



## In Anti-Bolshevik Russia

A Visit with P. D. Ouspensky

C. E. Bechhofer Roberts

Stranded in the midst of the Russian revolution, the author stayed several days in a barn with Ouspensky and Zaharov, another of Gurdjieff's followers. Over a bottle of vodka, Ouspensky engagingly relates some of his light-hearted Moscow and Essentuki adventures.

J. W. D.

There were the three of us in an old barn in Rostov-on-the-Don. Outside it was freezing; for that matter it had been freezing inside too the previous day, and would still have been but that by considerable luck and much aplomb we had managed to get some coal and stoke up a big fire. Zaharov, who was the rightful tenant of the barn—so far as anybody is the rightful tenant of a requisitioned room belonging to somebody else—had got a permit for the coal, made out, it is true, to another man from whom he had somehow obtained it. Ouspensky, leaving the fourth dimension on one side for the occasion, had concocted the whole plan; and I, as the least occupied of the three, had been given the rather laborious job of presenting the permit at the coal depot, several miles out of the town, obtaining the coal (no easy task) and escorting it back to the barn. Anyhow we had the coal.

The fire had a wonderful effect on our spirits. It seemed to thaw them out, as well as our bodies. Living, as one did in Russia, from hour to hour, a good fire was a thing to make a fuss about. We found also a quantity of spirit in one of the cupboards in the barn, and despite Zaharov's protests, we proceeded to convert it into vodka with the addition of some orange peel. Ouspensky told Zaharov that the rightful owner would never get back to Rostov in time to use it before the Bolsheviks came—a prophecy which proved to be accurate—and that, if we did not drink it, the Commissars would. So we began to drink it.

"People have been drinking since the beginning of the world," remarked Ouspensky suddenly, "but they have never found anything to go better with vodka than a salted cucumber."

With which remark he entered upon a series of reminiscences of his life in Moscow in the happy days before the war, which sounded queerly when one contrasted them with the misery and privations he and everyone else were now enduring. There was nothing of the reactionary in Ouspensky's praise of the good old days; his sister had died in prison as a political offender, and he himself had been no stranger to the revolutionary movement. One has to visit Russia, stay there a while and spend one's time with Russians, to understand what the last six years have meant for them. But I am interrupting Ouspensky.

"It was when I was a young man in Moscow," he was saying, "and my cousin once gave a party. We brewed the vodka together. It was a marvellous brew. There was one man there, the sort of type one only sees in Russia; a young man with long hair, a long beard, long moustaches and a sad, far-away look in his eyes. Well, he had one glass of vodka, got straight up from his chair, walked out of the house and into the nearest hairdresser's. There he made them run the clippers all over his head, and shave him; he came out as bare of hair as an egg, and went straight home to bed. That shows you what good vodka can do!"

"Apropos, did you ever hear," he asked, "about the chief of police in this town just after the outbreak of the Revolution in 1917? His clerk found him sitting in his office one morning, with a pile of newspapers and proclamations in front of him. He was scratching his head in perplexity. 'Ye-es,' he said at last, 'I can understand that the proletariat of the world ought to unite; but why must they unite in Rostov-on-the-Don?'"

"To-night," remarked Zaharov, with equal gravity, "we shall have hot water. We shall be able to wash our faces, clean our teeth and indulge in all sorts of unaccustomed amusements."

"Don't interrupt me," said Ouspensky. "I was remarking that every policeman in Moscow in the old days knew me by my Christian name, because, unlike most people, when I was drunk I always tried to resolve quarrels and not to start them. Besides, I used to give them big tips. And all the porters at the restaurants used to know me, and when there was a row on they used to telephone to me to come round and stop it. One night I remember I got home with the left sleeve of my overcoat missing. How I lost it, and where, I have never discovered, although I have given the matter very careful thought. Indeed, I once thought of writing a book about it."

"Well," said I, "where shall we be in a month's time, I wonder?"

They both turned on me. "It's clear," they said, "you've never lived under the Bolsheviks. If you had, you wouldn't ask that sort of question. You would acquire the sort of psychology that does not admit reflections of that kind."

"And yet," said Ouspensky, "when I was under the Bolsheviks last year, I did once consider the future. I was at Essentuki in the North Caucasus. The Bolsheviks had requisitioned all the books in the place and taken them into the school there. I went to the Commissar and asked him to make me librarian. I had been schoolmaster there previously. You didn't know I had been a schoolmaster since the Revolution, did you? [He turned to me.] Yes, and I've been a house porter, too. Well the Commissar didn't quite know what a librarian was, but I explained to him. He was a simple man and began to be almost frightened of me when I told him that I had written books of my own. So he made me librarian and I put up a big notice on the door, saying that this was the Essentuki Soviet Library. My idea was to keep the books safe, without mixing them up, so that when the Bolsheviks went away they could be given back to their owners. I arranged them nicely, and spent my time reading some of them. Then one night the Cossacks came and drove the Bolsheviks out. I ran round to the school and tore down the word 'Soviet,' for fear the Cossacks would come and destroy everything; and so it read simple 'Essentuki Library.' And next day I started to hand the books back to their owners. Not a soul had been to the Library all the time, so no harm was done in breaking it up."

"Still," said Zaharov, "Bechhofer's question has a certain theoretical interest. I wonder where we shall be in a month's time."

"You may wonder as much as you like," said Ouspensky, "but you will never find better vodka than this."

A month later I wrote the following entry in my diary:

"I can answer my own question now. I am at Novorossisk, writing this. Ouspensky is, I believe, at Ekaterinodar, trying to get his wife away to the comparative safety of the shore; I do not know if I shall ever see him again, or where. Zaharov died three days ago of small-pox, contracted at Rostov at the very time when we were living with him. And the Bolsheviks are at Rostov."

