

# The Whole World of Tolstoy

“Tolstoy—he’s a whole world...”

M. Gorky

## How a Meeting between an American Rabbi and Count Leo Tolstoy Resulted in the Founding of an American College

One of the stories that never fails to fascinate visitors and newcomers to Delaware Valley College in Doylestown, PA, is the account of Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf’s visit to Count Leo Tolstoy, a visit that led to the college’s founding.

Rabbi Krauskopf was not thinking about starting an agricultural school when he made his trip to Russia in the summer of 1894. His intention was to see Tsar Alexander III and offer his plan to end the persecution of the Jews in Russia by creating an agricultural homeland for the Jews in the unoccupied land in the interior. Jewish philanthropy from outside Russia would maintain the settlers until they became self-sufficient.

The Russian government’s refusal to grant Krauskopf a visa because of his religion created a flap in relations between the U.S. and Russia. On a visit to the White House, Krauskopf conferred with President Grover Cleveland and Secretary of State Walter Gresham, who instructed the U.S. representative in Russia to intervene on Krauskopf’s behalf. A bill was even introduced in Congress to abrogate the treaty between the U.S. and Russia that guaranteed each country’s citizens the right to travel within each other’s country if Rabbi Krauskopf were not permitted entry.

In the end, the Russians allowed Krauskopf entry, but he did not have an audience with Alexander III, who was in the Crimea during this time. It is difficult to imagine the xenophobic and ultra-Orthodox Alexander granting Krauskopf an interview. After all, he had unleashed the pogroms of the early 1890s by rescinding the reforms and liberalizing measures of his father Alexander II.

The U.S. Minister to Russia at the time was the distinguished scholar and statesman Andrew Dickson White. White, who had served as the first president of

Cornell University and would later represent the U.S. as Ambassador to Germany from 1897 to 1902, was best known for his book *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*. During this time, the U.S. delegation to Russia was not as prestigious as it is today. Even though he was unable to meet political dignitaries, White had plenty of opportunity to make contact with literary and intellectual figures. White arranged for Krauskopf’s visit to Tolstoy’s manor house at Yasnaya Polyana in early July. Tolstoy, whose lifestyle little resembled that of a count, was busily engaged in haymaking and did not have much time to spare for Krauskopf’s visit. Nonetheless, he agreed to a meeting.

Krauskopf and his traveling companion, a young lawyer named L. M. Bramson, arrived late in the afternoon. The wagon driver taking them from the train station to the manor was unsure where Tolstoy lived. Feeling a bit anxious, Bramson stopped to ask a peasant laborer standing by the road for directions. “Hey, Peter, can you tell me where Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy lives?” he shouted. Much to his chagrin, Bramson recognized that it was Tolstoy himself. Tolstoy was good-natured about the mistake and, after introductions, invited them to sit in his garden. Bramson and Krauskopf had made elaborate notes to guide their conversation with Tolstoy, but it did not go as either had planned. Tolstoy did most of the talking.

It is clear from what Krauskopf says in *My Visit to Tolstoy*, the series of five discourses written in 1911 about his trip to Russia,<sup>1</sup> that Tolstoy made an enormous impression on Krauskopf:

From the moment I first gazed upon him he held me captive, and, by a strange psychic power, he has held me enthralled ever since...I had often wondered how a Moses, and Isaiah, a Jeremiah, a Socrates, looked and talked, denounced and dreamed; the moment I saw and heard Tolstoy, I knew.

After a frugal dinner, throughout which the conversation amounted to little more than polite banter, it still was not clear whether Krauskopf would have the opportunity to discuss the urgent matter that had brought him there in the first place, namely, the situation of the Jews in Russia. Tolstoy's manner changed, however, when Krauskopf presented him a letter he was personally delivering from a "distinguished professor" he had met in St. Petersburg. The man had recently been dismissed from the University of St. Petersburg because of an essay he had published called *The Ethics of the Talmud*. In his account, Krauskopf did not name the mysterious professor, but in Bramson's 1944 recollections of the visit, he identifies him as V. S. Solovyov. Solovyov's theology espoused a philo-Semitism unusual for an Orthodox Christian. He had written about Judaism and the Talmud.<sup>2</sup>

A much more meaningful discussion ensued as Tolstoy and his guests went for a walk after dinner. Sympathetic as he was, Tolstoy thought that Krauskopf's ideas to help the Jews of Russia would come to nothing. At length, they came to the "Poverty Tree," where peasants would come to Tolstoy to seek help. Tolstoy invited his guests to sit with him while he silently reflected.

