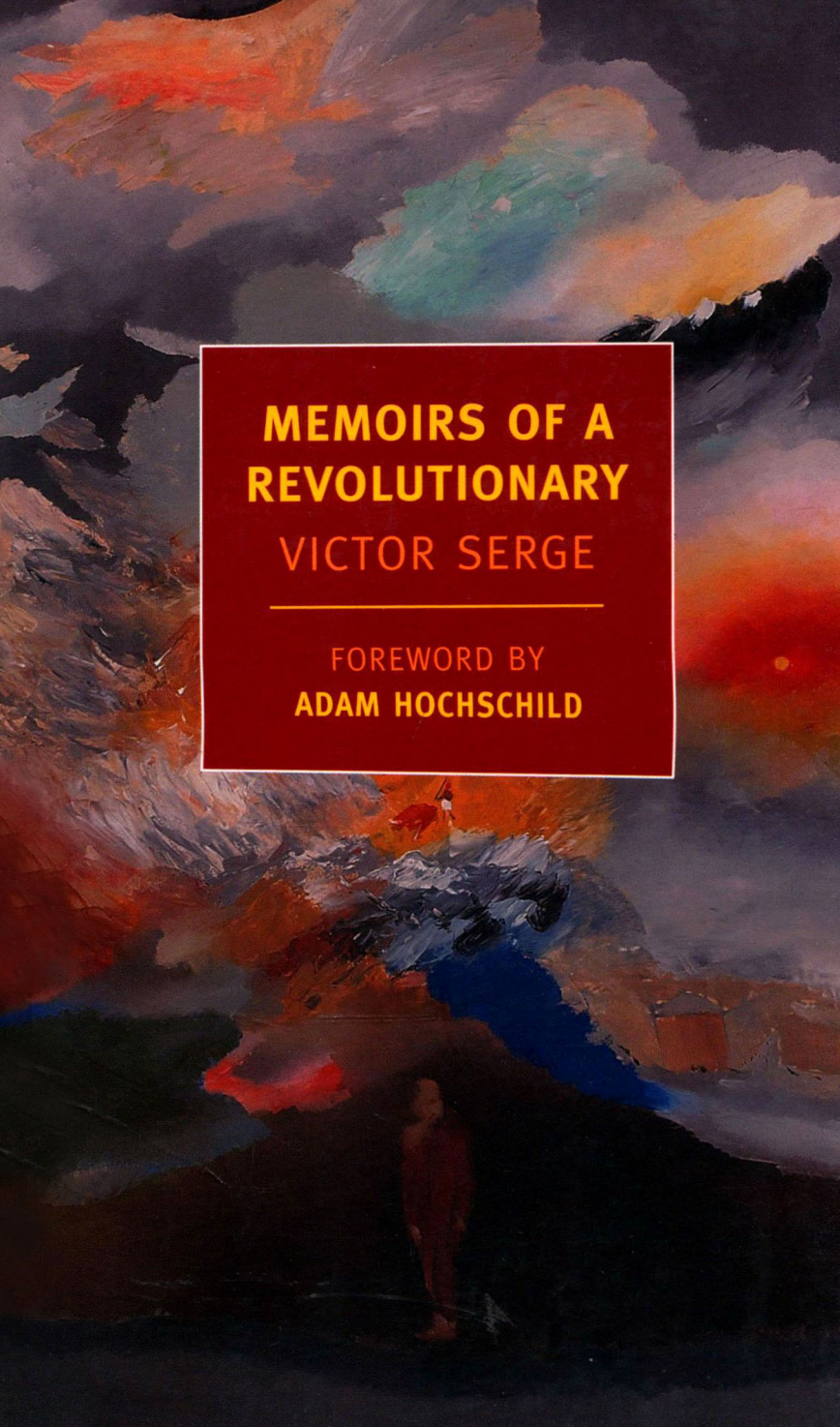
MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONARY
VICTOR SERGE
FOREWORD BY
ADAM HOCHSCHILD

