

Jef Last, a Dutch author in Stalin's Russia

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Josephus Carel Franciscus Last (hereinafter Jef Last) was born in The Hague in 1898 of bourgeois parents (his father was a retired ship's captain who had been made a factory inspector).¹ He studied Chinese language and literature at the University of Leiden and seemed destined for a professional career, but he became a communist and he was no longer welcome in his father's home. To join the working class, which he felt in tune with, he became a jack of all trades: merchant sailor especially, but also textile worker, taxi driver, gardener, and other things besides. At one time he worked in the Rembrandt photo studio in New York; some clients thought they were posing for Rembrandt himself. In the end, he became a journalist, writer, and lecturer for the Marxist cause.

He also worked in Moscow in 1932, publishing an encyclopedia and other propaganda organs for the Communist International, whose goal was to start a revolution in every country. But at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, it was proclaimed that literature had to consolidate the revolution in Russia instead, i.e., to glorify Stalin and the Soviet system. If you did not follow this Party line you were condemned, and a clear-sighted person could see what that meant. Last was still under the shock of this reversal when he was sent to talk about it at a congress of the Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires, which Gide chaired. So the two met and formed a friendship which lasted until Gide's death in 1951.

Gide took Last and a few friends with the same political views on an official tour of the Soviet Union in 1936. He was the most important writer in France in the first half of the 20th century, already famous, and the Soviet government was well aware of what a coup it would be if they could proclaim Gide as a convert to

¹ A version of this text was presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies/Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAÉN) held at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, on June 1-2, 2019. I have written about Last a few times in my life. See Kingstone 1981-1982, 1983, 1992a, 1992b. I have also translated Last's (1966) memoir of Gide, *Mijn vriend André Gide* ('my friend André Gide'), into French, which was serialized in the *Bulletin des amis d'André Gide* from 2012-16 and is due to be published in book form in the fall of 2020. This paper consists of a series of extracts I have translated from Chapter IV of this work into English (Last forthcoming, 79-133). It is with the permission of Jef Last's heirs that they are published in this journal.

communism. He was interested in the Soviet experiment, but not in any ideology, and indeed his reasons were as much personal as social. As Gide put it, "Friendship has played a preponderant role in my life [...] In my movement towards communism, I was largely led by the wish not to disappoint people I admired, Jef Last especially, who, from the moment I saw him, in a public meeting, became such an extraordinarily close friend" (Mauriac 1951, 193-94).² Last for his part expressed a debt to Gide not only as a friend but also as a writer: he no longer wrote ideological works, but he wrote better ones:

In other words, because I got to know Gide, a break occurred in my work, which then no longer corresponded to the image the public and the critics had formed of it. The label "communist" no longer suited it, yet people could not just stick the label "renegade" on top of it, any more than they could for Gide. [...] Such a change, of course, is not pleasant for a writer. But in the last analysis Gide's judgment means more to me than that of the Dutch critics, and I know he felt I made progress as a writer. In any case, because Gide became my friend, my work gained depth and sincerity. And that happened to all the artists who experienced Gide's influence.

(Last 1966, 78)

Afterwards Gide wrote *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, which was full of praise but also mildly critical of the regime, then, when a furious wail of condemnation arose from Moscow and satellites (who had been expecting unalloyed praise), he wrote *Retouches à mon Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, which was frankly a condemnation.³ Last meanwhile served with the Republicans in the Spanish civil war, at great personal risk, until he was persuaded he could as easily be shot by his own side as by the enemy (the communists regarded him as a friend of Gide's and therefore a traitor to the cause). During World War II he edited a clandestine newspaper, finally joining the fighting ranks of the Resistance. After the war he went with Gide to war-shattered Germany and they spoke at a big international rally for youth. Then Last travelled in every country in the Far East and wrote about all of them, taught school in Indonesia and advised President Sukarno on education. He was in Bali when he learned of Gide's death in 1951. He also returned to the University of Hamburg and completed the doctoral thesis he began in the 1920s, on the Chinese realist writer Lu Xun [Hsun] (Last 1959). He also translated several of Gide's works

² Last turned all his experiences into books and articles, often more journalistic than literary and written rapidly, to deadlines. He was by everyone's account idealistic, nomadic and spontaneously extremely generous – he gave his royalties away to others who needed help. He was also, like Gide, married and gay.

³ In his essay *Ainsi soit-il* ['so be it'], written in 1949 and published posthumously, however, his memories of that trip are far more positive, to Last's puzzlement.

into Dutch, and in 1966 Last wrote *Mijn vriend André Gide*, carefully not looking at Gide's books on the Soviet trip, but setting down all the details he could remember himself.⁴

Here, then, are some extracts from that book. Gide and Last sailed on a passenger liner from London to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg again), where they joined the rest of their party, went on by train to Moscow and then to the Caucasus, were driven around Georgia (including its capital Tiflis, now Tbilisi) in an open Rolls-Royce, and returned on liners on the Black Sea via Sukhum, Sochi and Yalta to Sebastopol, then flew home via Moscow and Kiev.

[In Leningrad]

Of course we're staying in the most elegant hotel in the city. The decor is completely in the style of a nineteenth-century spa. Thick red carpet runners, tables with curly gilded legs, mirrors everywhere. An army of chambermaids in black with white aprons and starched caps. Servants who every morning spend hours polishing the floors with a sort of club foot on their right leg. Very correct but slow service, with a fantastic excess of food.

