On Nostalgia and Courage: Russian Émigré Experience in Interwar Paris through the Eyes of Nadezhda Teffi

Nostalgie et courage : le regard de Nadezh Teffi sur l'expérience des émigrés russes à Paris dans l'entre-deux-guerres

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In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, between 70,000 and 80,000 Russians emigrated and settled in France. Many historians and literary scholars have studied the Russian émigré community in interwar France. Such luminaries of Russian culture as writers Ivan Bunin, Aleksandr Kuprin (1870–1938), Aleksey Tolstoy (1883–1945), Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865–1941), Nadezhda Teffi (1872–1952), and dozens of other famous writers, poets, and philosophers chose Paris. The adaptation of the Russian intelligentsia to a new way of life was difficult: in order to find jobs as professors, lawyers, or journalists, which were the jobs many Russian émigrés had before their hasty departure from Russia, one needed an excellent command of French, which was rarely the case. The tragicomical stories of adaptation of the Russian émigrés to their new home inspired many works of art, but none of them received as much popular acclaim as the short story “Que faire?” (“What to do?”) in Russian transliteration) written by Nadezhda Teffi in 1920. Teffi describes a former Russian general, a newly arrived Russian émigré, who is standing at the Place de la Concorde in Paris. After becoming acquainted with the majestic French capital and having examined its beauty, the general asks a rhetorical question: “It is, of course, all well, gentlemen. It is all very well. But... que faire? Faire... que?” This question summarizes the experience of many Russian émigrés; the question baffled...
them after their hurried escape from their motherland. Interwar Teffi’s prose reflects on the difficult process of starting a new life, reinventing one’s identity, mythologizing the history of the Russian Empire and one’s life story, and healing the trauma of exile.

Teffi’s prose contains strong elements of autobiography: in her short stories, she also describes her own experience of being an émigré in France. It is telling that many of her stories use first-person narration: she often uses the pronoun “we” to represent a difficult assimilation of émigrés to French life. No doubt, she uses her own experience to tell such stories. Teffi’s analysis of Russian émigré identity emphasizes the importance of memory and nostalgia. Teffi underscores myth-making as an essential mechanism in dealing with the trauma of displacement and alienation. Myth-making brings about nostalgia, and a nostalgic outlook towards the past defines the émigré’s identity in Teffi’s chronicle of Russian diaspora in Paris. I also show that Teffi’s writing highlights the importance of gender experience in adjusting to émigré life: Teffi depicts many women who become better assimilated to the French way of life and thus prove to be the “stronger sex.”

Methodologically, cultural history and memory studies inform the article’s argument. The construction of memory for legitimizing the relations of power in society has become the subject of many recent studies. In the 1920s, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) studied how society remembers events and how collective memory works.4 He argued that in order to legitimize the relationships of power, society constantly redefines memories of the past.5 Halbwachs also suggested that collective memories serve an important goal: the goal of

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5. Ibid., On Collective Memory, p. 46-51 and p. 134-135. In the introduction, Halbwachs gives a definition of collective memory: “Yet it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories... It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection.”, ibid., p. 38.
ensuring the cohesion of a group and the continuity of its traditions. While underscoring the significance of representations of the past for shaping national identity, French scholar Pierre Nora highlights a difference between memory and history:

“Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived... Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus... Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects...”

Highlighting the selectiveness of memory, its capacity to “accommodate those facts that suit it,” scholarship on the construction of memory inspires historians to approach nostalgia as a part of the construction of memory. In her book The Future of Nostalgia, literary critic Svetlana Boym argues that a nostalgic discourse often redefines the past, not as it was but as it might have been. In his work Mythologies, French philosopher Roland Barthes addressed the pivotal role of mythologies in shaping modern identities: myths bring meaning to everyday existence. The phenomenon of nostalgia attracts the attention of many scholars: it is an illusion that nostalgic reminiscences appear to represent the past accurately. On the contrary, nostalgic rosy images misrepresent the historical moment and omit all its problems and drama. Politicians use nostalgic discourses by representing the past from the elite’s perspective, a perspective that deliberately does not mention past and present social tensions. According to scholar Renato Rosaldo, “nostalgia is a particularly appropriate emotion to invoke, in attempting to establish one’s innocence, and at the same time to talk about what one has destroyed.” Informed by the theoretical perspectives, I shall address the Russian émigré identity in interwar Paris as significantly influenced by the mythologies of the Old Regime, émigré life and gender experience.

