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The Personal Side of Nestor Makhno

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February 2002

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into the hands of two of his enemies, his wife and Voline, which all his mistrustfulness was unable to prevent.

“Between 1918 and 1921, in the anarchist Ukraine, one of the greatest victories of the anti-hierarchical struggle inside the man class took place. Nestor Makhno — who was nicknamed ‘Batko’, that is, ‘Father’ — made some elegant speeches during the insurrection: (...) But when Makhno spoke of the emancipation of humanity, that did not prevent him, in his everyday behaviour, from restricting membership of humanity. Voline, who took part in Makhno’s insurrectionary campaign, writes: ‘The second shortcoming of Makhno and many of his close associates — commanders and others — was their attitude towards women. Especially when inebriated, these men indulged in inadmissible acts — hateful would be more exact — going so far as to force certain women to participate in orgies.’ Women then were so little a part of the ‘humanity’ of the Ukraine libertarians that Voline considered raping them a mere ‘shortcoming’, and a secondary one at that, less serious than Makhno’s ‘great fault’ which he considered to be ‘alcohol abuse’.” (Emmanuel Reynaud, “Holy Virility”, Pluto 1983.)

This is a rare look at Makhno from an uncompromisingly anti-patriarchal angle. Generally Makhno and the insurrectionary movement in the Ukraine are presented superficially and in very positive terms in anarchist media. Material in English dealing with Makhno’s personality, his relationships, etc., is very scarce. This motivated me to translate some biographical pieces looking at this side of the revolutionary. The four pieces presented here paint a vivid picture and will hopefully help dispel the romantic aura which still enshrouds Makhno and his movement in the eyes of many anarchists. My aim in publicising these pieces is to encourage a critical glance behind the scenes — without detracting from the movement’s achievements.

The first piece, **Gulyai-Polye in 1918**, helps set the historical context. The second piece, **Agafya Andreyevna**, is about Makhno's de-facto wife from 1919 onwards. **It should be said here that the author of these two pieces, N. Sukhogorskaya, was not an anarchist. Her assessment of Makhno and his movement is quite negative, even cynical, but she was a contemporary and an eyewitness of events in Gulyai-Polye and I think her colourful accounts can be enjoyed with caution.** The third piece, **Memoirs**, is a short autobiographical note by Makhno's de-facto wife. The picture is rounded off by the fourth piece, **Makhno in Paris** by Ida Mett, a Russian anarchist. Her observations partly contradict and partly corroborate those of the first two authors. All four pieces were published in Russian in "*Nestor Ivanovich Makhno. Vospominaniya, materialy i dokumenty*", Dzvyn publishers, Kiev, 1991.

This translation was made possible by a grant from the Institute for Anarchist Studies.

Will Firth, translator
February 2002

1. Gulyai-Polye in 1918 by N. Sukhogorskaya

The village of Gulyai-Polye¹ in the Zaporozh'ye district of the Ukraine is located about 6 km from the railway station of the same name. It was Makhno's home town and chosen place of residence, and when it was under the control of the Makhno movement it was often referred to as "Makhnograd", i.e. Makhno City. Gulyai-Polye is a rather large, sprawling village with around 2,000 houses. When I was in Gulyai-Polye there were about ten parish schools, three high schools, a technical college, two churches, a synagogue,

¹ In this translation place names etc. are given in their Russian form rather than Ukrainian.

Did Makhno really believe in the anarchism he advocated? I don't think so. It's more likely that he just remained faithful to his youthful passions, and at that time anarchism was a kind of belief, a faith which seemed capable of changing the face of the earth and making the poor happy. Makhno had a low opinion of the anarchists he knew in Russia around the time of the Revolution. He considered them incompetent. When they joined the Makhnovshchina as "theoreticians" he felt they were weak and cowardly in practice compared with the ordinary Ukrainian peasant who taught them what courage was all about. Makhno scathingly criticised Kropotkin for the patriotic stance he took in 1914. In conclusion it can be said that Makhno clearly felt the disparity between anarchist ideas and their embodiment in real life, in society.

Was Makhno the drunkard Voline portrayed him as? I saw Makhno on many, many occasions in Paris in the space of three years and didn't ever see him drunk. Several times there were dinners organised in his honour by Western anarchists where I accompanied him as an interpreter. He got tipsy from just one glass of wine, his eyes would start to shine, and he would become more eloquent. But let me repeat: never once did I see him really drunk. I was told that in the last years of his life he was often hungry, that he let himself go, and perhaps then he turned to drink. A few drops of alcohol were all his sick, weakened body could take. When he was a hetman, however, I presume he drank like any peasant did.

In my view Makhno's pathological mistrustfulness and suspicion of others was a negative side of his personality, but in context this too was quite understandable — the experiences of the Civil War were still very much alive in his mind. That having been said, Makhno was able to treat even his closest friends with suspicion.

Was Makhno able to distinguish friends from enemies? Sometimes he was, I think, and he was assisted by healthy instinct. But given his pugnacious character he often fell out with people who sincerely wished him well. After his death his personal diary fell

movement. I was struck by the incredible powers of transformation which this Ukrainian peasant possessed.

Another trait of Makhno's character no doubt contributed to his success with the masses — his unbelievable bravery and daring. Arshinov, despite having a patently hostile relationship to Makhno, related that Makhno walked around under enemy fire as if it were nothing but rain. Arshinov considered bravery of that kind a psychological anomaly.

