VERA
FIGNER
Figner appeared to be a super-revolutionary. A lot was said about her beauty, elegance, education, intelligence and ability to conduct herself properly in all social circles, aristocratic included. For us she was an ideal revolutionary, a woman with an iron will. After the fall of Pavlovskaya and Zhelagov [who had led the People’s Will prior to their arrest], she was the only one everyone recognized as having unlimited revolutionary authority.¹

Vera Figner was born on June 25, 1852; she was the oldest of six children in a well-to-do gentry family. Her father was a forester, and her early years were spent in the backwoods, isolated from the world. At the age of eleven, Vera was sent off to a cloistered private school for girls of the gentry, which did little to enlarge her experience. She spent six years there, cut off from contact with anyone but her fellow students as she acquired the superficial education deemed appropriate for women of her station.

In 1869, she returned to her family’s estate. “After being enclosed within the four walls of my boarding school,” she wrote, “I was bursting with a joyful feeling of freedom. This excess of joy, this heightened emotional state demanded action. I found it unthinkable that I might live without making some mark upon the world.”² Influenced by a liberal uncle, she came to see the disparity between her own privileged position and the destitution of the peasantry, and she resolved to work for their benefit. “Russian journalism and the women’s movement, at its height in the early seventies, provided me with a ready
solution for my philanthropic aspirations: I could become a doctor." Since it was impossible for women to study medicine in Russia, she made up her mind to go to Switzerland, where universities had recently begun to admit women.

But her father forbade her to go; instead he took her to Kazan, expecting that the lively social season in that city would involve her in more "feminine" pursuits. As it happened, a young lawyer, Alexei Filipov, fell in love with her and asked her to marry him. Before she agreed, Figner persuaded him to abandon his job and travel abroad with her—once married, she would no longer need her father's permission to travel. In the spring of 1872, together with her husband and her sister Lydia, Vera Figner arrived in Zurich, where she was to receive the political education that led her to become a revolutionary.

A dull, steady drizzle was falling. All I could see from the window of my small hotel room on Limmatquai were the tiled roofs of the houses, nestled close to each other. That rainy day, colorless, uninviting, and dreary, was my first in a foreign land, in an unfamiliar city.

Zurich! I had yearned to go for so long: over the last two years all my thoughts and desires had been centered on Zurich. There had been so much anxiety before leaving Russia. I hadn't planned to go until the fall, but in the spring the Russian papers had carried the news that Zurich University was introducing regulations that would make admission more difficult. We had made anxious inquiries of the rector and, receiving a reassuring reply—we could still enroll without taking exams—left our home province in a hurry.

It was a clear April day in 1872, a remarkable, invigorating day, abounding with sunlight and the scent of spring, when my sister and I set out from our native village of Nikiforovo, traveling briskly on a troika with bells ringing. From the administrative center of our district we had taken a steamship,
cherished goal, we practically ran back down the stairs. Now our studies would begin. Nothing but studying and more studying. "I won't go to the theater and I won't take walks"—before leaving home I had thus assured my uncle. When he pointed out that I would be tempted by the Zurich lake, which was full of fish, I had insisted, "I won't even go fishing!" even though I loved to fish. "No! There'll be no fishing or boating! There'll be nothing but lectures and textbooks!"

I was enormously enthusiastic—you could almost say fanatical—about my future profession. For two whole years I had been thinking about medicine and preparing myself for the university—studying math, physics, German, and Latin. Our earlier schooling hadn't prepared us women for the university, but our desire to extract every bit of knowledge from our narrow program was enormous. Our yearning to travel abroad to study did not spring from faddishness or frivolous vanity. We were still pioneers in the struggle for women's higher education, and the journey abroad was not easy for any of us: you needed real determination and unswerving will power to overcome material difficulties, the prejudices of provincial society, parents' opposition to novelty and their fear of letting their daughters travel to unknown, far-off places. The young Russians living in Zurich in 1872 were of very high caliber, indeed.

