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LEON TROTSKY

MY LIFE

An Attempt at an Autobiography

1930

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FOREWORD

OUR times again are rich in memoirs, perhaps richer than ever before. It is because there is much to tell. The more dramatic and rich in change the epoch, the more intense the interest in current history. The art of landscape-painting could never have been born in the Sahara. The "crossing" of two epochs, as at present, gives rise to a desire to look back at yesterday, already far away, through the eyes of its active participants. That is the reason for the enormous growth in the literature of reminiscence since the days of the last war. Perhaps it will justify the present volume as well.

The very fact of its coming into the world is due to the pause in the author's active political life. One of the unforeseen, though not accidental, stops in my life has proved to be Constantinople. Here I am camping—but not for the first time—and patiently waiting for what is to follow. The life of a revolutionary would be quite impossible without a certain amount of "fatalism." In one way or another, the Constantinople interval has proved the most appropriate moment for me to look back before circumstances allow me to move forward.

At first I wrote cursory autobiographical sketches for the newspapers, and thought I would let it go at that. And here I would like to say that, from my refuge, I was unable to watch the form in which those sketches reached the public. But every work has its own logic. I did not get into my stride until I had nearly finished those articles. Then I decided to write a book. I applied a different and infinitely broader scale, and carried out the whole work anew. The only point in common between the original newspaper articles and this book is that both discuss the same subject. In everything else they are two different products.

I have dealt in especial detail with the second period of the Soviet revolution, the beginning of which coincided with Lenin's illness and the opening of the campaign against "Trotskyism." The struggle of the epigones for power, as I shall try to prove, was not merely a struggle of personalities; it represented a new political chapter—the reaction against October, and the preparation of the Thermidor. From this the answer to the question

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that I have so often been asked—"How did you lose power?"—follows naturally.

An autobiography of a revolutionary politician must inevitably touch on a whole series of theoretical questions connected with the social development of Russia, and in part with humanity as a whole, but especially with those critical periods that are called revolutions. Of course I have not been able in these pages to examine complicated theoretical problems critically in their essence. The so-called theory of permanent revolution, which played so large a rôle in my personal life, and, what is more important, is acquiring such poignant reality in the countries of the East, runs through this book as a remote leit-motif. If this does not satisfy the reader, I can say that the consideration of the problem of revolution in its essence will constitute a separate book, in which I shall attempt to give form to the principal theoretical conclusions of the experiences of the last decades.

As many people pass through the pages of my book, portrayed not always in the light that they would have chosen for themselves or for their parties, many of them will find my account lacking the necessary detachment. Even extracts that have been published in the newspapers have elicited certain denials. That is inevitable. One has no doubt that even if I had succeeded in making my autobiography a mere daguerreotype of my life—which I never intended it to be—it would nevertheless have called forth echoes of the discussion started at the time by the collisions described in the book. This book is not a dispassionate photograph of my life, however, but a component part of it. In these pages, I continue the struggle to which my whole life is devoted. Describing, I also characterize and evaluate; narrating, I also defend myself, and more often attack. It seems to me that this is the only method of making an autobiography objective in a higher sense, that is, of making it the most adequate expression of personality, conditions, and epoch.

Objectivity is not the pretended indifference with which confirmed hypocrisy, in speaking of friends and enemies, suggests indirectly to the reader what it finds inconvenient to state directly. Objectivity of this sort is nothing but a conventional trick. I do not need it. Since I have submitted to the necessity of writing about myself—nobody has as yet succeeded in writing an autobiography without writing about himself—I can have

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no reason to hide my sympathies or antipathies, my loves or my hates.

This is a book of polemics. It reflects the dynamics of that social life which is built entirely on contradictions. The impertinence of the schoolboy toward his master; the pin-pricks of envy in the drawing-room, veiled by courtesies; the constant competition of commerce; the frenzied rivalry in all branches of pure and applied science, of art, and sport; the parliamentary clashes that reveal the deep opposition of interests; the furious struggle that goes on every day in the newspapers; the strikes of the workers; the shooting down of participants in demonstrations; the packages of explosives that civilized neighbors send each other through the air; the fiery tongues of civil war, almost never extinguished on our planet—all these are the forms of social "polemics," ranging from those that are usual, constant and normal, almost unnoticed despite their intensity, to those of war and revolution that are extraordinary, explosive and volcanic. Such is our epoch. We have all grown up with it. We breathe it and live by it. How can we help being polemical if we want to be true to our period in the mode of the day?

