Life Seen from Below

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An extract

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For free speech

For those who fought for it and those who are fighting for it

For those who will fight for it yet

1965

The tenth of December is hardly the most cheerful date for festivities in Stockholm, but that won't have bothered Mikhail Sholokhov when he visited that city in 1965 to pick up his Nobel Prize for Literature. He knew winter. The drifting of the ice floes was described in that one novel that would keep his memory alive forever, or at least as long as mankind felt an urge to search for things in books. And although the wind can wreak havoc there where a gold medal was waiting impatiently for him to claim it, Sholokhov's character allows us to imagine him arriving at the Swedish archipelago and ostentatiously removing his jacket to illustrate the hardihood of a full-blooded Cossack. Though he would have kept it on, of course, partly out of politeness and partly from fear that a rash divestment might have led to him losing the banquet speech he had carefully slipped into the inside pocket. He, the so-called Leo Tolstoy of the people, had quickly popped into the barber's before his departure from Moscow and sprinkled a few drops of perfume on his soon-to-be chiselled head before receiving the prize the real but apparently less people-ish Tolstoy had never been granted. This was his day. Today he would put his sombre years as a dockworker, bookkeeper, stonemason, clog maker, tax inspector, jack of all trades and accomplice of some behind him forever. Behind him, along with all the arses he had licked, slobbering his arduous way up as a journalist. In these hours, his having been forced to peddle his first manuscripts only made him greater, him, the son of an illiterate mother. And it pleased him to sense the rage of all those editors who had suddenly realised that they had rejected the early scribblings of a future Nobel Prize winner. Soon, very soon, his mug would grace a five-kopeck stamp, street signs with his name on them were, of course, already rolling out of the embossing machines, and only eternal life could deprive him of a state funeral.

Pure coincidence was reserved for people without talent. The fact that Stockholm city hall was located on a broad stretch of water served a higher purpose and that purpose went by the name of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov! A river lover in heart and pen, public protector of the Volga and Lake Baikal. This prole, who was not yet alienated from nature and knew when it was easiest to catch sterlet, must have also known that the bridges in the centre of this Scandinavian pearl, the Venice of the refrigerator, were the best place in the world to hook a salmon. Or an arctic char, that divine fish that needs nothing more than the simplicity of a boiled potato or two to accompany it on the plate. And a green asparagus, hurrah, occasionally, on midsummer's night for instance. As Sholokhov had reached an age where he had adopted the style of keeping his Adam's apple well concealed behind a fashionable polo neck or a fully buttoned shirt, the agitated pounding of the arteries in his tightly confined throat must have been unbearable as he climbed the city hall steps with a solemnity befitting a Lenin Prize winner, a Stalin Prize winner, and now, too, a Nobel Prize winner. That was why it was better for him to keep the top button of his shirt done up at the top of the steps while warmly shaking the hand of the local mayor: Hjalmar Leo Mehr, Meyerowitch in full, radical socialist and the son of Jewish-Russian revolutionaries. Fellow comrades. Perhaps Sholokhov also recognised Olof Palme amongst the guests, a leftist since seeing the difference between rich and poor with his own, occasionally grey eyes during a holiday in America, the Swedish Minister of Transport and Communication at the time of this Nobel Prize ceremony, but not nearly as famous as a perfect murderer would make him with a single bullet twenty-one years later. Bigshots all round, VIPs. Members of the mighty Bonnier publishing clan included: the threads of their network extended into palace smoking rooms. Not even the king wanted to miss this Nobel banquet. Gustaf VI: soporific company, a poor billiards player, an amateur botanist with the curious world of the rhododendron as his half-hearted specialisation but, according to the chatter of a renowned bibliophile, also the owner of a gigantic library that provided the palace staff

with several days of highly enjoyable dusting annually. All come to raise their glasses to the great Mikhail Sholokhov. And, of course, to enjoy the privilege of hearing his speech and giving a round of hearty applause. To reach the banquet hall, Sholokhov and his admirers had to pass through the Prince's Gallery, which Prince Eugen had once felt called to decorate with a fresco of his own making, assuming like Nero, foolishly, that status automatically gives rise to artistic talent. But deep in his dark soul, Sholokhov cherished immense sympathy for third-rate artists, for reasons he could not publically admit, and definitely not on the day he was going to be awarded the Nobel Prize.

