

DIARIES **AND**
SELECTED LETTERS



"ONE OF THE GREATEST WRITERS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY"
A.S. BYATT

**ВЛАДИМИР
МАЯКОВСКИЙ**
MIKHAIL

DIARIES AND SELECTED LETTERS

Mikhail Bulgakov

Translated by Roger Cockrell



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Introduction

“Am I thinkable in the USSR?”
*Mikhail Bulgakov, letter to the Soviet
government, 28th March 1930*

This volume of Mikhail Bulgakov’s diaries and letters covers a period of twenty years, from the time of Bulgakov’s arrival in Moscow in the autumn of 1921 to his death in the same city in March 1940. In the early years, Bulgakov was overwhelmingly preoccupied with domestic concerns and day-to-day survival in an environment that was often less than welcoming. But his thoughts were also directed outwards and, as a journalist and avid reader of newspapers, he became a keen observer of the social and political scene. Many comments in the diary relate to the volatile international situation outside Soviet Russia, particularly the potentially explosive events in Germany and the growing hostility and conflict between Soviet-style socialism and fascism. As regards Great Britain, he was less than impressed by its imperialist ambitions and its population of “slow-witted Brits” (see diary entry of 20th–21st December 1924).

By this time, however, Bulgakov’s desire to become a writer and his growing awareness of his special talent had already taken shape within him. He knew that the future would be difficult: “I bitterly regret,” he wrote on 26th October 1923, “that I gave up medicine, thereby condemning myself to an uncertain existence. But God will see I only did this because of my love of writing.” Once the decision had been made, however, he entered the literary scene in the early to mid-1920s with an astonishing burst of creative energy, producing a major novel, *The White Guard*, several stories and a number of plays. Initially he met with some success: one story, *The Fatal Eggs*, was published, together with part of *The White Guard*, and a dramatic adaptation of the same novel, *The Days of the Turbins*, was staged in Moscow to great acclaim. But there it was to end, and

a pattern was soon set that lasted for the rest of his life, in which he was attacked by a universally hostile and often virulent press, harassed by the secret police and subjected to crippling censorship.

After appealing to the government, he was given work as an assistant director at the Moscow Arts Theatre, but his urge to write remained undiminished. He found himself trapped, increasingly depressed, frustrated and overwhelmed by exhaustion and a sense of hopelessness. "I am unable to write anything," he wrote to Maxim Gorky on 6th September 1929. "Everything has been banned, I am ruined, persecuted and totally alone." He was to all intents and purposes imprisoned in the city that he had come to love. "I have been injected with the psychology of a prisoner," he wrote on 30th May 1932. He felt sufficiently safe to reveal his innermost thoughts and fears to only a very few correspondents – among them, his wife Yelena Sergeyevna, in a whole series of letters while she was away from Moscow in the summer of 1938, his brother Nikolai in Paris, the composer Boris Asafyev, the writer Yevgeny Zamyatin and his first biographer, Pavel Popov, with whom he was on especially friendly terms. With the renowned director and co-founder of the Moscow Arts Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky, the relationship was altogether more ambivalent, ranging from "delighted admiration" at Stanislavsky's skill as a director during rehearsals (31st December 1931) to "radical disagreement" with the Arts Theatre's impossible demands concerning the staging of his play *Molière* (22nd April 1935). As for the Moscow Arts Theatre's other co-founder, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Bulgakov seems to have had little but contempt for him. "Oh, yes," he writes with heavy sarcasm to his wife on 3rd June 1938, "I am simply dying with impatience to show my novel to such a philistine." At times Bulgakov could be brutally abrupt. In his diary entry of the 23rd to 24th December 1924 he referred to the novelist Alexei Tolstoy as a "dirty, dishonest clown", and elsewhere he accused the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold of being "so lacking in principles" that it was as if he walked about "just in his underpants" (letter of 14th June 1936).

