



Mykola Khvyliovyy
(1893-1933)

MOTHER

*Two sons to their mother did come:
Two soldier sons, but so unlike,
'Cause one stood up for the poor,
While the other stood up for the rich...*

Pavlo Tychina

The father of these raring boys died long ago, so long ago it was hard to say when. He was buried in autumn in the very same pre-revolutionary town where he had lived, just at the time when Ostap and Andriy embarked on their paths in life. As old-timers remember, the boys' father was a common tailor and, you could say, an uncommon man. Now who would have had the nerve to call him Taras Bulba? Who would have risked making even a run-of-the-mill soldier out of this shrimp of a man? But you see, the only thing on his mind was the restless Cossack past. Bent over some pants, say, he was sewing, or leafing through the pages of the young Gogol, the tailor (so old-timers said) would always heave a sigh and turn to his young wife, saying:

“Don't you think I'd make a fine Kish Ataman?”

From the history of the town it is known that when Ostap (the tailor's eldest son) finished the so-called “parochial school,” the tailor ran around his neighbors' homes, inquiring how he could place his firstborn in a military school. He wanted to make a military man out of his dear boy at any price (just like out of the second one), and at any price he wanted to see both astride raven-black cavalry chargers. Nothing came of his running around, of course (even the local officer of the law couldn't help him any), and, having sold those of his goods THAT were worthy of their name (a goat, a hen and a cock), the tailor had to take his firstborn to the local *Gymnasium*. On reaching his destination, he blessed his son with something like this:

“Well now, my dear son! Mind your father's behest: when you grow up, I ask that you go on to a military school besides and affix a glittering sword to your belt there, so that you be to me like. say, Ostap to Taras Bulba.”

Ostap heard out his father attentively and rushed off to take his entrance examinations. Well, he enrolled at that *Gymnasium* just in the autumn when the crank of a tailor parted with our bright and indefinitely mysterious world forever.

He was a typically small-town representative of his trade and did not dare violate a centuries-old tradition: like all small-town tailors he belonged to the very thin of purse. He did not leave anything behind, except for a pair of old scissors and a worn-out sewing machine. Well, his wife

had to live from hand to mouth and thus drag out an existence. She could no longer dream of seeing her second son attend a *Gymnasium*, and so sent him to an ordinary trade school.

In this way Fate itself guided the two brothers along different paths of life, which turned out to resemble the plot of a sentimental folktale: one son was always cleanly dressed, and even in his boyhood he displayed a tendency to turn into a negative type, while the other son did not so much as take off his grease-spotted shirt. The first was fed with sweet-smelling frankfurters ("Here, take two kopecks for your breakfast, so the lords' boys won't make fun of you!"), while the second ate black bread with salt. And that is why Ostap always wore a joyous smile on his face, as might have been expected, while Andriy never smiled at all: he always regarded the world with the austere look of a dissatisfied person.

Mother understood her second son, and her heart contracted painfully at his plight. How she wished then that Andriy could be dressed in a clean shirt and attend a clean *Gymnasium!*

Wasn't he as near and dear to her as Ostap? Or had she really shared her motherly love unequally? No, she loved her dear sons in equal measure, and she was absolutely not to blame that her earnings were scanty and she could ill afford to bring up both of them, as she would have liked. Or should she have taken Ostap out of *the Gymnasium* and placed him in the trade school, too?

Days, months and, ultimately, years passed in such painful reflections. Springs, birds of passage, and some unknown winds from strange countries swept over the town. Cheerless autumn rains, rattled on the town as well, and, finally, northern frosts set in. In summer the inhabitants harvested cherries, plums and apples, and then the fragrance of long-forgotten times hung in the air at the markets. Life in this town did not go beyond the circle of its everyday interests of the pre-revolutionary days and in no way differed from the life pictured in thousands of short and long stories.

Mother commenced her day at the morning market, where she bought the cheapest victuals, and ended it at her sewing machine. Customers arrived at her home at about ten, and she took their commissions. She sewed shirts and children's outfits the whole day through, having absolutely no time to talk to her dear sons. It was only during midday meals or late in the evening that she would come up to one of them and kindly caress him with her calm gray eyes.

