RUSSIAN WRITERS AND THE DOUKHOBORS

George Woodcock

ONE DAY WHEN I WAS TALKING to Mavor Moore about his childhood, he recollected going in his parents' house to answer a ring on the doorbell. "And there stood Princess Kropotkin." Princess Kropotkin was actually Alexandra (Sasha), the daughter of the famous Russian anarchist and geographer, Peter Kropotkin; after her father's death near Moscow in 1921 she had migrated to the United States and lived in New York. The friendship she sustained with Mavor's mother, the actress Dora Mavor Moore, was a continuation of that which had existed since the mid-1880s between her father and James Mavor, the distinguished Scottish Canadian political economist who was Dora's father, and whose memoir, *My Windows on the Street of the World* (1923), is one of the most interesting of Canadian autobiographies. It was a friendship that would involve a number of important Russian writers and intellectuals and that led to the coming of the Doukhobors to Canada.

Kropotkin and James Mavor first met in November 1886 when Kropotkin had gone to Edinburgh to lecture on anarchism. He stayed with James Stuart Blackie, the Classical scholar and translator of Aeschylus, and among the people he met on that occasion were Patrick Geddes, Fridtjof Nansen (then a young man studying in Scotland), and James Mavor, who was then professor of political economy at St. Mungo's College in Glasgow; he would not take up his post at the University of Toronto until 1892. The meeting stayed vividly in Mavor's mind, and he wrote in his autobiography what is perhaps the best portrait we have of the anarchist prince at this time, when he was forty-two and at the height of his vigour.

> He was short, not more than five and a half feet, slight in build, with unusually small feet, a slender waist and broad shoulders. He had a short neck and a large head. He wore a full brown beard, seldom trimmed and never lacking its distinctive character. The top of his head was destitute of hair, but on the sides and back of it his dark-brown hair was ample. His eyes sparkled with genius, and when he was roused became almost incandescent. His manner had about it the air of a court; but with his friends his affectionate solicitude was the outcome of a sincere and warm heart. He wrote in English with accuracy and distinct sense of style, and he wrote in French with equal facility and distinction, but in speaking the languages his accent was by no means perfect.

The friendship continued, Mavor visiting Kropotkin in Harrow, which was his home in exile, and they kept in touch after Mavor went to Canada. In September 1897, when the British Association for the Advancement of Science held its annual meeting in Toronto, Kropotkin gave two papers there, derived from the geographical expeditions that had predated his anarchist militancy, on the glacial deposits of Finland and on his influential theories regarding the structure of the East Asian mountain ranges. He stayed for several weeks with Mavor, and then travelled across Canada as far as Victoria, taking advantage of an excursion on the Canadian Pacific which William Van Horne had arranged on behalf of the visiting scientists. He returned more slowly, stopping in the new towns of the prairies and the pioneer settlements that were rapidly and rawly growing up. Often he came into contact with people from the Russian steppes: the Ukrainians — then mostly called Galicians — whom Clifford Sifton was industriously importing, and especially the Mennonites who had left Russia in the 1870s to avoid military service and who were living in communal villages and using their experience of dry farming on the steppes to pioneer agricultural methods suited to the prairies. Kropotkin embodied his observations in a lengthy article in *The Nineteenth Century* (March 1898) which is still worth reading for its vivid impressions of a pioneer world.

It was this article that came to the attention of Leo Tolstoy's close friend and follower, Vladimir Chertkov, who like Kropotkin was living in exile in England where he had founded a Tolstoyan colony at Purleigh, which became the headquarters of the Tolstoyan Committee seeking aid for the Doukhobors, at this time suffering great persecution in Russia because of their refusal to bear arms. The Tsarist authorities had expelled them from their rich farms in the Caucasus and sent them into an exile in Georgia so rigorous that they could survive only by emigration. A pioneer group — assisted by Tolstoyans and English Quakers — had already gone to Cyprus, then a British colony, but conditions there turned out to be unsatisfactory, and Chertkov and his committee were considering an alternative when Kropotkin's article appeared, describing the favourable conditions the Mennonites had obtained for settlement on the prairies. They had received their land in large blocks, instead of in quarter sections of 160 acres as happened to ordinary farmers under the Dominion Land Act, and had been allowed to settle in villages instead of being required to reside each on his own homestead. This enabled them to maintain their own form of communal organization, which was not unlike that of the Doukhobors, while they had been exempted from the provisions of the Canadian militia laws.

