IN MEMORY OF
PAUSTOVSKY

A tribute to the work of a great Soviet writer from the Vice-President of the Communist Party of Australia.

DOYEN OF SOVIET WRITERS, Konstantin Paustovsky died in July, 1968, at the age of 76. His passing attracted scant attention in Australia, for Paustovsky’s writing was little known in this country prior to the recent publication in English of the first four volumes of his autobiography *Story of a Life*.

Born on May 31, 1892, Paustovsky published his first story in 1911. He gave up journalism in 1927 to devote his life to literature. Paustovsky was a beautiful writer about beauty, nature, life and people. He made no secret that his writing was guided by the contention of the famous Russian poet Alexander Blok, who wrote:

Erase the accidental features
and you will see — life is beautiful . . .

Obviously he also followed the practice of Leo Tolstoy, who claimed:

The hero of my tale whom I love with all my heart,
whom I have tried to depict in all his beauty and
who always was, is and will be beautiful. is
Truth.

Paustovsky captured the spirit advocated by these great Russians and his writings continued their traditions. His famous stories *The Gulf of Kara-Bugaz* about the small gulf on the Central Asian side of the Caspian Sea which is almost pure glauber salts, and *Colchis*, of Golden Fleece fame, are beautiful and moving stories of wonderful places and people. *The Golden Rose*, about his experiences as a writer and traveller and about other writers such as Ivan Bunin and Alexander Blok is crammed full of sensitivity, compassion and minute observation of nature and life. These works were eclipsed only by the autobiography to which he devoted himself from 1947 onwards. The first volumes of *Story of a Life* have received great praise from critics in “western” countries as being exceedingly high calibre both regarding technique and integrity.

The first volume *Childhood and Schooldays* is a lyrical yet realistic picture of his life, and life at the turn of the century.
in various parts of old Russia. It is perhaps best described by Paustovsky's own comment that "only grown-ups know how nice it is to be a child".

_Slow Approach of Thunder_, the second volume, deals with the period of the First World War up until the Russian February revolution. Forced by the exigencies of the war to give up his studies, Paustovsky worked as tram conductor, medical orderly at the front and on a medical train, and later as a journalist. _Slow Approach of Thunder_ is an interesting and moving description of the suffering caused by war and of the problems building up which led to the revolutionary situation in 1917. In this volume Paustovsky writes of the tragic death of his first love.

Some press critics queried whether Paustovsky would be able to continue his story of post-revolutionary life with the vividness, realism and integrity displayed in the first two volumes. Indeed the experiences of Soviet literature illustrate that these were fair queries. Speaking at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU, the leading literary figure Alexander Tvardovsky pinpointed such problems:

The defect of many of our books is primarily the absence of the truth of life, the author's trepidations, his wondering what is permissible and what is not . . . This is nothing but a concession to the methods and habits belonging to those years of our development which were in general marked by a spirit of mistrust and suspicion that is particularly ruinous to art.

Such problems, whilst overcome to some degree, are still present in Soviet writing. Yet Paustovsky's following volumes _In That Dawn_ and _Years of Hope_ are perhaps even more interesting, vivid and realistic than the former.

_In That Dawn_ covers the years from 1917 to 1920. It portrays the zest, confusion, hardship and purpose of that period. The volume commences with this description of the mass democratic atmosphere prevailing:

In the course of a few months, Russia spoke out everything she had kept to herself for centuries.

Day and night, from February to the autumn of 1917, the country seethed from end to end like one continuous rowdy meeting. Crowds shouted in city squares, in front of monuments, in railways stations smelling of chlorine, in factories, villages, markets, and in every yard and stairway of every house which showed the slightest sign of habitation.

Furious yells of "Chuck him out"! or hoarse, enthusiastic hurrahs would suddenly drown out the fervid eloquence—pledges, accusations, appeals. The noise rumbled, like the thunder of carts on cobbles, from crossroads to crossroads.

