Chapter 24  The Freeing of the Serfs

Elizaveta Kovalskaia was born a serf in Russia. Her mother was a peasant and her father was a wealthy landowner. After acquiring an education, Kovalskaia became a feminist and led efforts to organize factory workers in the late 1800s. The reading below, taken from her autobiography, describes her feelings about servitude and emancipation in 1861. Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.

From my earliest years, life seemed incomprehensible and cruel to me. I think I was barely six when I became aware that there were landowners and peasant serfs in the world; that landowners could sell people... 

On long winter evenings in the village, I would quietly make my way into the maids' workroom and hide myself in a corner. There I would listen while the maidservants told each other their sad stories as they sat at their spinning wheels in the light of the blazing stove. Once, one of them took notice of my presence: “Take it from me!” she declared. “You'll grow up someday, too—and then they'll sell you.” I was tormented by nightmares; I dreamed they were selling me.

I don't remember my father selling any of his peasants. But before I was born, he did buy a young, intelligent musician—a violinist... After buying the man, my father gave him his freedom, but he stayed on voluntarily to live with us as the steward of one of my father's estates... It was he who taught me to read and write... 

The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 made a tremendous impression on me. For a long time, I felt literally drunk with joy.

When we moved to Kharkov, my father began to take an active interest in my education; he was preparing to make a lady of me. For this purpose, he hired a Frenchwoman to teach me music and dance, and for the other subjects, a Polish student who had been exiled to Kharkov because of his involvement in the Polish uprising. This student told me enthralling stories of the Poles' struggles for their freedom, and I wept because I was not Polish and could not struggle for my freedom.

At the age of eleven, I was placed in a private boarding school for girls. The founder of the school—a woman with progressive views—had set it up beautifully... However, the school was soon closed because it had failed to get financial support... In particular, parents had gotten upset when gymnastics were introduced... and we had to dress for them in loose-fitting men's clothing.

When the school closed, I enrolled in a gymnazia [a school that taught the classics]...

Vocabulary  Use a dictionary to find the meanings of the following words:

incomprehensible

enthalring

orientation

sanctioned

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Comprehension

1. How old was Elizaveta when she learned that serfs could be bought and sold? 

2. Why was Elizaveta tormented by nightmares as a child? 

3. What people had a strong influence on Elizaveta as she grew up? Why? 

4. What was Elizaveta's reaction to the emancipation of the serfs? 

5. Place an X next to the statements that are accurate.
   - Elizaveta identified with the Polish struggle for independence.
   - Elizaveta's father was a serf.
   - Elizaveta formed a self-education group for women.
   - Elizaveta attended public trials in Kharkov.

Critical Thinking

1. How would you characterize Elizaveta's father? Give examples to support your answer. 

2. From the selection, what can you infer about the status of women in nineteenth-century Russia. Give examples to support your answer. 

3. What can you infer from the reading about the effects of emancipation on the serfs? 

4. Why do you think Elizaveta read books with "a definite political orientation" and took part in a study group that "concentrated on social issues"? 

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