The program for Leningrad begins the very next morning. It's organized like the visit of a prince and leaves us almost no spare time. Our party, who fill several cars, is composed of generals, artists and authorities. Gide's picture has been published in all the papers, and outside the hotel there is already a group of people waiting, who point their cameras at us as soon as we emerge. Gide admires the old city and the Neva [river]. I don't agree with him that this city is more beautiful than Moscow, its symmetrical classical architecture is too cold for me. It also seems that all the columns are half as thick again as normal. They remind me of the broad gauge of Russian railways.⁵ An unpleasant attempt to dumbfound everyone with the colossal. Just as on a previous visit with *Intourist*, it dawns on me that we are only being shown monuments from the Tsarist period. Even in the entrance hall of the hotel you can see only traces of that old glory. We don't even drive through the new workers' districts, beautiful though they are.

We have an especially happy moment in the park created up against the walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress. On the river the white boats of the yacht club, a beach full of bathers, and a lot of merry visitors under the colourful umbrellas in the park. We are immediately recognized and surrounded by a heaving sea of parents and children. At last, some non-staged spontaneous enthusiasm. Gide has to shake hundreds of hands,

⁴ He and Gide agreed not to keep a diary in the Soviet Union after they caught their Soviet government *Intourist* ('foreign tourist') guide going through their wastepaper basket.

⁵ Standard gauge track is 1.435 metres wide, broad gauge is 1.52 metres. Not a huge difference.

countless cameras are aimed at him, but finally we have to run away from the great crowd of autograph-seekers.

In the evening a banquet, of which I remember above all an enormous fish which, it turned out, was made up of countless smaller fish. Gide is nervous with the endless speeches and courses of food, when we had long since been supposed to go to the opera. Finally, more or less at my insistence, and despite the Russian guests' obvious reluctance, the meal is ended. When we walk into our boxes at the opera, the performance, which is already in the second act, is suddenly interrupted. The orchestra plays the Marseillaise. Long cheers from the audience. The opera begins again with the first act.

We make a day-long tour through Leningrad's green belt, where the old country houses of the bourgeoisie have become vacation homes for children. An unforgettable, heartwarming impression. Healthy children, merry dancing, cheerful leaders whom the children clearly love. A riot of flowers in the flowerbeds, the decorations everywhere still have the character of true folk art. While we have lunch – a little too copious, to be sure – in the garden of a children's home, the children put on a performance so full of charm and imagination that Gide has tears in his eyes.

[Gide] wants to escape the formal tour and visit the Hermitage with just us. Herbart and I go exploring [the hotel] and find a service staircase that isn't guarded. We reach the street unseen and rush to the museum. We pay for our tickets like ordinary visitors. But the porter must have recognized us from our photos in the papers. We reach the second room at most when the silver fleet comes sailing towards us. At its head, a stately frigate, comes the assistant director. "Oh, Monsieur Gide, why didn't you warn us? And the director isn't here – he'll be in despair!" We have no choice but to go the director's office, where caviar and champagne are served us. Naturally we have to sign the guest book (I imagine they tore that page out later). Finally we can continue our visit. Gide, somewhat irritated, strides ahead, followed by the whole procession of assistants. He goes into a room where he spots an ancient Greek statue. The assistant director becomes even more nervous: "Excuse me, Monsieur Gide, that is not the route you have to follow." Gide explains: "I'm used to going where I see something that attracts me." She submits, but with such a sad face that Gide takes pity on her: "Lead the way then, madam. Show me which way I have to go." Since nobody is paying attention to *me*, I manage to break loose from the company and find the big room of Rembrandts. I sit still on a bench and watch one group of workers after another led past. They follow their leader like sheep and spend only a few seconds in front of the paintings that are pointed out to them. The explanations are of the same sort that docents give all over the world. Suddenly I see the official party coming in. Gide

discovers me and grabs me by the arm: "You rotten deserter! Now you're going to suffer with me to the bitter end!"

Herbart is interested in a Russian lady who studied interior decoration in Paris. She tells an unbelievable story: she was yelled at by her boss because she wanted to cover a piece of furniture with yellow material. But yellow is the symbolic colour for strike breakers and company labour unions.⁶ Herbart bursts out laughing. He once had to put out an issue of *Littérature internationale* in a different colour, because the use of yellow was forbidden then too.

[In Moscow]

Before Gide accepted the invitation, he had demanded that he could move about as freely in Russia as anywhere else. Koltsov,⁷ who was responsible for the trip, had expressly promised that. I had looked forward to myself showing Gide the Moscow that I had loved during my nine-month stay there in 1932. The village character of many places in the city, with its narrow alleys and unexpected views of whimsical Byzantine churches, had a special charm for me. But that, with all the publicity in the papers and film newsreels about our visit, was impossible. Koltsov apologized: "we are dealing with the spontaneous enthusiasm of the population, who see in your visit a symbol of Franco-Russian friendship. It is impossible, and it would also be misinterpreted both here and abroad, if we took no official notice of your visit. It would also contradict our people's conception of hospitality." [...]

In the meantime everyone's attention was concentrated on Gide, and the members of his party, when they were not with him, were not watched so closely. I was completely free to come and go as I wished, and I took advantage of this to seek out old friends and favourite spots. However, most of the friends I had had in 1932 and 1934, in the Writers' Club and in the office of the *Internationale* of revolutionary writers, proved to have disappeared, and nobody could or would tell me what had happened to them. The city itself had also changed, and not for the better. The lovely ring of boulevards around the city, which in Moscow played the same role as the canals in Amsterdam, where it crossed the main commercial streets heading for Red Square, used to be closed off by

⁶ In America, created by employers to counter genuine unions.

