

Our Wicklow Heritage

A community heritage archive of County Wicklow

Michael Tolstoy of Delgany

By Anna Bykova, Greystones Archaeological and Historical Society

If you go in through the main gates of Christ Church in Delgany, Co. Wicklow, and follow right to the very back wall, you'll find there a double-grave with a very unusual for this place Russian Orthodox cross on. On the tablet you can read:

MYRIAM

Countess Koutousoff-Tolstoy

née Comtes de Villers-Waroux

1906 - 1971

also

count Michael Koutouzow-Tolstoy

1896 - 1980

Many locals remember Michael Tolstoy as a real gentleman and remember his language school at Easton house. Just a few of them know the full story.

Full name of Michael Tolstoy was Michael Pavlovitch Golenishchev-Koutousoff-Tolstoy. He was a descendant of a famous Russian Field marshal Michael Koutousoff, who defeated Napoleon in Russia, but not a grandson of the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy as you could think. His family didn't have a title, but family members were called counts and countesses often. It was a common mistake with this noble and famous family related to many great Russian noble families.

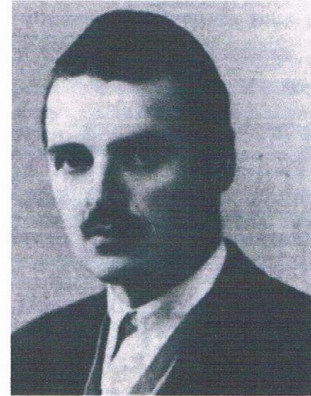
Michael Tolstoy, born 21 October 1896 in Tzarskoe selo (a municipal town Pushkin, part of Saint-Petersburg now), was the only son of Pavel Golenishchev-Koutousoff-Tolstoy (1869-1909) and Ekaterina Sheremetiev (1864-1942). Before marriage Ekaterina had been for three years a maid of honour to Maria Feodorovna, the widow of Emperor Alexander III. His father was a good brave soldier, but a bad husband. Michael's mother decided to leave her husband and went to Paris in 1901, when Michael was around 4-5 years old. In 1902 the marriage was dissolved. His father died at 1909. On 1 January 1909 he was in the rank of colonel and served in the General Staff in Saint-Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire, he had medals and the gold weapon for courage.

On 4 March 1907 his mother remarried, when Michael was 9. Her second husband was Baron Ludwig Karlovich von Knorring (1859-1930), a big landowner in the Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire and a Russian diplomat. Later he served as the Russian minister in Darmstadt and equerry to the Emperor. The step-father did bring Michael Tolstoy up and influenced him. The family moved to Germany where Ludwig von Knorring had a villa in Baden-Baden. In 1910-1911 Baron von Knorring was nominated Russian Minister to Hesse and Saxe-Coburg, it was an important post as the Romanovs liked to visit this small Grand-Duchy. During one of the visits young Michael Tolstoy was presented to his Tsar and to the Kaiser. He described it in his memories: "Poor Nicholas II gave me a very kindly smile, which, for no explainable reason, made me feel terribly shy. The Kaiser took the bunch of us in at a glance and said curtly: "Ought to make good officers those boys". Both events took about 20 seconds each..." [1].

Michael spent four years, 1911-1914, in a boarding school Birkenruh in Livonia (Latvia now). At 1914, when the Great War started, his relatives decided to move him in a Russian school. But Michael, a son of top Russian aristocrats, had very poor Russian. He had to have intensive private lessons to pass his living certificate, and on September 1915 was admitted to the Imperial Alexander Lyceum in Saint-Petersburg that was the best Russian university educating sons of the nobility who should afterwards occupy posts in the Imperial service. He spent there just 9 months and it was the most valuable months in his life.

He joined the army in June 1916, he entered the Horse Guards as a private in a special rank 'volunteer', which was common for young gentlemen of his origin to serve on some preferential terms and be promoted to officers fast. He spent 6 months at the front, then 6 months at the military academy Corps des Pages in Saint-Petersburg.

But it was 1917 in Russia. It was very dangerous for a young officer to be in a big city at that time, and Michael was sent in Pavlovka, the Wolkonsky Estate in Tambov region in the centre of the European Russia. He was engaged to Princess Marie Wolkonsky, resided there, but soon they had to leave Pavlovka as the estate, the lands and the house were nationalized. It was time of chaos and anarchy around. Marie Wolkonsky and Michael Tolstoy married on 4 February 1918. Next month the Red Committee of Pavlovka invited Marie Wolkonsky with her husband to return. The couple received a small house (not the manor), 2 cows, two horses and peacocks from the park. It's interesting that peasants lived around Pavlovka asked Marie to be a godmother to their children and she didn't refuse. Some months were quiet enough, but then in July 1918 some communists arrived to set up a tribunal and condemned Michael to death as an "enemy of the people". Michael should be shoot in the morning. That night an old coachman saved him and Marie, he made the guards drunk, helped the couple to leave the house and took them in his cart to a distant railway station, where they found a train.



