

Peter Alexeyevich Kropotkin (1842–1921) was very close to his older brother Alexander (1841–1886), a relationship that can be traced through their published correspondence for the years 1857–1871. So Alexander’s death by suicide in 1886 (a result of depression) was a terrific shock to Peter and led to an extended family crisis, since Alexander left a wife and three small children with scarcely any means of support. Peter was always very attached to his brother’s children and tried to help them as much as his limited means allowed.

The following article was written by Alexander’s oldest child, Nikolai Alexandrovich Kropotkin (1878–1949), and describes his interactions with his uncle

over a span of 35 years. Nikolai was born in Minusinsk, a town in central Siberia where his father was serving a term of exile. Although he became an anarchist, he arrived at his convictions independently of his famous uncle and did not embrace anarchism until he was almost 30. He lived mostly in Tver, a city 100 miles northwest of Moscow and worked in the cooperative movement. Although he never formally joined an anarchist organization, Nikolai carried on the propaganda of anarchist ideas. In the 1920s–1930s he was frequently arrested by the OGPU, spent time in Butyrsky Prison in Moscow, and served a term of exile in his birthplace Minusinsk. He was married to a great-niece of Mikhail Bakunin.

My Memories of Peter Kropotkin

by Nikolai A. Kropotkin

Peter Kropotkin’s **Memoirs of a Revolutionist**^[1] provides a poignant description of the warm friendship that existed between him and his brother Alexander, my father. So it’s understandable that from early childhood I was aware of my uncle’s impact in our family. Circumstances were such that Peter was separated from my father for a long time, and after his escape abroad in 1876, the brothers were fated never to see each other again; my father died in 1886 in Tomsk. Even correspondence with Peter was almost impossible, since any letters sent or received by my father always fell into the hands of the police.

In the summer of 1886 my mother^[2] and the three of us children, of whom I was the oldest—around eight years old—left Tomsk for European Russia.^[3] Our father was supposed to join us three months after our departure, when his term of exile would have expired.

En route we visited the city of Vovchansk, Kharkovskaya province, where my mother’s brother was the chair

¹ Although composed by Kropotkin in Russian, **Memoirs of a Revolutionist** was first published in an English translation in 1899. Subsequent Russian editions were translations of the English edition, frequently with abridgments, until a canonical Russian edition was published, strangely enough, in the Stalinist USSR in 1933.

² Vera Sebastianovna Kropotkina (née Berinda-Chaikovsky), 1849–1935, was from a family of revolutionaries.

³ Nikolai’s siblings were Mikhail (born 1881) and Vera (born 1884). For a biography of Mikhail, see <https://www.katesharp-leylibrary.net/s7h5tn>.

of the zemstvo administration.^[4] My mother’s sister [Ludmila] Pavlinova came to Vovchansk to tell our mother the terrible news about the tragic death of her husband in Tomsk; not long after our departure he shot himself.

There was no end to my mother’s grief. As well as the tragic loss of her beloved husband, she had to deal with the fact that she was almost destitute, with three small children, virtually helpless in the face of the formidable problems she faced.

We children were not told about the death of our father and we learned about it only some months later in London, at the home of Peter Kropotkin, where we had been invited to settle for good.

In the autumn we set off for England: my mother, the three of us children, a nanny, and my mother’s sister S. N. Lavrova,^[5] a close friend and follower of Peter Alekseyevich. We arrived in the small town of Harrow near London, where P. A. was living.

I have vivid childhood memories of that time, memories of my good uncle, who dearly loved us.

⁴ A zemstvo was an organ of rural self-government in the Russian Empire, run by a council elected with limited suffrage.

⁵ Sophia Nikolaevna Lavrova (1840–1916) became an anarchist under the influence of Peter Kropotkin while studying in Zürich in 1870–1873, and participated in his escape from prison in St. Petersburg in 1876. She was implicated in the assassination of General Mezentsov, head of Russia’s secret police, in 1878. Freed from prison in 1882, she emigrated to Paris where she worked as a midwife. In 1906 she returned to Russia.

At that time he was fascinated by manual labour: he busied himself with woodwork and taught gardening to me and my brother. He had learned how to ripen grapes in London's climate, using an unheated glass hothouse on a sort of deck attached to his house. He lived very modestly—there was no clutter in his home; he would spend whole days in his study with its homemade furniture designed for books and writing. At the time of our arrival, P. A. was living with only his wife and one maid, an English woman, who was soon replaced by our nanny. In the same year, P. A.'s daughter Sasha was born, his only child whom he doted upon for the rest of his life.^[6]

Among the closest friends of P. A., who often visited us, were Kravchinsky (Stepniak)^[7] and his dear wife Fanny,^[8] who was very attached to us; N. V. Chaikovsky^[9] and his family, also living in Harrow; and the engineer Linev,^[10] a Russian emigrant.