The meetings in Moscow were particularly heated and spirited. There, someone was always being tossed up in the air, or dragged off the Pushkin Monument by the belt of his greatcoat, or kissed and scratched by unshaven chins. Calloused hands were wrung; an intellectual had his hat knocked off—only to be carried in triumph the moment after, while he held on to his bobbing pincenez and
called curses upon this or that destroyer of Russia's freedom. Frenzied outbursts of clapping sounded like the drumming of hail on pavements.

As it happened, the spring of 1917 was cold, and hail often covered the new grass in the boulevards with its crackling grain.

No one ever asked permission to speak. Everyone took it for granted.

Paustovsky relates his experiences during the fighting in Moscow, his "capture" by anarchists, his travels to the Ukraine, brushes with bandits, life in Kiev which was occupied, surrounded or raided periodically by Germans, Denikin forces, Makhno bands or the troops of this or that Ataman. As well as describing his experiences with relatives, writers and artists, bandits, anarchists and communists, the writer frequently reverts to his views of art and literature:

... I was convinced that genuine literature was the truest expression of the mind and heart of a free man, that only there could the human spirit reveal itself in all its power, richness and complexity, redeeming as it were, the many failings of our commonplace lives. It seemed to me a gift from the future. It reflected man's perpetual longing for perfect harmony and undying love, cherished in spite of love's daily birth and death. As the droning of a seashell makes us wish for the quiet expanse of the sea at dawn, or the smoke of rising clouds, on the freshness of a forest, or a child's voice, or deep, all-embracing silence, so literature draws us to the golden age of our desires.

The volume concludes with Paustovsky's arrival in Odessa and the evacuation of the White forces under Denikin.

*Years of Hope* is primarily about Odessa under blockade in 1921; the hunger, poverty and hardship are vividly portrayed as well as the vigorous intellectual life engaged in by Paustovsky. He worked again as a journalist for a Soviet departmental information service (how this eventuated is an amusing story in itself) and later for the substantial, yet paper-starved periodical *The Seamen*. Of enormous interest and instruction are Paustovsky's meetings and friendships with famous writers Isaac Babel, Valentin Katayev and Eduard Bagritsky and Ilya Ilf. Ilf (real name Feinzilberg) later collaborated with Ivan Petrov to write *Little Golden America, The Golden Calf* and *Twelve Chairs*. He lived in those years as an electrical home repairs man.

Of particular significance are the descriptions of Paustovsky's meeting with Babel and the friendship and discussions which developed from that meeting. Little has been published in the Soviet Union about Babel, of *Red Cavalry* and *Tales of Odessa* fame, who was arrested in 1937 and later brutally murdered by Stalin's thugs. Babel's stories were published in the 20's and early 30's. By the first Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934 he had ceased writing and spoke there of himself being master of a new literary genre, "the master of the genre of silence". Earlier the *Red Cavalry* stories had earned Babel the stern rebuke of Budyonny, his former army commander, as being a slander against
the Red Cossacks. Paustovsky writes of Babel as being “a born unveiler of truth”. There seems little doubt that Babel chafed under the forced conformism of the Stalin period and paid the awful penalty.

Babel was in his late twenties when Paustovsky met him in Odessa. He lived with his family on the outskirts of Odessa. During a long evening chat Babel tells Paustovsky something of his writing methods related in the chapter “Slave Labor”. Babel produced his famous short story about Lyubka the Cossack woman of which he had written no less than twenty-two variations, thus indicating the tremendous effort and exactitude required by Babel in his literary work. Babel tells Paustovsky —

