Interview with Leo Voline

Leo Voline interviewed by Itineraire editors.

Leo Voline

Third son of Voline, Leo Eichenbaum (better known as Leo Voline) was born on 4 January 1917. From early on he shared his fathers ideals and at the beginning of 1937, he made his way to Spain, there to join a confederal column of the CNT. His account of the death of Durruti is most interesting. Is any further information on this commando available? Or is it all part of the myth?

Itineraire — How did your father sample the Russian Revolution?

Leo — As ever, as was his lifelong habit, he gave himself up completely to it: he was always the same way, whether it was family matters or anyone in need. He would not allow himself any excuse or weakness, even if his life depended on it. Sentenced to death by the Bolsheviks, he refused to renege upon his ideas and go over to them in order to win a pardon. He never wanted to play the leader and stay behind in Moscow with the 'salon anarchists'. 'Luckily', he used to say 'they are not the ones who will make the revolution'. And so it was that he set off to join the Makhnovist insurgent movement in the Ukraine, once he got wind of it. My father was always a bit backwards in coming forward, telling the masses: 'I count for nothing. It is up to you to act, to decide, to organise yourselves. You know your problems best. I can merely offer advice.' His respect for every single individual was total. In his view, everyone was good, and, if someone was not, that was the fault of society. As I see it, even if there is a kernel of truth in that, he was very often too forgiving. He never forced his opinion on anybody. One time- I must have been about fourteen — I asked him: 'What are your beliefs?' and he replied: 'Never mind about my opinions, search out your own truth' (…) I only got to know my father when I was about five years old and he was held in the Butyrky prison in Moscow under sentence of death. He was released on condition that he leave the country and that thanks to a campaign launched by a delegation of French revolutionary syndicalists led by Gaston Leval: it kicked up a real stink. So I cannot remember anything about my father before that time. The only memories I have left are of our everyday life, with a village as a backcloth — a village called Bobrow, in the northern Ukraine — and the tears of my mother, on her own with three children, and without any news of my father, no news of whether he was alive or dead. And the hunger… Food was our main worry, our sole topic of conversation. I recall one old peasant woman who lived with us and helped my mother. One day, our cat, which ate nothing but mice- and there were plenty

of those — turned up with a great hunk of meat in its jaws, filched from who knows where. The 'babushka' ate well that day.

Itineraire — How come your father, who came from a bourgeois family, wound up becoming a revolutionary?

Leo — He told me how, at the age of about 14, generally outraged by the fate of the common people and in particular by that of their own maid, Anita, a 16-year-old girl who was always the first to rise and the last to retire at night, and who was only entitled to venture outside for two or three hours every Sunday, he asked his mother how she was supposed to make something of her life and meet boys. To which his mother replied: 'Don't you concern yourself with that or you'll wind up in Siberia!' Which is precisely what happened nine years later, during the 1905 revolution. He was deported for life at the age of 23.

Itineraire — How did you live as exiles?

Leo — We left Russia carrying the mark of privation, in straightened circumstances, with just two suitcases for all our worldly possessions. You had to have been there to know what famine is, you had to have seen the corpses in the streets, perished of hunger. Poverty accompanied us into Germany. There were five of us children, the eldest two belonging to my fathers first wife. We settled in two rented rooms near Berlin. We saw very little of my father because he worked in the capital as a bookkeeper, I seem to remember. To supplement his earnings, he gave language lessons (in Russian, French, German). Those were tough times but we were happy. My father seemed to be living out his dream of a better society and was always in good form and optimistic. Harmony reigned within the family and there was never an angry word. Then, after three years, we moved to Berlin. My father made arrangements to leave Germany for France. We were beginning to see Hitler Youth marches, rallies and street brawling. My father was often away giving lectures. My mother fretted about him. and lived on her nerves. We stopped going to school, being on the point of departure. We spent the whole day outside, as we had only one attic room in which we all — except for my two older brothers who were staying with friends — spent the night. Along with my sister Natasha, we spent a lot of our time on the tennis courts adjoining our building. Wealthy Berliners used to use them and we would be scampering about all day picking up balls, which gave us some exercise and enabled us to contribute a little money to the household. Our father kept a record for us. Later, in France, in 1929, it paid for my first bicycle. It was 1925 by the time we finally got permission to go to France, from where my father had once been expelled.

Itineraire — That was back in 1916, I believe?

