

Book Review

David Lavén

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

UiT The Arctic University of Norway

david.laven@uit.no

Hellman, B. *Son till Tolstoj – Berättelsen om Lev Lvovitj Tolstoj*. Appell förlag, Stockholm, 2021. 448 pp. ISBN 978-91-985487-2-3

We humans love stories about disasters, outrageous behaviour, addictions, adultery, madness, violence, dirt, and tragic deaths and fortunes. In the world of popular music, for example, the list of people who have behaved unscrupulously and burned out is long. The alcohol-and-drug-fuelled, explosive rocket trajectory of AC/DC's Bon Scott, and the erratic, on-the-verge-of-madness behaviour of Wu Tang Clan's Ol' Dirty Bastard, are just two examples of artists who died long before their time. But both of them were truly original, funny, loose, outrageously profane, vibrant and full of life, and they became very loved and recognized, and ultimately achieved a cult status.

Why, then, would you choose to write a book about the life of a failed writer, artist and husband like Lev Lvovich Tolstoy? A person who was not very important, who, in spite of his rather limited talent had enormous ambitions, both morally and artistically, but never really achieved the recognition, success and greatness he thought he deserved. He was mostly (or only) famous because he was the son of the great Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy. Would it not be an incredibly boring book to write, and to read for that matter? You might as well write a book about an unremarkable and self-important midlevel manager of a neighbour you grew up next door to, who was always boasting about the electric windows of his new car, raving about his water bed with integrated clock radio, and other not overly exciting particulars of his life. But if you

dig deeper, maybe you will discover something interesting and inspiring behind the eyes of such an outwardly ordinary, humdrum man?

This is what Ben Hellman has achieved. He has written an interesting and exciting book about this rather mediocre and self-loathing superfluous man, struggling in the shadow of a giant. As you read Hellman's book, you will learn that Lev Lvovich actually lived quite a long and eventful life, despite of his anti-hero tendencies, personal failings and shortcomings. To complete this book, Hellman has made a remarkable effort, including meticulous research, going through Lev Lvovich's bibliography, letters, journals, newspaper articles and interviews about him, as well as various other sources. Hellman's book is fact-laden and rather bleak, but its style is brilliantly balanced and softly sprinkled with a fine dust of the author's gently humorous comments, especially when the anti-hero makes a particularly poor or contradictory life choice.

Hellman takes a chronological approach, the first chapter covering the happy childhood days of the charming little golden-haired boy, affectionately called Lyova by his kin. A boy who enjoyed a joyful and fulfilling youth during the halcyon days of Alexander II's reign. He was an amiable but sensitive child, squirming when witnessing his parents' rows, and easily jolted when his father vocalised his frustrations when the young boy failed to respond to the father's algebraic-pedagogic efforts during home schooling. The academic struggles continued, but Lev Lvovich eventually completed gymnasium and went on to study medicine and history at university, however failing to complete a degree. Nevertheless, he was reasonably talented as a writer, and a few of his short stories were eventually published.

Plagued by ill health as a young adult, Lev Lvovich travelled to Sweden and sought advice from the famous doctor Ernst Westerlund, whose medical expertise and paternal authoritarian care soothed the frayed nerves of the young Lev. Moreover, the treatments of Doctor Westerlund had some pleasant amorous side effects, materialised by his charming daughter Dorothea, who eventually became Lev Lvovich's wife and mother of his children. They spent a considerable amount of time in Sweden, a country

Lev Lvovich admired for its progressive society and the sobriety and orderliness of its people.

In the course of time, however, the sweetness and haze of infatuation began to clear, and after bringing his young family to St Petersburg, Lev Lvovich was faced with a series of disappointments regarding his career. He was ambitiously working on a novel, but the prestigious journals refused to print it. Finally, a less well-known periodical published it, but few critics bothered to mention it. Furthermore, his father heavily criticised his son's novel, calling it stupid and thoughtless. Lev carried on writing despite his creative and personal battles, his ambitions still remaining vivacious and high. Yet his work was never approved by his father, thus increasing the pressure on their already strained relationship.

By the turn of the century, the premonitions of a revolution were tangible in Russia. Hellman paints a rather gloomy picture of a man burdened by his legacy, a man with very high moral and artistic ambitions, trying to improve himself and the rest of the world by writing and publishing articles about politics, how to live healthily, about marriage and family life, as well as the benefits of abstinence from sex, meat, alcohol and tobacco. However, Lev Lvovich was never able to live up to these haughty standards, and he was constantly failing to be a moral person and follow both his own and his father's lofty ideals. Nevertheless, he was actually received by tsar Nikolai II in 1905, in a determined yet perhaps overly confident effort to save the people from a violent revolution, by offering a written compendium of ideas to the emperor. Still, it was a feeble attempt to intervene, which did not particularly alter the mindset of the conservative and autocratic sovereign. Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy did approve of his son's text, although reminding him that man's inner life is far more important than politics, thus never sincerely believing in Lev Lvovich's efforts. This patronising behaviour on behalf of the great author was not uncommon, and the relationship between father and son remained complicated throughout their lives. Lev Lvovich even blamed his father for his own shortcomings and lack of success.

Despite having a jovial childhood and marrying the woman he loved, Lev Lvovich described his life as unhappy. As an adult he fell for the temptations of gambling and

adultery, and he was always living well above his assets, staying in luxury hotels while travelling, frequenting the finest restaurants where he selected the finest dishes and wines. To maintain such a lifestyle, he relied heavily on the financial support of others. After the death of his father and the cataclysm of the Great War, Hellman depicts in the final chapters of his book how these vices ultimately forced Lev Lvovich to turn his back on his family, and he ended up a rootless, self-loathing emigrant living in poverty, wandering restlessly through Europe and America without finding his place in the world. After leaving his family, he occasionally lived with his sisters and children, who loved him regardless of his weaknesses but found it very difficult to put up with him for a longer period of time because of his lack of self-knowledge combined with a tendency to claim the moral high ground. Finally, Lev Lvovich returned to Sweden, where he died and was buried at Sireköpinge cemetery in the southernly Skåne region.

In summary, Hellman has written an interesting, entertaining and impressively readable and comprehensible book about a seemingly superfluous man who, according to Hellman, was a contradictory and fascinating person, albeit in a somewhat pitiful way. In other words, Lev Lvovich was a very human being, ambitious and stretching high but lacking talent, yet at the same time quite amusing and even partly endearing in his foibles.