

The International Union of Arts and Crafts - Part 2

by A.L. Pogosky

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[Page 1] WE are going to speak of practical details this time. Let us speak of them, then, but keep in view that all reform, all justice must be stated from within, as it is the Spirit that dictates and shapes matter, not matter that influences Spirit.

In this paper we are going to consider the means by which under *present* conditions we may bring some fresh breezes of the waking consciousness of the sanctity of work into some corners of its sphere at least, may consider whether it be not possible by love and wisdom, by devoted efforts and international interest, to create and supply conditions for a miracle of happy work to happen. One may call it compromise. Perhaps after ages of suffering we may take even this humbly, if by it, one can better even the minutest particle of existing evils.

It is a matter of temperament. Some form principles and theories for good things to come to humanity, somewhere, sometime; never seeming to claim the [Page 2] realisation of these good things at once, under their very eyes, brought about and helped by their very hands. Have we yet begun *living* our lofty ideals? I think not. Have you ever seen an earnest, strong-willed man or woman who did not succeed in shaping the circumstances of life sooner or later in his own way? If this is not true, then all the theories about "thought is a deed," or "thoughts are things", are childish dreams. So there is plenty of hope for us, who are ready to give our efforts, our lives, if need be, to establish the forgotten truth: Work and Love are one. If we are earnest we shall succeed, no matter how many mistakes we make on our way, nor how many thorny paths we may have to walk through.

Just at this moment we will not touch in any way the work of artists, musicians, writers, poets, or preachers. The tangle before our eyes is too big, too motley. And also we believe earnestly that those who, like them, come nearer than any of us to God on the wings of their gifts, are already thinking these thoughts themselves, and preparing a grand epoch of momentous importance, all tending to the same goal.

We shall dwell in our minds among those more humble workers, who toil and fret in all corners of the earth, toil so unceasingly that they almost forget their former freedom, are almost hopeless of brighter days. In this state of hopeless despair, brought about by ages of disharmony and injustice, by a broken law of equanimity, the toiler has no more [Page 3] time nor energy to think, to create, to fight. Some one must intervene, must take his cause to heart, must plead, must find the way where help lies, must take his suffering as his own. If this be done, half of the evil will recede.

When we hear of the "idle poor", of their improvidence, of their vices and dirty habits, we get into a

tangle, we suffer and are lost in controversies. What should we say of a doctor who, finding a patient showing symptoms of typhus, cholera, or any other dangerous disease, should get hysterical and run away so as not to see such awful things ? What are dirty habits, improvidence and all the rest of it among the poor, but *symptoms* of a more dangerous disease, which originated ages ago and is eating humanity away like cancer ? It was brought about by ignorance and injustice, and the selfishness of men. Yet we pronounce it God's curse and run away, so as not to suffer ourselves from the sight of these symptoms. We allow children and younger men and women to fall into the same pit of horrors !

The disease has many symptoms, many degrees of development. At some of its stages, one can see plainly how a well-regulated hygienic treatment may bring to the patient recovery, comparative health and strength.

There are very numerous centres of handicrafts, for instance, in France in the Valley of the Rhone. The *petites industries* — what are called cottage industries in England — are reigning supreme there. They are little noticed by the big world's press, it is [Page 4] true, but it is a little world of its own. If you were to spend one of your holidays there, and decide upon a good walking tour through the sunny, smiling valley of the Rhone, from village to village, leaving behind hurry and worldly conception of time, just giving yourself up to the present joy of life and movement, entering into this new rural world with an open heart and keen observing eyes, you soon would find as much as did once a famous traveller, Ardouin Dumazet — to whose twenty-seven volumes I may refer those who like to investigate further. Every village seems to have its own characteristics, its own sounds and ways. In some of them folks are making pipes, nothing but pipes of sweet briar; in others violins, and then you see the idea of the violin in all stages of evolution, everywhere up to the very roofs, drying, bleaching, ripening and what not. Further we find a little factory, which produces only one shapeless thing in great masses — celluloid. And round it a group of villages shaping this mass into all sorts of elegant or useful things too numerous to mention. And we hear of a peaceful evening, when the father rests in his garden among his little ones, watering his flowers and peas, and looking happy and independent.

There are some groups of villages in Austria, the famous Zakopane district, where the old Slavonia craft of wood-carving was brought from the ancient days of the Middle Ages right into the twentieth century. With the help of some of those idealists who could not succeed in losing their love for the beautiful, it took lately (some twenty to twenty-five years since) a [Page 5] fresh impetus, and the district is now covered with schools, and workshops, in fact has become a sight-seeing resort for tourists. The old traditions are sacredly kept by its leaders and teachers, but the twentieth century is clearly embodied in them, adding to the expression of the old Slavonic heart its new story of experiences. One need only go to the Church on Sunday and have a look at some young mother with her baby, to have a quaint picture of living history and symbolism. Whoever saw the fine, artistic, most elaborate garments of the baby, its little embroidered cap, every little detail of its clothing up to the richly embroidered, snow-white cover (which truly should range among church embroidery), and the rosy, healthy face of the mother in her picturesque, snow-white embroidered cap, would hardly believe such a thing could be yet in existence in our time of hurry and disharmony. Truly the eyes of men, women, and children, feeding, as they are even now, on beauty in nature, beauty in attire, and beauty in heart, are in a stage of development where they can be helped, where they must be helped. Is it absolutely necessary to have those graceful images broken, distorted and soiled, before they enter into a new cycle of progress ? Could we not spare them the vulgarities of our so-called civilisation of to-day ? Could we not be benefited ourselves by helping them through this stage of evolution, preserving all the best in the past, the traditions of excellent

workmanship, up to the next rung of the ladder ? Help is wanted in *protection* of the craftsman in this dangerous passage from work, as a natural [Page 6] expression of Spirit, to work meaning the manufacturing of goods in order to earn money, while land has become scarce and its tiller is obliged to take to some by-industry.

Under just conditions, which are bound to come when we alter our attitude into a just attitude of Brotherhood, the tiller of the land, having plenty of scope for his activity, will not need to produce " goods " of any other kind but the greatest produce of all — the food of humanity, grain. And in the leisure time allowed to him while nature rests and gathers forces, he, obedient to his mother, will also rest and gather strength; all his practical gifts will come into play, and the experiences gathered through the summer's heavy work will flow freely through the functions of his intellectual gifts. This may find expression in many unexpected, heretofore undreamed of ways of beauty; because good seed in good conditions produces good fruit. We have forgotten the taste of such fruit, because we have made its growth a torture.

But I will take you now to some corners of the world in Russia, and show you some forms of industries.

Here is a small old town in central Russia. Its best street is not much of a street; a few brick houses, a few shops and bakeries, a market place with a good many deserted storehouses, a quaint, straggling little house or shed with the old-fashioned public scales, where on market days the peasants weigh their loads of grain, hay, and other produce [Page 7] when they are fortunate enough to dispose of them. This town is surrounded by a motley crowd of still smaller houses, some of them mere huts made of logs and covered with straw, radiating from the town limits in all directions along the roads into the country. These minute, insignificant-looking, grey houses contain a larger population than the town itself. They belong to the so-called burgher class. The little town stands on a brisk little river, and once was a centre of grain traffic; but the modern railway system shifted this centre to a new place, and the commercial significance of this little town collapsed; the storehouses were deserted, and the inhabitants of the suburbs, who used to get their living in a good many ways round about the once flourishing town, were left in desolation — no land, no earnings, no labour of any kind required any more.

In those days women saved the day. One by one they took to gold embroidery, and tapestry weaving, and leather work, led at first by nuns who had had this industry at their finger-ends for ages. Soon these church embroideries turned into a more democratic, widespread kind of goods, such as slippers, bags, cushions; the tapestry weavers made children's girdles and ties, also tapestry slippers and trimmings. The leather workers manufactured the same easily sold, useful goods in their own technique. The goods were bought and sold by ordinary drapers in large towns. Later, another element came in and added a new feature to the industry of this suburb, now largely known. The War Office gave large orders [Page 8] for embroidery devices, marks and numbers for different regiments, both for officers and men. Of course these new important orders were managed through middlemen, and carried on for many years without the public ever taking any interest in the matter. Even the nearest neighbours, even the local administration County Council never paid any attention to what was going on in the suburbs. The busy workers were there, their laborious lives also; one could not help seeing their faces bent over the frames, close to the small windows; the brilliant shops in the two capitals with all the showy, gold-embroidered goods, so well known as Toryok industry, were before everybody's eyes. Yet no one ever tried to enter into the sphere of work, to learn how it was paid and managed. This indifference of the unthinking public is everywhere the best hotbed for sweating and degradation. This came to Toryok, nearer and nearer, and the coils of the sweating monster squeezed tighter and tighter, and the victims still clamoured for

work.

