



An Assembly to the Skull Mikhail Bulgakov

Mila Sanina is the social media editor at the the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* and Michael Wagner worked as a physician before taking up a research career in biomedical informatics. They met by chance at a café, and translated a collection of 101 feuilletons written by Mikhail Bulgakov between November 1919 and March 1926. *An Assembly to the Skull* is one of those feuilletons, describing a Soviet *smychka* - an assembly in which a central party official visits a rural community to link and bond the community to the party and its programs. The word *smychka* also refers to a mechanical assembly, which a party official in the story employs as a *special method of proof* to link and bond Grandpa Omelko, who has not understood a word of the visiting official's speech.

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Finally, one of the villages of Chervonny, in the Fastovsky District, the one in the Kievshchina area, lived to see a joy! Sergeev himself, a representative of the District Executive Committee, who is also deputy chairman of the Local Committee and head of the Labor Force Protection of the Fastov Station, had arrived to chair an assembly with the village folks.

The news broke on the radio that on such and such day Sergeev will be turning his face to the village!

The villagers, in dense shoals, went into the library-hut. Even 60-year-old Grandpa Omelko (by profession, a peasant of average means), armed with a crutch, dragged himself to the general meeting.

The hut was packed to the rafters. Grandpa huddled in a corner, pricked up his ear like a trumpet, and prepared himself to embrace the assembly.

The guest on the stage thundered like a nightingale in honeysuckle. The party program tumbled from his mouth in chunks, as if from a man who has been swallowing it for a long time, but did not chew it at all.

The villagers saw an energetic hand under the lapel of the jacket and heard the words:

More attention to the village ... Soil improvement ... Productivity ... Planting campaign ... middle and poor peasantry ... united efforts ... we to you ... you to us ... seeds ... district ... this guarantees, comrades ... crop loan ... People's Commissariat of Soil ... price movement ... People's Commissariat of Enlightenment ... Tractors ... co-operation ... bonds

Quiet sighs were fluttering in the hut. The report was flowing like a river. The speaker slowly turned sideways and finally completely turned his back to the village. And the first object that caught his eyes in this village, was the huge and wrinkled ear of Grandpa Omelko, like a gramophone trumpet. On the face of the grandfather was a strenuous thought.

Everything ends in the world, and so did the report. A somewhat strained silence came after the applause. Finally, the chairman of the meeting got up and asked: "Does anyone have any questions for the speaker?"

The speaker looked around haughtily: No, he was saying, there is no question in the world that I would be unable to answer!

And then the drama happened. The crutch rattled, Grandpa Omelko stood up and said:

"I ask, comrades, that Comrade Assembler tell his report in simple words, because I did not understand anything."

Having administered such an obscenity, the grandfather sat down. A sepulchral silence descended, and one could see how Sergeev had turned crimson. His metallic voice rang out:

"What kind of an individual is that one? ..."

The old man was offended.

"I am not an individual ... I am Grandpa Omelko."

Sergeev turned to the chairman:

"Is he a member of the Poor Peasant Committee?"

"No, he is not a member," responded the bewildered chairman.

"Aha!" rapaciously exclaimed Sergeev. "It means, he is a kulak?!" [a derogatory name for a rich peasant]

The assembly became pale.

"So get him out of here!" suddenly roared Sergeev, and falling into a trance and forgetfulness, turned to the village but not with his face, but with quite the opposite side.

The assembly was petrified. No one extended a hand to the decrepit old man, and who knows how it would have come to an end if Secretary of the Rural Union Ignat had not rescued the speaker. Like a hawk, the secretary swooped down on the old man, calling him a "grandpa of a bitch," and dragged him by the collar out of the library-hut.

When you are being dragged from a solemn assembly, it is a no-brainer that you'll be protesting. The old man abutted his feet on the floor and muttered:

"Sixty years I have lived in the world and did not know that I am a kulak... also, thank you for your assembly!"

"All right," sweated Ignat, "we will see how you will be speaking again. You will speak up with me. I'll prove what kind of element you are."

Ignat chose a special method of proof. To be precise, having pulled the old man out into the yard, he hit him on the head with something so heavy that the old man felt as if the midday sun had darkened and the stars had appeared in the sky.

It is unknown with what Ignat made his proof to the old man. According to an account of the latter (and he knows better than anyone else), it was made of rubber.

With this, the assembly for Grandpa Omelko was over.

Well, not quite. After the assembly the old man became deaf in one ear.

You know what, Comrade Sergeev? I will allow myself to give you two suggestions (they also apply to Ignat). First, find out how the old man is feeling.

And secondly: an assembly is an assembly, but still you should not damage the men.

Otherwise instead of an assembly, troubles will come.

For everyone.

And for you in particular.

Published on May 27, 1925, in the newspaper Gudok (The Whistle). The basis of this feuilleton is a real incident described by worker-correspondent No. 742.