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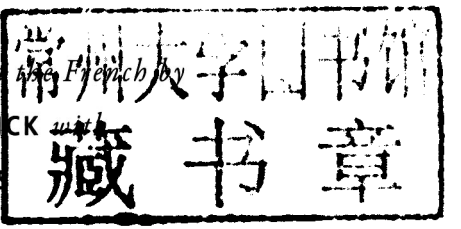
VICTOR SERGE

Translated from the French by
PETER SEDGWICK *with*
GEORGE PAIZIS



Glossary and notes by
RICHARD GREEMAN

Foreword by
ADAM HOCHSCHILD

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MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONARY

VICTOR SERGE (1890–1947) was born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich to Russian anti-Tsarist exiles, impoverished intellectuals living "by chance" in Brussels. A precocious anarchist firebrand, young Victor was sentenced to five years in a French penitentiary in 1912. Expelled to Spain in 1917, he participated in an anarcho-syndicalist uprising before leaving to join the Revolution in Russia. Detained for more than a year in a French concentration camp, Serge arrived in St. Petersburg early in 1919 and joined the Bolsheviks, serving in the press services of the Communist International. An outspoken critic of Stalin, Serge was expelled from the Party and arrested in 1929. Nonetheless, he managed to complete three novels (*Men in Prison*, *Birth of Our Power*, and *Conquered City*) and a history (*Year One of the Russian Revolution*), published in Paris. Arrested again in Russia and deported to Central Asia in 1933, he was allowed to leave the USSR in 1936 after international protests by militants and prominent writers like André Gide and Romain Rolland. Using his insider's knowledge, Serge published a stream of impassioned, documented exposés of Stalin's Moscow show trials and of machinations in Spain, which went largely unheeded. Stateless, penniless, hounded by Stalinist agents, Serge lived in precarious exile in Brussels, Paris, Vichy France, and Mexico City, where he died in 1947. His classic *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* and his great last novels, *Unforgiving Years* and *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (both available as NYRB Classics), were written "for the desk drawer" and published posthumously.

PETER SEDGWICK (1934–1983) translated and wrote the introductions for Victor Serge's *Memoirs* and *Year One of the Russian Revolution*. A lifelong activist and a founding member of the New

Left in Britain, he wrote seminal essays on Serge. In addition to his journalism and political writings, he is the author of a book, *Psycho-Politics*.

ADAM HOCHSCHILD has written for *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The Nation*. His books include *King Leopold's Ghost* and, most recently, *To End All Wars*. He teaches at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley.

GEORGE PAIZIS is the author of *Marcel Martinet: Poet of the Revolution*, *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction*, and, with Andrew N. Leak, *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*. He is a longstanding member of the Socialist Workers Party and until recently was Senior Lecturer in the French Department at University College London.

RICHARD GREEMAN has translated and written the introductions for five of Serge's novels (including *Unforgiving Years* and *Conquered City*, both available as NYRB Classics). A veteran Socialist and co-founder of the Praxis Center and Victor Serge Library in Moscow, Russia (www.praxiscenter.ru), Greeman is author of *Beware Of "Vegetarian" Sharks: Radical Rants And Internationalist Essays*.

FOREWORD*

Our Night with Its Stars Askew

SOME YEARS ago I was at a conference of writers and journalists from various countries. A group of a dozen or more of us were talking, and someone asked that each person say who was the political writer whom he or she most admired. When my turn came, I named Victor Serge. A man I did not know abruptly leapt to his feet, strode across the room, and embraced me. He turned out to be Rafael Barajas of Mexico, who under the pen name of El Fisgón is one of Latin America's leading political cartoonists.

It is rare when a writer inspires instant brotherhood among strangers. And rarer still when the writing involved is not fiction or poetry (although Victor Serge was a good novelist and poet) but a work of nonfiction. For me, and for others in many parts of the world, Serge's greatness lies above all in the book you are holding.

Victor Serge began and ended his life in exile, and spent much of it either in prison or in flight from various governments trying to put him there. He was born Victor Kibalchich in 1890; his parents were Russian revolutionaries who had fled to Belgium. He had little formal schooling. As a child he often had only bread soaked in coffee to eat. In Brussels, he recalled, "On the walls of our humble and makeshift lodgings there were always the portraits of men who had been hanged."