Then a new era dawned upon the struggling workers. The first ray of compassion came from a good man, a member of the local Zemstvo. The thought suddenly dawned upon him that it was his duty to examine how those neighbours of his fared, how these units of taxation, levied by the very Zemstvos of which he was a member, were served. He went from house to house, and the information he obtained made him think, and think deeply. Why, it seemed as if he were plunged into hell itself, or [Page 9] into a very pit of crime, where the evil-doer went about at his own will, subjugating all under his own boot by the power of his money, and no one else had anything to say to it. It was the prerogative of the spider to entangle and suck the feebly moving fly.

The good man thought and thought, then he made a decision. He went to Petrograd and found a way to the War Office. Among the many thousands of big and small wheels and screws of this elaborate institution, he found at last the spring of the machinery. He gathered courage, obtained and signed a contract for so many embroidered marks and symbols for the various regiments, studied the designs and samples, obtained the materials and returned to his little old-fashioned Toryok. He engaged a young lady by the month to distribute the work among the embroiderers and receive and pay for it when finished. A new wheel was thus added to the activity of the local Zemstvo, a new field for study and justice — a real work of love, was it not ?

The next few weeks and months were like the working of an immense beehive, with a new Queen. At the end of this period, the good man went to the War Office again, delivered the goods, received the money for them and signed a new contract for more work.

Then came an amazing surprise. There was far, far more money than what they paid to the workers. He calculated again and again, hardly believing in the possibility of such a gain. Then he gave directions to add something like 50% to the former scale of [Page 10] payment. The workers fervently crossed themselves, yet, old in experience, kept their joy in their own patient hearts.

A few more months; another delivery of goods; still more surplus money coming; another rise of the wages; all this went on with progressing rapidity. In his official report, which I read with a beating heart at the great Exhibition of the Coronation Year, attached by a worn-out cord to the splendid exhibits, the leader put it very quaintly: "At last the wages reached 60 cop. a day (1s, 2d.), after which we considered them so abnormally high that we abstained from raising them any more and devised another plan of investment". They organized a permanent department of cottage industries as part of the County Council's functions, took a house for the offices and stores, and started another branch — of lace-making, reviving, as they went along, the ancient designs from a rich collection of lace lovingly preserved by one who loved beauty. Just now, after eighteen years of steady progress, the centre has grown, and trained artists have contributed their efforts. At present these industries are in great demand all over Russia, and have a local wholesale depot.

I do not mean to say that all the leading management is ideal and that no better ways could be found; yet I note this instance with gratefulness, because it shows how much could be done, even under the present commercial conditions of the labour market. It inspires hope, and works out some of the lines upon which the industries may be improved.

[Page 11] There is another corner of industries where darkness still reigns, where no loving heart yet sheds its live-giving rays ; therefore this garden of workdom stands with blighted, withered leaves, and flowers which have no power even to open — stands barren and desolate, It is a group of villages on the shores of the Volga, not far off the famous town of Nijni Novgorod. The shares of land allotted at the time of emancipation were very small, as is often the case where land is valuable (on the shores of large rivers, or the rich soil of Central Russia, for instance). The brisk traffic in these regions brought a more than usual increase of population, and the shares of land grew smaller and smaller, till at last only one of ten families could farm; the others had to take to some industries. Men took to boat-building, the majority sought earnings in other large towns, women alone remained at home. They were lace-makers for several generations. Every woman, old or young, every child from seven years old, made lace. Middlemen, or rather a whole system of them, acted as distributors, enforced sweating, tightening the screw more and more. Cheaper, cheaper and cheaper, was the cry. The lace got looser and looser, it was handled in a disgraceful way, both parties vying with each other in getting the best bargain. It went on and on; the lace-makers earned less than the cost of bare rye-bread. To the English ear it would sound incredible, but facts remain facts. A lace-maker could not earn more than one penny a day, working early and late. At last this cruel system over-reached itself, as all [Page 12] evil will. The lace became so bad that even cheap prices could not tempt any buyer, and the whole industry of many thousand workers collapsed.