Michael Tolstoy, 1945



Myriam Tolstoy, 1945



Language school in Easton House, Delgany

Their plan was to get out of Russia. And Michael decided to apply to the German Ambassador in Moscow Count Mirbach, who was a friend of his stepfather Baron von Knorring. But the destiny was not kind to Michael, he found himself in front of the German Embassy at the moment of the assignation of Count Mirbach. He was arrested and accused of the murder. Second time in his life he could have been shot, but thanks to his knowledge of German he was able to clear himself of the charge. Then Michael and Marie managed to move to Petrograd (new name of Saint-Petersburg) to Michael's grandmother Sheremetev. Luckily Michael met on a street one of his friends from Birkenruh who helped people from the Baltic states to be returned to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania which became independent states in 1918. This friend put their names in the list for the Balts leaving Russia. So, in August 1918 Marie and Michael Tolstoy left Russia forever in a cattle truck sitting on their own luggage.

After stops in deferent countries and some risky and unpleasant adventures, Michael and Marie arrived in Paris to Michael's grandmother who still had a house there. His paternal grandmother was countess Catherine d'Andrini (1849-1937), she was a great heiress, a great beauty and one of friends of Empress Eugenie. Princess Cathrine Radziwill wrote about her: "Her Madonna-like features and straight profile were the despair of any painter... she was good, kind, amiable, sweet, and charming" [2]. At the age of 18 she made a lovmatch with a young secretary at the Russian Embassy in Paris Pavel Golenishchev-Koutousoff-Tolstoy (1839-1914), Michael's grandfather. Her husband had a good career, he was a chamberlain at the Russian Court, he held various court positions for 50 years, ending at his death as Great Master of the Hounds.

About the days in Paris we know from Michael's aunt Mary Frothingham Koutousoff-Tolstoy (1884-1976), who was a widow of Michael's uncle Alexander: "I felt it made the house quite cheerful to have some young people there, but it was a long time, following their harrowing experiences, before they once more learned to smile" [3]. Michael obtained a position in the Russian Military Bureau, and he and his wife made some extra money by playing in the cinema. But the pay was inadequate for their needs. All the Tolstoy funds that were deposited in the St.Petersburg banks were nationalised by the Soviets.

In 1920 Michael and Marie went to Baden-Baden to Michael's mother and stepfather. Michael had some income there as a go-between the aristocracy and antique dealers. In 1924 the couple moved to Belgium as Michael received a good position in Brussels. Their live became very drab and boring, Marie had some problems with her health and she died on 10 December 1929; she left Michael with their son Hilarion aged 2.

Soon, one more tragedy happened. On 28 December 1930 his stepfather died in Vevey, Switzerland, where Michael's parents moved after selling their villa in Baden-Baden.

Michael married again. On 14 July 1933 in Brussels he married Jeanne Francoise Marie Josephine du Roy de Blicquy (1898-1985), a daughter of Edouard du Roy de Blicquy and his wife Elizabeth née Barones Simonis. But the girl returned to her parents. Michael Tolstoy didn't like to speak about this marriage, many of his friends didn't even know about it.

Then Michael Tolstoy spent some years in the Baltic just before the WWII. In 1939 he received the divorce in Riga, Latvia and married again on Marie Louise (Myriam) de Villers d'Awans de Waroux, from the Belgian nobility. They didn't have money, even the wedding rings were brass curtain rings. They decided to go to Yugoslavia, as it was the cheapest country in Europe and it seemed to be outside the war zone. Later they lived for some time in Transylvania, Romania. Michael had some kinds of job, he was a language teacher, he tried to manage a chicken farm, helped to decorate rooms and parks.

On 12 July 1940 his only son Hilarion died in France in a car incident. In 1942 Michael's mother died in Switzerland. The couple could not go to either funeral, people could not travel for personal reasons in Hitler's Europe. Michael's mother left Michael some money and they moved to Budapest, Hungary.

