

A  
Russian  
Childhood

*Sofya Kovalevskaya*

A  
Russian  
Childhood

TRANSLATED, EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY  
BEATRICE STILLMAN

With an Analysis of Kovalevskaya's Mathematics  
by P. Y. Kochina  
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Springer Science+Business Media New York

This book has been selected for inclusion in the *Sources and Translation Series of the Russian Institute*, Columbia University.

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AMS`classification 01A70

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### Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Kovalevskaiã, Sof'ia Vasil'evna Korvin-Krukovskaïã,  
1850-1891.  
A Russian childhood.

Translation of *Vospominaniã detstva*.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Kovalevskaiã, Sof'ia Vasil'evna Korvin-Krukovskaïã, 1850-1891. 2. Mathematicians—Russia—Biography. I. Title.  
QA29.K67A3513 510'.92'4 [B] 78-12955

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Originally published by Springer-Verlag New York in 1978.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1978

ISBN 978-1-4419-2808-5

ISBN 978-1-4757-3839-1 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-4757-3839-1

For Pelageya Yakovlevna Kochina,  
untiring scholar and generous spirit,  
in admiration and friendship

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
CHAPTER ONE	
<i>Earliest Memories</i>	<i>47</i>
CHAPTER TWO	
<i>The Thief</i>	<i>59</i>
CHAPTER THREE	
<i>Metamorphosis</i>	<i>77</i>
CHAPTER FOUR	
<i>Palibino</i>	<i>82</i>
CHAPTER FIVE	
<i>Miss Smith</i>	<i>98</i>

*Contents*

CHAPTER SIX

*Uncle Pyotr Vasilievich Krukovsky* 111

CHAPTER SEVEN

*Uncle Fyodor Fyodorovich Shubert* 124

CHAPTER EIGHT

*My Sister* 133

CHAPTER NINE

*Anyuta's Nihilism* 145

CHAPTER TEN

*Anyuta's First Literary Experiments* 155

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Our Friendship with Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky* 173

*Notes* 201

*An Autobiographical Sketch* 213

*On the Scientific Work of Sofya Kovalevskaya*, by P. Y. Polubarinova-Kochina, USSR Academy of Sciences 231

## Preface

In the year 1889 Sofya Vasilievna Kovalevskaya, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Stockholm, published her recollections of growing up in mid-nineteenth century Russia. Professor Kovalevskaya was already an international celebrity, and partly for the wrong reasons: less as the distinguished mathematician she actually was than as a “mathematical lady”—a bizarre but fascinating phenomenon.\*

Her book was an immediate success. She had written it in Russian, but its first publication was a translation into Swedish, the language of her adopted homeland, where it appeared thinly disguised as a novel under the title *From Russian Life: the Rajevski Sisters* (Sonja Kovalevsky. Ur ryska lifvet. Systrarna Rajevski. Heggström, 1889).

In the following year the book came out in Russia in two

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\*“My gifted Mathematical Assistant Mr. Hammond exclaimed . . . ‘Why, this is the first handsome mathematical lady I have ever seen!’” Letter to S. V. Kovalevskaya from J. J. Sylvester, Professor of Mathematics, New College, Oxford, Dec. 25, 1886.

## Preface

installments of the journal *Vestnik Evropy* (Messenger of Europe), in the autobiographical form and the language in which it had been written. It was called *Memories of Childhood*. The editor of another journal, *Russkaya starina*, one Mikhail Ivanovich Semevsky, went so far as to maintain that Kovalevskaya's work was worthy of standing side by side with Tolstoy's *Childhood*: an exaggerated but understandable tribute to a native daughter from a public figure who, twenty-seven years before, had presumed to propose marriage to her elder sister Anyuta and been rejected by their father as a penniless upstart.

The success of her book in her native land was to be one of the last sources of pleasure in Kovalevskaya's life, for within six months, in February of 1891, at the age of forty-one, she was dead of pneumonia. Within the next few years the book was translated into French, German, Dutch, Danish, Polish, Czech and Japanese. Two English translations (riddled with errors of the type made notorious in the parodies of Vladimir Nabokov) appeared in 1895: one in London, the other in New York.

