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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
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ЧТО ДАЛА ОКТЯБРЬСКАЯ РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ КРЕСТЬЯНАМ

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY GEORGE H. HANNA

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PAGES FROM THE BITTER PAST

"Bitter sorrow haunted the hills,
Bitter sorrow barred the gates."

(Old Russian saying)

Yefim Vasilyevich Yeroshin, peasant farmer of the village of Koltsovka in Chuvashia, is 86 years old. He was born in this village where his father and his grandfather (the latter a serf) tilled the soil before him. He is a member of a collective farm and as such is entitled to receive a pension from the collective which would enable him to live at ease. He will not, however, listen to the advice and persuasion of his fellow-farmers to take it easy in his old age. He says he likes his job, night-watchman in the farm's office. But then, night-watchman isn't the right word for the job. Late in the evening, when everybody else has left the office, it is Yefim Vasilyevich that answers all telephone calls. He knows everything and everybody and can deal with whatever comes his way.

"The night-chairman," his fellow-farmers call him.

The younger villagers often look in as they pass late at night and see the lighted window of the office—youngsters going home from the club or from the evening school that is close by. The rising generation of Koltsovka like listening to the old man's tales of the past and he also finds pleasure in the merry young faces of his attentive audience. On many occasions the oldest inhabitant of Koltsovka has been asked to tell stories of the distant past to interested audiences of children and young people.

The tall, grey-bearded old man slightly roundshouldered stands in the middle of a close circle of young people.

"In those days," he begins, "the land didn't belong to those who tilled it but to one man, the landowner Ushakov. He could do whatever he liked with the peasants. There were twelve mouths to feed in our family and we had less than four acres. We never had enough bread. We used a wooden plough, there were only two iron ploughs in the whole of Koltsovka. You can't plough very deep and you can't work a lot with such a plough. How bitter was the bread we earned by the sweat of our brow and by the bleeding callosities on our hands! You can't imagine what our wives put into the flour to eke it out—grated bark from the trees, chaff and other refuse from the threshing-floor. You wouldn't dream of eating such bread today, but the village boys of my time were glad enough to get a lump of that and it seemed like cake to us because the poor villagers seldom had enough bread to last until the spring flood."

This was the case in Koltsovka and in all the countless villages and hamlets of the Russian provinces, in all those Gorelovkas, Neyelovkas, Neurozhaikas and Razutovkas* of which the great Russian poet Nekrasov writes in his wonderful *Who Lives Well in Russia.*

Until the sixties of the last century serf labour predominated in the Russian countryside. A census taken about the middle of the 19th century recorded some twenty-three million men and women serfs who were the property of the landowners. They were spoken and written of as chattels—peasants so and so, the property of landowner X. The peasant and his entire family were, in practice, the property of the landowner who could treat them as chattel slaves: he could exchange them for dogs, buy and sell them, lose them at cards or make a gift of them to somebody else. The aristocrats of the Kiev and Podolsk provinces owned a million serfs in each province. The

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* Imaginary names of villages coined by the poet from the Russian words for burnt-out, underfed, crop-failure and shoeless.—*Tr.*

landowners of the Volhynian, Tula, Smolensk, Tambov, Tver, Nizhny-Novgorod, Kursk, Saratov, Moscow, Yaroslavl and other provinces had in each case between 750,000 and 1,000,000 serfs.

The system of serfdom hampered the development both of agriculture and of industry. The compulsory labour of the serfs and the primitive techniques employed could not ensure high productivity. To develop the country economically the Tsar's government was compelled to put an end to this system. To economic necessity must be added the fear of the growing peasant ferment, those spontaneous outbursts when the peasants strove to seize the landowners' land and rid themselves of serfdom. In the end the Tsar's government realized that if serfdom was not abolished from above it would be abolished from below, by the peasants, who would overthrow the power of the landowning class.

