

1901-1917: Upheaval in Russia

It was the year 1906. Moshe Ruvimovich Stolyarevsky, sensing the volatile change in the atmosphere, had finally persuaded his wife, Rosa Abramovna, to make a difficult journey to Saint Petersburg.¹ Misha had come from a poor Jewish family; however, he possessed a fiery drive to succeed in life, and pored over his law textbooks many a night. The years of sweat, hard work, odd jobs, and bribes had paid off for him as he graduated from the University of Saint Vladimir, and finally joined the ranks of those few Jews who were allowed to live in the center of Kiev². After the pogroms, Kiev had become a dangerous place for Jews to stay³.

After his graduation, Misha married Rosa, his dearest friend, and children soon followed. First-born Sonya embodied a porcelain doll: pale, soft-spoken and docile, with

¹ "Volatile change...journey to Saint Petersburg: Saint Petersburg was the capital of Russia until 1918, and a major hub for Jewish life. The city was "the center of Russian-Jewish journalism and literature"(Pangborn), and "many nationwide Jewish organizations had their headquarters"(Pangborn) there, including ones such as the Society for the Promotion of Culture among the Jews of Russia (founded in 1863) and with the outbreak of World War I, the Jewish Committee for the Relief of War Victims. Being Jewish, Misha would want to move his family closer to their culture, and further away from the violence in Kiev. It is also important to note that in Saint Petersburg during 1905 "Bloody Sunday sparked the ...revolution as revulsion at the suppression of a peaceful demonstration and disgust at the military failure in the war against Japan (Russo-Japanese War) combined to create a wave of strikes and peasant rebellion across Russia" (Robinson). However, the revolution failed: over the course of 1905 and 1906, the peasant resistance was put down. This revolution is often called "the dress rehearsal for 1917" (Hingley).

² "The years of sweat...center of Kiev": As decreed by imperial law, "the Jewish Pale of Settlement was that part of the Russian Empire within which Russia's Jewish population was required to live and work for more than 130 years between the late 18th and early 20th century"(Britannica Student Encyclopedia). Initially, this was "intended initially to forestall commerce between Jews and the general population of Russia, the restrictions imposed by the Pale fostered the development of a distinctive religious and ethnic culture in an area covering roughly 386,000 square miles (1 million square kilometers) between the Baltic and Black seas" (Britannica Student Encyclopedia). Misha, being a lawyer, fit in the category of "Jews in certain professions and with particular educational backgrounds [who] were allowed to settle outside the boundaries of the Pale" (Britannica Student Encyclopedia).

³ "After the pogroms...for Jews to stay": The Russian word *pogrom* means to "wreak havoc, to demolish violently" (USHM). Historically, the targets of these pogroms were Jews. In the beginning of the 20th century, a wave of pogroms began to sweep Kiev and one of "Kiev's exceptionally destructive pogroms occurred in 1905" (Pangborn). This violence only continued during the civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, when "Ukrainian nationalists, Polish officials, and Red Army soldiers all engaged in pogrom-like violence in western Belorussia (Belarus) and Poland's Galicia province (now West Ukraine), killing tens of thousands of Jews between 1918 and 1920" (USHM).

flowing curly hair. Her voice, which she inherited from her mother, was Sonya's joy and when she sang, it was even possible to occasionally see her break into a rare, but genuine smile. Modya, five years her junior, was a headstrong boy, whose lively, shrewd green eyes had an air of audacity to them. He attended Gymnasium No.316, and wanted to become a doctor. Currently, he was missing, running around with his gang of boys through the old streets of Kiev one last time.

At the moment, Osip, the nine year-old, his dark head barely reaching the windowsill, was spying on Sonya, who was weeping her goodbyes into a young soldier's shirt, her tears leaving dark blotches on her traveling dress. Misha had left not long before, leaving his wife in charge, as he had to finalize last-minute paperwork for the move. Rosa was everywhere: in the kitchen, helping the maids pack up the food provisions, flying through the rooms, making sure that nothing was forgotten in closets and dusty corners, checking that no suitcase was missing. The cabby had already arrived, and the horses were snorting and throwing their heads impatiently.

Near Kreshchatyk Street, in the Lypky district, a state of chaos descended upon the Stolyarevsky household.

* January⁴ 1917 *

For already God knows how long, I have not been able to shake this unsettling feeling of being trapped, with not a single hope for escape. In these dark times clouded with death, fear and uncertainty I often wake up in this hospital bed thinking about that

⁴ I chose a time specifically right before the rebellion in Petrograd occurs and Soviets are formed, and before Nicholas II abdicates. These events will happen in February and March, respectively.

deceivingly bright autumn morning when we left our home in Kiev forever. I recount that day in my mind, and reread the poems I wrote, so as to never forget how completely our lives have turned around. Every day I ask myself: what happened to all of it?