But there is another and more elementary criterion, one that relates to plain conscientiousness in stating facts. Just as the most bitter revolutionary struggle must take account of time and place, the most polemical work must observe the proportions that exist between objects and men. I hope that I have observed this demand not only in its entirety, but also in its particulars.

In certain cases—although these are not very numerous—I relate long-ago conversations in dialogue form. No one will demand a verbatim report of conversations repeated many years after. Nor do I claim such accuracy. Some of these dialogues have rather a symbolic character. Every one, however, has had moments in his life when some particular conversation has impressed itself indelibly on his memory. One usually repeats that sort of conversation to one's personal or political friends; thanks to this, they become fixed in one's memory. I am thinking primarily, of course, of all conversations of a political nature.

I may state here that I am accustomed to trust to my memory. Its testimony has been subjected to verification by fact more than once, and it has stood the test perfectly. But a reservation is

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necessary. If my topographic memory, not to mention my musical one, is very weak, and my visual memory and my linguistic memory fairly mediocre, still my memory of ideas is considerably above the average. And, moreover, in this book ideas, their evolution, and the struggle of men for these ideas, have the most important place.

It is true that memory is not an automatic reckoner. Above all, it is never disinterested. Not infrequently it expels or drives into a dark corner episodes not convenient to the vital instinct that controls it—usually ambition. But this is a matter for “psychoanalytic” criticism, which is sometimes very ingenious and instructive, but more often capricious and arbitrary.

Needless to say, I have persistently checked my memory by documentary evidence. Difficult as the conditions of my work have been, in the business of making inquiries in libraries or searching out archives I have been able to verify all the more important facts and dates that were needed.

Beginning with 1897, I have waged the fight chiefly with a pen in my hand. Thus the events of my life have left an almost uninterrupted trail in print over a period of thirty-two years. The factional struggle in the party, which began in 1903, has been rich in personal episodes. My opponents, like myself, have not withheld blows. All of them have left their scars in print. Since the October revolution, the history of the revolutionary movement has held an important place in the research work of young Soviet scholars and of entire institutions. Everything of interest is sought out in the archives of the revolution and of the Czarist police department and published with detailed factual commentaries. In the first years, when there was as yet no need of disguising anything, this work was carried on most conscientiously. The “works” of Lenin and some of mine were issued by the State Publishing House, with notes that took up dozens of pages in each volume and contained invaluable factual material concerning both the activities of the authors and the events of the corresponding period. All this of course facilitated my work, helping me to fix the correct chronological pattern and to avoid errors of fact, at least the most serious ones.

I cannot deny that my life has not followed quite the ordinary course. The reasons for that are inherent in the conditions of the

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time, rather than in me. Of course certain personal traits were also necessary for the work, good or bad, that I performed. But under other historical conditions, these personal peculiarities might have remained completely dormant, as is true of so many propensities and passions on which the social environment makes no demands. On the other hand, other qualities to-day crowded out or suppressed might have come to the fore. Above the subjective there rises the objective, and in the final reckoning it is the objective that decides.

My intellectual and active life, which began when I was about seventeen or eighteen years old, has been one of constant struggle for definite ideas. In my personal life there were no events deserving public attention in themselves. All the more or less unusual episodes in my life are bound up with the revolutionary struggle, and derive their significance from it. This alone justifies the appearance of my autobiography. But from this same source flow many difficulties for the author. The facts of my personal life have proved to be so closely interwoven with the texture of historical events that it has been difficult to separate them. This book, moreover, is not altogether an historical work. Events are treated here not according to their objective significance, but according to the way in which they are connected with the facts of my personal life. It is quite natural, then, that the accounts of specific events and of entire periods lack the proportion that would be demanded of them if this book were an historical work. I had to grope for the dividing line between autobiography and the history of the revolution. Without allowing the story of my life to become lost in an historical treatise, it was necessary at the same time to give the reader a base of the facts of the social development. In doing this, I assumed that the main outlines of the great events were known to him, and that all his memory needed was a brief reminder of historical facts and their sequence.