In his years as an émigré Makhno, like many other famous people, suffered from the inability to adapt to normal, everyday life. It seemed he was vexed if people were not talking about him. And therefore he was constantly giving interviews to journalists, though he knew full well how hostile many of the parties and people around him were. Once a Ukrainian journalist asked me to arrange an interview with Makhno. I advised Nestor not to give an interview — I could just see the journalist was going to twist his words and there would be no way of refuting what was printed. But Makhno didn't listen. The journalist distorted his words and published what he wanted. Makhno was furious, but I don't think this bad experience taught him a lesson.

Was Makhno ever able to revert to being a "little" person? He probably dreamed of living as a simple peasant, but of course this was now impossible.

I remember one day we were talking about the fate of the Soviet generals Budyonny and Voroshilov. Makhno's attitude to them was marked by professional respect, and I even had the impression that the idea came to his mind — perhaps involuntarily — that he too could have become a Red Army general. But he never spoke of this. On the contrary, he told me that if he were ever to return to Russia he would have to undertake a serious study of the arts of war. This admission can perhaps be considered a dream spoken aloud. But I'm convinced that if Makhno returned to Russia it would only have taken a day or two for him to fall out with his superiors. He was always an honest man and could not tolerate social injustice.

a bank, a post-office, many mills and dairies, and a cinema. Ethnic Ukrainians made up the bulk of the population. There were very few Russians, most of them teachers and white-collar workers, but there was a sizeable Jewish community — merchants, tradesmen, etc. — that lived in harmony with the Ukrainian peasantry.

The village was actually more like a small town, and quite a lively one at that. The streets were wide and long and had raised wooden footpaths. On the outskirts of Gulyai-Polye there was a river Chornaya (Black River), one of the thousands of rivers of the same name in Russia and the Ukraine. The vegetation around Gulyai-Polye was sparse.

That was how Gulyai-Polye was in the summer of 1918 when I was sent there for "rest and recreation". The village had been taken by Austro-Hungarian troops shortly before my arrival, and the most influential person in the village prior to their arrival had been Makhno who was later to become so famous.

Nestor Ivanovich Makhno² was born into a modestly comfortable local peasant family. Makhno's father died when he was quite young, leaving his mother to bring up five sons alone. Nestor stood out among his brothers and legends soon arose around him. Old people in the village told me that when he was christened the priest's chasuble caught fire. They said this was an old omen meaning the child would grow up to be an infamous bandit³. I didn't ever hear much about Makhno's youth, but I was told that when he was about 18 and working at a factory he got involved in a group of expropriators. They called themselves anarchists, a term fashionable

² For those unfamiliar with Russian and Ukrainian names: the first element is the given name, the second is the "patronymic" based on the name of the father, and the third is the surname. It is the same with Makhno's wife Agafya Andreyevna Kuzmenko mentioned later. The combination of given name + patronymic is often used in everyday speech, thus the frequent occurrence of "Agafya Andreyevna".

³ In Soviet parlance anarchists and Makhnovists were frequently referred to as "bandits", and consciously or unconsciously Sukhogorskaya is following this fashion.

at the time. The gang was soon broken up and Makhno and his accomplices were sent to jail. After serving their prison sentence they were banished.

However, the February Revolution of 1917 came and Makhno was released. He returned home and immediately became the leading personality in the village. Legends added to his fame: the old one about his christening and the new one about his son. Makhno's first wife, a peasant girl, bore him a son, and at birth the baby already had teeth. This was an evil omen and people started saying that the Antichrist had been born. As it turned out, the "Antichrist" soon died and the truth of the prophesy could not be gauged, but the tale began to be told. I should mention briefly that Makhno later had two other wives, a telegraphist⁴, and then a teacher — the famous Agafya Andreyevna.

When the Austrians took control of Gulyai-Polye Makhno had to go underground, which was a great blow to his pride, especially because the arrest warrant listed him and his brothers as Bolsheviks. The whole family had to hide in the forest. At that time Makhno still had only a handful of active supporters — a small but eager band of adherents. Occasionally Makhno would kill or hold up and rob an Austrian soldier, but the first Makhnovists did not harm the local population, and this significantly increased their popularity.

The Austrian troops went to great lengths to catch Makhno and his comrades. Two of Makhno's brothers were soon caught and killed. Only three of the Makhno brothers survived, including Nestor and his elder brother Savely, a dull-witted, vicious fellow. It is around this time that my personal memories of the Makhno movement begin.

⁴ In their book "Dorogi Nestora Makhno" (Proza publishers, Kiev, 1992) A.V. & V.F. Belash mention a woman called Tina, "a telephone operator from the village of Bolshaya Mikhaylovka in Aleksandrovsk Uyezd (=district). Makhnovist agent. Makhno's partner from October 1918 to March 1919. Not a member of any party. Still alive in 1930."

books at that stage but hadn't yet got to the Makhnovshchina — all he had written was a kind of prelude. Nestor listened attentively to all I said but didn't think of following my advice. Not renown for being particularly tactful, I said to him: "You're a great soldier, but not a writer. Why don't you ask one of your friends to help you write your memoirs? Maria Goldsmid for example."

Makhno never forgave me those words. Perhaps towards the end of his life he did remember my advice after all, since things turned out just as I had feared: the book on the Makhnovshchina was not completed. One of Makhno's friends, a Frenchman, offered him material assistance so he could complete his memoirs, but when he saw no sign of the work ever ending he stopped giving money. Makhno was forced to earn his living again, and so it was that he never finished his memoirs. In the last years of his life Makhno lived in abject poverty which was in no way conducive to writing.

Was Makhno an anti-Semite? I'm convinced he wasn't. He considered the Jews a capable and intelligent people, perhaps he slightly envied them, but there was never the slightest trace of hostility in his relations with Jews. The accusations of anti-Semitism grieved Makhno, no doubt, and as a strong internationalist he felt the grave danger of this kind of accusation. Makhno was proud of having executed Hetman Grigoryev and he affirmed that the rumours of Makhnovists carrying out pogroms were a despicable lie.