⁷ Mikhail Yefimovitch Koltsov (1898-1942), Soviet journalist but more than that according to another of the Gide party, Pierre Herbart, who described Koltsov in his *En U.R.S.S., 1936* as "supervisor of the Union of Writers and the Soviet press" (34) – in other words a powerful tool of Stalin's tyranny.

buildings which shielded you from dust in summer and snowstorms in winter. There were parks in them, like the Eusebiusplantsoen in Arnhem, where children played and courting couples sat on benches. There you could see the old Russian Punch and Judy show, and in the summer children rode around on camels. That had all been torn down to make room for traffic. Smooth asphalt roads had arisen, much too wide to dare to cross them. [...] The thousand-year-old wall of the Kitaigorod (the Chinese quarter) with its Byzantine towers, had been demolished to make room for a parking lot.

I was still less pleased with what had taken the place of all that old beauty. I couldn't imagine why it was necessary to decorate subway stations with an excessive luxury of marble tiles, pictures and gilded lamps. That seemed as crazy to me as keeping your most valuable paintings in the toilet. Would it not have been better to keep the costs down, so that workers didn't have to pay a rouble per journey, a price out of reach for them?

In 1932 I had taken foreign friends with me to see remarkable new buildings, such as the one designed by Le Corbusier. [...] But now this style was completely discredited and huge new buildings had been put up in a classical confectionery style, like gigantic cream tarts. Two or three storeys had been added to almost all the old houses, but of course with no elevators, and against the simple facades they had stuck a sort of Corinthian pillars. I couldn't help thinking of an essay by Goethe, where he sees the freestanding pillar as a symbol of the democratic Greek individual and the pilaster built into the wall as a slave who belonged in the imperialistic Roman world.

Pottery, furniture, textiles betrayed an uncommonly bad petty-bourgeois taste. I don't think I saw in one store window anything I would have liked to buy for my house. [...] The housing shortage had gotten worse rather than better, and all around the city whole neighbourhoods had sprung up where people lived in sod houses or holes in the ground, in circumstances worse than even the Drenthe had experienced.

Gide (1952) himself wrote about the days in Moscow: "I can really say that I have known fame and that I didn't always enjoy the taste of it" (55). His companions shared in that fame. We were photographed from in front and behind, from above and below, had to sign endless autographs, talk to reporters, and once, while riding next to Gide in an open car through Sebastopol, I was covered with flowers thrown by schoolchildren from the sidewalks, which buried us waist deep. [...] He grew angry and shouted

"Enough already, I'm not the king of France!" [...] In 1932 I had been present at the reception for the writer Henri Barbusse. All the foreign writers living in Moscow at the time had received a letter saying our "spontaneous presence was requested at the station." The word spontaneous was not so crazy, for certainly we all spontaneously wanted to be there. When we came out of the station, the great square in front of it was packed with a crowd of thousands, who greeted Barbusse by singing the *Internationale*.⁸ I have seldom seen anyone so moved, and from that moment his critical intelligence was completely switched off. Our reception at the Moscow station was roughly similar, except that they sang the Marseillaise. Gide was not moved in the slightest. His only comment, on the car ride to the hotel, was "Did you see what a hurry they were in to get away?"

This whole staged sincerity filled Gide from the beginning with a mistrust which at the time I thought was often unfounded. Much later, when we arrived in Moscow unexpectedly, not according to the timetable, and went to see a movie in the afternoon before our plane left, nobody recognized us and the commissionaire treated us pretty rudely. "Do you see," Gide said to me then, "how artificial and puffed up all that previous homage was?"

We visited the institutes for the re-education of young criminals at Bolshevo.⁹ Again, Gide got an excellent impression of the group of firm self-aware young men whom we met there, but one remarkable incident happened on our tour. All the rooms we had seen up 'till then were decorated with the horrible social-realist propaganda paintings that looked like enormous enlargements of picture postcards. But then in one of the upstairs hallways I suddenly saw a brightly coloured original painting somewhat in the style of Jacoba van Heemskerck.¹⁰ I pointed it out to Gide, and he found it beautiful too. But the director who was giving us the tour seemed inconsolable that we had discovered it. He apologized profusely: "The work of a pupil we were very fond of. In many ways a brilliant lad. Out of sentimentality we let it hang there, in memory of him, although I know perfectly well that it's completely against the line. I will correct my mistake

⁸ Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) was a communist French writer chiefly known for his striking description of life in the trenches in World War I, *Le Feu* ('fire'). He often lived in Soviet Russia and died there.

⁹ A village created by the GPU (secret police and forerunner of the KGB) to rehabilitate young *bezprizorni* ('homeless people') who had become criminals. Gide (1936) knew that to be admitted, you had to turn in your accomplices (98).

¹⁰ Jacoba van Heemskerck (1876-1923), Dutch artist who borrowed from the forms of architecture and metal structures, using bright colours and heavy outlines.

at once. I will have it taken away today." All our assurances that we thought it as a very good painting, were of no avail. [...]

