

THE RUSSIAN TRAVELLER PRJEVÁLSKY.

BY

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On the first day of last November (1888), according to our calendar, General Nicholas Michailovitch Prjeválsky (this name is properly transliterated Przheválsky, but it is best to follow the received English and French spelling) the great Russian traveller, the explorer of Eastern Central Asia, and probably one of the last of the adventurous travellers, died of typhoid fever in the little town of Karakól on the road from Vierny to Kashgar. In his last moments he asked to be buried on the shore of Lake Issyk-Kul, in a spot which, surrounded by mountains covered with eternal snow and close to the blue waters of the lake, presents itself as vividly to me now as when I first saw it 15 years ago.

Personally, I met Prjeválsky but twice ; once when he spoke before the Imperial Russian Geographical Society at St. Petersburg in 1874, when he received the gold medal ; and a few days afterwards at the house of a friend. But even before that his name was known to me from his travels, and since that has become familiar to every one who interests himself in the geography of Central Asia.

Before speaking of his work as a traveller and explorer it is interesting to touch on his early life ; and for this we fortunately have some auto-biographical sketches

written in 1881, and recently published in the *Rússkaya Starina*.

Prjeválsky was born on April 12, 1839, in the little village of Otradnoe in the Province of Smolensk. He was the eldest son of a family comprising two other sons and a daughter, and was left fatherless at the age of seven. Although of Catholic and Polish origin his parents both belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. His mother was a woman of strong character, strict and severe, who believed in the rod as the best method of bringing up children. As the family possessed about 3000 acres of land and 135 serfs, they were neither rich nor poor. Prjeválsky's early education was, as was the custom of families in those days, conducted entirely at home, with teachers competent and incompetent—most of them young theological students sent out from Smolensk. He was a wild, unruly child, always escaping to the woods, his passion being sport. When he was ten years old he was sent with his brother to the high school or gymnasium at Smolensk, where he was left under the charge of a tutor, who took him to school, carried his breakfast to him, and then brought him home and strictly supervised him. At that time teachers in the country schools in Russia were not always up to the mark, and were frequently coarse and brutal; and these boys, in common with others, suffered much. Prjeválsky says however that one advantage was that they all remained boys and did not ape the fashions of men as school-boys do nowadays; and as their summer vacations were very long—because it was always necessary to repair or alter in some way the school buildings—they were enough at home to prevent their being spoiled by town life. His

earliest reading was about travels and adventures, but he was such a "bad boy" according to contemporary ideas, that all his mother's friends advised his being put into the military service and sent off to the Caucasus, whither all bad boys were sent at as early an age as possible. Nevertheless he did well at school, and was the first scholar in his class; although he nearly spoilt his career by taking part in a school rebellion a few days before he left it at the age of sixteen. He had then decided to enter the military career owing, as he says, to having read a book called "The Fearless Warrior," which gave him the conviction that this was the only way of being really virtuous and a benefactor to his kind.

In September, 1855, just as the Crimean War was ending, he went to Moscow as a *Yunker* in a Biélefsky Regiment. A *Yunker* at that time, as now, was something between an officer and a soldier. As belonging to the nobility he was on equal terms with the officers, but in all other respects—food, quarters and discipline—he was on a level with the soldiers. Soon after he joined his regiment they went on a march. "I had," he says, "about forty companions of all sorts of rascals, some of whom, on the very first day, stole some boots and got drunk in a tavern. This worked on me very much, and at first disenchanted me with the military service. I used to go shooting in the woods, and often wept there. The idea came to me then, that perhaps I could get out of it in some way by going into the Military Academy. My regiment at this time was stationed in the province of Tula, and the peasants constantly turned to me with the question, 'What is the matter with you to have been sent as a soldier so young?'"