We will never know how much Bulgakov's anger and sense of despair would have been mitigated had he been allowed to go

abroad, but we are left in no doubt how vitally important such permission was for him. Although at one stage he asked to be deported (letter to Stalin of July 1929), he emphasized in many other letters that he wanted only to be able to travel abroad for a couple of months. For personal and medical reasons he wanted his wife to accompany him, but they were both prepared to leave Yelena's young son behind as a pledge of their return. At one stage, permission appeared to have been granted, only for hopes to be cruelly dashed. It was simply not to be, it seemed, and he was left with his yearning and his dreams. "I dreamt about Rome," he wrote in a letter of 11th July 1934, "a balcony, just as described in Gogol, pine trees, roses... a manuscript." The Rome of Gogol, the Paris of Molière (which occupied a place in his heart that was second only to his beloved native city of Kiev), sunshine and the Mediterranean – all lured and beckoned, all so close and yet so unattainable, except through his imagination. And by the mid-1930s imagination seemed to be all that remained to him. He continued to work on his "novel", but he had given up all hope of it ever seeing the light of day. The most that he could hope for, as he wrote to Yelena on 15th June 1938, was that the novel would be of sufficient worth for it to be put away "into a dark drawer".

Bulgakov lived a tragically short life, not even seeing his fiftieth birthday, but it is something of a miracle that he was allowed to continue as long as he did, at a time when other similarly inclined fellow writers were disappearing into the maw of the gulag. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Bulgakov had not shared in any initial rush of enthusiasm for the 1917 revolution. Boris Pasternak, for example, speaking through his hero Yury Zhivago, saw the revolution as "magnificent surgery", whereas for Bulgakov it was the harbinger of a tragedy that would lead Russia to the abyss. Furthermore, Bulgakov remained openly unrepentant about his political sympathies. In his letter to the secret police (OGPU) of 22nd September 1926 he stated that during the civil war he had been "entirely on the side of the Whites, whose retreat filled me with horror and incomprehension". How then did he escape imprisonment, or even worse? Was it perhaps through the intercession

of Stalin? Certainly, Stalin particularly admired *The Days of the Turbins*, and there has been speculation of a “special relationship” between them. We also know, however, that Stalin was adamantly opposed to the staging of other plays such as *Escape* and *The Crimson Island* – and, in any case, if such a relationship had existed, why did he never give permission for Bulgakov to travel abroad?

There is no certain answer to such questions. Arbitrariness is one of the defining features of a totalitarian society; Bulgakov’s rhetorical question whether he was “thinkable” in such a society may therefore well have seemed justifiable. Yet whatever the perception of him by the government and the Communist Party (as well as, sadly, by so many of his colleagues in the literary and theatrical world), he was so much more than merely “thinkable”. For in a society pervaded by fear and terror, in which lying and deception had become the official medium of state policy and in which the dominant tone was conformism and the prevailing attitude one of sycophancy and self-seeking ambition, a figure such as Bulgakov was in fact indispensable. For there could have been no more powerful counter-statement to Stalin’s Russia than his stories, novels and plays, whether or not they were published or performed during his lifetime (Woland’s assertion in *The Master and Margarita* that “manuscripts don’t burn” comes to mind).

“My ship is sinking,” he wrote on 16th January 1930, “and the water’s already up to the bridge. I must drown courageously.” In her farewell to Bulgakov, expressed in a short poem written shortly after his death, Anna Akhmatova spoke in characteristically understated but all the more powerful terms of the writer’s significance for her personally and for Russia. These diary entries and letters represent not merely a unique record of one of the darkest periods in recent Russian history, but a testament to an exceptionally talented writer whose strength of spirit and rich and fertile imagination were to prove a source of inspiration to future generations.

– Roger Cockrell

*Diaries and
Selected Letters*

Note on the Text

The text for this selection of Bulgakov's diaries and letters is based on *Mikhail i Yelena Bulgakovy: Dnevnik Mastera i Margarity*, compiled and edited by V.I. Losev (Moscow: Vagrius, 2004). The more complete edition of the diaries and letters (*Dnevnik, pis'ma 1914–1940*) published in Moscow by Sovremenny Pisatel' in 1997 has also been consulted. Lacunae in the text have been indicated by <...>, while [...] denotes an editorial cut. First names, patronymics and dates have been provided in the notes whenever these could be traced.

1921

17th November

*To Varvara Mikhailovna Voskresenskaya**

Dear Mama,

How are you? Are you well? [...]

I'm really sorry that, in a short letter, I can't tell you in detail exactly what Moscow's like nowadays. Suffice it to say that people are undergoing a mad struggle for existence and having to adjust to the new conditions. Since my arrival I think I've managed to achieve everything it's possible to achieve in the six weeks I've been here. I have a job – not the most important thing, I know, but you have to be able to earn a living. And that's something I've succeeded in doing, believe it or not. In only a miserly way so far, it's true, but Taska* and I have been managing to eat and to stock up with potatoes. She's mended her shoes and we've begun to buy wood for the fire, etc.