After tea Gide was introduced to a man of about thirty, who was to tell us his life story. He was a *byesprizorni* ('homeless or abandoned child') and had committed horrible crimes, 'till the GPU had brought him to Bolshevo, where they had opened the way for him to a new life. I think he was now a foreman in one of the institute's workshops. His tale of the misery of his neglected youth was well told. He became lyrical when he told of the rebirth that he had experienced in Bolshevo, and of his joy at being able to co-operate in the socialist reconstruction. I must say I was really moved.

Maybe something was lost in the translation, however, because Gide did not share this emotion in the least. "But my dear boy," he said to me later, "don't you understand that that was pure Salvation Army? The poor fellow makes a nice little earner out of his confession. He's repeated it so often that he knows it by heart, as an actor knows his lines. And how smug! The only moment I liked him was when you could tell what pleasure he got from remembering his crimes."

[On the train to the Caucasus]

At every stop an enormous crowd of passengers got off the train and formed a crush around the urns of hot water to fill their teapots. Before the train left again, a bell rang three times, but many people jumped on the train when it was already moving. Gide was burning with curiosity to wander through the crowded cars, but we were assured that it was impossible to establish a connection between them and our private car [which was attached at the rear].

At the next stop I persuaded Gide to get off and only get on again at the last moment, in one of the forward cars. Gide was as delighted as a naughty boy with this little plan. We walked through the whole train, to the great joy of Gide, who stared wide-eyed. A Russian train full of people doesn't look much like a Western train, it gives you rather the impression of the migration of a tribe. We ended up in a car full of high school students who were going to a resort in the Caucasus to learn to ski. I admired afresh Gide's uncommon skill at immediately becoming the *frère et compagnon* ('brother and pal') of these young people, although they didn't understand a word of each other's language. Meanwhile a real panic must have broken out in our private car, and Bola, our official guide, no doubt thought he'd been left behind at the last station. She almost threw her arms around me for joy when I told her at the next stop that Gide was in the forward section. Suddenly it turned out that it took less than a minute to fold down the bridge and pull the concertina across to connect us to the forward cars. Gide came back to our private car for his afternoon nap, but in the evening

the whole group of schoolchildren were invited to join us. That successful evening party, with songs and balalaika music, belongs with the most positive memories that Gide brought back from Russia.

[Tiflis (today Tbilisi)]

That Gide was no freer to move about in Tiflis than in Leningrad or Moscow, is clear from two incidents:

In the first one he actually succeeded in sneaking out of the hotel early in the morning through a service exit. On his own he wandered along the boulevard and stopped at an incident. A few journalists, who happened to be passing by in a car, recognized him: "But Monsieur Gide, what are you doing here? This is nothing special. The woman was knocked down, the ambulance will be here in a moment. There's nothing to see." Gide tried to explain to them that he was interested precisely by how people in different countries react in such an event. The journalists understood nothing of this. "But Monsieur Gide, you're only here for such a short time, and there are much more interesting things you have to see! Have you seen the new power station? And the dam? Have you been to the movie studio, and the museum?" The bystanders had long since lost interest in the woman who had been knocked down, they stood staring at Gide, wide-eyed. To get away from their curiosity, Gide got in the car and the journalists took him to an exhibition of paintings in the Central Museum. The paintings were of the size and quality of the ones we see hanging on fairground carrouseles, and every one of them showed an episode in the life of Stalin.

The second incident occurred when we were to take a drive outside the city. We had sat in the car for a good quarter of an hour without going anywhere when Gide became impatient and ordered the chauffeur to get going, but the driver just answered "Ya nye ponimayu" (I don't understand). Afraid of a new outburst from Gide, Bola intervened. With obvious reluctance the chauffeur started out, but after we had driven around the same block three times we stopped again in front of the hotel entrance. Not until our "guardian angel,"¹¹ who was obviously late, had taken his seat next to the chauffeur could the real journey begin.

Meanwhile, as I have said, the less important members of the party had much more freedom. Herbart and I took advantage of that to wander over to the ruins on the hill which closes the city in on one side, to follow the river where it runs through a ravine, and to explore the labyrinth of narrow streets behind the pretty boulevards, on which there were very strict traffic policemen but almost no cars. We were disappointed that so little architectural beauty had survived, but we found some remarkable

¹¹ The GPU official who went everywhere with them in the Caucasus. After World War II, the GPU would be known as the KGB.

things. The "flea market" shows the same miserable repulsive scene that I had already seen in so many Russian cities in the hinterland. Nowhere is the terrible scarcity of consumer goods more evident than in these markets. It is almost unimaginable what worn-out broken junk is being offered here, and apparently finding buyers. That a peasant child is watching over his stock of one falling-apart shoe, one threadbare shirt and one tea-kettle with no spout, is just one example out of a thousand. And how is it possible for there to be buyers for bits of meat that have turned purple and yellow and are covered with hordes of flies? Among all these splendid things there is a swarm of peasants in rags. Suddenly a mother comes to a halt before us, with a little girl at most twelve years old. The child is barefoot and is wearing a sheepskin, wool side in against her body. On a command from her mother she opens it. She has nothing on underneath it. This mother, who visibly has nothing else, is offering her daughter for sale.

