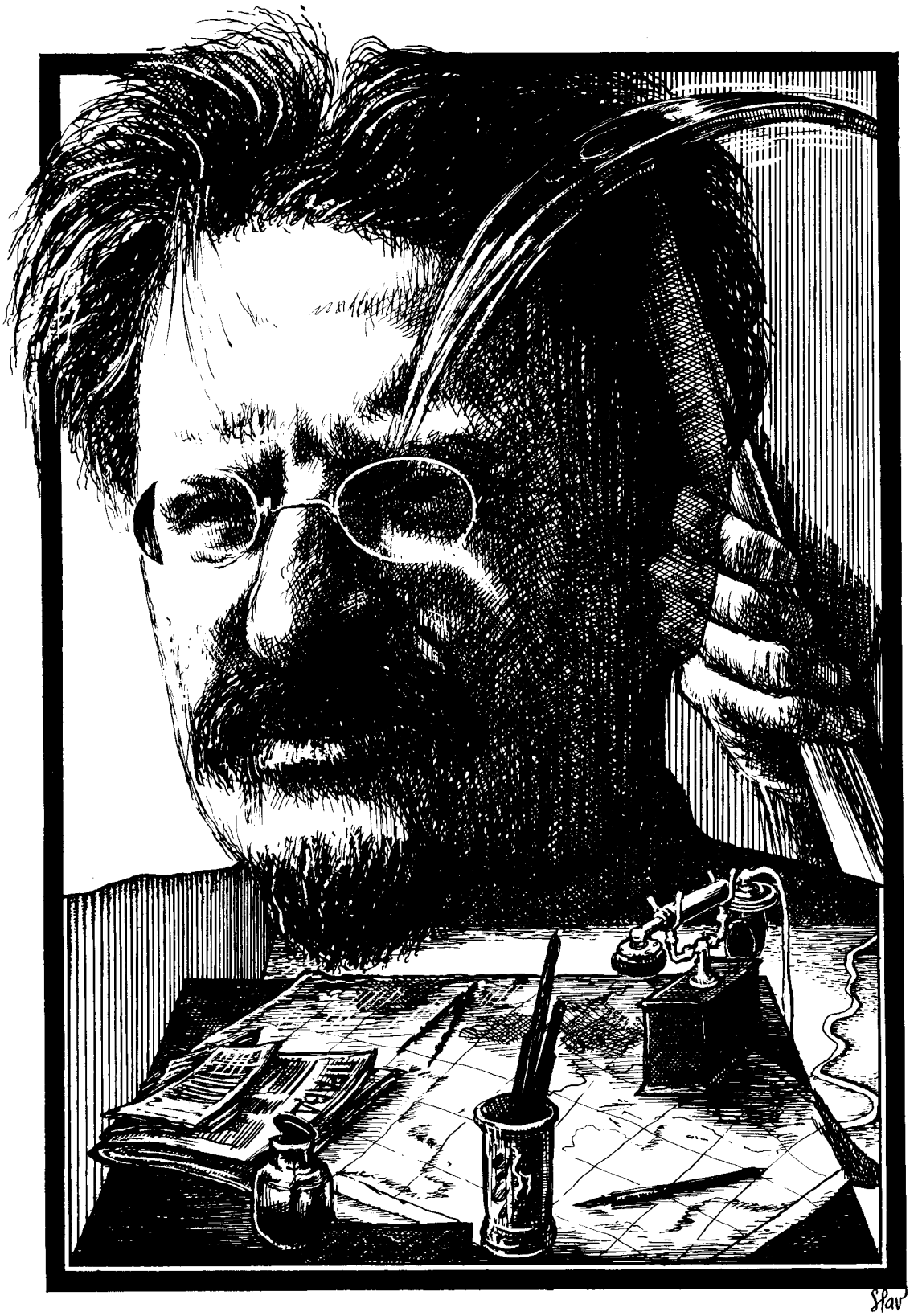

Alice Rühle-Gerstel

No Verses for Trotsky

A Diary in Mexico (1937)

WHEN WE READ in Cuautla in December [1936] that the Cardenas government had granted Trotsky asylum—and Fritz [Otto Rühle's son-in-law] rang us to confirm the news—we were delighted. In fact we had no specially close relationship to Trotsky.

I had various memories, starting with my half-heroic, half-sentimental admiration of 1917 when I had picked up a picture of him—a postcard showing him with a stand-up collar and a bushy moustache—in a socialist bookshop in the Gumpendorferstrasse in Vienna and pinned it up over my bed. Then that party game in Prague, probably in 1919, when my brother signed himself "Trotsky" in my family album. Our agitation and my bursting into tears when Otto arrived in Vienna in October 1927 and his first words to me after months of separation were: "Trotsky's been expelled from the Party. It's the end of the Russian Revolution." An argument with Otto about the "United Front", in Dresden around 1930, when I wanted to join the Trotskyists, purely for the sake of being somehow "involved"—without really knowing what the Trotskyists stood for. Discussions—no, just conversations with Wolfi Salus in the Café Elektra. And the many times I had wanted to—but never did—send Trotsky a telegram of sympathy when yet another country had deported him. And Otto's critical rejection of his policies and his portrayal of Trotsky as an arrogant, stern, and somewhat theatrical revolutionary hero. All in all, a pretty confused picture. . . . Nevertheless, we were very glad.

It was so marvellous that Trotsky was coming to Mexico—for him *and* for us! Suddenly the ideological differences fell away; all we were aware of was the togetherness of being exiled in Mexico; and we felt very close to him.

Then there were contradictory reports in the newspapers, with Fritz, of course, knowing all

LEON TROTSKY *was murdered in 1940 by one of Stalin's agents who hunted him down in Mexican exile. Although almost half-a-century has gone by, interest in him and his ideas has never quite subsided. Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography, massive in its detail (and in its piety), is still selling in paperback book shops and still serves to light candles for the handful of followers who continue to dream of World Revolution by following the true (if so often betrayed) Marxist-Leninist path. Here and there small groups of "Trotskyists" manage to come into positions of power on the European Left—as in the "Militant Tendency" (attractively supported by Miss Vanessa Redgrave) which has been aggravating the ideological disputes in the British Labour Party. But, by and large, the ideas are of little more than antiquarian interest. The person, however, can still fascinate.*

This remarkable memoir, which we publish for the first time in English, was among the papers of the Rühles—Otto was a well-known German socialist, Alice was an Austrian psychologist and a writer—who had taken refuge in Mexico in the 1930s. They lived in understandable political isolation, for in Mexico the anti-Nazi movement—the "Free Germany" committee (with Anna Seghers, Ludwig Renn, Bodo Uhse, André Simon Katz, Egon Erwin Kisch, et al.*)—was firmly in Stalinist hands. When Trotsky arrived in 1937, they found friendship and even comradeship. Even so, political differences were always in danger of erupting. Alice Rühle-Gerstel's handwritten notebook (only recently published by Alice Rühles' executor, Stephen Kalmar) moves along a sensitive line between ideology and friendship.*

In June 1943 Otto Rühle died of a heart attack. That same day (as she long ago, confiding in Manès Sperber, said she would do) Alice committed suicide. Kalmar organised the double burial, at which a handful of friends spoke (Victor Serge, Marcel Piveri, Julian Gorkin). Among her papers in the 3rd floor Mexico City flat from which she jumped to her death were the manuscripts of a novel, poems and short stories, translations, and this fragmentary notebook about Trotsky in 1937 (which J. A. Underwood has translated from the German).

M.J.L.

about it from Diego Rivera.[1] Rumours were rife: Trotsky was going to live on a closely guarded ranch away from the capital, but then we would hear something completely different. We celebrated Trotsky's arrival in advance with Mendizabal and O'Gorman. Through Diego Rivera, O'Gorman offered his house, while we volunteered to contribute money and wanted to invite Rivera, Mendizabal, O'Gorman, and others to form a relief committee.

IT NEVER CAME to that, though, because everything had already been organised better on an official level and also Trotsky arrived sooner. No one knew where he was going to land. We heard only at the last moment from Fritz, who had been with Diego Rivera to see the Mexican president. President Cardenas wanted to provide train, car, aeroplane, bodyguard, everything. Trotsky landed at Tampico, on the 9th of January 1937. Fritz drove down in his car to meet him at Lecheria, where Trotsky was to leave the train in order to slip unobserved into Mexico City by car in the middle of the night. One or two people came to hear of it, however, and immediately it was in the paper. Trotsky and his wife drove on to Mexico City in Fritz's car at sixty-miles-an-hour till they got to Diego Rivera's house in the Avenida Londres in the suburb of Coyoacan.

