

## A Ukrainian Socrates (1851 – 1935)

I can't remember when we didn't know him, for he was a part of our earliest childhood. He seemed so permanent, that at first we accepted his presence without question. When he boasted that he would live to be a hundred, well, of course, we thought he would; we didn't doubt his word.

But he lost out somehow, in his race to reach the century mark, and we have been missing him these last three years. (He died in 1935).

Moujow—that was his name, which in Ukrainian translates as “man”. He had a first name too, Sylvester, but we knew him only as Moujow, just Moujow. It wasn't till we were quite grown up that we discovered that he had a Christian name, like anyone else. And then we still kept call him plain Moujow, not Mr. Moujow. It wasn't from any lack of respect, either, for ever since we had been children, we thought that Moujow was a title, tantamount to that of some dignitary or patriarch, at least.

It was difficult to describe his character—something of a kindlier Bernard Shaw, with variations, you might say.

He was born over eighty years ago near Kiev in the Ukraine, and spent his youth and early manhood there. In his late thirties he was exiled to the Caucasus because of some religious differences he had with the authorities. There he remained three or four years. He then petitioned the Tsar that he be permitted to go home. His request was refused, but he was told that he was free to go anywhere else. He thereupon made his way across the Black Sea to Turkey, where he stayed just long enough to learn a little of the language and customs of the people. Later he met with some Doukhobours who were just preparing to sail for Canada. They were persuaded to allow him to accompany their party.

My earliest recollection of him is practically the same as my last. He was tall and slender, with a very erect carriage, and he always wore an old frock coat and carried a walking stick. His face was long and narrow, with good coloring for one so old. The forehead was high, and formidable as a great cliff; the nose like that of some ancient Greek philosopher; the eyes blue, like the blue of a mountain lake. Above the firm yet kindly mouth, there grew a long pointed moustache which looked like a bow of grey wool; the chin was pointed and covered with a longish white beard like a Santa Claus. His beautifully shaped head which resembled a pink Easter egg was bald on top, except for a fringe of white hair below the crown; and at the back like Old John Silver he sported a braid of salt and pepper color. His fingers were those of an artist—long and thin, and seemed to have been made for turning the delicate leaves of rare old books and manuscripts.

Sunday was the day he used to visit us. Early in the afternoon, we'd hear the gentle tap of his walking stick on our door, and there he'd be. Sometimes in the summer, he wouldn't bother knocking, but would saunter nonchalantly down the pathway which led to the garden, and there we would find him, serenely looking at the plants, or even plucking

them. We didn't mind him this, for it was usually herbs or flowerless plants which he picked, and he never seemed as happy as when he had a handful of fragrant mint in his hand, or a bunch of young sunflowers. But once in awhile, instead of just holding his bouquet and rapturously smelling it, he would place it on his head, and cover it with his hat. When asked the reason for this apparently ludicrous action, he would chuckle delightedly and say: "Don't you know herbs are good for the head? They cure bad headaches." Then he would immediately begin to give a lengthy and learned discourse on the merits of this or that plant as a medicine or drug.

He nearly always carried with him a bundle of papers or books, for he was a newspaper vendor on the streets of Winnipeg. This bundle he usually presented to my mother and it was from it she read and often retold to her children, immortal stories written by Dumas, Dante or Hugo.

For us children he usually brought some bright copper pennies, and once in a while, a silver coin. And one memorable Sunday, he took out from his pocket something in a small round black case, which he presented to my brother. It was a compass, and a very great marvel it seemed to our young eyes, which had never seen anything like it before.

Even as very young children we enjoyed listening to Moujow talk, as he sat at the table eating his borscht, or drinking his Russia tea, both of which he liked extremely. We didn't always understand him, of course, but as we grew older and better read, we learned exactly how wise he was. Sometimes with the self-assurance and confidence of the very young and inexperienced, we tried to inveigle him into what we thought naively to be a very learned and weighty argument, but he always bested us.

He was a great teller of stories was Moujow, and oh, how he charmed us with them! At first when we were very little there were old Russian and Ukrainian nursery tales. I can see Moujow's kind face all lit up with his irresistible smile as he obliged us with the tale of "The Monkey and the Spectacles."

"Once upon a time there was an old monkey who found his eyesight growing very poor. Some person advised him to buy a pair of spectacles. The old monkey took his advice, and bought half a dozen pairs.

Of course he didn't know what to do with them. He felt them, he smelt them, he licked them, and still he couldn't see any better. Then in desperation he threaded them all in a row upon his tail, but all to no avail—his eyesight was a poor as ever.

He thereupon grew very angry, and dashing them down violently on the ground said, "Foolish is the one who heads the advice of Man, who knows nothing about what he is talking."

Often we would wander in the garden and there in the fresh air, amid all the flowers and plants, Moujow would talk with us, and many were the gems of wisdom he scattered

through his discourse with us. I here quote three which stand in my mind as typical of the man.

“Time is the heart of God.” (After a dissertation on space and time).