The work has been frenzied, not easy at all. Morning to night, day after day, without a break.

Soviet institutions have been completely reorganized, with people being fired. This includes my own firm, which clearly won't last very long. So I'll shortly be out of a job. But that's not important: I've taken steps, before it's too late, to switch to private work. You'll no doubt already be aware that that's the only way to exist in Moscow – either that or setting oneself up in business. [...]

I'm trying to get myself a position in the linen industry. And, what's more, yesterday I was offered a job as a journalist for an industrial newspaper that has just started up. I don't yet know on what terms. It's a genuine commercial enterprise, and they're taking me on for a trial period. Yesterday I had to take an examination, as it were. Tomorrow they should be offering me an advance of

half a million. This will mean that they think highly of me, and it's possible I'll be put in charge of the news section. And so that's what lies in store for me: linen, an industrial newspaper and (casual) private work. The search for work of this sort is precisely what I had in mind when I was in Kiev. Any other kind of work would be impossible. It would mean, at best, that we'd starve.

[...] I know masses of people here – journalists, theatre people or simply business people. That means a lot in today's Moscow, which is changing to a new way of life, something that it hasn't experienced for ages – mad competition, everyone racing around showing initiative and so on. You have to live like this, otherwise you'll die. And I have no desire to die.

[...] Poor Taska is flailing away trying to grind rye with an axe head and prepare food from all kinds of rubbish. But she's marvellous! In a word, we're both thrashing around, beating our heads against the ice like fish. Just so long as we have a roof over our heads. Andrei's room is a life-saver.* When Nadya comes,* this question will become fearsomely more difficult of course. But I'm putting this out of my mind for now and trying not to think about it, since I have quite enough to worry about each day as it is.

In Moscow only hundreds of thousands and millions are worth anything. A pound of black bread costs 4,600 roubles, a pound of white 14,000. And the cost is increasing all the time! The shops are full of goods, but you can't afford anything! The theatres are full, but as I was walking past the Bolshoi on business yesterday (going anywhere not on business is out of the question nowadays!) the girls were selling tickets for 75, 100, 150 thousand roubles each! Moscow has everything: shoes, cloth, meat, sturgeon, conserves, delicacies – everything! Cafés are opening, spreading like mushrooms. And, everywhere, hundreds of thousands of roubles! Hundreds of thousands! A roaring wave of speculation.

I have just one dream: to get through the winter, to survive December, which will be the most difficult month, I should imagine. I cannot express just how helpful Taska is to me. With the enormous distances that I have to cover each day running (literally) around

Moscow, she saves me a massive amount of energy and strength, feeding me and leaving me to do only those things she can't do for herself: chopping wood in the evenings and carting potatoes about in the mornings.

We both go around Moscow in our miserable little coats. I walk along with one side of the coat in front of the other (the left side lets in much more cold air for some reason). I dream of getting Tatyana something warm for her feet. She's only got her thin little shoes. But maybe it will be all right! Just so long as we have a room and good health!

[...] I'm writing all this just to show you the circumstances in which I have to realize my *idée fixe*: to re-establish within the space of three years the norm of an apartment, clothes, food and books. Whether or not I'll be successful, we'll have to see.

I won't tell you, because you won't believe me, just how frugally Taska and I are living. We're careful with every little piece of firewood.

Such is life's harsh school.

In the evenings I work in fits and starts on my *Country Doctor's Notebook*.^{*} Could turn out to be quite a big piece. I'm also working on *The Ailment*.^{*} But I don't have time, I don't have time! *That's what's really painful!* [...]

PS: Can you guess what my most pleasant memory has been recently? Lying on your sofa and drinking tea with French rolls. I would give so much to be able to do that again, if only for a couple of days, drinking tea and not thinking about anything. I'm just so tired. [...]

1st December

To Nadezhda Zemskaya

[...] I'm head of the current news section at the *Business and Industrial Herald*, and if I go out of my mind you'll know why. Can you imagine what it means to produce an independent newspaper?! There should be an article by Boris* in the second number, on the aviation industry, on cubic capacity and stockpiles and that sort of thing. I'm being driven completely mad. What about the supply of newsprint? What if we don't get any advertising? Then there's the news! And the censorship! I'm at boiling point all day long.