"Well, how are you getting on with your studies, son?" she would ask, and fondle the child with her withered hands.

Ostap responded to the endearment with still greater endearment. He embraced his mother and told her that his studies were getting on fine, he would soon finish the *Gymnasium*, and then he'd treat his mommy to delicious candies and she would no longer have to eat the bitter bread of existence as she did now. Andriy, however, was a stranger to affection and Mother never heard a warm word from him. And although she knew that such tight-lipped boys more often than not made fine people, she could not bear the taciturnity of Andriy and walked away from him in sorrow.

In 1914 the Great European war commenced, as you know. At that time Ostap was already in his eighth year at the *Gymnasium*, while Andriy had finished the trade school and was working in the town's smithy. Mother no longer felt the pinch of need as much as she had before: although her eldest son still could not help her, Andriy was now bringing home his earnings, such as they were. They could already go to the movies every Sunday and even began contemplating having a little house of their own. To put it briefly, the war broke out just when the good horizons of the long awaited happy life were beginning to open for the tailor's widow.

Mother was seized by alarm, of course. She felt that a great tragedy was drawing near. Should

the war drag on, both Ostap and Andriy could be conscripted into the army (the former was going on twenty, and the latter nineteen), which would crush all her hopes. She would walk out into the street, inquire of her acquaintances what was going on, and lend an ear to the furtive talk floating around the nooks of a once placid town.

The town was really seething. militant patriots, who nobody had known up till then, crept out of their altogether not so militant little houses, shaking their fists and hollering that they would dispatch Franz Joseph to his maker in two weeks and conquer Austria-Hungary and Germany taken together within a month. State institutions kept churning out news bulletins about our "extraordinary victories," sending the philistines into an outright frenzy of delight. People milled around the market the whole day through and set afloat semi-fantastic rumors, and you could even see sedate local storekeepers suddenly hopping up to their customers and, for no apparent reason, engaging them in lengthy conversations about the current events. And only at the railroad stations, where the mothers saw off their sons on a long unknown journey, did silence reign. But this silence, too, was out of the ordinary. Some unheard of alarm, some unheard of bustle had assailed the town, as if a weird fan was ventilating its torpid life.

Just then she experienced the shock of her first blow. It happened when Ostap suddenly announced over the evening meal that he had decided to join the armed forces as a volunteer, intending thereby to pay homage to the memory of his father, as it were. Mother gasped in bewilderment. She argued for a long time, trying to make him give up the wild idea. She tried to prove that his father had had a wheel unhinged in his head, and so his behests could not be taken seriously. But Ostap stood his ground, and no power could make him change his mind. So Andriy advised Mother not "to give a fig for all that business." an^ said to his brother:

"If you want to earn a little cross so much, make yourself scarce, brother, and stop getting on our nerves!"

So Ostap left for the front line to earn his little crosses, and he earned a total of four of them there. He became a Sir Captain of Horse, and won the fame of a gallant soldier. His mother learned about it not from her dear son's letters (he wrote her only one letter during all this time) but from the illustrated magazines, in which, among the faces of the great heroes, she saw also his dear face. Looking at it made her both joyous and sad: joyous — because she had borne and brought up such a son; sad - because she would probably never see him again, since he had set out on a path that was absolutely strange and unknown to her. The memory of this so near and dear face still lingered in her heart as an enigma of her irretrievable youth. Night clouded over her soul, and she felt sad, looking at the twilight drifting over the gray puddles of her gloomy town.

Life had really grown dim in the town. No longer did the militant patriots come out into the streets and shake their fists as they had done at the outset of the war; no longer were joyous messages issued from the state institutions. The storekeepers silently catered to the needs of their customers and were reluctant to talk about current events anymore. Something impossible had happened: the war had become an everyday occurrence, and no one was touched by the hospital torments of the country's defenders. Hearts had become callous and the philistine was gloomily waiting for some new extravagant surprise.

