



**Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment In Russia*
(London: C. W. Daniel Company, 1925)**

Chapter III

DISTURBING THOUGHTS



LIFE went on. Each day brought new conflicting thoughts and emotions. The feature which affected me most was the inequality I witnessed in my immediate environment. I learned that the rations issued to the tenants of the First House of the Soviet (Astoria) were much superior to those received by the workers in the factories. To be sure, they were not sufficient to sustain life--but no one in the Astoria lived from these rations alone. The members of the Communist Party, quartered in the Astoria, worked in Smolny, and the rations in Smolny were the best in Petrograd. Moreover, trade was not entirely suppressed at that time. The markets were doing a lucrative business, though no one seemed able or willing to explain to me where the purchasing capacity came from. The workers could not afford to buy butter which was then 2,000 rubles a pound, sugar at 3,000, or meat at 1,000. The inequality was most apparent in the Astoria kitchen. I went there frequently, though it was torture to prepare a meal: the savage scramble for an inch of space on the stove, the greedy watching of the women lest anyone have something extra in the saucepan, the quarrels and screams when someone fished out a piece of meat from the pot of a neighbor! But there was one redeeming feature in the picture--it was the resentment of the servants who worked in the Astoria. They were servants, though called comrades, and they felt keenly the inequality: the Revolution to them was not a mere theory to be realized in years to come. It was a living thing. I was made aware of it one day.

The rations were distributed at the Commissary, but one had to fetch them himself. One day, while waiting my turn in the long line, a peasant girl came in and asked for vinegar. "Vinegar! Who is it calls for such a luxury?" cried several women. It appeared that the girl was Zinoviev's servant. She spoke of him as her master, who worked very hard and was surely entitled to something extra. At once a storm of indignation broke loose. "Master! is that what we made the Revolution for, or was it to do away with masters? Zinoviev is no more than we, and he is not entitled to more."

These working women were crude, even brutal, but their sense of justice was instinctive. The Revolution to them was something fundamentally vital. They saw the inequality at every step and bitterly resented it.

I was disturbed. I sought to reassure myself that Zinoviev and the other leaders of the Communists would not use their power for selfish benefit. It was the shortage of food and the lack of efficient organization which made it impossible to feed all alike, and of course the blockade and not the Bolsheviki was responsible for it. The Allied Interventionists, who were trying to get at Russia's throat, were the cause.

Every Communist I met reiterated this thought; even some of the Anarchists insisted on it. The little group antagonistic to the Soviet Government was not convincing. But how reconcile the explanation given to me with some of the stories I learned every day--stories of systematic terrorism, of relentless persecution, and suppression of other revolutionary elements?

Another circumstance which perplexed me was that, the markets were stacked with meat, fish, soap, potatoes, even shoes, every time that the rations were given out. How did these things get to the markets? Everyone spoke about it, but no one seemed to know. One day I was in a watchmaker's shop when a soldier entered. He conversed with the proprietor in Yiddish, relating that he had just returned from Siberia with a shipment of tea. Would the watchmaker take fifty pounds? Tea was sold at a premium at the time--no one but the privileged few could permit themselves such a luxury. Of course the watchmaker would take the tea. When the soldier left I asked the shopkeeper if he did not think it rather risky to transact such illegal business so openly. I happen to understand Yiddish, I told him. Did he not fear I would report him? "That's nothing," the man replied nonchalantly, "the Tcheka knows all about it--it draws its percentage from the soldier and myself."

I began to suspect that the reason for much of the evil was also within Russia, not only outside of it. But then, I argued, police officials and detectives graft everywhere. That is the common disease of the breed. In Russia, where scarcity of food and three years of starvation must needs turn most people into grafters, theft is inevitable. The Bolsheviki are trying to suppress it with an iron hand. How can they be blamed? But try as I might I could not silence my doubts. I groped for some moral support, for a dependable word, for someone to shed light on the disturbing questions.

It occurred to me to write to Maxim Gorki. He might help. I called his attention to his own dismay and disappointment while visiting America. He had come believing in her democracy and liberalism, and found bigotry and lack of hospitality instead. I felt sure Gorki would understand the struggle going on within me, though the cause was not the same. Would he see me? Two days later I received a short note asking me to call.

I had admired Gorki for many years. He was the living affirmation of my belief that the creative artist cannot be suppressed. Gorki, the child of the people, the pariah, had by his genius become one of the world's greatest, one who by his pen and deep human sympathy made the social outcast our kin. For years I toured America interpreting Gorki's genius to the American people, elucidating the greatness, beauty, and humanity of the man and his works. Now I was to see him and through him get a glimpse into the complex soul of Russia.