When I ask myself how it was possible for a person such as Makhno to attain such incredible power over people in his time, I guess I see Makhno as a true Ukrainian peasant in the depths of his heart. He never became anything else. Moreover, he was like a great actor who underwent a transformation beyond recognition when in front of a crowd. In a small circle of people he communicated with difficulty. His habit of using grand words seemed absurd and out of place in an intimate environment. But you just needed to put him in front of a large audience and there emerged a brilliant, eloquent, self-confident orator. Once I attended a public meeting in Paris on the question of anti-Semitism and the Makhno

the name of Polonsky was executed at Makhnovist headquarters.¹⁰ Many members of the general staff were unhappy with this. Voline arrived at the headquarters, and when he heard what had happened he asked: "What does Batko think? If he says it was the right thing to do I won't go into the issue." Makhno was sitting in the next room and had got tipsy. When he heard his comrades talking he came in and went up to Voline: "So you don't give a damn that a man has just been shot? You don't even ask why he was executed! As long as Batko approves it's alright, huh? But a man can make mistakes, can't he, especially when he's drunk. What do you say to that, eh?" Voline decided it was prudent not to answer.

When Makhno was living in Paris, alone and in poverty, the situation was different. Many now found the courage to sharply criticise his role in the Ukraine. Makhno was sufficiently astute to realise what was going on. He hated critics of this kind with a vengeance. But when someone spoke the truth to him, and he saw that his opponent was sincere, he may have been offended, but there can be no doubt that deep inside he respected people capable of such objectivity.

I can give an example from my own experience of Makhno's sensitivity to criticism. Once I happened to be typing a copy of his memoirs. At one point I noticed that facts of historical interest were interspersed with excerpts of speeches made at public meetings in the first few months of the revolution. These bits were not particularly original and did not deserve to be cited so many years afterwards. Speeches like that were made on every street corner in 1917, and committing them to paper was no great feat. I told Makhno that his memoirs were very interesting but it was no way to write a book. Facts and documents need to be selected and arranged so as to form an integral whole. Makhno had written two

¹⁰ An editor adds: "M.L. Polonsky, Bolshevik, commander of a regiment of the Makhnovist army, was arrested by the Makhnovist counter-intelligence under suspicion of planning to kill Makhno and shot on 5 December 1919."

Makhno was brave and daring by nature, and the partisan struggle against the Austrians taught him to be particularly resourceful. I first saw Makhno when the village was in the hands of the Austrians. He was strolling calmly down the main street. He wasn't much to look at — short, narrow-shouldered, with light brown bobbed hair and a flat, slightly ape-like face. He looked like he was about 30. He was wearing a soldier's uniform and a sabre hung from his belt. He reminded me very much of a village constable.

Makhno would have made no impression at all had it not been for his gaze. At first I thought I was the only one who was afraid when he looked at me with his cold, grey, steely eyes — they were really hypnotic! I later learned that even the most inveterate Makhnovist bandits could not withstand his gaze and began to tremble when he looked at them. I remember Makhno was walking down the street and people parted before him. My small son was toddling along at that moment and happened to run right into Makhno. A passer-by wanted to oblige Batko Makhno and rushed up to move the child away, but Makhno condescended and said to the boy: "Keep on walking, laddie, don't be frightened!" Everyone who witnessed the scene was moved by these unexpectedly kind words.

Not only the ordinary villagers were afraid of Makhno, but also his very own comrades-in-arms. I once witnessed how Makhno beat a drunken Makhnovist with a lead-tipped whip out in the street for some minor misdemeanour; the man cringed and kissed Makhno's feet and the hooves of his horse, crying and begging: "Forgive me, Batko, I won't do it again!" However, this did not mean that Makhno was opposed to alcohol in principle. He only punished people for "untimely" drunkenness in dangerous situations when the enemy was near. He himself only drank in his free time when he was not concerned with military tasks. But when he did drink he drank himself almost into a stupor and became an absolute fiend. In this state he would go out and kill a personal enemy or torture and execute prisoners. One time when he was under

the weather he hacked to death 13 prisoners-of-war, red Siberian fusiliers, purely for his own enjoyment.

Makhno set up his detachment while the Austrians were in the Ukraine, and especially in Gulyai-Polye. There was a lot of discontent because the Austrians and Germans took all they could from the peasants, and the way they treated the population was disgraceful, to say the least.

The troops occupying Gulyai-Polye were ethnic Hungarians, non-Slavs. The Austrian commanders intentionally deployed them so they would be unable to understand the language of the locals.

The Austrians set about energetically instituting “order” and restoring the “sacred right of private property”. They began by flogging all peasants who they found in the possession of goods appropriated during agrarian revolts. They used corporal punishment in even greater measure to combat the Makhno movement which was going from strength to strength. The Austrians would seize a peasant who they for whatever reason considered a Makhno supporter — not halting before villagers of venerable age — and proceeded to flog them in front of the whole village to set a warning example.

The Austrians made short shrift of real Makhnovists who they simply lynched in the main street in front of the local administration office opposite the high school. This “decoration” hung from the lampposts for several days. The Austrians did not give permission for the bodies to be taken down for burial, and later they interred the bodies themselves so no-one would be able to find them.

Like I said, the Makhnovists paid back the Austrians in kind. They caught them and killed them wherever they could and by whatever means possible. Whenever Austrians were killed Gulyai-Polye was forced to pay a collective fine. The villagers had no choice but to pay. Dissatisfaction grew, and with it Makhno’s detachment.

