

The “Moderate” One and the “Earnest” One A Husband’s Letter to His Wife

Volodymyr Vynnychenko

As you see, Olya, I’m writing to you direct from prison. I managed to find a kind person who agreed to get this past the prison authorities and drop it in the mailbox. So here I am in my old age. For twenty years I kept to myself on the farm, never venturing out, then the moment I come out I get myself locked up, thanks to my fellow countrymen. But don’t be alarmed, my dear, the authorities here are not all stupid. They will quite soon realize that if I am a socialist, pigs might fly. But sell those boars we bought from the pig farmer Remeslo anyway and come to see me—you might get me out sooner. But be sure not to sell the black boar in the sty on the left, he’s for breeding. When you get to Poltava go straight to the governor and explain everything to him, as I describe it below. But call on the secretary first and grease his palm to soften his liver. It might help.

It’s that crazy Nedotorkany’s fault. Do you know who I mean? The one who visited us last Easter Sunday and nearly came to blows with the local police chief who called the Ukrainian language “a dialect of Great Russian.” Do you remember? A tall, strapping fellow with a long Cossack moustache. He’s always wearing an embroidered Ukrainian shirt with a ribbon. No doubt you remember. Well, that’s the nasty piece of work that got me locked up.

I was about to set off back home when I thought, unfortunately: “Well, why don’t I pay a visit to my own sort, the Ukrainians? We have our freedom now, so there’s no longer any great danger in declaring yourself a true Ukrainian. Whatever happens, your attachment to your roots is indelible in your heart.”

So I stopped by the Ukrainian bookstore. I admit I spoke rather openly with the people there—had a go at the government for its objections to our native language. Well, as it turned out, Nedotorkany was headed in the same direction as I was, so we arranged to meet up in the evening and ride together to catch the train.

But this is the first and last time that I will travel together with earnest Ukrainians. I swear that if ever I see an earnest Ukrainian, I will give him a very wide berth. It will spare me the shame and misery I am now suffering. The moment he latched onto me in my room I should have gotten rid of him and refused point-blank to travel along with him. But how was I to know

that! I thought:

“Well, he’s one of us—a Ukrainian! One should support the national cause. You can’t sit around on your farms forever.” And now I’ll be sitting in prison for that.. When he got angry in my hotel room and wanted to leave I should have let him go, but no, I must have lost my mind, I begged him to stay. He got angry, you see, because I was wearing a collar and tie, not a Ukrainian embroidered shirt with a ribbon. (I wasn’t stupid—I didn’t want to advertise the fact that I am Ukrainian). I excused myself by saying that I had forgotten to bring an embroidered shirt with me.

But that made me a “renegade” and a ‘*katsap*,¹ disrespectful of our national culture.’ He was mortally offended.

Well, we traveled together anyway, chatting about Ukrainian newspapers, and I don’t hide the fact that it was actually pleasing to have a Ukrainian newspaper in my pocket without having to watch out in case they are rushing to arrest you. What can I say; it’s all very pleasant when it’s allowed, but it mustn’t contain anything controversial and we want it written in good Ukrainian. You couldn’t say of Nedotorkany that he was a socialist, either. It isn’t fair to say that of him—he just loves Ukraine a little too much. And at the moment that actually isn’t appropriate for us Ukrainians. We ought to be more politic: keeping silent here, holding back there, sometimes dancing to the tune of the powerful. Look, we won’t lose our heads or our legs as a result, and we may be lucky in some ways. But as for Nedotorkany, there isn’t anything to say—he isn’t the sort of man who understands politics. Just consider this, for example. We were riding in a cab, passing the memorial to the father of our nation, Bohdan Khmelnytsky, when Nedotorkany tapped the coachman on the back.

“Driver! I say, driver!” The latter turned and said
“Eh?”

Well, what of it? The fellow spoke Russian in his own manner. But no, Nedotorkany didn’t like it.

He corrected him in Ukrainian: “Not ‘eh?,’ but ‘pardon?’” The coachman didn’t know what he meant, of course.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Not ‘eh?’” I said, “you should say ‘pardon?’ Understand? Who’s that on the horse?”