Scholars pay increasing attention to the writings and the life of Nadezhda Teffi. Teffi enjoyed phenomenal popularity in tsarist Russia; in interwar Paris, her feuilletons published in émigré newspapers attracted many loyal readers. Teffi’s short stories were also reprinted in Soviet Russia to make a propagandist point about the miserable existence of Russians abroad. However, between the 1950s and the 1970s, there was a possibility that her stories would be forgotten in France and in the USSR because of a shrinking audience of Russian readers in France and because of her ironic (and often harsh) description of the Bolsheviks in the USSR. Teffi’s literary legacy attracted fewer literary scholars than that of Ivan Bunin or Aleksandr Kuprin. In 1973, literary critique Elizabeth Baylor Neatrour completed a Ph.D. thesis on Teffi’s writings. Neatrour made remarkable efforts to analyze the writings of Teffi in their entirety: the scholar not only rediscovered many short stories, verses, and plays published by the writer, but also identified the main topics in Teffi’s literary legacy. Neatrour also included an informative biographical essay in her dissertation. Another literary scholar, Edythe Charlotte Haber, addressed various aspects of Teffi’s writing in her 1971 dissertation.
same time, dramatic and deep changes which have occurred in historiography since 1971 have yet to shape and invigorate the studies of Teffi's literary legacy. Another major contribution to the studies of Teffi's prose came with Perestroyka: literary scholars D.D. Nikolaev and E.M. Trubilova published a seven-volume set of Teffi's prose and plays. For each volume, the editors wrote an introduction highlighting the dominant literary themes of the volume and addressing a particular stage in Teffi's literary career and life that created an interest in the topics. There are, however, many scholarly articles and books still to be written about Teffi and her works: priceless are her irony, her witty portrayal of human nature and folly, her analysis of myths and gender in representing the experience of émigrés, and her timeless sense of humor that make her works very popular in contemporary Russia.

Unlike many Russian writers who lamented the loss of their motherland and described it as the greatest tragedy in their lives and in the life of Russia, Teffi defined many émigré narratives as myths. She unveiled a gap between grand narratives – through them many Russian writers portrayed the Russian lifestyle – and the petty realities of Russian life before 1917. She used a great deal of sarcasm in retelling many fables through which Russian émigrés used to embellish stories of their lives. Of special value, Teffi's short stories about women's experiences provide a valuable gendered perspective on the history of Russian emigration. Teffi described the relentless struggle of Russian women to support their families; Teffi often highlighted a contrast between the patriarchs of the families, disheartened, disoriented, if not crushed by emigration, and their wives and sisters, who were able to survive, to provide for their families, and not to despond. Teffi's prose features industrious Russian women who learned different crafts, wove their networks of support while teaching Russian to their children and passing on Russian cultural heritage to the future generations. Teffi represented Russian men as becoming "a weaker sex" who often wallowed in the sorrows of self-pity, succumbed to melancholia and paralyzing nostalgia, and resorted to mythologizing their past.

In her short story A town, Teffi ironically noticed that many former Russian ministers and generals, now émigrés, devoted all their time to writing memoirs "for exalting their own names and for shaming contemporaries" with the only

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6. Ibid., p. 83.
14. See also the forthcoming article by Natalia Starostina "Nostalgia and the Myth of the Belle Époque in Franco-Russian Literature (1920s–1960s)" in Historical reflections/ Réflexions historiques, a special issue of the journal edited by Patrick Hutton and scheduled to be published in 2013.
difference that some memoirs were written on a typewriter and others by hand. Teffi meticulously studied myth-making which Russian émigrés eagerly pursued and scrutinized picturesque and whimsical tales they created. Teffi’s short stories and weekly feuilletons in newspapers for Russian émigrés provided social scripts for Russian women on how to survive emigration and how to become integrated in a new culture. Her sketches guided Russian émigré women through the Scylla and Charybdis of exile: Teffi emphasized the necessity to preserve a rich Russian cultural heritage and, at the same time, to find a niche in their new country of residence. Teffi taught the Russian émigrés to develop a healthy critical perspective on French mass culture and to cherish their Russian cultural heritage, immeasurably richer than cheap Parisian crazes. She inspired women to be critically engaged with many cultural paradigms and myths. Teffi also ridiculed the concept of patriarchy as a practice that ought to disappear with the wreckage of the Russian Empire. Teffi helped to build a healthy critical perspective on French mass culture and to cherish their Russian cultural heritage, immeasurably richer than cheap Parisian crazes. She inspired women to be critically engaged with many cultural paradigms and myths. Teffi also ridiculed the concept of patriarchy as a practice that ought to disappear with the wreckage of the Russian Empire. Teffi helped to build an imagined (and real) Russian community in Paris by revealing a unity of experience and emotions of Russian émigrés. In sum, Teffi’s prose helped women to build a new “émigré self” where Russian cultural heritage would be cherished and remembered.