I, too, had had to overcome material difficulties. Three or four thousand rubles were needed to provide several years of a modest student life for my husband and me. To economize, I had buried myself in the backwoods, where it cost me nothing to live at my mother's estate. We set aside my husband's entire salary for our intended trip, and I sold all the things I had been given for my dowry. Relieved of all household goods—both the necessary and the superfluous—carefree, young, and happy, we were able at last to make our way to the source of knowledge.

I was nineteen when I left, and my intellectual horizons were still very narrow. In the two years I had been out of school I had read few books or journal articles of a serious nature, and I had come in contact with absolutely no one while living in the countryside. My uncle was sympathetic to my aspirations to attend the university and become a doctor, the sort of doctor who would treat only the poor, the peasants, but aside from him, there was no one in our backwoods who could have opened up the world of ideas to me. This uncle had supplied me with some basic ideas about society—and that was the extent of my knowledge.

Early in the year, at a mineralogy lecture at the university, I found myself sitting next to a young woman with a whole bush of closely cut black curls. Her eyes were like coals in their narrow slits, and the brick-red blush on her homely round face gave her a distinctive expression, half provocative, half mocking. In fact, it was her nose that really appeared mocking, and it went with her sharply etched mouth.

"Are you in medical school?" I asked.

"No, I've enrolled at the Polytechnic Institute, in agronomy."

Now, that's strange, I thought. What's agronomy? Why is she sitting next to me, then? I thought people went abroad only to study medicine, and that every woman student could have but one goal—that she could resolve only to serve society, that is, "the poor." I understood service to society exclusively in the sense of ministering to "the poor," by which I meant the peasants. To me, medicine was the very best way to serve them.

"Why are you going into agronomy?" I asked my neighbor.

"What good is it?"

"My family are landowners in Tver province," she replied. "I'll live in the village and use my knowledge in farming the land."

Until then, I'd only seen estates run by totally uneducated stewards, and by the so-called peasant "elders," who were also stewards, but were paid less and were even less competent. The only agricultural system I knew was the one that my father and grandfather had followed, as had generations
of peasants and landowners from time immemorial. I can't say, then, that I understood the intentions of Sofia Bardina any better after her reply. On another occasion, Bardina informed me in class: "There'll be a meeting of Russian women students today."

"Why?" I asked, rather afraid that it would take time away from my studies.

"Someone suggested that we form a circle exclusively for women, in order to learn how to speak logically. At meetings with men," she continued, noting my bewildered look, "women usually keep quiet; we feel shy, and so we don't say anything. But maybe with practice we'll learn to develop our thoughts logically, and then we won't be afraid to speak in public. A women's circle would be a place where we could learn."

"Well, that sounds really good! When will the meeting be?"

"At eight, at the Palmenhof on Oberstrasse. Please come!"

That evening, after a meager student dinner, my sister Lydia and I set off for the Palmenhof. There in the hall we found a long dinner table, with a row of chairs alongside it. Plainly dressed young women were sitting around; some had broken into groups of two or three. There was a hum of conversation, and somewhere a lively argument was going on.

"Gentlemen [sic] Kindly be seated!" announced a tall blond woman with closely cropped hair—Doctor Emme's wife. A bell was then rung energetically; people took their seats, and the meeting began. Emme was chosen chairwoman, and she gave the floor to the librarian whose idea it had been to call the meeting. The librarian explained the goal of the circle: to learn to speak logically. Then, as a means to this end, she proposed that we read essays and hold debates.

We proceeded to discuss whether there was really a need for such a circle, and if so, who should participate. No one took issue with the circle's goal. On the other hand, passionate arguments arose as to whether the circle should be made up exclusively of women. Many scoffed at this idea: they found it ridiculous that women should be afraid in the presence of men, and thought that it would be both more natural and more expedient to form a self-education circle jointly with men, without fear of masculine competition. But these voices were drowned out in the majority decision to begin by organizing women students exclusively. We didn't work out a set of rules for the society, which was open to all women students. Once the general question had been resolved, we immediately got down to business, proposing that those who wished choose topics for the following meeting.