Leo — That's right. Discovering that he was due for arrest and internment, having been reported for drafting a leaflet against the war, he had fled, reaching Bordeaux and finding work as a coal-trimmer on the *Lafayette*, under the name of Franois-Joseph Rouby. During the voyage, exhausted and with hands bloodied, he thought of going to the captain but, with help from the other coal-trimmers, he held out until they docked in the United States, staying there until the Russian Revolution broke out. He let my mother back in Paris know that he would make his way back to Russia via Japan and China, and asked her to meet up with him there. And so we set sail from Brest aboard the Russian vessel *Dvinsk*, part of a convoy, on 5 August 1917. The convoy made a lengthy detour, steaming first towards the Equator before swinging out widely northwards, only to sail past the north of England, the seas and oceans being infested with German U-boats. There was one ship even sunk en route and we arrived in Arkhangelsk on 20 August 1917.

Itineraire — And how did things go in France?

Leo — When we returned to France in 1925, at first we had to be taken in by some old friends of my fathers, the Fuchs, in the Rue Lamarck in Paris, just long enough for us to find lodgings. My father never fancied living in large cities 'on account of the children's health'. Thanks to Henri Sellier, the mayor and senator for Suresnes, we found lodging in the newly-built garden city of Gennevilliers. Our living conditions were still quite straightened. I remember that one day my father burst out laughing: 'We're five centimes short of the price of a loaf!' But he insisted that we stay at school no matter what, especially as some of his comrades reproached him for having children, and him a militant! The two oldest boys — none too fond of school — true, they had arrived at the ages of 13 and 15 in a land whose language they did not know opted to learn a trade in a school for mechanics. Natasha opted to be a dancer: her teacher was the famous Russian ballet star who went on to become the Princess Ksishinskaya, mistress of tsar Nicholas II. My father met her, and after a lengthy conversation was much taken by her, but told her: 'My beliefs do not come into it. My daughter wishes to dance.' As for me, I was a great handyman and I used to take everything to pieces, even my mother's sewing machine, just to see how it worked. So I was steered towards technology and proved a dab hand. My father worked as a bookkeeper: he supplemented that with some morocco leather work from home. He and my mother frequently sat up through the night finishing an order. So, being a quick learner, I used to lend them a hand of an evening, until the day came I made up my mind to quit studying and look for work. I was a radio technician for several firms until the war broke out in Spain.

Itineraire — And you fought in it. How did that come about?

Leo — For me the issue was straightforward: since I was campaigning for a libertarian form of society, joining those fighting for just such a society was the logical next step. Some Spanish officials came to the house and I was present at their meetings with my father. Often the topic was arms purchasing, but the money had first to be raised from the sale of bonds and other valuables retrieved from Spanish banks. I wound up strolling around Paris with the bearers of these valuables, with a gun in my pocket. It was all very 'Hollywood'. In November 1936, seeing that this war was no trifling affair, I decided to set off for it. My father told me: 'Now think this through, because it will turn your whole life upside down.' It took some time to make all my arrangements and off I set on 14 January 1937. I had just turned 20. In fact, virtually the whole of the small libertarian group in the 15th arrondissement of Paris set off: five guys and one girl. The CGT-SR saw to the travel arrangements. There was a so-called identity check at the border, but the French police had been ordered to let all these undesirables slip across.

I had no belief at all in the success of the Republican forces. I always reckoned that no political party, no government, no country could countenance the victory of a predominantly libertarian force. Later I saw just how accurate that was. They all betrayed us: from the Republican government that withheld arms from the people, through the Communists who had our units encircled by the fascists when they opened up the front lines. Only 532 of us out of my unit of 4000+ men were left to break out of the encirclement on 6 February 1938, after 24 hours of battle. Not enough has been made of the American supplies that went to Franco, whilst England and France, in cahoots with Russia, preached non-intervention. (...)

When we reached Barcelona, our little group was surrounded by a gang of Communists as soon as we stepped off the train: they welcomed us with open arms and shepherded us into their units. Luckily, a group of the Libertarian Youth — who were very strong in Catalonia — were also waiting for us and saw them off. Given my background as a radio- navigator, I had it in

mind to join the Republican air force. After a few overtures were made, I was sent to Valencia for induction. Presenting myself in the appropriate office, I was greeted by a civil servant sitting behind his cash register. Just then, three superior officers who had arrived overheard me and, smilingly, clapped me on the shoulder and told me in French: ‘Great! Well take you right now!’ I very quickly retorted: ‘Take me where?’ Answer? ‘To the International Brigades!’ I leaned back towards the door, saying ‘With the Communists? No Way!’ Having taken some soundings, I learned that an anarchist column was due to go to the front very shortly to relieve the Iron Column which had been pretty well decimated during a six month tour of duty at the front. So I reported to an official in order to enlist in a CNT column, the Confederal Column, under the name of Leo Voline. They were pleasantly surprised that I was one of the sons ‘of my father’. And so, at the end of February 1937, with hundreds of young people packed into lorries, I was off to the Teruel front along impossible roads, singing anarchist anthems and revolutionary songs.

