



Sergei Rudolfovich Mintslov was one of Russia's most prolific authors. Born and educated in Tsarist Russia, he left his homeland after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and spent the rest of his life in exile in Riga, Latvia.

Faraway Days, penned by Mintslov in 1918, is an autobiography recounting a mischievous childhood and early adulthood. This insight into life on the country estates of the nobility as well as the evolution of a young officer in the military academy in Nizhny Novgorod and then Moscow is unlike any story previously told.

The original book was translated from Russian into English by his great cousin Igor Borisovich Labzin. Labzin's paternal grandmother was a frequent visitor to the country estate near Orei, 350 kilometres south of Moscow, where she used to meet Sergei. Upon discovery of this ageing manuscript, within which a young boy's story is told, Igor enjoyed a journey of discovery filled with hope, harsh reality and most of all, happiness.

ISBN 978-0-9874225-0-7



FARAWAY DAYS BY SERGEI MINSTLOV TRANSLATED BY BORIS LABZIN CHAPTER 1

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My father, born in St. Petersburg, was the son of the chief archivist of the foreign section of the Imperial Public Library, whilst my mother was the daughter of a landowner from the Orel district, major-general Yakov Andreevich Bodisco.

My father's stepbrother, A.A. Goppe, worked as an educator in the Orlov cadet corps. In 1864 my father, still a high school student, visited Goppe and at a ball met a famous beauty from Orel, Anna Yakovlena, or as she was called Nina Yakovlena Bodisco.

My mother used to tell me about that evening. She was presented to a pleasant and intelligent looking young man — my father. Sometime later he was again brought and introduced to her. My mother saw this as some kind of an omen — and not for anything: they fell in love with each other and my father proposed to her.

In St. Petersburg nobody wanted to even hear about this wedding: my father had just finished high school and was only 19 years old; my mother was considerably older than he. After much anguish, permission was finally granted.

The grandfather on my mother's side and his wife, whose maiden name was Spitsin, had large tracks of property in the Bolhovsk district in the Orel province; Shemyakino (which later on passed to the Baron Dolst), Lunevo, Lokna and others. These were all his holdings.

The grandfather lived in Shemyakino, where in the garden on the hill overlooking the river was situated a huge manor house that had fallen into a dilapidated state due to the expense of its upkeep, and which subsequently passed onto Nikolai Dolstoi. Grandfather's family was of some considerable size: Anna, my mother, Lyubov

(later married Baron Dolstoi), Natalia (died when still a little girl), Alexander, Nikolai (my mother's favourite brother) and Andrei.

As I already mentioned, my mother was quite beautiful and looked much younger than her years; photographs do not do her face justice. Nevertheless she was quite apprehensive about meeting my father's family. Aunt Lyuba told me later that my mother asked her youngest sister, Natasha, who was not so pretty and had a stoop, but was nevertheless kind and generous, to accompany her to the meeting and to pretend that she was the eldest sister.

My mother, as well as her whole family, was very cheerful, outgoing, full of zest as well as very short-tempered. Her wedding to my father took place on the 25th of July 1865. On the velvet cover of the Saviour's Icon, which is in my possession, is my mother's inscription: "25th of July 1865". It was blessed by Nikolai Bodisco.

After the wedding my parents left for Zraisk, where my father became a court investigator.

The first-born of the marriage, in 1866 in Zraisk was my sister Anna, and then in 1868 Vera, and on the 1st of January 1870, I was born. Vera and I were born in Ryazan.

My entry into this world was a little premature. A great number of guests had arrived at our place to greet the New Year. It was noisy and cheerful. My mother was dancing the mazurka and then suddenly, at dinner, she felt unwell and went up to her room. At midnight, to the sound of clinking champagne glasses and happy toasts, I made my entry into this world. I was born tiny and was covered in black hair. My nappies weren't even changed as "there was nothing to change", according to my nanny. It was thought that I would die soon and hence I was christened on the 6th of January. I was born at 7 months.

My father was very happy that a boy was born, and a priest from the St. Nicholas Church christened me.

My first vague recollection is of a sandy track in the garden, green bushes and an old nanny sitting on a bench. I was then quite small,

hardly able to walk, and can remember only fragments of the picture of those days. I can remember the garden and the high wooden porch on which sat my old nanny with a stocking in her hand.

At that time we occupied an outbuilding in the garden of one, Kuchenev, an old and stern landowner of the old serf days and a passionate lover of horses and dogs. Near his house there were dog kennels. Not far from our porch was a kennel inhabited by a huge bitch, Emika, and her offspring.

It was noticed at home that I was eating poorly and it was assumed that I was unwell; however the riddle was soon solved. My nanny who went outside with me used to fall asleep in the warm sun, whilst I used to lie with the young pups and suckle Emika, who would lick me gently.

I recount this story as told to me, not by my own recollections, although it seems to me that I think I do remember my wet nurse.

At the time of my birth, my sister's nanny was a young fulsome girl, in the style of a classic Russian beauty. She soon replaced my nanny, who because of her age entered an old ladies' home.

After that, whenever I used to get mad, Masha used to say "Look how vicious he is! It's that dog's blood in him".