Finally [at Gide's insistence] we were promised a four days' visit to study agriculture. The road we followed didn't seem like a road, just a pair of vehicle tracks across the steppe. It was very warm and the wheels of our car threw up clouds of dust. [At the kolkhoz they were entertained with] wonderful impressive choral singing with very remarkable melodies. Exuberant folk dancing. We slept in a long bare room on iron bedsteads like in a French maid's room. [...] In the cold light of morning the kolkhoz we had been brought to was a desolate sight. The old landowner's house that we had slept in was completely uninhabited, with brown damp patches on the ceilings and dirty peeling walls. There was hardly a chair in the whole building, just benches with no backs. On the walls hung oleographs of Lenin and Stalin and other ugly advertising prints. The barns and stables we were shown would make any Dutch farmer ashamed. Even the kitchen garden was overgrown. We were told that the actual fields where the tractors were used were located a good way from the house and we didn't have time left to go and see them. Since we therefore couldn't go and see the farming actually being done, Gide began to ask the peasants a number of questions. Both the questions and the answers had to be translated twice, from Georgian into Russian then from Russian into French, and vice versa. This produced unusually little information of value.

[On their journey they stopped at other peasants' farms, all equally poor.] Only once was there a sewing machine, but that was the house of a Party official. This man was Russian, so I could check Bola's translation of his replies. I told Gide that she had mistranslated various of his answers and given other statistics than the man had. So Gide decided to get his own back on

her. He ordered the driver to step on it, and there was no sign of the car behind us when we rode into Gory [Stalin's birthplace].

Only now did Gide tell me what he had in mind. He had thought it would be nice to send Stalin a telegram of thanks, but he wanted no Russian interference in the text. In the telegraph office he handed me his text for me to translate. I broke out in a sweat, because Gide had overestimated my knowledge of the language. My Russian was good enough to understand people and read the newspapers. I could make myself understood, but I spoke Russian like a child: I didn't know the last two cases of the noun or the various tenses of the verb.¹² My spelling was even worse. I honestly didn't dare send a telegram in my Russian to Stalin, knowing that every word would count.

Gide, getting steadily more nervous because Bola could turn up any moment, began to reproach me, and even seemed to think for a moment that I was trying to wriggle out of his request for political reasons. Before we got done with our quarrel, Bola dashed in. She snatched up Gide's telegram and immediately declared that it couldn't be sent like that. The greeting was wrong for a start. Gide had written "Comrade Stalin." That could not possibly be translated as *tovarishch*, but had to be at least *vozhd' narodov* (leader of the nations). "But that's not his official title," said Gide.

"No, but that's the title that Party members customarily give him."

"I'm not a Party member," said Gide, "and I cannot believe that Stalin appreciates such flattery."

"Stalin hates flattery," answered Bola, "but he will certainly appreciate it if you address him the way his friends are accustomed to do."

Gide insisted that it should say "comrade" and that he wished to speak to Stalin as he would in France. The director of the telegraph office stood there trembling and didn't dare take responsibility. Fed up with the whole business, I walked out of the office. I don't know exactly what the upshot was, but I think that in the end no telegram was sent.

Of this journey, largely along the Turkish border, Gide writes: "Pierre Herbart had fun claiming (but that was solely to annoy our guide Bola) that our car, or else the car ahead of us, carried banners with slogans in our honour, which I saw every time we went through every little village, always the same ones." That wasn't just a claim and it wasn't just said to annoy Bola. Herbart had noticed that in one of the slogans (which were in French) there was always the same spelling mistake. Once we had spotted that, we could easily tell from other details, a blot or a scratch, that it was always the same banner. It must have been collected from behind us and taken past us during our midday rest. Nothing too surprising in the land of Potemkin!

¹²The Russian noun has six case endings: nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, instrumental and prepositional (= locative).

The steamer *Proletarskaya* took us across the Black Sea, which luckily didn't live up to its name – it looked more like the blue surface of the Mediterranean. It was a beautiful ship with excellent accommodation for the first-class passengers. On the broad promenade deck and the sports deck we had plenty of room. But if we looked below, we saw that the waist of the ship and the tween-decks were packed with peasant families who left almost no room free at the hatches. They had brought their own food in baskets and bags and slept at night in the open air. It was better not to think what would happen if we were shipwrecked, because the lifeboats could certainly not have held even a tenth of this swarming mass. When we asked them why they were travelling, they said they had heard that farm labourers were needed in the Ukraine and that bread was cheap there.

Gide was annoyed because the ship's officers treated him like a prince, whereas nobody seemed to pay any attention to Masereel.¹³ Clearly his artistic style was no longer appreciated in the Soviet Union, he was regarded as a *quantité négligeable*. Masereel himself seemed perfectly happy. He did a whole series of pen and ink drawings of the peasants and the crew, and gave me one of them, with a dedication. Gide became absolutely furious when we arrived in Sukhum, where cars were waiting for our group but Masereel had to go into town and find what accommodation he could. There was another outburst right on the quayside from Gide, who wanted to keep Masereel with him, and who also protested at being lodged once again in a big house out in the country. However, it became clear to him and us that we couldn't refuse without causing a scandal, when he heard that Stalin himself had sent a telegram putting his own villa at our disposal. We had to say goodbye to the Masereels, but Gide went on sulking, and once we got there he refused the room that had been intended for him. He chose a small room instead, which is how I had the honour of sleeping where he was meant to, in the bed of my namesake, Uncle Joe.¹⁴

Gide's mood got even worse when the governor (or perhaps the party boss) of Abkhazia made us wait a good hour when we were starving. When he finally appeared, he was a little man with high black boots, a white Russian blouse and a hearing aid in one ear. His yellowish face had a Semitic look such as we had already seen in many Georgians. But something special radiated from this man, and Gide's anger disappeared in a few minutes.

