

In the Time of Tolstoy an Artistic Dynasty Was Born

THE POET: *An endeavor to have Boris Pasternak lecture in the U. S. and Britain has been abandoned because of the USSR's refusal to grant the Spanish novelist José Luis de Villalonga, chairman of the sponsoring international committee, permission to enter Russia and discuss plans with the writer. Fearing further efforts would be troublous to him, the committee has dissolved. Pasternak's latest book, "I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography," translated, with a preface and notes by David Magarshack (Pantheon, 192 pp. \$3.75), reached Feltrinelli a year after the Italian publisher received the manuscript for "Dr. Zhivago." The new work, which contains an essay on translating Shakespeare (translated by Manya Harari), has already been published in France. SR's critic is the authority on Russia David J. Dallin, whose last book was "The Changing World of Soviet Russia."*

By DAVID J. DALLIN

FROM the pages of this remarkable little book there looks out at us the restless, searching, and excited face of a great personality of our time, a poet and novelist, artist and philosopher, who has not yet found—will he ever find?—the definite, soothing, and reassuring answers to his questions, nor even a final field for his talents. He was, he says, a "leftist"; now they call him a "reactionary." A talented composer, he drops music after six years of passionate devotion. A great admirer of painting and painters, himself the son of a prominent painter, he turns to poetry. He writes a book of poems entitled "A Twin in the Clouds," and then calls the title "silly" and is "sorry" that he wrote the book. About his own poetry there is an avalanche of self-criticism. "My ear was at the time perverted by the pretentious extravagances and the break from everything natural that were in vogue in those days. Everything spoken in a normal way rebounded from me."

As if personalized in this outstanding man, we recognize the Russia of the twentieth century—its eternal metamorphoses and quests and torments, its religiousness in paradoxical garb, and its agonized spiritual ramblings. The peculiar world of the top strata of Russian intellectuals on the eve of the revolution and after re-emerges before our eyes—its "schools" and "trends," its enthusiasms, passions, and disenchantments. The names of the author's friends read like a survey of Russian literature:

Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Essenin, and many others.

An autobiography is not a novel, and style in an autobiography is generally not of the greatest importance, but here the style is extraordinary. I have never read a biography or an autobiography written in such beautiful, polished, and grand-master style. It is a delight. Here is an excerpt from Pasternak's description of the visit to Leo Tolstoy's house right after the great writer's death:

In the room lay a mountain like Elbrus, and she was one of its large, detached crags; the room was filled by a storm cloud the size of half the sky, and she was one of its separate lightnings. And she did not realize that she had the privilege of a crag and of a sheet of lightning to be silent and to crush by the mysteriousness of her conduct; that she need not enter into arguments with those who were the most untolstoyan in the world—the Tolstoyans; that she need not join in a pygmy battle with those people.

But he adds:

It was not a mountain that lay in the corner of the room, but a little, wizened old man, one of the old men created by Tolstoy, one of those he had described and scattered over his pages by the dozen. Little Christmas trees stood all around the place. The setting sun cut across the room with four slanting shafts of light and formed a cross over the corner where the body was lying with the thick shadow of the window-bars and other little baby crosses with the traceries of the young Christmas trees.

Among Pasternak's early reminiscences is his impression of Alexander Scriabin's third symphony, the "Divine Poem," played by the great composer himself at a neighboring *dacha*:

Lord, what music it was! The symphony was continually crumbling and tumbling like a city under artillery fire, and was all the time growing and



—From "Pasternak" (To be published May 4. McGraw-Hill).

Young Boris sketched by his father, Leonid Pasternak.

being built up out of debris and wreckage. It was brimful of ideas minutely worked out to a point that was indistinguishable from frenzy, and at the same time as new as the forest, breathing life and freshness and, indeed, arrayed, surely, in the morning of the spring foliage of 1903 and not of 1803.

Thus the book is more than the simple autobiography of a writer; but it is also less than that. We do not learn much of Pasternak's personal life, his family, or his children; nor do we learn about his relations with the authorities.