Statistics never registered items of such dramas. Then these women and children lingered, sickened, died out —no one of the outside world ever knew, ever wished to know. . . .During this period some of the more energetic women got occasional orders for some simple drawn-thread work. One or two earned some money at it. This sounded like a trumpet call. In a few weeks the drawn-thread work spread like smallpox. At every window one could see the bent-down face of a woman over a frame. The middlemen reappeared. They came with very poor pay indeed, but even this was life. They required ready-made goods. The poorest could not afford to buy the yard of cotton stuff and spool of thread. Thus a new subdivision was organised. Some of the workers who could afford to invest a few shillings for materials, would take the order and give it out to the poorer workers at a lower price. Then there came a still more profitable system of sweating children. A woman sweater — a poor wretch herself — provides the material and starts the first, difficult part of the work herself, spreads large frames in her own house, and takes children to do the mechanical work. Only one kind of stitch all day long, with imperfect light from small windows, and all evening till late at night, with a poor, smoky kerosene lamp, from day to day, from month to month, from year to year, all life long — always the same, no variety. Bent over the [Page 14] frame, sitting sideways, so close together that only the right hand is free to move, with faces as white as paper and transparent like wax, these young martyrs of "civilization" sit even today — yes, still stitching, stitching and stitching, and producing vile stuff in the shape of tea-cloths, pillow-shams and d'oyleys, yet finding a market, not only in Russia, but even in Germany and England, because they are so very cheap.

Yet the very same women could be made to earn ten times more if some kind heart would take the trouble to provide protection and knowledge (Love and Wisdom). The middleman, as he exists now in Russia, can provide only a cheap market; he is unable to improve, to bring in ideas, to introduce better goods to a better class of buyers. He has only the coarsest methods and his only means is sweating.

I have no doubt that in every country similar causes and modern conditions must have similar results. We know something of sweating in England. From Dr. Coomaraswamy's excellent book, *The Message of the*

East, one gathers the assurance of this being the case in India as well. But I give here illustrations from Russian industrial life, because I myself know it better and am hoping our international friends will add their experience. I will give another instance of certain efforts to improve conditions, this time from a north-east province of Russia — Viatka. A truly peasant province this, as on account of its severe climate there are very few noblemen's estates there, only the [Page 14] Tsar's forests and the peasants' shares of land. The members of the County Councils (Zemstvos) have to be elected mainly from the peasant communities. Let us see how it told, on the management of peasant industries.

After Moskow, it was Viatka whose County Council led the movement and awoke to its duty first. The first contact with the requirements of the local industries (the territory of the province of Viatka exceeds Great Britain) showed the fact of total ignorance of the subject. One part of the province did not know the other, no one could tell what was manufactured and on what scale, which of the goods were consumed in their own province and which and on what scale were they exported to other markets. A few large sweating firms in the city of Viatka knew a thing or two, but kept quiet. Naturally enough the Zemstvo, with the help of all its district branches, founded a museum, and for this first step wisely selected a house right in the market place, where every man and woman coming to sell hay or eggs or butter, could walk in and see. Soon a great collection of cottage-made furniture, utensils, toys, bowls, fancy boxes, wheels and agricultural implements (as there is plenty of timber round about), fur coats, felt boots and shoes, linens of all sorts and lace, was displayed in the new museum. This was followed by specimens brought from other parts of Russia, with a different technique; even foreign specimens found their way to this peasant museum, some 1,000 miles from Petrograd and some 500 miles from the nearest [Page 15] railway station at the time. A workshop was then added, and improved looms, with an instructor always ready to explain and demonstrate, attracted every market day eager crowds of women. More workshops for other crafts were soon added, not only in the city but in a good many villages, with evening classes for general instruction. Several lace schools were founded and maintained by the district Zemstvos. (The Zemstvo levies taxes on land to cover expenses of public education, roads, hospitals, and every other institution for the weal of its territory. The peasants, being 90 per cent of the population and living on the land, are the main taxpayers.)

But this movement could not go very much further without touching the mainspring of the cottage industries.

