

Aleksei would give a great deal to be able to travel in Western Europe but was pessimistic about his prospects. It was not a matter of money. He could well afford it. But the only way to get out was on a delegation of some kind — artistic, sports, scientific, and he did not qualify. Although he was fairly careful in what he said, it was plain that he was critical of many things about the régime and was not even remotely interested in Marx and company. (Later, in Yalta, at a book kiosk where he had asked the young lady in charge what new books she had, he handed her back a recently-published volume of a new edition of Lenin's works with such a disgusted expression that she quickly restored it to its place on the shelf in some degree of embarrassment, as if she had committed a breach of etiquette.)

Aleksei said that, although he received quite a good salary in the Ministry, he could easily make three or four times as much by taking a job as manager of a store or in the administrative office of a factory; indeed, he had had many tempting offers of jobs of this kind but for social reasons it would be quite impossible for him to accept. His family and friends would be simply horrified. I expressed surprise at such a snobbish outlook in a socialist state. It was the rankest snobbery, he admitted, and it was a great impediment to progress. People with more education, background, and taste were badly needed in all sorts of enterprises — in the clothing and furniture business, for instance, in the hotel and restaurant business, in printing and publishing, etc. Many of the people holding down highly-paid jobs in these fields were pretty crude and ignorant and the results were apparent in the bad taste of textiles, clothing, furniture, wallpaper, etc.

Facing disapproval

I said that, in his place, I would feel like defying the social conventions, taking a better-paid if less refined job, and trying to make a useful contribution where it seemed to be so badly needed. His parents would not understand, he said, and he would not be able to face the disapproval of his friends. I mentioned that, in Canadian and American universities, students did all kinds of jobs to put themselves through, even to waiting on table in restaurants. In Europe there was more prejudice. Even the Scandinavian students, who were pretty democratic on the whole, were shocked when some of their number had worked in the restaurant of International House in New York. That kind of work would be out of the question for a student here, he said, although many of them made extra money by doing translation or surveying or acting as supernumeraries in theatres.

Years ago, I said, there had been a strong prejudice against young people of good family going on the stage and there were probably still many conservative, puritanical people in Canada who would not wish their daughters to become actresses. In this country, Aleksei said, actors, opera singers and ballet dancers ranked very high socially. Their bohemianism was overlooked or forgiven, as it would certainly not be in other circles. Many of them had had matrimonial problems and had been divorced several times. Others were known to drink too much or even to be confirmed drunkards; but this did not affect their popularity in the least. Tarasova, for instance, had had four or five husbands and, although she was now too old for the parts she was playing, her admiring public remained loyal.

Nobody could understand why Ulanova had divorced Zavadsky to marry her present insignificant and rather stupid husband but after all that was her own affair. A good many others just moved about from one partner to another without bothering about the formalities of marriage and divorce. These things were known and talked about but an artist was still an artist.

Sports devotee

From time to time Aleksei paused to wonder where his cousin and Ivan had got to but he could usually be deflected from the search by a question about himself. He had gone in for sports in a big way when he was younger and still kept himself fit by gymnastics and swimming. As a result he was never ill and rarely caught cold. He went a great deal to the ballet, opera, theatre and concerts and many of his friends were theatre people. He considered himself something of an authority on the ballet and was quite dogmatic on the subject. Plisetskaya, he said, was the most brilliant dancer in Moscow. I agreed but thought that, as an artist, Ulanova was in a class by herself. This he would admit, but she had never been as brilliant technically as Semyonova, Lepishinskaya or Plisetskaya . . .

Ivan and I went down to Gorki Park (in Moscow) last night to see our highway acquaintance, Tatiana, do her motorcycle act. In a circular wooden building about 30 feet in diameter and 20 feet deep, she and the boss of the act, Grisha Levetin, a Jew of about 50 who formerly owned it but now works for the state, rode motorcycles at high speed up the wall. In the last act Grisha drove a small car and Tatiana her motorcycle. We stood with a crowd of about 100 around a railing at the top. The admission price was three roubles. The whole structure moved when the motorcycles whizzed around and this did not make the act any less exciting for the crowd. Tatiana said that the give in the wall was necessary; it was a kind of "amortization".

Women's lib

After the act, we went to see a play at the little theatre in the park and met Tatiana at 11:00 p.m. to go to Ivan's apartment for coffee. He had no hesitation in asking her how much she earned. About 1,000 roubles a day, she said. Last Sunday she had made 1,500 but had done the act 42 times and was completely exhausted. Last night there had been only three performances but it was quite enough for she had had a headache even before she started and the air-pressure always made it worse. They did not put on the act until about 100 spectators had assembled. She was supposed to work only every other day.

Part of the time Tatiana had whirled around with her hands in the air. The man had done this too and had also ridden standing up and driven his motorcycle up and down the wall as well as around it. Tatiana said that she could do all those tricks and more too but they would not let her because he was a man and had to appear the more daring of the two. Ivan remarked that apparently she and Grisha did not hit it off too well. They were always fighting, she said. He had a bad character — was a really difficult type.

This little manifestation of Women's Lib in the Soviet Union in 1955 is perhaps as good a place as any at which to bring this narrative to a close.