The villa was very simply furnished, but the meal was excessive as usual. I remember among other things a baked suckling pig with working electric lights for eyes, that was served on a silver salver by lackeys in velvet

¹³ Franz Masereel (1889-1972), a prominent Flemish artist who happened to be on the same boat, but not a guest of honour. An expressionist, his work is satirical and pacifist. Gide had met him in Paris in 1935 and admired his work.

¹⁴ Jef is short for Josephus, and Stalin's right name was Joseph Vissarionovich Djughashvili.

livery and white stockings. Gide and the governor, without using an interpreter, were soon in deep conversation and left the table long before the end of supper, to go on talking alone in Gide's room. That evening Gide said to me, "That is the most remarkable and interesting figure I have met so far in the Soviet Union." But he wouldn't tell me what they discussed. A few weeks after we got back to Paris, it was in the papers that this man had been condemned and liquidated.

No doubt because Gide had had a conversation with the governor, we only got to spend one night in Stalin's villa. With a feeling of relief we left the hedge and the guard behind and moved to a hotel on the Abkhazian Riviera. [...] The guests were largely Soviet intellectuals and artists, who paid 1000 roubles a month each to stay there. The chambermaid who served us, a still fairly young widow, earned 90 roubles a month. She lived with her family in a shed on the property. The seven of them shared one room with only a bed and a table for furniture. The mother slept with the girls in the bed, the boys slept on the floor. When I visited her, their lunch was on the table: a lump of sour bread and a herring. For 1 rouble 65 they could get a hot meal in the staff restaurant, and they did that two or three times a week.

My strongest memory of Sukhum is the sharp contrast between this peaceful, paradise-like setting and the tragedies hidden everywhere. When we arrived the hotel manager had profusely apologized that he couldn't offer any better accommodations. Unfortunately, he said, the hotel was built in the experimental period, when architecture had sailed too close to "formalism." The plan was to downgrade it to a workers' rest home, and soon they would build a new hotel in the classical style, with a frieze and columns. Just as with the painting in Bolshevo, it was impossible to persuade him that that was exactly the kind of architecture we found especially beautiful. By chance we had a young Soviet architect at our table that evening. When we attacked him, he defended the new Soviet architecture vigorously, but with such stupid and banal arguments that we finally stopped talking. Half an hour later I was in Gide's room when there was a timid knock on the door. I opened it and the architect came in, hastily shutting the door behind him. He refused to sit down. "Monsieur Gide," he said, "I just wanted to tell you that this afternoon I had to say what I said. A GPU agent was sitting at the next table. But I couldn't stand it if I thought you believed that we Soviet architects were really such idiots. Of course everything I said was nonsense." He wouldn't stay and talk for a moment longer, but before I let him out I first made perfectly sure nobody was to be seen in the hallway.

When I went for an afternoon walk the next day, I saw a little way from the hotel a drunk who was being tormented by a bunch of boys. Although his clothing was torn and stained, he didn't look like a peasant. A

dark lock of hair hung over his sweaty young face, over his intelligent eyes. He looked to me like a sort of personification of Schiller's Karl Moor.

Since I had long since learned that in Russia only drunks will tell you the truth, and because I suspected a Dostoievskian drama behind his drunkenness, I got close to him and grabbed his arm when he stumbled and was liable to fall. In that way it was relatively easy to strike up a conversation. I advised him to sleep it off under the trees and promised to come back in two hours with a bottle of vodka from the hotel and drink it with him on the river bank.

At six o'clock I indeed found him at the same place, still sleeping under the trees. But he soon woke up and was relatively sober. We walked together in silence for some time till we reached a quiet spot by the river, where we sat down on a pair of stones. I handed him the bottle, which he drank almost a quarter of in one swig. As I had expected, it took little effort after that to get him to talk. I had been right to conclude that he was an intellectual. He had studied at the film academy in Sverdlovsk. "I was a gifted student," he said, "not just anyone. In my first year I won the prize for the best documentary in our class. I was a great admirer of Eisenstein and Pudovkin."¹⁵ Those ideals were my undoing. When the official direction was changed to fit the General Line, I didn't want to submit. I was commissioned to make a short film and I used my modern ideas about montage. For that I was accused of wasting government money on an anti-proletarian film that the workers couldn't understand. The director felt kindly towards me and I could perhaps have saved myself if I had criticized myself in public and promised to do better. I was damned if I would. So then they launched another accusation against me, for sabotage."

[From Sukhum they took the boat to Sochi.]

We paid a moving visit to Nikolaj Ostrovski, the author of *How the steel was tempered*.¹⁶ Gide stayed at his bedside for nearly an hour. Completely paralyzed, the still-young writer lay in a bed whose sheets were no paler than his laundry-coloured skin that had sunk deeply around the eyes and was tautly stretched over the skull already clearly detectable under it. Yet shortly before our arrival he had been lying there dictating his new novel, which he hoped to finish before his rapidly approaching death. The more assured he was of that death, the less it filled him with fear. In those still

¹⁵ Vsevolod Vissarionovich Pudovkin (1893-1953), one of the greatest Soviet-era film directors (*Mother, The End of Saint Petersburg, Storm over Asia*).

¹⁶ Nikolaj Alexandrovich Ostrovski (1904-1936), a Russian novelist who remained a fervent Bolshevik. His novel *Kak zakaljalas' stal'* (*How the steel was tempered*) presents a young hero (himself) who fights for the triumph of the revolution. Paralysis and blindness did not allow him to complete his second novel, *Rozhdennye burei* (*Born of the storm*), on the civil war in the Ukraine in the 1920s.

always determined eyes shone his idealism, tempered to steel by the civil war. He believed in the future of communism as a Christian believes in Heaven.