Little Fira, who is almost eleven years old, came to visit me yesterday, brought me some jam and pastries my mother had made for me, and asked: “Osip, please tell me about Kiev...if you are feeling okay.” Despite her young age, she is such a caring tactful individual. I told her that no, I am not in too much pain, and in fact, the bullet wounds in my thigh have been healing quickly; however I am probably going to have a limp for the rest of my life. I spared her that last detail, there is already so much that she has to carry on her bony shoulders. She sat in the single straight-backed chair in the room, looking very thin, her clothes neat, but noticeably worn at the seams. I began to tell her of the artists, poets, writers and others who always seemed to be coming through my parents house, and the late tea-time conversations, and Sofia’s lilting voice which rang almost everyday like a beautiful spring (nowadays Fira tells me that Sofia has just about stopped singing- the war has taken a toll on her poor soul the most). After I had finished describing Kiev’s busy streets, the vendors, the ladies in carriages, the spires of the domed churches, the smell of *pirozhki*⁵ and sunflower seeds, it seemed as though Fira had been there all along, breathing it in; she has lived it through me.

In return, Fira told me that Petrograd is growing restless. She told me that strange people visit my father late at night, and they lock themselves in his study and discuss things in muted tones until the early morning, all the while Mother paces up and down the corridor. She whispered to me that the peasants are growing restless, and there is

⁵ “The smell of *pirozhki*”: Russian. Sweet or savory pastries.

rumor that there is a shift in power coming⁶. Some parents have even taken their girls out of school. I patted her on the shoulder and told her to stop worrying so much, but really, this troubles me a great deal; my father's sixth sense has not been wrong yet.

I have been absent from Fira's life for two years. When I left, she was still an innocent child; now I look at her and see a maturity in her large eyes far beyond her years...she has seen and heard too much. Two years may not seem long at all for the innocent bystander, but when your life has turned into a living nightmare, a second may seem like an eternity. When I was eighteen, and the year was 1915, the war had been going on for a year. The waving flags, the flowers, and smiles and cheers had dissolved to ash and dust.

Then, even though I studied at the Kalinin Polytechnical Institute⁷, I was drafted into the army because engineers were needed desperately. I served in the artillery. I was surrounded by men who were little else than walking skeletons, and was becoming one myself. Our forces were malnourished, cold, as well as poorly trained and equipped. Some men could not take it, and managed to escape and return home. As our ranks declined, each time some of my comrades never came back from the front. In the beginning, I had made a couple of close friends, Borya and Dmitri. Dmitri was taken prisoner, never to be seen again, while Borya fought with me at Lutsk⁸.

⁶ "Rumor...shift in power coming": In February 1917 Petrograd will see riots and rebellion, and in March Tsar Nicholas II will relinquish the throne to the Provisional Government. In July, the "failed Russian offensive against the Germans ... [will lead] to the rebellion in Petrograd; Kerensky [will replace] Prince Lvov as Prime Minister. (Robinson xi)

⁷ "Even though I...the Kalinin Polytechnical Institute": Established in 1899, it is one of the most prestigious engineering universities in Russia. Today it is called the St. Petersburg State Polytechnical University.

⁸ "While Borya...at Lutsk": Osip participated in the Battle of Lutsk which was part of the Brusilov Offensive. The objective in the south was "Kovel, an important railway center, but the advance extended over a front of 300 miles. The Austrians, taken by surprise, fell back, leaving many prisoners in Russian

Gradually, I learned to keep my distance and keep my mind sheltered from the pain that came with the loss of a comrade; I have seen grown men weeping for their mothers; I have seen soldiers abandon their comrades on the battlefield; I have held a dying man in my arms, and heard his final breath. I have seen feats of tremendous bravery that will be buried under the layers of dirt and forgotten in the turmoil and bloodshed. I do not know what awaits me in the streets of Petrograd. I would like to hope that perhaps the suffering of millions of people will soon be put to an end.

hands. The Russians took Lutsk (June 8) ...” (The Encyclopedia of World History) During the fighting, Osip took two bullets to the thigh (Pg.3). In total, there were about “1.7 million Russian military deaths” (Hingley 9), and the warfare was shorter, “tapering off in 1917 and ended entirely in 1918” (Hingley 9) after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty.

Works Cited

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Perspectives on World Cultures: History, Thought and Culture from Early Modern to Post-Modern
Spring 2011
20th Century Journal

During the spring semester, each student will be assigned a fictitious character from a specific country. Your task will be to research the history of the country of origin as well as 20th century world history to make your story as grounded in historical reality as possible. You will demonstrate your research using footnotes – see the sample paper on the Aztecs. Remember, this is an interdisciplinary paper and so we expect the evolving story of your character to include historical and cultural details, and to illustrate some of the major philosophical/religious and cultural influences of the age.

The aim of this exercise is to give you another lens through which to view the 20th century – a lens which invests you in the history of an individual (an insight often lost when studying world history), and which also encourages you to be creative within the bounds of historical records. (See accompanying article from 'Perspectives', the journal of the American Historical Association.) As you create your character's life story, you should consider:

- Name; place of birth; socio-economic status of family; number of siblings
- Race/ethnicity; gender/orientation
- Religious/cultural/educational influences

In your first entry (due Tuesday 1st February), you will build your character's narrative as regards origins/place/socio-economic status and will also explain their role in World War One (the latter may continue into the next entry if you find you have too much material).