Then came the second blow, when the war decided to deprive her of her second son as well and called Andriy up for military service. But he did not comply with the order and was declared a deserter. Andriy fled his native town, and she remained a lonely cuckoo. This was an extremely difficult time in her cheerless life. She even felt suddenly that the very great wide world was becoming not dear to her. If previously she knew why she had wasted away in misery, now she

was completely at a loss and only looked dully through her misty window. Outdoors, spring arrived, streams of thawed snow babbled, and the vernal sun smiled kindly upon the town, while she paced her room, from corner to corner, like a gloomy automaton, imagining the world as a huge and inevitable coffin. It is hard to tell to what end those torments would have led the poor woman if it had not been for the Revolution.

The first outburst of 1917 sounded to her like the music of a divine organ. Whereas for the town's philistines the Revolution was yet another new surprise which had been expected so gloomily, for Mother it was a charming balsam. She instantly acquired a glow of health and, walking out into the vernal streets blazoned with posters, she looked into the warm turquoise of the horizon with hope. Now she was absolutely sure that she would not have to wait long for her dear sons.

"I like the revolution very much," she said once to her neighbor.

In a word, Fortune seemed to have taken pity on Mother, no two ways about it: a month later it brought on its wings her first son Ostap, a holder of four St. George Crosses for valor; But it brought him back just at the time when such heroes were no longer in favor and the officers were being stripped of their shoulder straps. What happened then? Ostap did not stay in his native town for long, nor did he gladden his mother with the promised candies for long either. She heard his sword clank only once in her squalid home, and then he took off promptly with his unit to the Don.

Mother was confused: what could it all mean? Wasn't she just having a sweet dream? Did she really bring up her dear Ostap only to see him grant her one happy moment?

Then Fortune seemed to have taken pity on her for the second time and brought on its wings her other son Andriy. But he, too, arrived in his native town with a large unit just when the military caps bloomed with red stars in the land. And what happened next? Andriy did not stay in his native town for long and he did not gladden his dear mother with his presence for long either. She heard his sword clank only once in her squalid home and, after having exhaustively quizzed her about Ostap and the direction in which he had fled, Andriy also promptly took off with his unit toward the Don.

The Don became some dread mystery for Mother. She had heard that some officers were marshalling forces on the Don, she knew that the Reds were preparing for a deadly battle with them, but she simply refused to understand that her sons belonged to different camps, that Ostap and Andriy could be pouncing on each other like furious animals in mortal combat and that one of them was probably emitting a death rattle on the sharp tip of his dear brother's sword by then. She jumped out of her bed and looked with demented eyes through the window This nightmare was the most horrifying she had ever had, and it was only now she realized what real woe was like. For her, life resembled now not a coffin but an uninterrupted, chilling howl of a mortally wounded dog.

Thus days, months and years passed by. A civil war raged through the villages, towns and townships. Here and there conflagrations blazed, and the days were filled with the rat-tat-tat of machine-gun fire. Here and there artillery shells burst, and bands roved the big and small steppe roads. One or another of these bands would gain the upper hand, while she, more dead than alive, saw no end to this strife and did not believe she would ever find the tranquility of former days.

Then thunder crashed suddenly, followed by arrowy lightning. Someone great and wise seemed to have undertaken to prove to her that everything had its end, and to help her find the long-awaited tranquility. The thunder crashed once more and the lightning flashed: that was her dear son Andriy retreating, as his brother Ostap was pressing home the attack

Mother knew nothing about it, of course. She did not know that her relentless sons had collided in mortal combat almost on the threshold of her squalid little room. Within a week the town changed hands several times, and only toward the end did she learn that the troops of her sons were fighting one another in the empty streets of the town. With disheveled hair, she rushed to the headquarters, and met Ostap there. She fell on her knees before him and begged that he stop the fighting, to which he gave a smile, and said in a strange voice:

"Be so kind as to go home, old woman, and don't bother me"

She looked at her son and did not recognize him: before her stood a severe man who was distantly remote. This was no longer the Ostap who had promised to treat her to delicious candies. Here was the embodiment of a ruthless wisdom she was unfamiliar with. She looked once more at her dear son with dry eyes, and silently went home.

That same night she met her second child as well. Around three o'clock in the morning someone rapped on the window-She quickly got out of bed and then heard the dear voice asking her to open the door of her squalid home. She rushed to the threshold and saw her Andriy at long last.

