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MY KIEV CUSHION

Written for "The Listener" by E.T.C.

KIEV is in the news just now and I hope it will soon be in the good news. But this is the story of a cushion, not of a great city.

I'll have to begin at the middle as its beginnings I can only imagine. It is all through my Austrian friend Mitzi that I became the proud possessor of a cushion all the way from Kiev—quite a jump you will admit.

Mitzi has really imaginative and inventive ideas for Christmas presents; so when, early in December, she wrote me, "I have cushionitis just now. But Karl says you are not a very cushiony woman," I waited. I knew it would be something special and would have the style and distinction that rightly belong to Mitzi.

At last the big softish parcel came and I knew it was the cushion. Impatiently I opened it and what did I find? I found something to make me not only exclaim but dance and sing!

It was the rarest and loveliest thing, in hand-woven oatmeal-coloured linen, with a cross-stitch so fine it might have been painted.

There was a red-roofed cottage with a waving tree behind it. At the cottage



Tolstoy may once have leaned his head against it

gate stood a smiling girl greeting an upstanding young man in an amber tunic, tied with a crimson girdle, and with high Russian boots. He was holding a horse by the rein and smiling, as young men will, at the comely young woman. A feathery tree was behind the horse and a very live red dog looked up expectantly, paw up, as if he were going to get a nice juicy bone.

All this was told in cross-stitch, and there were some Russian words printed across the top of the cushion, in red cross-stitch, too, in that funny writing with letters turned the other way or on their heads. Round the top and sides (I want you to see it all properly) was a strip of amber velvet ribbon to repeat the lively accent of the amber tunic.

A letter lay beside it and when I'd finished dancing around I read this: "Golubchik, I know you are the one to enjoy this cushion as it has come all the way from Kiev. While in Palestine I was friendly with a Russian tooth doctor and he often told me of his home in Kiev. Gleb Kabushin was his name, and he had not only known Tolstoy—of course he was pretty old—but Tolstoy had actually stayed at his house. This may have been a face towel or may have adorned a drawing room chair. Either way it would still be romantic. Probably Tolstoy's head has leaned on it or he has dried his hands on it. You will appreciate all this, so gladly I send it to you, a New Zealander, from Mitzi, an Austrian, from Palestine, from Gleb Kabushin, a Russian, via Tolstoy. It is a real international cushion, very old and historical, so treat it tenderly and let none but friendly heads lean on it. I added only the yellow velvet ribbon and the stuffing from feathers of good New Zealand geese."

My Russian cushion was the tour de force of my small room and all who came admired it; and when I told them they also admired the enterprise of my friend Mitzi for being so poetically resourceful.

Next I must get a translation of those exciting-looking words. It happened that a Ukrainian woman lived only round the corner, but she had been here so long she mightn't be able to read the Russian script.

With the cushion under my arm I trotted along to her, and she said, "Wait

till mamma comes out to see me and I will let you know." So, not long afterwards her mother was with her and I was asked to come and meet her.

I found a grand-damish frail old lady, but something vital still sparked in her black eyes. She was all animation to see something from her beloved fatherland and she started to read the words in Russian first. The first word she said was Molodyets, and I couldn't chip in fast enough, "I know that one. That means good fellow, doesn't it?"

"How did you know that?" she asked beaming.

"That is the only Russian word I know," I admitted, "and I found it in a poem in a paper. 'Stalin is my darlin', my darlin', my darlin', Stalin is my darlin', the old molodyets.'"

I found out then that the words meant exactly what the cross-stitched picture indicated: The good fellow with his horse greets the charming peasant girl. The word for charming was, I think, krasnoya—something like that, and very pleasant sounding.

"We had many such things in my old home in Nikolaiev," the old lady went on. "They are all hand done; the peasants made up the designs too. They were very clever."

I often look at that cushion and every time my eyes are gladdened and refreshed. It is a small though concrete link between me and that vast continent. I imagine first the lusty peasant girl who thought it out and her eager, patient fingers translating her ideas into form. Her work was anonymous, but deals with eternal themes and will endure.

This Kiev cushion is probably a hundred years old—or even more. It has heard the rolling Russian vowels and consonants, and then it heard Austrian, and now the plain New Zealand speech. It may have been in the back of a chair where Tolstoy once leaned back and smelt the sweet smell of the lilacs from large open windows.

It has looked out on a cold blanket of snow. It has seen happy gatherings with the samovar bubbling where gay young people sucked their clear, thin tea through cubes of sugar and shouted and talked in their volatile Slavic way.

There are pickled cucumbers somewhere near and freshly-baked rye bread and thick sour cream and curd cakes and little cakes scattered with poppy or caraway seeds. And perhaps an enormous homely loaf—sitny it is called—with a few currants and a golden crust. There are little saucers of cherry jam and cranberry jelly.

Far away back into time I see the Tartar hordes (and now the Nazis!), the Cossacks, Catherine and Peter the Great, Ivan the Terrible, Prince Igor, Boris Goudounov, Stenka Rasin, Alexander Nevsky, Nevsky Prospect in old Petrograd, Petroushka, the steppes in snow in red sarafans, the huge rivers whose names give the tongue a new gymnastic.

I see the peasants stamping their furious Gopaks, the fine ladies and gentlemen dancing Mazurkas under the soft light of crystal chandeliers. I see the great fairs of Nijni Novgorod, the land of Gogol, Pushkin and Lermontov, land of Tolstoy, Dostoyevski, Turgenev, Tchekov and Gorki, Glinka, Moussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov and Shostakovitch. I see the bold architects of a new world, Lenin and Stalin. . . .

All this—and much more—Mitzi gave me when she gave me the Kiev cushion!

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