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Abramchik 4*

The Life and Activities of M. Abramchik

Abramchik told me not long ago that he had been asked for his autobiography, and he wondered whether I wouldn't be able to write out something, since he did not have the time, and furthermore he did not want to write his own autobiography.

I am glad to do this, because it actually is not difficult for me to write Abramchik's biography. I have been in contact with him since we studied together in 1920, during five further years of study in Ruz Prague, and later we travelled through the world together-this is more than twenty years that Abramchik and I lived inseparably, and it is easy for me to speak about his past.

Mikola Abramchik, the son of farmers with modest means, Symon and Tatyana Abramchik, was born August 6, 1902, in the village Syichavichyi, Radashkauskaye Volost, Vilenshchyna. Mikola's grandfather and great grandfather still belonged to the white collar intelligentsia that firmly adhered to "Lithuanian separatism", for which after Abramchik they were numbered among the proletarian-peasant estate.

Mikola's great grandfather, Bazyl Abramchik, was an administrator on the Kalyuzberg estate near Radoshkoviichi that belonged to a rich landowner named Sayiski. He gave his ~~thirteen~~ thirteen sons what was at the time a rather extensive education-two of them were forest rangers and others were highly placed postal officials.

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The insurrection of 1863, in which Bazyl's sons took part, ended tragically for the Abramchiks. One of Bazyl's sons was hanged, others sent to Siberia or to "remote areas of Russia". Mikola's grandfather Yanka, who was then studying at an ecclesiastical seminary, was exiled and deprived of his civil rights.

Yanka Abramchik later settled down as a miller in the village Syichavichyi, married a local peasant woman Tatsyana Rudz, and started to farm the dowry of 8 desiatinas (1 desiatina is 2.70 acres). But for reasons unknown in 1890 Yanka and all of his family, including Mikola's parents, found themselves in Siberia.

However, Mikola's father Syimon Abramchik returned to Syichavichyi within a few years with the aim of settling on the land that had been his mother's dowry. The czarist authorities turned this question over to the volost (district) council, which unanimously decided to back Syimon Abramchik, and the inhabitants of the village helped him to build a dwelling.

Syimon Abramchik soon became prosperous and earned the respect of the local populace. He was continually being selected for various posts in his "society" (four villages), such as village elder, official in charge of the stores of provisions, and in 1917 he was appointed deputy to the first All Byelorussian Congress.

Since his own education was limited, Syimon Abramchik made every effort to give his three sons and his daughter as extensive an education as possible.

The family situation in which Mikola spent his childhood were

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favorable to the development of his character, on the basis of religious devotion, thirst for knowledge, and high idealism.

Simon was a very religious man and a very original religious fraternity met at his home. Those who met there were older people, who in answer to the compulsory ecclesiastical policy of the czar secretly joined together as if fearing, or more probably vacillating before the choice of catholic or Greek orthodox belief, and prayed ardently both according to the catholic and the Greek orthodox rites. Mikola's great grandfather Bazyl also came to attend these prayer meetings, walking 9 versts on foot to get there, despite the fact that he was over 100 years old. These meetings took place almost every evening.

In addition to the aforementioned meetings there were less numerous gatherings of Socialist Revolutionaries at Simon's house. A teacher at the Syichavichyi elementary school, Yusya Rudz, who was an ardent revolutionary, was a permanent guest until the time of his arrest and escape from prison, where he had been condemned to death. Sometimes Rudz would bring various socialist friends of his to spend the night at Abramchik's when they were passing through. The children were not excluded from the discussions that arose on such occasions, and of course all of this had its influence on the young Mikola.

When Mikola was 7 years old he entered the elementary school in Syichavichyi. He acquired his secondary education first at the 4-year school in Radoshkovichyi, and later in Minsk. In the fall of

1920, after six grades of secondary school (REAL'NAYA GIMNASIYA - a school specializing in mathematics and natural sciences, where ancient languages are not taught), he passed the competitive examinations of the newly organized Polytechnical Institute. The Riga peace, which cut Nikola's parents off from Minsk, again compelled him to ~~abandon~~ abandon science and move to Syichavichy (western Byelorussia).

Being an alert young student of 18, he could not remain in the village and went on to Vilna. The old Byelorussian capital made a strong impression on Nikola. He went to the Bazilyanski ~~monastery~~ monastery-that Byelorussian fortress-to find out the location of a polytechnical institute in Vilna. In the corridor he ran into an acquaintance from Minsk, Ya. Stankevich, who reproached Nikola for his desire to continue studying, when there were not enough people to teach the uninformed Byelorussians. Nikola yielded to the demands of society and started some pedagogical courses for externs. Before Christmas 1920 he went to the village of Lenkaushchynia in the Ashryanaki Uyezd to take over the position of teacher at a Byelorussian elementary school there.

