

# Chapter 04

## MOSCOW

1925

### People :

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### Text :

The text is from my copy of Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth*, New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925.

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## CHAPTER IV

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*February 10, 1920.*---The opportunity to visit the capital came unexpectedly: Lansbury and Barry, of the London *Daily Herald*, were in Petrograd, and I was asked to accompany them to Moscow as interpreter. Though not entirely recovered from my recent illness, I accepted the rare chance, travel between Petrograd and Moscow being limited to absolute necessity.

The railroad conditions between the two capitals (both cities are so considered) are deplorable. The engines are old and weak, the road in need of repair. Several times we ran short of fuel, and our engineer left the train to go off into the woods for a fresh supply of wood. Some of the passengers accompanied the crew to help with the loading.

The cars were crowded with soldiers and Soviet officials. During the night many travelers boarded our train. There was much shouting and cursing, and the plaintive cries of children. Then sudden silence, and an imperious command, "Get off, you devils. You don't belong here."

"The railroad Tcheka," the *provodnik* (car porter) came into the coupé to warn us. "Get your papers ready, *tovarishtchi*."

A dark, stocky man entered. My eye caught the gleam of a big Colt in his belt,

without holster. Behind him stood two soldiers, with bayoneted rifles. "Your papers!" he demanded.

"English travelers," I explained, showing our documents.

"Oh, pardon, *tovarishtchi*," --- his manner changed instantly, as he caught sight of Lansbury, wrapped in his great fur coat, tall and side-whiskered, the typical British *bourzhooi*.

"Pardon," the Tchekist repeated, and without looking at our documents he stepped into the next coupé.

We were in the special coach reserved for high Bolshevik officials and foreign guests. It was lit by candles, had upholstered couches, and was comparatively clean. The rest of the train consisted of third-class cars, containing double tiers of wooden benches, and of some *teplushki* (freight cars) used for passenger traffic, without light or heat, incredibly crowded and filthy.

At every station we were besieged by crowds clamoring for admission. "*N'yet mesta, N'yet mesta!*" (No room!) the militiamen accompanying the train kept shouting, repeatedly drawing their guns. I called the attention of the officers to the vacant places in our compartment, but they waved me aside. "'Tis not for them," they said.

Arriving at the Moscow depot we found platform and waiting room a dense mass, almost everyone with a heavy load on his back, pushing and shouting, those in front trying to get past the armed guards at the gates. The people looked worn and begrimed, most of them having spent several days at the station, sleeping at night on the floor, and waiting their turn to be let through.

With difficulty we made our way to the street. There scores of women and children fell upon our things, each trying to drag them to his little sleigh and assuring us he'll carry our effects anywhere for a small price. "A bit of bread, little father," the children begged; "just a little, for Christ's sake."

It was bitterly cold, deep snow on the ground. The children stood shivering, knocking one foot against the other for warmth. Their emaciated little faces were blue and pinched, some of the boys barefoot on the frozen steps.

"How starved they look, and how poorly clad," I remarked.

"No worse than you see at the London stations," Lansbury replied curtly. "You're hypercritical, Berkman."

In an automobile of the Foreign Office we were driven to a large house, with high iron fence and guard at the gate, the former residence of Y---, the Sugar King of Russia, now occupied by Karakhan.

A palatial home, with costly carpets, rare tapestries, and paintings. The young man who met us and who introduced himself as Tchicherin's secretary, assigned Lansbury and Barry to the guest wing. "I regret we have no spare room for you," he said to me; "we didn't expect you. But I shall send you to the *Kharitonensky*."

The latter proved to be a Soviet guest house, on the street of the same name. Formerly owned by a German merchant, it is now nationalized and serves to house delegates and visitors from other parts of the country.

In the *Kharitonensky* I was informed that the *commandant* of the house was absent, and that nothing could be done without his orders. I waited two hours, and when the *commandant* finally appeared he said that he had not been notified of my coming, had received no instructions to prepare a room for me, and that, moreover, no rooms were vacant.

Here was a dilemma. A stranger in a city without hotels or boarding houses, and no lodgings to be had except by order of one or the other of the Soviet institutions. As I had not been invited or sent to Moscow by any of its government branches, I could not count upon them to secure a room for me. Moscow is fearfully overcrowded, and the multiplying Government departments constantly need new quarters. Visitors who cannot find a place often pass the night at the railroad station, the *commandant* suggested. I was about to take the hint, when we were approached by a man wearing a white fur cap with ear pieces reaching to his knees. A Siberian, I thought, from his dress.

"If the *commandant* does not object, perhaps you will share my room till another is vacant?" he said pleasantly, speaking good English.

The *commandant*, having examined my papers, consented, and presently I was installed in my friend's large and pleasantly warm room.

He looked at me carefully, then asked:

"Are you from San Francisco?"

"Yes, I used to live there. Why do you ask?"

"Is your name Berkman?"

"Yes."

"Alexander Berkman?" he persisted.

"Yes."

He embraced me, kissing me thrice in Russian fashion. "Why," he said, "I know you. I used to live in Frisco myself. Saw you many a time --- at meetings and lectures. Don't you remember me? I'm Sergei. I lived on the Russian Hill. No, of course, you wouldn't remember me," he ran on. "Well, I returned to Russia at the outbreak of the February Revolution, by way of Japan. Been to Siberia, in Sakhalin and the East, and now I have brought our report to the Party."

"Are you a Communist?" I inquired.

"A Bolshevik," he smiled, "though not a Party member. I used to be a Left Social Revolutionist, but I'm close to the Communists now, and have been working with them since the Revolution."

Again he embraced me.

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