As soon as Chertkov wrote to him, Kropotkin went to Purleigh, and convinced the Tolstoyan Committee that Canada was the best of all possible places for the Doukhobors to settle. Two Doukhobor delegates were already in England, and it was decided that they should immediately go to Canada to assess the situation. Meanwhile Kropotkin wrote to James Mavor, unaware that Mavor's interest in

the plight of the Doukhobors had already been aroused, and he had suggested independently to Clifford Sifton that the Doukhobors might fit well into his plans for the settlement of the North West Territories. At the same time Mavor had written to Tolstoy, and in the correspondence that followed Toystoy had assured him that the Doukhobors were excellent farmers. When Mavor asked about the Doukhobor attitude to education Tolstoy — rather rashly as it turned out — expressed the view that the Doukhobors would send their children to school, "provided the children would not be obliged to receive religious training."

Meanwhile, without waiting for an answer to Kropotkin's letter to Mavor, the Doukhobor delegates had set sail for Canada on the *Vancouver* on September 1. Here two further leading members of the Tolstoy circle became involved, for the Doukhobors were accompanied by Prince Hilkof, like Kropotkin a "conscience-stricken nobleman" who had given up his fortune and privileges to serve the cause of the people, and Aylmer Maude, the English carpet dealer who acquired fame as Tolstoy's leading translator. While his companions travelled steerage, Maude took a first-class cabin because he was susceptible to sea-sickness, "feeling much ashamed of myself for such un-Tolstoyan self-indulgence."

To the connections Mavor had made, Maude added his own in the carpet trade, and through the merchant James Morgan he made contact with Thomas Shaughnessy, vice-president of the CPR, who offered favourable terms for transporting the Doukhobors if they came. Maude in fact turned out to be the most useful person on the delegation, keeping constant touch with Tolstoy and the Tolstoyan Committee in England, and mediating between the Canadian authorities and the Doukhobor delegates who spoke no English and who became suspicious of their non-Doukhobor companions, actually accusing them of "making money out of the Canadian government at the expense of the Doukhobors." Tolstoy tried to soothe the ruffled feelings of Hilkof and Maude by remarking: "All descriptions of Doukhobors . . . are so idealistic that they become unbelievable, and therefore such incidents only lend reality to the picture." Despite such discouragement, Maude went on a tour of the United States to raise interest, and gained some support from the novelist William Dean Howells, and, more important, from the American Quakers. Thanks to Maude's efforts, assisted by some backstairs persuasion on Mavor's part, agreement was reached by October 1898 on the terms on which the Doukhobors would be granted land in Canada.

Once the Canadian government had finally wired on October 27 that everything was clear for the arrival of the Doukhobors, the *Lake Huron* was chartered to take the first shipload from Batum to Halifax. Toystoy himself raised $17,000 — almost half the cost — by appeals to wealthy Russians. He also donated the royalties of his last novel, *Resurrection*, but this was not ready for publication until the end of 1899, and the $17,000 it raised was actually used to help settle the Doukhobors after they reached Canada. The arrangements at Batum were made on Tolstoy's

behalf by an attractive young Tolstoyan, Leopold Sulerzhitsky, a renowned and reformed ladykiller who had become a convinced pacifist (converted by Tolstoy's daughter Tatiana) and had served his own term in prison for refusing military service. The first voyage out, indeed, was accompanied by a whole contingent of the Russian intelligentsia, for Tolstoy's son Sergei also sailed, while one of the doctors, Alexei Ilyich Bakunin, was a nephew of the dead anarchist leader, Michael Bakunin, Kropotkin's predecessor as the leading ideologue of the movement. The *Lake Huron* left Batum on December 21 and docked in Halifax on January 24, 1899. Sergei Tolstoy returned to supervise further sailings, but Sulerzhitsky remained with the Doukhobors for a whole year, until early 1900, helping them get settled on the land allotted to them in what later became Saskatchewan.