As a teenager in a radical group he was one of the tiny handful of people in Belgium who boldly criticized King Leopold II's rule over the Congo, then the most brutal colonial regime in Africa. But he

*Adapted, in part, from Adam Hochschild, *Finding the Trapdoor: Essays, Portraits, Travels* (Syracuse University Press, 1997), and *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

went farther than others in taking a stand against colonialism itself—a rare position in Europe at that time. He left home while still in his teens, lived in a French mining village, worked as a typesetter, and finally made his way to Paris. There he lived with beggars, read Balzac, and grew fascinated by the underworld. But soon the revolutionary in him overcame the wanderer. He became an anarchist and the editor of one of the movement's newspapers. For refusing to testify against some comrades he was sentenced, at age twenty-two, to five years in a French maximum security prison. Released in 1917, he eventually managed to make his way to revolutionary Russia—the ancestral homeland he had never seen.

He arrived in early 1919 in a country engulfed in civil war. This brutal conflict, which took several million lives, was between the Bolsheviks and the counterrevolutionary White forces—mostly led by former Tsarist generals, and supplied by England, France, and the United States. Although a supporter of the Russian Revolution, he became quickly agonized by the other, more sinister battle the Bolsheviks were fighting, against virtually all the other parties of the Left. They had closed down Russia's first democratically elected legislature and were now busy executing many of their political opponents.

He spent most of the next seventeen years in Russia, writing under the name Victor Serge. Among the many shrill and angry voices of that time, his still rings clear and true today. Serge never abandoned his passion for civil liberties or his sympathy for the free spirits who didn't toe the Bolshevik line. "The telephone became my personal enemy," he wrote. "At every hour it brought me voices of panic-stricken women who spoke of arrest, imminent executions, and injustice, and begged me to intervene at once, for the love of God!"

Yet the White armies were attacking from all directions; Serge felt it was no time for intellectuals, however right their criticisms, to be on the sidelines. "Even if there were only one chance in a hundred for the regeneration of the revolution and its workers' democracy," he later wrote, "that chance had to be taken." He worked as an official of the Communist International and served as a militia officer fighting the Whites. At one point he was in charge of examining the captured archives of the Okhrana, the Tsarist secret police. At the same time he

continued to be appalled by the growth of a new secret police regime around him, and argued ceaselessly against the straitjacketed press, the arrests, the closed trials, and the death penalty for political prisoners.

As he watched the Soviet bureaucracy grow ever more oppressive, Serge became more convinced than ever that political power should be decentralized and given to the small community and the workplace. He and some like-minded friends tried to build a miniature version of the society they believed in by founding a communal farm on an abandoned estate where "we would live close to the earth." But, surrounded by turmoil, famine, and distrustful villagers, the experiment didn't last.

Before long, Serge was expelled from the Communist Party. In 1928, Stalin clapped him in jail. Always alert to irony, Serge talked to one of his guards and found that he had served in the same job under the Tsar. A few days after his release from prison, Serge wrote, "I was laid out by an unendurable abdominal pain; for twenty-four hours I was face-to-face with death.... And I reflected that I had labored, striven, and schooled myself titanically, without producing anything valuable or lasting. I told myself, 'If I chance to survive, I must be quick and finish the books I have begun: I must write, write...' I thought of what I would write, and mentally sketched the plan of a series of documentary novels about these unforgettable times."

And write he did. In all of his books, and particularly in this one, his masterpiece, his prose has a searing, vivid, telegraphic compactness. Serge's style comes not from endless refinement and rewriting, like Flaubert's, but from the urgency of being a man on the run. The police are at the door; his friends are being arrested; he must get the news out; every word must tell. And he is not like the novelist in a calmer society who searches and experiments to find exactly the right subject at last; *his* subject—the Russian Revolution and its aftermath—almost killed him. During Stalin's dictatorship, it is estimated today, somewhere between ten and twenty million Soviets met unnatural deaths—from the deliberate famine brought on by the forced collectivization of agriculture, from the firing squads, and from the Arctic and Siberian network of labor camps that devoured victims of mass arrests. Driven by Stalin's increasing paranoia, these arrests and

executions peaked in the Great Purge of the late 1930s, when millions of Soviet citizens were seized in midnight raids. Many were never seen by their families again.

