
Tolstoy and the Škarvan Case

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Early in February 1895 Tolstoy received a letter from his devoted Slovak disciple, Dušan Makovický, informing him that a young Slovak army doctor, Albert Škarvan (1869-1926), shortly before completing his conscript service in the Austro-Hungarian army had, on grounds of conscience, refused further service and was now under arrest. Through Makovický, Tolstoy was already acquainted with Škarvan's name; he knew the young man had come under the spell of Tolstoyan ideas. But this influence had not been strong enough to prevent him from joining the army (though as a noncombatant, it is true) when, on completing his medical studies at the University of Innsbruck towards the end of 1894, he had received his call-up notice.

Replying to Makovický, Tolstoy admitted to being excited by the news of Škarvan's resolute action. "When I learn about deeds of this kind," he wrote, "I always feel a strong admixture of apprehension, exultation, compassion, and joy." He was fearful lest such action should stem from a love of notoriety or egotism. But if it reflected the divine truth, then indeed it was a matter for rejoicing even if "the man were to get burnt" in the process. "I hope, I am sure, that our dear Škarvan has acted as he has acted because he cannot act in any other way." In that case God would be manifesting himself through him and then any hardships he had to suffer would be easy to endure. "Please," Tolstoy concluded, "write and tell me everything you know [about Škarvan]. Can we help him in some way? And give him my love" (February 10, 1895; *PSS* 68: 29).¹

Meanwhile, in northern Hungary (present-day Slovakia) the Škarvan case pursued its course. When Škarvan took his momentous step his regi-

ment was stationed in the town of Kaschau (today Košice). His initial defiance of the military had occurred on February 7, and he remained in confinement of one or another sort until his final release from prison on October 25. The army authorities had not at first known quite what to make of the case or what to do with this strange young man. The case indeed was unprecedented since in Austria-Hungary only the peasant sect of Nazarenes objected on principle to military service. They were sentenced to repeated terms of lengthy imprisonment. This fate now hung over Škarvan's head: a kindly army major was to warn him that, as an educated man used to the comforts of life, he would never be able to endure such treatment (Brock 1991, 237).

After a few weeks the military authorities decided to send Škarvan under escort to Vienna. There he was placed in the psychiatric ward of one of that city's leading hospitals.² After keeping him under examination for nine weeks the doctors decided unanimously that Škarvan, however odd his views might appear to many people, was undoubtedly sane. Thus the hopes entertained by the military of consigning him to a lunatic asylum for good were frustrated. He was then taken back to Kaschau and soon put on trial there.

On the way to the Imperial capital the Vienna express had stopped at a station near where Makovický had a country medical practice. The tolerant military escort allowed the latter to travel for several stops with Škarvan. Among various mementos brought back from a recent visit to Russia Makovický was able to show a photo of Tolstoy to Škarvan, who felt immensely encouraged by this glimpse of "grandpa, as we used to call him among ourselves," as he adds in his *Memoirs* (Škarvan, *Zápisky* 66-67 and *Moi otkaz* 77).³ In the psychiatric ward a little later Škarvan experienced another reinvigorating contact with Tolstoy when a Ruthenian acquaintance of his, named Shevchuk, then living in Vienna and an almost daily visitor at the hospital, brought him a copy of the freshly appeared story *Khoziain i rabotnik* [Master and Man]. Reading it, his spirits revived. "The labourer Nikita put me to shame by his sacrificial life and his beautiful death. As I read the story, I felt ashamed of my meanness of spirit. A good book is often a help in life" (*Zápisky*, 74-75 and *Moi otkaz*, 88).

Back again in the barracks of Kaschau Škarvan finally went on trial before a military court, which on July 4 sentenced him to lose his medical diploma (the MD gave the right to practice medicine) and at the same time to serve four months in a military prison, including a month in solitary confinement and two days each month on a bread-and-water punishment diet. This may sound like harsh treatment. But compared to what the courts meted out to the unhappy Nazarenes (happy Nazarenes Tolstoy might have been inclined to say since they were enabled to suffer intensely for their beliefs), Škarvan's fate was comparatively mild. He had been an officer in the joint Austro-Hungarian army; and in the Habsburg monarchy that counted for something, even in a military prison.