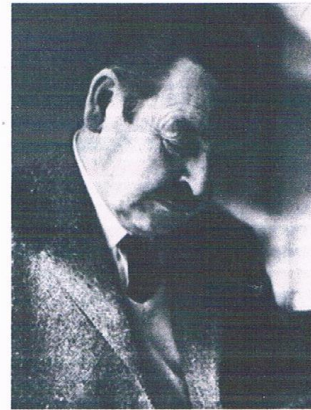
Now the most interesting and most controversial part of his life started. At the beginning they had an active social life in Budapest, but many people were suspicious about them or even hated the couple. They could be arrested by the Hungarian secret service, but fortunately, someone advised them to disappear from Budapest and spend some months far from the capital. Then in April 1944 they were offered to join the Swedish Red Cross. Michael Tolstoy was very disappointed of his work there as it was more secretary job, not a real help. He decided to do something real and practical. He visited the nearest and biggest P.O.W. camp Veszékény with gifts for the soviet inmates. And he organized an international hospital for wounded soldiers and wounded civilians, under the protection of the Swedish Red Cross, there was a department for soviet soldiers as well. To be honest he was the first and only person who cared about soviet soldiers at that time. The nurses in the hospital were Jews, and this work helped them to hide from the Germans. Until the end of his life he was proud of his efforts.

Tolstoy in his hospital at the edge of the city was the first of the representatives of the Red Cross or the Swedish Legation who came in contact with the Red Army. After meeting with the chief of the Soviet Medical Headquarters Michael Tolstoy was arrested by SMERSH. After two weeks of questioning, examination and interrogation he was released.

Firstly he worked as a go-between the Russian Kommandantura and all the citizens of allied or neutral countries. He should interview them and see to their repatriation. Then he worked as an interpreter for Russian authorities. And after the war Michael and his wife Myriam stayed on in Budapest working as language teachers for Russian military personnel. Michael Tolstoy wanted to be helpful, wanted to use his language knowledge to help people during the war, wanted to help his ex-fellow citizen. But the Soviets didn't trust him and didn't like him. On the other hand, in the Western Europe Michael Tolstoy's postwar service with the Soviets in Hungary looked very suspicious. There were rumours about him as a possible Soviet agent.

In January 1951, the Tolstoy's were expelled from the communist Hungary. Just before their leaving Myriam was converted from the Roman Catholic to the Russian Orthodox Faith. They moved to France, then in Belgium and soon applied for the residence permission in Ireland, where Michael's old Lyceum friend Nikolay Couriss was living and successfully running a Language school at Collon, Co.Louth.

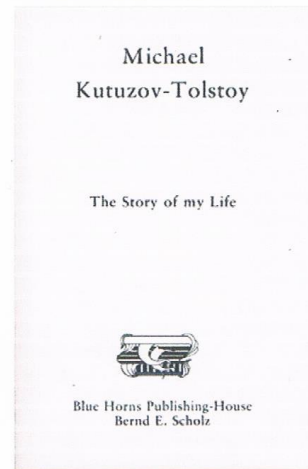
The first years in Ireland were difficult years. For many years the couple was under close police surveillance, especially if they visited the continent or Britain. Secondly, they had to work hard, they were not young, they were at



Michael Tolstoy, 1970s



Michael Tolstoy and Kitty Tenanty, around 1970s



their 50s and they were very tired people after all events. They bought an old house with a big garden, it was called Greenlawn in village Collon, Co.Louth, close to Michael's friend Nikolay Couriss. They started market-gardening and sold their produce in the local markets. They sold home-made jams, chutneys, vegetables, flowers. Myriam was one of the firsts who started to do yoghurt in Ireland. A further interest was the breeding of budgerigars, she won some prizes in Dublin. Also they wanted to give language lessons, but the results were not encouraging. Michael Tolstoy gave a few broadcast talks on Radio Eireann in a weekly program for women "Between Ourselves".

In the early days of 1959 Myriam's mother died and left her some money. It changed their life completely. Myriam bought Easton House in Delgany, they repaired it and made a nice garden. And they started their language school. It was popular as the school worked as a guest house and offered language lessons for extra. They offered English, French, German and Russian. Students came from Germany, Belgium, France and the UK, but never from Ireland. All through the 1960s they took an average 50 students for summer months. Myriam liked to teach young pupils, she was always better with the beginners, Michael was with more advanced students.

They paid social visits to people of good standing in the country and have interesting social life. It was happy time for them. Some of their students became their good friends.

On 31 January 1971 Myriam died, aged 65. The funeral service was conducted by a Russian Orthodox archbishop Anthony of Sourzh (a very famous person in the Russian Orthodox community), three Roman Catholic priests and a Church of Ireland rector. In 1970s the school still worked, but there were only a few guests.