“TEFFI!” THE WRITER’S POPULARITY IN PRE-1917 RUSSIA

Humorous short stories and feuilletons made Teffi phenomenally popular in pre-1917 Russia. Teffi’s prose represented late imperial Russia by integrating portraits of writers and bourgeois, students and officers, peasants and artisans, coquettes and artists, and so on. Teffi’s prose and poetry became a magical mirror in which one could find a precise reflection of oneself. In her honor, the manufacturers of candies and the admirers of her literary gift, Gleakson and Robinson [Гликсон и Робинсон], gave the name “Teffi!” (with an exclamation point) to a sort of caramel. In her memoir On the banks of the Seine [На берегах Сены], Irina Odoyevtseva (1895–1990), a Russian émigré writer, recorded an anecdote about it. Nadezhda received an anonymous parcel with these caramels named in her honor. Being so flattered by this expression of her national fame, Teffi ended up eating all three pounds of the sweets to the point of becoming sick. Contemporaries loved Teffi’s stories. Before 1920, Teffi published many collections of short stories and poetry, including Lifeless animal [Неживой зверь] and Passiflora [Пассифлора]. Writer and poet Mikhail Tsetlin (1882–1945) wrote that the existence of the Russian émigrés would be duller and more boring without her weekly feuilletons that appeared in Russian émigré newspapers Vozrozhdenie [Revival] and Poslednie Novosti [Latest News]. Teffi’s prose charmed political adversaries, such as Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and the last Russian tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918). During the Russian revolution of 1905, she published her short stories in a left newspaper New Life [Новая жизнь]. According to Teffi, it was there that she met Vladimir Lenin. Her poem “Bees” ["Пчелки"] described hard work by women-seamstresses and received a word of praise from Vladimir Lenin: the end of the verse tells how the working women sewed “the bloody banner of freedom.” According to writer Georgy Ivanov (1894–1958), in 1913, when the Romanovs celebrated the tercentenary of their dynasty, tsar Nicholas II wanted Teffi’s short stories to be included in the anthology prepared for...
the occasion. The last Romanov wanted only her stories in the anthology: "Teffi! Only her! No one but her is needed! Only Teffi!" Irina Odoevtseva recorded the story of this episode from the words of her husband."20 When parties and factions split Russian society, Teffi’s talent made her one of the universally accepted national writers. Russian émigré writer Mark Aldanov (1886-1957) wrote: "On the admiration of the talent of Teffi, the people of different political views and literary tastes converge, and I cannot think of any other writer who caused such unanimity among the critics and the audience."21 In contemporary Russia, Teffi continues to be a very popular author.22

Teffi’s feuilletons were published in widely circulated editions and reached hundreds of thousands of Russian readers.23 Her witty short stories appeared in Satirikon, a satirical journal based in Saint-Petersburg and published between 1908 and 1918. Along with Russian satirists and poets Arkadiy Averchenko (1881-1925), Sasha Chernyy (1880-1932), Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), Sergey Gorodetskiy (1884-1967), Don-Aminado (1888-1957), and many others, Teffi used humor and satire to portray Russian contemporary life. Her feuilletons were also featured in A Russian Word [Русское Слово], a Moscow popular daily newspaper, Words [Речь], and Stock News [Биржевые Новости]. Before 1917, Teffi published over ten collections of short stories that acquired instant popularity among Russian readers. Among the best stories written in this period are A Demonic Woman, Life and a collar, and Diaries. Stories explored the paradoxes of middle-class life and, especially, of women’s experience in tsarist Russia.