I recall how uncle impressed us with his dexterity in physical exercises, and in riding his bicycle, which in those days had either three wheels, or two—of which the front one was huge and the back one tiny. I also recall how he won a shooting competition, to our great pride. The event was held in a meadow near our home as part of a holiday celebration, and he shot a bunch of glass bottles hanging from a cross beam with a rifle. He taught us all the rules for building fortified positions, which he considered necessary knowledge for revolutionaries, and we practiced building forts with snow. The winter of 1886–1887 in England was quite snowy,

⁶ Peter Kropotkin's only child Alexandra Kropotkin (1887–1966) was always known in family circles as "Sasha."

⁷ Sergei Mikhailovich Kravchinsky (1851–1895), pseudonym—Stepniak, was a militant Narodnik revolutionary who fatally stabbed General Mezentsov in 1878 and fled abroad. He settled in London in 1884 where he wrote articles and books opposing the tsarist regime before his premature death when he was hit by a train at a railway crossing.

⁸ Fanny Markovna Lichkus (1855–1945), studied medicine in St. Petersburg before going abroad and marrying Kravchinsky. After his death in 1895, she lived in poverty in London for decades before being granted a Soviet pension.

⁹ Nikolai Vasilyevich Chaikovsky (1851–1926) lent his name to a radical student group, the Chaikovsky Circle, active in St. Petersburg in the early 1870s. Both Kravchinsky and Peter Kropotkin were members. After many adventures, Chaikovsky settled in England in 1880, returning to Russia only in 1907.

¹⁰ Aleksandr Loginovich Linev (1843–1918) was active in revolutionary circles in Russia in his student days, and was forced to emigrate abroad in 1873, settling in London. Later he left the revolutionary movement and returned to Russia, where he enjoyed success as an inventor in the emerging field of colour photography. When he died in 1918, Kropotkin wrote an obituary for him.

a welcome change for people used to damp winters with rain and frost. We staged desperate battles with our friends—boys from the neighbourhood—and our uncle was happy to join in.

I guess we destroyed the strict, work-oriented lifestyle of uncle's home with our noisy disturbances, hordes of friends, and the resultant broken windows and trampled garden. P. A. found himself between two fires: his loving wife with a new-born child and the contingent of undisciplined Russian relatives. All this was made more complicated by the rather dire material conditions of emigrant life. Unaccustomed to running a European household, our nanny and aunt were slowly but surely undermining our uncle's frugal lifestyle. And so, after eight months of living with P. A., our family and Aunt Sophia left for Russia.

We parted with uncle's family on the best of terms, as a result of a realistic decision that we believed would be best for both sides.

Our family returned to Russia and, after wandering around a bit, settled in Tver, because it was the home of close friends of my father from his Siberian exile.

P. A. helped our family for a long time, sending money every month.

He was a constant presence in our family as a much-loved uncle; his letters were not especially numerous, but always reflected his affection and love for the children of his brother.

For P. A. knowledge and science provided the tools for carrying out his social ideals. For him knowledge meant progress—freeing the minds of people from the darkness of ignorance and age-old prejudices by means of intellectual and technological liberation. In accordance with this, one of his first gifts to me, a 10-year-old, sent to Tver from far off London, was a set of drawing instruments with a note: "Study! Knowledge is power!"

Years passed. P. A. constructed the theoretical ideas of anarchism on a scientific basis, and was active in the revolutionary, scientific, and journalistic life of Europe. Meanwhile we were growing up while living in Russia with its contradictions, amorphousness, and dark ways.

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It was not until 1904 that I made plans to visit uncle again in London on family business.

I arrived in January 1905, after spending a couple of months in Paris.

This was an interesting time in Russia: first there was the war with Japan and the “spring” of Sviatopolk-Mirsky.^[11] The weight of political oppression was lifted somewhat: all sorts of meetings and congress were permitted to take place, and there was more freedom of the press.

I had spent the winter of 1903–04 in Petersburg, and the following summer lived in a village in Tver-skaya province. So it was understandable that the emigrants in Paris, whom I was meeting for the first time, were eager to pump me for information.