I've written a piece on *Eugene Onegin** for the theatrical journal *The Screen*. It hasn't been accepted. The reason: suitable for a literary journal, but not for a theatrical one. I've written a literary article dedicated to Nekrasov,* 'The Muse of Revenge'. Accepted by the arts-publications bureau of the Main Political Education Committee [of the Commissariat of Enlightenment]. They paid me 100. It was forwarded to the *Artistic Herald*, which is due to be published under the aegis of the MPEC. I know already either that the journal won't appear, or that at the last minute someone or other will take a dislike to 'The Muse'... and so on. Such a mess.

Please don't be surprised by such an outrageously incoherent letter – it's not deliberate, just that I'm literally worn out. I've given up on everything. Writing is out of the question. The only time I'm happy is when Taska pours me some hot tea. The two of us are now eating immeasurably better than at first. I wanted to write a long letter to you describing Moscow, but this is what you've got instead. [...]

1922

13th January

To Nadezhda Zemskaya

[...] I'm enclosing with this letter the correspondence from *Business Renaissance*. I hope you'll feel able (I will try to repay you by doing something for you in Moscow) to send it to one of the Kiev newspapers of your choice (preferably one of the large dailies) as a matter of urgency and offer it to them.

The results could be as follows:

(1) They won't accept it; (2) they will accept it; (3) they will accept it and find it interesting. If (1), then there's nothing more to say. If (2), then collect the fee agreed by the journal and send it on to me, deducting for yourself any amount which you calculate you've spent on postage and any other expenses arising from your correspondence with me (entirely up to you how much).

If (3), then please put me forward as their Moscow correspondent on any topic of their choice or for some "basement" satirical article on Moscow.* They can then send me an invitation and advance. Tell them that I'm head of the news section, a professional journalist at the *Herald*. If they print the *Renaissance* piece, send me two copies by registered post. Please forgive me for troubling you [...]. You'll understand what I must be feeling today, as I disappear up the chimney with the *Herald*.

In a word, overwhelmed. [...]

Bulgakov's Diary

25th January

(Tatyana's name day)

Given up writing the diary for a bit. A pity – there's been a lot of interesting things going on all this time.

I'm still without a job. Taska and I not eating well. So I don't feel like writing.

Black bread now 20 thousand a pound; white <...> thousand. [...]

26th January

Joined a troupe of roving actors. We'll be playing in the suburbs. 125 roubles a performance. Miserly amount. It will mean I'll have no time for writing of course – vicious circle.

Taska and I now half-starving.

Didn't mention that Korolenko's death* has been marked in the newspapers by masses of complimentary comments.

Vodka at N.G.'s.*

9th February

My life's never been so black as it is now. Taska and I are starving. Had to ask uncle for a little flour, vegetable oil and some potatoes. Boris has a million. Been all over Moscow at a run, but no job. [...]

<...> They may be turning No. 3 into a home for starving children.

Professor Ch. has gone overboard, striking the following off the lists of those who receive special rations: all actors, infant prodigies (Meyerhold's son* was one of those on the list!) and "academics", such as those from Sverdlovsk University. <...>

14th February

This evening, at the former women's college on Virgin Fields, *A Doctor's Notebook** was discussed. By half-past six all doorways were crammed with dark masses of students. There were several thousand of them. In the lecture hall <...>

Veresayev is not at all attractive, looks like an elderly Jew, but he's kept himself very well. He has very narrow eyes, large, bushy eyebrows and a bald patch. Low-pitched voice. I found him very likeable. A completely different impression from the one he used to give when lecturing. A contrast perhaps with the professors. Whereas they ask difficult, boring questions, Veresayev is always close to his students – they look for challenging questions and truthful resolutions. He doesn't speak very much, but when he does, it always sounds somehow clever and intelligent.

There were two women with him, evidently his wife and daughter. Very nice wife. <...>

15th February

The weather's got much worse. There's a frost today. Walking around on totally worn-out soles. My felt boots are useless. We're half starving. Up to my ears in debt [...]

24th March

To Nadezhda Zemskaya

[...] I shan't even begin to describe what life in Moscow's like. It's so extraordinary I'd need eight pages to describe it properly; you wouldn't be able to understand it otherwise. [...] But I'll mention a few random points anyway.