**BEING AN ÉMIGRÉ IN TEFFI’S PROSE**

The year 1917 drastically changed her life. As early as 1917, Teffi pinpointed Lenin as “the mother-in-law of the Russian Revolution,” a characteristic that brought association with an evil figure in Rus-
sian folklore. At the same time, Teffi understood the complexity of the Russian Revolution as a search for justice and equality that unexpectedly brought about terror and violence. In her short story *At the Rock of Gadarene* [На скале Гергесинской], Teffi wrote:

"Seen at a morning at the gates of the commissariat, the trickle of blood, a trickle slowly crawling across the pavement, cuts the path of life for good. One cannot walk over it. One must not go further. One can turn and run. And they run. By the trickle of blood, they are cut off forever, and there will be no return."[25](#)

Teffi defined two groups of people who were likely to leave Russia. The first group "ran from the Bolshevik truth, from the principles of socialism, from equality and justice"; they were prepared to leave by hiding diamonds and money in their soles and even "noses". Immoral and corrupt, this group included "speculators, former gendarmes, former members of Black Hundreds and other former [Teffi means here "have-beens", "people who were the part of compromised and corrupted social and political groups"]", but maintaining their individuality, scoundrels." There was another group, "the meek and frightened by lies, black Bolshevik practice, by terror, injustice and violence."[27](#) Teffi demonstrated social stratification in Russian emigration.

A theme of lost illusions defined the dynamic of another short story, *A maybug*. Teffi described the tragedy of Kostya, a young and unemployed male émigré in Paris who is a noble from an impoverished family, a former officer in the White Army, and a veteran twice shell-shocked in the Civil war. His injuries prevent him from gaining permanent employment in Paris; desperate, hungry, and broken, he approaches a tutor who taught him and his brothers many years ago. Kostya is lonely in Paris: his mother died of typhus fever, his father and a brother were killed. He hopes that this tutor will help him because the latter used to benefit from the patronage of Kostya’s mother. The encounter does not go well: contrary to Kostya’s expectations, this old acquaintance, Zhukonkulo [a Ukrainian-sounding name, a part of which meaning “a bug”] insults and kicks Kostya out onto the street. Before committing suicide, Kostya accuses people like Zhukonkulo:

"... such a horror... He has no obligations. No, the bug, you do have obligations! When you were evacuating your frigging swag... and money, we were covering you by our own chests [and] were sacrificing our lives when you were loading your cargo on ships... Then you, the bug, fawned upon me, flattered me, and composed verses on me being a hero. And now you have no business with me... Why did you cheat me then? I served to you, the bug."[28](#)

The story illustrates the tragedy of the Russian emigration where young idealists like Kostya would give up their health and even their lives to fight for political myths generated by cynical speculators, personified in this story by Zhukonkulo. Unlike many Russian writers such as Ivan Bunin, Teffi did not portray *all* Russian émigrés as the victims of the Bolsheviks: she showed that there were perpetrators among the émigrés, people whose greed and dirty affairs destroyed Kostya's generation and led to the collapse of the Russian Empire.

Teffi left Russia in 1920 and ended up in Paris; her experience was remarkable because her émigré life had its own ups and downs. In the interwar decades, Teffi pub-
lished her short stories, poems, and one serialized novel in newspapers primarily designed for the Russian émigré community in Paris. Before 1924, her publishing provided her with the means of livelihood; Teffi could not take time off from writing. In 1924, she met a Russian Londoner and banker Paul Tikston who became her companion and sponsor until 1930. Tikston had a stroke after the Great Depression which ruined him financially. Teffi took care of Tikston for several years: as the writer V. Vasyutinskaia recorded, Teffi provided Tikston with love and tenderness while entertaining her readers with funny stories and again resorting to writing as the only way to support herself and Tikston. Teffi’s health was also poor: she suffered from severe neuritis and underwent surgery in the 1920s. During Vichy, Teffi refused to collaborate with the Nazis, and her health deteriorated in the 1940s. Vera Bunina-Muromtseva recorded in her diary the last meeting between Bunin and Teffi: at the beginning of this visit, Teffi could not even utter a word to her old acquaintance because of her paroxysm.

Teffi became one of the most active members of the Russian literary community in Paris: she gave presentations at literary soirees, helped find employment for newly arrived émigrés, and brought a great deal of charm and wit to any gathering. In her memoirs On the banks of Seine, Irina Odoevtseva wrote that everybody loved Teffi and that Teffi had a capacity to trans-