On the second voyage of the *Lake Huron*, the Russian Marxist writer Vladimir Bonch-Breuvich, later a close associate of Lenin during the October Revolution and the Civil War years, was among the sympathizers accompanying the Doukhobors. His interests were largely sociological, and he spent much of his time familiarizing himself with the sect's rich heritage of oral literature, psalms and hymns, which the Doukhobors themselves called the Living Book.

Another Russian writer of some importance who became involved with the Doukhobors in Canada was Paul Biriukov, the former naval officer who became Tolstoy's disciple and eventually his official biographer. Like Vladimir Chertkov, Biriukov did not accompany the Doukhobors to Canada in the 1890s, but, from his vantage point of Geneva, where he lived at this time, he provided a channel of communication between the Doukhobors and their friends in Canada and the Tolstoyans in Russia. Later, however, when the Doukhobor leader Peter Verigin died mysteriously in 1924, and his son Peter Chistiakov (the Purger) came to Canada in 1927 to take over his father's role, Biriukov finally reached Canada in his train. Now more than eighty, he had been told that he could organize a Tolstoyan system of education for the Doukhobors. But nothing came of his expectations; after reaching Canada he was given nothing to do and treated as a butt for Chistiakov's jests and rages. He returned disillusioned to Russia, the last of the writers of that country's classic age to be connected with the Doukhobors.

These contacts resulted in a number of books, all appearing in the first decade of the twentieth century. Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, whose completion was hastened by the plight of the Doukhobors, even if its theme had no relation to them, was the most important. Aylmer Maude wrote *A Peculiar People: The Doukhobors* (New York, 1904), a wry record of disillusioned sympathy. Leopold Sulerzhitsky, after returning to Russia, had a distinguished career as an actor and director with the Moscow Arts Theatre until his early death in 1916, taking part in a number of

Stanislavsky's productions of Chekhov's plays. His account of his experiences, *V Ameriku s Dukhoborami*, appeared in 1905, and it was finally published in English and in Canada, translated by Michael Kalmakoff, as *To America with the Doukhobors*, in 1982. Maxim Gorki, who was an affectionate friend of Sulerzhitsky and included an essay on him in his *Literary Portraits*, complained of the disorganized way in which the book was written (it was in fact little more than a rewriting of the diaries Sulerzhitsky kept at the time), and recorded how he had urged "Suler" to include some of his own interesting adventures to enliven the text, but Sulerzhitsky had replied: "What have I to do with it? The Doukhobors are the subject; I am an outsider to this unnatural coupling of religion and politics."

Unlike his Life of Tolstoy, Paul Biriukov's book on the sect, *Dukhobortsy* (Moscow, 1908), has never been translated, nor has the material from the Living Book which Bonch-Bruevich included in his various studies of the Doukhobors. Perhaps indeed the most important material remains the series of Tolstoy's letters regarding the Doukhobors and their emigration, which has never been completely published in English, though it appears in the Russian editions of his collected works. Probably the best book written at the time outside Russia on Tolstoy's involvement with the Doukhobors was J. Bienstock's *Tolstoi et les Doukhobors; fait historiques réunis et traduits du russe* (Paris, 1902). Tolstoy's letters, indeed, show him turning from a somewhat naïve and misled admirer of the sect as an example of Christian anarchism into a critic of the theocracy that its leaders practised in real life, the kind of mental evolution everyone who has had close contact with Doukhobors has undergone. "How is it that you have turned from a martyr for the truth into a despot?" he shouted at Peter the Lordly when the latter returned to Russia on a visit in 1907 and called at Vasnaya Polyana.

By this time, indeed, the interest of Russian writers in the Doukhobors, now facing new problems with the Canadian government, perceptibly diminished. No book sympathetic to them was published in Russia after 1908, when Biriukov's account appeared. This was not merely because the Doukhobors were out of sight in Canada, and therefore largely out of mind. It was, even more, because, between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, new developments in Russia were demanding attention, and the problem of the Doukhobors, though it continued, was no longer thought of as a Russian one.