As it turned out, the first paper was prepared by the librarian. Strange as it may seem, her subject turned out to be the question of suicide, which couldn't have been further from our minds at that time. She argued that everyone, without exception, was the result of psychic disorder, and proclaimed that there could be no such thing as a perfectly normal suicide.

Although none of us knew anything about the question or had the faintest notion of psychiatry, the challenge—to us it seemed a challenge to common sense—was taken up boldly. A passionate debate ensued; the chairwomen's hand got a real workout, shaking her bell to keep order. The meeting was chaotic; instead of debating in an orderly manner, everyone talked at once. It finally became clear that the majority opposed the one-sided views of the speaker, and we left for home, having exhausted ourselves over such questions as: What is a normal person? Is anyone really normal? Perhaps everyone's a little crazy, one way or another? Far into the night, loud voices resounded through the sleeping streets of Zurich: "Normal . . . abnormal . . . psychosis . . . where are the limits? . . . There are no limits!"

Varvara Alexandrovna, a young, blond student who was a friend of my sister Lydia, gave the second paper. Its theme was the peasant rebellion of Stenka Razin. The paper itself was weak, but it set off a debate because it completely idealized Razin's personality—both as a mighty leader and as a de-

*Later, of those present, Konokova, Bardina, Zavadskaya, Khorobeyskaya, and Gubnetskaya took their own lives.—Figner.
structive hero in the Bakuninist sense. At this session, the question of science and civilization was raised. Were they really necessary for mankind? Did humanity need science to be happy? Did civilization yield any benefits, or—so long as the masses were enslaved and the upper classes enjoyed lives of luxury and refined culture—did it merely harm the people?

Rousseau and that incomparable apostle of destruction, Bakunin, were invoked by ardent disputants who took the side of those adversaries of civilization and culture. Others, upset by the violent attacks on all of humanity's gains, put up an energetic defense, as if our debates could actually bring about utter barbarism by somehow destroying civilization. My devotion to science was passionate, and I yearned to dedicate my life to it, so I, too, screamed with genuine frenzy about the value it could have and about how, in order to bring justice to this earth, we must not destroy civilization but instead disseminate it among all who were deprived. One passionate woman, half-Italian, half-Russian, annihilated civilization as befit her southern temperament. The meeting degenerated into chaos; everyone was flushed and impatient, and it became impossible to hear anything over the shouting. The Italian woman got a nosebleed, while the chairwoman reproachfully paraphrased Napoleon's speech to his armies in Egypt: after ringing her bell furiously, she said with deep feeling, "Mesdames—all of Europe is watching you!" This reference to a Europe which was allegedly observing Russian women students in Zurich attentively sounded so funny that everyone roared with laughter, and all the ardor of the disputing sides was extinguished immediately. The meeting ended but the agitation did not subside, and in the fresh air of the streets everyone resumed arguing the merits of civilization and science.

Ridiculous as it may seem, that was the circle's last discussion. It was as if all our passion and eagerness to learn to speak logically had been absorbed in that debate about civil-

zation. Perhaps we realized that our cause was hopeless. In any event, after all that disorderly and overheated verbiage, the opposition to excluding men grew very powerful. There was one more meeting, where the question of admitting the stronger sex arose again. The defenders of the original decision had toned down somewhat and lost strength. We argued for a while, talked a bit longer, and dispersed without reaching any decisions. It became apparent that the women's circle was falling to pieces; in contrast to its former verbosity, it expired silently, to the regret of no one with the possible exception of its initiator, and was not resurrected. However, during its brief existence it had served a purpose by bringing the young Russian women of Zurich together and giving them a chance to meet and size each other up. The arguments revealed various tendencies and temperaments, making it easier for people with similar views to get together. And indeed, several new circles were soon formed in the Russian colony.

