

AFTERWORD

"A.N.Grech. A Wreath for Country Estates. Solovetsky Islands, 1932".

These are the words inscribed on the first page of the manuscript which is hereby brought to the attention of our readers. The unusual title is matched by the mysterious history of this manuscript book (no one knows how it found its way into the Moscow History Museum) and by the tragic life story of its author. Like so many members of the Russian intelligentsia, he had to serve a term in a labour camp in the north of Russia, on Solovetsky Islands; was arrested a second time and ended his days in another labour camp, near Tula in Central Russia.

In point of fact, the few scattered biographical references, which do not give the date of Alexei Grech's death, fail to present even a general picture of his life. Even his family name has not been reliably ascertained. The pen name "Grech" is traceable to Nikolai Grech (1787-1867), a well-known literary figure and publisher of the journals "Syn Otechestva" (Son of the Fatherland) and "Severnaya Pchela" (The Northern Bee), whose efforts the manuscript's author held in the highest esteem. Some light on this matter is shed by the following inscription on Alexei Grech's letter to Vasily Arsenyev, probably made by the addressee: "From the historian Alexei Nikolayevich Grech (chairman of the Society for the Study of Russian Country Estates; previous names: Zaleman and Stepanov). May 1928."

Obviously, what is needed is a specialist study of the life and work of Alexei Grech. Alas, not a single essay devoted to him has appeared so far. One hopes that the members of the Society for the Study of Russian Country Estates, formed in April 1992, which has taken over from the society of the same name that existed in the 1920s and was so closely linked with the name of Alexei Grech, will address themselves to this exacting task. At this stage the information available is still extremely meagre.

Alexei Grech (Zaliman, Zaleman, Stepanov) was born in 1899. In 1931 he became an inmate of the Solovetsky labour camp, convicted on political charges. At 32 years of age Grech had already established himself as an historian and art specialist of wide-ranging erudition and had authored many works, some of which had been published. His main achievement, however, was that he helped to launch two societies, "Artifex" and the above-mentioned Society for the Study of Russian Country Estates. As regards the former, Grech was literally its prime mover. However, it eventually emerged as a kind of intellectuals' club, lacking a clearly defined program, and this ran counter to Grech's original plan. This is what he wrote in a 1921 letter: "I find it hard to visit the "Artifex", I realise that it is not what I would like it to be, and so I quit. I've had enough of decadentism, aestheticism and dilettantism..." Many of the "Artifex" most active members left it for the same reasons and set up the Society for the Study of Russian Country Estates in December 1922. The founders were Yuri Bakhrushin, Alexei Grech and Vladimir Zgura; the latter presided over the Society's work in 1923-1927, until his tragic death during a Crimean holiday.

The Society believed its main purpose to be an all-round study of Russia's peerless country estates. In the course of seven years its members had been able to carry out a tremendous amount of work, involving the inspection, description and photographic recording of estates in Moscow Province and those in provinces of Tver, Tula and Ryazan, compiling card indices of documentary materials and photographs. These, sadly, disappeared without a trace together with the rest of the Society's archives.

The Society had its premises in a quiet lane close to the centre of Moscow, in a building which was also the home of its chairman, Vladimir Zgura. In 1927 it had 150 members; Zgura, B.Denike, G.Novitsky, A.Ustinov, G.Zhidkov and Alexei Grech formed the board. The Society had four commissions covering the main lines of its work: one was in charge of excursions; others dealt with bibliographical work, cartography and photography, respectively. Zgura and Novitsky also gave instruction at the study courses in history and the arts offered by the Society. In 1930, the Society's last year, its membership dwindled to 97, and changes in its organisational structure were made. All that was left was two commissions, those in charge of cartography and photography, as well as a section dealing with expeditions and excursions.

As Zgura's successor, Alexei Grech headed the Society in 1927-1930, the most dramatic years of its existence, when the authorities put it to relentless pressure before closing it down; many of its members were imprisoned and met their death. Grech was the last victim.

The country's new masters needed neither the famous Russian country estates nor a Society engaged in their study; neither did they need those who were totally committed to the preservation of the nation's cultural heritage. On general lines, they did not need any of the cultural traditions of pre-revolutionary Russia, which had nourished the first generation of the Soviet intellectuals who strove to preserve these traditions in the new conditions.

The year 1930 proved to be fatal to many cultural societies based in Moscow. Those specializing in historical-cultural, art and literary studies figured prominently in the popular reference book "All of Moscow" for 1930, but most of them failed to reappear on the pages of its next-year issue, for they had been suppressed with ruthless efficiency. An idea of atmosphere that surrounded the Society for the Study of Russian Country Estates and its chairman can be gleaned from the above-mentioned letter, addressed by Grech to Vasily Arsenyev, one of the Society members, which the latter received on March 31, 1930. Begging Arsenyev's pardon because a manuscript, which the Society had received from him, had disappeared, Grech writes the following: "It has come to my mind that your manuscript may have rested in my desk at the Academy premises when I was working on a selection devoted to the Decembrists; but the desk was wrecked by a bunch of schoolchildren, as was the entire room". Grech added that he was stepping down as the Society's chairman.