Most obviously I've noticed the following: (1) badly dressed people have disappeared; (2) the number of trams has increased and, if you are to believe the rumours, shops are going bust, theatres (apart from those putting on grotesque shows) are going bust, together with private publishing houses. It's impossible to talk about prices, since the currency is falling so rapidly that sometimes the price of things changes within a single day. [...]

The rest, I repeat, is indescribable. Apartment prices are unbelievable. Luckily for me, this nightmare of an apartment on the fifth floor in which I've been struggling to live for six months is inexpensive (700 thousand for March). [...]

I'm completely overwhelmed by work. I don't have any time for writing or for learning French as I should. I'm building a library (prices at second-hand booksellers – the ignorant, insolent swine – are higher than in the shops). [...]

It's now two in the morning. I'm so tired that I can't even actually remember what I've written! Some rubbish or other, but the main thing is it seems I've forgotten what it was...

24th March

*To Vera Bulgakova**

[...] I'm working very hard for the large newspaper *The Worker* and the Head of the Scientific and Technical Department. With Boris Mikhailovich Zemsky. Started only recently. The worst issue in Moscow is the question of housing. I'm living in a room left to me by Andrei Zemsky. Bolshaya Sadovaya 10, Apartment 50. A really nasty room, the neighbours also. I don't feel I've settled in, had so much trouble getting everything organized. I won't begin writing about the cost of living in Moscow. My salary is about 45 million a month (that's the rate for March). It's not enough. I need to do all I can to earn some more. I have many acquaintances in Moscow (journalists and artists), but I rarely see any of them, because I'm working so hard, racing around Moscow exclusively on newspaper business. [...]

1923

23rd January

To Vera Bulgakova

Dear Vera,

Thank you all for your telegram. I was very pleased to hear that you're in Kiev. Unfortunately, I couldn't deduce from the telegram whether you had returned for good or just for the time being. My dream is that all of us should at last be able to settle down safely in Moscow and Kiev.

I think that you and Lyolya* might be able to get together amicably and arrange to live in the same place where Mama lived. Maybe I'm mistaken, but I feel this would be better for Ivan Pavlovich too* – perhaps one of the family who is so closely linked to him and who owes him so much could live nearby. I can't stop thinking about Kolya and Vanya* and how sad it is that we can't make things easier for them in any way. I'm also very sad when I think about Mama's death and the fact that it means that there's now nobody in Kiev living close to Ivan Pavlovich. My one wish is that your arrival in Kiev doesn't lead to any disagreements within the family but, on the contrary, brings you all closer together. That's why I was so glad to read your reference to the "friendly family". That's the main thing, for all of us. It's true: just a little goodwill and life would be so wonderful for you all. I'm speaking for myself: after so many tough years I value peace and quiet above all else! I would so love to be among family. But it can't be helped. Living here in Moscow, in circumstances that are immeasurably more difficult than yours, I am nonetheless thinking the whole time how to place my life onto a normal footing [...]

I'd like to ask a special favour of you: please live together in friendship and do it in memory of Mama.

I'm working so hard and am dreadfully tired. Maybe I'll be able to come to Kiev for a bit in the spring to see you and Ivan Pavlovich. If you manage to settle down in Kiev, have a word with Ivan Pavlovich and Varvara* to see if you can do something to preserve Mama's plot of land in Bucha.* I would be so sorry if this were to disappear. [...]

Your brother Mikhail

Bulgakov's Diary

24th May

Haven't taken up my diary for ages. On 21st April travelled from Moscow to Kiev, where I stayed until 12th May. In Kiev operated on myself (cancerous lump behind my left ear). I didn't get to the Caucasus as I had planned and returned to Moscow on 12th May. That's when things really started to happen. The Soviet representative Vatslav Vatslavovich Vorovsky was murdered in Lausanne by Conradi.* On the 12th there was a grandly staged demonstration in Moscow. Vorovsky's murder coincided with Curzon's ultimatum to Russia* to take back Weinstein's* impudent diplomatic messages that had been sent via the British trade representative in Moscow, to pay compensation for the English fishing vessels detained in the White Sea, to desist from propagandizing in the Far East and so on and so on.