Though Krauskopf was in awe of Tolstoy, it is also clear from his account that Krauskopf found some of Tolstoy's opinions irritating. For instance, Tolstoy took a dim view of American public education; he thought Americans were ruled by gold and not the shining republic they thought themselves to be. Out of politeness, Krauskopf did not argue with his host, but he did excuse himself to pen a note to Andrew White in St. Petersburg who was worried about Krauskopf's safety.

When he came back, Tolstoy asked Krauskopf whether he had read his book *What Then Must We Do?* Krauskopf, embarrassed that he had not read it, told him how much he had enjoyed *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Much to Krauskopf's surprise, Tolstoy dismissed these works as mere chaff to amuse gilded youth and idle women. Tolstoy wanted the world to read his serious non-fiction work. In this text, a revolu-

tionary manifesto almost, Tolstoy put forth his idea that only through the return to the soil and the simple life would the oppressed and persecuted become free. (It is interesting to note the Krauskopf's personal copy of *What Then Must We Do?* contains a number of marked passages, clear evidence that he read it carefully at some point after his return.)

Tolstoy asked Krauskopf about the Jews that were crowded into ghettos in the large cities in the United States and urged him to take the same plan he had for the Jews of Russia and make it work in America. "Lead your young people to the farm. Start agricultural schools for them."

And there, under the Poverty Tree, Krauskopf made a solemn promise that, upon his return home, he

### *Tolstoy and Krauskopf*



(From the 1946 celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Delaware Valley College.)

would establish an agricultural school for "Jewish lads, and other lads." What had started out as a mission to help the Jews of Russia led to the founding of the National Farm School a scant two years later.

## The Lost Work

Last night in a dream—I wrote a Tolstoy epic—set in my time—  
 all the details—exact—just right. There was an entire chapter  
 about the dull sound of marbles rolling across the linoleum floor.  
 Then—the desire for water became a recurring theme which led  
 to some confusion about the sex scenes—many of which took place  
 in frothy hot tubs at a Motel 6 just outside of town. I had to  
 rewrite—forever—the part where Death showed up at the corner bar—  
 she finally wore a black satin gown—drank warm tap water from a goblet.  
 The protagonist’s devotion to aspirin did not go unnoticed—that—  
 along with his compulsion to frequently change the furnace filters.  
 When the terrorists arrived, they arrived unexpectedly—as expected—  
 yet—who would think they would wear the various faces of my cousins?  
 The epilogue ended up being far too long—much longer than the book itself—  
 which caused me—to remember—how much—I wanted to know the end.

-Timothy J. Nolan



After his return, Krauskopf wrote to Tolstoy on several occasions and even sent him the early annual reports of the school to show the progress being made. His letters were never acknowledged, however, and Krauskopf was certain that as a *persona non grata* the censors never let his letters through to Tolstoy.

Rabbi Krauskopf set off to meet a famous man. He met an even greater one instead. In the process, Krauskopf became a more impassioned social reformer and humanitarian.

In 1896, Krauskopf bought a hundred-acre farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, just outside Doylestown and about thirty miles north of Philadelphia. He arranged for construction of a small classroom building, hired two faculty members, enrolled six students, and started The National Farm School.

Rabbi Krauskopf died in 1923. By then, The National Farm School provided a three-year program combining academics and farm work. It stayed that way through World War II, becoming a junior college in 1945 and adding the senior year of undergraduate studies in 1948. At that time it became the National

Agricultural College. In 1960 it was renamed Delaware Valley College of Science and Agriculture, which was shortened in 1989 to Delaware Valley College.