Otto and I went over to Coyoacan around four in the afternoon. I was very excited. It's a very strange experience, meeting such a hero twenty years after one's romantic enthusiasm for him—and with him, too, now in exile. . . .

THERE WERE several people standing around on the patio. After a couple of minutes Trotsky came through from the back of the house into the living-room. He embraced Otto and shook me warmly by the hand. We all sat down on some of those primitive leather chairs that the Mexican Indios make in the villages and that, apart from a table and a few bookshelves, were the only furniture in the large, dimly-lit room. I felt very embarrassed.

Trotsky was very much at his ease, cheerful, quick in his movements, almost youthful. He behaved like a lord of the manor receiving his villagers, in other words without a trace of condescension but with the most delicate emphasis on absolute equality, combining extreme courtesy with complete informality. Or like an old doctor seeing ex-patients again and being really interested in what has become of their former ailments.

He looks quite different from his pictures and quite, quite different from the way I had imagined him. The first thing that struck me, and that continued to preoccupy me throughout the hour we spent with him was that he has *blue* eyes, for goodness' sake! It had never occurred to me that Trotsky could have blue eyes. Why not? That blue somehow colours his whole appearance. They are not like Otto's blue eyes, loyal, limpid, sometimes gentle, sometimes furiously angry eyes. They are like a child's eyes, perhaps also a doctor's eyes. That was my first impression and it is still, if with some modification, my chief impression of him: childlike, naive, innocent. They are deeply innocent eyes, innocent in the sense of a naive faith in the future of mankind, in himself, and in other people, a person who has no doubts because doubting would make him sad, because he is perhaps afraid of doubt upsetting his equilibrium. Wonderfully sympathetic eyes.

But perhaps it was not until slightly later that I reached this analysis, when I had got to know him and understood him better. Unfortunately I did not have the idea of writing everything down at the beginning. So these reminiscences, begun on 11 October 1937, are really reminiscences of reminiscences. . . .

WHAT ELSE do I remember of that day, besides the eyes? The whitish beard, more good-humoured and at the same time more jaunty than one had imagined—the yellowish, slightly parchment-like, but very delicate skin, with cheeks that blushed easily—delicate veins on the forehead, a straight, powerful nose, the neck wrinkled and white above the soft collar, an old woman's neck—the whole face is not exactly virile, but then neither is it feminine; it's like the face of an elderly child. He has plain, fine, powerful hands—strong, shapely, and not particularly long fingers with well-kept nails, hands that look as if they are washed often and carefully. I am reminded briefly of the passage in his book *My Life* when he goes to Odessa to school and the woman he lodges with shows him how to wash his hands and clean his nails. From the look of those hands, it might have been only the day before that she had shown him.

HE WAS WEARING a worn, slightly darned, but quite respectable grey sports suit with plus-fours, a soft white shirt, and a dark-red tie. He has a quick springy walk, holding himself very straight but not stiffly so. And he was wearing glasses (what sort of specs?)—all one sees is those piercing eyes.

He has a high-pitched, slightly nasal voice and articulates very clearly, occasionally punctuating

[1] The famous Mexican painter was a great admirer of Trotsky around 1937. He also thought highly of Otto Rühle, whose portrait he painted.

with "eh eh", but only when looking for the right word; he does not do it when he is speaking Russian. He speaks German with us, and French when Diego Rivera is there. He speaks both languages almost perfectly and with great elegance, selecting beautiful and unusual words in a way that shows that his knowledge of these languages is derived largely from academic literature, although in between he also uses very general expressions.

I was much too confused that day to listen closely to the conversation. He told us about his voyage on the small Norwegian freighter that had brought him to Mexico, about how pleasant the captain had been and how closely he had been watched (he was not allowed to listen to the radio, not told where he would be landing, etc.). Their departure had been so hurried that his wife had had only two hours to do all the packing. (We could see a great many crates out on the patio and a number of plain hold-alls in the room.)

Trotsky was bitterly ironical on the subject of Norway, which under pressure from Russia had first imprisoned and then deported him. He had told the Norwegian Minister of Justice, a Social Democrat: "You will pay for this some day. Think of me when you find yourself in exile. . . ."[2]

His complaints sounded neither personal nor "soft", but neither did they sound proud. He understood, of course, why he had been treated as he had, but he seemed to be still angry about it. He was delighted to have been granted asylum in Mexico but without being over-enthusiastic. He did not seem to be fully aware of what in fact it meant, namely his salvation from certain death; rather as if he had an inner conviction that there would always be a way out for him.

"The only friendly thing on the entire trip was the ocean", he said, and he chuckled because the sentence had come out so well. Then he told us with almost boyish glee about how he had managed to outwit the detective who was always following him (this was in Paris before the War); he used to get in the *Métro*, the detective would get in too, and just before the doors closed Trotsky hopped out again and waved his hat at the astonished policeman. . . . Later he had bumped into him again somewhere and said to him, "You were really awful to me in Paris that time. . . ." He laughed with pleasure at the memory. Apart from that he said very little about himself and his experiences, rather asking us about our own: how long had we been here, could we speak Spanish yet, where did we live, how did we like it, how was our health? Just like a good doctor seeing old patients again.

OTTO AND HE swapped reminiscences. The first time they had met, in 1907, Trotsky was on the way to or from an important congress. When Otto mentioned this, Trotsky corrected him. He has a fantastic memory for detail and knew exactly how it had been, just that little bit different. . . . The talk turned to people they both knew; Trotsky was amazed and delighted that Ledebour[3] is still alive.

After an hour we stood up to go, asking whether we might say hello to his wife and give her a hollow pumpkin filled with Mexican fruit. Natalia came in, very small, very dainty, ashen-faced, with sad, red-rimmed eyes, delicate features, her thin and somehow dishevelled hair dyed bright blonde. In tears she hugged and kissed me, saying the one word "*merci*" over and over again. She was quite overwhelmed; the journey had taken a great deal out of her. We told her to take care, get plenty of rest, and watch what she ate. Trotsky said he had not felt so well for a long time. Nor did he in fact show any traces of exhaustion but was thoroughly bright, breezy, and optimistic. We left.

I felt rather tired—from a surfeit of experience.

SO THAT WAS Trotsky. Blue eyes. And so unaffected, so . . . so Austrian! He gives the impression of a titled Austrian officer of the best sort. . . . There is an amazingly easy-going quality about him. One feels so completely at ease in his company. In fact I very nearly wrote that he was a "*gemütlicher Kerl.*" In that cold, gloomy room we felt as if we had been sitting in a cosy country house with old friends. Whether he knew precisely

OTTO AND ALICE RÜHLE

[2] Following the occupation of Norway in 1940 the minister in question was indeed forced to flee the country.

[3] Georg Ledebour was a leading left-wing Socialist in Germany before the First World War and in the years immediately after it.

who Otto was, his political role, etc., we were unable to find out. He certainly behaved as if he did know. He did not seem the least bit Russian, even less Jewish, and even less like a revolutionary, and even less like a refugee in danger of his life! He is fifty-six years old, Otto sixty-two, and Trotsky looks ten years older than Otto; in appearance and in terms of personality he is not exactly young and even less "grown-up"—a child, in spite of his age. A person who makes me immediately want to sit on his lap and put my arms around his neck.... It simply does not cross one's mind that he is also a man, let alone a hero. We have such story-book ideas about heroes. A dear, kind person, to be liked.

A FEW DAYS LATER, Otto went over alone and they talked about old times and people from the movement.... Then, a few days after that, we both called on Trotsky again. Sitting in the room was an American woman, whom he introduced to us. The big table had now been pushed into the centre of the room and the luggage cleared away, and on the table there was already a quantity of books and newspapers; he was already at work, studying the Moscow Trials.

Callers were walking about on the patio, and after a while Trotsky excused himself, saying he must deal with them. He stepped outside and we heard him say, "I can give you ten minutes. That's all." It was the General speaking. We saw the ladies and gentlemen take various photographs. They were from the American magazine *Life*, and they wanted to have Natalia holding the magazine, but she declined. Later a picture appeared in *Life* showing Trotsky with Otto and me—we had had no idea that we were being photographed.

