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FROM SOVIET RUSSIA TO POLAND

I.

LATE IN FEBRUARY, LEAVING KIEV WHERE I WENT from Moscow, I took the train for Shepetovka, the Soviet border in Western Ukraine.

Shepetovka is next door to Zdolbunovo. There are no natural boundaries separating these two towns. Before the Revolution they were part of Volhynia which was one of the greatest gubernias (provinces) within the Ukraine. But now Shepetovka is in Russia, while—after the Riga Peace Treaty concluded in 1921 which granted Poland a large hunk of the Ukraine and divided Volhynia in two parts—Zdolbunovo is in Poland.

It now takes three hours to go from Shepetovka to Zdolbunovo. The train is constantly stopped and inspected by detectives. In the old days it took less than an hour to make the trip. It was like going from Brooklyn to the Bronx. There was constant traffic between these two towns. There was always a stream of peasant carts bringing agricultural products to Zdolbunovo, or to my home-town, Rovno which is just a short distance away. But now? Now, as I have said, these two towns belong to two different coun-

tries, even to different worlds. I know of people in Rovno whose relatives live in Shepetovka, and they haven't seen each other for fifteen years. Indeed, it is much easier to go from New York to Shepetovka than it is from Zdolbunovo. One also knows more in New York of what is happening in Zdolbunovo than in Shepetovka. The censorship on both sides is very rigorous.

I arrived in Shepetovka early in the morning. The train for Zdolbunovo was not leaving until four o'clock in the afternoon. I passed the interval of eight hours investigating the town and talking to the young interpreter of the Soviet travel agency, Intourist.

The interpreter was only a fourteen-year-old boy, but, as is common with most Soviet youngsters, he spoke with the air of a grown-up man, and we had a long and intimate conversation. He related to me the history of his life. Before the Revolution his father was a typical Jewish cobbler in Berdichev. Now he was managing a shoe factory. But the boy wanted to be a "Red diplomat." He was studying English. The school sent him to Shepetovka so that he might gain some practical experience through talking with the English and American tourists. As a result he spoke with an accent that was a mixture of Oxford and the New York East Side.

The boy was energetic and lively. Listening to him, it occurred to me that he was out of place in Shepetovka. Somehow he symbolized all that was new in the life of Soviet Jewry. Shepetovka, on the

other hand, was a symbol of the past. An old ghetto-town, resembling to the last detail the town of "S" about which I have written in a previous chapter, it has not changed much in the sixteen revolutionary years. While everywhere in Soviet Russia new cities were being built and old cities renovated, the Government has left this little border town unchanged.

"Tell me," I asked the boy, "why does the Government treat Shepetovka like an orphan?"

I asked this question in jest but the boy took me seriously.

"Well, sir," he replied in his mixed accent, "Shepetovka is too near the Polish border. Suppose there is a war. Suppose Shepetovka is taken away from us. Do you know, sir, that during the civil war Shepetovka had a different government every day? Petlura was here, then came the Poles, then the bandit Bulak-Bulakhovich, and now we, the Bolsheviks. Why should we spend money on improving it?"

I was surprised to hear such a lucid explanation from a fourteen-year-old boy. What he told me was quite true. The spirit of war permeated the Shepetovka atmosphere.

Whether there is actually danger of a war between Poland and Soviet Russia is largely a matter of prophecy. But Poland is not a very congenial neighbor. Although a small country, she has a large imperialist appetite.

When I first returned to Poland in 1932, the country was plunged into a war hysteria. Glaring posters and leaflets distributed on the streets, in theatres and

cafes, announced German atrocities that were being committed against the Polish population on the upper Silesian border.

This war mood is nothing new in Poland. Since the very first day of her existence as an independent state she has been engaged in a continuous struggle with her national minorities, particularly with the three million Jews and seven million Ukrainians who comprise one-third of Poland's population.

Another factor contributing to the country's never-changing war psychology is Poland's border controversies with Germany, Lithuania and, above all, Soviet Russia. In spite of the fact that she has recently concluded a peace pact with the Bolsheviks, Poland still considers herself as Europe's bulwark against the advance of Russian Communism.

Under such circumstances, Poland needs a large army. And the truth is that Poland has one of the largest standing armies of all the smaller countries in Europe. More than one-third of her budget is spent for military purposes. In no other country does one see so many smartly dressed officers and soldiers. They crowd the theatres, sidewalks and cafes. Militarism is one of the best paid professions in Poland. Militarism rules the country. According to the new Polish "constitution," the lower house of the Sejm (parliament) has lost most of its power. Although it has not been abolished altogether and is still elected by popular vote, its only function is to introduce new bills. The senate, on the other hand, which has equal voting power, is appointed by the President—a pup-

pet in the hands of the country's aged dictator, Marshal Pilsudski—and only those who hold military decorations and the Cross of Independence are eligible to serve in it.

Is there any wonder that Soviet Russia refuses to take any chances with Shepetovka?

Moreover, Pilsudski has always had special designs for the Soviet Ukraine. He has said as much. His ambition, no doubt, was recently strengthened by the announcement of Hitler's lieutenants, Hugenberg and Rosenberg, that Germany would be glad to help Poland take the Ukraine away from the Bolsheviks if only she would give them in return the long-coveted Polish corridor.

Is there any wonder that the spirit of war permeates this little border town? . . .

2.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, a young Ukrainian border G.P.U. man, dressed in a long gray coat and a green cap, approached me and asked for my "pashport." He examined it carefully and led me to the waiting train. A few minutes later I was speeding past the wide, snow-covered plains of Volhynia . . .

Even as a child I knew that part of Volhynia intimately and I looked for familiar scenes and objects. Where were the lively, white-painted peasant huts, the bearded muzhiks with their white shirts flopping in the wind, the young peasant boys and girls who

always used to watch every passing train? . . . Where? . . . But then I remembered that I was in a country that had suffered indescribably during the past fifteen years. Invasions, wars, famines, subjugation—all that left an incurable wound on the body of Volhynia. The half-ruined peasant huts were deserted. The whole country was deserted . . . Volhynia was no longer gay and prosperous . . . It was now a land of tears and groans . . .

The scene was depressing. Time moved slowly. To drive away boredom I fell into conversation with a Polish engineer. He was the only passenger besides myself on the train. He, too, was returning from Soviet Russia.

Five years ago, when Poland was already in the throes of the crisis, Pan Stanislaw Mockowski was given a job in Russia. He was a good engineer and well paid by the Soviet Government. Now he was returning for his wife and son. He was going to settle permanently in Soviet Russia.

Pan Mockowski was a very intelligent and well-informed man. He knew a great deal about Soviet Russia and even more about the social and economic conditions in Poland. We spoke in Russian.

I remarked about the difference between the Soviet and Polish Ukrainians.

"Yes," he said, "just look at the difference. Soviet Russia has given the Ukraine freedom and independence. It created an autonomous Ukrainian Republic where the Ukrainian people develop their own language and culture. Soviet Russia strives to

compensate her Ukraine for its many years of slavery under the Tsarist regime. But the Poles consider their Ukraine a conquered colony, and as befit 'conquerors' they attempt to 'Polonize' it. And let me tell you: it is the cruelest act of conversion ever practiced by one civilized nation upon another . . .

"It is a peculiar thing. If I didn't feel it way deep in my bones, I would never believe that Poland, too, has a revolutionary tradition. For 175 years Poland strove to free herself from the yoke of Tsarist Russia. Poles suffered horribly in old Russia. But people, especially Poles who have always been imbued with the idea that they are born to rule, forget soon. Just as soon as the Treaty of Versailles granted Poland her independence, she forgot her revolutionary past. Pilsudski, the former terrorist and revolutionist, is now a dictator.

"The Treaty of Versailles, as you probably know, also guaranteed the right of equality to Poland's national minorities. But her very first days as an independent state were heralded by a wave of pogroms against Jews . . ."

Much of what Pan Mockowski told me is a matter of recent history and is commonly known.

At first the Ukrainians and the Jews took the Treaty of Versailles' "guarantees" seriously. They proceeded to organize their own schools, theatres and launched a strong nationalist movement. The Polish Government soon put a stop to it. It commenced its "Polonization" campaign. Jews and Ukrainians were dismissed from schools, post offices,

factories, railroads, hospitals, etc., and replaced by Poles.

These Poles usually flocked to the Kresy Wschodnie, as Poland refers to her Ukraine, in the hope of easy gains. They soon became notorious and hated for their fanatical nationalism, religious bigotry and, above all, graft.

The Government also began to "colonize" the Ukrainian villages with Poles. Land that was confiscated from peasants accused of being in sympathy with Communism was distributed among the Osadniks—former Polish soldiers and officers.

Today every Ukrainian village has a number of Osadniks. Their function, of course, is to spy upon the peasants in the villages and the Jews in the adjoining cities. Because the Communist Party is illegal in Poland, all an Osadnik who covets a peasant's land has to do is to declare him a Communist. The same is true if he has a grudge against a Jew.