Serge's opposition to Soviet tyranny meant that his work could never be published in Stalin's USSR, but his radicalism long kept much of it out of print in the United States as well. Today, however, he has won due recognition at last. Recent decades have seen studies and articles about him by many writers and a biography by Susan Weissman; Richard Greeman has translated a number of his novels into English for the first time; older editions of other Serge books have been reprinted; and there is now even a Victor Serge Library in Moscow. These memoirs of his life belong on the same small shelf as the other great political testaments of the twentieth century, books like Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell felt akin to Serge, and tried unsuccessfully to find him a British publisher.

Serge was part of the generation that at first saw the Russian Revolution as an epochal step forward from the political system which, in the First World War, had just taken the lives of more than nine million soldiers, and left twenty-one million wounded and millions of civilian dead as well. His great hopes make all the more poignant his clear-eyed picture of the gathering darkness as the Revolution turned slowly into a vast self-inflicted genocide. It was the era when, as a character in his novel *Conquered City* says, "We have conquered everything, and everything has slipped out of our grasp." A poem Serge wrote captures the same feeling:

> If we roused the peoples and made the continents quake,
> ... began to make everything anew with these dirty old stones,
> these tired hands, and the meager souls that were left us,
> it was not in order to haggle with you now,
> sad revolution, our mother, our child, our flesh,
> our decapitated dawn, our night with its stars askew...

Serge's eyewitness account of this "decapitated dawn" is nowhere more tragic than in chapter 6 of this volume, where he describes coming back to Russia in 1926 after a mission abroad. "A return to Russian

soil rends the heart. '*Earth of Russia*,' wrote the poet Tyutchev, '*no corner of you is untouched by Christ the slave.*' The Marxist explains it in the same terms: 'The production of commodities was never sufficient...'" In the countryside, hungry poor have taken to the roads. The streets of Leningrad are filled with beggars, abandoned children, prostitutes. "The hotels laid on for foreigners and Party officials have bars that are complete with tables covered in soiled white linen, dusty palm trees, and alert waiters who know secrets beyond the Revolution's ken." One after another, people Serge knows and admires—labor organizers, poets, veteran revolutionaries—commit suicide.

In 1933, Stalin had Serge arrested again, and exiled him and his family to the remote city of Orenburg, in the Ural mountains. People were starving; children clawed each other in the streets for a piece of bread. Serge became fast friends with the other political exiles there, a small group of men and women who shared food and ideas, nursed one another through illnesses, and kept each other alive.

Fluent in five languages, Serge did almost all his writing in French. By the time of his exile in Orenburg, his books and articles had won him a small but loyal following among independent leftists in the West who were alarmed by both Fascism and Stalinism. In 1936, protests by French intellectuals finally won him the right to leave Russia. This was the year that the Great Purge began in earnest, with mass arrests and executions on a scale unmatched in Russian history. Serge's release from the Soviet Union almost certainly saved his life. The secret police seized all copies of the manuscripts of two new books he had written, including the novel he thought his best. Thanks to his exile, Serge said wryly, these were "the only works I have ever had the opportunity to revise at leisure." People have searched repeatedly for these manuscripts in Russian archives intermittently opened since the end of Communism, but with no success.

When he arrived from Russia in Western Europe, Serge's politics again made him an outsider. Neither mainstream nor Communist newspapers would publish his articles, and the European Communist parties attacked him ferociously. His primary forum was a small labor paper in Belgium. There, and in a stream of new books and pamphlets, he railed against the Great Purge, defended the Spanish Republic, and

spoke out against the Western powers for accommodating Hitler. These ideas were not popular. To make ends meet he had to work at his old trade as a typesetter and proofreader, sometimes correcting the galleys of newspapers that would not publish his writing.