The school served 4 villages, of which Lenkaushchynia was the center. There was already a Polish school in the latter, located in the center of the village and it was named after the landowner Strutyzhinski.

Nikola Abramchik organized the school in the village itself and first started to work with 12 pupils. At the same time he

opened evening courses for adults which were attended by young people beyond school age and by the parents of children who attended the school.

Within two months the enrollment had jumped to 60 children, whereas the Polish school had only four (Strutyishinski's children and one of his servants) despite the fact that the peasantry in this school district was 50% catholic, that is, more under the influence of Polish culture. In the next school year (1921-22) ^{the Polish school} had to make repairs. In this connection the Polish administration and police began to exert pressure against the Byelorussian school, but they were not able to get the upper hand. The Polish school inspector sent seven Polish teacher either for the independent parallel Polish school or as teachers of the Polish language in the Byelorussian school, but the peasants did not allow one of these teachers into the village.

During summer ~~vacation~~ vacation in 1921, when Abramchik was attending post-graduate pedagogical courses in Vilna, he came into contact with the Byelorussian national revolutionary movement which at that time, under the leadership of the BNR (Byelorussian National Republic) government from Homyel Kaunas (in alliance with the Lithuanians), was preparing a rebellion in western Byelorussia. Mikola Abramchik was appointed BNR uyezd chief for the following volosts: Radoshkovichyi, Krasnopolyki, and Khatsenchyitsyi. In the fall of 1922, as a result of the successful "maneuvers" in his uyezd, he was

appointed chief of the Vileiski Okrug. All of the uyezd chiefs in the Vileiskaya Oblast gladly accepted the leadership of the 19 year old Abramchik, notwithstanding the the ages of some of them, such as the chief of the Kuratetskaya Uyezd, Gorylik, who was a teacher and a delegate to the Seim, which is an indication of the high opinion in which Abramchik was held by Byelorussian society.

Until May 1922 managed both of his positions—that of teacher and that of okrug chief—well. In the fall of that year the Polish school inspector for the Ashyanski Uyezd decided that it would be impossible to convert the school into a Polish school so long as Abramchik was a teacher there, and he ordered Abramchik's ~~stye~~ transfer to central Poland (near Warsaw). Abramchik did not accept this appointment, and as a token of protest he renounced teaching altogether.

He then moved to Radozhkovichyi to occupy himself exclusively with national revolutionary work in his district. As a cover for this work, he registered as a student in the seventh grade of the Radozhkovichyi Byelorussian gymnasium (high school). The teachers at this school knew that Abramchik had already been through ~~some~~ secondary school and disregarded his frequent absences, which gave him the opportunity to travel about in his district and to visit the Byelorussian rebel headquarters, which was located in Lithuania (in Tavroganyi).

In November, 1922, an important meeting of the revolutionary liberation movement was held in western Byelorussia. Up to that time the Central Liberation Committee of Western Byelorussia had

received all political and tactical instruction from Kaunas, directly from the BNR government, or through the supreme rebel headquarters in Tauragan. When the BNR government clashed with the Lithuanian government over the city Vilna, the BNR government abandoned Kaunas and the Lithuanians tried through several Byelorussian officials in Tauragan to continue preparations for an insurrection in western Byelorussia, propagandizing this revolutionary liberation movement in international form as Lithuanian resistance for Vilna.

The Byelorussian Central Revolutionary Committee for Western Byelorussia, which up to that time had been headed by the poet Leonid Podzevich and "aginovich (a member of the Slutsk Insurgent Council), broke off its collaboration with the Lithuanians, retaining the entire secret apparatus on the earlier purely independent Byelorussian lines. However when relations with the Lithuanians were broken off the Byelorussian Central Revolutionary Committee was compelled to give thought to its future tactics because it would have been more than risky now ~~farther~~ to base their hopes for a successful insurrection solely on their own forces against the solidly organized Polish government.

In Minsk at that time the Byelorussian SSR was headed by Charvyakov, and the commissar for enlightenment was Prof. Ignatovski- both of them were close Social Revolutionary Party adherents of L. Rodzevich and Ya. Laganovich. The Central Committee of Liberation of Western Byelorussia decided to get into contact with them, and Mikola Abramchik was assigned to effect the liaison. When

Abramchik had received a letter from L. Rodzevich, he went illegally to Minsk, to the private quarters of Prof. Ignatovski.