In September 1918 the Austrians left Gulyai-Polye. The Makhnovists made full use of the situation. They plundered the enemy’s

assure himself that his diary entry was a precise account of what happened.

If I’m not mistaken Galina Kuzmenko started a relationship with a German officer after the Nazi occupation of France, and she and her daughter went to Berlin where she was later killed in the bombing of the city. But maybe that’s wrong and she’s still alive somewhere. It cannot be excluded that she is living somewhere in Russia.⁹

Makhno loved his daughter very much. I don’t know what their relationship was like at the end of his life, but when she was a small girl Makhno would play with her without end, he really pampered her. There were times when he got angry and gave her a smack, but afterwards he was utterly miserable at the thought that he had raised his hand against her. Nestor dreamed of his daughter getting an education. I only saw her once after his death, she was seventeen. She looked a lot like Makhno, but she seemed to know little about him, and I don’t think she was interested in his fate.

As far as Makhno’s relations with Voline are concerned, I’m sure Makhno neither liked nor respected the man who was to become his wife’s partner. Makhno considered him unworthy and lacking in character. Makhno often told me that in the Ukraine Voline toadied to him and never had the courage to say his own opinion when Batko Makhno was around. Once a Bolshevik parliamentarian by

⁹ A.V. & V.F. Belash (op. cit.) mention that Agafya A. Kuzmenko was deported to Germany to work as a forced labourer following the Nazi occupation of France. After liberation by Soviet troops she returned to her homeland. She received a 10-year prison sentence and her daughter was put in a boarding school in Dzhezkazgan (central Kazakhstan). After completing her sentence Kuzmenko lived with her daughter in Dzhezkazgan, subjected to constant humiliation by the Soviet authorities. Kuzmenko died on 23 March 1976 aged 86. A.V. & V.F. Belash’s book contains two black-and-white photographs of Kuzmenko — one from the 1920s which matches N. Sukhogorskaya’s description of her in piece two, the other from the 1970s which shows her as a vivacious-looking old woman.

a peasant girl from his home town who he married shortly after his release from prison in 1917. A child was born of their marriage, but when Makhno had to go into hiding during the German occupation someone told his wife that he had been killed, and she married again. The child died. Makhno never saw his first wife again.

Makhno had a prominent scar on his right cheek running all the way down to his lower lip as the result of a blow dealt to him by his wife Galina who once tried to kill him while he was asleep. That happened while they were in Poland, and it seems she was in love with an officer from the Petlyura movement at that time. I don't know for sure what the particular motive for such a savage act was. Often, in society, Makhno's wife would try to compromise and degrade him however possible. Once, in my presence, she said about someone: "Now that's a real general, not like Nestor was." By saying that she obviously wanted to show that she didn't consider her husband a real military leader. However, Galina knew full well that when Makhno was in Romania the government there had rendered him homage befitting a high-ranking commander.

In Paris Galina Kuzmenko worked as a domestic servant and cook. She felt she was predestined for a better lot and thought fate was very unkind to her. In 1926–27 she applied to the Soviet authorities for permission to return to Russia. Moscow rejected her application, to my knowledge, but I don't think Makhno ever forgave her for submitting it. The fact that they remained together was probably due to their weakness and inability to end the relationship. After Makhno died Galina Kuzmenko took up with Voline. Together they also committed a most ignoble act — they stole Makhno's personal diary from under his pillow. So it was that this unique manuscript was never brought to light. This was Makhno's journal for the duration of his time in exile. In it he noted his impressions of comrades, their activities, and much more besides. I know it existed because in 1932 Makhno told me he'd like to get my impression of events which I too had witnessed; he wanted to

baggage trains and killed the stragglers. Infuriated, the Austrians returned and fighting ensued. Then they withdrew again, but this proved costly for the local population. As soon as the Austrians had left the Makhnovists reoccupied Gulyai-Polye and started taking revenge on wealthier members of the population or whoever they took a dislike to. At this time I was on a business trip to another town. When I saw the newspaper headlines that Makhno had killed the entire population of Gulyai-Polye, I dropped work and rushed back to Gulyai-Polye where I had left my son. No, Makhno hadn't killed everyone, but whoever had had any contact with the Austrians or had simply done business with them fled if they could. This was sensible because Makhno had promised to bump off all "friends" of the Austrians. But as a rule the refugees didn't get far — the Makhnovists blew up bridges, trains were stopped, and everyone Makhno "wanted" was taken off the trains, detained on the roads, etc.

I succumbed to the general panic and also decided to flee Gulyai-Polye for Berdyansk. A mass of people from the surrounding towns and villages had gathered at Pologi railway station, a railway junction 20 km from Gulyai-Polye. The station was chock-full — there was an impenetrable crowd, and people of every age and social status were sitting or lying on the floor.

Austrians troops were still in Pologi but were about to be evacuated. All Austrians were being withdrawn from the Ukraine. The railway station was brightly illuminated and soldiers paced up and down on patrol since the Austrian headquarters were located here temporarily. However, Makhno himself was strolling about among the refugees and observing the crowd. He was disguised as a worker in dark glasses. I hadn't seen him very often but other people recognised him and pointed me out to me. Many of the people at the station had seen Makhno numerous times and recognised him immediately, but no-one even thought of delivering him to the Austrians. There would be no protection for us if we did. The local village authorities were themselves afraid

of Makhno, and the Austrians were leaving. No-one cared about us.