“Risibility is a panacea for many ills.” (This followed a most delightful discussion on the necessity for a sense of humor in one’s life.)

The last one was the outcome of an argument concerning the duty of happiness and the happiness of duty.

“Happiness is a beautiful bubble blown from the pipe of peace.”

One Sunday the incidence of goodness amongst men came up for discussion. We, who were very young, and inclined to take things at their face value, argued that there were a great many good men in the world. To prove the point we mentioned in turn Mr. A., Mr. B., and Mr. C., with whom we were all well acquainted, and who led exemplary lives, as far as was known. We were not prepared for the blast which followed.

“These are all false and hypocritical men. There is not one really good man alive!” he thundered.

“What about Christ?” I ventured in a trembling voice.

“Not even he was perfect,” Moujow said in a soft and sad tone, adding, “Bring me the Bible and turn to the book of St. Luke, Chapter 18, Verse 19.”

I did so. “Now read,” he said. In a shocked voice I read these words: “And Jesus said unto him: ‘Why callest thou me good? None is good, save one, that is God.’”

There was nothing more for me to say, he had proved his point, but it seemed to me that my heart was broken. Never again would the world be the same. I remember that I left the room and wept.

Before Moujow left for home that afternoon I managed to dry my tears and say goodbye to him. He patted me under the chin, and in a fond and tremulous voice he said. “Little philosopher, I did not mean to hurt your feelings.”

He entranced us with tales concerning that great trio: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Sometimes the different forms of present-day governments came under his scrutiny and discussion. But perhaps best of all, he liked to speak of those great titans in Russian and Ukrainian letters: Gogol, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Turgeniev, Shevchenko, and Tolstoi—especially the latter for whom he seemed to have a special niche in his heart, though we didn’t know exactly why, until one day he unexpectedly told us that he had met the great man and had carried on a correspondence with him. And wonder of wonders! One day he showed us a fragment of a letter written by Tolstoi not to prove his statement, but

because we begged him to bring something that was “his”. It was also that day we asked Moujow why he hadn’t become a writer. He then told us something of his early life, of which we had known very little.

He was one of a large family of children, born to a rich and educated farmer. Because his intelligence showed itself at so early an age, his father, an extremely wise man, sent him to school, and so he spent a few years at Kiev and Warsaw. But he was too restless to remain in any one place for any length of time, so his formal education was neglected, beyond the smattering he received in these two cities. Besides, his views were becoming more and more radical as he grew older, and instead of learning, his mind was set on teaching.

Just about this time the Reformation swept over the Ukraine, and he along with others was stirred by its force. He abandoned the faith of his fathers and became a minister, along with Raboshapka (Gray Cap), one of the first Ukrainian reformers. Life quickly became a series of preaching, teaching and denunciations, in the private homes of converts. When that soon proved unsafe, it meant carrying on in caves and underground passages, and eventually it led to court trials and imprisonment.

It was here we interrupted his account with: “But why were you always getting into religious difficulties with the authorities, Moujow?” And he answered hotly: “I was searching for the Truth, and they tried to stop me.” We went on: “Well, why didn’t you write? You remember you told us how Voltaire helped the French cause by writing.” And he answered thoughtfully: “The greatest good sometimes comes from oral teaching, not writing. Socrates wrote nothing. He left that to Plato. We had Gogol (Hohol), Franko, and Shevchenko.” And his eyes grew misty, and he became silent. I thought he was through for the day, but after a few minutes’ silence he resumed: “I can do it, though, for I have written a little, but it’s too much trouble. Talking is much easier for me.” And with these words he fell into a deep reverie, and shortly afterwards took his silent departure.

A few months before his passing, he was asked: “What is Death, Moujow?” I shall never forget his soul-shaking answer, which fell so quietly from his lips, and which was to change my entire philosophy of life: “Death is the Key to Life.”

We were to recall those words shortly afterwards, when we learnt of his own death on a cold winter’s day in November, a few weeks before the passing of England’s King George V, and her poet laureate, Rudyard Kipling. The coincidence of the dates impressed us because the influence of Moujow on us was such that we couldn’t escape the feeling that they shared a common destiny.

What more shall I tell you of the strange man Moujow, besides his great love of children and young people, of the beauty of nature and the out-of-doors, of books and discussion? In my mind he stands like a righteous Diogenes with a lighted lantern in his hand, searching in the glare of broad daylight for an honest man, or like a bewildered Pilate asking “What is Truth?” Yes, he searched for over eighty years in his quest, but he never found the object of his search.

Three years ago he died, and when I asked what I could do they said, "Buy some roses, pink and red. Living he loved them so and now he's dead."

And so that chill November day, there were roses on his coffin, symbols they were of what he sought. I like to think of him as holding that bouquet in his hand, and sniffing them as he strode his way into the next world.

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*Written by Olga Lesik, 666 Burrows Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba - 1938*  
Retyped by Nina Westaway, March 2012 from two versions.