Meanwhile, Stalin's agents roamed Western Europe, on occasion assassinating members of the opposition in exile. Back in the Soviet Union things were still worse: Serge's sister, mother-in-law, two brothers-in-law, and two sisters-in-law disappeared into the Gulag. His wife, Liuba Russakova, became psychotic and had to be put in a French mental hospital. The Germans invaded France; when Nazi tanks reached the suburbs of Paris, Serge left the city. The United States refused him a visa. The Nazis burned his books. Just ahead of the Gestapo, he and his teenage son left Marseilles on a ship to Mexico.

One of the many unexpected things about Serge's memoirs is that the book he thought he was writing is not exactly the one we admire him for today.

In both this book and some twenty others—fiction, nonfiction, biography, history, and poetry—his driving passion was to rescue the honor of the idealists who participated in the Russian Revolution from the Stalinists who took it over and turned it into a horror show. It is easy to understand Serge's feelings. He grew up acutely aware of the injustices of the Europe of his day, bled white by the horrendous war of 1914–18, and poured all his energy and talent into the Revolution that promised to end them. But looking back on those times today, we cannot share Serge's hope that the fractious Left Oppositionists who coalesced around Leon Trotsky could have created the good society in Russia, even though surely none of them would have constructed a charnel house as murderous as Stalin's. And, indeed, Serge's brilliant capsule portrait of Trotsky in these pages shows both the man's wide-ranging intellect and his harsh, authoritarian streak.

What moves us in this book now is not so much Serge's vision of what the Revolution might have been. It is, rather, two qualities of the man himself.

The first is his ability to see the world with unflinching clarity. In the Soviet Union's first decade and a half, despite arrests, ostracism, theft of his manuscripts, and not having enough to eat, he bore witness. This was rare. Although other totalitarian regimes, left and right, have had naïve, besotted admirers before and since, never has there been a tyranny praised by so many otherwise sane intellectuals. George Bernard Shaw traveled to Russia in the midst of the man-made famine of the 1930s and declared that there was food enough for everyone. Walter Duranty, the Pulitzer Prize–winning *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow, downplayed reports of famine as a gross exaggeration. In Soviet Russia the great muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens saw, in his famous phrase, the future that worked. An astonishing variety of other Westerners, from the Dean of Canterbury to American ambassador Joseph Davies, saw mainly a society full of happy workers and laughing children. American vice president Henry Wallace made an official visit during World War II to the Kolyma region, on the Soviet Union's Pacific coast. It was then the site of the densest concentration of forced labor camps ever seen on earth, but Wallace and his entourage never noticed anything amiss. By contrast with all these cheerful visitors, Victor Serge had what Orwell, in another context, called the "power of facing unpleasant facts."

Serge's other great virtue is his novelist's eye for human character. He never lets his intense political commitment blind him to life's humor and paradox, its sensuality and beauty. You can see this in photographs of him as well, which show kindly, ironic eyes that seem to be both sad and amused by something, set in a modest, bearded face. "I have always believed," he writes, "that human qualities find their physical expression in a man's personal appearance." In what other revolutionary's autobiography could you find something like this thumbnail sketch of a French Communist Serge knew in Russia?

> Guilbeaux's whole life was a perfect example of the failure who, despite all his efforts, skirts the edge of success without ever managing to achieve it.... He wrote cacophonous poetry, kept a card index full of gossip about his comrades, and plagued the Cheka [the secret police] with confidential notes. He wore

green shirts and pea-green ties with greenish suits; everything about him, including his crooked face and his eyes, seemed to have a touch of mold. (He died in Paris, about 1938, by then an anti-Semite, having published two books proving Mussolini to be the only true successor of Lenin.)

In Serge's best novel, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, three members of the Trotskyist opposition meet on skis in the woods outside Moscow. They talk of the injustices around them, agree that things are hopeless and that prison and early death probably await them; then they have a snowball fight. In *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, Serge describes fighting White saboteurs on the rooftops of Petrograd in 1919, during the "white night" of the far northern summer, "overlooking a sky-blue canal. Men fled before us, firing their revolvers at us from behind the chimney pots.... The men we were after escaped, but I treasured an unforgettable vision of the city, seen at 3 a.m. in all its magical paleness."

