

Letters

M.Gorky

February 21–23, 2021

Gorky wrote over 20'000 letters (and received about as many), at least that many are extant. One can surmise that his systematic epistolary output spanned at least five decades, thus this amounts to about 400 a year, at least one a day on the average. In this slim volume, published by Progress Publishers in Moscow, about a hundred have been collected¹. Most of the letters are addressed to fellow Russians, but a fair amount are also written to foreign literary dignitaries such as G.B. Shaw, H.G.Wells, Romain Rolland and Stefan Zweig, in addition to Knut Hamsun and Upton Sinclair. This begs the question as to Gorky's command of foreign languages. How did he communicate with them and not only by letter, because some of them actually visited him both in exile in Germany and Italy as well as in the Soviet Union? In a letter to Stefan Zweig he admits that he reads and writes nothing but Russian and that his delay in answering is due to that his friend who usually translates for him was gone away. If some of the letters were translated into English, are those the versions which are published? As to their English they do not stand out. One does not expect any of his foreign correspondents to have known Russian.

The letters are arranged by recipient and chronologically among those. There are thirty, starting with Tolstoy and ending up with Zoshchenko². Some are rather interesting, others not so. Some are quite long, over ten pages to Stanislavsky to which we are going to return, a few rather short. In many cases specially added photos of Gorky and the correspondent are inserted, such as with Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bunin, Wells, Zweig, Rolland, showing Gorky at various ages. I have come across a figure of 6'4" pertaining to his height, which would have made him a rather tall man, towering over his correspondents. He does so over Wells, but Tolstoy appears almost as tall in a picture having Gorky standing next to him leaning on his cane, although he was only in his early thirties at the time. Was really Tolstoy that tall? Gorky has a characteristic appearance with his snub nose, his thick head of hair, and his rather craggy face, reminiscent of one carved out of wood. He does not appear as a refined intellectual but as a rather uncouth, not to say course figure exuding peasant strength and lack of sophistication.

Gorky was very conscious of himself as a writer, and returns to the subject repeatedly. To the painter Ilya Repin he confesses that he is dissatisfied with himself as a writer because he has read too many books which have plundered his soul. What do I really have left which is original? He asks. A writer who is asked how did you come up with this and that, will appear a fool if he has to admit that he just read it somewhere.

One of the more interesting letters are those he wrote to his first wife Yekaterina Peshkova, the first selected from Tiflis where he was imprisoned for some time around

¹ There is some overlap of half a dozen or so letters with those attached to 'On Literature' reviewed as well in this volume

² Mikhail Zoshchenko (1894-58), Soviet author and satirist

the time their son Maxim was born. After the failed revolution of 1905-06 he left for an American exile via Finland and Sweden. About Finland he is lyrical, a fairy-tale of a country, this little country³ of great people. A very nice democratic country, of strong, beautiful and highly original people. He speaks about pine forests, lakes and rocks and in Helsingfors⁴ he was well feted. In the States he lived in the Adirondacks in Upstate New York, close to the Canadian border. Here in America he finds the Red Indians and the Negroes, to be the most interesting. The Americans themselves are only interesting, he explains, by virtue of their ignorance, which is astounding and their lust for money, which is disgusting. He was very busy working at the time and describes the daily routines. Waking up at seven breakfasting by eight by the time he is already at work until dinner time at one, then tea at four, and supper at eight after which he writes until midnight. The book he wrote is one of his classics - *Mother* (Мать). He had already a reputation, local people are in fear of him, as a dangerous revolutionary, and hence also fascinated by him, as is the press who begs him for articles. They pay him by the word, 16 cents for each, and with 30'000 words submitted he amasses the equivalence of 2000 rubles⁵. He is not living alone but have a few companions making up a bit of an entourage, among those a Russian serving as his secretary. He does not reveal though that the secretary is a young woman, whom his wife has already met and disliked and with whom he by now is living as common law husband and wife⁶. Close to where they live the American educator John Dewey has set up a philosophical institute, active in the summer, and to which celebrities are being invited to lecture. The psychologist William James is one, who Gorky dismisses as being considered a star of the first magnitude, but concedes that he is not bad, but a nice old man.

Gorky is a good friend of Ivan Bunin, a bit surprising in view of their divergent politics, Bunin subsequently becoming an exile after the revolution (but so of course were Gorky himself during many years); but he very much appreciates Bunin's poetry, although he himself was not that much of a poet and did not find himself qualified to pass judgment on it (in a letter to Pasternak, he complains that the poetry of the latter is too sophisticated for him, and gives him great trouble in trying to make sense of the images Pasternak supplies). To Bunin he writes that the death of Tolstoy has greatly affected him making him feel like an orphan. But he also confesses that he disliked him more often than he loved him, but adding that somehow he stood above our feelings, they simply were not applicable to him. He also begs him to write on 'Cervantes' to be included in a series of books to be addressed to children to elevate their minds. Nansen has agreed to write on Columbus, and he has appealed to Rolland to write on Beethoven and Socrates, Wells on Edison, and are looking for suitable authors for Darwin, Francis of Assisi, Giordano Bruno and Garibaldi, whom he might write on himself. I do not know whether this project ever was brought to fruition, but Gorky never produced a book on Garibaldi.