Until his death Michael Tolstoy was a Russian patriot and was very proud of the successes of the Soviet Russia in science, cosmonautics, military activities etc. He had some correspondence with the USSR.

He was a very charming person, fluent in four languages Russian, English, French, and German. He was a gentleman with perfect manners. He died 5 September 1980, aged 85 years. There are no more people with the surname Golenishchev-Koutouzoff-Tolstoy. This branch became extinct with the death of Michael.

He left behind a number of antiques and items associated with the Old Russia. These were sold on auction in 1981. All money were inherited by Kitty Tenanty, the housekeeper, who was with the family since their first years in Collon and was very devoted to the family. She died in Greystones in 2008.

Michael and Myriam Tolstoy's memories published in English and German.

After his death, the reputation of Michael Tolstoy was ruined. In the autobiography of Pavel Sudoplatov, a top-rank officer of the Soviet intelligence services, Michael Tolstoy was called a long term Soviet agent supplying reports about the Swedish Legation in Budapest and especially about Raoul Wallenberg who according to Michael's reports "was collaborating with German intelligence" and "was playing a double game" [4]. Another Russian author Lev Bezymenskii in his book Budapeshtskii Messiya (Budapest Messiah. Raoul Wallenberg), published in 2001 in Russian, was sure that it was Kutuzov-Tolstoy who had shopped Raoul Wallenberg to the Russians [5]. Also in 2011 there was a documentary 'Solo for Solitary Owls. Raul Wallenberg'. In this documentary, Igor Prelin (a historian of security services, KGB colonel in the reserve) asserts openly that Tolstoy was an agent and they quote from his reports [6]. The same convictions you can find in a book of Jangfeldt Bengt, a Swedish author and researcher, "The Hero of Budapest" published in English in 2013 [7]. The answer should be in the KGB archives. We know exactly that they have a file of Michael Tolstoy, but it's still top secret, none of researchers did see it.



[1] *Kutuzov-Tolstoy, Michael*, The story of my Life. Blue Horns Publishing-House, 1986. P. 41.

[2] *Radziwill, Catherine, Princess*, Memories of forty years New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1914. P. 290-291.

[3] *Koutouzow-Tolstoy, Mary*, The Right Age. P. R. Macmillan Limited, 1961. P. 115.

[4] *Special tasks: the memoirs of an unwanted witness – a Soviet spy master* / Pavel Sudoplatov and Anatoli Sudoplatov with Jerrold L. and Leona P. Schecter. Little, Brown and Company, 1994. P. 268.

[5] *Bezimenskii, Lev*, Budapeshtskii Messiya, 2001, In Russian: http://modernlib.ru/books/bezymenskiy_lev/budapeshtskaya_missiya/read/.

[6] *Solo for Solitary Owls. Raul Wallenberg*. Documentary. Channel Kultura, 2011, in Russian: http://tvkultura.ru/video/show/brand_id/32653/episode_id/490209/video_id/490209/.

[7] *Bengt, Jangfeldt*, The hero of Budapest: the triumph and tragedy of Raoul Wallenberg. I.B. Tauris, 2013. P. 358.

This page was edited by Anna Bykova on 01/11/2018.

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Comments about this page

For attention of Anna Bykova.

I studied languages at Delgany House in the early 60's. I was close to the Tolstoys. I am currently writing my life story and want to include my happy time with them.

Your article, under the 'Our Wicklow Heritage' banner, confirms some detail of Michael Tolstoy's life as portrayed to me. They treated me almost as a son. But I always felt uneasy about some of his comments on his life which did not ring true.

Your good review of him and Myriam adds weight and understanding to my view of them. I should add that they were both exceptionally kind to me.

Can I ask you, as a courtesy and if you are agreeable, that I make reference to comments in your article and to the images within the book. My aim is to be truthful about people in my life and not to mislead my readers knowingly or out of ignorance.

I would acknowledge you and your article if you so wish.

Regards.

Peter.

2/2/2020

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By peter wetzel
On 06/06/2019

Hi, Peter! Thank you for your very interesting comment. I've just seen it. I'll be happy to discuss the details. Could you please email me: abykovaireland@gmail.com. Anna

By Anna Bykova
On 30/07/2019

Dear Mr Wetzel, thank you for your very interesting comment. I'd be happy to discuss the details with you. You can contact me: abykovaireland@gmail.com.
Sincerely, Anna

By Anna Bykova
On 30/07/2019

County Wicklow Heritage > <http://www.countywicklowheritage.org/>