The air was full of talk of a diplomatic bust-up, even of war. But the general opinion, it's true, was that it wouldn't come to war. And quite right too: how could we go to war with Britain? But there may well be a blockade. The news that both Poland and Romania are getting agitated (Marshall Foch has visited Poland*) is also very bad. In general we're poised on the brink of events. In today's newspapers there are reports that British warships are being sent to the White and Black Seas, and news that Curzon rejects any idea of compromise and demands that Krasin* (who set off by airplane for London immediately after the ultimatum) precisely fulfils the terms of the ultimatum.

Moscow is such a rowdy city, especially when compared to Kiev. Most striking of all is the huge amount of beer-drinking that goes on here. Even I'm drinking quite a bit. And, in general, I've let

myself go recently. Count Alexei Tolstoy has arrived from Berlin.* Dissolute, insolent behaviour. Drinks a lot.

Have gone off the rails – written nothing for six weeks.

Wednesday 11th July

The biggest gap in my diary so far. In the meantime there have been events of extraordinary importance.

The sensational row with Britain has ended quietly, peacefully and shamefully. The government has made extremely humiliating concessions, even including the payment of compensation for the execution of two British subjects, persistently accused by the Soviet newspapers of being spies.

And then recently there was an even more remarkable event: Patriarch Tikhon* suddenly made a written statement renouncing his error in his attitude towards the Soviet authorities, saying he was no longer their enemy and so on.

He was released from confinement. Moscow full of countless rumours, and there is an absolute storm in the White émigré newspapers abroad. Disbelief, different interpretations and so on.

The day before yesterday the Patriarch's statement appeared on walls and fences, beginning with the words: "We, by the grace of God, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia..."

Essentially he's saying that he's the friend of the Soviet government and, while condemning the Whites, he's also condemning the Living Church. No church reforms other than the adoption of the new orthography and calendar.

There's an unbelievable row within the Church now. The Living Church is beside itself with rage. They wanted to get rid of Patriarch Tikhon entirely, but now he's speaking publicly and still in his post, etc.

We're having a revoltingly cold and wet summer.

White bread is 14 million a pound. The value of the chervonets* is climbing all the time and is now worth 832 million.

25th July

The 1923 Moscow summer has been extraordinary. Not a day goes by without it raining at least once, sometimes several times. In June we had two exceptional downpours, with roads being flooded and Neglinny Alley collapsing. Something similar today – another downpour with large hailstones.

Life here as chaotic as ever, rushed, nightmarish. Am spending a lot on drink, sadly. Colleagues at the *Hooter** drinking a lot. Played billiards on Neglinny. Two days ago *The Hooter* moved into the Palace of Labour on the Solyanka, and now during the day I am some distance away from *On the Eve*.*

My writing is progressing sluggishly. The Berlin book* has still not been published, I'm pushing ahead with my satirical sketches in the *On the Eve*. *The Hooter* takes up the best part of my day, meaning that my novel is hardly moving at all.

Moscow is extraordinarily lively. Traffic increasing all the time.

The chervonets today is worth 975 million, the gold rouble 100. State Bank exchange rates.

That's just wonderful, isn't it?

22nd August

Haven't taken up my diary for months, omitting to record important events.

27th August
Evening

Just got back from a lecture by the Change of Landmarks group:* Professor Klyuchnikov, A. Tolstoy, Bobrishchev-Pushkin and Vasilyevsky-Ne-Bukva.*

The Zimin Theatre was packed. There were masses of people on the stage, journalists, acquaintances, etc. Sat next to Katayev.* In his talk on literature Tolstoy mentioned me and Katayev, among other contemporary writers.

Still no sign of my 'Notes on a Cuff'.

The Hooter's tormenting me, preventing me from writing.

Sunday, 2nd September

Chervonets banknotes today, by the grace of God, worth 2,050 million roubles (two billion fifty million roubles). Up to my eyes in debt. With little money, the future looks bleak.

Sofochka arrived yesterday, with her mother, husband and child.* On their way to Saratov. They're due to leave tomorrow by fast train, going back to a place where they once had a wonderful family life. But now they'll be leading a difficult and poverty-stricken nomadic existence.

Went with Katayev today to see Alexei Tolstoy at his Ivankovo dacha. He was very pleasant. The only thing wrong was his and his wife's incorrigible Bohemian attitude towards young writers.

All that, however, is redeemed by his genuinely large talent.

When Katayev and I left he accompanied us as far as the dam. Half-moon in the star-studded sky, silence. Tolstoy talked about the need to begin a school of neo-realism. He even waxed a little lyrical. "Looking at the moon, let us vow to..."