While the peasants and the Jews are being driven to extinction, the Osadniks are amassing enormous fortunes. They have spread a reign of terror through the villages and cities. Their debauches in the style of the former Polish Shliacta (nobility), are notorious throughout the Kresy.

At the beginning, as I have indicated, the Ukrainian movement was purely nationalistic and even anti-Semitic. After fifteen years of the Polish reign, however, in the face of a common enemy, the Ukrainians began to look toward a united front with the Jewish masses. Often Jews and Ukrainians run

on a common ticket in elections. Moreover, the Ukrainian peasants began to look eagerly toward a union with their kinsmen of the Soviet Ukraine. There began sporadic peasant revolts. Alongside of the posters describing atrocities committed by Germans against Poles, I also saw posters proclaiming the new emergency decree which imposes the death penalty upon any one accused of "Soviet espionage." And the Polish Government is not slow in carrying out its threat. But that, of course, will not solve the Ukrainian problem. Even Roman Dyboski, the very much pro-Polish historian admits that "Poland has not proved capable so far of evolving a constructive and consistent Ukrainian policy. If a 'comprehensive' Ukrainian program is not adopted, and resolutely carried out soon, the calamity of an Irredentist movement in favor of a larger Ukraine across the Soviet border may overtake Poland in a possibly none too distant future . . ."

3.

No wonder, then, that both Shepetovka and Zdobunovo are zealously guarded. The Poles fear a Ukrainian revolt; the Russians fear a sudden Polish invasion.

When we crossed the short strip of land—known as no-man's land—that lies between the borders of the two countries, our train stopped.

"We are in Poland," said Pan Mockowski, "don't be surprised at anything I may say. I am still a Polish

citizen. I've got to be on guard. If they suspect my pro-Soviet sympathies, it may go bad with me. Let us forget our Russian and speak Polish . . ."

We heard the clang of arms and loud voices speaking Polish. Two gendarmes dressed in smart blue uniforms, each one armed with a gun, rifle and sabre, and a man dressed in civilian clothes entered our compartment. One of them was apparently the chief. He looked elegant and wore long Polish mustachios.

"Passports!"

I held out my passport. The chief recognized my American passport and was very polite.

"Pan Amerikanin?"

"Yes," I replied.

The gendarme clicked with the heels of his shining boots, saluted me, and turned to my Polish companion. The latter looked a bit pale. He, too, held out his passport. It was a Polish passport with a white eagle painted all over it. The chief gendarme recognized his passport also.

"Pan Poliak—you are a Pole?" he asked curtly.

"Poliak."

"How is it that you are coming from the Bolsheviks?"

The engineer smiled significantly.

"You see, Pan," he said, "I worked in Soviet Russia. The Bolsheviks paid me in foreign currency. I sent it to my wife and she put it in a Polish bank. Now I am going to Polska to spend the Bolsheviks' gold . . ."

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The frown on the gendarme's face changed into a smile. I could see that he was pleased. He patted the engineer on the back. The latter shrunk back in disgust. Suddenly the idea of a Pole spending Bolshevik gold in Poland struck the gendarme as being very comical. He began to laugh. He was still chuckling when he bent over to examine my valise.

"A nice valise," he said, "is it Amerikanska?"

"Yes."

Suddenly his smile changed into a frown. He beckoned to the civilian and went into a long consultation with him. While they consulted, the gendarme twitching his well-groomed mustachios nervously, I observed the civilian. I recognized his type at once. There was no doubt about it: he was a Jew, a Jewish detective, a disgusting creature whose function is to spy upon his fellow Jews, and of whom, unfortunately, there are many in Poland. He was a little fellow with a long nose and racy, colorless eyes. He was called upon to judge whether there would be any danger to Poland if I took through with me the few Yiddish pamphlets that the gendarme found in my valise. The expert shook his head negatively.

The gendarme clicked with his heels some more and saluted me:

"I am sorry, Pan, but I can't let you take these through Poland."

"Why?"

"Bolshevik propaganda, Pan."

"You are wrong, Pan," I said, "these are pamphlets

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describing the Jewish colonization movement in Russia. They are mostly statistics anyway . . .”

“What can we do with him?” the chief asked the other gendarme in Polish. “I thought he was an American but he is only a little Jew.”

He looked at the Jewish detective. The latter again shook his head negatively.

I saw that the pans were stubborn. There was no use arguing. My poor little pamphlets! They were not destined to see Poland. Thus was averted a revolution in the *Rzecz Pospolita Polska*, in the free and happy Polish Republic . . .