did in some of the earlier chapters. As Ehrenburg himself points out, the events related here are

... still fresh in everyone's memory. The scenes of the Moscow of my youth, "la Rotonde" where "Nihilist" bohemians proclaimed the end of the world, are unknown to

the majority of my readers, but there is hardly any point in recapitulating the Cold War incidents or describing all the Peace Congresses. Besides, it is high time . . . to make an attempt to understand one's era and oneself.¹

Such an attempt, Ehrenburg hastens to advise us, cannot be fully successful. It is bound to be inhibited by his own incomplete knowledge of facts, as well as his discretion or "built-in censorship":

The Soviet people, the ideals which I hold dear, have many enemies. The struggle still goes on. This, too, compels me to omit certain details;

¹ *Novyi mir* (Moscow), No. 2, 1965, p. 41.