At the time of the reforms abolishing serfdom the landowners plundered the peasants ruthlessly: they took for themselves the best of the land that the peasants had formerly tilled for their own use. The government of landowners maintained by the autocratic Tsar and the officials appointed by them, so manipulated the reform, said Lenin, that when the peasants gained their freedom they had been robbed of everything they had. Although they ceased to be the legal slaves of the landowners they were still in their clutches.

The aristocratic landowners managed to grab more than one-fifth of the land formerly used by their peasants. For the land that remained the peasants had to pay enormous sums by way of purchase and until these sums were paid in full the former serfs were regarded as being "temporarily bound." They were compelled to do feudal corvée service, that is, till the land of the landowner without pay, or they were compelled to leave the land and work to pay for it and in addition were subject to heavy taxation. The price of the worst land, that which was left for the peasants, was set at almost double the market price. Up to 1905 the peasants had already paid almost 2,000 million gold rubles for their land. In the words of the

poet, "many new chains were invented to replace those of the serf."

After the formal abolition of serfdom the biggest owners of land were still the same princes, counts and barons. Let us imagine ourselves in the place of a traveller who crossed the Russian black-earth region half a century ago, going from district to district of the Ryazan, Tula, Orel, Tambov, Penza, Voronezh and Kursk provinces.

On the old Ryazan Highway, a couple of miles from Ribny, we come across a huge tract of cultivated land with no hedges; beyond it a stud farm and rich grasslands along the River Vozha.

"Whose property is this?"

"It belongs to Mr. Radzewicz, he's the landlord."

We move on until we reach the River Oka. On the bank opposite the town of Lgov we see rich water-meadows, country mansions and an establishment for baling hay. We turn to the men, women and young people dressed in homespun linen shirts and bast shoes who are mowing grass with their scythes.

"Who do you work for, good people?"

"We are Khludov's farm-labourers, he's the landlord and he owns the factory."

Leaving behind us the ramshackle cottages of the peasants and the gorgeous mansions of the Princes Kropotkin, Shcherbatov, Saltykov, San-Donato, Golitsyn, Shakhovsky, and Yusupov whose estates covered tens of thousands of acres, we drive on to Tambov Province.

Near the village of Koltyrino, in Shatsky District, we drive through the estate of Princess Volkonskaya. The boundaries of the estate are out of sight for the princess owns 5,700 acres of farmland and a huge park. Still farther on we come to the domains of Count Vorontsov-Dashkov, whose possessions include 48,000 acres of land, a stud farm and a flax-teasing establishment. All round us, on this huge estate, we see ragged, barefooted peasants toiling till they drop, we see them dining off a crust of stale bread and an onion.

When we pass the railway station at Zemechino we come to another estate, that of Princess Dolgorukaya, which

includes sugar-beet plantations, a sugar refinery, a glue factory and watermills. The neighbouring estate belongs to a landowner by the name of Pashkov who has over 68,000 acres in Tambov Province and several thousand more in the neighbouring Province of Penza. Labourers are tilling the land and working in the brickfield, at the oil-presses and cheese factory and are boiling pitch, all to increase the wealth of the exploiter Pashkov.

To the south of the Sury railway station we come to the lands and forests belonging to Prince Vorontsov. He has a number of estates, one of which, Nizhny Shkaft, covers an area of 139,600 acres. A whole administrative district is his private property.

Stakhovich, the Marshal of the Nobility of Orel Province, Master of the Horse of the Imperial Household, is the owner of a huge area of the best lands in Yelets District.

From the Sinezerka-Brosovo railway we take our seats in a carriage and drive for a whole week, every day asking:

"Where are we?" and in reply we learn that we are on the estate of His Royal Highness the Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich.

This scion of the royal family owns 271,700 acres!

So it was in every district, in every province. The grand dukes, dukes, princes, counts, barons, titled aristocrats and aristocrats with no titles, factory-owners, enterprising merchants of the higher class—the whole of this predatory gang kept a stranglehold on the working people.

