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Mikhail Bakunin
Letter to Nikolaj Ogarev
1869

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In Switzerland, Mikhail Bakunin wrote a letter to his Russian friend Nikolaj Ogarev about his complex relationship with his wife, and how she had a relationship with a dear friend of his, an Italian anarchist militant. She became pregnant with his child, and Bakunin was willing to raise the children as his own.

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Letter to Nikolaj Ogarev

Mikhail Bakunin

1869

December 16, 1869

Locarno, Switzerland

Antosja arrived. I went to meet her in Arona, the first Italian city at the end of Lake Maggiore, and I spent two and a half days in great anxiety, expecting her at any moment. Contrary to date on the telegram I had received from Naples, she arrived two whole days late, as a result of the storm in the Mediterranean. She traveled by sea, on account of the low price. The poor woman was quite shaken. Imagine yourself in this situation: alone at sea with an eighteen-month-old child, eight months pregnant and of an ideal disposition for seasickness. She spent days without moving on the boat until Gaeto, despite terrible sea turbulence. She arrived to me exhausted and sick. The child is also sick. I took them to Arona with great difficulty. Antosja took a little rest, the little one as well. But in four, three, or perhaps two weeks, she will deliver. You understand that in these conditions, my head is spinning.

Dear friend, I want once and for all to explain to you my relationship with Antosja and her veritable husband. I did a terribly stupid thing, even more than that, I committed a crime by marrying a young girl almost two and a half times younger

than me. I could, to justify myself, invoke many extenuating circumstances, tell you that I pulled her out of a vulgar provincial dump, that if she had not married me, she would have become the wife of a monster, of a Siberian police chief. But a fact is a fact, a mistake a mistake and a crime a crime. Antosja is a kind person and a beautiful soul, I love her as much as a father can love his daughter. I managed to wrest her away from the world of trivial ideas, to help her human development and save her from many vulgar temptations and loves. But when she met true love, I did not believe myself to have the right to enter into a struggle with her, that is to say, against this love. She loved a man who is completely worthy of her, my friend and my son in social-revolutionary doctrine, Carlo Gambuzzi. Two and a half years ago, Antosja came to tell me that she loved him and I gave her my blessing, begging her to see me as a friend and remember that she had no better nor more sure friend than I.

A few months later, at the Congress of Geneva, after a long struggle not only on her part, but also on the part of Gambuzzi, a struggle in which furthermore I did not interfere in any way, that I deliberately ignored, Antosja found herself pregnant. Due to lack of confidence, she hid her pregnancy from me, she endured terrible torments, deceived everyone and, under the pretext of going on a trip, went to give birth in a village near Vevey, exposing herself, as well as the child, to great danger. Informed of this without my knowledge, Gambuzzi arrived and took the child with him to Naples. Antosja recovered; as for me, I still suspected nothing.

One year ago, in October 1868, an incident revealed everything to me. The fact that I did not learn this earlier is not the fault of Antosja but of Gambuzzi. From the beginning, she wanted to tell me everything, but he demanded of her and pleaded with her not to talk to me about anything. In this respect, as in many others, he showed himself to be below her. Raised in the bourgeois world of Italy, he still can't free himself

from the cult of propriety and from the point of honor, and often prefers small winding paths to the long straight road. I will say in his defense that the thought of aggrieving and offending me actually terrified him. He has a filial attachment for me and an undeniably warm friendship.

Anyway, having learned the essence of things, I repeated to Antosja she was entirely free and asked her to decide her own fate, without any consideration of me, in the manner that she believed best: to stay with me as a wife—a wife of course only insofar as the public is concerned—or to separate from me and live in Naples openly as the wife of Gambuzzi. She decided on the first option for the following reasons: above all, she is accustomed to me, and the idea of living apart seemed unbearable to her; second, she feared being a burden for Gambuzzi, feared to put him in a situation that he would not know how to extract himself from with honor, given his social prejudices.

So all three of us decided that everything would remain the same as before. The child would spend the winter in Naples (this decision was made in October 1868) and, in autumn, Antosja would travel to Italy, supposedly with a sick Polish friend who would “die” in the summer and entrust her son to Antosja. This fall, Antosja traveled to Naples with the child, and what happened was what was to be expected and what I had predicted: once again, she became pregnant.

She was in despair. So Gambuzzi proposed that she come to give birth in Naples and leave the new child entirely to his guardianship; renouncing him completely, she would return with me after the birth, with the son, our adopted child of the deceased Polish friend (of course a myth). Antosja rebelled against this proposal and stated categorically that for nothing in the world nor for any consideration whatsoever would she abandon her child. A fight began between her and Gambuzzi. They appealed to me as judge. I took the side of Antosja, of course, and wrote to Gambuzzi that his plan was monstrous,

that a mother capable of abandoning her child simply for social considerations would be a monster in my eyes.

So Antosja addressed this entreaty to me: leave Geneva, come to Italy and recognize the two children as my own. I did not reflect on it for long and agreed. I felt obliged to accept, because I could see no other way to save Antosja; and having committed a crime against her, it was my duty to assist her. That took place in July or August of this year, precisely at the moment when I announced to you that I had to leave Geneva.

After the Congress of Basel, Antosja pressured me. I hastened to leave and, as agreed, I went down to Locarno, began looking for a home, a nursemaid, and telegraphed Antosja that she could come, that I was waiting for her. For over two weeks, I received no word of reply to my telegram, nor to letters sent after it. I realized that the struggle was continuing between them; I wrote them a synodic letter in which, while describing our mutual situation to them in its true light, I indicated two options for them and demanded that they choose one or the other, namely: either Antosja, renouncing once and for all the love of Gambuzzi and contenting herself merely with his friendship, return immediately to me with my son and my future child, or else she should remain in Naples as the wife, known to all the world, of Gambuzzi, with the two children of their relationship also recognized by him. I offered my stamp of approval for either decision, but I demanded they choose one or the other without delay and stated that I would only agree again to do the first provided that it come into effect immediately.

Antosja arrived. Gambuzzi offered to stay, but she declined the offer.

Friendly relations on my part, as well as on the part of Antosja, continue with Gambuzzi. Their romantic relationship is over. I adopted the children of Gambuzzi, without denying his incontestable right to take charge of and lead their education alongside Antosja. Life here is inexpensive. He will pay 150 francs per month into the common fund and I will do the same.

We will stay together, Antosja and I, as long as the revolution hasn't called me. Then I will belong only to the revolution and myself.