



Remembering Gudok Mikhail Bulgakov

Translated by Margaret Wettlin. The following is an excerpt from "I Dreamed a Dream", an unfinished manuscript by Mikhail Bulgakov, first published in 1975. The text centers on Bulgakov's early days working for the magazine Gudok, referred to herein as "a certain big newspaper." Also, "Sochelnik" is code for the Berlin-based paper Nakanunye, and "a little piece to the amount of 64 pages" refers to Bulgakov's own "Notes on the Cuffs".

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Remembering Gudok

From that night on I sat down to work at one in the morning and wrote until three or four. It was easy to work at night. In the morning I was called to account by old Semyonovna:

"What's this? Your light on all night again?"

"That's right. My light was on."

"You're not supposed to burn electricity at night."

"That is precisely what electricity is for."

"We got only one meter and I can't pay that much."

"I don't burn any electricity from five to twelve."

"Very funny... what's a person up to all night like that? This ain't tsarist times."

"I'm printing notes."

"Notes?"

"Banknotes. Counterfeit money."

"Think it's funny, do you? We got a House Committee to take care of slick-haired has-beens. You'd ought to get shipped off to where the rest of the intellectuals are; us workers don't need your scribbling."

"An old crone who makes fudge and takes it to market is more like a private merchant than a working woman."

"You shut up about that fudge! We never lived in mansions. High time we was putting you out of this house."

"As for putting people out, if I catch you smashing Shura's head again and hear him screaming, I'll report you to the People's Court, and you'll get put in the jug for three months at least, and if I had my way you'd be kept there a darn sight longer."

In order to write at night one has to have a means of subsisting in the daytime. I will not tell you how I subsisted from 1921 to 1923; it is nobody's business. In the first place you would not believe me, and in the second—it has nothing to do with this story.

In 1923 I found a means of subsistence.

While engaging in one of my fantastic enterprises I made the acquaintance of a journalist named Abram, who was a very good sort.

One day Abram took me by the arm and piloted me to the editorial offices of a certain big newspaper for which he worked. In obedience to his instructions I offered my services as

a re-writer, which was what they called those who took illiterate items and turned them into something that could be printed.

They handed me some stuff sent in from the provinces, I worked it over, it was taken into somebody's office and a little later Abram came back with mournful, evasive eyes and told me I was rejected.

I have completely forgotten how it happened that a few days later I was given another try. Can't remember for the life of me. But I do remember that within the week I was sitting at a dirty rickety table in the newspaper office and inwardly singing a hymn of thanksgiving to Abram.

But one thing I must confess to you, my dear: never in my life have I set hand to more odious work. The very memory of it is a nightmare. I was at the receiving end of a continuous, inexorable stream of hopelessly dull piffle. Outside it was raining.

I have likewise forgotten how it came about that I was asked to write humorous sketches for the paper. My re-writing had nothing to do with it. On the contrary, I expected to be fired any day for I can tell you in secret that I was a flop at the job—lazy, careless.... Perhaps (and I think this is it) I owe my promotion to the illustrious, the incomparable Sochelnik. It was published in Berlin and I wrote humorous sketches for it.

One day assistant editor July (his real name was Julius)— a good fellow but a fanatic — said:

"Mikhail, is it you who writes humorous sketches for the Sochelnik?"

My heart sank; this, I thought, is the end. Sochelnik was held in contempt by everybody on earth. It turned out, however, that July just wanted me to write sketches as good as those in the Sochelnik.

We quickly came to an agreement. I was put on a higher salary than that paid for re-writing, for which I was obliged to contribute eight small sketches a month. We shook hands on it.

Here let me tell you another secret: the writing of a sketch of seventy or a hundred lines took me, including time out for smoking and whistling, from eighteen to twenty-two minutes. Retyping it, including coy digressions with the typist, took eight minutes. In a word—half an hour and the deed was done. I signed it, usually with a pseudonym but occasionally with my own name, and took it to July or the other assistant editor who bore the odd name of Navzikat.

For three years this Navzikat was the plague of my life.

It took me only three days to size him up. He was, in the first place, dumb; in the second, rude; in the third, arrogant. He understood nothing at all about the newspaper business, which made one wonder why he had been given such a responsible job.