Otto must have told Trotsky about my difficulties with the Mexican climate as a warning to take care of himself. Trotsky greeted me with anxious and genuinely interested questions about the nature of my problems, wanting to know all the details. I was a little embarrassed, still finding it odd to be on equal terms with a man like Trotsky, so I made light of the matter, but he continued to press me until finally I said, "But surely, that's of no interest to you, comrade—I mean, it's not important...." "Not important? It's very, very important", he said.

Shortly after Trotsky's arrival someone told us he could not bear people to smoke in his presence. I know many people, starting with Otto, who do not like my smoking; yet so fanatical a smoker am I that, though my conscience bothers me, I still go on smoking. With Trotsky I don't. Consequently my mind feels strangely empty and I hear things as if from a long way away, as if I were in an operating theatre or attending some special ceremony. The whole man gives one the feeling that one must not sully him in any way, not even with cigarette smoke. He seems so pure. Although utterly informal himself, he exudes an atmosphere of formality, good manners, dignity, composure. One cannot imagine him bursting—either into laughter or into tears; he is so contained. There he is in his old suit and crude, scuffed sandals; the room is cheerless and dimly lit; his life is a mess, an appalling mass of complications. One is aware of none of that; one is always having to remind oneself of it. With him, one is aware of an intimacy, a sense of elation. As if one were a better person than one actually is. And one then feels grateful to him. Perhaps that is the secret of "handling people"—being able to give the person you are with a heightened awareness of himself? Although Trotsky does not give me the impression of someone who would want to "handle people."

We talked of nothing in particular. Written down, it would be dry, rather sterile stuff. Trotsky puts everything he says in fine, rounded sentences, there are no loose ends. It is all sensible, correct, beautiful. But neither witty, nor significant, nor particularly impressive. It may be that we do not know one another well enough yet. I hardly dare open my mouth or even listen. I am constantly having to balance this contradiction inside me: this is Trotsky—and this is really a quite unneccessary conversation. Before he came I wanted to learn a great deal from him, to ask him questions, to get to know him—but after only the first meeting it was completely the other way round . . . one felt the need to tell him things, to give to him, to be friendly and nice to him . . . not because he needs it, no, that too would be wide of the mark . . . but perhaps in order not to disturb the equilibrium that floats all around him.... At the same time one knows that around him all is restlessness, tension, passion, dynamism, and that he himself is a wild man, a revolutionary, a hero. How does he manage to be so peaceful and still? Even Otto is all mildness in his presence, and it is certainly not with awe because he is not in awe of him. There are people with whom one cannot be anything but quiet and friendly rather as if one did not want to make them unhappy. As if it lay in our power to make Trotsky unhappy!

We had been over there several times already, either together or separately. Occasionally, feeling lonely and unhappy in the office, I would simply leave and catch a bus to his place. I immediately felt free and light-hearted, without in fact anything in particular having been said.

ON MY second or third visit I arrived to find "something up"—something to do with the news of the Radek/Pyatakov trial in Moscow and the probability that their son Sergei, of whom they had heard nothing for two years, had been arrested

or shot (he was accused of having "poisoned workers"). We exchanged a brief greeting; there was no noticeable change in Trotsky's manner. He was very busy, with all sorts of people calling to see him and interview him. I did not wish to be in the way—so I went for a drive along the Cuernavaca road with Natalia and Frida.[4]

In the car Natalia cried a little, but she also took a nostalgic delight in the landscape, which reminded her of the Caucasus. We talked about Paris; we all loved Paris. Natalia said, "Come the revolution, we'll all go to Paris together. . . ." Come the revolution—everything revolves around that. Not even this shattered, tormented, frail little woman ever thinks of having a private life—as if it were a game of chance. As someone else might say, "When I win the lottery" or "When my business takes off. . . ." Not that it is so very different, when all's said and done: Trotsky's private life *is* the revolution.

BECAUSE HE WAS so busy with the Trials and because so many people were calling to see him, we used to tell each other we wouldn't go and visit him. But that was only the ostensible reason. In reality we didn't have a great deal to say to him. I, who ask so many lesser beings for their advice and who need authorities so much—I have never even thought of asking Trotsky, who after all certainly is an authority, particularly as far as I am concerned.

He always behaves as if he were in our debt. So forthcoming, so warmly sympathetic, so friendly. Not out of formal politeness—and not from a sense of shared convictions, either, as if all comrades were one enormous family—or perhaps it is. There is something of the paterfamilias about him. The fact that Jan had toothache or that Van needed a new raincoat[5] were matters that seriously concerned him. In fact the subject of health is one that is discussed at embarrassing length. Other people's health, that is; he never mentions his own.

WHEN THREE OR FOUR weeks had gone by without a visit, one of us would say. "We ought to take a bus to Coyoacan again." It was not exactly an urgent need. Trotsky for his part has always invited us to come and see him often. And whenever we do, or one of us does, he drops his work immediately and gives us his whole attention. He absolutely refuses to listen to any suggestion that he should carry on working, that we should wait, etc. It is the same even when we visit him on the spur of the moment and arrive unannounced. Perhaps it is part of his life-style, never to keep anyone waiting. We used to notice, too, that Rita, the Russian shorthand-typist, stood up as soon as we appeared on the patio, as if she had instructions to do so.

ONCE WHEN I WAS THERE it started pouring with rain, I could not leave, and when the time came to eat it was taken for granted that I should eat with them. Natalia had made an omelette especially for me. It was my first meal with Trotsky. I had brought him Willi Schlamm's book, *Diktatur der Lüge*. I talked to Natalia. She was complaining that he worked so much and would not look after himself, despite his old, mysterious trouble that so many doctors had already tinkered with in vain—slight temperature, upset stomach, insomnia. "It is the way he has always been", Natalia said in her halting French, with the occasional Russian word thrown in. "Back in Moscow, in the Kremlin, they all spent Saturday and Sunday in the country, even Lenin . . . but not L.D.[6] He used to say, "We're campaigning to make people save petrol, and you want us to go on pleasure jaunts ourselves? . . .' I'm sure he knew that a few litres of petrol wouldn't do the Soviets any harm, but he was always so strict with himself and with us. Many people sent us food when everything was so short. But he noticed immediately. If there was butter on the table he would ask, 'Where does the butter come from? We can't have that—eating butter at a time like this!' Lenin was much more relaxed in this respect. In the middle of the Civil War he had his two-hour sleep after lunch and no one was allowed to wake him up, no matter what happened. Lenin's life was so precise—timed to the minute. Our son Liova bumped into him outside the Kremlin one New Year's morning. 'Well, and what did you do yesterday?' Lenin asked. 'I went to the opera', the boy said. 'What about you, comrade Lenin? Where did you see in the New Year?' 'I went to bed at nine, as usual', was Lenin's reply. Our Liova couldn't get over it!"

As we sat down at table, Trotsky came in, all briskness and energy. He had already leafed through Schlamm's book. "I think it's brilliant", he said. "Couldn't you and Otto pick out a few passages and translate them for the Commission?" (That tells me this lunch must have been *after* the session of the Investigating Commission in Mexico.) At the head of the table sat Trotsky and Natalia; I was on his right, with Van beside me and Berny Wolff[7] opposite. Van has no German, Natalia no English, and Wolff no French—so that most of the conversation was between Trotsky and myself, speaking German and occasionally French. L.D. helped me to food, poured water for me and

[4] Frida Kahlo was Diego Rivera's wife and a distinguished Mexican painter in her own right.

[5] Two of Trotsky's secretaries and bodyguards.

[6] Leo Davidovich, i.e. Trotsky.

[7] Also Trotsky's secretary.

the others, and was very anxious that everyone should eat a lot, but it must not be fresh bread; in a basket lay a large number of bread rolls, cut open by his own hand several hours before the meal and allowed to dry out, because that is healthier. Odd, because in his life he cannot have had much time to worry about health, hygiene, regular mealtimes, etc.... Or has he? The long years of exile—now some twenty-two in all[8]—have forced him into domesticity and private life, so that perhaps in direct contrast to what one might expect a certain petty-bourgeois quality has entered his daily life. Rigid mealtimes, to give the everlasting sameness of waiting, hiding, planning, and hoping at least some visible characteristics. Once again he reminded me of a feudal aristocrat insisting on order in the family; I can almost imagine him being very strict morally, though not of course in any formal sense. . . . He poured out water, handed round dry rolls, and ate his boiled chicken without fuss, sitting very straight in his chair, while the young men tucked into rare beefsteaks; Natalia had a plate of vegetables and I an omelette with salad.... L.D. joked with Van, who looks so young but is already a father, and who might have to go to France to do his military service.

I often ate with the Trotskys after that, always on the spur of the moment, and each time it was the same, so pleasant, so friendly in a measured sort of way, with L.D. often in joking mood, the young men sitting quietly and answering only when he spoke to them, Natalia worried and often wrapped in thought . . . and rather fussy in the execution of her housewifely duties, possibly because she cannot yet communicate with the staff properly in their own language. But Trotsky always sophisticated, relaxed, a king out of uniform....

AT ONE OF THESE lunches—it may even have been the first time, I don't quite remember—the conversation came round, *via* the Furtmüllers and the Adlers, to individual psychology. Lina Furtmüller had visited the Trotskys in France two years before and had once again tried to bring them round to the psychological view of Alfred Adler.... I unfolded my own Adlerian standpoint, but Trotsky showed more interest in Freud. I tried to show that while Freud was cleverer, more scientific, more profound, and Adler shallower and woollier, the latter's work did have a solid socialist foundation, whereas Freud's attitude was reactionary in comparison. Trotsky would have none of it: how can science have an "attitude"? The job of science is to research, and politicians then have to make use of its results in one way or another. . . . If someone studies astronomy or mathematics, he does not have an "attitude"; he researches. . . . If Freud has pointed out to us the laws governing the unconscious, our job is to accept them and put them to work; that is the natural consequence of the division of labour....

I could see we were getting nowhere. At the same time, because I have such a respect for Trotsky as a Marxist and a thinker, I began to doubt my own or rather our own thoroughly considered (we had been working on it for years) and reasoned "ideological research"—but only for a moment.

I soon realised, somewhat ruefully, that Trotsky is rather old-fashioned . . . a case of a bold mind on a rather narrow track. He laid the track himself as a young man, and now he runs on it—and any changes that occur relate purely to improved solidity in the substructure, greater cleanliness in the trains, higher speeds, or new signals—but to leap from the moving train into the field and look out for the aeroplane that may happen to fly over, and then wave to it and make it land and pick one up, or perhaps even to alter one's goal or discover that in any case it can be reached only on foot—oh, no.... And once again that feeling of solicitude came over me: "Don't meddle, don't interfere—if you remove so much as a stone the whole edifice will come tumbling down...." I have never shown such consideration as I show to Trotsky—and I even stop myself smoking in his presence....

ONCE WE WENT on an outing. This was fairly early on, just after Jan's arrival. The B.s picked us up and we all drove over to Coyoacan. Trotsky was all ready in sports suit and cap, Natalia in a hat and white high-heeled shoes. Jan and Berny and Diego Rivera's chauffeur. We drove off in two cars. Trotsky and his wife sat in one with the B.s' children and Jan in the front seat. At the Mirador we all got out to enjoy the view, but there were already other cars there and we were immediately surrounded by a lot of people staring at us curiously, Trotsky's picture having appeared so many times in the newspaper. We quickly climbed back into the cars and drove for about two hours until we came to a turning that took us into a beautiful forest. There we wanted to picnic, but between us and the field we wanted to sit in flowed a broadish stream. Otto quickly took off his shoes and socks, waded into the water, and began to build a bridge with stones. Trotsky admired and envied him, but he did not quite dare to go barefoot himself. Before long, however, happy and flushed, he was collecting huge boulders and pieces of timber to help build the bridge. He was really enjoying himself, boyishly happy. We lounged on the grass, doing nothing. Only the children had found a place a little way away and were giving

[8] Including the years before the Revolution.

their whole attention to the children's supplement of the Sunday newspaper. "You can see who the serious ones are", Trotsky remarked. "We grown-ups are just lazy."

A fire was lit and some soup warmed, we all ate a lot and joked a lot, and after the meal no one really felt like washing-up. Finally five-year-old Peter said peremptorily, "Trotsky, *andale, lava los trastes!* (Trotsky, go and do the washing-up!)"—and while we laughed in embarrassment and all tried to set to work, although we would have preferred a nap, Trotsky was delighted at Peter's impertinence and insisted that he and the boy carry the bowls and cups to the stream, where he knelt down over the water and rinsed them, allowing no one else to help. He seemed really to enjoy not being famous for once and not having to behave as his past, his goal, and his fame laid down that he should. He fitted into the landscape well; one could imagine him being like this when he went fishing or hunting—his harmless hobbies, through the following episode of the butterfly suggested to me that they may not be quite as harmless as all that. . . . But that comes later; I want, if I can, to relate things in order.

Afterwards we lay down again. Natalia alone stood up to go for a walk. She did not come back for a long time, and we began to worry about her and went off looking for her in all directions. Trotsky was the least worried of us, saying that Natalia often went for long walks and had a very good sense of direction. But he became quieter and quieter and eventually said nothing more, and the rest of us were very concerned and fearful as to what might have happened. . . . At last she came back with her arms full of plants and leaves (she adores flowers), hot and contented, her wrinkled old face looking suddenly like a girl's. . . .

We parted in Coyoacan pleased and happy. What a delightful day!

BUT NOW I WANT TO TELL the story about the butterfly. We were having another meal with Trotsky when an enormous and magnificent butterfly flew into the dining-room through the open patio doorway. We were eating, but everyone jumped up immediately and tried to catch the butterfly. I couldn't understand it—grown men wanting to catch a butterfly! No one succeeded, and we finished our meal. The butterfly had settled somewhere high up, and no one appeared to take any further notice of it.

After a while we got up from the table and I went out on to the patio with Natalia to smoke a cigarette. As I turned, I saw Trotsky in the dining-room. He had just caught the butterfly, and with a confident, graceful gesture he squashed its tiny body between his fingers, like a surgeon cutting open the skin. . . . His face was expressionless and showed no sense of triumph, no regret, nothing. Natalia quickly ran into the bedroom and came back with a needle, an attentive nurse handing the surgeon the right instrument at the right moment. I felt slightly faint, although I really was a surgeon's nurse once; I found it so meaningless, so cruel, so downright inhuman. All right, it was a sentimental reaction, I too had mounted butterflies at home as a child, but to squash them between two fingers in that cold-blooded way. . . .

I was aware of Trotsky's enthusiasm for hunting and fishing, and I suppose an angler has to be able coldly to stick a fish-hook down the pretty trout's throat and the hunter must be indifferent to the dark blood that the hare with his bright, uncomprehending, stupid eyes sees spreading in the grass beside him. Children are like that—and people who make history. Perhaps productivity is inseparable from it . . . but from what? It isn't cruelty, but what is it? Is it something to do with wanting implicitly to reach the goal one has set oneself and not letting anything stand in one's way? I have a lot of thinking to do about this. . . .

THEN CAME THE DAY when Otto was invited to sit on the Commission[9] and of course accepted immediately. We felt that here would be a platform for airing all the great political issues. At the same time we were aware that it would bring to light the political differences between ourselves and Trotsky, and that this might destroy our beautiful, warm friendship. . . .

Later, when on some occasion or other (or in one of the many newspaper interviews that appeared in the early days) there was mention of the hostility with which Trotsky treated everyone who disagreed with him about the unconditional defence of Russia—depressed at the prospect of a possible rupture of relations, I brought up the subject with Natalia. I was visiting them one day, and as usual they had both asked expressly and with genuine concern about my state of health. In the middle of the conversation—he was not there for a moment, she was rummaging in the perpetually untidy wardrobe, and I was leaning in the bedroom doorway—Natalia said, "We had no idea you suffered periods of melancholy. Your husband told

[9] In March 1937 the American, English, French, and Czechoslovak committees formed a joint Investigating Commission to review the Moscow trials. A "counter-trial" was to give Trotsky an opportunity to rebut the formidable charges brought against him. In addition to Otto Rühle, the members of this commission were Alfred Rosmer, Wendelin Thomas, Carlo Tresca, Suzanne Lafollette, Benjamin Stolberg, John R. Chamberlain, Carlton Beals, and Francisco Zamorra. Among those who supported and organised the trial were John Dos Passos, James Burnham, Sidney Hook, Norman Thomas, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

us. We've always found you such a cheerful, well-adjusted person. . . . Why is it? What are you so worried about?"