But he was just as distantly remote to her as Ostap. He did not even greet her, neither did he look at her, constantly averting his once kindly eyes.

"Why did you come to me?" Mother finally asked with great sadness.

"I came to you, mommy, so that you could help me in my cause," Andriy replied in a strange voice.

"What is that cause of yours, son?" Mother asked with a sigh-"Why is it just yours and why cannot it be mine, too?"

Andriy gave a crooked smile, and sat down on a chair.

"It can't be yours, because you don't understand anything," he said.

"Oh, my God!" Mother exclaimed. "Wasn't it me who brought you up, my dear son? Why do you think I can't find a common language with you?"

"Because you're also trying to find this common language with my brother Ostap, who's one of my fiercest enemies? Andriy replied.

"Your fiercest enemy? Son, what are you talking about? Good Lord!" Mother said and burst into tears.

Coining up to her, Andriy said with the voice of a stranger:

"Stop bawling, old woman, because I have no time now. Besides, you must help me get to my brother's headquarters."

No sooner had the last words escaped his lips than a noise came from outdoors. Andriy rushed to the window and saw horsemen in the dusk of the moonlit night. He realized that an enemy band was surrounding him, and said to his mother:

"Hide me, mommy, and make it quick. Hide me from my brother Ostap!"

She lost no time, hid her dear son Andriy in the dark attic, and returned to her room. Just then the door burst open, and Ostap, flanked by two young horsemen, appeared on the threshold.

"Well, old woman, where did you hide my brother Andriy?" he asked sternly. "Or do you think my patrols missed him?"

"I haven't seen your brother Andriy." she replied with determination and, her face turning pale, sat down on her bed. "I haven't seen him!"

"Don't lie, old woman!" Ostap cried out and took hold of his glistening sword. "Or do you think I'll spare my fiercest enemy?"

On saying this, Ostap turned to the horsemen. They gave a grunt of satisfaction as if to say:

our Sir Ataman recognizes no kith or kin and he knows no brothers when it comes to struggle!

"I'm happy you think that way about me!" Ostap said. "So I want to prove to you that I know no mother in the struggle either."

The holder of all four St. George Crosses, which glittered proudly on his chest, sat down beside his mother. He ordered his men to make a search of the yard and attic, lit up a cigarette, and corrugated his stern eyebrows at the bridge of his nose.

The pale-faced mother sat at his side, looking silently at the son. He gave off such a smell of alcohol that she involuntarily turned her face toward the window. Now and then she shot a glance at the door and listened intently to the noise around her: would they really find Andriy? Only when the horsemen returned and reported that Andriy was nowhere to be found, did she sigh with relief, and said:

"Didn't I tell you he wasn't here?! So why have you come to me?"

"Oh, I see you want to put my wits to sleep, don't you?" Ostap cried out. "Now mind you, old hag: I won't spare you either! If you don't give up my brother by morning, I'll..."

Ostap grabbed his sword and showed it to her. At that her patience was exhausted, and she said:

"What are you talking about, Ostap? As you fear God, stop it! Have you, my drunken son, really forgotten your childhood and the 'delicious candies'?"

"Ha-ha-ha!" Ostap roared with laughter. "Hear that, boys? My mother's recalling delicious candies! She wants to melt me. Hear that, boys?!"

The drunken men responded with a roar of laughter which their jangling swords echoed in some horrible despair. Ostap spoke again:

"Oh no, mommy, candies won't save you! Thanks for bearing and bringing me up, but don't be so proud of it! Bearing is not such a difficult thing... and it even brings some joy. Ha-ha! As to bringing up your kids, that's your natural duty. In a word I want to live, and I'm not going to let my brother Andriy break my neck for the sake of some noble cause or other!"

Mother looked at her son with horror and did not understand anything. She was still hoping that all this was nothing but the ravings of a drunken man, but realized that even this hope was waning. I'm just having a fiendish nightmare, she kept saying to herself persistently, repeatedly clasping her grief-stricken forehead with her withered hands. This went on until Ostap rose to his feet.

Once he got up, he told Mother to make him a bed on the porch, where he would wait for her answer and last word till morning: she had to tell him where Andriy was hiding. Swaying on his drunken feet, he went out onto the porch, his men following him.