Indeed, what was the use of improving the technique of anything, if the goods were destined for the hands of the sweater, who would not pay a farthing more for better-made goods? The Zemstvo of Viatka soon saw the necessity of controlling the market also. It opened a depot in addition to the museum, a regular store, where furniture and other hand-made goods could be bought retail, or on wholesale terms. It also had a shop at Nijni Novgorod during the fair, and in a few years the turnover exceeded £50,000 (500,000 roubles). This allowed the Zemstvo not only to control the prices for work, but also to supply the workers with materials (such as thread, iron fittings, varnishes, etc.) at factory prices.

[Page 16] This put the necessary check on the former despots, the sweaters. They groaned, were furious with the Zemstvos, but had to submit to a real power. Again I will say that all is not ideal; many things could, and should be more artistic, many mistakes are made through lack of properly trained leaders, but as we have no colleges for training leaders and managers of handicrafts worth speaking of anywhere in the world, we have to appreciate even these efforts and learn the offered lesson.

Thousands of instances could be described, but even these few will be sufficient for discussing the question —how to help the workers.

Some day we can enter into details and take one industry after another and discuss the various requirements and means. To-day I will try to show a little of the general trend of help as it is given.

In Russia it is usually considered that help must consist in *teaching* the technique of various sorts of work. In a centre of a certain industry a school is opened, a cheap teacher from Petrograd is sent for, and children are made to learn lace-making or weaving. The teacher, as a rule, is a young girl who went through three years of industrial education at the Imperial School of lace; before this she has learnt to read and write — nothing else. She is often very undeveloped and dull, without any ideas of how to teach. Sometimes an elderly foreign lady-milliner or old incapacitated governess, having some friends among the officials, gets this post of instructor, but as the pay ranges between £20 to £25 a year, there are [Page 17] few applicants of this kind. The teacher teaches what she herself has been taught. The school, with its ready-made principles, is brought from the town into a new world of peasantry, whose life, history, traditions are quite different and perfectly unknown to the town civilisation. The school brings the western methods, the peasantry lives by the eastern traditions. The teaching applies to the surface, the old traditions are concerned with the essence of things.

No attention is paid to what crafts were practiced before the introduction of the school, nor what the methods and traditions were. No one ever thought of this. The grandmothers or even mothers may have possessed a craft with a past of a thousand years, may have possessed methods so elaborate and symbolical that none of these teachers ever could attempt to copy them. I can refer those who like to know more about such methods to the beautiful eight volumes with several thousands of illustrations of the Mordva ornament and needlework by Dr. Haekel, Helsingfors (Price 25 roubles). If the children were left in their mothers' hands they would become as skilled themselves, inhale as it were the fragrance of the work from childhood, sharing its different stages with their mothers.

Knowing all this, knowing also this great value of inherited traditions, skill, taste, and symbolism, it is quite painful to see the results of school education. At present all new "science" (whether it applies to lace or embroidery, weaving or metal work) is chance [Page 18] work. Some "fashionable" piece of machine-lace, perhaps out-of-date in Paris at the time, some metal brooch of a peculiar style, *Art nouveau*, made by the million in a factory to shine a week or two in high life, which descends gradually to the lower classes, and is sold then in the street for a penny; some "interesting" effect of machine weaving — a fad of to-day, the object of disgust tomorrow — all these may take the fancy eye of the undeveloped so-called "leaders and teachers" and serve as a model for laborious handwork. It then goes through these schools, and is engraved for ever in the young minds of the peasant pupils, as something new and desirable.

My memory keeps a multitude of facts, a multitude of efforts, rising and falling, histories of births and deaths of industries — alas, also histories of their crippled childhood, of their faulty, sickly growth. It all looks to an outsider a chaos. Not so to me. One red thread runs through all; its name is *separateness*.

The workers, the leaders, the producers and the consumers do not love each other, do not know each other. They are groping in the dark, not knowing that they are limbs of one common body, under one common law, that they cannot do without each other. Instead of planned harmony, they work in a chaotic, disorderly, disjointed way. What result can there be but degradation and misery ?

In all countries, the handicrafts are going on in various ways, under various influences, driven often to degradation and death by ignorance or greed. [Page 19] Both workers and leaders, middlemen and consumers, are unaware of the colossal magnitude of this universal fact. They take it as purely local, or do not trouble their heads at all, save about cheapness.