26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., p. 69.
29. Orlando Figes and other scholars highlight a paradox of the Russian civil war: it was often the idealistic youth who joined the White Army to fight against the Reds despite the fact that such young men could potentially gain more from fighting on the opposite side and from the Revolution’s unprecedented practices of social mobility and disregard towards the principles of seniority. The political message of the Whites was often confusing: first, the Whites wanted a victory in the civil war, and, then, they would begin a debate about the political future of Russia. The Reds, on the contrary, articulated their political program clearly; the Reds’ use of the mechanisms of mass culture (posters, propaganda, performances, illustrated newspapers, and so on) ensured a dissemination of their message among wide masses. The propaganda of the Whites sometimes appealed to nostalgic yet politically empty slogans of the glory of the Old regime and the Russian Empire. See Orlando Figes, A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924, London, Jonathan Cape, 1996, p. 589-603, 682-696.
31. From В. Н. Муromtseva-Bunina in Иван Алексеевич Бунин, В.Н.Муromtseva-Bunina [Ivan Alekseevich Bunin and V.N.Muromtseva], Устами Буниных. Дневники Ивана Алексеевича и Веры Николаевны и другие архивные материалы [In Bunin’s Words: Diaries of Ivan Alekseevich and Vera Nikolaevna and Other Archival Materials], под ред. Миллица Грин (Miliitsa Grin, d.). In three volumes. vol. 3, Frankfurt, Posev, 2005. In a diary entry from October 12, 1952. Vera Muromtseva wrote: ‘Последний раз она [Тэффи] была у нас. Ей хотелось повидаться с Яном. Пришла. Не могла вымолвить ни слова. Припадок. Что-то проглотила и стала над собой потешаться: ’Хороша гостья.’ Ян тоже готовился к встрече, что-то принимал, чтобы не было удушья. Я приготовила чай и то, что она любит. Она почти не ела. Боялась. Говорили они оба оживленно. Смеялись. Острили. Вспомнили.” “She [Teffi] visited us the last time. She wanted to see Ian [Bunin]. She came. She could not say a word [because of her] paroxysm. She had swallowed some [medicine] and began to tease herself: ‘I must be such a good guest!’ Ian also prepared for this visit and also took some medicine to avoid paroxysm. I made tea and those snacks which she loved. She almost did not eat. She was afraid [of her] paroxysm. They both merrily chatted. They laughed. They made wisecracks. They reminisced.”
form even the dullest dinner into a dazzling soiree. Her secrets were, first, her wit and, second, her capacity to avoid political debates. Teffi participated in dozens of organizations and charities for the Russian émigrés, including literary evenings of "A green lamp," a literary society of Russian émigrés in Paris run by writers Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius. Contemporaries defined her as one of the pillars of Russian emigration. Russian émigré writer Vasily Poplavskiy wrote that the Western critiques associated Russian literature with the name of Teffi. Teffi often met with Ivan Bunin who genuinely enjoyed her friendship. Her two collections of stories, The Lynx (1923) and A Town (1927), represent her émigré experience and the experience of her friends.

RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ NOSTALGIA: "WE THINK OF ONLY WHAT HAPPENS THERE. WE ARE INTERESTED IN ONLY WHAT COMES FROM THERE" 34

The arrival of Russian émigrés to Paris was often accompanied by trauma and the most trying circumstances. With the retreat of the White army from Crimea, thousands left Russia in a hurry; new Russian émigrés sometimes could not even comprehend that they were leaving Russia for good. Upon arriving in France, some Russian émigrés would suffer from nostalgia: all their hopes and aspirations would be directed towards Russia. Teffi explored this odd paradox by coining this phrase: "we were afraid of death from the Bolsheviks and we died here [in France]." Teffi characterized this state as illness. She talked about the painful realization that neither French culture nor the language could possibly convey many important aspects of Russian culture. In a short story Nostalgia, there is a tragi-comical dialogue between a French maid and a Russian nanny, "very authentic – plump, angry, not liking a new order, guarding old ones, knowing how to bake a Russian cheesecake, and capable of holding all households in awe." The Russian nanny shared her stories with her French friend: she told her about the toll of Russian churches, her faith, the incomparable taste of the first ripe cranberries under snow, "forests, fields, nuns, salty milk mushrooms, black cockroaches, religious processions..." The French maid does not understand her confessions. Teffi alluded to the unthinkable suffering which this insatiable longing for the lost motherland brought to the life of the Russian émigrés. The theme of nostalgia is central in her post-1917 prose.

In her short story Raw materials, Teffi alluded to the "great sadness" which fell on Russian society in Paris. By this sadness, the writer referred to nostalgia, to the tragedy of the Russian civil war, and to the fast devaluation of Russian culture. Teffi wrote that Russian culture died and "here, in the afterlife existence, has no meaning whatsoever." The Russian writer was alarmed by the fact that some Russian professors and artists became workers in France. She was concerned about the fact that the émigrés all too easily gave up their Russian heritage and made themselves "raw material" for French culture. Teffi created an apocalyptical image of the whole of Russia becoming raw material.

