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The Life of Vladimir Korolenko



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Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko was born on July 27, 1852, in the town of Zhitomir, Ukraine. His father was a judge, a man of honesty and integrity. He died when Vladimir was fifteen, leaving his family without any means of subsistence.

"It was partly due to the state stipend, but mostly to the heroic efforts of my mother who, though frail in health, battled valiantly for the future of her children, that I was able to complete my course at the classical school and go on to Petersburg in search of higher education. However, I began my new life in the capital with seventeen rubles in my pocket. I spent two years in a dogged fight against poverty, trying, without much success, to reconcile two tasks, that of getting an education and earning my daily bread. I still cannot understand how I managed to survive the first year in Petersburg without any means whatever. On the second year I took to colouring botanical atlases for children and on the third I found a job of proof-reading which threatened to engulf all of me. But at that time several friends of mine managed to get into Petrovskaya Academy of Agriculture

and Forestry in Moscow, or, rather, near Moscow and wrote to me suggesting that I join them."

Korolenko became enrolled at Petrovskaya (today Timiryazev) Academy, was given a state grant and there seemed to be no reason why he should not complete the course and become a forester in due course. But in 1876, when Korolenko was in his third year, events occurred which entailed a drastic change in his entire life.

Great resentment was rife among the students of the Academy over the collaboration of the Academy's administration with Moscow Department of the Gendarmes (political police). Facts had become known of the administration's assistance in students' arrests and other opprobrious activities. Korolenko penned a protest on behalf of the student body, put his signature first and was chosen to present that protest. This action of the students was classified as "rioting" and reported to Tsar Alexander the Second himself. Korolenko was expelled from the Academy, arrested and banished from Moscow. This was his first public action and the first of the many acts of suppression he was to be the object of.

There followed the harshest period in Korolenko's life. With a short interval of eighteen months, it lasted for nine years, from 1876 to 1885. During this time Korolenko was incarcerated in the prisons of Moscow, Petersburg, Vyatka, Kostroma, Vyshni Volochek, Tobolsk, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, and Yakutsk and lived in exile in the remote village of Beryozovskiye Pochinki in Vyatka Gubernia and in the village of Amga in Yakutia.

The amazing fact was that the tsarist police inflicted all these ordeals on him without bringing any concrete charges against him, just on account of his "subversive tendencies", which were first revealed in his clash with the administration of Petrovskaya Academy. Korolenko's staunchness, his steadfast defence of his own and his comrade's rights galled the powers that be and they went out of their way to victimise the rebellious exile. For instance, Korolenko was transported from Vyatka Gubernia to Siberia for an alleged attempt to escape, which was an invention from beginning to end.

In 1881, after the assassination of Tsar Alexander the Second, Korolenko, like all the other exiles, was required to swear allegiance to the new tsar Alexander the Third. Though all he had to do was put his signature to the text of the oath, an act which was considered to be a pure formality, Korolenko, who would not admit of a compromise with his conscience, refused to sign the oath, declaring: "My conscience forbids me to give the pledge that is demanded of me in its present form." For this refusal Korolenko was sent from the town of Perm in European Russia to the backwoods of Yakutia.

In Beryozovskiye Pochinki Korolenko lived in a peasant hut where the stove had no chimney and where people choked with smoke whenever it was heated. The hut housed not only people but also farm animals belonging to the family. In Amga in Yakutia Korolenko had to do heavy peasant work, ploughing, sowing, mowing, reaping, etc. He baked his own bread, washed his clothes, cooked meals, even made his own footwear. "Life tossed me about in such a whimsical manner," he wrote later, "that I have had a chance to see and, what is most important, to feel, all strata of the Russian people, beginning with half-wild Yakuts and inhabitants of forest wilds in European North where they do not yet know the ordinary cart, and ending with urban workingmen."

In 1885, when Korolenko's term of exile expired, he was nearly 32. He was forbidden to take up residence in the capitals and settled in Nizhni Novgorod.

Here he started on a literary career and soon earned a name for himself. The work that brought him fame was the short story "Makar's Dream". It is a story of a half-Yakut peasant, a drunk, a thief and a cheat. After death he is called up for a judgment, where the good and the evil man did in life is weighed up in a balance. Makar's sins send the big wooden scale down into a pit. The Big *Toyon* as he refers to God in his mind, sentences him to a long period of expiration. But at this point human dignity rears up in the uncomplaining Makar. He begins to defend himself, describing how he was driven all his life: "The village Elders, the foremen, the justices and the *ispravniks* were always after him to pay his taxes and the priests to pay the tithes. Hunger and misery drove him hard; he had suffered from the drought in summer and the bitter frosts in winter; the taiga and the frozen soil yielded him nothing!" Has he ever, Makar goes on, known affection, kindness and joy? And yet he, too, "was born like the others—with bright open eyes, in which heaven and earth were reflected, and with a pure heart which was ready to hearken to all that was beautiful in the world..."