But they were not satisfied with my answers, since I harbored few illusions about the possibility of a serious and imminent revolt, knowing full well the general ignorance and backwardness of the masses and their alienation from our intellectuals. The emigrants left me alone and began to pontificate among themselves about the popular mood and destiny of Russia. I marveled at their extraordinary obtuseness, for it seemed to me that they completely misunderstood the temper of the Russian people. “And what about Uncle” I thought to myself, “who hasn’t been in Russia for 30 years already.” Because the emigrants I had been talking to had certainly been there more recently, and yet had little understanding of Russia and weren’t even able to speak the language properly any more.

So it was with great astonishment that I discovered that Uncle Peter was first and foremost a real Russian. He had a good understanding of its everyday life, customs, and manners; and the very diverse layers of the population. He could express himself in the popular vernacular in striking fashion—it was as if he was seeing Russia in front of himself, a Russia that he loved passionately. In spite of a certain, as it seemed to me, idealization of the Russian people, he was much more sober than the Paris emigrants in his views on the future possibilities for Russia.

I found him in bed suffering from pneumonia. At the time he was living in the town of Bromley, near London, in a small cottage with his wife, daughter—who

¹¹ Prince Peter Sviatopolk-Mirsky, Minister of the Interior in the tsarist government in 1904, attempted some mild reforms, referred to as a “political spring.”



Peter Kropotkin and his family lived in this house at 6 Crescent Road, Bromley (southeast London) from 1894 to 1907. A commemorative plaque was installed in 1989.

was then 17 years old, and Marie, a French maid about whom I will say more below.

He eagerly questioned me about Russia, but not in the manner of the Paris emigrants, who were more interested in banquets in Petersburg and the latest gossip in the capital. He asked about the peasants—their customs and what they talked about, he asked about students, and about the pomeshchiks [rural gentry] and their lifestyle. And while he displayed an enthusiastic love for the peasantry, he also had a tolerant attitude towards the pomeshchik milieu, for he knew it well and so was not inclined to depict it in exclusively dark colours.

He told me that it had always been his dream to return to Russia and publish a newspaper for peasants. Unfortunately he was unable to carry out this wish. Such a newspaper would have been both interesting and accessible to the people. For he said that when he writes, it is always with the thought in mind that what he writes should be “useful to us.”

This was said by someone who was an internationalist in the broadest sense of the word, someone who was closely connected with the revolutionary movement throughout the whole of Europe. And by a quirk of fate, almost all of his books were written in either French or English—even his own memoirs!^[12]

His spoken language was wonderful—lively, vivid, and clear. Our highly cultured emigrants and ex-prisoners spoke in that manner, for example Vera Zasulich,^[13] but these people had not long been separated from Russia. His speech was quite alien to the inarticulate language, larded with foreign and invented words, with which our intelligentsia disgraced and disgraces itself both orally and in print.

His daughter Sasha, born and raised in England, did not speak Russian very well in 1905, but P. A. and his wife persisted in talking to her in that language.

¹² As noted in footnote #1, Kropotkin’s memoirs were written in Russian but first published in English translation. The original Russian manuscript was discovered among his papers after his death.

¹³ A Narodnik-terrorist in her youth, Vera Zasulich (1849–1919) later became one of the first Russian social-democrats.

During my visit to P. A. the Gapon saga was transpiring in Peterburg.^[14] The English newspapers covered all the events in detail and cited Gapon's proclamations. P. A., sick and bed-ridden, was unusually excited; he read the English newspapers to me in Russian (I didn't know English), and it was imperceptible that he was translating. He was so successful at finding the right words for Gapon's fiery proclamations, that later, when I was able to read them in Russian, I realized that the words were the same as the ones I had heard from uncle in Bromley. "Just wait, now it will be Moscow's turn!" said P. A. He evidently expected an insurrection in Moscow.

During these days P. A.'s house was besieged by countless numbers of reporters, demanding an interview about the Russian events. He refused to receive them, and all they got from P. A. was a brief note he wrote in front of me in pencil: "Down with the Romanoffs!"

I had brought with me and handed over to my uncle a thick packet of letters, written by my father and him and dating as far back as their childhood years. There were also notebooks with their adolescent diaries. On the first day of my arrival P. A. immersed himself feverishly in reading them; his whole childhood and youth passed before his eyes while reading these records of the past. The old man, sick and living as an exile in a foreign land, saw himself and his family and friends in Moscow on Levshinsky Lane,^[15] in the country, and in the Pages' Corps, after 30 years of life abroad and more than half a century from the time of his childhood.

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My next visit to P. A. was in 1909 in the London suburb of Highgate. Like my previous visit, this was during the winter. I found my uncle to be in good health—cheerful, but preoccupied. The cause of his concern I found out later from his letters: he wanted to send his daughter Sasha, already 20 years old, from England to Russia. I escorted her to Russia in the spring of 1909, where she spent time in various places until late autumn.