The company was led through the Golden Hall. More pomp than splendour. A brick box set with pieces of golden mosaic, no less than eighteen thousand according to the art historian who had taken the trouble of counting them. The anorexic blonde depicted on one of the walls was supposed to represent Stockholm – in the middle of the whole world, no, in the centre of the universe! Most children's drawings had more artistic panache than this piece of pictorial puke, but once again Sholokhov would have felt a warm fraternal bond with the maker. Soon the dishes would be lowered theatrically from the ceiling of this glittering cavern, direct from the kitchen. Practised noses could possibly sniff out the menu already: a roulade of poached fish tongue, stuffed chicken with an asparagus vinaigrette and a Madeira sauce *de foie gras*, Macedonian-style pineapple, with liqueur, of course, and petit fours.

After that, coffee with, somewhat less inspired, Marie Brizard liqueur and Courvoisier cognac. The celebrated author's Cossack heart would have chimed more cheerfully if they'd pulled out a bottle of vodka, but the rumours of his unslakeable thirst for that particular beverage had undoubtedly spread beyond the village of Kruzhilin; they'd long since broken free and drilled through the concrete of the Berlin Wall, and the Nobel Committee was probably apprehensive of the prospect of an overly-slurred speech. The dinner itself was held in the adjoining area, known as the Blue Hall despite its being the colour of the cheerless red bricks of its construction. The seven hundred invitees searched raucously for the seats that had been allocated to them according to some unknown logic, concealing when necessary their disillusion regarding the proximity of any less prestigious diners. The first bottles of Chateau du Basque 1959 – known by epicures as an exceptionally good year – were decanting in the kitchen in expectation of the chicken. A procession of ramrod waiters whose pitiable faces were begging for a glint of sunlight and a shot of vitamin D brought out the glasses of champagne (Pommery & Greno Brut), and the guests found it difficult to resist sneaking a sip. But before the bubbly could be raised skyward, Sholokhov had to give his speech.

He moved forward. The crackle of the microphone gave him the international attention he'd been craving for years. He fished the speech up out of his pocket. Smoothed it out. Coughed briefly to loosen his vocal cords. And although it was a modest, theatrical smoker's cough, it already contained an echo of doom. This celebrated member of the Communist Party Central Committee would not evade death forever and would end up dying in the Orwellian year 1984 – forty kilos with his boots on – of a cancer that was even crueller than the gulags, that's not true, of a cancer that was almost as cruel as the gulags. But never mind, those worries were for later. Now it was the day, his and his alone, on which they would think about his immortality and nothing else.

1944

Any American air-force pilots with a grasp of the quintessence of war would have been delighted to bomb Sofia on March 30, 1944: a beautiful city, addicted to jazz and football, alive like never before, populated by people whose talent for happiness had been put to the test and come through with flying colours. Complaining about life is an activity more commonly practised by the fortunate, out of guilt. But war or peace, when the cheerful virtuoso Sasho Sladura picked up his violin to play in a cafe, the place would start to swing and sing, a discount paradise.

The population at the warm foot of the Vitosha had multiplied with the enthusiasm of germs: in just under fifty years the city had metamorphosed from a modest community of eleven thousand souls to an incipient metropolis with three hundred thousand residents. That kind of thing considerably increased the American military's chances of a direct hit. Even a cross-eyed gunner could do himself proud. Even a hopelessly misdirected bullet could blow a hole in something fabulous, a child perhaps.

In the Balkans they'd always had their hearts in the right place, right next to their stomachs, and that was unlikely to change. As an activity, eating vied with things as lofty as chess and in those last days of the war inventiveness was the gourmet's logical answer to food shortages. It is in simplicity that culinary artists distinguish themselves from mere cooks.

As a result the air that was filled with squadrons of deadly Mustangs and Lightnings must have also been saturated with the smells of thousands of casseroles: the final and fortunately delicious meals of one hundred and thirty-nine innocent citizens who had to pay the price for their leaders' toadying to an Austrian lunatic. The Americans didn't hit a single military target on that thirtieth of March, they didn't even try to. They were on a crusade against fascism and, like crows having a shit, they dropped their bombs at random over the centre of the oblast where Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim and Jewish people lived together in mutual respect, united by their love of goat cheese and Vasil Spasov's dribbling skills. The Bulgarian citizenry had not delivered a single Jew up to the Nazis. Bulgaria even had more Jews after the war than before. The government may have sold its conscience to the Führer, but the ordinary people refused to accept a single wagon leaving for the concentration camps and risked their own lives by blocking the tracks to prevent all rail transport to the slaughter parks. Successfully.