“Him?” the coachman pointed to Khmelnytsky with the handle of his whip.

“That’s right.”

“Oh, that’s some *khokhol* general.”

“Why *khokhol*?”

“If he’d been one of ours he’d be sitting straight, but this one’s sliding

¹ *Katsap* is an offensive Ukrainian term for a Russian; cf. *khokhol*, a similarly offensive Russian term for a Ukrainian.

sideways. Not much of a general."

These words made Nedotorkany give a start. Grabbing the unfortunate coachman by the belt he shouted:

"What!? Not much of a general! You *katsap* bastard! Don't you realize that all your *katsap* generals together are not worth the sole of his foot? Eh? This is the Hetman of Ukraine! Do you hear?"

This annoyed the coachman.

"You'd better hold your tongue, sir," he said angrily. "I could drop a word in someone's ear, you know. I may be a *katsap* all right, but I'm of the same faith as what the Tsar is."

He might have kept quiet after that, but no, this aroused Nedotorkany even more and he blurted out something that you would only expect from some socialist. My heart missed a beat and the coachman was alarmed.

"So that's it?" he retorted. "Is that any way to speak of His Majesty? Well, all right then—just you wait!"

"Where are you off to?" yelled Nedotorkany.

"Well, you'll see! Yes! At the police station we'll find out whether you were speaking the truth. We've brought in plenty of your sort..."

"Damn it!" I thought. "He's asking for trouble. He'll get me locked up." I had already had the feeling that this was how things would turn out.

"Come on, coachman," I said in a friendly tone, "drive on to catch the train. Forget about it."

"Oh no. I can't do that. Oh no. We'll sort this out at the police station, for sure!"

What could we do? He really was taking us in. I noticed that Nedotorkany was beginning to squirm.

"So are you really off to the police station, my fellow-countryman?" he asked, finally.

"Did ya think ya was going to a restaurant after you talked like that? Eh?" What could we say to him? He was actually taking us in! Nedotorkany was starting to fume. Then he suddenly calmed down, smiled at me, and told the coachman:

"All right, go on then. So what? We'll just see what the police will have to say to you at the station when they hear what you said about the Tsar. Let's go."

The coachman did not respond. He kept quiet.

"We'll see! We'll see whether they'll give you a little pat on your head for comparing your peasant's gob with that of the Tsar."

"Did I say that?" the coachman turned round to him. "I just meant in general, you know. You're making too much of it!"

"No, my dear fellow. You said it, and my friend heard you too—he'll bear witness. Well, do you know what you get for that?"

The coachman gave no reply, turning away and driving on. Then he slowly turned the horses round and went back.

“Where are you going?” asked Nedotorkany ironically, simply unable to resist the question.

“Don’t want to lose any time...”

“Oh, time, is it? Damn *katsaps!*”

“Leave it, Danylo Ivanovych,” I intervened. “To hell with him. Just keep quiet now.”

“No!” he said. “No need to humor him. Look what a bloody infidel he is! Ordering us about in our own home! Not much of a general! As for your Kuropatkins, Rozhdestvenskis and Stesels, what good are they? Only one of your generals was any use—Kondratenko, and he was a Ukrainian anyway, not a *katsap*. But do they know that? *Katsap* morons!”

Such a strange man! At the railway station he went at it again. He’s goes off to buy the tickets. I wait and wait, no sign of him. What’s going on? Oh well, I’ll go and look for him. I get to the ticket office and there’s a great crowd there! There’s a policeman by the counter and Nedotorkany next to him, angrily shouting about something. I try to catch what it’s about.

Nedotorkany’s shouting “He has no right! According to the Manifesto all languages are equal. He must understand me, for God’s sake! Who does he think he is, bloody stuck-up cashier!”

The policeman interrupts him.

“I don’t give a damn!” yells Nedotorkany. “Let him sue me! He’s in Ukraine, not in Katsapia, so he’s got to speak Ukrainian!”

I later regretted that they hadn’t arrested him right there and then! Unfortunately for me, it somehow turned out all right. Perhaps the policeman was stupid, who knows? We summoned a porter and got on the train. The first bell had already rung, announcing the imminent departure. The porter kept struggling to get our suitcases up on the rack, but there wasn’t enough room and he put one of them under the bench. Nedotorkany noticed this.

“Can you get it on top?” he inquired in Ukrainian.

“What’s that, sir? Get onto the cops?” he replied in Russian, misunderstanding the question.

“Doesn’t matter,” I hastened to intervene, starting to search in my purse for a zloty.

“Are you really Ukrainian?” Nedotorkany inquired skeptically of the porter meanwhile.

“Beg pardon sir?” responded the latter, bowing.

“Are you a *khokhol* or a *katsap*?”

“Me, sir? A *khokhol*! Born and bred! From Chernihiv province.”

“Can’t you speak your own language then?”

Well, here we go!” I thought. “That’s all we need—to get into an argument with him! Now we’re in for it!” And as bad luck would have it, I couldn’t find a zloty. A hryvenyk wouldn’t be enough and twenty kopecks would be too much.

"Ages since I lived in the village, sir. Forgotten the speech of the country folk," smiled the porter, watching me fumbling.

Nedotorkany scowled even more.

"—It's not the speech of 'country folk,' it's Ukrainian!" Country folk could be French, German, Polish. Same with the upper classes."

"Yes!" sighed the porter. "There's folks of all sorts." The second bell rang. The porter shifted from one foot to the other, watching what I had in my hand.

But I couldn't find a zloty. I gave up.

"Have you got a zloty, Danylo Ivanovych?" I asked.

"A zloty? All right. But he should be ashamed to forget his native language. As for the cashier, the swine! He even wanted to have me arrested! What a *katsap* bureaucrat he is! A zloty, did you say?"

"Yes, a zloty, a zloty."

"Our fellow dumpling eater holds his tongue and sits on his hands. Meanwhile, the *katsaps* are in charge of everything and spread their culture."

"Sir! I haven't time, I have to be off. The second bell's rung," the porter hesitantly interrupted him. Nedotorkany gave him a nasty look.

"Can't you say that in your own language?"

"I'm a busy man, sir. Be so kind as to pay for my work. I've no time to get involved in politics."

"Come off it! I'm not talking about politics."

"Danylo Ivanovych," I butted in, "never mind about that, just find a zloty."

"Oh no! Wait a minute. He has to be taught. I asked you, can't you say it in your own language?"

By now the passengers were beginning to notice us. The porter shrugged his shoulders and smiled at some young man who was watching us out of curiosity.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" I thought. "There'll be another scene."

"Danylo Ivanovych,"—I'm begging him now, "do leave the man alone!"

"No, wait. Just tell me what you call someone who forgets his own mother? Eh?"

The final bell went. The porter began to shake and with an angry look he said firmly:

"If you please, sir, for my work, or I'll call a constable. Come on, what is this?"

When I heard him mention the word constable I quickly took out a 20-kopeck coin and pressed it into the porter's hand. He was gone in a flash.

For some reason Nedotorkany shook his head, putting his purse back in his pocket. We set off. I settled comfortably in my seat, heaving a sigh of relief and began to doze off. I was just drifting off when I heard a familiar voice shouting:

"Ukraine saved Russia!"

Opening my eyes, I looked around and there was a political rally in full swing around us. There were villagers, students, workers, some young gentlemen, some Jews—in fact a whole national assembly had gathered here. And in the midst of them was Nedotorkany, on his soap-box. You know, Olya, it's terrible on the trains now, wherever you go all you hear is "Revolution, resolutions, a constitution, the intelligentsia!" Were such goings-on ever heard of on a train? One used to travel in peace, chatting with a neighbor about the harvest or about the Boer War, and one's blood pressure was normal, one did not suffer liver pains, and one felt relaxed. But now you hear nothing but:

"So many killed," "So many injured." Or "Confiscate the land without compensation!"—"No, buy it up!" They go on and on with never a thought that someone might be heartbroken at those words—whether it's about buying up or confiscation. And the elderly peasants, too, the mumbling clever clogs! "You have to abide by the law," they say, "the lords as well as the rest. They shouldn't have to go round with hands outstretched, begging for food. Let them have a plot of land just like everyone else and let them work on it." How do you like that, my dear? That's why I said "Let's sell the land before it's too late," But no, "wait a bit," you said. Well, it seems, we will wait till the bitter end. If only you could have heard what they were saying here, on the train.