I will never be able to forget that terrible night in Pologi. I stepped out of the brightly illuminated station into the pitch blackness of the street. It was a dark, autumn night, but there was a bright reddish glow all along the horizon -throughout the area the farms of the Germans and Makhno's personal enemies were on fire. It was eerie, and I wished the night would pass. Back in the brightly lit halls of the railway station I felt even worse than out on the street. There were rumours upon rumours like a never-ending radio broadcast: about derailed trains, bridges being blown up, people being killed or dragged out of trains and bestially tortured. Unfortunately the rumours were true and not exaggerated or invented. People assembled at the station in ever greater numbers. They were victims of these events, or rather, their dependants and relatives. Most of them were women – at that stage Makhno still did not touch women. In particular I remember one Jewish mother whose three sons had all been dragged out of the train and killed on the way to Aleksandrovsk – one of them was just a schoolboy of 16. Panic reigned at the station, the air was rent with moans and crying. Everyone was filled with fear and thought the same things would happen to them too.

Finally our train set off. They said that the bridge on the way to the next station, Kirlovka, had been blown up, but it bridge turned out to be intact. Almost all of us lay on the floor of the carriage because we were afraid of being shot at through the windows. But to our great surprise and relief the train made it to Berdyansk without incident.

2. Agafya Andreyevna by N. Sukhogorskaya

In the local schools there were students who were Makhnovists, though they only attended school when Makhno was in town.

to tell me his dream. The young Mikhniyenko (Makhno's actual surname) would return to his home town of Gulyai-Polye, start work, lead a quiet, clean life, and marry a young peasant girl. He had a good horse and good gear. He and his wife would return home in the evening after a successful day at the market selling the fruits of the harvest. They also bought presents there. Makhno got so carried away with the story that he completely forgot he was now in Paris and had neither land, nor a house, nor a young wife. At that time he and his wife were living apart – they separated many times only to reunite and try to live together again. Heaven only knows why it turned out that way. Makhno's wife probably didn't love him any more, and who knows if she ever did. She was a Ukrainian teacher and her views were closer to those of the Petlyura camp – she never really had anything in common with the revolutionary movement.

I once read somewhere that Makhno had become an anarchist under the influence of a teacher he later married. That is complete and utter nonsense. He didn't get to know Galina Kuzmenko until he was already famous as Batko Makhno.⁸ Evidently the simple teacher was attracted to the prospect of being the wife of the powerful hetman of the Ukraine. However, she was not the only woman in Batko Makhno's good graces. Makhno told me in Paris that at the time of his greatest power people came and toadied to him, and he could have had any woman he wished, but in reality he had no time for a private life. Makhno told me this to debunk the myth about the drunken orgies he is supposed to have taken part in. Makhno was in fact a clean man, one could almost say chaste. It seemed to me that his attitude to women combined a kind of peasant simplicity with a respect for the weaker sex characteristic of Russian revolutionary circles around the turn of the century. Sometimes with sincere regret he recalled his first wife,

⁸ By this stage Agafya Andreyevna Kuzmenko had evidently switched to using Galina as her first name.

The February Revolution of 1917 opened the prison doors and Makhno was again free. By now he was twenty-five⁷ and was armed with an intellect acquired at the revolutionary “university” of Butirky prison. Makhno did not stay in Moscow for long. He hurried back to his home town of Gulyai-Polye and threw himself into the maelstrom of the revolution.

Makhno enjoyed great authority among the people of his region, and the first anarchist groups he founded were made up of local peasants. When he later tried to write a history of the movement he gave these groups the credit for having been the motor force behind the partisan movement. He denied the role of anarchists from outside and saw them just as “special guests” who gave nothing of substance to the movement. Makhno was firmly convinced that it was his service alone that the movement became anarchist.

Was Makhno an upright man who wished the best for his people, or was it just by chance that he ended up in the midst of that general mêlée? I think he was sincere in his social passions. He was a political leader with natural talent, though at times he let himself be drawn into hazardous military adventures where even his political knowledge and personal capabilities were no guarantee of success or survival. Nonetheless, I think he was definitely the right person for the role of popular avenger. Incidentally, the weakness of the Makhno movement was also the weakness of the insurrectionary peasantry in all of Russia: it had no clear goals and concrete tasks. The peasants wanted land and freedom above all else, but they didn’t know how to make use of either. This weakness partially explains why even today the Russian peasantry is unable to successfully oppose the new feudalism imposed by Stalin.

I remember Makhno once telling me his dream. It was autumn 1927. We were walking in the Bois de Vincennes. Perhaps the beauty of nature put him in a poetic mood and made him inclined

⁷ An editor corrects this, indicating that Makhno was almost 28 in the spring of 1917.

These were grown men aged twenty and upwards. Some of them said to the teachers: “Move me up to the next class or else you’ll be in trouble with Makhno.” But this did not significantly influence the marks teachers gave and whether or not they recommended students should repeat a year. Some Makhnovists were given low marks, just like any other students were, and to be fair to Makhno he didn’t meddle in educational matters.

Generally speaking, Makhno left the teachers alone. The Makhnovists only ever killed one teacher, an old ethnic German whose son was an officer. As I said earlier, the bodies of people who had been killed were always left lying in the streets for some time afterwards. Relatives had to go to Makhno to ask permission to bury the body. The dead German lay in the main street all day, and a detachment of mounted Makhnovists took pleasure in desecrating the body. One bandit kept trying to get his horse to crush the dead man’s skull with its hooves. But the horse pranced around, jumping back and forth over the corpse, and however much the Makhnovists goaded it, it wouldn’t do what they wanted. Then the enraged Makhnovist took his whip, beat his horse bloody, and galloped off.