"Well, for one thing, that our beautiful friendship may be about to break up. . . . I sometimes lie awake at night, thinking about it. . . . After all, there are many points on which we disagree . . . for example, as far as the unconditional defence of Russia is concerned, didn't L.D. write that he had uncompromisingly broken with all the friends who thought otherwise?"

"Oh, Alice! That doesn't mean you two! Not people he's so fond of and thinks so highly of! When it's a question of young people, students he wants to influence and educate, then of course he is very strict, but not with you. . . . That's something you really needn't worry about!"

THE COMMISSION.[10] Great preparations were made, and letters were exchanged between New York and Mexico. I was not in Coyoacan at all during that time. Then slowly the people began to arrive: Dwight Macdonald with the Eisner girl [a painter and niece of Kurt Eisner, the Bavarian socialist leader, murdered in 1919], James T. Farrell, Dr Albert Goldman, who was to be Trotsky's defence counsel at the hearing, and finally the Commission itself—Dewey, Stolberg, Lafollette, Beals . . . and later Finerty as well. It all happened at the Calle Amberes, all the interviewing, talking, and interpreting. Journalists and photographers swarmed round the house. We thought it proper to stay away from Coyoacan throughout that period; then no one could say we had been in private contact with Trotsky beforehand. . . . Not until the day before the hearing did the members of the Commission go out there. Otto told me how Dewey and Trotsky, who had been looking forward to this meeting with such excitement, at first ran straight past without recognising each other. . . .

Great excitement on the first day of the Hearing. The house had been given a second door, telephone booths and wooden railings blocked off the entrance to the Hearing room, lots of chairs set out, lots of police, the street window bricked up almost to the top, the dining-room turned into an office with large numbers of secretaries working feverishly over countless pieces of paper, several typewriters, in fact everything looking very official. . . .

TROTSKY IN HIS STUDY WITH THE RÜHLES

I was not able to get there until the afternoon; the opening formalities had been in the morning. Beyond the wooden railings Trotsky was passing to and fro between the bedroom, the dining-room, and the back room. When he saw me and I gave him a brief, rather formal greeting from a distance, he came up to the railing and shook me warmly by the hand: "How's the insomnia? Are you sleeping better now?" The man's a saint! Six or eight weeks before I may have mentioned that I was not sleeping. . . . Then we had not seen each other for at least a month, a month that for him had been full of worry and excitement and an enormous amount of work, and now at last the time had come for him to go on trial before the whole world, before millions of people, to justify himself, put his views, speak to the human race. Possibly, despite all the strict controls on admission to the hearing, somewhere in the dimly-lit room the enemy sat waiting to put a swift end to that magnificent life. . . . And at a time like that he thinks of my insomnia! My answer came from the bottom of my heart: "I shall never forget you asking me that for as long as I live!"

I ATTENDED about five sessions, and usually my attention was less than complete because I spent much of the time making a whispered, sentence-by-sentence translation for the benefit of Mexican comrades. The proceedings have in any case been published, so I shall simply try to give my own impressions.

My first impression was of Trotsky's complete ease of manner. For weeks he and his wife and secretaries had been up late every night, reading, hunting up references, sorting out files, compiling dossiers on the different charges, making excerpts, having much of the material translated into English, and writing his great closing speech. One might have expected him to be on the verge of collapse. But only on the last day of the Hearing—after a week of between six and eight hours' interrogation daily as well as tracking down, preparing, and translating the documents mentioned during the proceedings which had to be produced—did he appear tired. Throughout the week he remained fresh and almost gay. He

[10] The Commission sat from 10–17 April 1937 in Diego Rivera's house. The investigating committee was chaired by the eminent American philosopher and educator, John Dewey. Suzanne Lafollette acted as secretary, and the members were the writers Benjamin Stolberg and Carlton Beals and Otto Rühle. John F. Finerty, who had defended Sacco & Vanzetti and also Tom Mooney, had offered his services as legal adviser.

answered every question without the slightest hesitation, clearly and simply, as if he had not been giving information about himself or undergoing what was for him an extremely important test but rather as if he had been delivering a lecture at a working-man's college or giving an interviewer material for his biography. Of course he also felt that the members of the Commission were well-disposed towards him, and he had complete confidence in his case.

He managed the English rather well. His pronunciation was bad, but his vocabulary was enormous and once again I had the impression that it was derived primarily from academic literature. He was an absolute delight to listen to, putting things so marvellously in his awkward English. Someone—I can't remember who it was—said to me during one session, "If he sounds that good in English, what an orator he must have been in Russian!" Many people must have asked themselves the same thing.

Many of the questions put to him were extremely naive. His answers were invariably charming and very skilful, often beginning with the words "There's no simple answer to that . . ." or "The *real* problem, though, is. . . ." And then with a didactic feeling for relevance he would put the question into the appropriate context with an astonishing precision of detail yet at the same time taking a broad view. It was said by people who opposed this hearing that, Trotsky being so good an orator, he would "tie the Commission in knots", etc. Not so. There is nothing of the charlatan about him; he is much too simple and natural for that. But the relative ignorance of the members of the Commission (Otto excepted, but his language problems made it difficult for him to follow) forced him willy-nilly into the position of teacher.

DR GOLDMAN asked, "Mr Trotsky, how many children do you have?" and Trotsky said, "I now have two sons." The whole tragedy of this unhappy family lay in that "*now*." And he said it so modestly, with such dignity, as he did what followed concerning the death and suicide respectively of his two daughters, the disappearance of his younger son, and the grave danger threatening his elder son, and all of it simply because they were or are Trotsky's children.[11] It brought a lump to one's throat, but he was—I can say it only in French—"*serein*." Pure in heart, blameless, it's a pity about the children but history marches on. (Later, when Trotsky was going off to San Miguel Regla for a rest, I asked Natalia why she did not go too, and she replied, "Oh, that wouldn't be a rest for either of us. We lie awake at night, and then we talk about the children, and then we're miserable. . . .")

The next question was about when Trotsky had been deprived of his Russian citizenship. Goldman asked, "What did you do when you heard the news?" Trotsky thought for a second before answering. In both real and symbolic terms it had been an enormous blow for him. Then he said, "I wrote an article."

On two occasions during the eight days of interrogation I saw Trotsky angry. When Lafollette read out something in which he was accused of having written reactionary articles for the Hearst press, he leapt to his feet in indignation and delivered a fulminating speech. And the second time was when Beals—who had already irritated Trotsky by the nature of his questions and even more by the coldly inquisitorial tone in which they were put—took up the story about Borodin, whom Trotsky was alleged to have sent to Mexico in 1919 as a Communist emissary. "Tell your informant that he is a liar", he said in a voice of command. Finerty then pointed out to Beals that "gossip" could not be treated as an accusation. (That same day Beals resigned from the Commission.)

The Commission itself was nice, a lot of good-hearted, decent people, but poorly prepared. Apart from the report of the Moscow Trials they had done almost no preliminary reading. Hence the naivety of so many of the questions. One morning when I was there Trotsky gave what was really an elementary lecture on socialism, the revolution, etc. (Incidentally a small, dark woman turned to us during this and asked, "Have you noticed that they're all Jews?" In fact Otto, Dewey, Finerty, Beals, and Lafollette are not, only Goldman and Stolberg. Afterwards the questioner turned out to have been Mrs Beals.)

By the closing stages of the Commission everyone was already dead tired. Trotsky began to read his final speech at about seven in the evening, and no one was listening properly any more (after Goldman's long and rather poor closing speech). Even I went out to the patio for some fresh air at one point, and when I came back Trotsky was no longer reading himself but letting Goldman read the speech for him, and the whole thing rather petered out at the end.

SHORTLY AFTER his arrival in Mexico the New York Trotskyists called a meeting in New York that Trotsky was to address by telephone from Coyoacan. He was looking forward to it very much

[11] Sergei Sedov, the younger son, who had never taken an interest in politics, was condemned in 1936 for "Trotskyist" activities, deported, and shot (probably in 1938). Leon Sedov, the older son, died in 1937 after an appendix operation in a Paris private clinic of mysterious and probably not natural causes.

and eagerly studied the text that had been translated into English for him, showing us the manuscript to which he had added accents and other little marks to help him with the unfamiliar pronunciation. He took the matter very seriously, because this was his first opportunity to speak in public since 1932 (when he had given two lectures and made a radio broadcast in Copenhagen).