Among these was the Fritsche circle, a radical study group composed of thirteen women, aged sixteen to nineteen, most of whom were enrolled in the medical faculty. This group played a crucial role in Figner's political development.

From my first days in Zurich, I had been confronted by a whole series of questions, the existence of which I had never even suspected and which began to shake the views I had acquired—unconsciously in childhood, actively after I left school. I was assailed by doubts and had to deal with them. Because of the moral issues that those questions raised, I eventually became a socialist and a revolutionary.

Just as I had been accustomed to viewing nature itself as something immutable, thinking about neither the past nor the future of the universe, up to this point I had accepted the existing social system and forms of government without question, without examining their origins or the possibility of changing them. I knew, of course, that the world was divided into the rich and the poor—how could I have failed to see that?—but I hadn't the faintest idea of the social injustice

*"Forty centuries observe us from the height of three pyramids."—Figner.
that this division engendered. I knew that society was divided into estates—the gentry, the petty bourgeoisie, the peasantry—but I had no conception of class distinctions. The expressions “capital,” “proletariat,” and “social parasitism” were not in my vocabulary.

There is poverty in the world; there is ignorance and disease. People who are educated and—like me—born to well-to-do families ought to share their natural desire to assist the poor. Under the influence of my mother and my uncle, as well as of the journal articles I’d read, I made up a social program for myself before leaving for Zurich: some day I was going to help peasants in Russia buy horses, or build new huts after their old ones had burnt down; as a doctor I hoped to cure people suffering from tuberculosis and typhoid, to perform operations and give advice on medicine and hygiene; and as a zemstvo activist I planned to set up schools, spread literacy, and provide grain elevators to help the peasants save money. As far as over-all political structures were concerned, I either failed to think of them at all, or, to the extent that I did, considered the form of government in Switzerland or the United States to be ideal. But I never asked myself how such a system could be established in Russia—the question never even occurred to me. My uncle had once told me confidently, referring to John Stuart Mill, “Every nation gets the government it deserves.” Since his words carried great weight with me, I took this as an axiom and set my mind to rest. I could think of no exceptions to this rule—which was correct in a certain sense—and no one around me had anything else to say at the time. But if the rule was true, then Russia possessed the very government that it deserved; when Russia became a different country, it would receive a government resembling that of Switzerland or North America. And this would work out somehow by itself.

Then I went to Zurich, and the “foundation” I had built

—FIVE SISTERS

up by the age of nineteen began to be undermined from all sides. Like a bolt from the blue it hit me that I, who was virtually fresh from school and inspired by the finest aspirations toward science and goodness, I, at the age of nineteen, was already an exploiter, and my mother and my uncle and all of my relatives were all greedy, mercenary exploiters: they belonged to a privileged minority, under whose oppression the masses, the proletariat, were born, suffered, and died. At first I failed to understand—I refused to understand—that all of us were really like that. I did become confused and morally troubled, but then I began to deny everything; I argued against and refused to accept the villainous role ascribed to me and everyone close to me.

I was obsessed by doubts and contradictions, but I was ashamed to ask anyone for explanations, afraid of appearing stupid and ignorant. Everyone else who had arrived in Zurich before me seemed so learned and intelligent. They didn’t doubt: they affirmed. Bardina, my classmate from the mineralogy lectures, seemed to me the only person who would not laugh at me and could lead me out of my difficulties, and so I began to speak to her frankly.

“My father was a forester, and then a peace mediator,” I said. “How could he be an exploiter? Whom did he exploit?”