Ignatovski listened to Abramchik's story and then summoned seven robust youths, among them Charvyakov, to come to him. A meeting took place here at Ignatovski's apartment, at which Abramchik gave a detailed account of the situation in western Byelorussia. Abramchik spent the night at Ignatovski's and the conversation continued late into the night. Toward evening of the next day one of the young men arrived at Ignatovski's dressed in a suit made of peasant material and told Abramchik that he would go with him to Vilna. This man was later given the nickname of PRINESERNYI, because Abramchik has to carry him on his shoulders across a stream into the border zone.

The negotiations between the Committee for the Liberation of Western Byelorussia and the Minsk Socialist Revolutionaries led to the founding in Minsk of the Committee for the Liberation of ~~Western~~ Eastern Byelorussia, headed by Prof. Ignatovski.

It was agreed by both committees that the insurrection in western Byelorussia should not be planned for the near future, the present time to be spent in the preparation of cadres. Since the Polish government had liquidated almost all of the Byelorussian schools, it was decided to form a net of secret Byelorussian elementary schools. The catholic priest A-ka accepted the position of inspector general for these schools and Abramchik was appointed his assistant.

Abramchik worked at this post until the fall of 1924, touring

all of western Byelorussia searching out reliable teachers and organizing secret schools. At the same time he built up stores of secret literature which later, by order from Vilna, was scattered about in one night. During these two years, he ~~visited~~ illegally visited Prof. Ignatovski 29 times with assignments from the Central Committee for the Liberation of Western Byelorussia. During this time Ignatovski became so impressed with him that he let him sit on the most secret conferences of the Minsk Byelorussian anti-Bolshevik activists.

In June 1924 Abramchik formally completed his secondary education. He tried to enter the Vilna University, but at that time it was almost impossible to enter a Polish institution of higher learning from a Byelorussian secondary school.

It had already been decided by the Committee for the Liberation of Western Byelorussia that Abramchik would have to be sent to some institution of higher learning. After four years of uninterrupted conspiratorial work Abramchik was in need of a period of rest so that traces of his activities could be covered up.

In the fall of 1924, Prof Ignatovski called Abramchik to Minsk and offered him a choice of two schools: the Leningrad Military Academy or the Marinogorski Agricultural School in Moscow. Ignatovski advised him to choose the former, which was the school to which he sent the Byelorussians who were most important in the national movement, so that he could later have a reliable cadre of military specialists. However Abramchik decided on the agricultural school.

After one week's attendance at the agricultural school Abramchik returned to Ignatovski, saying that he hadn't liked the school, inasmuch as the scholastic level was low. He also had not liked the atmosphere and described the school as a hangout for tramps. Ignatovski pondered for a moment and then whispered to Abramchik, "My best regards to Petr (Dryichevski) and Zakharok. Say that we often think of them in Moscow. We must remain firm. I believe that you will be able to get there. May God help you!"

One fall morning in Prague Nikola looked up one Albertov, whose address (Na Slupi) he had obtained from a correspondence with an old friend, a partisan poet Uladzimir Zheilka. Here he found several dozen old friends, both from the pedagogical courses and the conspiratorial work. News of Abramchik's arrival soon reached president Krechevski, who asked Abramchik to come to see him that evening. Abramchik remembers this interview with Krechevski and Zakharok as one of the happiest moments in his life, giving him the opportunity to know two such great historical personages.

In Czechoslovakia Abramchik simultaneously completed two courses of study—at the Ukrainian Academy he completed a course in economics, earning the title of diploma'd engineer in the economic sciences, and at the Czechoslovakian Karlovy University he completed his studies in the history and sociology department.

While he was studying, Abramchik remained in contact with Ignatovski and persons close to him, such as Yanka Kupala, Prof. P., and others who for one reason or another came there from Minsk.

Toward the end of the third course Abramchik was preparing for print a work entitled "Economic Geography of Byelorussia", which Ignatovski liked very much, and on the basis of which Ignatovski proposed a lectureship ~~izhik~~ in economic geography to him at the Minsk University.

However, despite the fact that the Poles had at that time deprived Abramchik of his Polish citizenship and were demanding his extradition from the Czechoslovakian authorities because of a brochure Abramchik had written in French condemning the Polish terror in western Byelorussia which had caused a great stir in the western European press, Abramchik refused to go to Soviet Byelorussia.

In the fall of 1929 Abramchik and I started to travel through the world on foot, for the purpose of acquiring practical knowledge of the agricultural economy of western Europe. For a year and several months we went on foot and by bicycle from Prague to Lyons, visiting all of the districts that interested us in Czechoslovakia, northern Germany, Bavaria, Switzerland, the Rhine area, and then France. On the way we worked at various ordinary jobs so as to come to know the village life and the life of the workers, as well as to pay our way.