The names of some villages that have been retained to the present day tell an eloquent story. Since the Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow reopened after the war years, visitors from all parts of the Soviet Union find much of interest in the Animal Husbandry Section. One of the most admired exhibits this year was the herd of thoroughbred milch cows from the famous Gorshikha Farm in Yaroslavl Region. Visitors listened to the stories told by the young dairymaids attending the cows and also to Ilya Ivanovich Abrosimov who wore the Order of Lenin and

the Gold Star of a Hero of Socialist Labour on his coat lapel; he was in charge of this "branch" of the farm at the exhibition. Many people asked him why his collective farm bore the name of "Gorshikha" ("Most Sorrowful").

"That's a long story," answered Abrosimov, "but if you're interested I can tell you.

"People come from many parts to visit our farm. They want to see our dairy farm, just like they do here at the exhibition, and want to find out how we manage to get from five to six thousand litres of milk from each cow a year. Then they go to look at the piggery and the sheep pens. You've heard of Romanov sheepskin coats, haven't you? Well, our sheep provide the skins. A lot of people are interested in our poultry farm. Our chickens, like our pigs, are white, fine big Leghorns. It's a big farm altogether, the farm buildings and the farmers' cottages are built of brick made in our own brickfields.

"People tell us that our lands are rich and that the name of the village, Gorshikha, doesn't describe either the farm or the life we lead.

"That's true enough. But, you know, there's an old saying that 'you can't throw words out of a song.' The name of our village, Gorshikha, goes back to times long before the Revolution, when there were swamps all round and a few decrepit log-huts huddled together in the forest. The people never had enough to eat and there was no milk even for the children. The name Gorshikha came from the sorrowful nature of the land—you couldn't think of anything more sorrowful—and from the life of toil and sorrow led by the peasantry."

In old Russia, 30,000 of the biggest landowners possessed about 188,500,000 acres of land, as much as was owned by ten million peasant farmsteads. Members of the royal family owned over 18,850,000 acres of land.

Dolbekino, one of the estates of the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, covered 46,200 acres, from which His Royal Highness obtained an annual net income of 130,000 gold rubles. The peasants of Dolbekino owned land which

amounted to a little over two acres per head. In a good year they had bread enough to last them till Christmas. The steward of the estate, a tsarist general, squeezed the peasants off their farms, robbing them of the last handful of earth. And who was there to protect the poor man in those days? The courts? Only aristocrats sat in the courts and it was by a court decision that even the village streets were ploughed up. In the end all the land that had belonged to the peasants became the property of the Grand Duke.

Rich landowners were able to perform any illegal act with impunity since the courts were always on their side. The landowner Komstadius seized illegally the grasslands of the peasants in the village of Zhukli, Sosnitsky District, Chernigov Province. The peasants appealed to the county court. The following is the decision taken by that body:

"In view of the fact that the suit was submitted by illiterate representatives, Stepan and Isaac Ustimenko ... the said suit will not be examined but will be returned to the aforementioned representatives."

In our time, not only a schoolboy, but even a middle-aged person finds it difficult to believe that one individual could own a whole district and that the entire population worked for him. In the old days, however, the big landowners were the dominant class in Russia. The courts and the police were on their side and handled the common folk accordingly. The hungry peasant saw plenty of untilled land around him but he dared not touch it for it belonged to the "master." In the Kirsanov District of Tambov Region, there are still old people living who remember Reitern-Obolenskaya, the woman who owned all the land and from whom the peasants were compelled to rent a few acres because their own holdings were insufficient to feed them and because they had nowhere to pasture their cows. Reitern-Obolenskaya had a glass tower built on the roof and sat there with a telescope watching the labourers at work. Woe betide anybody whom she saw sitting down to take a rest or leaving his work for a drink of water.

In those days the *Peasant Song* was compiled by the people:

Oh, how great is the anguish and sorrow
Of the farmer with no land to till;
But the master is happy and gleeful
For the labourer submits to his will.
If we don't want to die of starvation,
To the master to work we must go,
That the masters who live on our labour
The real meaning of work shouldn't know.