... a work of art is not a pot-boiler. You write several versions of the same story — so what? I’m not even sure the twenty-second is fit to publish. It looks as if it could still be tightened up. It’s all this elimination that makes for power of language and style. Of language and style, he repeated. You take anything — an anecdote, a bit of gossip — and you turn it into a story you yourself can’t bear to put down. It glows like a jewel. It’s round like a pebble. It hangs together by the cohesion of its parts. And its cohesion is so powerful that even lightening can’t split it up. People will read it. And remember it. And they’ll laugh over it, not because it’s cheerful but because you always feel like laughing when somebody has brought something off. I have the nerve to talk about bringing it off only because we are alone. And you won’t tell anyone about this conversation so long as I live. You must give me your word. It’s no credit to me of course. Goodness knows how someone like me, the son of a small broker, gets possessed by the demon or the angel of art. But whichever it is, I have to obey him like a slave, like a pack mule. I’ve sold him my soul, and I have to write as well as I know how. It’s my happiness, or my cross. More of a cross, I suppose. But take it away, and every drop of my blood will go with it and I won’t be worth a chewed up fag-end. That’s the work that makes a human being out of me and not just an Odessa street-corner philosopher. He paused, then went on more bitterly. I’ve got no imagination. All I’ve got is the longing for it. You remember Blok — “I see the enchanted shore, the enchanted distance”. He got there all right, but I won’t. I see that shore unbearably far off. I’m too sober. But I thank my lucky stars that at least I long for it. I work till I drop, I do all I can because I want to be at the feast of the gods and I’m afraid they’ll throw me out.

An amusing and revealing incident is described by Paustovsky. In hungry, war-torn Odessa the local poets organised a poetry reading in the city hall. The poster announcing the performance concluded with the statement, “At the end of the evening the poet Shengeli will be beaten up”. Shengeli was an important poet in Odessa at that time. The expensive tickets were sold out within three hours. A fracas did ensue which ended the performance, but it wasn’t the advertised beating. Poets, little theatre companies and even political organisers could possibly take note of this Odessa experience!

This fourth volume concludes with Paustovsky having left Odessa, shivering with cold and hunger — in Sebastopol, braving bandits and being shot at, in order to walk at night to the house
where Anton Chekhov had lived. Yet for all the hardships of the period, Paustovsky burned with hope and faith for Russia, for mankind and for the future. Standing amid the snow before Chekhov's house, he thought as follows:

And suddenly I felt the nearness and certainty of happiness. Why, I don't know. Perhaps because of that pure snow-whiteness which looked like the distant radiance of a beautiful country, or because of my sense of sonship — long unexpressed and driven to the back of my mind — towards Russia, towards Chekhov. He had loved his country in many ways, and he had loved her as the shy bride about whom he wrote in his last story. He had firmly believed that she was going unwaveringly towards justice, beauty and happiness.

I, too, believed in that happiness — that it would come to my country, to starved and frozen Crimea, and also to me. I felt this as a swift and joyful impulse, like a passionate look of love. It warmed my heart and dried my tears of loneliness and fatigue.

This theme frequents Paustovsky's autobiographical writings. Even without the two volumes yet to be published in English Story of a Life will be living testimony to a wonderful writer, a great patriot, a lover of humanity and truth.

In 1967 Paustovsky was awarded the Order of Lenin. This decoration followed two Orders of the Red Banner. Following his death Pravda stated that he belonged to the generation of writers who laid the foundations of Soviet literature and that he educated many now famous writers. Despite such awards and comments Paustovsky was often frowned upon by officialdom. This was evident in the speech of leading literary conservative Vselolod Kochetov at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in the following terms:

To be frank, however, we must admit that among us remain dour writers of memoirs, who look more to the past than to the present and future. With their twisted outlook and with a zeal worthy of a better cause, they poke around in the refuse of their well-frayed memories to unearth mouldering literary corpses and present them as something that still lives.

This constituted a none-too-subtle attack on Paustovsky and Ilya Ehrenburg to say nothing of its savoriness or otherwise.

Paustovsky was the "father" of the anthology Pages from Tarusa published in the USSR and abroad some years ago. Tarusa is a town on the Oka river where Paustovsky lived and where historically a large number of writers and artists have lived and worked. This book contains stories and poems written by "new" and "old" writers many of whom have been in disfavor including one of the most talented young short story writers in the Soviet Union, Yuri Kazakov.

Recently Paustovsky joined other writers and intellectuals in petitioning Government leaders with expressions of deep concern at the circumstances surrounding the trial of A. Ginzberg and his associates. And so another man has died; a man who will be missed, whose name and work will live for a long time to come.