The Makhnovists hated the intelligentsia. Members of the intelligentsia, especially men, were afraid to go outside when the Makhnovists were in control of the town. The Makhnovists once wanted to kill an acquaintance of mine simply because he wore a broad-rimmed hat. “Fancy hat — you must be a damn intellectual. I’d better bump you off”, one Makhnovist said to his face. This scared the living daylights out of him and he ran away as fast as his legs would carry him. But this was an exception, and the treatment of intellectuals was largely civil. This was due to the fact that Makhno’s third wife, Agafya Andreyevna Kuzmenko — who later used Galina as a first name because it sounded more refined — had also once been a teacher in Gulyai-Polye. She therefore considered herself a benefactor and the patron of the schools and the intelligentsia in general. She worked at a school until her relationship

with Makhno. Agafya Andreyevna taught Ukrainian. She was a proud Ukrainian and was in favour of national independence for the Ukraine. I don't know when Makhno too became a proponent of Ukrainian national independence, but he was one, just as he had once been an anarchist. Makhno often changed colour, he was a real political chameleon. In fact he only wanted Ukrainian independence so he could become the country's leader. That's why Makhno killed Grigoryev, who he considered a dangerous opponent. Makhno loved power and the fear it instilled in people. He enjoyed people's esteem and all the trappings of power. I once saw Makhno and his wife arrive in town riding on a wonderful carriage clad all round in blue cloth and drawn by three mouse-grey horses. The people stood and bowed, taking off their fur caps, and Makhno and his wife answered their subjects with a condescending nod. A real Gulyai-Polye monarch.

In 1920 Gulyai-Polye changed hands almost monthly. Skirmishes and gunfire were virtually a daily occurrence. There was fighting and gunfire every single week from January to August, if not longer. Quite often we had to run home from work amidst machinegun fire, or with shrapnel in the air. On the worst days shells from six-inch guns and other lighter artillery were raining down. But then the artillery fire would subside, there would be more rifle and machinegun fire, the sound of horses' hooves that had been faint now grew louder and clearer. A new victor was entering the town.

I remember one time the Whites took the village. They were chasing a man and thought he had hidden down in our cellar. Fighting still raged in the background and the soldiers' rifles, held at the ready, were smoking. "Everyone out of the cellar and up against the wall!", they yelled. "If we find him hiding there — you'll all be shot!"

We all crawled up out into the courtyard. The gunfire in the village continued unabated, bullets filled the air, and we were all terrified at the thought that someone had perhaps really taken refuge

All manner of legends arose about "Batko Makhno" and his movement in the Ukraine during the Civil War. One day the telegraph agency Rosta would report that Makhno had been taken prisoner by the Russians, and the next day the news would be entirely different. Being a young student who dreamed of heroic deeds and absolute freedom I imagined Makhno to be a real hero — brave, strong, fearless, unselfish — a fighter for the popular cause. I remember that they said in the Ukraine that Makhno had once been a primary-school teacher. And so here I come to Paris in 1925 and find out that Makhno is also there. I waited impatiently for an opportunity to meet him, and soon I had the chance. I met him in the small hotel room where he lived with his wife and daughter. He was completely different to what I expected: short and frail looking, not at all one who stood out. Later I was able to meet him regularly, and when I got to know him I better understood his character and his role in the Civil War.

The most significant thing about Makhno, I think, was that he always remained essentially a Ukrainian peasant. In no way could you say he was carefree, because deep down he was a real, thrifty peasant, with a perfect understanding of small-town life and the concerns of ordinary people.

Makhno became a revolutionary, a terrorist, in his early youth. His whole way of life was a perfect reflection of his times. He grew up in the large family of a poor agricultural worker. When he was still a juvenile he and some friends constructed bombs, and once the boy put one of his "products" in the basin which his mother normally used for mixing dough. You can imagine his poor mother's amazement and mortal fear when she heard the explosion and saw the basin fly out of the oven. Soon after that tragicomic episode Makhno made an attempt on the life of a local policeman, for which he was condemned to death. He was just seventeen at the time, and only his mother's pleading and intervention saved his life: his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Makhno remained behind bars until the revolution of 1917.

3. Memoirs by Agafya A. Kuzmenko

In 1917 fate brought me together with a man who I imagined to be the people's liberator from Tsarist tyranny, Nestor Ivanovich Makhno. I lived through many, many misfortunes and scandals with him during the Civil War. When his army was defeated and the remnants scattered we fled to Poland. There we were tried and deported. We finally ended up in France. In Paris the White émigrés and Petlyura supporters gave us a hostile reception because Makhno had fought against the White Guards and Ukrainian nationalists. Life in Paris was very hard. After quite some difficulty Makhno managed to get a job at a film studio, and I found work as a laundress for a rich family. Nestor suffered from tuberculosis and the effects of his wartime wounds, he was sick all the time. From time to time he would work a little – as well as making props and scenery at a film studio he was a shoemaker for a while and later worked at a French newspaper office. He also wrote his memoirs.

4. Makhno in Paris by Ida Mett

Shortly before the war I wrote down my memories of Makhno who I had got to know during my time in Paris. These notes were then lost during the war. But seeing what some people have written about Makhno, I've decided to write down those memories again so as to set the story straight.

In order to present a full picture of Makhno it would probably be necessary to portray him at the time of his "greatness" in the Ukraine. But how do we decide who was the "real" Makhno – the vibrant figure renown throughout the Ukraine, or the impoverished émigré languishing abroad? I think historical accuracy is important above all else, so I will try and relate everything I remember from when I knew him.

down in the cellar. What would happen to us then? But everything turned out all right in the end.

The Whites came, and then the Reds. They considered all the townsfolk dyed-in-the-wool Makhnovists, so there were many arrests, interrogations, etc.