And with calm certainty Bardina would point out that peasants and workers paid various taxes to the treasury, taxes that went to pay the salaries of all government bureaucrats, including those of my father and my uncle. The people worked hard to pay those taxes out of their meager earnings; they went without necessities to send their hard-earned kopecks to the state treasury. Forced in addition to pay indirect taxes on salt and other necessary items, the people bore the burden of almost the entire budget. They lived in poverty, on bread and kvass—a sort of beer, made from fermented rye.
It was difficult for me to digest such a notion—and still more difficult to accept it. All the more so because there was only one way out: if it was all true, then I would have to renounce my position, for it would be unthinkable to recognize that you are the cause of others’ suffering and still retain your privileges and enjoy your advantages. But that would mean that I would have to descend into that very poverty, filth, and degradation that was the lot of the oppressed majority. It was terrible to draw such a conclusion, terrible to have to make up my mind!

I wouldn’t give up. “But a person who puts money in the bank and gets interest on it—he certainly can’t be living at another’s expense, you can’t call him an exploiter,” I asked.

Bardina demonstrated calmly and methodically that even the bank, that peaceful refuge, was a device to wring sweat from the workers, and that interest was also criminal income.

I borrowed from the library a book of statistics that every young man and woman was reading at the time. It contained cold, dry figures which demonstrated that, with only minor deviations, an inevitable number of thefts, murders, and suicides were committed year after year in every country. People lived their lives, thinking that they exercised free will, that they could choose freely whether or not to steal, whether or not to murder. But the statistics demonstrated that whatever the desires of any particular individual, out of every ten thousand people, so many people steal, kill someone, or take their own lives. Why was this fatal repetition of exactly the same figures inevitable? It must mean that there are more fundamental, more profound motivations than individual will. There could be only one answer: social conditions are such that, despite individual inclinations, temperaments, or desires, they inevitably produce crime. Hunger and deprivation of all kinds—these are the true causes of all theft and violence against human beings. Personal influences and judicial punishments are helpless against such a reality.

“Individual efforts are useless against the power of the social structure,” Bardina would tell me as we paced the corridor of the upper floor of the Russian House in Zurich. “Con-
subsequently, we should direct all our resources not toward
ameliorating the plight of isolated individuals, nor toward
docenting individual cases, but rather toward the struggle to
subvert the social institutions that are the source of all evil.
We must struggle against man’s exploitation of man, against
private property, against inheritance rights. All of these must
be abolished,” she said.

The books I was reading by Proudhon, Louis Blanc, and
Bakunin told me the same thing.

It was easy enough to say, “Abolish inheritance rights,” but
I must confess I was sorry to part with them. I fully admit
the selfishness of this feeling: I didn’t want to find myself sud-
denly empty-handed. My father had bought some land when
it was very cheap—ten or eleven rubles per desiatina [2.7
acres]—right after the peasants were emancipated. This land
had gotten much more valuable, and in time I would inherit
a part of it. How could I rebel against inheritance rights? I
had a desire, a powerful instinct, to own property, even if only
in the future; I certainly didn’t want to stay poor. But logic
led me inexorably to the conclusion that the money my father
had once spent for land had been blood money. There was
no avoiding it; still, I would need a great deal of time before
I could rid myself of the desire to hold on to what I con-
sidered mine, or reconcile it with the new idea that labor—
physical labor—is the basis of everything, that it creates all
material wealth.

When people of our circle spoke of the nation’s wealth,
they rarely referred to the contributions of intellectual labor;
the issue was discussed exclusively from the point of view of
its disproportionately high compensation in comparison to
that of onerous physical labor. Intellectual labor was also
condemned because of its origins: it was possible only because
certain conditions allowed some groups in society to liberate
themselves from the burden of physical labor by shifting it
to others, thus gaining the leisure to cultivate science and art.
And so we placed the highest social value on physical labor,
concluding that it alone was moral and pure. Laborers alone
exploit no one—quite the contrary, everyone exploits them,
thus committing an enormous social injustice.