Škarvan indeed had felt in fine fettle as he returned from Vienna to face the music. In his *Memoirs* he recalls the scene: "It was then spring . . . warm, sunny, joyful spring. There were flowers in bloom [in the barracks garden], and the air was scented, and the birds were warbling all around . . . What joy it was to be alive!" His conscript colleagues, their term of service completed, had all gone home by now. But a new batch of young conscript doctors had taken their place. These now greeted Škarvan warmly: no doubt they were curious to see this peculiar fellow about whom the senior officers must have told them. The young men laughed together as if without a care in the world. "No one," Škarvan concluded, "looking at our jolly gathering would have imagined that, on the threshold of prison, one could enjoy oneself in such an almost childlike way. And indeed I have wondered myself that it could be so" (*Zápisky*, 93 and *Moi otkaz*, 105-106).

Even after entering jail Škarvan kept in good spirits, despite his grim surroundings and the Spartan lifestyle to which he was now subjected. The chapters of his *Memoirs* in which he describes life in an Austro-Hungarian military prison, especially his two weeks "in solitary" constitute a valuable contribution to prison literature—alas, inaccessible to those who do not read Russian or Slovak.⁴

For the spring and most of the summer of 1895 Škarvan's name does not appear in Tolstoy's

correspondence but Slovak and other visitors may have brought news of him to Iasnaia Poliana during this period. Or it may have been that Tolstoy, with his mind filled with pressing matters nearer at home, including several Russian conscientious objectors in jail or awaiting trial, may have let the Škarvan case escape temporarily from his memory, though he was certainly aware that the young man remained locked up. But early in September we find him asking Makovický: "How is dear Škarvan getting on? Do you or his other friends—or his mother—see him? And is he in good spirits?" He has to think of his soul, Tolstoy went on, if he is to survive his ordeal. "And that is going to be difficult to do both because he is young and strong and because he is a physician so that all his youthful energy is now directed toward the body. Anyhow please keep me informed about everything you know about him. I know already what the papers write about him"—most of it slander! But that should not disturb Škarvan.

Tolstoy wanted to hear exactly how the young man spent his time in jail. "Does he read? Does he work?" The Russian asked Makovický to pass on to Škarvan one piece of advice: he should so organize his prison day as to divide his time, so far as possible, equally between intellectual and physical pursuits. For instance, let him learn a foreign language; let him practise a manual craft. Finally, Tolstoy again asked Makovický to tell him in what way he could help Škarvan. "We his friends are a small group but we do indeed truly love him" (September 11, 1895; *PSS* 68: 175-176).⁵

It was not only in Russia but also in his own Hungary that Škarvan's "deed" had found him friends. In the Hungarian capital, Budapest, a circle of active Tolstoyans had emerged under the leadership of Eugen Heinrich Schmitt, who had begun to propagate the Tolstoyan gospel on the pages of his journal published in German, *Die Religion des Geistes* [The Religion of the Spirit].⁶ On hearing of Škarvan's trial and imprisonment, Schmitt had set to and composed an outspoken "Manifesto" protesting against the government's action. In August he sent Tolstoy a draft informing him that he intended to publish the Manifesto in his paper. Tolstoy agreed that "the idea of the

Manifesto" was excellent but, he added, "I have not been so taken with the form" that Schmitt had given it. A document of that kind should be "easily understood by persons without a literary education." Tolstoy advised his Hungarian disciple to write "simply and clearly" so as to achieve the effect he desired. He compared Schmitt's efforts on behalf of Škarvan to his own efforts on behalf of the persecuted Russian war resister, the village schoolmaster Evdokim Nikitich Drozhzhin. Their cause was one (mid-September, 1895; *PSS* 68: 177-80).⁷

But of course Tolstoy still hoped he could himself be of assistance to his young Slovak friend. Learning from Makovický toward the end of September of the exalted "spiritual state" which Škarvan had maintained throughout his imprisonment, he expressed his joy at this news and at the expectation of Škarvan's imminent release from jail. Makovický had asked the Russian if perhaps he could help Škarvan financially when he came out. And to this request Tolstoy responded a little ambiguously. "I don't myself have money available" at the moment, he wrote. "I could certainly collect some but I think it better not to have to do so" (September 29, 1895; *PSS* 68: 187-188).

For all Tolstoy's willingness to help, his potentialities as a fundraiser were not inexhaustible. A few months earlier the Doukhobor crisis had reached its climax with their solemn burning of arms on June 28-29, and the efforts of Russian Tolstoyans were now centred on campaigning on the Doukhobors' behalf. That involved heavy expenditure.

In fact, Škarvan did not require much financial assistance after leaving prison on October 25. He lived at home. His needs were simple and easily satisfied. True, he could no longer earn a living as a doctor since the annulment of his diploma took away the legal right to do this. (He did indeed occupy his time by giving medical aid to the peasants in the surrounding countryside where there was an insufficiency of trained doctors. But he did this mostly without charging since his patients lacked the means to pay.) Škarvan's major worry concerned his old mother. But the kindly Makovický was already helping her finan-

cially while Škarvan was in jail, and he continued to send her money after the latter's release.