By the time this book is published, I shall have reached my fiftieth birthday. The date coincides with that of the October revolution. Mystics and Pythagoreans may draw from this whatever conclusions they like. I myself noticed this odd coincidence only three years after the October uprising. Until I was nine years old I lived in a remote little village. For eight years I

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studied at school. I was arrested for the first time a year after I left school. For universities, like many others of my time, I had prison, Siberia, and foreign exile. In the Czar's prisons I served four years in two periods. In the Czarist exile I spent about two years the first time, a few weeks the second. I escaped from Siberia twice. As a foreign émigré, I lived for about twelve years altogether in various European countries and in America—two years before the revolution of 1905, and nearly ten years after its defeat. In 1915, during the war, I was sentenced in my absence to imprisonment in Hohenzollern Germany; the next year I was expelled from France and Spain, and after a brief stay in the Madrid prison, and a month in Cadiz under the surveillance of the police, I was deported to America. I was there when the February revolution broke out. On my way from New York I was arrested by the British in March, 1917, and detained for a month in a concentration camp in Canada. I took part in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and I was the chairman of the St. Petersburg Soviet of delegates in 1905, and again in 1917. I took an intimate part in the October revolution, and was a member of the Soviet government. As the People's Commissary for foreign affairs, I conducted peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk with the delegates of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. As People's Commissary for military and naval affairs, I devoted about five years to organizing the Red army and restoring the Red navy. During the year 1920 I added to that the direction of the country's disorganized railway system.

The main content of my life, however, except for the years of the civil war, has been party and literary activity. In 1923 the State Publishing House began the publication of my collected works. It succeeded in bringing out thirteen volumes, not counting the previously published five volumes on military subjects. Publication was discontinued in 1927, when the persecution of "Trotskyism" became especially intense.

In January, 1928, I was sent into exile by the present Soviet government; I spent a year on the Chinese frontier; in February, 1929, I was deported to Turkey, and I am now writing these lines from Constantinople.

Even in this condensed synopsis, the outward course of my life could hardly be called monotonous. On the contrary, counting the number of turns, surprises, sharp conflicts, ups and

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downs, one might say that my life was rather full of "adventures." But I must say that, by natural inclination, I have nothing in common with seekers after adventure. I am rather pedantic and conservative in my habits. I like and appreciate discipline and system. Not to provide a paradox, but because it is a fact, I must add that I cannot endure disorder or destruction. I was always an accurate and diligent schoolboy, and I have preserved these two qualities all my life. In the years of the civil war, when I covered by train a distance equal to several times round the earth, I was greatly pleased to see each new fence constructed of freshly cut pine boards. Lenin, who knew this passion of mine, often twitted me about it in a friendly way. A well-written book in which one can find new ideas, and a good pen with which to communicate one's own ideas to others, for me have always been and are to-day the most valuable and intimate products of culture. The desire for study has never left me, and many times in my life I felt that the revolution was interfering with my systematic work. Yet almost a third of a century of my conscious life was entirely filled with revolutionary struggle. And if I had to live it over again, I would unhesitatingly take the same path.

I am obliged to write these lines as an émigré—for the third time—while my closest friends are filling the places of exile and the prisons of that Soviet republic in whose creating they took so decisive a part. Some of them are vacillating, withdrawing, bowing before the enemy. Some are doing it because they are morally exhausted; others because they can find no other way out of the maze of circumstances; and still others because of the pressure of material reprisals. I had already lived through two instances of such mass desertion of the banner: after the collapse of the revolution of 1905, and at the beginning of the World War. Thus I know well enough, from my own experience, the historical ebb and flow. They are governed by their own laws. Mere impatience will not expedite their change. I have grown accustomed to viewing the historical perspective not from the standpoint of my personal fate. To understand the causal sequence of events and to find somewhere in the sequence one's own place—that is the first duty of a revolutionary. And at the same time, it is the greatest personal satisfaction possible for a man who does not limit his tasks to the present day.