But how would it be possible to do away with private
property, or to abolish the rights of inheritance, when every-
one wanted to keep what he had? Everyone would defend his
property, and those who feasted at life’s table would never
voluntarily agree to relinquish their privileges!

Both the program of the International Workingmen’s As-
sociation and socialist writings in general declared that
the only way to subvert the existing order was social revolu-
tion. These two words embraced everything; they were com-
plete and convincing unto themselves, without any further
details. Social revolution would turn everything upside-down.
The people would rise up (and we were sure that the army
would at this point desert to their side) and proclaim the
abolition of private property and inheritance rights. The land,
the factories, and the mills would be declared public property.

After the social revolution, everyone would have to perform
physical labor. Everyone would have to labor six to eight hours
per day; in their spare time, they would be able to do intellec-
tual work or simply to enjoy themselves. Their needs would
be satisfied by the product of their labor—which would be
at the disposal of society as a whole. No one would need
inheritance rights, because children would be raised and educa-
ted at the expense of society and not their parents. Society
would also care for the sick, the elderly, and the crippled.

All of this seemed clear, simple, and easy. I was captivated
by the picture of Fourier’s phalansteries. The formula “from
each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs”
seemed a miraculous solution to all the complicated questions
about organizing production and consumption. In the mills
and factories, laborers would continue their business—the
business of production—but without the slightest disruption of
time; they would then bring the products of

18 Phalanstrees, as described by the socialist Charles Fourier (1772–1837),
were communities in which men and women would be equal and social life
would be governed by the “laws” of human nature.
their labor to public stores. Meanwhile, the peasants, having made the gentry's land communal property, would till the fields as before, bringing the grain to public warehouses.

Then, factory and agricultural labor cooperatives would begin to exchange their products, evaluating them according to the amount of labor expended on them. All these labor cooperatives would form a free federation of free communes—the ideal of Bakuninist anarchism.

Only people who had lived in comfort before the revolution would find life difficult after it. It would be hard on those who had worked only with their heads and were not at all accustomed to physical labor. But here, too, Fourier was helpful, pointing out that even children could perform many of the easier tasks and could be useful to society. And since work would be required from each according to his ability, those who were weak would be assigned the easiest kinds of work.

Everything we read about seemed easily implemented and highly practical. To us, the word “utopia” did not exist: there were simply various “plans” for social revolution. Nobody raised objections; you could say that we were unanimous in our enthusiasm. Those who were less entranced—or not entranced at all—kept their distance, introducing no dissonance to the reigning harmony. We believed that all these new ideas of democracy and economic equality were, logically speaking, totally invulnerable, and that those who questioned them did so only out of egotism or cowardice.

If these ideas had not been subject to persecution in Russia, then it might have been possible to examine disagreements or doubts about them on their merits. However, those who defended and preached the ideas were indeed being persecuted, while all those who valued their own personal well-being were unable to accept them, for reasons of self-preservation—because to accept them meant to put them into practice. Those who were reluctant to forgo their privileged position, who could not find the strength to renounce it for the good of the people, would cry, “It can’t be done! You’re all daydreamers!”

"You go talk with the people a bit; you’ll be the first to be strung up if there’s a revolution!" I was told by Mrs. Shcherbatov, the wife of a justice of the peace, who seemed both old and out-of-touch to us twenty-year-olds.

Well, I thought, listening to her, aren’t you afraid that the peasants will hang you!

In the circles I frequented most, the idea of social revolution played an enormous role. It was one of the ideas to which we’d grown accustomed, and, apparently, no one doubted that the revolution would come soon. There was no real reason for such confidence, but everyone was convinced nevertheless that the time was at hand. We looked hopefully to the Russian people. There had been great popular explosions in the past. In fact, from the outset, the entire history of serfdom had been the history of popular protest. In the most recent past, peasant riots had occurred sporadically throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. And hadn’t the tsar himself said, before he emancipated the serfs, "It is better to free the serfs from above, than to wait for them to free themselves from below." In fact, the peasants had not been satisfied by the Emancipation; it had proved to be only a new form of slavery. Still dissatisfied, the people were waiting for a new emancipation, one that would give them all the land this time.