We remained in Gulyai-Polye and gradually got used to all the perils, hiding during the fighting in cellars and basements. Between engagements we would go for walks and look for safer, better-protected places to hide. Discussing where to run and hide the next time and where was safest became a pastime. People took their valuables to the cellars when they went to hide because their houses and flats were often looted while they were away. Not by Makhnovists, but by simple thieves. Makhnovists, by contrast, went and took things in front of people's eyes when they were at home. Everyone knew that their house or flat was going to be burgled, but life was dearer than belongings, and looting was just something you had to come to terms with. There was a teacher who, when danger was at hand, put on everything she owned – both her thick winter coat and her other lighter coat, as well as several dresses. She even found a way of wearing two pairs of galoshes, and at the end of it she cut a very voluminous figure. Sometimes, when hurrying to hide, she would get stuck in a fence where the opening was too narrow and had to be pushed through.

The population was afraid of all military forces, and of Makhno above all. They all came for a while and then left again, sometimes quite quickly, and when Makhno returned he was always angry and vengeful. The Makhnovists' vengeance was terrible. A young peasant girl was shot in our courtyard for daring to speak to the Reds when they were in control of the town. Not to mention if something had been betrayed to the enemy. Even suspicion of something small, harmless and unfounded, could lead to torture or even death. Makhno said: "If just one person informs I'll slaughter the whole neighbourhood." Those were not empty words – he was

in a position to do what he said, and his retributions took quite a toll on the German and Jewish communities.

One day I had the misfortune of witnessing the torture of someone suspected of informing on the Makhnovists. A man of colossal build burst into our courtyard, pushing along a young peasant in front of him and acting as if it were some game. The peasant was of average height, but alongside his giant tormentor he looked like a child. Now the hulk of a fellow led the peasant up to the wall and pressed his head against it. He ordered his victim to bash his head against the wall and do it proper and hard. Several other Makhnovists stood by watching, they began to sing and forced the peasant to dance. By now the young man's head was badly hurt, blood was flowing down his face and tears streaming from his eyes, but the thugs just slapped him in the face and ordered him to keep dancing. The poor fellow fell to the ground, you could see he was dizzy. Then they unsheathed their sabres and began jabbing him in the ribs. He didn't even groan or scream. This poor tormented fellow was an ordinary farmer lad who they suspected, without foundation, of having informed on the Makhnovists to the Reds.

Makhno's espionage was very effective, and he personally took part in the gathering of information. I mentioned earlier how Makhno strolled about Pologi and Gulyai-Polye while the towns were under Austro-Hungarian control. I also saw how he walked around town when it was controlled by the Whites, disguised as an old woman nibbling sunflower seeds. An acquaintance pointed him out to me when he was playing stallholder at the market; once he pretended to be a beggar, and once he even got married in a church, skilfully disguised as the bride. Makhno knew everything that went on in Gulyai-Polye, and his intelligence service knew even more. When Makhno ordered his spies to find out something, just for "encouragement" he promised them: "If you don't find out, you're dead!" Short and sharp. And he did kill, without hesitation. This "encouragement" worked very well, and Makhno's intelligence service was incredibly successful.

they found out the couple were married. That's what Makhno told them, but I don't know if it was really true because Makhno didn't believe in going to church. In any case, her mother and father were not overly fond of their son-in-law. Agafya Andreyevna's parents lived in a village about 100 km from Gulyai-Polye, and one day the old couple were killed in an attack by the Whites. Agafya Andreyevna never forgave the Whites for this and spoke of her parents' death with great bitterness and emotion. Her brother and sister-in-law were all that now remained of her immediate family. This brother, who was in no way interested in politics or the Makhno movement, was forced to tag along behind the Makhnovists with his family. In general, the Makhnovists always took dependants and household members with them when they left, for they were in mortal danger as well. Makhno's mother also moved with the insurgents or, owing to her age, was put in safe hiding somewhere. One person the Makhnovists took along with them was a roughly nine-year-old boy, the son of a friend and comrade of Makhno's who had been killed. The boy had a small horse, and he often accompanied the detachment even when it went out on campaign. No attention was given to families — when it came to battle the common cause took priority over the welfare of individuals, and a family had to find its own way out of trouble.

Agafya Andreyevna told us that she rebuffed Makhno when he first made approaches to her. She was very frightened and hid, but then she gradually grew used to him. Besides, a teacher's life in a small town was neither cheerful nor sweet, and her relationship with Makhno gave her power and a life full of adventure, worlds apart from the otherwise dull life of a provincial town. Agafya Andreyevna was quite an intelligent woman and she had interesting tales to tell.

Makhno began to smile. He cheered up and even went down to dance. Agafya Andreyevna, on the other hand, stayed upstairs with her people and wouldn't let me leave. They were all talking Ukrainian, the play was in Ukrainian, a Ukrainian hopak was danced on stage, and the songs that were sung were also Ukrainian.

Around eleven o'clock Makhno's wife said to me: "It's time for you to go now." I left, and as soon as I got home the shooting started. The intelligence service had conveyed correct information — the Makhnovists were warned and ready and were able to leave the cinema unharmed with no casualties. The Makhnovists' machineguns fought off the Reds, preventing them from coming anywhere near the cinema.

Makhno's wife, from my impression, was not a malevolent woman. Once she visited the house where I rented a room. She was wearing a sealskin coat and light-coloured boots. She was attractive and smiled, and she seemed more like an elegant lady than the wife of a bandit who would herself go into battle or fire a machinegun. It was said that she had single-handedly killed several Makhnovists who she caught plundering and raping.⁵ The Makhnovists were afraid of her too. They used to call her Mat (Mother), just as they called Makhno Batko (Father). She stayed away from Makhno's bouts of drinking, but she did love to play cards. She played with large stakes since she had a lot of money which came not from hard work but from banditry.