On October 16 Tolstoy wrote to his disciple, E. I. Popov: "Today I got a nice letter from Škarvan" (October 16-17, 1895; *PSS* 68: 218).⁸ A week later, writing to Makovický he described Škarvan's letter, written from jail, in enthusiastic terms. "It provided one of the most joyful moments of my life." From reading it he drew some transcendental conclusions about the meaning of life. He felt the letter somehow proved "that God exists and that the spirit residing within me is part of Him, that I am a son of God..." "Škarvan's letter," he concluded, "made that kind of impression on me. I intend to answer his letter today. But if I don't succeed in doing so, please give him my love" (October 24-25, 1895; *PSS* 68: 234-235).

It was another three weeks before Tolstoy got down to a reply to Škarvan's letter that had caused him, as he now told him, so much heartfelt joy. He had meanwhile been ill, Tolstoy explained, and that was the main cause of his continued silence. From the way Škarvan wrote he had at once recognized in his young friend "a brother in spirit," "a new found traveling companion along the way." He admired his steadfastness in his ordeal and his courageous spirit and his energy in pursuing the good. Tolstoy's fears that Škarvan might give way in prison had been, he now saw, without foundation. He felt they shared the same outlook on life, and he urged Škarvan to continue to follow his conscience whatever the consequences.

Tolstoy ended his letter with three requests. First, he asked Škarvan his opinion of Schmitt and his journal. What do people in general think of him and how far does his influence extend? "Putting aside his often angry tone and hurried style and the bombast and verbosity of much of his writing, I see in him a sincere and very talented man and, most important of all, a person who is not a materialist but a believer in spiritual values and, therefore, one who is akin to us." Not only Tolstoy but many others were to have their doubts about this somewhat enigmatic Hungarian (of German background). It shows the confidence Tolstoy already felt in Škarvan that he should make these enquiries; of course he knew, too, that

the latter, living not so very far away from Budapest, would be in a position to give him a reliable answer.

Next Tolstoy asked Škarvan if he would be able to translate some of his current writings into German, especially such items as could not then appear in Russia. He must already have been aware of Škarvan's linguistic ability: a master of at least three foreign languages the latter was eventually to translate *inter alia* Tolstoy's *Resurrection* into his Slovak mother tongue.⁹

The most intriguing item came in the last paragraph of Tolstoy's letter. There he urged Škarvan to tell him all he could about his family, his friends, and his present way of life. "It all touches me very closely because indeed you are very dear to me." In particular—"if it won't be disagreeable to do so"—please do tell me all about "your Viennese lady-friend [*venska dama*]" (November 14, 1895; *PSS* 68: 254-66).¹⁰

The lady in Škarvan's life, who had aroused Tolstoy's interest (the novelist was by no means dead in him and romance still had its charms for the ageing writer), was Countess Adela Mazzuchelli, the 37-year old widow of an Austrian general of North Italian ancestry. The two had met in the psychiatric ward of the Vienna hospital in which Škarvan had been temporarily placed for examination. The countess came there frequently to visit a noncommissioned officer suffering from mental illness with whom she was (or so she thought) in love. But the young widow, immediately she saw Škarvan, transferred her affections to the handsome young Slovak. "I was lost," she told him, "you have brought me back to life and now I am as if born again. I feel indeed like a sixteen-year old girl" (Winkler 79). Škarvan, whose fiancée had recently broke off their engagement as a consequence of his incarceration, soon came to reciprocate the countess's love.

In the Slovak version of his Memoirs, written nearly a decade later, Škarvan relates how on June 10 the infatuated countess was at the Vienna railway station to meet him as he was on his way back from the psychiatric clinic to his regiment in Kaschau. Once again the escort was a kindly man. He allowed the countess to sit in their reserved carriage, even discreetly withdrawing to a neigh-

bouring carriage to allow the loving couple to enjoy privacy. The countess got out at Marchegg, a few stops down the line. "We felt," Škarvan writes, "in an exalted, almost religious mood. Valuing each moment, we talked about everything that was upon our minds. That journey has remained indeed one of my most cherished memories." As farewell was said, Škarvan goes on, "I can see her as she stood on the platform weeping . . . like a child . . . with her big, serious eyes and her hair ruffled by the strong wind that was blowing. The scene lasted only a few seconds before the train began to move" (*Zápisky*, 88-89).¹¹

But that parting was not yet for good. The countess soon came to Kaschau where she became a frequent visitor at the military prison after Škarvan had been sentenced. Indeed she was waiting for him there when on July 4 the guard brought him from court to the jail. That meeting, Škarvan recalled, was like "when the sun shows itself unexpectedly through the clouds and the landscape, so gray a minute before, now shines with a multitude of living colours . . . How my spirit rejoiced!" (*Zápisky*, 111).

