

Mother, by Maxim Gorky

It was a long time ago that I first read *Mother*, by Maxim Gorky, sixteen or seventeen years; yet I still remember clearly the richness of that experience, the taste of a wine I had never known before. This was a hot, warm, wonderful liquid for someone who had mainly been swilling pap. My reading was not by plan or method; without benefit of school or curriculum, I took anything and everything that came my way, drunk with the magic of what I had discovered in books. And then I came on *Mother*, the first of Gorky I had ever seen, and much of what I had read before was thin and tasteless by comparison. It was tapestry after cotton and burlap, living, breathing people after cardboard cutouts.

Of course, I talk as a writer. Gorky has had an enormous influence on me—more, I suppose, than any other foreign writer—and more than anything, he made me want to write. This giant of a man, filled with courage and love and hope, and such a great, aching pity, wrote not of princes, pirates and playboys, but of the working class and its own splendid heroes, the organizers and the agitators and the teachers—of those who for a century now have spilled out a river of their own blood so that the hopes and aspirations of all men might come to be.

I read *Mother*, and the word “Russia” became the embodiment of men and women rather than an idea. Here were the Russian workers who were to make the October Revolution; here was their hope and their zeal, and it was the hope and zeal of all human beings. Here was their unspeakable misery and shame, and it was the misery and shame of all people. Here, for the first time, I saw the following words:

“What queer people you are!” said the mother to the Ukrainian one day. “All are your comrades—the Armenians and the Jews and the Austrians. You speak about all as of your friends; you grieve for all, and you rejoice for all!”

“For all, mother dear, for all! The world is ours! The world is for the workers! For us there is no nation, no race. For us there are only comrades and foes...”

The remarkable thing about *Mother*, and which still makes it live, is its characterization of the mother, Pelagueya Vlasova. Here we have the living process by which an ordinary person becomes, step by step, a fighter for justice. There is nothing secret about it, and yet almost no other writer except Gorky has been able to show the process. The “conversion” comes from the deepest, most elementary human feelings. It begins with her simple, motherly concern for her son; in the end, it has become a motherly concern for all the people. Through her emotions as a mother, she has reached the realities of justice.

As the *New York Times* reviewer said in 1907, in a comment on the first American edition of *Mother*: “We are made to mingle intimately with the little band of revolutionists; we pass from place to place with the mother as she secretly distributes literature which sows truth and stimulates ambition. Through her we know her people.”

And reading the book again, now, almost a generation later, I do not find it in any way lessened. It remains a big, beautiful book, written by a big and saintly human being; if anything, it grows in size and importance, a unique record of man’s hopes and man’s potential.

It is exactly forty years ago that Maxim Gorky wrote *Mother*. He was thirty-nine-years old then, already a writer of international fame and importance. Young as he was, he had behind him twenty years of work and experience in the Russian revolutionary movement. No ivory tower artist this. Already, he had served four jail sentences; he had been exiled; he had gone through the Revolution of 1903 as an active participant. He had attended the Fifth Congress of the Bolshevik Party in London and had made a special trip to America to collect funds for the revolutionary movement of his own country. Born and nurtured by the Russian Working Class, he never turned his back upon them. Nor was his writing something precious, to be hugged to his bosom and wrapped in cotton batting. He wrote party leaflets, pamphlets and articles for the press.

That was Gorky, most beloved of Russian writers, as much the reflection of the soul of Russia as Mark Twain was of the soul of America. In his hands, literature became a noble and persuasive weapon for the liberation of mankind, and at the same time—and quite naturally—his books are among the best novels, artistically speaking, that have been produced in our era.

Gorky lived to see the October Revolution and to witness and participate in the establishment of the first Socialist Republic. As a man and a writer, he never ceased to grow, and at the time of his death, he was the venerable dean of Russian writing, loved by the people of the Soviet Union as few writers in all history have been revered by the people of a nation.

Among the Russian people, *Mother* remains Gorky’s best-loved book. It has gone through 106 editions in 28 languages since its first publication. Among English and American readers, *Mother* is the most popular of all his work, the most read, and perhaps the most representative of his own genius. Know very well to another generation, it has been out of print in America for many years. Those who will read it for the first time, will make a major literary discovery; and for those others who have read it so long ago, there is a very real pleasure in the renewed acquaintance with old, good friends.

Howard Fast
New York, June 1947