Uncle's life style involved following a regular work schedule. He spent whole days alone in his study, surrounded by a mass of books, and appeared only at meal time.

Once a week, on Sundays, he received anyone who

¹⁴ The charismatic priest Georgi Gapon (1870--1906) was a popular working-class leader during the early stages of the 1905 Russian revolution.

¹⁵ Actually Small Levshinsky Lane, N° 4. The building later became the home of the Kropotkin Museum (1921--1939).

wanted to see him. These visitors were a quite diverse, even ill-assorted, bunch: Russian emigrants and students, Russian upper class tourists, artists, and anarchists. The anarchists included French, Italian, and English, many of whom at that time were enthralled by his book **Fields, Factories and Workshops**. This work, along with those of John Ruskin, had inspired something in the nature of a social movement directed towards village life.

P. A. was very fond of music and sometimes played the piano in the living room quite proficiently.

When P. A. wasn't busy working or preoccupied, he was extraordinarily cheerful, loved to joke and laugh. In fact he was unusually lively, running up and down the stairs and through the rooms. At the time he was 68 years old, but other than his grey hair and beard, he bore almost none of the signs of old age: he was a solidly-built, active person with a healthy complexion and lively, youthful, very beautiful dark blue eyes that sometimes seemed almost black.

The volume of his correspondence was enormous; everyday he was brought a packet of letters worthy of some kind of institution, with letters from all corners of the globe, in all languages, and with the most unusual postage stamps.

In his external manner, P. A. was a refined, courteous person; one had a sense of his upper class, military upbringing—he was like a military man in disguise. Possessed of a quick and penetrating wit, in his day he had also been an exceptional dancer and equestrian.

He was always courteous to the people around him, and in interacting with women, he had an old-fashioned, chivalrous manner. And he expected and demanded this sort of behaviour from everyone. But despite his "aristocratic" manner, he was an extreme democrat who believed that everyone not only should, but always could, acquire the appropriate habits for social life.

Quite typical for him were his relations with his half-servant, half-member-of-the-family, the Frenchwoman Marie. As an anarchist who was forever preaching about the innate good nature of humans, P. A. believed that criminality was the product of unfair conditions of life. In conformity with this, he accepted Marie into his home, although knowing she had frequently been caught stealing in her homeland.

Unfortunately, she did not abandon this habit in the home of P. A., who believed that living and working with high-minded people who had a simple life-style

would correct her behaviour. But he warned his visitors not to leave purses and other valuable things in the pockets of the coats they hung up by the front door.

I learned about this once when P. A., sitting with me in the dining room, suddenly jumped up and ran into the corridor, followed by angry shouting. It seems that he heard rustling and found Marie checking the pockets of my coat.

His faith in the essential goodness of human nature was so great that for many years he put up with an incorrigible thief in his home, a thief who frequently embarrassed him in front of his guests. And Marie loved P. A. like her father.

The good nature and lenience of P. A. did not impede his hatred and hostility towards anything he considered harmful to the development of society. Any sort of violation of the freedom of the individual, any kind of narrow-mindedness, dogmatism, complacency, ignorance, and prejudice did not, it would seem, have a more fervent enemy than P. A. He had the temperament of a fighter—audacious, militant, and passionate.

Unfettered knowledge, constructive criticism, resourcefulness, mutual aid, and exchange of information—these were the means which he advocated, both in his books and in his everyday life, for the achievement of a better life. Sustained passionate struggle—“permanent revolution”—against any sort of oppression, intolerance, and discrimination—this was the path he chose and which he followed the whole of his long life.

I recall how once, while sitting with my uncle in the dining room, we heard knocking at the front door. P. A. went out to open it and immediately I heard his angry voice and some kind of commotion. I went out to the entrance hallway and saw a sturdy Englishman, a stranger, who had opened the door and put his foot so that P. A. couldn't close it. P. A. was beside himself, showering the Englishman with profanity and trying to push him back towards the street. But this imperturbable character continued to hold open the door, not entering, but not drawing back either. Things began to take such a turn that I feared a possible scuffle and, although not understanding what the matter was about, I grabbed a stout walking stick from the stand at the entrance. Finally the Englishman retreated, and P.



Peter Kropotkin and his daughter Sasha.