Doubtless the countess was able to help Škarvan through his months of incarceration. But, as Tolstoy was to learn, problems arose as soon as he returned to freedom. Škarvan was to marry three times. His first two marriages—to an Italian and Hungarian respectively—were disastrous. But he found domestic happiness in middle age when he married Margita Sokolová, who survived him. Like Tolstoy himself, Škarvan obviously encountered difficulties with squaring his aspiration for Christian asceticism with his own strong sexual drive. Perhaps the twenty-four-year-old Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, not yet an Old Bolshevik, puts his finger on the dilemma faced by Škarvan, whom he met in 1897 while visiting the community Vladimir Chertkov had set up at Purleigh in England. "Several times," writes Bonch-Bruevich, "I felt like opening his head to discover what he was thinking about. I could not rid myself of the idea that behind the mask of Tolstoyan humility and search for Christian truth he thought—only about women." Bonch-Bruevich recalls how one day "a tall, finely proportioned, golden-haired young English girl arrived at the community.

Škarvan gazed at her with his intent and far from Platonic glance as if he was penetrating her through and through" (quoted in Winkler 86).¹²

With respect to Countess Adela Škarvan decided reluctantly that a future together did not hold out the prospect of happiness for either of them. As late as May 1896 he was still consulting with Tolstoy in the matter. "Your romance with her," the latter wrote, "is very moving." He saw their relationship as "a drama"—a tragedy—involving two persons with quite different characters. (May 2, 1896; *PSS* 68: 95-96).¹³

Tolstoy was always pleased to receive Škarvan's letters; he seems to have enjoyed giving his young friend advice not only about his love life but also, of course, about the condition of his soul as well as his lifestyle. Earlier in the year, Tolstoy had sought news of him from Makovický: "What's happened to Škarvan? Where is he and what is he doing? How is his spiritual state? Please tell me everything about him." Then he added: "I find his Memoirs very valuable: people will read them with much profit" (February 22, 1896; *PSS* 69: 45-46). In fact, Škarvan early in December 1895 had sent part of his Memoirs to Tolstoy who, after he had read with much satisfaction the sections sent, passed them on to Chertkov for eventual publication. Further installments followed. Škarvan presumably composed his work in Russian. But since he had not yet acquired the fluency in that language that he later achieved—he was also a novice writer—Chertkov probably had to do a considerable amount of editing. At any rate it was not until 1898 that the Memoirs appeared at Chertkov's Russian-language press in England (Mráz 166-167).¹⁴

As Tolstoy explained to Škarvan: "Your Memoirs have especially touched me since at this very moment our young friend the painter, [Leopold] Sulerzhitskii, is incarcerated in the psychiatric ward of Moscow's military hospital for refusing army service." He, too, had written an account of his time under arrest, and Tolstoy promised to send Škarvan a copy. Though Tolstoy did not allude to this, Sulerzhitskii, we know, was soon to yield to family pressure and give up his resistance to entering the armed forces, Tolstoy showing

remarkable understanding of the young man's dilemma and telling him he must do what his conscience told him was right. Undoubtedly with Sulerzhitskii's case in mind, Tolstoy a little hesitantly now assured Škarvan that if, as seemed likely, he was called up for service again he would retain his undiminished "respect and love" were he to opt to obey the call to rejoin the army (December 16, 1895; *PSS* 68: 277-278).¹⁵

Škarvan, however, was made of sterner stuff than Sulerzhitskii was. (Or perhaps external circumstances made it easier for him to maintain his resistant stance?) In June 1896, shortly before he was due to report again for another spell of military duty, Škarvan had received an invitation from Chertkov to visit Russia and money to cover the expenses of the journey. The Austrian authorities, glad probably to be rid of this difficult subject, allowed him to leave the country despite his conscript situation. Next month Tolstoy and his wife welcomed Škarvan to the hospitality of Iasnaia Poliana where he spent part of his time until in February 1897 the Russian authorities expelled him as an undesirable alien (Winkler 82-85; also letter from September 30, 1896; *PSS* 69: 155).¹⁶ (He had been active, along with Russian Tolstoyans, in campaigning on behalf of the Doukhobors.) From Russia he moved on to England beginning an unhappy exodus, filled increasingly with longing for his Slovak homeland. Exile came to an end only in 1910 when the Habsburg authorities granted him an amnesty, at the same time returning his medical diploma so that he could now set up a country practice within view of his beloved Mount Kriván.

