



Chapter VII

REST HOMES FOR WORKERS



SINCE my return from Moscow I noticed a change in Zorin's attitude: he was reserved, distant, and not as friendly as when we first met. I ascribed it to the fact that he was overworked and fatigued, and not wishing to waste his valuable time I ceased visiting the Zorins as frequently as before. One day, however, he called up to ask if Alexander Berkman and myself would join him in certain work he was planning, and which was to be done in hurry-up American style, as he put it. On calling to see him we found him rather excited--an unusual thing for Zorin who was generally quiet and reserved. He was full of a new scheme to build "rest homes" for workers. He explained that on Kameniy Ostrov were the magnificent mansions of the Stolypins, the Polovtsovs, and others of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and that he was planning to turn them into recreation centres for workers. Would we join in the work? Of course, we consented eagerly, and the next morning we went over to inspect the island. It was indeed an ideal spot, dotted with magnificent mansions, some of them veritable museums, containing rare gems of painting, tapestry, and furniture. The man in charge of buildings called our attention to the art treasures, protesting that they would be injured or entirely destroyed if put to the planned use. But Zorin was set on his scheme. "Recreation homes for workers are more important than art," he said.

We returned to the Astoria determined to devote ourselves to the work and to go at it intensively, as the houses were to be ready for the First of May. We prepared detailed plans for dining rooms, sleeping chambers, reading rooms, theatre and lecture halls, and recreation places for the workers. As the first and most necessary step we proposed the organization of a dining room to feed the workers who were to be employed in preparing the place for their comrades. I had learned from my previous experience with the hotels that much valuable time was lost because of the failure to provide for those actually employed on such work. Zorin consented and promised that we were to take charge within a few days. But a week passed and nothing further was heard about what was to be a rush job. Some time later Zorin called up to ask us to accompany him to the island. On our arrival there we found half-a-dozen Commissars already in charge, with scores of people idling about. Zorin reassured us that matters would arrange themselves and that we should have an opportunity to organize the work as planned. However, we soon realized that the newly fledged officialdom was as hard to cope with as the old bureaucracy.

Every Commissar had his favourites whom he managed to list as employed on the job, thereby entitling them to bread rations and a meal. Thus almost before any actual workers appeared on the scene, eighty alleged "technicians" were already in possession of dinner tickets and bread cards. The men actually mobilized for the work received hardly anything. The result was general sabotage. Most of the men sent over to prepare the rest homes for the workers came from concentration camps: they were convicts and military deserters. I had often watched them at work, and in justice to them it must be said that they did not over exert themselves. "Why should we?" they would say. "We are fed on Sovietkis soup; dirty dishwater it is, and we receive only what is left over from the idlers who order us about. And who will rest in these homes? Not we or our brothers in the factories. Only those who belong to the party or who have a pull will enjoy this place. Besides, the spring is near; we are needed at home on the farm. Why are we kept here?" Indeed, they did not exert themselves, those stalwart sons of Russia's soil. There was no incentive: they had no point of contact with the life about them, and there was no one who could translate to them the meaning of work in revolutionary Russia. They were dazed by war, revolution, and hunger--nothing could rouse them out of their stupor.

Many of the buildings on Kameniy Ostrov had been taken up for boarding schools and homes for defectives; some were occupied by old professors, teachers, and other intellectuals. Since the Revolution these people lived there unmolested, but now orders came to vacate, to make room for the rest homes. As almost no provision had been made to supply the dispossessed ones with other quarters, they were practically forced into the streets. Those friendly with Zinoviev, Gorki, or other influential Communists took their troubles to them, but persons lacking "pull" found no redress. The scenes of misery which I was compelled to witness daily exhausted my energies. It was all unnecessarily cruel, impractical, without any bearing on the Revolution. Added to this was the chaos and confusion which prevailed. The bureaucratic officials seemed to take particular delight in countermanding each other's orders. Houses already in the process of renovation, and on which much work and material were spent, would suddenly be left unfinished and some other work begun. Mansions filled with art treasures were turned into night lodgings, and dirty iron cots put among antique furniture and oil paintings--an incongruous, stupid waste of time and energy. Zorin would frequently hold consultations by the hour with the staff of artists and engineers making plans for theatres, lecture halls, and amusement places, while the Commissars sabotaged the work. I stood the painful and ridiculous situation for two weeks, then gave up the matter in despair.

Early in May the workers' rest homes on Kameniy Ostrov were opened with much pomp, music, and speeches. Glowing accounts were sent broadcast of the marvelous things done for the workers in Russia. In reality, it was Coney Island transferred to the environs of Petrograd, a gaudy showplace for credulous visitors. From that time on Zorin's demeanour to me changed. He became cold, even antagonistic. No doubt he began to sense the struggle which was going on within me, and the break which was bound to come. I did, however, see much of Lisa Zorin, who had just become a mother. I nursed her and the baby, glad of the opportunity thus to express my gratitude for the warm friendship the Zorins had shown me during my first months in Russia. I appreciated their sterling honesty and devotion. Both were so favourably placed politically that they could be supplied with everything they wanted, yet Lisa Zorin lacked the simplest garments for her baby. "Thousands of Russian working women have no more, and why should I?" Lisa would say. When she was so weak that she could not nurse her baby, Zorin could not be induced to ask for special rations. I had to conspire against them by buying eggs and butter on the market to save the lives of mother and child. But their fine quality of character made my inner struggle the more difficult. Reason urged me to look the social facts in the face. My personal attachment to the Communists I had learned to know and esteem refused to accept the facts. Never mind the evils--I would say to myself--as long as there are such as the Zorins and the Balabanovas, there must be something vital in the ideas they represent. I held on tenaciously to the phantom I had myself created.