On the day of the meeting the telephone suddenly would not work, although everything had been thoroughly checked and put in order beforehand. Everyone was running around excitedly, offering advice. In New York a huge crowd was sitting in the hall and waiting to hear from Mexico. Engineers examined the telephone politely and with Mexican slowness, but could find no reason for the fault. Suddenly someone noticed that Trotsky had disappeared. Great agitation. Where could he be? The audience in New York had already been waiting for two hours. When there seemed to be no hope of hearing Trotsky's voice, [George] Novack (or was it [Max] Shachtman?) read out the speech, which had been air-mailed to New York in advance.

Trotsky arrived home about midnight, having spent two hours driving around on his own; he had been to the main Post Office, the Telegraph Office, the Ministry of Transport, and the telephone companies to try to get the call put through somehow. The thing was so important to him that he had disregarded the very necessary precautions and even shown no consideration for Natalia and the secretaries. Everyone agreed that the call had been sabotaged by the Stalinists. But the investigation got bogged down, nothing emerged, and a disheartened Trotsky has never, so far as I know, repeated the attempt to establish telephone contact with the outside world.

THE COMMISSION finished its work on a Saturday, and on the Sunday Trotsky was invited to lunch by Mrs George. We went along to coffee afterwards. Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Dewey, Lafollette, Finerty, and Stolberg were also there. Everyone was in a festive mood, cheerful and yet dignified. Trotsky was asked about all kinds of people, and he characterised them in a few well-chosen words. Unfortunately I cannot recall a single one of those portraits, except that he described Tukhachevsky—then still a Marshal in all his glory[12]—as a capable, energetic, but nevertheless second-rate soldier. . . .

Journalists thronged the steps outside. Lunch was served in the dining-room, which overlooked the garden. When all the rest had gone, Trotsky gave Dewey too a farewell embrace and said, "I have realised that American liberalism exists as a fact!" Two days later, when Dewey was leaving and we all accompanied him to the station, Dewey looked down from the Pullman car and said, "One face is missing here, Trotsky's!" The two had greatly enjoyed each other's company; they were well suited, both of them so correct, so sincere, so clean.

We noticed on several further occasions subsequently how well Trotsky got on with liberals and democrats and also how much importance he attached to their opinions and their agreement—quite contrary to the Marxist view and to Marxist "morality", as if what mattered to him above all else was to be clean and honest, completely forgetting how relative those terms are, although of course intellectually he knows very well.

A WEEK OR TWO AFTER the end of the Commission we went over to Coyoacan once again. I went up to Trotsky and—in the Mexican way (which I have adopted) of embracing everyone you have not seen for some time, and because Otto and he always embrace, and because I am so fond of him and remembered his splendid bearing before the Commission—I embraced him and said, "You were marvellous!" And he kissed me on both cheeks. Since that day we have made a habit, when saying hello and goodbye, of exchanging warm, friendly kisses that do not embarrass me one bit and that are given and received as a matter of course.

Once we arrived to find him ill in bed. We drank tea in the bedroom, and as he lay there looking so yellow and thin and old in his Spartan bed in that gloomy, inhospitable room I felt a surge of emotion and said, "I love you!" He took my hand and kissed it. Since then he has often kissed my hand, and I have found it natural and agreeable, though I loathe the custom ordinarily.

I HAD BOUGHT Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*, and Otto and I had read some of it and discussed it at length. I took the book with me on one visit and asked him to inscribe it for me. He wrote a few lines for Otto and me and took me to task for having bought the book instead of asking him for it. He took a copy of the English edition from the bookshelf and wrote in it in German, "To my dear Comrade Alice Rühle with kind regards and in deep gratitude. 2/VI/1937."

I was quite overcome. "What are you grateful to me for, for heaven's sake?"

He smiled shyly and a little archly: "Well, let's

[12] In May 1937 Tukhachevsky was one of a series of top generals to be charged with high treason, condemned, and executed.

just say I am grateful to you!"

I really did not understand. He surely can't have been referring to that little bit of translation work. I've really done nothing for him at all. Not even "entertained" him. Perhaps that is precisely what he is grateful for? Or it could be simply a meaningless phrase. Except that a man like Trotsky never writes meaningless phrases. Every word is precise, saying exactly what it wants to say. Perhaps he is grateful to me because I never want anything of him, never even involve him in discussions or ask, "What do you think of this or that. . . ?"

Once, on the occasion of the second Moscow Trial, I asked him, "What makes it possible, psychologically possible, for an intelligent man like Radek to make such statements? What does he hope to achieve?"

Very gently, like a father, he answered, "A fanatical love of Russia and the fact that the people who are arrested are given the idea that in that way they are saving the country and the Party. They are kept locked up for months without contact with the world or with one another. Their view of things becomes distorted, and then they are promised that things will be made easier for their families and ultimately they themselves set free. . . ." His analyses are set out more clearly and in greater detail than I have retained in memory in the closing speech from the hearing under the heading "Why Did They Confess?"

Willi Schlamm, too, in his *Diktatur der Lüge*, made certain shrewd assumptions on the subject. Through us Schlamm sent Trotsky an inscribed copy of the book. When I took it over to Trotsky—about the beginning of May—he quickly read a few pages and liked it very much indeed. Then he read the whole book. So did we. The beginning and the end are full of a whining moralism. No Marxist analysis but a polemic against the "dialecticians", whom he always puts in inverted commas; pretty unpleasant. I wrote him (Schlamm) a very strong letter. Trotsky's opinion was the same as ours, except that it was even a bit stronger, because in Schlamm's preface, after a few respectful words for Trotsky as a person, he had dissociated himself in critical terms from Trotsky's policies.

We asked Trotsky several times whether he did not want to reply to Schlamm. He kept putting it off and eventually said he would write Otto a letter about the book, since it had come to him through Otto. He never did so, and we learned from another source that Trotsky had "slaughtered" Schlamm in an article. He never showed it to us. Nor did he ever show us another article that was brought to our attention, in which without naming names he attacked Otto politically. He avoided any kind of political discussion. So did Otto, out of respect and affection and in order not to spoil the beautiful harmony amongst us émigrés. Until the Wendelin Thomas case. But I shall come to that.

I OFFERED Trotsky my modest knowledge of Russian as well as any other assistance from the outset. He always used to thank me warmly and decline on the grounds of my own burden of work and my poor health. Moreover he really did not seem to need me: Jan was doing the field work, Van the French, Berny Wolff the English, Rita the Russian things, and Natalia puts in a lot of work herself. For the preparations for the Commission a number of other young people came in.

At the beginning of May they said Trotsky's closing speech was to be published in Spanish as soon as possible, and I was given six chapters to translate. To do the job properly, I asked for a copy in Russian as well as the English version. As we were sitting there and I was leafing through the Russian original at random, comparing it with the English translation, I spotted some inaccuracies and said as much in an undertone. Trotsky, who is somewhat hard of hearing, nevertheless heard what I said. With a gesture that—at least as far as I am concerned—is characteristic of him, he tapped several times with the flat of his hand on my hand holding the manuscript and said, "Very good, very good, excellent! You really have a great gift for languages!" He beamed at me like a teacher at a prize pupil. On the basis of this random inspection he asked me to edit the whole booklet. I translated my chapters quickly, but because the others took longer and longer over theirs the thing dragged on for months. Eventually, with only two chapters missing, I was asked whether I could quickly do them as well. Although I did so immediately and I keep asking about it, the booklet has yet—almost a year later!—to come out. . . .

IN CONNECTION WITH Schlamm, I'd like to mention Trotsky's treatment of two other young authors. Wollenberg, a former general of the Red Army and a rather wild fellow—now out of the Party and living in poverty in Prague—sent him through us manuscripts about the Red Army and a sort of Utopian comedy in which he ridiculed the absurdity of the charges (Trotsky as a "Gestapo agent", etc.). Trotsky never talked about them and months later had Van give the manuscripts back to us without comment. A certain Wolf Weiss sent me a rough manuscript entitled "In the Jails of the GPU"—a very impressive piece of writing. Trotsky immediately adopted it and sent it to friends in America, who have spent months trying to get it published—so far without success. Trotsky has asked me to look after the correspondence, and Diego Rivera to illustrate the book.