He did not like the *Yunkers*, who were his comrades, and to whom the officers then paid no attention, and who were besides so brutal in their relations with the soldiers that, although he was habituated to the customs of serfdom, his feelings were revolted, and his only solace was in shooting in the woods, in studying the habits of animals and botany, of which he had got some knowledge at school. In the summer of 1856 his regiment moved to the town of Kozlóf, in the province of Tambóf, and were a mere band of robbers, because generally nothing was bought either for men or horses. "Everything was obtained free. Turns were kept in this, and once, when my turn came, I remember that I killed a turkey with my bayonet, which we afterwards ate in camp." Soon afterwards he was made an officer, and sent to the Polótzk regiment in his own province of Smolensk, by which he was able to go home and bring one of his serfs as a servant, who was an excellent sportsman, and who by some means was always able to supply both him and his horses with food, free. At this time, as he had no liking for the dissipated life led by the officers, he read many books of history, travels and novels, and first got the idea that it was his duty and his fate to become a traveller. He petitioned the commanding officer to be sent to the Amur, which, owing to its recent occupation by Russia, was uppermost in the minds of all, the result of which was his being placed under arrest for three days; and this decided him to enter the Staff Academy. He busied himself with his studies alone, for at the time there were no educational facilities offered to an officer; and when he thought that he was nearly prepared, he was much put back by

the advice of one of his friends to learn the Military Code by heart, as this would be the chief subject of examination. This he found utterly repulsive and impossible, but nevertheless he went in August, 1861, to St. Petersburg—a city up to then entirely unknown to him, and found himself without money, but succeeded in passing the preliminary examination with credit, for, fortunately, the questions on the Military Code were not difficult. At first he had hard work to get on, and often went without his dinner. He read up his favorite subjects, and tried to make some money by writing. One article, “The Recollections of a Sportsman,” was accepted by a leading journal; but he was paid nothing for it, on the ground that it was not customary to pay for the first article. As his theme on entering the second year he took “The Amur Region,” which, of course, had to be compiled from what had been published at the time; and soon after this, the Polish rebellion having broken out, offers were made for volunteers, with certain privileges. He accepted them and went back to his old regiment as an aide-de-camp. He passed in this way another year, always with his mind set on travelling; dreaming at that time of going to Africa—although when he reflected that he had no money, and on the amount that such a journey would cost, he concluded to turn his attention to Asia. A friend presented to the Russian Imperial Geographical Society his article on the Amur, and he was elected a member, and his article was printed. His finances at this time were somewhat better, and he was able to obtain books; one of them, which made a strong impression on him, being Buckle’s “History of Civilization,” the rest being chiefly on geography and

travel. At the end of 1864 he went to Warsaw, where, at his request, he was made a teacher in the *Yunker* school and librarian, and where for two years he diligently prepared himself for what he considered his future task by lecturing on geography, compiling a text-book, renewing his studies of zoology and botany, and when at home in the summer, collecting a herbarium. Finally, at the end of 1867, on the representation of a gentleman who was a friend of his, and at his own particular request, he was ordered as a staff officer to Eastern Siberia, and immediately started.

He remained at Irkutsk only about a month, having, meanwhile, charge of the library, and was thus enabled to post himself as to the region. He was delighted with Siberia, and when he was ordered off with a nominal commission of taking the census of the population on the river Usuri, his only discomfort was that the German friend, whom he had brought out at his own expense, had unfortunately fallen in love with some Amalia before starting, and refused to go further. Nevertheless he found another companion, and spent several months in a boat on the Usuri and Lake Khanka, and wrote a Report, which, owing to his ignorance of languages, had very little to do with the population, of whom he had formed an unfavorable opinion, and more with the natural history of the country. He was very much depressed, therefore, when his commanding officer, on reading the report, said: "I have read your whole report, but I knew the whole thing, without your saying it, that in that region it is d——d disagreeable." However, Prjeválsky sent his account to the Geographical Society and was rewarded with a

