

Fragments from My Diary

M. Gorky

March 4-8, 2021

This is a collection of 38 disjointed pieces, ostensibly fragments from a diary kept by Gorky during many years. There are longer pieces such that the concluding one on the industrialist Bugrov making up a mini novel of 35 pages, while quite a few are only half a page or a page. Most of them reminds you of his collections in 'Through Russia' while the ones here are ostensibly taken from real life and thus potentially more interesting. When it comes to reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov and Blok the documentary value is unmistakable.

Gorky has a penchant for word-painting, long drawn out descriptions of nature and the appearances of people, which impeccable as they may appear, somehow do come across as somewhat tedious and add very little as they tend to be forgotten as soon as they are read. However, one case when this attention to detail works is to be found in the section 'Fires' in which various fires are described, but most memorably a forest fire across the Volga from Nizhny Novgorod. It is a pure account devoid of any plot but a valiant attempt to describe a forest fire, how it creeps along the ground and then suddenly flares up consuming trees with lightning speed. Most of the stories relate to strange and fascinating people Gorky has met, mostly tramps and down and out people, often with a tragic life which has seen successes and happiness making their present situations so much more painful. The pen-name Gorky means as we know 'bitterness' in Russia, but one suspects it does not refer to his own life as opposed to the bitterness he has encountered in it.

There is a short section on Tolstoy which I have not encountered before, in which Tolstoy riding on his horse makes another horse budge on the path, knowing he has to do that for the bard. While the one on Chekhov seems to appear in many collections. The one on Blok, however, I have never encountered before, and the short and rather touching piece on Blok and the Strumpet, seems to have been made up.

The most interesting story is on Nikolay Bugrov an industrialist and businessman based in Nizhny Novgorod who befriended Gorky as a fellow city dweller who had made it good. What did he get out of this, Gorky wonders, who got to hear a lot of his outpourings on a variety of topics, especially on his committed work ethics along with his deep doubts as to what was the sense of the work he so passionately pursued. Maybe he was lonely and wanted to have an audience, or he was intrigued by that 'dangerous' revolutionary Gorky many of whose works he had read and enjoyed. Gorky was at first appalled by him due to various rumors he had heard, such as he picking up young women, living with them and then discarding them when he had grown tired of their company by marrying them off to suitable employees, but prolonged contact with a man makes for a certain sympathy and loyalty. About who this Bugrov was is not so easy to find out through the internet, there is an entry on a more recent Bugrov, a Russian writer of science fiction, and a portrait of a bearded man with his hair combed parted in the middle. Further search reveals a Nikolai Alexandrovich Bugrov (1837-1911) stemming from a family of Old

Believers in Nizhny Novgorod, well acquainted with Gorky with whom he also exchanged letters. He run mills powdered by steam, had a fleet on the Volga, and spent a lot of money on charities and poor houses¹, and spent a significant part of his business profits in improving the infra structure of the city. He himself leading a modest life.

The translator, her name prominently displayed on the title page, is listed as Moura Budberg (1893-1974) supplies also a preface. She was a Russian adventuress and suspected double agent, amorously engaged with both Gorky and H.G.Wells.

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¹ The scene in Lower Depths is supposed to take place in a so called doss-house built by Bugrov in memory of his father. Bugrov was surprised that Gorky, a former inmate of such an establishment, had managed to break loose.