

Learning American Democracy from the Bottom Up

At dawn of tomorrow our ship spreads her sails,
Lifts anchor and follows the sun
Out over the seas to America, hail!
Where each of us aims to become
(Instead of a castaway dining on air)
A happy, industrious millionaire.

THIS LITTLE ditty is a translation of the cheerful refrain which for a long time was commonly heard in the dreary camps around Constantinople among the unfortunate Russians who had become dislodged and dispossessed by the Soviet revolutionists. Following several attempts to overthrow the Communist regime which only intensified the governing elements' hatred of the burgeoise and educated Russians, those who escaped torture and death became exiles in many parts of the world. A large number sought temporary refuge in the camps around the Turkish capitol city while bending all their efforts to gain permission to come to the United States.

Many of the newer Russian immigrants are of this class of people. Some of them may become American millionaires some day. The fortitude with which they have met adversity and ruin is indicative of the determination with which they are setting themselves to the task of climbing up from the bottom in America. Aided by their education and culture, having become entirely void of class and caste conscience, these cultured Russian immigrants are in possession of essential assets upon which to build a future of success in their new homeland.

The cheerful spirit that helped them to see the bright side of life in the refugee camps in Constantinople is abounding still in America where many of them are as foreign to our customs as they are to our language.

Should anyone be interested in knowing what happens when the social world turns turtle and soft hands become calloused at common labor, he may visit the clubs of these exiled immigrants in our eastern cities where most of them have found some humble means of livelihood while learning the language and customs of the country. Some of the stories are humorous, others are grim, but they nearly always reflect a spirit which indicates that the exiles have humor and philosophy enough to insure a fair measure of success in this country.

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Here is a little personal narrative from a Russian author, one of the newly-arrived immigrants, which illustrates the cultural attributes and the former social stations of these immigrants who are working their way in America from the bottom up. This author is himself one whose writings include several volumes of Russian civil war history. He tells of a recent job he had as a laborer in an oil refinery:

For two months I worked beside a big fellow whom I sized up as "an Italian from Calabria." One day I was admiring the physical might of my fellow worker when the latter dropped a heavy barrel and expressed his annoyance by swearing fluently in very emphatic Russian. He proved to be a former Denekin general in whose command I had myself served as a private.

A former officer of the tsarist Imperial Guards,

who was content to wash automobiles at night in a public garage, recently lost that job, not because the work displeased him but because the foreman made the mistake of slapping him in the face, at which the ex-soldier became furious and gave his boss a sound thrashing.

In the kitchen of a fashionable New York hotel, a former chief prosecutor of the highest court in Russia and a recognized authority on the criminal law of pre-war Russia, has for some time been busily engaged washing dishes for a living. Previously he had been dismissed from a factory job in the middle of a week and his legal mind made him suspect that he might be entitled to a full week's pay. The dishwashing job suits him very well, the work being fitted to his physical strength and "the food is unquestionably good, is the way a writer in an Eastern periodical, in telling the story, puts it.

Two Russians who lately applied for membership in the painters' union are a former military colonel and a doctor of medicine. Each had served an apprenticeship but neither had yet mastered English. By means of eloquent pantomime the colonel convinced his examiners that he knew how to paint, but the doctor will have to try again.

One New York hospital employs in its kitchen a Russian artist who has not abandoned his love of art and who recently went to much trouble to acquire a supply of materials to be used in his spare time for modelling clay and paraffin novelties. A young officer who fought under Baron Wrangel is now earning wages in a biscuit factory, while his wife works in a perfumery house and adds further to the family income by boarding two extra fellow Russians.

To the one who should be found to have "the most unusual and original occupation," a company of these Russians recently offered a prize in the form of a Russian doll. The prize went to a former county prosecutor who is now employed in a local amusement resort "to stimulate the appetite of a trained snake." His duty is to hold before the snake a mouse tied to a string, the sight of which makes the serpent hungry, active and ready to perform.

"Your face is familiar. Surely I must have met you somewhere," said a New York hostess recently to a distinguished guest, a Russian prince, formerly of Petersburg.

"Madame has an excellent memory," replied the prince. "On Tuesday your husband engaged me as chauffeur, and this afternoon I drove you through the shopping district."

This story may be an exaggeration but there are many like it current among the newer Russian immigrants in New York.

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These newer and more cultured immigrants have shown an aversion for the old colonies in the lower New York east side neighborhoods where the earlier immigrants gravitated. Up on the west side, out Riverside Drive, more than five thousand of these new Russian immigrants have established themselves.