Bakunin proclaimed—and this was the predominant opinion in our circles—that their very position made workers and peasants socialists and revolutionaries. With this optimistic view, it was easy for us to face the future. "But if the people are ready, how come they’re not revolting?" someone would always ask. The answer was that the people were divided; they were disorganized and weighed down by police oppression, which crushed every initiative. Therefore, it was the intelligentsia’s role to bring its knowledge to the people, to organize them and to help them unite for rebellion.

Despite our absolute certainty of the masses’ revolutionary mood and readiness to act, despite our belief in the proximity of a social revolution and in its ultimate victory over the entire existing order, we made a strange distinction between our own
fates and the radiant prospects of the revolution. About ourselves, we were always pessimistic: we would all perish; they would persecute us, lock us up, send us into exile and hard labor (we didn’t even think about capital punishment then). I don’t know how the others felt, but for me that contrast between a radiant future for the people and our own sad fate was extremely influential when I was considering how to apply my socialist beliefs in practice. That contrast was always an emotional undercurrent in the stream of ideas that flowed freely in Zurich.

If not for the persecution, I’m not at all certain that I would have become a socialist at that time.

Spring vacation of 1873 came as a welcome break. Laying aside our histology and physiology textbooks, eight of us women students went on a train and left Zurich to spend a few weeks in different surroundings. For some reason, we had chosen Neuchâtel—which wasn’t especially picturesque—for our vacation: perhaps we were drawn there because it was the home of an eminent member of the International, James Guillaume, whom the Fritsch group had met at a congress of anarchists in St. Imier.

When we reached Neuchâtel our first goal was to appease the voracious appetites we had developed on the trip. We entered a restaurant, which was completely empty, and settled ourselves around a table as if we were at home. The soup was served, then a second course arrived—but what in the world was it? The whole dish was just a mass of little white hanks, with pairs of tiny white legs attached! Were they some sort of bird, we wondered? Was it possible they were baby chicks? “Something’s suspicious,” the younger Lubatovich grumbled. “Could they really have exterminated so many chicks?” Kaminskaya grieved.

“Auntie,” we whispered, “ask the proprietor what kind of dish this is. We won’t eat it until we find out.”

Several of the Fritsch had nicknames. We called Bardina “Auntie” on account of her reliability and diplomatic talents.

Vera, the younger Lubatovich, was called “Wolfie” because of her morose stare and her habit of swearing “by the devil” and “by the bourgeois.” For her inimitable appetite, Olga, the older Lubatovich, was jokingly called “Shark,” and Dora Apletova was nicknamed “Hussar” because of her masculine appearance.

Bardina placed her pince-nez on her pointy nose and posed the question.

“Those are frogs’ legs, Madame!” the proprietor answered.

Of course no one would touch them, and our host removed the dish, amazed that we would scorn such a delicacy.

After we satisfied our hunger, and indulged in a good laugh over the frogs’ legs, we set off together to explore the area, escorted by a pack of street urchins who shouted, “That’s not a woman, it’s a man!” at the sight of our “Hussar.”

We wound up in Lutri, a village three or four kilometers from the city, on the shores of a lake. It was an unprepossessing hamlet, and the lake was one of the least appealing we had seen in Switzerland: its shores lacked mountains, the finest ornaments of a Swiss landscape, and the water had neither the blue nor the green hue characteristic of the country’s lakes. But however undistinguished the village, it did have a boarding school for young ladies, who at the moment were off on vacation. We rang the bell and were greeted by a person resembling a class woman11 in our own Russian girls’ schools: an old maid, wearing glasses, with the stern expression of a schoolteacher. This was Mlle. Auguste, the woman who ran the school.