"Ukraine saved Russia!" my Nedotorkany shouts.

"How's that?" asked some fair-haired student.

"Because Russia was still asleep when our villagers rose up in 1902."

I froze. Had he taken leave of his senses? He had nothing to boast about.

"Excuse me," said the student. "You're mistaken."

"Ah," I thought, "well, here's a sensible person." And what do you think?

"Excuse me," he said, "there was revolutionary activity in Russia even before the disorder in Poltava. If you're talking about rescuing, it was the intelligentsia and the common people who saved Russia."

"That's right!" I was thinking, when some young lady, suddenly jumping up onto the upper bench, by the window, shouted out in Russian:

"Come off it! If you want to know the truth, your intelligentsia were very, very reluctant to raise the revolutionary banner. Oh yes! They were only capable of following the banner raised by the proletariat (and dragging their feet at that). Of course, I am not speaking of the working class intelligentsia but of the bourgeois intelligentsia. Just like the bourgeoisie everywhere, they immediately betrayed the cause of freedom."

The young lady sat firmly on her bench and even pushed the cushion aside, preparing to join in the fray. They went at it hammer and tongs! He was for the "intelligentsia" and she was for the "proletariat"! Somebody—

evidently a worker—sided with the young lady, as did a red-headed student, and the fair-haired student was challenged by some young gentleman. The exchange became so heated that they quite took my breath away.

"Well," I thought, "I'm in trouble now; they're going to arrest me."

And so it turned out. It might not have come to that, but the devil got into Nedotorkany again. If they had calmed him down a bit, he would even have shut up. I was already thinking that he would keep quiet anyway. But no chance, I can see he's keen to put his two cents in. As long as they didn't mention Ukraine he kept his cool, but no sooner had someone spoken of it than he lost his composure. Ukraine is a sore point with him. Just mention it and he goes crazy. I can't even get very angry with him any more, because I can see that he is simply an unhappy man—just at the very thought that a fellow isn't speaking Ukrainian and doesn't recognize Ukrainian. I dearly love Ukraine myself, I love my native language and I respect Taras, the father of Ukraine, but as for thinking about it like that—well, I just can't do it. He is even ready to take land by force in order to establish his independent Ukraine. Well, I can't go that far. Ukraine is Ukraine, but land is land. If you tell him that, amongst other things, do you think he might listen? No chance! And this is what was his downfall, and mine. That's how it happened. All it needed was for somebody there to say, for example, that Poland might gain its autonomy. I involuntarily glanced at Nedotorkany. I could see he was tense; apparently he was anticipating something. They changed the topic of conversation. Then Nedotorkany rudely interrupted them, demanding:

"All right then. What have you to say about Ukraine?" At first they did not understand.

"What do you mean, 'about Ukraine'?" someone asked.

"Well, look, there's Poland's autonomy, but what about Ukraine's?"

"Perhaps in time Ukraine will be autonomous too."

"Really?" laughed Nedotorkany sarcastically. "Thanks a bunch! That's very generous of you!"

"Are you actually against that?" asked the fair-haired student.

In a flash, Nedotorkany scowled fiercely, saying emphatically:

"Ukraine is for Ukrainians. We don't need your autonomy!"

Now I see some swarthy-looking student pushing his way forward, wearing a red Russian-style high-collared shirt, who had limited his earlier remarks to brief interjections on behalf of the young lady and "the proletariat."

"Excuse me..." he addressed Nedotorkany in Ukrainian.

The latter immediately mellowed on hearing his native language.

"Excuse me. Who do you mean by 'we' when you say 'we don't need autonomy'?"

"I mean us, all Ukrainians."