Teffi could not resist making a sweeping generalization about contemporary French culture. In a short story Sunday, Teffi described Parisian theatrical life as kitsch:

"There are many theaters. The French play very well. In one theater Ki-Ki plays, in another Fi-Fi, in the third Si-Si. Then you
can go see the plays: *Le danseur de Madame*, *Le bonheur de ma femme*, *Le papa de maman*, *La maman de maman*, *Le mari de mon mari*, *Le mari de ma femme*. You can go to any of them; it is the same as attending them all. Some of the plays are very serious and substantial. In the plays in which an actor in a gray-haired wig approaches the footlights and says with feeling: ‘Faut être fidèle à son mari’, a deeply moved public applauds and a Russian sitting in the tenth row holds his head in his hands quietly: ‘How strong their family foundation is. They are happy!’ ‘Fidèle à son mari’—the actor growls and adds with the same pathos, but in a slightly more gentle manner ‘Et à son amant’.”

Teffi suggested that the ways in which Parisians spent their weekends were dull and disappointing and, by the end of the weekend, people felt cheated. Teffi made a wrong assumption, which many tourists and émigrés would make, that mass culture represented the true essence of French culture, and the emptiness and superficiality of culture industry represented those of the French cultural landscape. At the same time, she contrasted such cheap mass culture with the richness of Russian culture.

Teffi found much irony in the desire of Russian émigrés to pretend that they still belonged to the *crème de la crème* of European society. Teffi highlighted a sharp contrast between the poverty of émigré life and the denial of such trying circumstances by describing a vogue for soirées.

(Such gatherings tried to revive the tradition of literary and cultural salons such as the salons of Viacheslav Ivanov, Fyodor Sologub, and Dmitry Merezhkovsky in pre-1915 Saint Petersburg.) Her short story *Five o’clocks*’*[Файфоклоки]* contains a comical portrayal of émigré soirées: unlike the salons in pre-1914 Russia, now émigrés gather in miserable looking cheap hotel rooms, so cheap that they don’t even have a separate bathroom. To hide this poverty, Teffi suggests hiding sinks under a Japanese fan, serving shelled nuts as snacks (but not providing tongs for splitting them), offering broken chairs to arrogant guests and then blaming them for breaking “very expensive furniture,” and talking only about sophisticated refined topics and not about the petty affairs of everyday life. To excite the male guests of such soirées, Teffi suggested a reader to...
start a political intrigue, a conversational twist that could keep guests busy for hours.

“One needs to direct conversations during such five o’clock’s towards the topics of high society and not in the least towards topics which trouble you most personally in this particular moment. Let us assume that your mind is preoccupied by the fact that in the morning a shoemaker made you pay through the nose for a new sole. No matter how much you are overwhelmed by this emotional experience, you should not talk about it because everybody will pretend that this kind of trifle is never of interest and would not even understand right away, qu’est-ce que c’est [in Russian transliteration – N.S.] a sole? Talk about opera and attires. Just be sure not to say the truth: ‘I do not go to the opera: I have no money…’ It is all wrong. You need to keep up appearances. ‘The French do not understand Tchaikovsky; how would they be able, in your opinion, to convey… Skryabin?’ Or this way: ‘Paquin [un couturier – N.S.] repeats herself?’ And nothing more. Let them all explode [from envy].”

Teffi at the same time highlighted the myth-making in which the Russian émigrés engaged. She underscored absurdities which the stories of Russian émigrés about Soviet Russia were filled with: she made fun of the fact that the newly arrived émigrés spread most improbable rumors about Soviet Russia: people could go for months without eating; all Soviet children would become the victims of cannibalism, et cetera. In her verse “Melancholy,” Teffi showed how many Russian émigré writers, Lolo, Averchenko, Don-Aminado and others mythologized the Russian past. She defined the myth as a notion that everybody in imperial Russia was fed and dressed up.

