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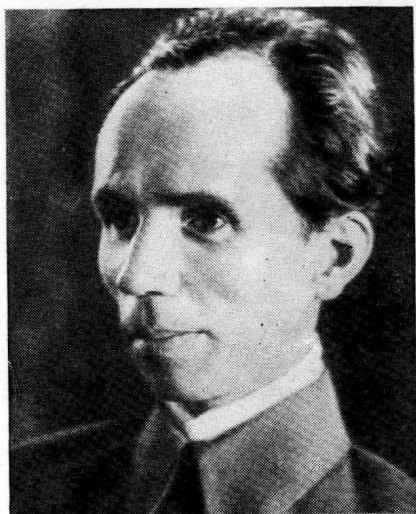
# THE HEROIC LIFE OF NIKOLAI OSTROVSKY



*Man's dearest possession is life. It is given to him but once, and he must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying, he might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world—the fight for the Liberation of Mankind.*

Nikolai Ostrovsky

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М. Гумювски

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S . T R

HEROIC LIFE

NIKOLAI  
OSTROVSKY

(“HOW THE STEEL WAS TEMPERED”)

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СЕМЁН ТРЕГУБ  
ЖИЗНЬ И ПОДВИГ НИКОЛАЯ ОСТРОВСКОГО

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Among the names that form the pride and glory of Soviet literature no small place belongs to that of Nikolai Ostrovsky, author of *How the Steel Was Tempered* and of the unfinished novel *Born of the Storm*.

Ostrovsky was born on September 29, 1904, in the village of Vilia, in the Ukraine. He died December 22, 1936, in Moscow. Only thirty-two years of life; and of that brief span he was desperately ill all the last twelve, and blind, too, for the last eight. It was in his last, most difficult, six years that his books were written.

This period brought out more strongly than ever Ostrovsky's inherent traits of character: his tremendous self-discipline, his power of will, breaking down all obstacles that might block the way to the aim he had set himself. The greater the difficulties that confronted him, the more persistent his struggle, his advance.

He was tempered steel—not to be shattered like glass by the great hammer of fate.

Nikolai Ostrovsky's life story forms the best commentary to his works; and his works are the best summation of his life.





## CHILDHOOD—ADOLESCENCE—YOUTH

Poverty shadowed Ostrovsky's life from childhood. His father, Alexei Ivanovich Ostrovsky, working as a maltster at a distillery, never earned enough to support the family. The staff of the household was the mother, Olga Osipovna Ostrovskaya, who washed and sewed and cooked for the "gentlefolk" to keep her four children fed and clothed.

Nor were the Ostrovskys any exception. There were five hundred peasant families in Vilia, and most of them, pinch and scrape as they might, had always eaten the last remnants of their harvest by the New Year.

Around the village lay huge estates, the properties of Counts Mogelnicki and Chaplinski and of the Court physician Reyn. From dawn to dark, the peasant youth toiled in the fields. And their fathers, when times grew hard past bearing, would set out in search of work in other parts, often far from home.

Small wonder, then, that in the blaze of 1905 the landed estates at Vilia were swept by fire—and its red glow suffused the sky of Nikolai Ostrovsky's infancy.

In 1913, at the age of nine, Nikolai completed the Vilia parish school. That, for the time, was the end of his

schooling. The family had no means; and in any case, what education could a child of his lowly station expect?

In 1915, at the height of the First World War, the Ostrovskys moved from Vilia to the town of Shepetovka—a big railway junction, intersection of the Warsaw and the Kiev lines. At that period Shepetovka was not far behind the front. It was here that life's "universities" really began for Nikolai.

The novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* begins with a description of Pavel Korchagin's expulsion from school on the insistence of the Scriptures teacher, Father Vasily. This happened to Nikolai Ostrovsky in Shepetovka, where his mother had hoped to give him another year or two at school. Soon afterwards he was put to work as a kitchen boy at the railway station restaurant.

As time passed, Nikolai was weighed down more and more by "life's leaden abominations". He saw life from its ugly under side, "as, from a basement window, one sees the dirty boots of the passing people".