None of us was over twenty-one, and many of us had short hair and so appeared even younger—indeed, we could have been taken for a bunch of those very schoolgirls who were in Mlle. Auguste’s charge. She surveyed us critically, asked who we were, and inquired about our plans; then she went inside to confer with her mother, a good-natured old woman who had charge of the household. Mlle. Auguste returned with an

11 Class women (klaũsye damy) were monitors, responsible for the behavior and study habits of the students, whom they accompanied to all their classes.
affirmative reply, and for a moderate price we installed ourselves in that tranquil refuge for young spirits. The dormitory—we got two rooms with eight beds—was at our disposal, we ate in the dining room, where they fed us quite meagerly, and if we liked, we could spend the entire day in the garden. The dormitory was crowded, but that didn't bother us: it was fun to lie in bed in the morning and at night, chattering, joking, and teasing each other. Sometimes the bars would be aimed at Auntie, sometimes at Wolfie, but most often at Hussar, in whom we discovered some ludicrous eccentricities.

"Hussar! What time is it?" some would shout from beneath the covers. Hussard would remain silent, although she was awake and was nearest to the clock.

"Hussar!" Wolfie would snarl. "Let's have an answer!"
Not a word from Hussar. We redoubled our shouts—in vain!
At last, like the hissing of an old wall clock, our answer came through the friendly laughter of the entire group: "You know I don't talk in the morning!"
And we never found out what time it was.

Liutri was only a stone's throw from Neuchâtel, where Guillaume was leading a section of the International. How could we miss the chance to attend a meeting, listen to Guillaume and the debates among the workers, and finally walk out to the strains of the revolutionary Carmagnole?12 And so, one ill-fated evening, while I stayed home with another girl, my friends set out for Neuchâtel. The evening ended up in a scandal that rocked all of Liutri: Russian opinions came into conflict with Swiss customs.

Of course, the meeting of the section didn't start before eight or eight thirty at night, after the working day had ended and supper was over. It lasted until eleven, and then my friends had to travel three or four kilometers to get back to Liutri. By that time our little village was lost in darkness; in fact, citizens went to bed early all over Switzerland. The lights were out in our boarding school as well. The village bell had rung ten—the fateful hour when all decent Swiss folk were in their beds—but our ladies still weren't home! It got to be ten forty-five, then eleven . . . Mlle. Auguste, alarumed, came to our room and demanded an explanation. It was indecent for young ladies to roam the streets at night, she cried; our friends were compromising not only themselves, but also the school that was sheltering them. After such a scandal, who would want to send their daughter to her school? It was twelve o'clock—midnight—and the ladies she'd welcomed into her home still hadn't returned!

To top it all off, a storm had gathered and the rain started pouring down. Mlle. Auguste's mother was so upset she couldn't sleep, and the half-empty house, with frightened people constantly running over to the windows, seemed to us charged with electricity. All the complaints and cries of the well-meaning Swiss pedagogues were borne by the two of us who had stayed, and we began to get nervous ourselves: perhaps something really had happened to the tardy travelers? We waited and waited.

Finally they arrived, excited and soaked to the skin. A torrent of reproaches fell on their frivolous heads, and none of Auntie's diplomatic talents, which had always saved us at difficult moments, could help us through this delicate situation. As I recall, we were asked to leave that quiet refuge as soon as possible, but in any case we had only planned a brief stay in Liutri, and as it happened, the incident was soon forgotten.

But see what the force of conviction can do: Aptekman, the Hussar, began to propagandize Mlle. Auguste, who quickly became attached to the Russian girl and was converted to socialism. The bugbear of nihilism,13 which had reared its head when the young students returned home after midnight was banished, and thereafter Mlle. Auguste was ready to do anything—even break the law—for Aptekman.

12 The Carmagnole was a song and dance popularized by the French revolutionaries of 1799.
13 Russian nihilists were known for their rejection of traditional mores and values.