From Nikolaj Ostrovski's sickbed we were taken to the editorial office of the *Kurortnaya Gazeta*.¹⁷ They didn't believe in tears there either. They were a merry intelligent troop of still remarkably young journalists. Their hearty comradeship was disarming. Elsewhere Gide would surely have looked a little bemused at the editor-in-chief's naïve declaration: "Monsieur Gide, when we heard that you would visit our city, we immediately sent to Moscow for your books. I can tell you that we fulfilled our plan one hundred per cent and in the allotted time, as a team, we read your complete works."

But in the light of later events, the lead article of the *Kurortnaya Gazeta* seems strange, yet it is but one example among many of the ridiculous praise: "With deep joy we today greet André Gide and his comrades in arms, our comrades Jef Last, an important Dutch writer, and Pierre Herbart and Eugène Dabit, the best representatives of France's revolutionary literature. Long before André Gide devoted his great talent to oppressed humanity, public opinion in our country highly appreciated the magnificent art and admirable mind of the creator of *Les Nourritures terrestres*, *Voyage au Congo*, *Retour du Tchad*, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* and other masterworks which have placed the name of André Gide in the first rank of contemporary literature..."

[In Sochi]

Gide told cheerful stories about youth camps, clubhouses and libraries that they had visited. It seemed that everything in Sochi was a model example. Then we opened the papers. Whole pages were devoted to a so-called discussion about the new constitution. I read and translated this "discussion" for Gide. They were pieces like this: "When I was still living in New York, I couldn't pay my rent for a week because I was ill. When the debt had risen to thirty dollars, my landlord cancelled the lease. I refused to leave the apartment because I had a fever. Thereupon the landlord sent for the fire brigade and blasted me out of bed with fire hoses. Now I am back in the Soviet Union, thanks to your policy, o Stalin, leader of the nations, such scandals cannot occur any more. The new constitution

¹⁷ Two articles from this newspaper, translated into French by Last, are among his papers in the Literary Museum (*Literatuurmuseum*) in The Hague. One announces a new edition of Gide's complete works translated into Russian, the other reports that the level of borrowing of Gide's works from the public libraries of Sochi was very high (surprise...).

guarantees us that we need not worry if we are ill. I cannot be grateful enough, o great Stalin, for this constitution.”

The whole page was written in this style. Not a word of criticism, not one sensible observation, nothing that *looked* like a discussion, nothing but Byzantinism. Even more sinister were the other columns of the paper, in which already the first reports were appearing of the purges and trials. It seemed as if this joyful Soviet Union was riddled with corruption even in the very highest ranks. The death penalty, and years-long confinement in prisons and concentration camps, seemed the only means to prevent disaster.

From Sochi to Sebastopol we are again on a shiny passenger ship, the Grusia [=Georgia, in Russian]. [...] When I look down at the tween-decks, I see the same swarming mass of peasants in rags with shoes made of birchbark tied around their legs with string. They eat melons or chew sunflower seeds. You don't need to offer them vodka to hear the grumbling voice of discontent. Clearly they are sure they can hide in the anonymity of the grey mass. It's always the same complaints. Not enough bread in the winter, no place to keep the little bit of grain that you raise on your own piece of land, so that you're forced to sell it to the kolkhoz after all. And for the money you get for it, the village stores don't have a single thing to buy. No tea-kettles, no shoes, no sewing thread. The only well stocked stores are the bookstores.

I saw leaning over the railing a young man who obviously did not belong with the peasants. His shabby but clean clothes were more that of a student. He had beautiful, slightly melancholy brown eyes. I tried to start a conversation with him, but he broke off his sentences in the middle and spoke so softly I could hardly understand him. But slowly I got to learn his life story. His father was the foreman of a rubber boot factory, his mother was a Volga German.¹⁸ He was educated in the factory's high school and came out top of his class. Then the "triangle" (the director, the Party representative and the union representative) decided he should have a scholarship to study chemistry at the technical university. But he didn't want to. From his childhood onwards he was interested in literature. His mother knew Heine's *Buch der Lieder* by heart and recited poems from it in the evenings.¹⁹ He hated chemistry. He wanted to become an artist. His father couldn't understand that. The party cell, the union and the

¹⁸ In 1760-61 Catherine the Great invited 27,000 Germans to come and settle in the lower Volga valley. Between the two world wars they had their own soviet republic, but when Hitler invaded, it was abolished and they were deported to Siberia.

¹⁹ Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), a great German poet in whom romanticism and revolutionary views mingled. His *Buch der Lieder* (*Book of songs*) appeared in 1827.

management understood it even less. He had a head on his shoulders and the factory needed chemists. Shouldn't he be grateful for the scholarship they gave him? Had he no responsibility to the factory that paid for all his education? Didn't it show a bad character and a very suspect political outlook, if he refused to serve the construction effort in the place the Party assigned him? He would surely be seen as a saboteur and perhaps put his whole family in danger. Tired of his father's constant pressure, he ran away. He'd rather try to earn a living on a kolkhoz. At least for this vacation people would leave him in peace. After that he'd see. Perhaps they'd forget him. Perhaps it would be possible to disappear in the masses.