Today, Rabbi Krauskopf’s school has expanded to 550 acres and has a full-time enrollment of about 1,600 students. Majors are offered in arts and sciences, education, business administration, criminal justice, pre-professional studies, and, of course, agriculture. Only about a dozen private colleges in the United States still have working farms as part of the educational curriculum, agriculture having been ceded by American higher education, in large part, to large public land-grant institutions.

Delaware Valley’s farm includes approximately sixty milk cows, forty beef cattle, fifty sheep, fifty pigs, and fifty-five horses—fifteen of which comprise a breeding herd of Standardbreds. In addition, sixty acres are devoted to apples, peaches, various vegetables, flowers, and research on topics such as crop rotation and manure use.

The college that had its unlikely start when a rabbi spoke with the author of *War and Peace* has not forgot-

ten its origins. When Joseph Krauskopf died, he gave the college his extensive collection of books and expressed the hope that a reproduction of his home library be built to house them. The trustees followed his wishes, and The Joseph Krauskopf Memorial Library was completed in 1924. The Memorial Room in the library is an exact replica of the founder's home library.

Krauskopf was ordained at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1883 and from 1887 until his death was rabbi of the Congregation Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia. His writings include *Evolution and Judaism* (1887).

Peter Kupersmith  
Delaware Valley College

## Notes

1. *My Visit to Tolstoy: Five Discourses by Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf*, printed by Oscar Klonower in Philadelphia in 1911.

2. **Editor's Note:** In a letter to V. S. Solovyov, dated 7 August 1894, Tolstoy commented upon Krauskopf's visit:

Krauskopf turned out to be a man of very un-Christian nature, which did not however interfere with his very reasonable plan; and I, no matter how useless my sympathy may be, sympathized with him. His un-Christian nature I noted from the brochure that he gave me on the topic of "an eye for an eye." He says there that "an eye for an eye" is right, and that turning the other cheek is wrong; what is more, he says that when it comes to turning the other cheek and giving one's cloak that one should not turn one's cheek nor give away one's shirt, but instead show a fist and a knout. (*Литературное наследство*. Москва: Издательство АН СССР, 1939. Том 37/38, книга 2, стр. 274. My translation.)

Solovyov's article on the Talmud was entitled "The Talmud and the Latest Polemical Literature about It in Austria and Germany" (Талмуд и новейшая полемическая литература о нем в Австрии и Германии) (1885).



## A Response: L.N. Tolstoy's Short Story "God Sees the Truth, but Waits"

In 1975 Professor Jahn of the University of Minnesota published an article entitled "A Structural Analysis of Leo Tolstoy's 'God Sees the Truth, but Waits.'" According to Jahn, the structure of the story is determined by two significant events that are symmetrical but reveal contrasting characteristics of the protagonist, Aksyonov.

However, the contents of the story lend themselves better to a division into four episodes. Aksyonov is introduced as a happy and successful merchant who leaves home on a business trip and whose jolly disposition lasts until the morning of the next day, when he is accused by police of having murdered the merchant who occupied the hotel room next to his (he did not share the room with the other merchant, as Jahn writes. In that case it would have been unlikely that he had not noticed that his companion had been murdered). Hereafter, the second phase sets in: an official finds in Aksyonov's bag a bloody knife and arrests the frightened but innocent man. The third phase encompasses the thirty-six years he spends in a Siberian prison, during which period he considerably ages, never laughs, and turns to the Lord. Then a new group of convicts is brought in, and one of them, Makar Semyonov, is from Vladimir, like Aksyonov. Of course, Semyonov heard about the slaying of the merchant, adding that the man in whose bag the bloody knife was found was obviously the culprit; and, furthermore, that nobody else could have stuck the knife into the bag because the bag was at the head of the bed and placing it there would have awakened anyone else. Hereupon Aksyonov grows very suspicious because who other than the killer would have known the bag's location. Such a fury takes hold of Aksyonov that he can only think of revenge. But the tale takes still another turn: Aksyonov catches Semyonov throwing dirt from under one of the plank beds. The latter is in the process of digging a tunnel and threatens to kill Aksyonov if he turns him in. What follows can be considered the fourth phase: when being interrogated Aksyonov does not betray Semyonov. This touches the latter so deeply that he comes up to Aksyonov, makes a full confession, and begs him to forgive him. Aksyonov replies that