Teffi’s interpretation of the émigré experience drastically differed from that of other writers such as, for instance, Russian émigré writers Ivan Bunin, Arkadiy Averchenko, or Don-Aminado. Teffi portrayed the experience of emigration through the lens of gender. In her novel An adventure novel [АВАНТЮРНЫЙ РОМАН], Teffi described the tragic fate of a Russian émigré woman. The protagonist of the novel is Marusia Dukina, a thirty-five-year old woman, who, under the name of Natasha, works as a model. Born into a noble Russian family, Marusia leaves Russia and settles in Paris after 1917. Beautiful and smart, Marusia is a model in the fashionable Maison Manel in Paris. (E. Trubilova suggests Maison Manel is a scripted name for Maison Chanel: in Paris, not only did several Russian émigré women work at Chanel, but Coco Chanel also enjoyed the patronage of the Great Russian Duke Dmitry Pavlovich Romanov.) As Teffi noted not without sarcasm, an interwar Parisian fashionable maison had to have “a Russian princess Natasha […], that is, an elegant Russian émigré woman of noble origins, of good taste and of good reputation.” Marusia’s duties consist of wearing expensive attire made by the Maison Manel to encourage rich customers to buy such dresses for themselves; she also displays different outfits for the rich clientele of the Maison. Marusia possesses only blurred and distant memories of Russia before 1917. Marusia’s life is strange: her expensive dresses create the illusion that she is a wealthy and well-connected woman, however in reality she is not rich, but very lonely. Despite Marusia’s posh appearance, her dresses do not make her a member of the Parisian bourgeoisie.
and bohemia; Marusia herself does not feel any connection to these strata. She is emotionally numb: paradoxically enough, neither the Revolution nor exile, her failed marriage, her fleeting affairs, and her job bring excitement to her life. She no longer thinks of herself as Marusia: her name «Natasha» does not only become her alias, but also her identity, more real and tangible than her true self. At the same time, Marusia is honest and kind and is not corrupted by the world of fashion, intrigue, and excess surrounding her.

Marusia’s life drastically changes after meeting a handsome young man, a good dancer of twenty, who introduces himself as Gaston Luke. During their first meeting, Gaston slips drugs to her cocktail and, after she faints, steals three hundred francs from her purse. Oddly, he visits her the next day and enters her life. Despite her suspicions that Gaston is a scoundrel, she is mesmerized by him and tries to unveil his secrets. Her suspicions that he is a thief, a gigolo for wealthy men and women, a liar, and a drug dealer are only corroborated by his stories about his family and his life that are pure fiction. Gaston comes and goes, asks Marusia to bring an expensive bracelet of doubtful origin to a pawnshop, and, in general, ruins the tranquility of her life. Gaston brings emotions and love to her life that becomes “an adventure novel.”

Marusia feels a great deal of pity towards Gaston: she is overwhelmed by a feeling of tenderness towards this young man. Marusia has a premonition that Gaston is going to destroy her. Nonetheless, during their first night together, Marusia pours out her love to him as if Gaston was her son: “My boy, poor erring boy! I will not leave you!” On another occasion,

“Crying Marusia embraced her warm sleepy boy and in Russian, like a babo, wailed above him: ‘You’re my torment, my love! I know nothing about you. Where are you from? Who are you? Where are you leading me? And I do not want to ask. And I do not want to know – it will only hurt me more because I will not be able to leave you.’”

His erratic appearances in her life and his capacity to leave no trace after his visits make Marusia wonder whether he even really exists or whether he is just a product of her imagination. Contrarily, Gaston finds her dull and suggests

42. Ibid., p. 93-94.
47. Ibid., p. 36-37.
48. Ibid., p. 42-43.
49. Ibid., p. 50-51, 58-59, 80-81.
50. Ibid., p. 75-76.
51. Ibid., p. 80.
52. Ibid., p. 79.
her to join him in his life of “adventure.” Gaston makes her reconsider her moral principles: she starts to blame herself for her inability to steal, to lie, to transform her existence into an adventure novel. She sees herself as “a wet chicken and a Russian loser ["мокрая курица, русская растяпa, размазня"].” By the end of the novel, he treats her as a souteneur and suggests that she gets herself some lovers. Gaston, who turns to be a Latvian émigré, George Bubelik [Жорж Бубельк] embodies the worst characteristics of the Parisian semi-monde and the Russian émigrés. He despises Russian émigrés, disrespects and uses women like Marusia. He lies about the past and appears to be ashamed of his heritage. Gaston dislikes any form of work and survives through crime and cheating. By the end of the novel, Gaston kills a woman and is arrested by the French police; this news, as well as his infidelity, diminishes Natasha’s will to live and she drowns in the sea. Marusia’s relationship with Gaston brings her nothing but fear, hunger, and cold and stirs up memories of the Russian Revolution.