Unfortunately ingratitude is the way of the world, true virtue never expects virtue in return, and the people of Sofia repaired their flattened homes for the fourth time that month. Schools, the public baths, the national library, the theology faculty building, the museum of natural history, the court, the agricultural bank, you name it... all reduced to dust the populace could breathe in and cough out. To the satisfaction of the approaching communist regime that would suddenly find it much easier to acquit itself of its ideological task of cramming the city full with depressing concrete monstrosities.

1943

People in the Sofia Valley didn't have a particularly high estimation of Americans anyway, what with their chewing gum and their perfumed cigarettes. Their films were as bland as the food they ate. To save themselves from total vacuousness they'd resorted to importing and mishandling Africans, because art apparently thrives on misery, and that eventually provided them, after much pentatonic groaning on the cotton plantations, with jazz and the blues: salvation from endless nothingness. And sure enough, their military skills were even more pathetic than their taste buds. Much ado about nothing much. On that thirtieth of March 1944, to rack up, oh God, oh Lord, one hundred and thirty nine human bodies, they had caused a nasty peak in their fuel bills and expended no less than thirty-three thousand bombs. The death toll could have been a good bit lower too, if a number of civilians hadn't been too lazy to go down into the bomb shelters, as sceptical as they'd become about the sharpshooting skills of those so-called freedom fighters. You see, everybody remembered the bombing raids of a year earlier. The joke of 1943.

Bulgarian All Souls' Day. People had commemorated their dead by lighting candles on their graves. They'd dredged up old stories and laughed at the jolly escapades the deceased had got up to when alive and well. Just as tradition demanded. And afterwards, a little woozy from the bottle of rakia they had drained in memory of the departed, they had gone home to cover their windows with black paper so that if there *was* a night-time raid the American pilots would see a city as dark as anthracite sliding under their wings. And lo and behold, the American military proved cowardly enough to bomb the city that very night. Surprising people in their sleep, burying them under a steel rain, and immediately flying away again to avoiding seeing anything that might end up haunting their dreams. That was something they excelled at. The Sofia cemetery is a paradise for children who like to play hide-and-seek – though their parents might have enjoyed a race to find the grave of the writer Konstantinov more – and with all those candles on the graves that night it must have looked like an enchanting, fairy-tale city. So the Allies unwittingly bombed the cemetery. Releasing tons and tons of bombs into the depths. The only casualties that night were already dead and in their various stages of decomposition they suddenly found themselves back up above ground. The bodily remains of the Macedonian revolutionary Gyorche Petrov were also blown up out of his peaceful grave, and those who found him liked to tell the story of how, after twenty years of rotting away, his impressive beard was still dangling from his skeleton.

Since that night the commemoration of the dead has never been quite the same. Besides remembering the beautiful moments in their loved ones' lost lives, people also recall American military bungling. The tradition of the bottle of rakia was sacred, but in these hours of remembrance others might also drink a small glass of Coca-Cola, if they could get it. Not because the taste was in any way beguiling, but because it was such a joy to piss it out afterwards.

1999

When your territory is being inundated with refugees, you have reason to rejoice: it means you're finally being seen as a safe haven. Your own misery is over. You have a surplus and the outcasts who receive too little have sniffed it out. Suddenly the Bulgarians had come out on the far side of misfortune. Throngs of Kosovars were fleeing a war – because there is always going to be a war somewhere, if you live long enough everyone gets a turn – and trying to find safety in Sofia. The Balkans were trembling, but not Sofia. Well, it was momentarily. When hit by a Tomahawk cruise missile that was actually intended to plunge a number of families into mourning in Belgrade, three hundred and twenty-seven kilometres to the north-west. Despite the meteorological conditions being perfect for mass murder. And the Tomahawk counts as a "smart bomb". Which had now starred in a stupid accident. The Allies still weren't up to it. They weren't any good at it before. They weren't any good at it now. They'd never be any good at it. Collateral damage? They were bunglers. Maybe those old communist grumps had been right all along and the Westerners couldn't possibly have landed on the moon, simply because they weren't capable of it. The errant but still explosive cruise missile had been full of uranium, a great excuse to never again give up smoking, but NATO told the people of the city that there was no need for panic of any kind. Excusing himself to the Bulgarian victims, a Royal Airforce spokesperson said, "It's a missile. You can't go on testing them like washing machines."

As if the Bulgarians all had thoroughly-tested washing machines at their disposal.