"Excuse me," laughed the student, "I'm Ukrainian myself, but I can

say that you are very mistaken when you take it on yourself to speak for everybody. The Ukrainian bourgeoisie, and only some of them at that, might need Ukraine to be independent, but the Ukrainian proletariat doesn't need it at all. The working people of Ukraine, like workers everywhere, need a political system that favors their development. Like autonomy, for example. But to cut themselves off from their Russian or Polish brothers is something they don't need at all."

At first, Nedotorkany was rather stunned. Then he flew off the handle:

"What?! You mean you want to go on being ruled by foreigners?"

"We're ruled over by the bureaucracy," said the student, "and they rule over those foreigners too. The foreigners are not our enemies; they're our brothers."

I can see that Nedotorkany is beginning to snort and go red in the face. He's getting angry.

"And these are the words of a Ukrainian? Are you Ukrainian? In a *katsap* shirt?"

"I'm Ukrainian."

"Well, you're nothing but a *katsap* lackey, you're not Ukrainian! You're ..."

"Why are you insulting me?" asked the student, scowling. "I'm talking to you as a human being and you're using language fit for the Black Hundreds."

At this Nedotorkany got inflamed and burst out angrily:

"What?? Me—with the Black Hundreds?! Look here, you *katsap* spy! I'll show you—"

Addressing someone nearby, a short Jewish man standing next to Nedotorkany said with a smile "He really is like someone from the Black Hundreds." When Nedotorkany heard this he didn't stop to think but lashed out at him, striking him full force in the face.

"I'll give you 'Black Hundreds,' you Jew boy!" At this, all hell broke loose. The Jew shouts and tears come to his eyes. The students, foaming at the mouth, surge towards Nedotorkany. He waves his fists, shouting. Oh Lord! And here we are at the station; we hadn't even noticed the train stopping. Such a din ringing in our ears! Then all of a sudden a constable made his way through the crowd and everyone went quiet. Perhaps somebody had sent for him, some well-meaning idiot. When Nedotorkany saw him, he was simply furious.

"So that's what you're like!" he shouted. "Sending for the police? And you call yourselves revolutionaries?"

"Liar! We didn't send for him!"

"You are liars yourselves! Just look, you villagers. Do you see how the friends of the people stand up for you? Do you see how they struggle against those who defend your national honor and soul? Look, they've set a dog on me."

"Excuse me sir. What's going on here?" began the policeman in Russian. But he was unable to make himself heard; that crazy man did not let anyone get a single word in..

"Take me! Take me!" he shouted. "I'm not afraid of falling into any cop's clutches! We are capable of standing up for an idea. Arrest us, go on, you tyrants. Let's go, Mr Samzharenko! The *katsaps* are turning us over into the 'hands of justice.'"

You can imagine how I felt when he addressed this outburst to me. I simply fainted. I wanted to shout out that this had nothing to do with me, that I was utterly innocent, but I was tongue-tied, as though in a dream. I thought I was about to have a stroke, but for some reason the Lord was merciful. I was quite numb as they led me out and I ended up in some room.

So that's why I'm behind bars now. No other reason, I swear to God. Whatever protestations I made to the police officer, he didn't believe me and I was taken to Poltava. They brought me here yesterday. I think they'll release me; the prison governor gives me hope. I myself think they'll surely realize I am a calm individual. As for loving Ukraine, well, have I ever mentioned this to anybody, anywhere? Just in that library. Well, just that once, and just in passing, but otherwise I've never said this to anybody! What do you think, Olya? Come here as quickly as you can, my love, and get me out. Sell those boars and borrow a fifty from Mitrofan Pylypovych and help me out, Olya, because I can't stand it. Just make sure you don't sell the boar that has a good pedigree. Your husband, Sydir Samzharenko.

PS: Even now Nedotorkany is unrepentant. He keeps swearing at his fellow inmates in the prison. "God damned *katsaps*, get the hell out of our Ukrainian prisons! What are you lot doing here?" Well, I ask you, is he nuts or what?

Translated by Patrick John Corness and Oksana Bunio

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