The wall clock ticked away the seconds. Time was gliding on at an intolerably sluggish pace, and to her an hour seemed like an endless eternity. Now and then she tiptoed to the front door and listened intently. Somewhere the morning cocks crowed, and farther away dogs howled with irremediable despair. In her mind's eye she saw the successive pictures of her cheerless life and the dear faces of her little sons. Today the town was empty and wild, today two brothers were locked in mortal combat, while a fair and warm sun had once smiled upon the town, and Ostap and Andriy had been such likeable boys. Today the settlements were rumbling with the din of a civil war, mad-brained horsemen were galloping along the roads, and the sons did not want to recognize each other, and even their mother was not granted their recognition. But in previous years they had fondled her with their little children's hands and looked so kindly into her face. What could it all mean? Did such things always prevail in life?

Suddenly it dawned on her that this was not a nightmare at all, and everything happening now

was a usual and natural occurrence. If she could not grasp this, it meant that she had lived out her share of life, and her place in it was being claimed by new people with new ideas and new desires that were alien to her. This realization made her want to meet her Death.

She went up to the front door and pressed her ear against it.

Ostap was snoring, as were his drunken men.

She climbed up to the attic to her son Andriy, and said into the darkness:

"Your enemies are sleeping, son. So run as fast as you can!"

"I think I wouldn't be able to run away from the sober as it is," Andriy said. "And these ones are drunk, aren't they, mommy?"

"Yes, they're drunk, son. You can easily slip out of the window... Run son!"

"Where is my brother Ostap sleeping?" Andriy suddenly asked, his voice quivering nervously.

Mother looked at her son, and in the dusk of the moonlit night seeping into the attic, she saw a suspicious glint in Andriy's eyes. She realized at once that Andriy intended to kill his drunken brother.

The realization made her reply promptly:

"Your brother is sleeping in my bed."

"All right then! So I can have some rest, too."

He told her to return to her room and not bother him anymore. She complied, climbed down the ladder, entered her room, and went to bed.

Lying under her light blanket, she tried in vain to guess how many hours had passed. For a long time now she had been hearing Andriy shuffling warily in the entrance hall. He must be looking for the ax, she thought.

She wanted to tell him not to look for the ax, but could not make herself do it for some reason. The moon was beginning to wane already and dawn was probably stealing over the earth somewhere far away. The wall clock was ticking away monotonously, the fleeting seconds flying off into eternity: they were being pursued by minutes and — much slower than the minutes — by hours. They were oblivious to these shots alarming the empty town. His Highness, the King of Time, was marching on in an organized manner with staggered rows of subjects, but indifferently and sedately as well.

Mother saw her youngest dear son stealing up to her shaded bed. She wanted to warn him that it wasn't Ostap but she, his mother, lying in bed, but she could not make herself utter a sound. Why should she warn him anyway, when it was so pleasant to dream. She went on dreaming about a happy life, and dreamed on until Andriy came up to her and did what might have been expected...

He had really come up to her bed. The fratricide had come up quietly, and stopped like an apparition.

But why did he stand there like that? Wasn't this the end yet! No, it would probably be the end now! Not without reason did she desire death so intensely, not without reason.

Then came the sudden crash. That was Andriy hurrying to perform his civic duty in the belief that his brother Ostap was lying in that bed.

Instead of dreams some rosy lights of the hereafter suddenly flashed in Mother's eyes. She did not even have time to utter a cry. Mother was no more, and in vain did the ax drop on her head again and again and thump so irksomely in the twilight of dawn. Mother was already no more.

Then Andriy jumped out of the window and ran through the empty streets of the medieval town. And at the same time houses, stores and, ultimately, the very earth broke into a gallop in a

horrible whirlwind.

But Mother was already no more. The very first blow of the ax had carried her into that mysterious world which knows no sorrow or pain, where the tender strip of light at dawn never blushes, where the red-yellow cocks never crow as boisterously as they did in the town during that dolorous twilight of dawn.

Mother was already no more, the mother of the raring boys whose father had died long ago, so long ago it was hard to say when.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko