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The Influence of Education on Russian Serfdom

by Geneva Beles

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The memoirs of Savva Dmitrievich Purlevskii can provide glimpses into the influence of education in the life of an ordinary Russian peasant. Purlevskii wrote his memoirs at the end of his life in 1868; and, typical of many memoirs, he is recalling events that occurred from his earliest childhood memories or had been relayed to him by family members; and, at times, his recollections may have been embellished or diminished due to the passage of time. However, in reading his memoirs titled, *A Life under Russian Serfdom*, published posthumously in 1877, the influences of education and self-learning, along with the correlating evolution of his initial tolerance of serfdom to a strong dislike of his obligations and sense of frustration of being owned, can be found.

The village of Velikoe, located in the province of Yaroslavl', was the birthplace of Purlevskii. He opens his memoirs with a history and description of his village and a sense of the people who resided in the village, including the owners. His village's industry centered on the production of flax and the creation of flax related items, such as mittens, gloves, and woolen stockings. The village was gifted to Prince Anikita Ivanovich Repnin for his military achievements in the Russian army in 1709. Repnin had a wooden mansion and was friends with the governor. The relationship between the serfs and their owner was tolerable, and for the most part, harmonious. Though they were a possession of an estate, the serfs enjoyed relative few money obligations and had freedom. The prince, as did many of his peers, created economic hardship for himself and sought ways to improve his finances by selling his estate, which included the sale of the people who lived on the land. The entire estate was purchased by Savva Iakovlevich Sobakin, a wealthy man from the merchant class (Purlevskii 27-30).

Sobakin had friends in high places and good connections within the nobility but, due to a mistake on his part, he was banished from St. Petersburg. This change in ownership of the estate changed the lives of Purlevskii's predecessors. Life for the peasants became one of "slavish obedience" (Purlevskii 31). This new owner, after building a cotton mill, required that anyone who could not pay the rent must work at the mill, which included almost everyone in the village.

A study of Russian life in the two generations prior to Purlevskii's birth, demonstrates an effort on the part of some monarchs to improve the education of their subjects. For instance, Catherine the Great, who ruled Russia for thirty years from 1762-1796, invested in her own self-education from the onset of her arrival at the Russian palace as the fiancé of the heir to the throne. She learned the Russian language, read the writings of enlightened French writers, studied politics and was a great observer of human nature. One of the paradoxes of her rule is, even though she is as well educated and well read as her enlightened European peers, she still did not release, or encourage the release, of peasants from their role in society as serfs. She seems to have been on the cusp of making drastic reforms with her changes in the Senate and her charters that granted rights and obligations to both the nobility and the towns, but the release of the hold of serfdom never materializes under her rule. She does, however, advance the cause of education beyond the elite nobles. This was apparently a hard won battle, as few members of the nobility saw the need for peasants to learn to read and write, particularly when many of them had not accomplished this yet themselves (Thompson 131-141).

Since a well run government was important to Catherine the Great, she needed to staff her administration with well trained people, which was challenging with the extremely weak educational

system that was in Russia in the mid 18th century. She established the first school for women, the Smolny Institute in St Petersburg, and wanted to establish a network of state boarding schools, which was never really implanted; but she later established a system of public schools that provided a free education to the public in provincial cities and district towns, though not in the countryside. While the ratio of student to population was low, Catherine did succeed at making a start for public education (Thompson 42-43).

Purlevskii continues his narrative with his reminiscences about his grandfather, Petr Petrovich. Petr Petroich was often talked about by Purlevskii's father and other residents of the village, as he was elected as the bailiff and served in this capacity from 1794 to 1802. While Purlevskii does not specifically indicate that his grandfather had any formal education, an inference can be made that he had been provided in some way, at least in part, some type of education and learning. Purlevskii states that his grandfather had been brought to Moscow by his much older brother who was a merchant's assistant for many years. He worked as an errand boy and then became an assistant himself "to a very smart individual and from whom he learned Muscovite trading habits and other things" (Purlevskii 46). His grandfather brought the villagers together, including the peasants, and proposed that they each assist one another based on their ability and means and bail each other out as needed. From his own monetary savings he gave a substantial amount of money to help establish a common fund for anyone to borrow money if they wished to begin a trade. The borrower paid the money back with a small amount of interest. One basis for believing he had some form of learning was that this agreement between Petrovich and the towns people was written down on paper, which would indicate that he had learned to read and write. A second basis for believing Petrovich had some education was that at some later point in his bailiff duties he had introduced bookkeeping and two young men were taught how to handle the books (Purlevskii 46).

Purlevskii's father, Dmitri Petrovich, was about thirty when his grandpa died. His father had also acquired trading and business skills and continued on with their well established household. He had limited education and Purlevski began to study reading and writing in order to read fairytales from his father's books. His father appears to have been reticent for him to learn to read, or at least read fairy tales. He buys him, however, a prayer book and Psalter, and later brings him to the parish priest, Ivan Petrovich, for lessons. In a relatively short time, he learns to read basic letters in his ABC book. Purlevskii seems to struggle and much effort is required by him to learn diacritical marks and grammar. In his own way he wants to still learn and he starts to memorize the entire prayer book and Psalter. His teacher, Ivan Petrovich, never really gives much effort in his teaching duties. His father also does not seem to take much interest in his son's studies until the occasion when his father asks him to write something and, much to his son's embarrassment, he is unable to write or recite the words his father asks of him. After receiving a punishment he is given a firm order by his father to be a "good reader within three days," or he will suffer additional punishment. As time progresses, it becomes apparent that his teacher is somewhat lackadaisical in his instruction and Purlevskii continues learning on his own and at home (Purlevskii page 56).

His father did read contemporary secular literature in addition to his religious books and later left these books to Purlevskii. Purlevskii himself starts to build his own collection of books that he would read to the entire family, except for his father. His father seems to want to control what his son would read and would only allow him to read aloud if he approved the secular literature. He also would give him readings from several religious books. Purlevskii recalls a rather strange paradox in his memoir. His father does express sorrow that his abilities limit him from teaching his son basic grammar, writing skills and arithmetic, because he had not learned these skills himself, since there had not been anyone available to teach them. This is somewhat paradoxical, as the question can be asked, why would his father spend money on and collect books if he could not read? It is likely that his father, who had a problem with alcohol, could have become overly sentimental in that moment, or was intimidated by his son's education and abilities surpassing his own.

Life continued under his father much as it had under his grandfather, though not quite at the same level of success. His father did not seem to suffer any embarrassment about his serf status, though did feel some sadness when his landlord required him to obey some whim. When his father dies after a drinking binge in 1811, Purlevskii's life was altered significantly at age eleven. He refers to this pivotal moment as the time when "the laboring part of my life began" (Purlevskii 64). His family begins to lose money and this was also the time that Russia was invaded by Napoleon, and hardship was endured by many. Times become very difficult for Purlevskii and his mother and they exist with very little. Eventually, he marries the daughter of Petr Ivanovich, a well respected manager of the barges that transported iron for the landlord.

An episode occurred in the village that had a huge impact on how Purlevskii viewed serfdom. The heirs of his landlord announce that they will be collecting a sum annually from the village peasants in addition to the annual rent, and if they are unable to pay or refuse to pay, their young people will be forced to enter the military or the metal mills. In Purlevskii's own words, "these events shocked him" and for the first time he "tasted the sorrow of his status as a serf" (Purlevskii 77). Either lacking in courage or the strength, he did not speak out. He and his family survive the hardship and his business continues to thrive, but the incident imprinted on his mind that the peasant way of life needed to be changed.

Toward the end of his memoirs, Purlevskii reminds the reader of his great love of reading in his childhood. Though he was mostly restricted to religious themed books in his young years, he ventures out into secular literature after his marriage. Through his reading of these books, including poetry, a slow transition begins to take place in his own views about serfdom. He appears to be conflicted during this process. On one hand, the ideas he reads about holds a great deal of personal appeal but he admits he is fearful of rushing into any fast conclusions or how a change in his behavior would affect his own family. He not only becomes preoccupied about his own serf status and the status of his family, but his concerns about consequences prevent from following through and acting upon on his thoughts.

By the year 1826, Purlevskii had sufficient funds to buy his way out of serfdom, but for whatever reason, he chose not to pursue this option. As he writes his life story late in his life, he almost seems to regret his lack of action. Purlevskii usually did not participate to any great degree in the communal affairs of his village. However, around 1828 he was assigned the job of bailiff. At the time he was given this assignment he was not particularly happy, but he begins to study communal affairs and observes abusive events that haunt him. Also in this role, education once again becomes a theme in his life and he petitions his landlord that a school (and later a private medical practice) should be established in his village. Seventy boys become students and begin to learn to read and write, and are given instruction in theology. He serves in his capacity as bailiff until he becomes embroiled in an incident that requires him to go to St. Petersburg to appear before the mill manager (Purlevskii 101-106).

With his death in 1868, the memoirs of Purlevskii end, without the last years of his life explained in his own words. However, additional details about his life are outlined in an epilogue that was written by an editor when his memoir was published in 1877. Purlevski was ordered by his landlord to go back to his village but for some reason Purlevskii flees St. Petersburg and ends up with an Old Believer's group in Nekrasovty. The life of a runaway serf proved to be very unpleasant in many ways, but he was befriended by many of the town's residents and reinvents himself within the community.

Throughout his memoir Purlevskii acknowledges that he enjoyed a far better life than many of his contemporaries. Though he endured some hardship, for the most part, he admits that he has been given good housing, purchased good food and clothing and has money to spare. He is conflicted in his feelings and thoughts about serfdom. As his life advances, so does his education and his search for meaning. He was successful enough to purchase the freedom of his only son in 1856

from serfdom, but chooses not to purchase his own, when he could have done so on several occasions. Purlevskii seems to have made a final transition of acceptance of serfdom to the need to purchase freedom for his son, which would have come with a very steep price. The exposure to literature and meeting other individuals in his travels certainly influenced his decision to pursue the release of his son from serfdom and perhaps he would have gone on to purchase his own release from his obligations to his landlord if an important edict had not been issued by Tsar Alexander in 1861 that abolished serfdom in Russia. It is said that Purlevskii, who is an old man in 1861, heard about the release of peasants from serfdom, became very emotional (Purlevskii 114). Up to the very end of his life, Purlevskii is engaged in his own self learning process and culminates his educational pursuits by writing his own memoirs and shares his own journey from tolerance of serfdom to the desire to be released from the bondage of serfdom.

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