1910 was also the year of Tolstoy's death. The two men, though they continued to correspond (Škarvan confiding some of his marital troubles to "grandpa"), gradually drifted apart. The Slovak acknowledged his debt to the Russian seer, who had led him out of spiritual darkness up into the light. But, while remaining an adherent of nonviolence, he had eventually succeeded in shaping a *Weltanschauung* of his own. The precise shape of Škarvan's later philosophy of life can only emerge after later scholarly study of his extensive correspondence and diaries located in

Slovak and Czech archives. As for Tolstoy, Škarvan had played at one point in time a special role in his bodyguard of war resisters. Others were to take that place without, however, ousting the Slovak from Tolstoy's affections or obliterating him from his memory.

Notes

1. Makovický was Tolstoy's personal physician at Iasnaia Poliana from 1905 to 1910. For Makovický, see Winkler; also Kolafa. So far no comprehensive biography of Škarvan has been published. But see the anthology of Škarvan's writings edited by Chmel; also the chapter entitled "Tolstoyism, Cultural Nationalism, and Conscientious Objection: A Slovak Case Study" in my *Freedom from War: Nonsectarian Pacifism 1814-1914*, 230-246. A third prominent Slovak Tolstoyan of this period was the well-known *littérateur* Ivan Hálek; also a doctor like Makovický and Škarvan, who later moved over from Tolstoyan nonviolence to Marxism and eventually became a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. See his *Od Tolstého k Marxovi*, esp. 13, 54-58; also Tkadlečková, 209-214.
2. In my account, *op. cit.*, 238, I stated erroneously that this was a military hospital. It was a civilian institution.
3. Chmel aptly contrasts the two Slovak Tolstoyans' characters and their differing relationship to Tolstoy. Makovický, he writes, was the Master's "unquestioning, humble, and steadfast disciple," whereas Škarvan, always something of an exhibitionist, was a Tolstoyan "impulsive, lyrical, and individualistic"—and sometimes a critic of Tolstoy's ideas. Indeed, he always claimed that his refusal of military service had stemmed not so much from his desire to follow Tolstoy's teachings as from his personal revulsion from the tyranny of militarism. No one, he said, had prompted him to take that momentous step; none of his friends had even known about his decision beforehand. See Chmel's epilogue to his 1991 re-edition of Škarvan's Slovak Memoirs, 218, 219; also Škarvan, *Moi otkaz*, Appendix 2, XIII.
4. My translation of these chapters from Slovak into English is scheduled for publication in 2002.
5. Škarvan was very close to his mother, a widow who kept a shop in a small town in the Slovak highlands. While his father had been Czech by origin, his mother was of Slovak peasant stock. It was she who had brought Albert up to be a conscious Slovak patriot.
6. For Schmitt, see my "Tolstoyism and the Hungarian Peasant."
7. See also letter to M. V. Alekhin from September 4, 1895 (*PSS* 68:154). For Drozhzhin, see my *Freedom from War*, 212, 213, 376.
8. Popov was the author of a—rather uncritical—biography of Drozhzhin.
9. *Vzkriesenie*. Makovický's family, who were staunch Slovak nationalists (and fairly wealthy), supported financially the publication of Tolstoy's works in Slovak. We may note that Škarvan also translated *Resurrection* into Hungarian for serial publication in *Magyar Hírlap*.
10. For further enquiries of the same kind concerning Schmitt, directed this time to Makovický, see letter to Makovický from February 22, 1896 (*PSS* 69: 45-46).
11. The Russian version, *Moi otkaz*, 98-99, is briefer and less vivid.
12. Unfortunately I have not been able to trace these quotations in Bonch-Bruevich's writings.
13. See also his letter to Škarvan from December 16, 1895 (*PSS* 68: 277-278).
14. Mráz suggests that Škarvan may have written some sections of his Memoirs in German. At any rate, he composed the Memoirs on his own before leaving for Russia and not, as some writers have asserted, at the prompting of Russian friends after he had gone into exile. Škarvan himself claimed that the idea of writing an account of his arrest and imprisonment first occurred to him at Kaschau before his release. He had wanted thereby to refute some of the erroneous accounts of his behaviour that had appeared in the Austro-Hungarian press. Later, while still at home, friends in Russia encouraged him to undertake the task. See his *Moi otkaz*, 3, 4.
15. For Sulerzhitskii, see my *Freedom from War*, 214, 215, 377.
16. Škarvan seems to have feared that Austria-Hungary

might ask for his extradition as a draft-dodger. See his *Moi otkaz*, 197.

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