In the end "the scales started to swing, with the wooden scale now rising higher and higher".

This story bespoke Korolenko's love for Man, his ability to glimpse the innermost workings of his heart, his passionate desire to see man straighten up to his full stature and defend his human dignity. "A person has rights and must stand up for them, both for his own and other people's sakes," wrote Korolenko, and this is the key idea of "Makar's Dream". The story was a tremendous success, and not only as a work of literature either. The merchant from Nizhni Novgorod Zarubin had this to say about it to Maxim Gorky: "...I read 'Makar's Dream' and wept, it moved me so! Imagine that one person can be that sorry for another! Everything turned upside down in me from that moment."

The stories about Siberia, "Sokolinets" and "Murderer", and the short novel *In Bad Company*, telling about "down-and-outers", about wretched pauper children, established Korolenko as a first-rate writer. His language aroused particular admiration, the authentic speech of simple folk which he employed in his stories. "What amazing language! I have known nothing like it in the entire Russian literature," Lev Tolstoy said about Korolenko. Chekhov said that "Sokolinets" sounded like "a good musical composition".

The short novel *The Blind Musician* published in 1886 was destined to become Korolenko's best-known work. It was translated in all foreign languages. This story treats the theme of the overcoming of egoism as the necessary condition of human happiness. In the epilogue Korolenko says, speaking of the hero of this novel: "In the place of the old suffering—blind, selfish, not to be allayed—he carries now in his soul a true knowledge of life. He has come to know other people's sorrows, and other people's joys."

Korolenko journeyed a lot over Nizhni-Novgorod region. "I have recently returned from an excursion in Nizhni-Novgorod Gubernia," he wrote after one such trip. "Most of it was done on foot with a sack behind my back. Roads, forests, fields, free winds and impressions galore." On another occasion he informed his friend in a letter that he had "gone down nearly the entire length of the Kerzhenets in a rowing boat. The trip lasted five days, and I spent four nights on the sandy banks with fishermen. There was a thunderstorm on one of the nights, from which I hid under my boat."

These trips gave rise to a series of poetic essays "In Deserted Places" and a number of short stories, of which "The River Plays" is the best known. This is what Maxim Gorky had to say about the image of Tyulin drawn by Korolenko in that story: "Hundreds of books have been and are being written about the Russian peasant, but it was Korolenko who gave an exhaustive portrayal of the soul of a Russian muzhik, who drew a historically authentic type."

One of Korolenko's greatest literary achievements is the short story "At-Davan" telling about a petty clerk who refused to submit to an appalling humiliation and paid for his rebellion with a life banishment to Siberia. The telling of the story of his ruined life arouses in the exiled clerk the consciousness of his human dignity and gives him the resolution to rebuff an abusive bully of a Governor's courier.

The writer is fully on the side of the clerk, he rejoices in this outbreak of protest. He cherishes every instance of resistance against suppression, arbitrariness, injustice.

The story "Without a Tongue" is placed in America. Korolenko visited the United States in 1893, when he attended the World Fair in Chicago. "This book is ... about how America appears to an ordinary Russian person at first glance," he wrote about the story. The misadventures of Ukrainian peasants who emigrated to America in search of good fortune, their collisions with American reality are described in tones of gentle humour.

In his autobiography Korolenko wrote that "only half of him was given to belles lettres. The other half went in for publicistic writing". He did a lot of "fighting with his pen", writing articles for newspapers and magazines on the most topical and urgent problems of his time. "The tip of a steel pen," he wrote, "proved to be a weapon capable of dealing and repulsing blows."

Korolenko dealt many a blow to bureaucrats, policemen, all kinds of parasites, exploiters and oppressors of the people, to the very order of tsarist Russia. He saw his main purpose in life in awakening "the civic awareness in society and among the people".