His only source of inspiration lay in books. He was a voracious reader, seeking in the printed page not only consolation, but answers to the problems that tormented him. *Giuseppe Garibaldi*, *The Gadfly*, *Taras Bulba*, *Spartacus*, *Shevchenko's Minstrel*, *Stepnyak-Kravchinsky's Andrei Kozhukhov*—such were some of his best and truest friends. "He wanted to be brave and strong, like those of whom he had read in books," he was later to write of sixteen-year-old Pavel Korchagin. How true that was of his own self!

Many years later, asked how he had come to be a writer, Ostrovsky said of this period:

"I was often dissatisfied with the characters in the stories and novels that came my way, and—reading aloud to my mother—I would unconsciously begin to



*The house in which Nikolai Ostrovsky was born*

improvise, reading not what was printed on the page before me, but what I should have liked to be printed there. Carried away by my fancies, I would soon get into a tangle of contradictions, and then Mother would catch me and accuse me of lying. I would be hurt and ashamed."

Of one such occasion he said:

"I remember once, when I was twelve.... I brought home a book I'd gone to no little trouble to get.... One of the characters, I remember clearly, was an arrogant Count who amused himself by tormenting his servant, for lack of anything better to occupy his time. He did every nasty trick he could think of—flipped the man on the nose, or suddenly shouted at him until his knees shook with terror. I sat reading all this stuff to Mother, well, and I couldn't stand it any more. And when the

Count flipped the servant's nose so hard that he dropped the tray he was carrying, instead of letting the man smile humbly and withdraw, as the author had written it, I flared up and continued the story as I would have liked it. True, the author's elegant style disappeared, and the story went on in a different sort of lingo: 'And then the servant swung around on that Count, and didn't he just punch him in the snout! And again, and again, till the Count saw stars!'

"'Hold on, hold on,' Mother cried. 'Who ever heard of such a thing—hitting a Count!'

"The blood rushed to my face.

"'Serves him good and right, the dirty so-and-so!' I said. 'It'll teach him how to treat a working man.'

"But Mother insisted:

"'Who ever heard of such a thing? I don't believe it! Show me that book—there's no such words in it, I'm sure!'

"Furiously, I hurled the book to the floor and cried:

"'Well, and so much the worse! I'd smash all his ribs for him, if it was me!'

"... And that, perhaps, may be regarded as the inglorious beginning of my literary career."

The boy Ostrovsky could not passively reconcile himself to the injustice reigning in the world around him. He protested; and his outspokenness made him enemies. Eventually, one of the waiters at the restaurant, picking on some trifling fault, beat him up cruelly; and the restaurant keeper discharged him.

Came 1917, and the February Revolution.

Reading the posters with which the town was plastered before the elections to the Constituent Assembly, Nikolai one day made the acquaintance of a Bolshevik supporter, the worker Linnik, whom he was later to portray

in the novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* as the joiner Dolinnik.

After the Great October Socialist Revolution, when Soviet power was established in Shepetovka, Nikolai went to Linnik—now Chairman of the local Revolutionary Committee—to offer his services. The thin, shock-headed youngster was so eager that he could not be denied.

"I couldn't turn him down," Linnik recalls. "We used him simply as a message boy, at first, but later he became a special messenger for the Revolutionary Committee."

Those were not easy times. They were times of mortal struggle, at the front and in the rear, against intervention and counter-revolution, to uphold the victory of the Revolution.

When the Shepetovka Revolutionary Committee had to go underground, Nikolai Ostrovsky reconnoitred for it, plastered up leaflets, and undertook the dangerous tasks of a special messenger. At this time he was working at the electric power station, and also studying at an advanced elementary school.

To his teacher at this school he confessed one day that he would like to be a writer, but did not know how to go about it. He wrote often for the manuscript magazine, *Blossoms of Youth*, that the pupils at the school put out—verse, stories, fairy-tales. He acted, too, in the school plays, preferring always the boldest, most heroic parts.

His interests were many and varied. But above all else in his young heart reigned the fervent urge to aid the Revolution.

Walking down the street, one day, Nikolai saw Fyodor Peredreichuk, a member of the underground Revolution-

ary Committee, under guard of an armed Petlyura gendarme. Peredreichuk, a former sailor, worked at the railway depot, and Nikolai knew him well. Decision came instantly. Nikolai threw himself on the guard, and during the struggle that followed Peredreichuk was able to escape. The boy was arrested and immediately brought up for questioning. He was beaten mercilessly, but all attempts to get information from him about the underground were vain. He did not say a word. In the end, he managed to escape.

In the spring of 1919, Soviet power was firmly established in Shepetovka. A few months later, on July 20, 1919, Nikolai Ostrovsky and his friend Sergei Bruzzhak joined the Young Communist League. The League, in those days, attracted only the most courageous of the youth. Those were times when, as Ostrovsky was later to put it, together with your membership card you were handed a rifle and two hundred cartridges. Throughout the Ukraine, the League numbered only eight thousand members. The Shepetovka unit had five members, and one of the five was Nikolai Ostrovsky.

On August 9, 1919, not quite three weeks after joining the League, Nikolai went to the front as a volunteer. He fought at first in Kotovsky's brigade, and later in the First Cavalry Army.

In the cavalry, he was immediately assigned to a scouting party. A few days later he was wounded in battle, in the district of Voznesensk. He lay almost a month in hospital, and finally left before his wound was properly healed, because he was afraid of losing track of his unit.

In 1920, Nikolai fought in the campaign against the Polish Whiteguards. For a time he was one of the Red Army guard protecting a propaganda train. Later, he

fought in the ranks of the Fourth Cavalry Division. He repeatedly distinguished himself in battle and was commended in regimental Orders of the day.

On August 19, 1920, in the vicinity of Lvov, he was again wounded, this time seriously: in the head and abdomen.

"It happened on August 19," we read in *How the Steel Was Tempered*, "during a battle in the Lvov area. Pavel had lost his cap in the fighting and had reined in his horse. The squadrons ahead had already cut into the Polish positions. At that moment Demidov came galloping through the bushes on his way down to the river. As he flew past Pavel he shouted:

" 'The Division Commander's been killed!'

"Pavel started. Letunov, his heroic commander, that man of sterling courage, dead! A savage fury seized Pavel.

"With the blunt edge of his sabre he urged on his exhausted Gnedko, whose bit dripped with a bloody foam, and tore into the thick of the battle.

" 'Kill the vermin, kill 'em! Cut down the Polish *szlachta*! They've killed Letunov!' And blindly he slashed at a figure in a green uniform. Enraged at the death of their Division Commander, the cavalrymen wiped out a whole platoon of Polish legionaries.

"They galloped headlong over the battle-field in pursuit of the enemy, but now a Polish battery went into action. Shrapnel rent the air, spattering death on all sides.

"Suddenly there was a blinding green flash before Pavel's eyes, thunder smote his ears and red-hot iron seared into his skull. The earth spun strangely and horribly about him and began to turn slowly upside down.



"Pavel was thrown from the saddle like a straw. He flew right over Gnedko's head and fell heavily to the ground.

"Instantly black night descended."

This episode in the story of Pavel Korchagin is a description of what actually happened, on that date, to Nikolai Ostrovsky.

The entry in the hospital register reads:

"Red Army man N. Ostrovsky. Admitted August 22, 1920."

This time he was two months in hospital. For many days he tossed in delirium. The doctors thought him beyond hope. But he was young and strong, and his wounds finally healed. Only—a shell splinter had injured the optic nerve, and when he left the hospital his right eye retained only four-tenths of normal vision.

The Army was now out of the question. But Ostrovsky found his place in the Cheka, in the fight against banditism.

The Civil War over, he threw himself with the same selfless fervour, with the same heroic devotion, into the struggle on the peaceful labour front, fighting to overcome the country's economic dislocation.

The whole land rang to Lenin's words at the Third Congress of the Young Communist League: "The ground has been cleared, and on this ground the young communist generation must build a communist society."

In 1921, Ostrovsky was directed by the Kiev Gubernia Committee of the League to the central repair shops of the South-Western Railway. The young people at the shops instantly recognised the new assistant electrician as a leader, and he was soon made secretary of the League unit at the shops.