L. TROTSKY.

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CHAPTER I

YANOVKA

CHILDHOOD is looked upon as the happiest time of life. Is that always true? No, only a few have a happy childhood. The idealization of childhood originated in the old literature of the privileged. A secure, affluent, and unclouded childhood, spent in a home of inherited wealth and culture, a childhood of affection and play, brings back to one memories of a sunny meadow at the beginning of the road of life. The grandees of literature, or the plebeians who glorify the grandees, have canonized this purely aristocratic view of childhood. But the majority of the people, if it looks back at all, sees, on the contrary, a childhood of darkness, hunger and dependence. Life strikes the weak—and who is weaker than a child?

My childhood was not one of hunger and cold. My family had already achieved a competence at the time of my birth. But it was the stern competence of people still rising from poverty and having no desire to stop half-way. Every muscle was strained, every thought set on work and savings. Such a domestic routine left but a modest place for the children. We knew no need, but neither did we know the generosities of life—its caresses. My childhood does not appear to me like a sunny meadow, as it does to the small minority; neither does it appear like a dark cave of hunger, violence and misery, as it does to the majority. Mine was the grayish childhood of a lower-middle-class family, spent in a village in an obscure corner where nature is wide, and manners, views and interests are pinched and narrow.

The spiritual atmosphere which surrounded my early years and that in which I passed my later, conscious life are two different worlds, divided not only in time and space by decades and by far countries, but by the mountain chains of great events and by those inner landslides which are less obvious but are

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fully as important to one's individuality. When I first began to draft these memoirs, it often seemed to me as if I were not writing of my own childhood but of a long-past journey into a distant land. I even attempted to write my story in the third person, but this conventional form all too easily smacks of fiction, which is something that I should want to avoid at all costs.

In spite of the contradiction between these two worlds, the unity of the personality passes through hidden channels from one world into the other. This, generally speaking, accounts for the interest that people take in the biographies and autobiographies of those who, for one reason or another, have occupied a somewhat more spacious place in the life of society. I shall therefore try to tell the story of my childhood in some detail,—without anticipating and predetermining the future, that is, without selecting the facts to suit preconceived generalities—simply narrating what occurred as it is preserved in my memory.

At times it has seemed to me that I can remember suckling at my mother's breast; probably I apply to myself only what I have seen in the younger children. I have a dim recollection of a scene under an apple-tree in the garden which took place when I was a year and a half old, but that memory too is doubtful. More securely do I remember another event: I am with my mother in Bobrinetz, visiting the Z. family, where there is a little girl of two or three. I am the bridegroom, the little girl is the bride. The children are playing on the painted floor of the parlor; the little girl fades away; the little boy is standing dazed and petrified beside a chest of drawers. His mother and the hostess come in. His mother looks at the boy, then at the puddle beside him, and then at the boy again, shakes her head reproachfully and says: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" The boy looks at his mother, at himself, and at the puddle, as if it all had nothing whatever to do with him.

"Never mind," the hostess says, "the children have played too long."

The little boy feels neither shame nor repentance. How old was he then? About two years, possibly three.

It was about this time that I ran into a poisonous snake

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while walking in the garden with my nurse. "Look, Lyova!"* she cried, pointing to a bright object in the grass. "Here is a snuff-box buried in the ground!" My nurse took a stick and began to dig it out. She herself was not more than sixteen years old. The snuff-box uncoiled itself, stretched into a snake, and, hissing, began to crawl in the grass. "Ai! Ai!" screamed my nurse, and, catching me by the hand, ran quickly. It was hard for me to move my legs fast enough. Choking with excitement, I told afterward of our finding in the grass a snuff-box which turned into a snake.

I remember another early scene that took place in our main kitchen. Neither my father nor my mother is at home. The cook and the maid and their guests are there. My older brother, Alexander, who is at home for the holidays, is also buzzing about, standing on a wooden shovel, as if on a pair of stilts, and dancing on it across the earthen floor. I beg my brother to let me have the shovel, and try to climb up on it, but I fall down and cry. My brother picks me up, kisses me, and carries me out of the kitchen in his arms.

I must have been about four years old when some one put me on the back of a big gray mare as gentle as a sheep, with neither bridle nor saddle, only a rope halter. I spread my legs wide apart and held on to the mane with both hands. The mare quietly took me to a pear-tree and walked under a branch, which caught me across the middle. Not realizing what the matter was, I slid over the mare's rump, and hit the grass. I was not hurt, only puzzled.

I had almost no ready-made toys in my childhood. Once, however, my mother brought me a cardboard horse and a ball from Kharkoff. My younger sister and I played with dolls which we made ourselves. Once Aunt Fenya and Aunt Raisa, my father's sisters, made some rag dolls for us and Aunt Fenya marked their eyes, noses and mouths with a pencil. The dolls seemed remarkable to me; I can remember them to this day. One winter evening our mechanic, Ivan Vasilyevich, cut

* Trotsky's full and original name was Lev Davydovich Bronstein, his father's name being Davyd Leontiyevich Bronstein. "Lyova" is one of the many similar diminutives of Lev, which literally means "Lion." In English and French usage, Trotsky has become known as Leon, in German as Leo. In ensuing pages the reader will frequently find him referred to as Lev Davydovich, and often in quotations from his wife's journal simply as L. D.—*Translator.*

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a little railway-car with wheels and windows out of cardboard and pasted it together. My older brother, at home for Christmas, instantly announced that he could make a car too, in no time. He began by pulling my car to pieces; then he armed himself with a ruler, pencil and scissors, and drew for a long time. But when he cut out what he had drawn, there was no railway-car.

Our relatives and friends, when going to town, would sometimes ask what I wanted from Elizavetgrad or Nikolayev. My eyes would shine. What should I ask for? They would come to my help. One would suggest a toy horse, another books, another colored crayons, another a pair of skates. "I want half-Halifax skates!" I would cry, having heard this expression from my brother. But they would forget their promises as soon as they had crossed the threshold. I lived in hope for several weeks, and then suffered a long disappointment.

A bee sits on a sunflower in the garden. Because bees sting and must be handled with care, I pick up a burdock leaf and with it seize the bee between two fingers. I am suddenly pierced by an unendurable pain. I run screaming across the yard to the machine-shop, where Ivan Vasilyevich pulls out the sting and smears a healing liquid on my finger.

Ivan Vasilyevich had a jar full of sunflower-oil in which tarantulas were floating. This was considered the best cure for stings. Victor Ghertopanov and I together used to catch these tarantulas. To do this, we would fasten a piece of wax to a thread and drop it into one of their burrows. The tarantula would seize the wax in its claws and stick tight. We then had only to draw it out and catch it in an empty match-box. These tarantula hunts, however, must have belonged to a later period.

I remember a conversation on a long winter evening during which my elders discussed over their tea when it was that Yanovka had been bought, how old such and such a child was at the time, and when Ivan Vasilyevich had come to work for us. My mother speaks, glancing slyly at me: "We brought Lyova here from the farm all ready-made." I try to reason that out for myself, and finally say aloud: "Then I was born on the farm?" "No," they answer me, "you were born here at Yanovka."

"Then why did Mother say that you brought me here ready-made?"

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"Mother was just joking!"

But I am not satisfied, and I think it is a queer joke. I hold my peace, however, for I notice that particular smile that I never can bear on the faces of the older initiates. It is from these recollections exchanged at leisure over our winter tea that a certain chronology emerges: I was born on the 26th of October. My parents must have moved from the little farm to Yanovka either in the spring or summer of 1879.

The year of my birth was the year of the first dynamite assaults against Czarism. The recently formed terrorist party, the "People's Will," had on August 26th, 1879, two months before my appearance in the world, pronounced the death sentence on Alexander II. And on November 19th an attempt was made to dynamite the Czar's train. The ominous struggle which led to the assassination of Alexander II on March 1st, 1881, and at the same time resulted in the annihilation of the "People's Will," was just beginning.

The Russo-Turkish War had ended the year before. In August, 1879, Bismarck laid the foundations of the Austro-Germanic Alliance. In this year Zola brought out his novel, *Nana*, in which the future originator of the Entente, then only the Prince of Wales, was introduced as a refined connoisseur of musical-comedy stars. The wind of reaction which had risen after the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of the Paris Commune was still blowing strongly through the politics of Europe. Social Democracy in Germany had already fallen under Bismarck's discriminatory legislation. In 1879 Victor Hugo and Louis Blanc demanded in the French Chamber of Deputies an amnesty for the Communards.