This letter is a valuable addition to what we know about the life of Alexei Grech. From the allusion to the Decembrist collection one can deduce that he was an historian. A man possessing profound and wide-ranging knowledge, he was acknowledged by specialists to be an authority on painting and manorial art of the 18th and 19th centuries. This is precisely the subject of his major work, "A Wreath for Country Estates", which is now published for the first time.

Grech started working on the "Wreath" in 1932 and he probably continued until his release from the labour camp. The duration of his first term, which began in 1932, has not been ascertained so far, but there are many reasons to believe that it ended not earlier than April 1936. This conclusion is borne out by a medical prescription dated March, 1936, and written on a printed form of a medical unit of the OGPU (the dreaded State Security service); it was discovered between the last pages of Grech's manuscript.

The author's purpose transpires from his introduction to the manuscript and from its title. Being fully aware that the historical and cultural heritage of pre-revolutionary Russia was irrevocably doomed, the ex-chairman of the suppressed society set out to preserve, at least in writing, that which had been a prize possession of Russian culture. The manuscript was conceived as a monument to Russian country estates, which, to use Grech's own expression, "have all become a colossal necropolis".

The "Wreath" comprises 47 essays, each providing a detailed description of an individual estate or a survey of several estates lying in a certain district of Moscow Province or some neighbouring provinces. Grech's choice of estates is not original; all of them have been covered by descriptions made both before and after him, but the "Wreath" is unique in that it presents, in shapshot fashion, the condition of these estates in the mid-1920s. In those years the Soviet press, subject to the strictest control, dared not publish any data on the outrageous misuse or purposeful destruction of these famous sites. Moreover, the "Wreath" is the last and largest composition to be written in the tradition upheld by members of the Society for the Study of Russian Country Estates. Most of the essays follow the pattern worked out by the Society in the 20s: the location and early history of an estate, an appraisal of its architectural ensemble, a detailed description of its interior settings, its furniture, lighting fixtures, sculptures, libraries and picture galleries, as well as of the theatre auditoriums, hothouses and other ambitious and fanciful projects; information about the owners, architects, artists and others who lived on that estate or frequented it. In Grech's descriptions every estate emerges as a living body: architecture is inseparably linked with the natural setting and the owners' life-style, and the interior decoration and numerous collections add an important touch to the inimitable image of the Russian manor. Such an all-round approach to the subject is exemplified most fully by Alexei Grech. Those who came after the Society's suppression treated the ravaged estates merely as architectural monuments; their owners' life stories and life-styles, and the art works that went with these sites were disregarded.

Another point to make: despite the fact that the "Wreath" makes such good reading, it is undoubtedly a serious study, intended for specialists in the field. It summarizes surveys of country estates that had been carried on for a number of years, and it presents the data of many articles and materials that had never been published; it is actually the summing-up of the Society's activities. Grech must have been fully aware how important his work would be for experts, and this probably accounts for his scrupulous descriptions of unique mementos of bygone days, pictures, chandeliers and mural paintings, in which he tries to convey graphic images; the names of personages appearing on the portraits are invariably listed.

Grech emerges both as a studious researcher and a writer on matters of everyday life. The manuscript contains poetic descriptions of magnificent fetes and hunting parties, and of the owners' wide-ranging whims; these are sometimes spiced with a touch of irony. Written in an exquisite style, the essays contain some lyrical digressions.

For the manuscript's author, this piece of composition must have been a means of escaping his immediate grim surroundings by steeping himself in an irrevocably lost world. Many parts of the text were heavily edited by him, as evidenced by numerous corrections and addenda (written on separate sheets of paper or as marginal notes in pencil and ink). The last five pages of the manuscript, which was left unfinished, are all in pencil. On the margin of page 256 we find a list of country estates to which Grech had intended to devote separate essays: those of Sukhanovo and Dubrovitsy, Ostrov, Zhodochi, Krasnaya Pakhra and estates in other villages of Podolsk District.

The first part of the manuscript may have been retyped, as suggested by markings that indicate the end of each typescript page and the words "six signatures" inscribed on page 200. Let us note that the following 60 pages (their total number is 260) account for the greater part of the text. In contrast to the clear and bold penmanship of the first 200 pages, these are written in a small and crabbed hand. This has been a serious impediment to the publishers, as well as the fact that there were many words with missing letters. Maria and Alexander Afanasyev and Lyubov Pisarkova, who undertook to prepare the manuscript for the press, have also provided it with annotations and indices of proper and geographical names.

The compilers thank Alexander Afanasyev for his painstaking effort on editing the manuscript.