For the contemporary reader Kovalevskaya's memoir still retains its original freshness as a personal document. At the same time it vividly recreates a segment of the social history of the period in its portrait of a wealthy landowning gentry family, struggling to preserve its stability against the erosions of an era which witnessed the emancipation of serfs from their masters, the rebellion of children against their fathers, and the rise of radical political groups armed with limitless faith in the power of science to bring about a just social order.

The English version presented here was translated from the 1974 Russian edition of *Vospominaniya detstva* contained in S. V. Kovalevskaya, *Vospominaniya i povesti*,



## Preface

Nauka, Moscow, 1974 (the most complete collection to date of Kovalevskaya's fictional and critical writing), with a few corrections of minor errors discovered in comparing the 1974 text with the editions of 1951 and 1961 edited by S. Ya. Shtraikh. It includes the first translation into English of the chapter "Palibino" from Kovalevskaya's own text. The early Russian editions did not include this chapter, and the Shtraikh editions (published before Kovalevskaya's original manuscript of the chapter was discovered in the archives of the USSR Academy of Sciences) had utilized a translation from Swedish into Russian done by Kovalevskaya's daughter, Sofya Vladimirovna.

Certain other revisions should be mentioned as well. In the first Russian editions some of the chapters were left untitled, and Shtraikh supplied his own titles for these. The translator has substituted titles more appropriate to the content of the chapters. The chapter called "Palibino," which had been inserted by Shtraikh as Chapter Seven, now stands as Chapter Four, where it seems to fit best chronologically. The present translation also names the family's Polish tutor, who remained nameless in Kovalevskaya's manuscript for reasons described in the notes. In a few instances, sentences or paragraphs which appeared in the Swedish edition, but not in the Russian, have been included in the translation. These insertions are indicated wherever they occur. Finally, the book's title itself was changed to *A Russian Childhood*, in the hope of evoking some more concrete association in the minds of English-speaking readers than is called forth by the name of Kovalevskaya, which by now is almost unknown outside of mathematical circles (where she has been cited as "the most important woman mathematician prior to the 20th century").

Kovalevskaya's memoir comes to a close with the Dostoevsky episode, when she was fifteen years old and only

## Preface

just beginning to have some intimation of the possibilities of adult life opening up before her. In order to fill out the picture, therefore, supplementary material has been provided. This includes Kovalevskaya's own *Autobiographical Sketch*, an account of the highlights of her scientific career published posthumously in *Russkaya starina* and prepared for publication by her brother Fyodor.

Academician P. Y. Polubarinova-Kochina, of the Institute for Problems in Mechanics of the USSR Academy of Sciences, has contributed an article explaining the significance of Kovalevskaya's mathematics.

Finally, the translator has supplied a biographical introduction which attempts to set Kovalevskaya's memoir into a broader social and historical context. It first appeared, in briefer and somewhat different form, in *Russian Literature Triquarterly* ("Sofya Kovalevskaya: Growing Up in the Sixties," No. 9, Spring, 1974, 276–302).

Many people have contributed valuable help and suggestions in the preparation of this book; none of them bears responsibility for its deficiencies. I would like first of all to acknowledge my indebtedness to those scholars who contributed articles and commentary to the various Soviet editions of *Vospominaniya detstva*: most particularly to S. Ya. Shtraikh, through whose work I first became acquainted with the complex and fascinating interaction of the Korvin-Krukovsky and Kovalevsky families with the larger society they inhabited.

My gratitude is due to Dr. Neal Koblitz of the Mathematics Department of Harvard University and now a fellow-researcher in Moscow, for the graciousness with which he undertook to translate Academician Kochina's article into English. Special thanks go to Joan Thatcher (Zhanochka Tetcher) and to Sharon Miles, for aid and comfort when it was most needed. As ever, I am in debt to Rose Raskin of Columbia University: valued reader, stern critic

*Preface*

and priceless friend. To Michael Stillman, who is at the center of my life, there is no adequate way to acknowledge or measure my gratitude.

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*Moscow*

*May, 1978*