In 1905 this dolorous song of the peasants was printed as a leaflet and distributed by the Bolsheviks working in an underground organization at Kramatorsk.

Pyotr Ivanovich Azhirkov, Hero of Socialist Labour and Chairman of the Borets (Fighter) Collective Farm in Bronnitsy District, Moscow Region, has published a book entitled *Our Collective Farm* which has been translated into English. Azhirkov in his youth was a labourer on the estate of a big landowner and in speaking of this part of Russia in pre-revolutionary days he says the following:

"Before the Revolution Rybolovo was included in Bronnitsy District, Moscow Gubernia. People used to say of us: 'Vereisk peasants have sufficient grain to last them till Easter, Zvenigorod peasants have enough till Shrovetide, Bronnitsy peasants till Christmas.' This was true, by January our peasants had no grain left....

"Those were hard times. We could not eke out a living from the little land we had. The kulaks had the best land and much of the peasants' land was so wedged in between the landlords' estates that it was almost impossible to work it. Most of the land on our side of the river belonged to Prince Gorchakov. Across the river lay the estates belonging to General Volkovsky, the Danilovsky Monastery and the Starnikovo kulaks. Farther off, towards Faustovo, were the rich meadows of Count Orlov-Davidov, an absentee landlord. His stewards auctioned the right to mow his meadows and pasture cattle to the highest bidder, usually the Khryakov kulaks, the Rybolovo hay merchants.

"Few villagers had cows or horses. In order to provide the children with milk, two or three households would club together to keep a cow, each household milking it on certain days.... Often our peasants would mow and stack hay, but they were not allowed to cart it away until the elder had had proof that they had paid all their arrears. They often had to part with their hay.

"The peasants had little seed for sowing, their land was badly tilled and the harvests were poor. Our family would sow four measures of rye (about 2.6 bushels) and we would harvest three, or at most four times the amount we sowed. Our own grain did not last us over the New Year and, willy-nilly, we had to leave home to earn money."

In those days there were many different means by which the landowners could keep the peasant farmers in bondage. The impoverished, unfertilized soil, ploughed with wooden ploughs, could not produce a satisfactory harvest and the grain yield was often so low that nothing was left over for the next year's seed. Dire necessity compelled the peasant to apply to the landowner's steward for assistance, and dearly he paid for it. If he took a measure of rye the whole family had to work to pay for it and, what is more, work at a time when they should have been reaping their own corn. In this way the peasants were kept in permanent debt.

The peasant's cottage was in a state of constant dilapidation, the walls heeled over and the thatch clung precariously to the rafters. The peasant needed timber and there it was, close at hand, but it belonged to the landlord and the peasant was not even allowed to gather sticks for kindling. In order to get a log he again had to become indebted to the landowner. Year after year the peasant worked for nothing on somebody else's land, he could see no end to his bondage and could never be anything but a pauper. When he died his children inherited his debts, living in the same bondage and in dire poverty.

Here is a most brutal document signed by an illiterate peasant woman (that is, she placed a cross under it) who hired herself out as a farm-labourer to Count Pototsky, one of the biggest landowners in Russia:

"I" (name and surname), "have engaged myself voluntarily as a wage labourer on the estate of Count Pototsky for the performance of any farm work that may be given me for a period of 144 days, without maintenance; for the whole of this period I am to be paid 34 rubles of which I have been advanced 10 rubles, the remainder to be paid according to the time I work.

"1. The working day is from sunrise to sunset.

"2. If I leave my work without just cause I must return double the advance irrespective of the number of days worked.

"3. I undertake to go to my work immediately I am called.

"4. If the estate calls me for any kind of work on a Sunday or a holiday I have no right to refuse to work.

"5. If I go away on a working day or a holiday without the permission of the estate I shall be obliged to work off the days on which I have been absent.

"6. If I should be ill or die my family must fulfil this contract."