He's fearless, but he looks to me and to Katayev for support. His ideas on literature are always correct and apposite, at times magnificent.

In amongst my bouts of depression and nostalgia for the past, living in these absurd, temporarily cramped conditions, in a totally disgusting room in a totally disgusting house, I sometimes, as now, experience a brief upsurge of confidence and strength. I can

sense my thoughts soaring upwards, and I believe I'm immeasurably stronger than any other writer I know. But in my present circumstances, I may well go under.

3rd September

The weather's now wonderful, after such a dreadful summer. The last few days have been warm, with bright sunshine.

Every day I go off to work to this *Hooter* of mine, and every day is a complete and utter waste of time.

The pattern of my life is such that, although I have little money, I continue to live beyond my humble means. I eat and drink well, but there's not enough money to buy things.

Not a day goes by without a damn drink, without beer. Today, for example, I was in the tavern on Strastnaya Square with Alexei Tolstoy, Kalmens* of course, and the lame "captain", who, when compared with the count, seemed like a shadow.

The relatives left for Saratov today.

A telegram arrived this afternoon: there's been a terrible earthquake in Japan. Yokohama destroyed, Tokyo on fire, coast inundated, hundreds of thousands of dead, the Emperor's palace destroyed, fate of the Emperor himself unknown.

And today I caught a glimpse of another telegram saying that Italy had attacked Greece – don't know the precise details yet.

What is going on in the world?

Tolstoy has been talking about how he started to write. First in verse. Then imitations. Then he turned to portraying the life of landowners, taking the theme to its limits. It was the war that inspired him to begin writing.

Sunday, 9th September

Went to see Tolstoy at his dacha again today and read him my story 'Diaboliad'.* He thought it was very good and will be taking it to St Petersburg, where he wants to publish it in *Zvezda** with his own introduction. But I'm not happy with the story myself.

It's cold already. Autumn. Yesterday I got really angry with Kalmens's constant pressurizing and rejected his offer of 500 roubles, leaving me in a tight spot. Had to borrow a billion from Tolstoy (his wife's suggestion).

Tuesday, 18th September

Among the entries and scrappy record of events in my diary I haven't once referred to events in Germany.

Here's what's going on: there has been a catastrophic fall in the value of the German mark. Today's newspapers, for example, report that one dollar is equivalent to 125 million marks! The government is headed by a certain Stresemann, dubbed by the Soviet newspapers as the German Kerensky.* The Communist Party is going all out to incite revolution and stir up trouble. At major Party gatherings Radek* is declaring categorically that the German revolution has already begun.

It's true: there's nothing to eat in Berlin now, and there are clashes in several cities. Two things are possible: either the Communists will win and then we will be at war with Poland and France, or the fascists will win (German Emperor and so on) and Soviet Russia's position will deteriorate. Either way, we are on the brink of huge events.

Not well today. Very little money. Had a letter from Kolya a day or two ago; he's ill (anaemia), feeling depressed and miserable. Wrote to *On the Eve* in Berlin asking them to send him 50 francs. I hope the swine will do this.

A. Erlich came to see me today and read me his story. Komorsky and Davy.* Chatted over a glass of wine. I still don't have an apartment – I'm only half a human being.

25th September

Heard yesterday that a conspiracy has been uncovered in Moscow. Among others arrested have been Bogdanov, the chairman of the Supreme Economic Council! And Krasnoshchekov,* the chairman of the Industrial Bank! And Communist Party members. The conspiracy was led by a certain Myasnikov, who had been expelled from the Party and who had settled in Hamburg. Also involved were some factory heads of committees (metallurgists). It's not known what all these people intended, but I have been told by one Party lady that it was a "left-wing" conspiracy – against NEP!*

Pravda and other newspapers have started sabre-rattling with regard to Germany (even although there is clearly no hope of a revolution there, since the Stresemann government has begun negotiations with the French). In connection with this, it seems that the chervonets on the black market has fallen below even the State Bank rate.

*Qui vivra – verra!**

30th September

Probably because I'm a conservative to the... wanted to write "to the core", but that's hackneyed... anyway, in a word, I'm a conservative who's drawn to his diary around anniversary time. What a pity I can't remember the exact date in September I arrived in Moscow two years ago. Two years! Have there been many changes during this period? Of course there have. Nevertheless this second anniversary finds me still in the same room and inwardly everything's just the same.