After I first discovered Serge's writings, I tried to look for traces of him in Russia. In the summer of 1978, I visited what Serge called "this city that I love above all." When he first arrived there it was Petrograd, later Leningrad, and today once again is, as it was a century ago, St. Petersburg. I began at the Smolny Institute. Before the Revolution, the Smolny was Russia's most exclusive girls' finishing school, under the personal patronage of the Tsarina. In 1917 the Bolsheviks took it over as their headquarters and planned their coup d'état from classrooms where daughters of the aristocracy had once studied French and Latin. Serge had his office here, as the infant Revolution defended itself against the attacking White armies. In one of his novels, he describes how the barrels of cannons poked out between the school's elegant columns.

Now I found the building closed to the public; the grounds were a park. Fountains played; a warm breeze rustled the trees. Two old men talked on a bench. There was no suggestion of the history that had taken place at this spot; it felt ghostly by its absence. By 10 p.m. the

sun had just set, but the sky still glowed with the same mysterious "magical paleness" that had caught Serge's eye, even while he was being shot at, so many decades before.

In October 1919, when the Revolution was menaced from all sides, Serge took up arms in defense of this city. He fought in the decisive hillside battle that turned back the White Army at Pulkovo Heights, site of an old observatory outside the city. Some sixty years later, a puzzled cabdriver waited while my wife and I climbed the hill at Pulkovo. A beech grove shaded us from the hot sun. On one side, a peasant woman in a red kerchief walked slowly around the edge of a field, in search of something—wildflowers? mushrooms? From the hilltop we could see the distant city. On the horizon was a gleam of gold from the towers of the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul. This hill was as far as the White Army got. When the Whites fell back, the tide of the Russian Civil War turned, the battles died away, but the Russia that took shape was not the one that Serge had risked his life for.

On another day we went in search of the apartment where Victor Serge and his family had lived. It was on a street lined with weathered stone buildings where gates to enclosed courtyards seemed to open onto another century. I found the right building and mounted marble steps still lined by a pre-Revolutionary wrought-iron railing and banister. Outside the large wooden door on the top floor, there was no telling which bell to ring, because it was a communal apartment, with seven doorbells for the seven families who lived there. I picked one. A tenant said, "Wait. I'll get someone. She has lived here many years."

We remained on the landing. Finally a woman came out: stocky, broad-faced, with gold teeth and slightly suspicious eyes. She said she was sixty years old; she had lived in this apartment since she was seven. No, she said, defying my arithmetic, she did not remember the man I was asking about in my clumsy Russian—although, oddly, she did recall the Russakovs, Serge's wife's family. But when asked about Serge, she shook her head firmly, arms crossed on her chest. Another *nyet* came when I asked if we could come in. Evidently she feared getting into trouble if she allowed a foreigner into the apartment. Anyway, she added, the whole place has been remodeled, so it is not the same as when this man—is he a relative of yours?—lived here.

Curiously, despite the noes, she was happy to talk, and we stood on the landing for more than half an hour. I peered past her, trying to glimpse inside. According to Serge, the apartment had been hastily abandoned by a high Tsarist official and still had a grand piano. In the bookcase had been the many volumes of *Laws of the Empire*, which, savoring the symbolism, Serge burned for heat one by one in the winter months of early 1919.

I brought up Serge's name again, and suddenly her eyes narrowed. "This man—was he an anarchist?"

"Aha, so you *do* remember him!"

"No." Her arms crossed again firmly; she shook her head. "Absolutely not."

That evening, back at our hotel, I checked some dates in these memoirs. If she told me her age correctly, this woman was ten when the police knocked on that same door at midnight and arrested Serge the first time. And she was fifteen when, in front of a pharmacy still standing on a nearby corner, he was arrested again and sent into exile in the Urals. Fifteen years old. A family she shared a kitchen with. Could she really have forgotten? Did she only remember the "anarchist" from some later denunciation? Then I noticed another passage in the memoirs. Serge says that in the mid-1920s, the Soviet authorities moved a young secret police officer "plus his wife, child, and grandmother" into the communal apartment to keep an eye on him. The dates fit. Was this woman the child?