"But that's absolutely monstrous, horrible," I exclaimed, "that they want you to study something which is absolutely not in your nature!"

He didn't seem to understand my indignation. Why would that be horrible? It was his fault. His mother spoiled him. And it's true, the factory had paid for his education, and a rubber boot factory needs chemists...

He went back to his admiration for Heine. But his teacher had told him that that was wrong too. Heine is too romantic...

"Your teacher is a fool. Marx admired Heine. And Heine happened to write the most revolutionary poems of his time. But those are not in the *Buch der Lieder*. But which *Russian* writers do you like?"

He named a few well-known names: Sholokhov, Fedin, Alexei Tolstoy.²⁰
"I mean the classics."

Yes, he'd read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* [*Vojna i mir*], Gogol's *Dead Souls* [*Mjortvyje dúshi*], Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* [*Otcy i deti*].

"And Dostoyevsky? What do you think of Dostoyevsky?"

His voice was almost inaudible. "Dostoyevsky is a giant ... But in school we weren't encouraged to read him..."

"Why not?"

"He's decadent. Almost as decadent as Garshin!"²¹

"Nonsense! Absolute nonsense! And come to that, even if he was decadent, can't his work be beautiful? What do you think of Yesenin?"²²

²⁰ Mikhail Alexandrovich Sholokhov (1905-84), Soviet author, notably the author of *Quiet flows the Don*, begun in 1925 and completed in 1940. Konstantin Alexandrovich Fedin (1892-1977), a socialist realist writer, but his stories have a certain freshness. Alexei Tolstoy (1883-1945), novelist and short story writer, originally anti-Bolshevik (of the White Russian nobility), but he changed sides and flourished. He is not to be confused with Leo Tolstoy (1869, 1899) and his *War and peace* (*Vojna i mir*).

²¹ Vsevolod Mikhailovich Garshin (1855-88), Russian short story writer who wrote about people with delusions, suffered from them himself, and committed suicide.

²² Last scares the lad by inquiring what he thinks of a contemporary writer who is not officially approved. Sergei Alexandrovich Yesenin (1895-1925), a lyrical poet who at first hailed the Revolution but grew hostile to it, succumbed to depression and committed suicide. Young people liked his poetry, but the Party judged it too alien to the proletariat.

His melancholy brown eyes were wide open now, but wide open with fear. He looked at me as if I was the Devil himself. He jerked out: "What do you want of me? Are you a provocateur? I won't talk to you any more." A moment later he had disappeared into the grey mass of peasants.

[Sebastopol] is a very grey city, built up against a hill, on top of which a panorama showed the siege of the city [in the Crimean War in 1855]. I went to see it, and it looked just as realistic and dusty as the Panorama Mesdag.²³ Other things seemed familiar to me here. One single streetcar line ran in a circle around the grey concrete blocks of downtown. The cars were identical to those on the "frog" [streetcar named *De kikker*] to Sloterdijk [neighbourhood in Amsterdam].²⁴ No doubt the same American company had sold the same design to the two places. A few happy Young Pioneers came along with us as guides. One of them tugged at Gide's coat: "Monsieur Gide, do you see our electric streetcar? Have you anything like that in Paris?" He was only nine or ten years old, and he was convinced that there could be no more modern city in the world than Sebastopol.

[That evening Last and Gide snuck out from an endless dinner into a neighbouring park.] Children lay sleeping on nearly all the benches and even on the grass. They looked filthy and were wearing indescribable rags. One of them lay with his teeth chattering. Obviously he had a fever. Gide tried to stuff a banknote in his hand, but his filthy claw was too feeble and he dropped it. We had to stuff it in his pocket, for fear the other children would steal it from him. We asked him where he came from. He was a peasant lad from the Ukraine, and there was famine there. Besides, the winter in Sebastopol was warm. I remembered reading in the papers that it was proposed to introduce the death penalty for children as young as twelve, because of the rise in banditry.

[While Gide, Herbart and Schiffrin left for Moscow, Last stayed in Sebastopol to be with their companion Eugène Dabit, who (unbeknownst to him) was dying there of a misdiagnosed scarlet fever.] I wandered back down to the harbour and got into a conversation with two or three of the boys who dived for pennies. [...] They eagerly took the cigarettes I offered

²³ A panorama is a painting forming a circle around the spectator. The Panorama Mesdag, in The Hague, depicting the coast at Scheveningen in 1880, is housed in a round building constructed for it. The painter H.W. Mesdag (1831-1915) was the leader of the "Scheveningen school" and devoted his life to seascapes.

²⁴ See Otto (2004).

them. Laughing, they asserted that they had no other clothes than the swimming trunks they had on. I said I couldn't believe that. They laughed: "Come with us, you'll see where we camp." Near the harbour there was a quasi-Roman triumphal arch painted yellow. In the square pillars, on either side of the passage through it, were doors. They opened one of them. Behind it was a sort of oblong kennel with no window, the floor of which was covered with newspapers. "Here," they said, "we sleep at night. The police turn a blind eye. And there in the corner is everything we possess." And indeed, to describe as clothes the few threadbare rags in a little heap there, would have been an exaggeration.

[Back in Moscow]

I paid a visit to my friend Sipovitch. Even at his home, as well as at the home of my other friend, Volodya Bisharin, the walls seemed to sweat fear. [...] As pompous as our arrival had been, so cool and unemotional was our departure. All the authorities were probably too worried about what awaited them, to pay much attention to us.

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