In the meantime Trotsky himself went away—this must have been in June. Through Mexican friends he was given the opportunity of staying completely incognito on a *hacienda* in the State of Hidalgo, with only Sixto, Frida's chauffeur, a loyal

and absolutely trustworthy person, and Sergeant Casas of the Mexican police going with him. (He had been there earlier with the B.s to see for himself whether it was suitable. No one knew anything of the plan; no one knew them; but when they got out of the car at the *hacienda* the manager ran up to them, warmly kissed Trotsky's hand, and said, "Your Grace, I've seen your picture in the paper—what an honour, what an honour. . .!") Trotsky had the house to himself and went riding, hunting, and fishing, though he spent most of the time in bed, resting.

He sent us several postcards in his vigorous, simple hand, and in one of them he expressed concern about Natalia, who had an unpleasant eye disorder and was undergoing some painful dental treatment. I promptly rang Natalia and asked when I might come to see her. She said, "Come tomorrow, would you? L.D. is here for the day. . . . You'll appreciate that I'd like to be alone with him!" He had hardly been gone a week, and he was already so homesick he had had to come back—and not just for the day but for an evening and a night, like a secret lover. How deeply attached he is to that wan little woman, and how much his life revolves around her!

Next morning, at her insistence, he drove back to the *hacienda*, but again he could bear no more than a week of his lonely rest-cure. He wrote to Natalia twice a day. She read me a bit from one letter: "Imagine—there I am sitting by the fire with my plus-fours unbuckled at the knee, my shirt open, no tie on, and the proprietor of the estate arrives unannounced with relations and friends whom he wants to introduce to me. No chance of getting myself straight, they were all around me, and me with my trousers flapping loose and no tie. . . ." He is always so correct, so neat, so precise—he devoted all of half-a-page to the incident.

While Trotsky was at the *hacienda*, Van had an appendix operation and Natalia an operation on her jaw. He came back in a hurry. Later he went back to San Miguel and several times to Taxco, to the cottage that Mrs Iturbe places at his disposal, complete with staff. We even visited them there once, on 12 October. But more of that later.

In May I went down with measles. Trotsky rang up every day for a fortnight to find out how I was, and he sent me flowers from his garden. All my other friends forgot me. Trotsky does not forget, whether for good or evil.

ONCE, JUST AS I was going, I took a copy of my poem "*Wirtschaft 1935*" from my briefcase and left it with him. He rang me up the next day: "My dear comrade! It's magnificent! You really have such a command of language. . . . I was quite carried away!" So another time I took him one or two more of my political poems. Not long afterwards, when we met again, he said, "All your poems are so melancholy, so pessimistic. . . ." I replied, "But not '*Wirtschaft 1935*', surely?"

"Well", said Trotsky, "at least that looks up at the end. Magnificent, magnificent. . . . Listen, since you can write such magnificent verse, wouldn't you like to compose a poem about the Fourth International?"

I was flabbergasted. How could a man of such culture, such refinement, such familiarity with literature say such a thing in earnest? But he was in complete earnest. For him everything is a means to an end, and there is only one end, world revolution, and the way to world revolution is *via* the Fourth International. It's obvious! Personal poetry? All well and good. But if a person can write—as he said of me—"magnificent" poems, then let her do something for the cause! I was quite at a loss, because in the first place I can't write verse to order and in the second place I certainly couldn't do it on the subject of the Fourth International, which I do not regard as the right way to world revolution. I got out of it by saying with a smile, "Comrade L.D., I only write poetry when I'm so desperate I can't stand it any more!"

OUR VISITS usually fell in the afternoon, around four o'clock, when each time a delightful and elegant tea would be served at which L.D. would insist that everybody tuck in. Occasionally I had meals there, particularly in August when I was doing the Commission work.

Once I was there with Otto for Sunday lunch. When I was there on my own the food was very simple with just an extra place laid for me, but for Otto Natalia had prepared a veritable banquet. L.D. and Otto talked about old times, dropping a host of names from the old Social-Democrat movement. I chatted a bit with Natalia across the table, translating for her now and then because she was having difficulty in following the conversation in German. Trotsky, too, kept on turning to her in a kindly way to say something in Russian. The young people at the table listened in silence.

Trotsky was telling us about the first time he had been invited to Kautsky's home in Berlin, and how Kautsky had been discussing something with Bebel (or Bernstein?) and he had listened in silence with the feeling: "These are the great men of the movement, and I am an unknown young man. . ."—when suddenly he turned to the youngsters at the table and said with a laugh, "In twenty or thirty years' time Van or Jan will be sitting at table, saying, 'When I was a young man I sat listening to Trotsky having a discussion with Rühle and did not dare to take part in the conversation. . . .'" It's always the same. . . .

WHEN ONE STEPS FROM the bright, sunny patio with its orange tree always in fruit, its chayote, which climbs up the big eucalyptus and bears a prickly fruit that often appears on the table at mealtimes as a vegetable, its purple bougainvillaea, its stone fountain in the centre, and the many old-Indian idols of clay and stone lying around everywhere, when one steps from that patio into the living-room, a cold chill runs down one's spine. The street windows are bricked up, with curtains drawn across them. All the light comes from the door leading to the patio.

The only room with any sun is the shorthand-typist's. It overlooks the street and is not safe enough to be used as a living-room, although the police have set up their hut across the street and can examine everyone who approaches the house. The bedroom is small and shabby and lies between two other rooms in which the secretary-bodyguards sleep on primitive beds. The bathroom is reached through either the kitchen or the dining-room, and from the big study Trotsky takes a short cut across the patio to get to the bathroom or his bedroom. In the rainy season and on cold evenings this is not a pleasant trip. He always wears a thick navy-blue jacket with a high buttoned collar and thick woollen socks; Natalia is always wrapped in a large shawl.

Lying on every table is a revolver, and even going to the lavatory everyone takes one with him. On one such occasion Van's revolver—Van is the good-looking, fair-haired Frenchman who is in fact a very gifted physicist by profession but whose enthusiasm for Trotsky is such that for some eight years he has acted as his secretary, with all the sacrifices in terms of free time, comfort, family life and security that that office implies—Van's revolver went off, which everyone found very amusing. What a situation. . . .

The house being so unsuitable, they were all on the look-out for something better. But they could find nothing. It must have a high wall and the windows must look out on the garden, and houses like that are either very dilapidated, old-fashioned, rat- and vermin-ridden, or impossibly expensive. Rivera is letting them use his house together with staff and his car and chauffeur.

Trotsky pays for the food as well as footing the not inconsiderable bill for his international correspondence with its countless telegrams, air-mail letters, and newspaper and magazine subscriptions. The secretary-bodyguards work for nothing; Rita, a Polish Jewess who did not live in the house, used to get 200 pesos. Their living costs were defrayed by Trotsky's writing and journalistic work. His income does not go very far. Jan would occasionally drop mysterious hints about some money needing to be raised—probably collections were held among friends. So the question of a move was eventually shelved and various alterations made to the house to make it more comfortable and safe; a wall was built in the back garden, etc. When we moved into our house in January and the Trotskys came to visit us, Natalia said wistfully, "We'll never have it as nice as this again—just the two of us in our own house. . . ."

The young secretaries are kind, intelligent, and touchingly devoted—but they are always there with their admiration, their sense of duty, their revolvers, their eternal vigilance; L.D. and his wife are never alone, can never retire, never disappear for a while, never go for a walk by themselves or even drive around in the car; there is always a bodyguard with them. Poor prisoners, noble victims of an idea!

EVEN IF HE BORE this exile—ten years now!—in resentful, grumbling inactivity he would merit sympathy. But Trotsky remains friendly, alert, good-humoured, always concerned for the well-being of those around him, and with an insatiable appetite for work, whether—as he spent almost the whole of 1937 doing—tracing all kinds of files, documents, and exchanges of letters for the Commission's benefit, comparing them and getting hold of them by various complicated means from all over the world, or making memoranda, receiving the press, dictating, writing articles, reading proofs, and this year also writing *Les Crimes de Stalin*—the great summing-up of the Commission, which makes a fat booklet—and working on his biography of Lenin. All with quiet, modest self-assurance.

One day Trotsky told me as I arrived that at last he had seen Rivera's frescos at the *Secretaria de Educacion*.[13] He had been wanting to see them for months, but it was too dangerous, the Ministry being the stronghold of the Mexican Stalinists. Finally he had rung B. one Sunday and driven there.

"I was deeply moved", Trotsky said. "I believe Diego to be the most significant artist alive today. It's sublime! And do you know what affected me most of all? Here one is, living next door to this Diego, seeing him nearly every day, talking to him as one would to any Tom, Dick or Harry, shaking him by the hand, and completely forgetting that one should really approach the man only in humility and reverence. . . ."