A. slammed the door after him while continuing to swear.

It took P. A. a long time to regain his composure, but finally he answered my questions and said that this was some kind of government agent delivering a notice, and instead of putting it in the mailbox, was trying to bring it into the house without sufficient reason. This was a violation of one of the elements of civil freedom—the inviolability of the home. So now I learned in practice what I knew previously only from reading: a citizen of England had the right to shoot anyone who, without sufficient

grounds, tried to enter their home without their consent. And “sufficient grounds” are so difficult to obtain in this free country, that government agents often prefer to wait on the street to arrest a criminal rather than go to the trouble of applying for permission to enter a home.

Now I understood why P. A., despite many limitations on his activities, was willing to live in England for such a long time. He had been expelled from two republics—Switzerland and France—for almost nothing, and in the latter country he had even served a three-year prison term.

P. A. and I talked a lot about Russia, about politics, and about art; he told stories about his relatives and recounted events from his rich and variegated life.

In our discussion of art, P. A. had this to say more or less about Tolstoy's **Resurrection**: “If I could write verses and novels, I wouldn't do anything else. We scholars and journalists are less effective at influencing people than a talented poet. It's through art that society can be brought closer to our ideals most efficaciously.”

There are scholars who are constantly telling us: “That's been proven,” “that question has been settled,” “this has finally been established once and for all,” etc. It's as if these dull people, with mediocre talents, are carrying around with themselves a kit with all their acquired knowledge; in each situation in life they pull out the appropriate items and stick under our nose various schemes, theories, and “low truths.” But these are not the work of their own intellect, but rather homegrown or foreign erudition.

Peter Alexeyevich literally hated such people—“learned fools,” doctrinaires, and dogmatists. For him no au-

thorities should be accepted on faith. When he was speaking, it seemed to you that he had only just arrived at the point of view he was putting forward—you could see the play of his mind, his critical sense. But at the same time he was a person who was distinguished by the depth of his knowledge, educated in many disciplines and an important scholar in the fields of geography and geology.

His erudition wasn't a bag that he lugged around with him, but a grindstone on which he sharpened his wit, his capacity for criticism.

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I visited P. A. again in London once more in 1911. He was already 69, but was still spry, lively, and passionate—a quick-witted man with a capacity for laughter, anger, jests, or a heart-to-heart talk.

Of course this was, in significant measure, because he lived in England, with its cultured and healthy way of life, and because fate had sent him in the person of his wife a real friend who looked after him and took upon herself many of the burdens of life. In Russia, with its endemic slovenliness, P. A. would have been denied a “mundane” and easygoing life, and would have soon been “eaten up” by both his friends and his enemies.

Finally, in 1917, P. A.'s dreams were realized when revolution flared up in Russia, toppling the old order that he so hated. He returned to Moscow.

Living in a different city, I met my uncle infrequently during the next few years. I saw him twice in Moscow and visited him on three occasions in Dmitrov, where he took up continuous residence.

I was able to talk to him only in a superficial way, as there were always other people around in Moscow, and generally he was reluctant to speak openly in these days. It seemed to me he was having difficulty adjusting to

his new surroundings and was somewhat bewildered.

His relationship to Soviet power had two sides, in my opinion. On the one hand, he welcomed the audacity of the Russian Revolution in smashing the old order; on the other hand, as an anarchist he couldn't reconcile himself with the centralized policies and “old-style” methods of the government, which ended in trampling on freedom, independence, and the human personality.

He could not reconcile himself to the destruction of emerging elements of a new society, elements that he regarded as always advancing the situation of humanity, namely, local self-government and free cooperation.

He lived in poverty, although it was not the extreme form that was common enough in those days. He was helped by the cooperators. He never complained about shortages, high prices, etc. Almost everyone did in those days, but he understood that hardship was inevitable in revolutionary times.

I recall my thoughts at the coffin of P. A., when it was lying in the hall of the former Nobles' Club, the very place where he made his first entrance into society as a child. I remembered his fiery speeches and the spell-binding gaze of his beautiful eyes. I remembered his love for life with its joys and beauty, and his unshakable faith in the fundamental good nature of people, even people like Marie and the intrusive Englishman. For the whole of his long life he honourably and courageously followed his own road, never deviating from it, but at the same time never being a narrow-minded fanatic.

P. A. was above all like a far-off guiding star, giving off light to guide us towards distant goals as we toil along thorny and blood-soaked paths.

Nikolai Kropotkin

Translation and editing by Malcolm Archibald

Translator's Note: Nikolai Kropotkin's article was first published in the *Bulletin of the All-Russian Public Committee to Perpetuate the Memory of P. A. Kropotkin*, N° 2 (December 9, 1924), Moscow, pp. 12-20. Biographical information about Nikolai was supplied by Anatoly Dubovik.