Even crossing the Atlantic to Mexico, on the final flight of his exile-filled life, Serge never allowed himself to *feel* exiled. An internationalist always, he felt at home wherever there were people who shared his beliefs. He recorded the clenched-fist salute his shipload of anti-Nazi refugees got from Spanish fishermen; he organized even at sea: "Out in the Atlantic, past the Sahara coast, the stars pitch up and down above our heads. We hold a meeting on the upper deck, between the funnel and the lifeboats."

In Mexico he stayed true to his vision as both a radical and a believer in free speech, and again met resistance. Communist Party

thugs at one point shot at him; on another occasion they attacked a meeting where he was speaking, injuring some seventy people, many of them seriously. His young daughter was covered with blood, from stab wounds in the body of a man who had bent over her to protect her. His politics cut off his access to both the mainstream and leftist, pro-Soviet Mexican press. Book publishers were no better. He wrote anyway, finishing both his panoramic novel of the Great Purge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, and these memoirs. He tried and failed to find an American publisher for the memoirs, and neither book appeared before his death, at the age of fifty-six, in 1947.

These pages are, among many other things, a gallery of firsthand sketches of an astonishingly large proportion of the significant left-wing writers and political figures of the first half of the twentieth century. One portrait is of Serge's friend Adolf Joffe. A Russian Jew, Joffe was from the generation of revolutionaries whose desire to change the world was matched by a deep, free-ranging curiosity about it. He read widely, and as an exile in Vienna before World War I, underwent psychoanalysis by Freud's disciple Alfred Adler. From a wealthy family, he donated his entire inheritance to the revolutionary movement. He was originally trained as a doctor, and, writes Serge, he "reminded one of a wise physician . . . who had been summoned to the bedside of a dying patient." After the Revolution, Joffe became a Soviet diplomat. In 1927, he returned to Moscow from his post as ambassador to Japan, seriously ill and in despair at the direction the Revolution had taken. As an act of protest, he committed suicide, leaving behind a message saying that he hoped his death would help "reawaken the Party and halt it on the path that leads to Thermidor."

Serge came to Joffe's apartment and helped to organize the procession that accompanied Joffe's body to Moscow's Novodevichy cemetery. The authorities tried to foil the march at every step. Even the most pessimistic of the marchers could not have imagined that theirs was to be the last antigovernment mass demonstration permitted in Moscow for the next sixty years.

In 1991, sixty-four years after Joffe's death, I went to see his daughter

Nadezhda at her apartment in Moscow. Stalin had wiped out his opponents and their family members with such thoroughness that it was amazing to find one of them still alive. Nadezhda Joffe had spent some two decades of her life in prison camps and internal exile. A vibrant, gray-haired woman of eighty-five, she was probably the last person alive in Russia who had once known Victor Serge. As the spring sun streamed through her window, we spent a morning talking about him and her father and the Russia that might have been if people like them had prevailed. Just before I left, she told me a story.

"A descendant of the Decembrists [reformer aristocrats who rebelled against the Tsar in the 1820s] sees a crowd demonstrating in the street and she sends her daughter outside: 'Masha! Go and see what's going on.'

"Masha returns and says, 'Lots of people are out on the street.'

"'What do they want?'

"'They're demanding that no one should be rich.'

"'That's strange,' says the woman. 'My grandfather went out onto the street and demanded that no one should be poor.'"

The artist in Victor Serge would have liked this parable, I think. And the idealist in him would have liked its hint of the path not taken, of a revolution leading to a better society and not to one drenched in blood. He would have been in the grandfather's crowd and not the later one. In this book you will find a man who saw both types of crowds—humans at their best and at their worst—and who left us a record of the world he knew in a voice of rare integrity.

One last visit, this one in April 2002, Cuernavaca, Mexico. Outside the open door bursts of lush green vegetation climb everywhere; sunlight reflects dazzlingly from whitewashed walls. Inside, this one-room building seems almost the size of a small gymnasium. The ceiling is dotted with more than a dozen skylights. Oil paintings lean against the walls; a table is piled high with black-and-white prints; and to one side is a large, old-fashioned, iron printmaking machine, with a big wheel that must be turned slowly by hand. At the far end of