My parents did not get on well together, and as time went on it became worse and worse. My father used to like having a good time, to flirt, and to carouse, which in turn would lead to many an angry scene between them.

Anjuta, the future well-known theosophist and translator, I can only remember as a gloomy quiet child always with a book in her hands. All you had to do was shove a book in her hand and she would then sit, without a peep, and be motionless for hours. My mother taught her to read at a very early age.

My second sister, Vera, was on the other hand, a very active, sharp and aware girl. We were inseparable. She was the family's favourite and, in spite of her young age, took me under her wing and looked after me like an adult would.

I don't think that she played up as much as I did, at least I cannot recall any complaints being made about her. Not that Anjuta played up either, although I do remember that sometimes she quietly and single mindedly used to "carry on". Once, everybody was alarmed by the spreading smell of fire, rushed into the nursery to find that the spotted chintz bed curtains over Masha's bed were in flames. Anjuta had set them alight.

Vera looked a lot like our father and he never refused her in anything, which makes it all the more amazing that the child, who could do almost anything, was not spoiled at all.

(Missing Pages)

I can still remember when the black coffin was poised above the awful hole and started to be lowered into it! The sound of the soil on the lid, I think I can still hear to this day. This funeral, for a long time, pursued me like a nightmare at nights and even during the daytime in the quiet, when I was by myself.

I often had a dream that in the rooms above the wing where the children's room was, a witch was chasing me, whilst I, mortally terrified, would hide in the cupboard full of ginger coloured seal furs and watch her from there, as she with flashing eyes was looking for me everywhere, never quite guessing where I was.

Often, whilst alone during the daytime, I would become frightened of the silence and would immediately hide in my secure corner or under the table.

The downstairs entry at our place was somewhat strange. In the middle of the floor was an opening, surrounded on all four sides by a wooden screen, from which led a wide wooden staircase.

I used to love to run around this screen, and generally all of us used to prefer to play in this thoroughfare.

Masha always used to put me to bed, and I would never let go of her until she had told me a few fairy tales. I especially loved the "horror" ones, about ghosts etc.

Having been left alone, I would bury myself in the sheets up to my head and, terrified, I would listen to every sound, always expecting that out of the darkness a cruel monster would appear under our porch light. Darkness and especially silence I feared greatly. I have always had trouble overcoming this fear.

I was five years old when Anjuta and I became sick with scarlet fever. We were separated from each other and Vera was in a frantic state, crying and begging to be allowed to be with us and kept repeating, "My husband will die, he will die!"

We were being treated by a doctor, however the illness became worse and Anjuta started choking. It was at that stage that Doctor Babikov was called in. He had the reputation of being a knowledgeable, thorough person. Babikov lanced the boils in our throats, which in Anjuta's case were saturated with blood, and saved us.

Some time later, suddenly Masha (as she told the story), having woken up towards the morning, saw in the half dark the housemaid cleaning the floor in the middle of the room. Masha at the time slept in the nursery. Being afraid that the housemaid would wake up Vera and being taken aback at the maid's untimely activity she wanted to shoo her away, but "her voice left her".

The maid put the brush against the wall and slowly came up to Masha, then fell upon her with all her weight, all the while staring into her eyes, and then in one breath whispered "the evil!"

Terrified Masha began to pray aloud, the weight started to ease off, and the apparition left her and disappeared. Masha was so terrified that she woke up my mother and told her about the apparition.

People laughed at her, but she maintained steadfastly that it was not a dream but reality as she was not asleep at the time.

In the morning Vera woke up complaining of a "sore throat".

A day later she was already lying in her coffin.

The grief was terrible. I did not understand what was happening, but looking at others I wept also. Father was especially shattered by her death and appeared to have lost touch with all reality.

I can well remember the moment when the small coffin, draped with a white silk brocade (she died at the age of six), was carried out. There was frost in the garden and the windows were covered in ice. We were not taken to the cemetery and Anjuta and I stood in the front room, tearfully watching as our sister was being taken away to somewhere.

I looked at Anyuta and all of a sudden burst into laughter because she looked so funny.

She also burst into laughter, and then we both burst into tears again.

Our house went dead.

In the spring Masha took me to the cemetery of the Dunov monastery where Vera was buried. We often used to go there afterwards for a walk. Masha and I always cried at the small grassy mound. I remember how, during one of those visits to the cemetery, the ground was being dug up and for some reason a layer of earth about three quarters of a metre had been removed.

When we arrived there, the whole area was covered with yellow costumes and human skulls. I think that that they had accidentally come across an ancient mass grave in which were buried the brave defenders of the city. It just so happened that the ancient fortress used to be in this area.

Vera, who loved her mother and father and whom they loved, used to be the link between them. Once she had departed, then so did the link holding them together. Even before my sister's death, on several occasions, they had wanted to separate but the question as to with whom Vera would go, was never able to be resolved. Without hesitation, my father was willing to part with me and my sister, but never Vera. Mother also could never agree to this.

The whole problem was solved by Vera herself, the darling little girl, who used to feel the family discord so much, that unlike a little child she always tried to bring together my parents, and as if feeling her impotence at the impending separation she lost her will to live.

Soon after that, my parents separated, and my mother went with both of us to Moscow.