It was a tragedy for a great writer not to be able to write over a period of many years; and it was hard on an autobiographer not to be able to mention this tragic experience except in vague hints in passing. From other sources we know that for some twelve years he lived in fear of execution. He wrote nothing, except "for the drawer" of his desk, although those



—From "Pasternak" (McGraw-Hill).

Boris Pasternak's student years recorded by his father—never soothing, assuring answers.

years were the period in an artist's life when the creative talent reaches its blossom. He cannot relate more than a few minor details of the last decades, for it is too early still to write about this era: "One would have to write about it in a way to make the heart stop beating and the hair stand on end. . . ." We are far, he says, from this stage.

These are the concluding words in his autobiography, but the autobiography has in no sense been concluded. Every week adds a few more verses to the story of the wounded caged eagle. His latest poem is a gloomy one:

I am like a beast in an enclosure,
Somewhere are people, freedom,
and light,
Behind me is the noise of pursuit
And there is no way out. . .

Their Coat of Arms Was Truth

THE PAINTER: Boris Pasternak's background is glimpsed in the following excerpts from an article about Leonid Pasternak by the Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), who during the last decade of his life lived in Tel Aviv, working as publisher, editor, translator, and critic. A volume of Bialik's critical essays, translated by M. M. Shudojsky, will appear shortly.

By H. N. BIALIK

HAMBURG, 1923.

Leonid PASTERNAK is a fine artist, a distinguished portraitist *sui generis*, skilful of hand and faithful of eye, who joys in his work. A master of color, possessed of a polished and perfected technique, he proceeds on his own way undeviatingly, always faithful to his own soul and constantly renewing his inspiration. And he is withal a delightful person of equable temperament, cultured and refined, industrious, diligent, and alert. Clear of spirit and light of movement, he is beloved and respected by colleagues and students alike. This is Pasternak, the man and the artist.

His background? What will that give us? What good, for example, will it do if we know what happened during his childhood in the 1860s, when Jews first began to taste Russian culture, and the enlightened ones among them were in headlong flight from Judaism? What will we learn from the fact that he was reared in the home of poor parents: his father was an innkeeper in Odessa, "the beauty of the South" on the shores of the Black Sea, the city of light and levity, and that there he attended the Russian gymnasium and—like most children of the "pioneers of the Haskalah" [the Jewish Enlightenment in Europe, characterized by interest in secular studies and by a revival of Hebrew]—he was ignorant of the Hebrew language and literature?

And how will it aid us to know further that the boy's soul was suddenly taken with painting, so that he used to steal out of the seventh grade in the gymnasium in order to attend surreptitiously the art school of his city? His parents objected strenuously, because to them painting was an absurd affair devoid of any "future." And how will it help our understanding if we learn, further, that he continued afterwards, in young manhood, to vacillate, so that without

making a complete break with the university in Odessa, where he was studying law to appease his parents, he nonetheless after many difficult experiences succeeded in getting to the Munich Academy of Art? There for the first time the gates of perfect art were opened widely for him, and he learned to know the work of the greatest artists, such as Holbein, Rembrandt, and others. What will all these little particulars do for us?

It is enough to note that upon his return to his native land, after a period of much diligent application, he was already aware of his powers and equipped with considerable knowledge and a perfected technique. With the full splendor of his talent he began to devote himself zealously to creative work; in time he became one of the assiduous builders of Russian art. One after the other, his facile hand produced a whole series of lovely genre canvases, large and small, dealing realistically with the present, whose "subjects" are drawn from the actual life of the Russian people.

Perhaps it was no mere accident or the payment of a "tax" to his time that he chose motifs of life at once simple and intimate in their tranquillity and modest sadness, especially those of home and family and homesickness for one's native land. These subjects have wittingly or unwittingly always drawn the Jewish realistic artists. Externally, these paintings are completely "Gentile"; the "mode," i.e. the technique, the manner, is entirely European. ("Is there such a thing as a Jewish manner?" Pasternak and others like him could ask.) But in the "inwardness" of his work the artist, probably in spite of himself, has hidden a particle from the secret recesses of his Hebrew spirit—that which has come to him unawares as an inheritance from his forefathers. One need only observe Pasternak for one hour among the members of his family in the pure, patriarchal atmosphere of his tranquil home; one need only lis-