While Agafya Andreyevna sat with us that evening she told us about herself and her family. Her parents were conservative, religious peasants.⁶ At first they were upset about their daughter's relationship with Makhno, but later they calmed down a little when

⁵ In a biographical note A.V. & V.F. Belash (op. cit.) refer to Agafya Andreyevna as "a proud Ukrainian with anarchist leanings, a tireless defender of women's rights".

⁶ A.V. & V.F. Belash (op. cit.) mention that Agafya Andreyevna came from the family of a Kiev gendarme, a former peasant from Peschany Brod in Kiev Province.

Makhno only left town when enemy troops were at the point of entering it from the other side. He had no infantry and all his troops were mounted, be it on horseback or on tachanki, four-wheeled carts pulled by two horses and in most instances mounted with a machinegun. Enemy infantry simply could not engage the Makhnovists. One summer a detachment of Red military school cadets from Leningrad (or rather Petrograd, as it was still called at the time) was sent to fight Makhno. Splendid young soldiers. We told them about the Makhnovists' strengths and how cunning Makhno was. We warned them that infantry were no match for mounted troops. But they just laughed, green as they were. Then they were sent to try and catch Makhno, all 160 of them. Makhno intentionally let them come up close to draw them into a chase and then made the foot soldiers pursue the Makhnovists for around 40 km before accepting battle. Only about 30 of the young Bolsheviks made it back to Gulyai-Polye, and now they knew from bitter experience that infantry alone was no use against Makhno. After that I never saw a pure infantry detachment in Gulyai-Polye again — if infantry did come, it was always accompanied by cavalry.

Makhno moved fast and no-one knew where he was and in which direction he was heading. In case of danger the Makhnovists left to hide in Dibrovsky Forest about 40 km from Gulyai-Polye. This was a large forest where they had underground tunnels with substantial quantities of hidden supplies and equipment.

I met Agafya Andreyevna several times. Once she arrived in the village and suggested organising a fund-raising evening for poor school teachers. The Makhnovists had just returned from a campaign and had a lot of money. "They'd just spend it all on booze and card games anyway," she said. "For all they care the school could be closed down, there'd be no money, and the teachers would go hungry".

There was no refusing our "patron" — she would be deeply offended, and Makhno's revenge would follow — so the teachers had no choice but to organise the fund-raiser. All of us who were there

that evening were afraid. It was known that the Reds were planning a raid on Gulyai-Polye and was on their guard. The Makhnovists set up machineguns around the theatre. It seemed the shooting would begin at any moment and we would be forced to run for shelter.

Teachers and some white-collar workers were forced to staff the buffet. The premises of the picture theatre, where there were always social events or film screenings in the evenings, was full of people, including Makhnovists. First a Ukrainian play was put on, followed by a variety show with a range of Ukrainian songs. The choir was very good. The main performance had still not begun, although the time it was scheduled for had long passed. Makhno had not yet arrived and they didn't dare begin without him. Finally the band struck up a flourish: Makhno had arrived with his wife and all the hetmans. As soon as they had taken their seats up in the boxes the main performance began.

The buffet did exceptionally good business — the Makhnovists paid generously for everything. All of a sudden a sailor came up to my table of the buffet and began using sign language to show me what he wanted. Makhno had a devoted follower who was a mute and would kill whoever Makhno took a dislike to — he just needed to be given a sign. Once the man had no weapon with which to kill the designated victim, so he simply sprang on him and sunk his teeth into his throat. The mute always wore a sailor's uniform. I automatically assumed that it was the same mute standing at my table. My heart sank to my boots, and when the mute took it into his head to start writing me little intimate notes I lost my head. What was I to do? I most certainly was not going to go off anywhere with him, and the thought of running away was no consolation — where would I run to? They'd catch me anyway. But then I remembered what someone had taught me to say in a pickle: that I was busy. I wrote the mute a note to this effect, and then he gave up the game. To top it all off he even started talking. It had all just been for fun, a practical joke to frighten me. The real mute,

as it turned out, had been poisoned not long before that evening, be it intentionally or by accident.

After that "pleasant acquaintance" I calmed down a little and continued at the buffet. I saw Agafya Andreyevna. She came up to greet me as if I were a newcomer, and invited me up to the box with her partner, Makhno. She was a very attractive brunette, tall, shapely, with wonderful dark eyes and a complexion which, although dark, seemed fresh and healthy. She didn't look at all like a bandit. Because she was short-sighted she wore a pair of eye glasses with a pince-nez, which even suited her.

Although my first impression was relatively favourable, I went up to the box in fear, and for good reason. I was shown to a seat right between Makhno and his wife, and behind and in the neighbouring boxes was the entire general staff of the Makhnovist movement and all the leaders. Agafya Andreyevna was very friendly, as were the Makhnovists, yet there I sat racked with fear. After all, I knew they were reckoning with an attack and that all the people around me were not trustworthy. They even tried to "calm" me by saying: "Of course some bombs are going to be thrown today. All of us leaders are here, and the Reds know it". I couldn't stand the pressure and asked Agafya Andreyevna when she was expecting the attack. She sympathised and promised to tell me when it would be time for me to leave.

Makhno was dressed in a dark-coloured uniform, his field dress. Agafya Andreyevna was wearing a dark blue men's suit — a light, tight-fitting coat, and wide trousers. A tall, black astrakhan cap was on her head. Makhno sat there sober and seemingly discontented, though everyone very much liked the play. In the intervals the Makhnovists drank beer, home-distilled vodka that they had brought in by the crateful that evening, and other drinks. Everyone looked fearfully at Makhno — his discontent was bound to manifest itself in one way or another. But then someone started singing Makhno's favourite song: "Our Makhno, Tsar and God, from Gulyai-Polye to Polog' ". The band caught up the tune and