In 1891-1892 the Nizhni-Novgorod Gubernia was hit by a famine. Korolenko went to the villages, set up canteens for the starving peasants on funds made up of donations, launched a fierce struggle in the press against the landowners, *zemstvo*, functionaries and the Governor who sought to conceal or belittle the scope of the catastrophe. Subsequently he collected those articles into the book *The Year of the Famine*.

Korolenko's vigorous literary and public activities made him a central figure in Nizhni Novgorod. Gorky referred to the period of his stay in the city as "Korolenko's time". The gendarmes maintained a close surveillance over Korolenko's activities and exerted themselves in writing denunciations against him to their head office. In 1889 Tsar Alexander the Third, upon reading one of Korolenko's stories, demanded information about the author. The Gendarmes' Department provided a memorandum, upon which the Tsar drew his resolution: "Obviously Korolenko is a highly subversive individual, though he has talent."

Korolenko spent eleven years in Nizhni Novgorod. In 1896 he moved to St. Petersburg. His last significant public venture in Nizhni Novgorod was the defence of Multan Votyaks.

A group of peasants from the village of Stary Multan, Votyaks (Udmurts) by nationality, were accused of murdering a passing beggar for the purpose of making

a human sacrifice to their heathen gods. A bloody crime was imputed to an entire nationality. Korolenko attended the trial in the capacity of a correspondent and became convinced in his mind that the Votyaks were innocent and that the entire case had been fabricated by the police and the prosecutor with a view of furthering their careerist ends. After the verdict of "guilty" was brought in and the sentence passed, Korolenko started a campaign for the repeal of the sentence and a re-trial. "These people are in a terrible plight though they are innocent of any crime, an outrageous injustice is being perpetrated, and I cannot think of anything else," Korolenko wrote at the time.

The re-trial was eventually held, with Korolenko acting as counsel for the defence. His speech in defence of the falsely accused peasants shook the audience to such an extent that even the court stenographers stopped making notes and listened spell-bound. The jury acquitted the innocent Votyaks.

During the trial Korolenko received a telegram which informed him about the death of his daughter whom he had left seriously ill. "On the fourth of June the Multan trial was concluded," Korolenko wrote in his diary. "I was afraid, practically certain that my girl was no more, but the joy of securing the acquittal was so great and gushed into my heart in such a wave that there was no place left for any other emotions (true, this mixture cost me a lot. I have a feeling that in those days I lost several years of my life)." After the Multan case Korolenko developed an acute nervous insomnia. "I've grown grey and old during this year," he wrote in his diary.

Korolenko's stay in St. Petersburg lasted from 1896 to 1900. He was editor-in-chief of the journal *Russkoye Bogatstvo*, wrote many publicistic articles for the journal himself and gave much of his time to work on manuscripts of beginning authors.

The scope of editing work that Korolenko carried on throughout his life is really amazing. In the course of 1903 alone he read 504 manuscripts, and wrote a review of each, some of these reviews being veritable critical articles in their own right. Gorky, who himself benefited from Korolenko's tutoring, wrote that Korolenko the editor was "an excellent coach of young authors".

The Multan case earned Korolenko country-wide recognition as a noble-spirited public figure, and people appealed to him for help from all parts of Russia, fully convinced that he would respond and do his best to help. He was called "Russia's conscience".

In 1899 Korolenko received a letter from the town of Grozny in North Caucasus. A complete stranger informed him that a certain Yusupov, a Chechen by nationality, had been sentenced to hanging for highway robbery which he had not committed. Later Korolenko wrote that the moment he read the letter he realised that he was now sharing responsibility for the life of that man and for the sentence passed on him. "If I managed to find a way, Yusupov may live, if I fail—he will be hanged."

Korolenko wrote a letter to the Chief Military Prosecutor, had a meeting with him and made the case public through the press. As the result the innocent man, who was already awaiting execution, was fully exonerated and set free.

In 1900 Korolenko moved to Poltava in the Ukraine, where he was to spend the remaining twenty-one years of his life. In that city, too, Korolenko combined creative writing with publicistic pursuits, editing and intensive public activities. In summing up the results of his life towards its close, he wrote: "I realise I could

have done much more if I did not have to divide myself between pure belle lettres, publicistic writing and practical enterprises like the Multan case or helping the victims of the famine. But I do not in the least regret it.... I could not act otherwise.... And it was necessary, moreover, that literature in our day and age should not remain indifferent to life."