Itineraire — And how did your father stand with regard to the war in Spain?

Leo — My father was totally committed to action alongside the Spanish movement. He was in ongoing contact with officials, especially as he was busy editing the newspaper *L’Espagne antifasciste* from Paris. Thus every day he received reports on current developments. And so, on 21 November 1936, he got a telegram which read: ‘Durruti murdered on the Madrid front by Communists’. One hour later, a second telegram arrived (just as my father was setting out for the printshop) saying: ‘Cancel first telegram, in order to preserve unity of action.’ Which was the absolute obsession of the time. Later, in prison in Cerbre, I came across a young Corsican lad, making his way home as I was, disheartened by the Communists, and he admitted to me that he had been a member of the commando that slew Durruti. He was very emotional and shouted to me: ‘But I swear to you, Leo, I never fired a shot!’ His name was Andre Paris.

Itineraire — Lots of people used to visit you in order to see your father?

Leo — There was a never-ending stream, a terrible situation for my mother. Where my father was concerned, our door was never shut. Lots of ‘freeloaders’ used to come, basically to cadge a free meal, without a thought for the problems that posed for us. Some made a habit of it and used to turn up regularly for a meal. I have never forgotten my mothers look when she saw them coming. Sometimes they were foreign fugitives, persecuted for their beliefs, sent to Voline by French comrades. There was a number of reasons for that: my father spoke several languages, and he also had connections which he never called upon for his own benefit but which proved very useful in pulling others out of a hole. He knew Henri Sellier, the senator-mayor of Suresnes; and Leon Blum; and the Paris prefect Jean Chiappe (whose life one of my fathers friends, Paul Fuchs, had once saved and who had promised him help any time he might need it). There was the lawyer Henry Torres too.

Itineraire — Some of these people would have been freemasons like your father was?

Leo — Yes, maybe. By nature I am very reserved. So there are topics that I never broached with my father, except one time when I asked him why he was a freemason. He replied that he had hesitated on account of certain rites with which he was not in agreement, but reckoned that those were the circles in which one might spread one’s ideas widely, given that his lodge was already very ‘leftist’. I also happen to know that through those connections he was able to give lots of people a helping hand. When comrades in difficulty showed up, my father would use his connections to straighten things out for them, find them papers, residence permits, lodgings and work. It was often very hard. Sometimes people lived with us while they waited. Luckily there were also genuine friends who did their damnedest discreetly to look after the children, lay on

a party, dress up as Father Christmas. I recall especially the Goldenbergs, Senya Fleshine and Mollie Steimer, the Doubinskys, Arshinov and others.

Itineraire — And did Makhno and Arshinov come too?

Leo — Yes, Arshinov and his wife, along with their little lad, André, visited for years right up until they left for Russia. My father used to say to him: 'Marin…' I have no idea why he called him that. I remember especially one song that they used to sing together with Makhno, which referred to 'Batko' (Makhno), 'Uncle Marin' (Arshinov) and Voline. When Arshinov called to the house in Gennevilliers in 1927, pining for home — I was just a kid of about ten — my father used to say over and over to him: 'Marin, you must not go. They will shoot you. Do not kid yourself, they will never forgive you.' But he went all the same in 1932, and they shot him in 1937. Makhno used to come often when we lived in Berlin in our attic. I used to listen keenly to him, for all his talk was of his battles, his daring coups, his guile in dealing with the enemy — a real western for a lad of between 7 and 9 like me. Then, in France, we lived way out on the outskirts: he was worn out, ailing and handicapped by his many wounds and we saw less and less of him until he died in 1934.

Itineraire — You did see your father again, in 1940, in Marseilles. What was he up to then?

Leo — That's right. Demobbed in August 1940 (I had belonged to a ski troop unit in the Alps), I met up with my father in Marseilles on 28 October. In the interim, waiting to see how things would turn out generally (Paris was occupied by the Germans) I had gone grape-picking and various other things. There were a million and a half refugees from the occupied zone in the Marseilles area. Work was very hard to come by. My father, already hard hit by my mothers death and living from day to day, was still active: meetings, lectures, propaganda. We talked about it a bit, but, because of my reserve we did not get too far.

Communication between father and son is not very easy: I still felt too much of a child beside him. It was a lot later on, once I had gained some experience and greater knowledge of people, that I should have liked to chat with him. But by then he was no longer around. Taken in by one of his best friends, Francisco Botey, who (along with his wife Paquita) had fled Spain for the Marseilles area, he had company and care in those tough times, but passed away, exhausted and gravely ill, in September 1945.

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Retrieved on 19th May 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
Published in *Itineraire* 13, pp 21–24.. Translated by: Paul Sharkey.

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