Such was the contract that made a bondswoman of this poor peasant. Her position was little better than that of a slave, for the contract provided for every contingency so that once the poor woman had placed the yoke of slavery on her shoulders she could never remove it: where could she, who signed the contract because of her poverty, get double the advance to release herself? She knew no holidays and no Sundays, from dawn to dusk she had to toil for His Grace the Count and live in semi-starvation on whatever she could provide herself with. And if the woman were to fall ill on account of the arduous nature of the work or were to die from overstrain, she had already undertaken that her family would work in her place.

Here is another contract, concluded between Prince Golitsyn and the peasants of the village of Matveishchevo, Yuryev District, Vladimir Province, in 1893. The contract reads: "We, the aforementioned peasants, undertake to attend to work at the first call of the Sima office and to fulfil all work assigned conscientiously and should it

be shown that any job has not been conscientiously fulfilled we shall be collectively liable to a fine of 100 rubles to be paid into the office of Prince Golitsyn...."

People born in Soviet times and even those who are well over forty years old do not remember the rural authorities and the rural police officer that were the scourge of the people throughout the countryside.

In April 1902, after the peasant disturbances in the south of Russia, one of the leading judicial officials included in a report the following statement made by the peasant Kiyan at a court hearing: "Allow me to tell you something of the unhappy life of a peasant. I must support my father and six motherless children. I have to get my living from a small holding of about two acres and a patch of little more than half an acre in the fields. To pasture cows we have to pay twelve rubles per head to the landlord Kuzminov and to rent a dessiatine (2.7 acres) on which to sow grain we have to pay by harvesting three dessiatines of his land. And all this has to be done by these two hands of mine.... We cannot live like this, we have our necks in a noose. What can we do? We peasants have applied to all authorities. We have been to the rural council, we have been to the land administration, but none of them would see us, there is nowhere we can get help."

The tsarist State Council produced a special law on the hiring of wage labourers for farm work. Among other things it said:

"The labourer must obey the employer and fulfil all his demands implicitly and zealously in accordance with contracted conditions.

"The labourer must behave decently, soberly and respectfully towards his employer, the employer's family and all persons appointed by the employer to supervise the work.

"The labourer must not absent himself without the employer's permission.

"The employer has the right to make deductions from wages for time lost, for careless work, for insolence and disobedience and for any damage done to his property.

"Deductions for absence from work must not exceed double the wages that would have been paid for the time lost."

This truly Draconic law meant nothing more nor less than the most brutal exploitation and bondage for the poorer section of the peasantry. The landowner, his steward or members of his family had only to accuse the labourer of insufficient zeal, indecency, disrespect or disobedience in order to make deductions from his already miserly wages.

The landowner could rob the labourer right and left with impunity, since the labourer was nothing more than a slave. If he queried the accuracy of his wages or raised an objection to illegal deductions he would land in prison. In the Code of Punishments that could be inflicted by a magistrate's court there was an article to the effect that a farm-labourer could be placed under arrest for a period not exceeding one month for insolence to his employer or members of his employer's family and also for flagrant disobedience of any order given by the employer or any overseer appointed by him. The same term of imprisonment could be inflicted on him "for absence from work or for leaving work without permission in the event of his not fulfilling the legal demand of the police to return to work."

The landed aristocracy kept the peasants in bondage, exploited them ruthlessly until they were ruined and forced to go begging. These titled exploiters themselves lived in fabulous luxury and idleness, maintained stables and kennels at the expense of the peasants, fed crowds of "clients," held banquets and garden parties and visited health resorts abroad. In one night they could lose at cards the fruits of the labours of thousands of people.

Whenever the peasants, driven to despair, demanded that their lives be made easier, whenever they made any attempt to claim their rights, punitive expeditions were sent against them, they were shot, beaten up or publicly birched, no difference being made for age or sex.

In 1902 the newspaper *Iskra* reported that a punitive party led by the chairman of the rural council, Kovalko,