Our itinerary had been planned to include France, Spain, the northern coast of Africa, and then Italy. However in Lyons two unforeseen ~~xxxx~~ circumstances caused a radical alteration in our plans. The first of these was the news of Ignatovski's suicide, and the second was the presence in France of a large ~~xxx~~ Byelorussian workers' emigration.~~xxxx~~

Our next destination was Paris where, at the beginning of 1931, the French government had recognized the Union of Byelorussians in France. From this time on Abramchik worked uninterruptedly for the Byelorussian workers' emigration. He himself worked along with ordinary workers at various factories, mines, and on the land, and engaged in the struggle against any occupation of Byelorussia. He published his own paper and wrote articles in other papers on the Byelorussian liberation movement and made contact with various political and cultural figures in Europe. He was always in contact with the president Sakharok and became his chief coworker and his deputy for western Europe.

At the beginning of the war in 1939 the Polish government, which had moved to France, began the mobilization of Poles, among them the Byelorussians from western Byelorussia. The Union of Byelorussians in France waged a struggle against the Polish government that to many appeared hopeless, but not to Abramchik. Notwithstanding the harsh French laws regarding anti-allied propaganda, Abramchik with his inborn courage fearlessly urged the Byelorussians to boycott the Polish army and made requests to the French government to allow Byelorussians to join the French army (the wartime foreign legion). He petitioned for the formation of Byelorussian national units within the French army. The consequences of the courageous and decisive stand taken by Abramchik was that the French government allowed Byelorussians a choice between joining the French or the Polish army.

This freedom of choice raised the morale of the Byelorussians

and more than 1,200 of them volunteered in the French foreign legion (which must not be confused with the regular foreign legion). Unfortunately the attainment of further aims in France was hindered by the arrival of the Germans.

The Gestapo started to search out its enemies in Paris and Abramchik decided to go to Byelorussia. An acquaintance in Berlin, Mr. Sh., helped him to get to Berlin and promised to help ^{Byelorussian} him in getting to Byelorussia. However F. ^{Byelorussian} Kinchyits, a Gestapo official, exposed Abramchik, and he was obliged to remain blockaded in Berlin.

But even in this situation Abramchik did not give up. At the request of the well known Byelorussian patriot, who was still trusted by the Germans, he undertook the organization of a Byelorussian charter commission in Germany. At the same time he and the late catholic priest Gadlevski decided to establish a Byelorussian resistance net. After organizing this net Abramchik and Gadlevski intended to go to England. Unfortunately Gadlevski was exposed by another Byelorussian Gestapo worker, Dr. Yermachenki and this cost him his life. Abramchik remained in Berlin for about two years. The resistance work that he carried on encompassed not only the Byelorussians in Germany; the Byelorussian Committee for Mutual Aid in Abramchik's hands became a sanctuary and moral support for all Byelorussians. Abramchik occasionally had the opportunity to visit Zakharok in Prague.

In July 1943 a delegate from the BNP (Byelorussian Independence Party) arrived in Berlin with a party of newspaper writers who were on an excursion and asked Abramchik in on behalf of his party

to go to Byelorussia to take over the political leadership and publication of the illegal press of the BHP. Abramchik made preparations to move to Byelorussia with his wife, where they would live in the woods. He was however prevented from carrying out his plans because he was arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Paris.

In Paris Abramchik was kept under strict surveillance. He was forbidden by the Gestapo to receive any Byelorussians at his quarters or to meet them anywhere or even to correspond with Byelorussians. Despite everything, Abramchik made contact with persons in the French resistance and, in expectation of the arrival of the allies, prepared a number of tracts describing the tragic plight of the Byelorussian people.

Immediately after the liberation of France, he gave over all of his efforts to the defense of the rights of displaced persons in Germany.

Knowing Abramchik as well as I do, it seems to me that he can not be characterized as other than a revolutionary of the Byelorussian liberation movement, a person with inexhaustible energy, who has dedicated his entire life to the Byelorussian people. It is no wonder that before his death president Zakharok did not want to deputize his authority to anyone other than Abramchik.

It seems to me superfluous to write about Abramchik's present activities as president of the BHP; there is no Byelorussian colony in America or in Europe that is not familiar with this inexhaustible fighter.

There need ~~hardly~~ scarcely be mention of the shameless "press" of our compatriots abroad, who have tried to picture the entire nationalist-liberation work of Abramchik between 1920 and 1924 as an off-shoot of Abramchik's membership in the Komsomol. It should be noted that until 1925 the Komsomol did not exist in ^{western} Byelorussia. The fact that Abramchik was in Minsk illegally indicates only that at that time our youth did not consider the Riga border a boundary to their national activities.

Lyevon Ryidlevski