One " leads " in a far-away village, perhaps collecting and distributing work to order of some firm in town ; another, perhaps a very well-meaning soul, living all the year round in the country and having leisure time, and pressed by a famine year, gives small orders to peasants in a philanthropical spirit. Some friends in the same spirit buy and try to spread the goods. Perhaps a high official — friend of the initiator — may procure a yearly stipend; and lo ! a new industry is afloat. It may end in a disaster, when there is no knowledge; the goods may not be marketable; or it may prove a success, especially when the initiator learns more than he teaches, brings out the best traditional quality of the workers, all the characteristic strong features; then such goods find their way abroad and get good prices. There may be larger efforts too. One Zemstvo opens a store of peasant industries in Moscow, another in Riazan or Viatka; there are some friendly societies or shareholding companies dealing with peasants' industries, also private shops and a great many local centres of industries scattered all over Russia. There are people eager to lead, to teach, to act as middlemen, some very honest and well-wishing, others greedy and ignorant, large and small sweaters, and there are immensely more workers who are in need of organizations. It is not a thing we can take or [Page 20] leave. It is there : unavoidable, chaotic, and calling for help.

All these channels of organization and distribution of peasant work act separately. Their experiences are not shared or utilized, they do not know each other, they do not realize the common great aim, the common great source ; they do not feel the support of a co-worker, co-thinker, co-lover. They repeat the same lessons, make the same mistakes. The valuable experience of one is lost to the thousands of others. In Russia, this separateness is inflicted by the general trend of politics. The rulers find it undesirable to allow the union of various workers, as they know only too well that Union is Strength, and Strength is Power.

If such is the result of separateness in one and the same country, how much more must it reflect on international separateness — how much less do we know, each in our own country, of foreign tastes, and requirements, of foreign markets ! Yet the twentieth century in its lines of life has in every way gone away from the nineteenth century. The world gets smaller and smaller. In olden times we thought of the limits of our village, and then of our province. Now we must study the life and ways of foreign countries, we begin to feel our international message, we begin to join our voice to the symphony of the world.

A Russian provincial may be indifferent to the characteristics and symbols of his own locality, but, bring into his small town Japanese or Hindû goods, or French or Spanish, and see what a commotion it [Page 21] will create. An English lady may get tired of many once tempting things of English make displayed in Regent Street, yet may be strongly attracted by the original Russian hand-made goods, novel to her eye and mind. It is quite natural that we should accommodate ourselves to those new lines. The thinker

knows that this intercourse has a far deeper significance than it seems to have from the outside. The ways to the common aim get more and more interlaced, those who tread them become more and more brothers, more and more mutually needed.

The International Union of Arts and Crafts may try to lay the first lines of communion between the various countries. It may join and transcend the old world-wide organisations, add a new note, a new service to them, and draw strength and power through each of their branches, may, as it were, act in every corner of the world by friendly hands.

Central headquarters may be organized in London. This centre may attract to itself handicrafts from all parts of the world, reveal new fields to the seekers of beauty and originality, to the common hunter of novel goods, to the student of ethnography and antiquity, to the mere woman of the world or housewife. From these an exchange of goods may radiate throughout the world, bringing Hindû, English or Japanese work to Russia, Russian and Hungarian to India, and so forth.

To the leaders of industries, to the craftsmen, it will be a source of inspiration and study. To the workers supplying the hand-made goods, it will be an [Page 22] outlet and a market which will deal with them not only honestly but intelligently. The machine-goods have established such centres of information and distribution a long time ago. Money is well taken care of. It is only the world's handicrafts, whatever their magnitude, that are neglected, uncared for, because they run in separate efforts.

To-day the idea of work in unity with love seems yet Utopian, too much in the sky; but so was any other progressive idea on the eve of its realisation in the concrete world. But if mankind is to progress, to evolve, these lines of unity are bound to evolve also, and then it will take proportions undreamt of to-day.

Large depots of exchange of industries will grow like mushrooms in every large town of every nation; the honest, loving service to workers and consumers is bound to tell on their popularity. The neglected industries will take up strength again ; those who live on small plots of land, now unable to support a family all the year round, will then be secure during the winter months, and the towns will be freed from their overcrowded conditions, thus solving one of the greatest problems of the present age.