VLADIMIR YERMILOV

A.P. CHEKHOV

SOVIET LITERARY CRITICISM

Vladimir Yermilov

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Anton Pavlovich CHEKHOV

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В. ЕРМИЛОВ

А. П. ЧЕХОВ

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"THERE WAS NO CHILDHOOD IN MY CHILDHOOD"

Anyone who reflects upon the destiny of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, shop-boy behind the counter of his father's country-town grocery, schoolboy coach from an impoverished middle-class family, medical student, purveyor of entertaining stories to run-of-the-mill comic papers, and later writer of world fame, will be struck first and foremost by the salient feature of this destiny—the overwhelming nature of the obstacles unfavourable to the growth of talent. An unflagging concentration of inner forces, an indomitable will for the creative struggle were required. Life seemed to be subjecting Chekhov to perpetual ordeals, as if to prove his title to genius. His path was beset with snares cunning enough to trap many a gifted but weaker man, such as his elder brothers, the writer Alexander and the artist Nikolai, both generously endowed with talent, but unable to understand that talent is of little or no avail without an unremitting struggle to keep it alive, without meticulous, painstaking toil, and without a great number of other essentials.

Chekhov paid for all he attained with his health, with incessant arduous labour, with loneliness, and with efforts at self-improvement which never let up for a single moment, and demanded all his spiritual powers.

The story of his life and work—and for him, life was work—is a story of talent and will-power overcoming tremendous obstacles.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born on the 17th of January, 1860,* in Taganrog.

The Chekhov family was richly endowed with natural gifts. The crystal spring of talent bubbled up in almost every member of it.

The grandfather of Anton Pavlovich, Yegor Mikhailovich Chekhov, was a peasant from the Voronezh Province, one of the serfs of the landed proprietor Chertkov, father of the well-known disciple of Tolstoi. Yegor Mikhailovich was blessed with perseverance, organizational and administrative ability, and a clear brain. But he was harsh and tyrannical, and subject to frequent fits of unreasonable rage.

He had one aim in life, a dream towards the realization of which he pressed steadily forward, stinting himself in every way. This dream was of freedom for himself and his children. And it came true. Yegor Mikhailovich bought the liberty of himself, his wife, and their three sons from his owner at the price of three and a half thousand rubles—a large sum for those days. There was not enough money to buy off his daughter, but the proprietor graciously set her also at liberty. As soon as he had purchased his freedom, Yegor Mikhailovich secured the post of bailiff on the Don estates of Count Platov, son of the hero of 1812, the famous Ataman Platov.

Though he had experienced the horrors of slavery in his own person, Yegor Mikhailovich by no means renounced the principle of slavery and oppression for others.

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* All dates are given according to the Julian calendar (Old Style).

Anton Pavlovich remembered that his grandfather had been "a rabid advocate of serfdom."

The ferocious temper of Yegor Mikhailovich was not incompatible with a certain eccentricity and playful imaginativeness, showing themselves every now and then between the lines in his correspondence. "My dear, gentle Pavel Yegorovich," he wrote to his son, the father of the future writer, though Pavel Yegorovich, far from displaying the slightest gentleness, actually surpassed his father in unbridled tyranny. Perhaps Yegor Mikhailovich sensed in his son something hidden from others—a latent, unobtrusive dreaminess. However that may be, the children of Pavel Yegorovich must surely have found the word "gentle," as applied to their father, somewhat strange. They were only too familiar with the "gentleness" of their father! In a letter to his brother Alexander (1889), in which he reproached the latter for despotism and irritability in his dealings with his wife and children, Anton Pavlovich wrote:

"I would ask you to remember that tyranny and lies wrecked your mother's youth. Tyranny and lies distorted our childhood to an extent hard to remember without nausea and horror. Remember the horror and disgust we used to feel when Father made a row at the dinner-table because the soup was oversalted, or called Mother a fool....

"Tyranny is a triply-accursed crime...."

Tyranny played a fatal part in the lives of several generations of Chekhovs. In three generations of the Chekhov family—Yegor Mikhailovich, his son Pavel Yegorovich and, finally, his grandson Alexander Pavlovich—we meet with the quality of arbitrariness and the unbridled, merciless imposition of their own will.

At the same time these three generations were notable for that imaginativeness which goes with artistic tendencies.

The writer's father, Pavel Yegorovich Chekhov, styled himself a "merchant" by profession, but in his soul he was an artist.

His life as shop assistant to the eminent merchant Kobilin, who was also the mayor of Taganrog, differed little from that of the shop assistants described in the plays of Ostrovsky, and later by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov himself, in his story *Three Years*. From dawn to dark he had to ingratiate himself with all and sundry, to cringe and smile, to submit with a good grace to blows and cuffs. The yoke had to be borne for the meagre savings it was possible to scrape up.

Like his father before him, Pavel Yegorovich had an aim in life—to extricate himself from the state of servility and win through to independence. He dreamed of becoming the owner of a shop With characteristic grandeur, however, it was not of a shop, but of a "commercial enterprise," that Pavel Yegorovich dreamed. And thanks to his extraordinary perseverance, he attained the fulfilment of his dream. In 1857 he opened a grocery shop, with a side-line in haberdashery.

But Pavel Yegorovich was not so single-minded as Yegor Mikhailovich, who had allowed nothing to stand in the way of his intentions. Pavel Yegorovich was impeded by his soul of an artist.

His gifts were diverse. He taught himself to play the violin. Anton Chekhov's love for music was handed down to him from his father. Pavel Yegorovich had artistic as well as musical leanings ; he painted in oils and went in for icon-painting. Of himself, his brothers, and his sister, Anton Pavlovich said: "We get our talent from our father, and our soul from our mother."

Pavel Yegorovich longed for musical grace, harmonious order, artistic beauty in daily life, but his lack of education prevented him from expending his talents and energies on anything but eccentricity. His chief obsession

was the church choir he had created, which took up much of his time, to the detriment of his business. By means of dogged perseverance he made his choir the best in the town. He selected his singers from among the blacksmiths, and the alto and treble voices were supplied by his own sons. It was this choir, and not his business, which constituted the real interest of his life.

For his sons the choir was a curse. In an article called "Anton Pavlovich Chekhov as Choir-Boy," Chekhov's brother Alexander writes:

"Poor Anton, a growing lad, with an undeveloped chest, a poor ear for music, and a weak voice, had a bad time. Many tears were shed during choir rehearsals, and much healthy childish sleep was lost owing to these rehearsals, which went on till late at night. In everything regarding the church services Pavel Yegorovich was punctual, strict and exacting. If a morning service was to be held on some great holiday he would wake his children at two or three o'clock and drag them to church in all weathers.

"... Pavel Yegorovich was profoundly convinced that, in compelling his children to sing in the choir, he was performing a good and pious act, and would bow to no arguments or persuasions."

All their lives the Chekhov brothers detested a religious education, with its sanctimonious, hypocritical, slavish spirit. Anton Pavlovich said that any religious education reminded him of a screen, which showed sweetly-smiling childish countenances on the outside, but behind which went on torture and martyrdom.

"I was bred up in religion myself," he wrote, "and received a religious education with its singing in the choir, its readings from the Apostles, and the psalms in church, regular attendance at services, the compulsion to assist at the altar and ring the bells. And what is the result? I remember my childhood as a pretty gloomy

affair, and I am not a bit religious now. When my two brothers and I sang the trio: 'Hear my prayer,' standing up in the church, while everyone looked at us with emotion and envied our parents, we felt like little convicts doing hard labour all the time."

And so the aspirations of Pavel Yegorovich towards beauty and grace were transformed into the very opposite of beauty or grace, and became the essence of torture.

In the same way Pavel Yegorovich's love of discipline and of harmonious order was crudely distorted and became a source of anguish to his children. Here are a few details which are characteristic of his "educational system." We are looking somewhat ahead, towards the Moscow life of the Chekhov family, which followed on the Taganrog period. Completely ruined, Pavel Yegorovich fled secretly from his creditors in Taganrog to Moscow, where the Chekhov family dragged out a famished existence in a wretched tenement in what was then an obscure Moscow district, mainly inhabited by prostitutes —Drachevka Street, off Trubnaya Square. The eldest son Alexander attended the physics and mathematics faculty of the University, and lived apart from the rest of the family; Anton remained to finish his studies at the Taganrog high school. In Moscow, too, Pavel Yegorovich insisted on the Taganrog routine, pinning up on the wall a schedule, solemnly entitled:

"Schedule of work and domestic duties for the needs of the household of the family of Pavel Chekhov, residing in Moscow.

"Nikolai Chekhov, 20 years old. To rise between five and seven, according to his own discretion and inner compulsion.

"Ivan Chekhov, 17 years old. To see to household affairs according to this schedule.

Mikhail Chekhov, 11½ } Regular attendance at 7 o'clock
Marya Chekhova, 14 } vespers, early mass 6:30, late mass 9:30 on holidays

"Confirmed by head of family for fulfilment according to schedule

"Head of family

"Pavel Chekhov.

"Any member of family failing to carry out these instructions, to receive, for first such offence, reproof, during which it is forbidden to cry."

This "schedule" was of a semi-facetious nature. When, however, the seventeen-year-old Ivan failed to take his part in "household affairs" Pavel Yegorovich "reproved" him, beating him so savagely in the yard that Ivan could not help bawling. The neighbours came running out to see what the matter was, and the proprietor of the house threatened to evict the family if there should be a repetition of such scenes.

If this was the way Pavel Yegorovich brought up his sons when they were almost grown-up, it is not hard to imagine the sort of treatment they received in childhood. Alexander Pavlovich relates that the first question put by his brother Anton to a friend he made at school was: "Do they often whip you?" On receiving the reply: "I am never whipped," Anton was amazed.

Of all the impressions branded on the soul of Anton Pavlovich in childhood, that of being whipped was the most humiliating. The memory of these whippings was never erased from his consciousness. He once said to V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, the famous theatre-manager: "You know, I have never been able to forgive my father for whipping me." The paternal castigations were first and foremost wounds inflicted on the boy's soul, his dignity as a human being.

When Chekhov said: "There was no childhood in my childhood," he implied much. In the first place there was nothing very suitable to a child in the very routine of his childhood—a routine closely approaching hard labour. Pavel Yegorovich's shop was open from five in the morning till eleven at night, and the only paid assistant was a shop-boy. Pavel Yegorovich not infrequently imposed the entire care of the shop on his sons. Their day was divided between the shop, the school, the shop again, endless choir rehearsals, and equally endless prayers in church and at home. In addition to all this, the children were set to learn crafts—Anton that of a tailor. There was, too, any amount of "household" work. From his earliest years the little Anton had to learn to keep accounts and, above all, to acquire skill in trading, which included both respectful behaviour to customers and the ability to give "short measure, short weight, and bring off all sorts of petty swindle," as Alexander Pavlovich wrote in his memoirs.

Humiliating corporal punishment, a strenuous routine of toil, perpetual lack of sleep—such was Chekhov's childhood, very different from the blissful childhood whose poetry rises before us from the pages of the novels of Lev Tolstoi, Aksakov, Alexei Tolstoi (*Nikita's Childhood*), and other writers from the ranks of the aristocracy. "I received so little kindness in my childhood," Chekhov wrote to the writer Tikhonov, to thank him for his cordial criticism of the play *Ivanov*, "that I still accept kindness as something unusual, something of which I have had little experience heretofore!"

It would, however, be wrong to describe the life of the Chekhov family as one of unrelieved gloom. The softening influence of Yevgenya Yakovlevna, the mother, must not be forgotten, nor must it be forgotten that the influence of Pavel Yegorovich on his children was far from being exclusively unfavourable. After all, he did try to

implant in his children from their earliest years habits of hard work, a sense of duty, responsibility, discipline. Admittedly, his methods of inculcating these qualities in the souls of his children were such as might have inspired them with disgust for any discipline whatever. And this was to a certain extent true in the cases of the elder sons, Alexander and Nikolai. Anton Pavlovich, however, succeeded in extracting the useful from the harmful in the paternal discipline. His attitude to his father, despite so many sad and gloomy passages, was one of respect and affection.

Pavel Yegorovich aspired to make his children truly educated persons. He felt that if he had himself received an education he could have done something of use, something important for humanity. And he wanted his children to be more successful than he had been. He sent them all to high school, employed a music teacher for them, had them taught languages at an early age. The elder sons spoke French fluently while still in their teens.

And yet all that there was of good both in the nature of Yegor Pavlovich and his attitude to his children, was marred by middle-class vulgarity, eccentricity, tyrannical ways, and distorted by the hardships of life.

The eccentricities of their near relatives—their father and their uncle Mitrofan Yegorovich—were not lost on the young Chekhovs. A habit of observation, a keen sense of the ridiculous, a profound instinct for what was false or affected, characterized the little Anton and his older brothers. Their consistent ridicule of eccentricity constituted what may be called instinctive talent, as yet undeveloped, unconscious, but already nervously apprehensive of the dangers threatening it.

It is noteworthy that the first published story by Anton Chekhov known to us—*Letter from a Don Landowner* (1880)—is a parody of the epistolary style of his grandfather Yegor Mikhailovich and his uncle Mitrofan Yegoro-

vich. These letters are distinguished by a combination of bombast and illiteracy, the endeavour to invest the commonest things and everyday events with a pompous dignity. The hero of *Letter from a Don Landowner*, a sombre individual of the Prishibeyev* type, with absurd pretensions to learning, has very little in common with Mitrofan Yegorovich, who was not in the least like Prishibeyev. Anton Pavlovich regarded his uncle as a "kindly soul, a man with a good, pure, cheerful disposition." And yet Chekhov saw fit to parody the style and tone of his letters.

By making their uncle's failings the target of their sarcasm, Alexander and Anton at the same time took aim at those of their father.

One of the ways by which the young Chekhov brothers endeavoured to fight their principal foe—middle-class vulgarity—was ridiculing the eccentricities of their father and their uncle. It was precisely vulgarity which distorted and marred all that was good and pure in their father and uncle. In the solemn adornment and elevation of everyday life, the attempt to cloak ugly, pitiful reality revolving around the kopek, may be seen the outlook and aesthetic standards of vulgarity. (In a letter written in 1888, Anton Pavlovich bitterly remarks: "The fact that I was born, brought up, had my schooling, and began writing in an atmosphere in which money played a disgracefully important role, has injured me terribly.") It is precisely vulgarity which underlies the endeavour to adorn pitiful reality and thus to be reconciled with it.

From his childhood Chekhov detested lies in all their aspects—not for nothing, in the letter to Alexander already quoted, did he specify two foes—tyranny and lies. He felt the falsity of the choir-singing when everyone

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* Prishibeyev—a character in Chekhov's *Sergeant Prishibeyev.—Ed.*