silver medal, which he considered a very slight recompense for his services : although to those who knew what other Russians were doing at the same time, it seemed a sufficiently large one. M. Seménof, at that time the Vice-President of the Society, who had himself written very noteworthy accounts of his own journeys in Asia, took up Prjeválsky's case, and in the autumn of 1870, the latter started on a journey through Mongolia, very much hampered by lack of means, as he received for his expedition only \$2000, which, however, he made last him for over two years ; and meanwhile visited Lake Koko-nor, traversed some of the regions mentioned by Marco Polo, but visited by no subsequent traveller, found the rhubarb of commerce growing wild, paused for a while in Pekin, where he took lessons in astronomy at the Russian Observatory, and would have gone into Tibet, whither he was almost invited by the Tibetan officials, but he had no more funds, and was obliged to return to Koko-nor in a state of great destitution. Ragged and footsore he went back to Siberia, with an excellent collection of objects of natural history, including birds, skins and furs, eleven species of fish, 3000 specimens of insects, 4000 species of plants, and a great number of geological specimens, besides all the topographical observations which he had made. On his return to St. Petersburg he was given the gold medal of the Geographical Society, and was received with enthusiasm. In spite of the rich result which his travels had yielded for natural history, many persons were disappointed, and I must admit that I then shared their views, at the small amount of ethnological and historical information which he had brought back, and they were

inclined to criticise the conduct of these expeditions where it was so important to learn the actual complexion and character of the population. While Prjeválsky had prepared himself for his work in an unusually careful way, he had neglected one thing, the acquirement of a knowledge of native languages, and was therefore obliged to employ two and sometimes three interpreters—that is a Cossack who spoke Tartar, some one else who spoke Mongol, and often a third. Of course, information obtained in this way could not be relied upon as entirely accurate, as I have myself experienced. It was a pity that neither the Government nor the Geographical Society was willing to spend money enough to send with the expedition one or two students of the Academy of Oriental Languages, who could have greatly facilitated the task of Prjeválsky, whom all admitted to be the leader, and the only one at the time possible to conduct such expeditions.

Prjeválsky had the personal pleasure of showing his collection to the Emperor, and was promoted to be Lieutenant-Colonel, and received the right to a pension of \$100 a year, which for a Russian officer is a large sum. More than that, he won the attention of the Grand Duke Constantine who is always awake to everything that concerns science, and who had founded the medal of the Geographical Society which had been given to him ; and, by the Grand Duke's intercession with the Minister of War, he was placed on the General Staff of the Army, from which—in spite of his studies at the Academy and his services—he had been excluded, because his name was too much like a Polish one. In August, 1876, after several detentions, he was ready to start on another

expedition towards Tibet, an amount of about \$15,000 having been allotted to him, which enabled him to supply himself with all that was absolutely necessary.

He crossed the Tian Shan into Kashgaria, which was then ruled by Yakub Bek, and went into the basin of the river Tarim; through a region where no European had ever penetrated, towards the old trade route which ran near the lake called Lob-nor, mentioned by Marco Polo—a route abandoned for many ages on account of the gradual encroachments of sand and desert. He reached the frontiers of Tibet and felt confident that he could have got to Lhasa itself had he not been prevented by illness. The great geographical result of this expedition was the rediscovery of Lob-nor; and of the great mountain chain hitherto unknown, which rose immediately to the south of it. His views were afterwards criticised and combated by Baron Richthofen, the distinguished Chinese scholar, and President of the Berlin Geographical Society, but it is now generally admitted that Prjeválsky was right, and the nearness of the lake to the mountains explains much that was hitherto hazy in the traditional geography of this region, dependent on the accounts of the old Chinese writers. He made, too, one great discovery in natural history, in finding wild camels which had been talked about for 400 years, “thin, slim, not bigger than a horse, and with two humps, with a keen scent; climbing like goats; and hunted by the natives for the sake of their wool.” Of these he was fortunate enough to obtain four skins.

This was a short expedition lasting only eleven months, and was a sort of reconnaissance of the route to Tibet, like his subsequent journey of 1879–80.