³ Of course still part of the Russian Empire, but of course not of Russia, and thus seen almost as a different, independent country.

⁴ At the time the original Swedish name was in general use all over the world.

⁵ This translates into 1 ruble being \$ 2.40

⁶ He would nevertheless maintain friendly relations to his first wife throughout his life, their marriage could not have been based on passion.

In a very long letter to Stanislavsky he sketches a play to be written through the interpretations and activities of the actors. It is an interesting potential process of a play being modified by the acting, having lines dropped, added or modified. What Gorky tries to do in his letter is to suggest a setup for actors to improvise upon. I have no idea whether this experiment was ever put in place⁷.

In his letter of 1911 to his colleague Leonid Andreyev he deplores the fact that the Russian Nation has been contaminated by the thick and heavy blood of the Orient and blames this for the passivity of the Russians and their incapability for prolonged exertion having become too disillusioned. To have an active approach to life is absolutely essential, he argues, and dismisses the Asiatic nihilism of an Ivan Karamazov. He worries, in a letter to Wells, about the possible initiatives of setting up a transcaspian Moslem State, and what consequences that will have for Armenia and Georgia. A year later he writes his regrets of the death of Strindberg, calling him a marvelous rebel.

To Zweig he writes about Zweig's book on Casanova, Stendhal and Tolstoy. Praising it of course, but having his reservations about his account of Stendhal, a writer whom he loves and has read almost everything by, not to mention Tolstoy whom he knew the best. Tolstoy is a colossal unprecedented contradiction of intellect and instinct. He fought against reason and considered consciousness being the greatest of all evils. Many thoughts can find a place, he quotes Tolstoy, especially in an empty head. He concludes a letter to Zweig inquiring about Rolland, wondering why he has not heard from him. Has he offended him in any way?

Many letters are selected from his interchanges with Romain Rolland. He discusses the Russian poet Balmont⁸ who recently had been expelled from the Soviet Union and engaging himself in anti-Bolshevik propaganda, pestering Rolland with letters. Admittedly he wrote some beautiful poetry initially but he quickly lost his gift, according to Gorky, who dismisses him as not being intelligent, not even normal, warped by alcoholism. He apologizes for a book he has just written and finds the French version garbled. Thus one can suspect that even if he did not write French he would have been capable of reading it. He complains about the difficult situation in Germany in 1923 and refers to Husserl with disgust. That eminent philosopher had claimed that Germany had had an ideal government in 1848 with 150 professors seated in the Parliament. He writes about the young poet Yesenin and his arrival in Moscow: The city welcomed him with the delight of gourmet welcoming strawberries in January. He repeats invitations to Rolland to come and visit the Soviet Union, bragging about the progress the country has achieved in the last few years. How grimy Russian villages are disappearing and being replaced by towns blessed with all kinds of modern conveniences. How the Finns, the Mongolians and the Turco-Finnish nationalities have been given their own written languages. This is a statement quite puzzling at many levels. The Uzbeks and the Turks are getting a Latin alphabet and it seems that those who read it surges ahead in literacy compared to those who only read

⁷ Were the plays of Shakespeare written by Shakespeare? Meaning did they have one specific author, or were they the outcome of a collective process, in which actors gradually evolved a play, then to polish it through subsequent performances. Admittedly highly speculative, true though that many plays have been modified according to actors suggestions during rehearsals

⁸ (1867-1942) Symbolist poet, serial suicidee (with no success)

the Arabic script, i.e. only read the Koran. He writes about the great demand for books among those who have been starving for spiritual nourishment for centuries. Millions of copies of the collected works of Tolstoy have been printed but cannot be had in stores, selling so quickly. In fact so great is the demand for books that there is a serious paper shortage. In 1934 he writes to Rolland and mourns the death of his son Maxim at the age of 36. He was very gifted, he writes with paternal pride, but his will was not organized and he failed to take proper care of his many gifts. He refers approvingly to a scheme to destroy the Arctic Ice and return Siberia and Canada to the heavenly conditions which held during the Miocene period. This is a project to his taste, to really change the world for the better. The modern reader invariably think of global warming with not the same kind of optimism. There is also a reference to Victor Serge⁹ being expelled, a political activist whom Rolland was instrumental in having released due to his excellent relations with Stalin. A few letters to Lenin are included, along with a picture from Capri back in 1908, where Lenin and Gorky are facing each other over a chess board, deep in thought, surrounded by on-lookers in the foreground and cliffs in the background. Gorky brings up the terrible waste when old houses are torn down, but not the glass of windows and others things are taken care of, something he also seems to have brought up in private conversation, alluded to in a letter written to the widow, He also in January 1919 appeals to him to have his journal Новая Жизнь revived, the journal which Lenin had closed down the previous summer as being too critical of the Bolshevik regime. To the novelist Fedin he writes that suffering must be hated, only in this way can it be destroyed. A phrase he will later repeat to his younger contemporary the poet Zoshchenko.

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⁹ cf. the review on his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* included in this collection