In 1902 the famous "Academic Incident" took place. Tsar Nikolai the Second annulled the election of Maxim Gorky Honorary Academician for the section of belles lettres, but the decision was announced not on behalf of the tsar but on behalf of the Academy itself. In protest against this sleight-of-hand and this gross interference of "police and administration", as Korolenko put it, into the affairs of the Academy, Korolenko renounced his own title of Honorary Academician. Anton Chekhov did likewise.

Korolenko's most stirring public action while in Poltava was his "Open Letter to Counsellor of State Filonov". Filonov, a high-ranking Poltava functionary, was put in charge of the punitive force sent to the village of Sorochintsi, where there had been a peasants' riot. There he staged a brutal mass punishment. He had the entire population of the village driven to its square, made them all kneel in the snow and kept them in this position for four hours, the Cossacks from his troop lashing the bent backs with their iron-tipped whips and Filonov himself calling individuals out of the crowd and beating them up with his own hands.

Korolenko concluded his account of this outrage with the following words:

"I am going to wait until—if there still remains at least a vestige of justice in this country, if you, your colleagues and your chiefs retain some measure of consciousness of professional honour and duty, if we have the institute of prosecutors, courts and judges who remember the meaning of law and the judge's duty—until one of us, you or I, is put in the dock and meted out legal punishment."

Korolenko urged for legal proceedings to be instituted against Filonov, but the trial never took place because Filonov was assassinated. The Black Hundreds and tsarist authorities then started a campaign of persecution against Korolenko, who was accused of "instigating a murder". They even attempted to fabricate a court case against him, and he was swamped with threatening anonymous letters. The Head of the city police wrote a secret report in which he denounced Korolenko as a person who was "harmful for law and order and public peace and deserving of an exile from the Gubernia to the far places in Siberia".

An investigation confirmed Filonov's crimes as presented in Korolenko's "Open Letter", and the authorities did not dare to take measures against a writer who was widely known and respected not only in Russia but abroad as well.

In 1909 Korolenko wrote an article in which he protested against the wave of executions let loose after the defeat of the Revolution of 1905. The article was entitled "Everyday Occurrence". Lev Tolstoy wrote to Korolenko in connection with this article:

"Vladimir Galaktionovich! I have only just heard of your article concerning the death penalty and tried hard during the reading but failed to keep back—not tears, but sobs. I am lost for words to express my gratitude and love to you for this excellent article, both as regards expression and idea, and, most important, feeling that inspired it. It must be duplicated and distributed in millions of copies."

Soon after he moved to Poltava Korolenko started work on the main book of his life, the autobiographical story which he entitled *The History of My*

Contemporary. In his foreword to the book Korolenko wrote: "In this book I endeavour to call back the memory of and revive a number of pictures from last half-century, as they found reflection in the soul of first a child, then a young man then an adult person.... In my work I sought to keep as close, as possible to historical truth...."

The German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, who translated *The History of My Contemporary* into German, wrote: "This book is Korolenko's autobiography, a work of high artistic merit and at the same time a first-rate cultural and historical document." Gorky also gave a high appraisal to *The History of My Contemporary*:

"I picked up this excellent book and—read it through once again. And I will re-read it more than once yet—I like it better and better for its serious tone and its staid kind of modesty, little known to our contemporary literature. There is nothing flagrant, yet everything moves the heart. The voice is low, but gentle and mellow, the voice of a real person. Every page makes you aware of a wise kindly smile of a big-hearted man who has thought and suffered a great deal."

Korolenko did not finish *The History of My Contemporary*. Work on the book was interrupted by his death on December 25, 1921. The book embraces his early childhood, school and student years and his exile wanderings ending with his arrival in Nizhni Novgorod.

The History of My Contemporary ranks with such classics of Russian memoirs-writing as Herzen's *The Past and Reflections* and the autobiographical trilogies of Lev Tolstoy and Gorky.

During the Civil War Korolenko took up the cause of children who had been evacuated to the Ukraine from the starving Moscow and Petrograd. He headed the League for the Salvation of Children. In the summer of 1919 two bandits broke into Korolenko's home. They were after the funds of the League. The old sick writer, his wife and daughter, unarmed, fought against the armed bandits, who shot at them, and succeeded in resisting them and keeping hold of the money on which depended the subsistence of seven thousand children.

Once, also during the Civil War, the writer was warned that an attempt is being planned on his life for his articles and advised to go into hiding. Korolenko replied: "I shall remain here even if the warning is well-founded. Death? Very well then! A writer must live up to his works."

Gorky called Korolenko's life "A hero's thorny path".

By *Alexander Khrabrovitsky*