I found the main entrance of his house nailed up, and there seemed to be no way of getting in. I almost gave up in despair when a woman pointed to a dingy staircase. I climbed to the very top and knocked on the first door I saw. It was thrown open, momentarily blinding me with a flood of light and steam from an overheated kitchen. Then I was ushered into a large dining room. It was dimly lit, chilly and cheerless in spite of a fire and a large collection of Dutch china on the walls. One of the three women I had noticed in the kitchen sat down at the table with me, pretending to read a book but all the while watching me out of the corner of her eye. It was an awkward half-hour of waiting.

Presently Gorki arrived. Tall, gaunt, and coughing, he looked ill and weary. He took me to his study, semi-dark and of depressing effect. No sooner had we seated ourselves than the door flew open and another young woman, whom I had not observed before, brought him a glass of dark fluid, medicine evidently. Then the telephone began to ring; a few minutes later Gorki was called out of the room. I realized that I would not be able to talk with him. Returning, he must have noticed my disappointment. We agreed to postpone our talk till some less disturbed opportunity presented itself. He escorted me to the door, remarking, "You ought to visit the Baltflot [Baltic Fleet]. The Kronstadt sailors are nearly all instinctive Anarchists. You would find a field there." I smiled. "Instinctive Anarchists?" I said, "that means they are unspoiled by preconceived notions, unsophisticated, and receptive. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, that is what I mean," he replied.

The interview with Gorki left me depressed. Nor was our second meeting more satisfactory on the occasion of my first trip to Moscow. By the same train travelled Radek, Demyan Bedny the popular Bolshevik versifier, and Zipperovitch, then the president of the Petrograd unions. We found ourselves in the same car, the one reserved for Bolshevik officials and State dignitaries, comfortable and roomy. On the other hand, the "common" man, the non-Communist without influence, had literally to fight his way into the always overcrowded railway carriages, provided he had a *propusk* to travel--a most difficult thing to procure.

I spent the time of the journey discussing Russian conditions with Zipperovitch, a kindly man of deep convictions, and with Demyan Bedny, a big coarse-looking man. Radek held forth at length on his experiences in Germany and German prisons.

I learned that Gorki was also on the train, and I was glad of another opportunity for a chat with him when he called to see me. The one thing uppermost in my mind at the moment was an article which had appeared in the Petrograd *Pravda* a few days before my departure. It treated of morally defective children, the writer urging prison for them. Nothing I had heard or seen during my six weeks in Russia so outraged me as this brutal and antiquated attitude toward the child. I was eager to know what Gorki thought of the matter. Of course, he was opposed to prisons for the morally defective, he would advocate reformatories instead. "What do you mean by morally defective?" I asked. "Our young are the result of alcoholism rampant during the Russian-Japanese War, and of syphilis. What except moral defection could result from such a heritage?" he replied. I argued that morality changes with conditions and climate, and that unless one believed in the theory of free will one cannot consider morality a fixed matter. As to children, their sense of responsibility is primitive, and they lack the spirit of social adherence. But Gorki insisted that there was a fearful spread of moral defection among children and that such cases should be isolated.

I then broached the problem that was troubling me most. What about persecution and terror--were all the horrors inevitable, or was there some fault in Bolshevism itself? The Bolsheviks were making mistakes, but they were doing the best they knew how, Gorki said drily. Nothing more could be expected, he thought.

I recalled a certain article by Gorki, published in his paper, *New Life*, which I had read in the Missouri Penitentiary. It was a scathing arraignment of the Bolsheviks. There must have been powerful reasons to change Gorki's point of view so completely. Perhaps he is right. I must wait. I must study the situation; I must get at the facts. Above all, I must see for myself Bolshevism at work.

We spoke of the drama. On my first visit, by way of introduction, I had shown Gorki an announcement card of the dramatic course I had given in America. John Galsworthy was among the playwrights I had

discussed then. Gorki expressed surprise that I considered Galsworthy an artist. In his opinion Galsworthy could not be compared with Bernard Shaw. I had to differ. I did not underestimate Shaw, but considered Galsworthy the greater artist. I detected irritation in Gorki, and as his hacking cough continued, I broke off the discussion. He soon left. I remained dejected from the interview. It gave me nothing.

When we pulled into the Moscow station my chaperon, Demyan Bedny, had vanished and I was left on the platform with all my traps. Radek came to my rescue. He called a porter, took me and my baggage to his waiting automobile and insisted that I come to his apartments in the Kremlin. There I was graciously received by his wife and invited to dinner served by their maid. After that Radek began the difficult task of getting me quartered in the Hotel National, known as the First House of the Moscow Soviet. With all his influence it required hours to secure a room for me.

Radek's luxurious apartment, the maidservant, the splendid dinner seemed strange in Russia. But the comradely concern of Radek and the hospitality of his wife were grateful to me. Except at the Zorins and the Shatovs I had not met with anything like it. I felt that kindness, sympathy, and solidarity were still alive in Russia.