When he arrived on the Tibetan frontier, after being asked whether he was English or Russian, he was begged not to advance further. He remarks in his book—which has been well translated into English by Mr. E. Delmar Morgan, who has also translated his “Mongolia,” and who, it is to be hoped, will furnish also a translation of his account of his last journey—“that it was useless for four men to combat the fanaticism of a whole nation;” and he went back across the plains of Tsaidam to the Lake Koko-Nor. Then he tried to go to the sources of the Hoang-Ho, or Yellow River, but was unable to find his way amongst the curious labyrinth of precipices and ravines that open out on every side; and contenting himself with his very rich botanical collections and his ethnographical observations, returned across the Alashan country by the way of Urga to Irkutsk.

The results of the last two journeys of Prjeválsky were so remarkable that he received the Humboldt medal of the Berlin Geographical Society, the great medal of the Royal Geographical Society (London), the medal of the Italian Geographical Society, and others, all of which had their influence in Russia, and enabled the Russian Society to grant him about \$25,000 for his new expedition, during which he explored the sources of the Hoang-Ho, northern Tibet, and the Tarim basin, travelling in all about 5000 miles.

The expedition consisted altogether of twenty-one persons, including Prjeválsky, his assistant, Robarófsky, whose name will, without doubt, be heard again, Koslof, and interpreters, Cossacks, soldiers, etc. He started in 1884, this time for Kiakhta, crossed the desert of Gobi

to the head-waters of the Hoang-Ho, crossing one pass of the height of over 16,000 feet, discovering many lakes on this high plateau, which is spoken of as a marshy plain, the Sing-su-hai or "starry sea" of Chinese historians,—and we can easily imagine why the great Yellow River has at times such inundations, which cause devastation through northern China, and why Embassies are sent from Peking to offer sacrifices in order to propitiate the deities controlling its course. At the height of 11,700 feet he found a great lake to which he gave the name of "Never-Freezing;" and at the height of about 14,000 feet two others, which he called the Russian Lake and the Expedition Lake. Here the attacks from the natives obliged him to descend the river; and finally crossing the range of the Altyn-Tagh he came down to the banks of the Lob-nor, where he remained for several months during the winter. Subsequently, after traversing the desert of Keria and Khotan, he crossed the Bedel Pass, 13,700 feet high and came back to Karakól in the Russian dominions where, singularly enough, he afterwards died.

He was about to start on a new expedition, indefatigable as he was, hoping this time to reach Lhasa; thinking that the English failures on the southern side might increase his chances of getting into this forbidden country of Tibet on the north—when he died. The expedition however is not given up, but will be carried on under the leadership of Colonel Pevtsof, who has already made his mark by several journeys in Mongolia, and proved himself a worthy successor to Prjeválsky.

To us, who take only a scientific interest in the geography of Central and Eastern Asia, it is amusing

to find that while the English highly approve of the political aims, and especially of the political information of the three last English travellers, on routes near and crossing those of Prjeválsky—James, Carey and Younghusband—they are much startled by the final chapter of Prjeválsky's account of his last journey, where he ventures on criticisms of the Chinese Government and officials in Chinese Turkestan, and shows the ease with which the Russians might occupy that country, and the advantages it might give to the Russian Government. Should the Russians ever find it profitable to themselves to occupy this inhospitable and barren waste, either for repressing disorders on their frontier, or for approaching nearer to India, it will perhaps be due not so much to the travels of Prjeválsky—great as their results have been—as to the labors of Mr. Nicholas Petrófsky, who, after a career of many years in Tashkent, has been for ten years past the Russian consul in Kashgar.

If any practical inference may be drawn from Prjeválsky's expeditions, it will be to show what great results can be obtained from an economical expedition, so long as it is under good leadership, and for this Prjeválsky had shown every quality; and by an explorer who has especially qualified himself for the task as Prjeválsky had done. It might be as well, therefore, for us to consider whether we could not do better to explore our continent for ourselves, whether North or South America, rather than leave the greater portion of the task to English, French and Germans.