Navzikat would begin by turning the sketch this way and that in the effort to find some criminal idea lurking in it. When he was convinced of its harmlessness he made additions and corrections.

While this was going on I smoked and had the jitters and suppressed a desire to throw an ashtray at his head.

When he had done as much damage as possible to the original he wrote "To press" on it and my work was over for the day. Thereafter all the force of my intellect was

concentrated on devising means of escape. The thing was that July cherished the idea that all employees including feature writers ought to put in an appearance on the dot every morning and stay in the office all day long so as to give their utmost to the state. The slightest deviation from this ideal caused July to grow thin and wan.

I cherished the idea that I ought to go home, to the room I loathed but where my treasure was laid up in the form of sheets and sheets of paper. As a matter of fact there was no reason under the sun why I should have stayed in the office. All I could do was waste time; I wandered from department to department, bored to death, chewing the rag, listening to jokes, smoking till my head swam.

Having killed about two hours in this way, I vanished.

This, my dear, was the way in which I lived not a double but a triple life. One at the paper. In the daytime. Eternal rain. Tedium. Navzikat. July. I left with my mind a blank, my head humming.

Second life: On leaving the office I dragged myself to the Moscow branch of Sochelnik. I liked this life better than the first. I must inform you that it was in this second life I composed a little piece to the amount of some sixty-four pages. A story? No, not a story, more like memoirs.

I managed to have an excerpt from this work of art published in the Sochelnik's literary supplement. I was able to sell a second excerpt very profitably to the owner of a private grocery. He evinced an irrepressible enthusiasm for literature and put out an entire almanac with the sole purpose of being able to publish his own story called The Villain. The almanac contained, besides the grocer's story, one by Jack London, others by Soviet writers and this excerpt by yours truly. He paid his contributors. Partly in money, partly in sprats. But the thing soon went up in smoke. I tramped the Moscow streets indefatigably in the hope of selling another slice of my opus but to no avail. Nobody wanted either a slice or the whole....

Meanwhile my humorous sketches were exerting a baneful influence upon me. By the end of the winter everything was clear. My taste was deteriorating. More and more often I found myself using trite words and stereotyped metaphors. The sketches had to be funny and that led to coarseness. The moment I tried to make them more subtle my executioner Navzikat looked nonplussed. In the end I shrugged my shoulders and wrote stuff that would tickle Navzikat. Oh, my dear, the things I turned out in those days would make your hair stand on end!

Whenever some revolutionary holiday came round Navzikat would say:

"Well, I hope you'll have a brain wave for the coming holiday—a real heroic story, that's what we want!"

I blanched, I flashed, I shifted my feet.

I had long been acquainted with his odd opinion of reporters and writers. He thought they could write anything at all, no matter what it was about. You have no doubt guessed that I never discussed this matter with him. July was more clever and sensitive and no discussion was necessary for him to realize I did not go in for heroics. Mists of sorrow gathered about his shaved head. Add to this the heinous fact that at the end of the third month, I had turned in one less sketch than agreed upon, at the end of the fourth month, I turned in two less, supplying only seven, then six.

"Mikhail," said the appalled July, "you've only turned in six sketches."

"You mean that?" I asked innocently. "I guess you're right. It's those damn headaches I've been having lately."

"Too much beer-drinking," he put in testily.

"Too much sketch-writing," I corrected.

"Oh, come. You spend two hours a week on those sketches."

"Ah, if you only knew what those two hours cost me, old boy!"

"Well, I don't. What's wrong?"

Navzikat came to July's aid. Ideas kept popping into that man's head like bubbles.

"I hope you'll give us a good story about the French Minister."

I felt giddy.

I can say this to you, my dear, and you will understand me: how can a person write a humorous story about the French Minister if he doesn't give a hoot for the French Minister? Who is the French Minister? Where is the French Minister?

In the end they left me in peace.

So happy was I to be exempted from French Ministers and Ruhr miners that I reduced my output by three that month, submitting only five stories. Disgraceful as it is to admit it, the following month I submitted only four. This brought July's patience to an end. He put me on piece work.

THE END