I looked him in the eye and said, "So now you can imagine how I feel, talking to you as if you were any Tom, Dick or Harry. . . ." He gave me a slightly puzzled look and then said awkwardly, "No, no, it's different with me. I'm no Diego Rivera. People can and should talk to me like a perfectly ordinary person. . . ."

[13] The Ministry of Education in Mexico City has some very important frescos by Diego Rivera on the history of the Mexican revolution.

ONE DAY IN EARLY JULY Van arrived with a letter in Russian that Trotsky had written to Wendelin Thomas in answer to his letter.

Wendelin Thomas, a member of the New York judicial commission and a non-Party left-winger whom Otto vaguely remembered as a former Social-Democratic member of the German parliament, had written to Trotsky on behalf of the Commission to find out what Trotsky thought of the "Bolshevik methods" that Thomas regarded as the root of all evil. He particularly wanted Trotsky's opinion of the 1921 Kronstadt mutiny and the Machno movement.[14] The letter had been courteous, respectful, and correct. I was to translate Trotsky's reply into German as soon as possible.

When I had read the reply I was shocked and perplexed. Trotsky had adopted a superior, condescending, "Who do you think you are, young man?" sort of tone, ignored the main issues completely, turned the discussion in a different direction, and in the end become frankly insulting. I read the letter to Otto, and he was as shocked as I had been. Not that we disagreed with him on the question of Machno, Kronstadt—and methods of political struggle. It was because his tone would inevitably annoy the writer of the letter and this might possibly have embarrassing public consequences for Trotsky. He had written, as Otto put it, the sort of heavy-handed denial that used to be put out by the Bolshevik party press. . . . It was not the sort of level that, for reasons of personal respect and sympathy, we wanted to see Trotsky sink to.

Had Trotsky been there I would have taken it upon myself to go to him and discuss the matter. But he had driven to San Miguel (or was it Taxco?) that same day for a few days' rest. He had left this letter as well as others he had dictated to be dealt with in his absence; to write or telephone to San Miguel about it seemed out of the question, and in any case I had been given the letter to translate, not to say what I thought of it. Otto and I stayed up late that night, discussing what to do. In the morning I rang Van and told him of our misgivings. Van, of course, thought Trotsky's letter "right", so there was nothing I could do but supply the German translation. Wendelin Thomas subsequently replied in a pamphlet published by his group, referring also to the fact—of which we were unaware—that Trotsky's reply had meanwhile appeared in the Trotskyist *Bulletin* or the *Quatrième Internationale*; but not the letter that had occasioned it. Several weeks went by; Trotsky was still away; the thing was not that important after all; and it was not until some time later, when we happened to bump into Jan in town, that the subject came up again. Jan naturally took the opposite view to us.

TWO DAYS AFTER that—it must have been the end of August—I was in Coyoacan. I got there early to look through some documents for the Commission. Trotsky, still in his dressing-gown, said he was sorry he could not talk to me but he was expecting some American visitors. Soon he re-emerged in a white linen suit and white sandals and saw some visitors. I was working in Van's room, the door to the patio was of course open, and Trotsky called me out.

I cannot recall how the conversation began, but I do know that shyness, deference, and caution all inclined me to want to avoid a theoretical discussion. Trotsky, however, insisted on talking about Russia and Germany. He contested Otto's view that the two countries have the same structure. I replied that though they may have come from different bases—Germany from private capitalism and Russia from the beginnings of socialism—now under Hitler and Stalin both countries were state-capitalist.

Trotsky would hear nothing of "state capitalism." He tried to persuade me that expropriation can take place only along revolutionary lines and that there is only capitalism or socialism, capitalism being invariably private—despite state concentrations—and socialism invariably collective.

I argued that, of course, the expropriation of state-owned capitalism could be accomplished only by revolutionary means but that one could imagine, and in Germany indeed already see, that in the final phase of the capitalist crisis individual entrepreneurs believe they are better off nationalising their concerns and securing a high profit margin for themselves as chairman of the board on a fat salary or whatever it might be. Trotsky thought otherwise. Even if individual entrepreneurs preferred such solutions for themselves, they would no longer be able to secure the futures of their sons and grandsons and that would be that as far as they were concerned!

We argued for a long time, with Trotsky laughingly rebuking me for not thinking Marxistically and dialectically, yet failing to convince me. I have forgotten the details. But because this—apart from the brief conversation about Freud and Adler already mentioned—was the only theoretical discussion I ever had with Trotsky, I vividly remember the mood.

[14] In 1921 the sailors and workers of Kronstadt rose up against the Bolshevik government and demanded free elections and more rights. The mutiny was brutally suppressed by Trotsky and Tukhachevsky on orders from the central government.

In the same year Trotsky and the Bolshevik government also fought Machno, who had had considerable success in organising an anarchist social-revolutionary army in the Ukraine, which rose up against the Bolsheviks in favour of an autonomous Ukraine after Machno had spent the Civil War fighting bravely alongside the Red Army against Denikin and Wrangel.

"Go on, then—smoke!" he said as I hurriedly put the cigarette away again. "You might as well: I've caught you red-handed!" So I smoked, and we sat in a sunny corner of the patio and continued our discussion. I was having a discussion with Leo Davidovich Trotsky, the hero of the October Revolution, whose picture I had pinned up over my bed twenty years before. . . . It was so unreal, so unlikely, my arguing with him like that on equal terms. . . . But on the other hand, why not? I am not stupid, nor am I any less experienced than dozens of the young people with whom he carries on or has carried on discussions both oral and written, and he doesn't behave at all like a hero or like a professor, doesn't talk down to one at all but argues enthusiastically and amiably without ever intimidating the person he is trying to convince. Nevertheless he failed to convince me.

I saw his statement that "fathers will never consent to seeing their sons disinherited" as simply dressing up as theory that concern for the younger generation that is altogether typical of Trotsky. He is surrounded by young people, and he cares for them as if they were his own children. Rita left—she is married now—and her place was taken by Ray from America (who learnt Russian while Trotsky was still in France out of sheer enthusiasm for him and in the hope that she might one day be able to help him). Berny Wolff returned to his university course and in his place another American arrived, a thin, taciturn, proletarian youth who did not stay long but was replaced by the powerful and clearly well-fed Joe Hansen from San Francisco, who also brought a car. Jan left for America, and Ray moved into the house. . . .

So things are always changing. Mexican youths from the Trotskyist movement help with the night watch; the housekeeper couple, regarded as politically unreliable, have been replaced by a young comrade called Rosita. They are all of them children, and to all of them Trotsky is their father. And they all agree with Ruth Eisner, who came to help with the Commission: "He may be very harsh to you—but he's the loveliest man I ever saw."

A FEW DAYS AFTER I had had my discussion with Trotsky about state capitalism, Otto went over to Coyoacan. I had not known he was going and came home from the office at three to find him not there. Shortly afterwards the phone rang. Trotsky's voice—he never gives his name when he rings up—said "Comrade Alice . . . ?" in that inimitable Russian accent!

"Comrade Otto has just left. You were perhaps wondering where he was. We've been having a big argument which went on and on. . . . Now, don't be alarmed! I'm ringing to reassure you. We argued like mad, but don't worry—we parted good friends!"

I was touched and surprised. Half an hour later Otto arrived back and told me about the discussion, which had been started by Trotsky on the subject of the Wendelin Thomas affair. Trotsky had said (approximately), "The man's an anarchist—he's up to no good." And Otto had taken him to task about the way he suspects everyone who disagrees with him. Then they had got on to their political differences of principle—Otto had to have a go at it sooner or later!—and Otto had defended his anti-Bolshevik, Trotsky his Bolshevik standpoint. They had both become flushed and excited. And, finally, Otto had shouted, "*Sie, mein Lieber Trotzki, sind selbst der allerärgste Stalinist* (You, my dear Trotsky, are the worst Stalinist of them all! . . .")

The Singers

We heard them leave our neighbours and draw nearer,
Easing their rough throats. One had a wicked cough.
Another could hardly have made his purpose clearer—
Give them Noel, collect, and then push off.

But on our doorstep they assumed politeness,
Whispered, fell silent, let the song begin,
And all we had lost was kindled by its brightness
Shrill as heartache, crying to come in.

John Mole