Before her death, Marusia has a strange dream that her grandparents and other people she loved and who passed away were waiting for Marusia to begin a supper. In her last moments, she remembers this dream and realizes that “it is good that they are waiting for me. It is very good that someone somewhere is waiting for her too.” The death of Marusia is strangely peaceful; it appears to the reader that Marusia is able to escape the dirt and intrigue of Paris only after leaving this world.

Teffi warns her female audience to avoid the pitfalls of this all-forgiving maternal love towards the prodigal sons of Russian emigration. Some messages of the novel are obvious: a desire to have an adventurous life can bring havoc to one’s existence. People who mythologize their biographical past are likely to lie about their present. In the character of Gaston, aristocratic disdain towards any kind of work coincided with his involvement in petty crimes and, eventually, brought him to prison. Other messages of the novel are more subliminal: women need to respect themselves, to be confident about their own value and to resist the dazzling charms of the Parisian semi-monde. When George leaves Marusia, she begins to see herself as the one “who nobody needs, uninteresting... A manikin for showing other people’s attires.”

This psychological abasement destroys Marusia and eventually leads to her physical death: in a state of psychological shock and feverish, Marusia jumps into the sea and, after miscalculating her strength, drowns. The novel teaches women to develop equal relationships with their partners. Teffi made the point that it became a habit for Marusia to bustle around George, to bring him his cigarettes and dinners, and to never displease him with her questions.

The themes of confidence and respect are the subject of Teffi’s story Lavizza Chen [Лавиза Чен]. The protagonist of the story, Katya Petrova, a student at the Conservatoire, meets a pianist Evgeniy Shredder. Shredder is in love with a signer named Lavizza Chen; his stories about Lavizza’s divine talent, beauty, and charisma torment Katya because the comparison does not seem to be in Katya’s favor. Katya becomes Evgeniy’s wife. She has to listen to his stories about his unrecognized talent, about his intellectual brilliance, and his former mistresses. Katya is hurt by her husband’s coldness and their unloving relationship, by his derogatory comments about Katya’s voice (“art does not tolerate mediocrities”), and his growing obsession with Lavizza. In the meantime, her knowledge of German brings her employment in a bookstore while her husband can-
not find any work. Evgeniy is constantly irritated and angry at Katya. Lavizza gives a concert and Katya sees this "bitter happiness of her life" for the first time. She is astonished to see an unattractive woman with a sharp thorny voice; her husband badly accompanies Lavizza. The public hisses and laughs at Lavizza and Evgeniy. Katya leaves Evgeniy by the end of the story. The story thus suggests that women should protect their talents and dignity and not accept to be humiliated by their partners.

An important part of Teffi’s work addresses the different experiences of women and men in emigration. In her short story On courage Teffi described a fictional character, a Russian woman named Vera Sergeevna Rezatova who “was equipped to struggle for survival. She knew how to sew, to knit, to make pies, to decorate hats, to give a massage and to nurse the sick.” Many characters in Teffi’s stories are the breadwinners for their families and for their husbands. In her short story “A wife,” Teffi portrayed the heroic efforts of a wife of a Russian émigré composer to help her husband overcome depression and to start composing music again. She starves, but ensures that her other half eats well. She invites a French journalist to their house to interview her spouse and makes every effort to help her husband to become a productive artist again. By the end of the story, she explodes with words that if she is going to leave him, he will starve to death. Teffi suggests that Russian women should respect themselves and start building their own lives, their new émigré selves.

Teffi inspired Russian émigré women to cherish their cultural legacy whether they consisted of the memories of Russian life, or of Paris, or of first books. Teffi taught émigrées to respect their heritage because it was the essence of their identity. Forgetting this legacy and trying to “shed” one’s cultural origins could lead to a tragedy like that of Marusia Dukina, who came to despise the “Russianness” in herself. Teffi also taught Russian émigré women not to fall victim to the petty tyrannies of their dethroned patriarchs. The writer analyzed the importance of myths and nostalgia in redefining one’s identity in emigration: however, unlike other writers, she highlighted a gap between the idyllic memories of the past and a life of inequality and social contrasts in tsarist Russia. She identified myth-making as an important survival mechanism in emigration, a way to deal with the necessity of reinventing one’s identity and to start a new life. Teffi’s
ironic portrayal of the émigré experience provides an important lesson about the past to understand contemporary Russian émigré experience. An enduring appeal of Teffi’s prose is in the stories of émigré women, becoming independent and strong through their emigration experience. Teffi’s prose also reveals a gap between the romanticized expectations of a life abroad and the actual experience of surviving in a country where an émigré was a stranger.

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