But neither the echoes of parliamentary debates nor those of diplomatic events, not even those of the explosions of dynamite, could be heard in the village of Yanovka where I first saw the light, and where I spent the first nine years of my life. On the boundless steppes of Kherson and of all South Russia was a kingdom of wheat and sheep, living by laws all its own. It was firmly guarded against the invasion of politics by its great open spaces and the absence of roads. Only the numerous barrows on the steppes remained as landmarks of the great migration of nations.

My father was a farmer, first on a small scale and later on

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a larger one. As a little boy, he had left with his parents the Jewish town in the Province of Poltava, where he had been born, when they went to seek their fortune on the free steppes of the South. There were at that time about forty Jewish agricultural colonies in the provinces of Kherson and Ekaterinoslav, with a total population of about 25,000 souls. The Jewish farmers were on an equal footing with the other peasants not only as regards their legal rights (until 1881), but also as regards their property. By indefatigable, cruel toil that spared neither himself nor others, and by hoarding every penny, my father rose in the world.

The registration book was not kept very accurately in the colony of Gromokley, and many entries were made after the date of the events recorded. When the time came for me to enter high school, it appeared that I was still too young for admission. The year of my birth was then changed in the birth certificate from 1879 to 1878; so I always had two records, my official age and the one observed by my family.

For the first nine years of my life I hardly stuck my nose outside my native village. Its name, Yanovka, came from the name of the landlord Yanovsky, from whom the estate had been bought. The old proprietor, Yanovsky, had risen from the ranks to a Colonelcy, had won the favor of the powers that be in the reign of Alexander II, and had been given the choice of one thousand acres of land on the uninhabited steppes of the province of Kherson. He built himself a mud hut thatched with straw, and equally crude farm-buildings. But his farming did not prosper, and after the Colonel's death his family moved to Poltava. My father bought over two hundred and fifty acres of land from Yanovsky and leased about four hundred more. I remember the Colonel's widow well. She was a dried-up little old woman who came once or twice a year to collect her rent from us and to see that everything was in order. We would send our spring wagon to meet her at the station and bring a chair to the front steps to make it easier for her to alight. The phaeton made its appearance at my father's later, after he had acquired driving stallions. The Colonel's widow would be served chicken bouillon and soft-boiled eggs. Walking with my sister in the garden, she would scratch the resin from the fence-posts with her shrivelled fingers, and assure her that it was the most delicate sweetmeat in the world.

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My father's crops increased, as did the herds of cattle and horses. There was even an attempt to keep Merino sheep, but the venture was unsuccessful; on the other hand there were plenty of pigs. They wandered freely all over the place, rooted everywhere, and completely destroyed the garden. The estate was managed with care, but in an old-fashioned way. One measured profit or loss with the eye. For that very reason, it would have been difficult to fix the extent of father's fortune. All of his substance was always either in the ground, or in the crop above, or in the stocks on hand, which were either in bins or on their way to a port. Sometimes in the midst of tea or supper my father would suddenly exclaim: "Come, write this down! I have received thirteen hundred roubles from the commission merchant. I gave the Colonel's widow six hundred, and four hundred to Dembovsky. Put down, too, that I gave Theodosia Antonovna one hundred roubles when I was in Elizavetgrad last spring." That is about the way he kept his books. Nevertheless, my father slowly but obstinately kept climbing upward.

We lived in the little mud house that the Colonel had built. The straw roof harbored countless sparrows' nests under the eaves. The walls on the outside were seamed with deep cracks which were a breeding-place for adders. Sometimes these adders were mistaken for poisonous snakes, and boiling water from the samovar went into the cracks, but to no avail. The low ceilings leaked during a heavy rain, especially in the hall, and pots and basins would be placed on the dirt floor to catch the water. The rooms were small, the windows dim; the floors in the two bedrooms and the nursery were of clay, and bred fleas. The dining-room boasted a wooden floor which was rubbed once a week with yellow sand. But the floor in the main room, which was solemnly named the parlor, though only about eight paces long, was painted. The Colonel's widow stayed here.

Yellow acacias, red and white roses, and in summer a climbing vine, grew around the house. The courtyard was not fenced in at all. A big mud house with a tile roof, which my father had built, contained the machine-shop, the main kitchen, and the servants' quarters. Next to it stood the "little" wooden barn and beyond that the "big" barn. Beyond that again came