Writing A New Self and Creating a Sense for Emotional Belonging: The Case of Nadezhda Teffi, a Russian Writer in Interwar Paris

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When considering the great upheavals of twentieth-century European history, the experience of Russian émigrés in interwar France may strike the historian as a dramatic, sudden, and deep change in luck.¹ Many Russian émigrés who ended up on the shores of the Seine after 1917 were the members of the Russian intellectual and political elites who had enjoyed the life of prestige, wealth, refined social and cultural opportunities in tsarist Russia. For many Russian émigrés, life as they knew it was turned upside down when they left Russia. They had to begin their life anew, to rebuild their identities, and to reinvent the self. The experience of women émigrés was especially difficult. Many women had lost their relatives and husbands during the First World War and the Russian Civil War, and many needed to

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become primary caregivers for their children. At the same time, despite the trials and challenges of their émigré existence, the Russian émigrés sought to revive the traditions of literary salons. In addition, the Russian community had made efforts to become better integrated in the artistic and cultural life of Paris. This paper addresses the efforts of Nadezhda Teffi and other Russian émigrés to revive the atmosphere of intense cultural dialogue and to re-establish the pre-1914 tradition of Saint-Petersburg literary salons in France. The creation of a literary salon was considered by these Russian émigrés as a way to become a part of the French literary milieu. As this paper shows, such efforts resulted in a partial success. Many émigrés needed to negotiate between their loyalty to their natal culture and their cultural adjustment, if not assimilation, to French culture. For many Russian literary émigrés, successful assimilation into French culture seemed to symbolize disloyalty to the Russian culture. Consequently, many cultural discourses and practices which Russian émigrés brought with them were met with a limited interest by the Parisian literary establishment. By portraying certain limits of a Russian literary salon to ensure the integration of Russian intelligentsia into the realm of French contemporary life, Teffi suggested the importance of writing as a means of negotiating this cultural terrain: a sheet of paper became a metaphorical realm where Russian and French cultural traditions, the “old” Russian self and the “foreign” French one, could merge to fashion a “new émigré” self. Through writing, the new self could whimsically combine sophisticated and refined aspects of Russian culture, nostalgia about the lost motherland, and grapple with the realities of making difficult and painful choices, in ways that might assist successful assimilation into French culture.

In order to analyze the writings of Teffi, this article theoretically engages with the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Roland Barthes, Jürgen Habermas, Jochen Hellbeck, and Dena Goodman. In his works on memory, Halbwachs showed the significance of memory for creating a group identity. For Halbwachs, an individual becomes engaged in the constant process of re-editing and redefining one’s memory narratives in order to edit such memory narratives in correspondence with dominant discourses.² Roland Barthes reflected on the significance of myths and mythologies in creating modern identities and in

bringing a sense of justice to everyday life.\textsuperscript{3} In addition, the work of a historian Jochen Hellbeck analyzes the complex process of identity construction by taking a close look at the diaries of Soviet citizens under Stalin’s rule: Hellbeck shows how the ideas in the public sphere enter a complex dialogue with one’s realm of private ideas and emotions. Hellbeck shows that the identities of Soviet citizens were shaped by dominant discourses existing in a society even when experience of such individuals contradicted such discourses.\textsuperscript{4} Writing played an essential role in the transformation of Hellbeck’s subject of the study, a peasant Stepan Podlubny: by writing his diary Podlubny sought to become a “new man,” and thus, writing and language became the realm where identity transformation had taken place. By emphasizing the importance of language, Hellbeck highlights the essential relationship between writing, the construction of the self, and the public sphere. In addition, recent works by historians of France on salon culture likewise emphasize their significance in the public sphere. As Dena Goodman and other scholars demonstrate, literary salons, an important invention in early modern France, played a vital role in disseminating new ideas, created new patterns of sociability, and allowed wealthy educated women to shape the public opinion and to establish powerfully their presence in the French public sphere.\textsuperscript{5}

Through the lenses of these diverse texts, the efforts of Tefi and other Russian émigrés to revive the tradition of the Russian literary salon on the shore of the Seine highlight the importance of such activities in rebuilding their identity. The article uses many short stories and feuilletons written by Tefi. Many of such stories are a first-person narrative; they represent the chronicle of not just the Russian émigré community in Paris, but show the process of forging the new “self” by Tefi. The writer recorded how conversations with her Russian compatriots would inspire her subject matters and specific expressions in her stories. For instance, in her story “Ke fer?” (a


\textsuperscript{4} Jochen Hellbeck, \textit{Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Inspired by the “linguistic turn” and works by Jürgen Habermas, Hellbeck examines complex interactions between the public and private spheres.

French question “Que Faire?” or “What to do?”), published in the Russian émigré newspaper *Poslednie Novosti* (*Latest News*) on April 1927, Teffi described the situation of a newly arrived Russian émigré. The story portrays certain emotional paralysis of a former Russian general who is standing at the Place de la Concorde in Paris. In the aftermath of his tour of Paris, the general asks a question which deeply troubles him: “It is, of course, all well, gentlemen. It is all very well. But... ke faire? Faire ... ke?” In his memoir, a Russian émigré-writer Don Aminado recorded that Teffi heard about the general and his rhetorical questions “ke faire” from her émigrés-friends, and immediately asked a permission to use this expression in her short story.⁶ “What to do?” became the central question in negotiating a Russian émigré identity in this reconstituted French public sphere.

Nadezhda Teffi remains one of the most popular Russian writers in contemporary Russia today, although few of her works have been translated to English and French.⁷ Teffi enjoyed a great

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⁷ Recently, the life and works of Nadezhda Teffi have become the subject of increasing scholarly attention even though in postwar decades Teffi’s literary legacy attracted less attention than that of Ivan Bunin or Aleksandr Kuprin, famous Russian writers-émigrés. This is a paradox because her short stories, plays and a novel which appeared in Parisian newspapers in interwar decades were immensely popular among the Russian diaspora: her works have helped Russian emigres to see the commonality of their experience and suggested ways to cope with the challenges of their exile. In 1970 and 1972, two scholars, Edythe Charlotte Haber and Elizabeth Baylor Neatrour, devoted Ph.D. theses to Teffi’s writings, “The Works of Nadežda Aleksandrovna Tèffi” by Haber (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1971) and “Miniatures of Russian life at home and in Emigration: The Life and Works of N. A. Teffi” by Baylor (Indiana University, 1972) by Baylor. Perestroyka brought about a renewed interest in the literary works by Teffi: Russian literary scholars D. D. Nikolaev and E. M. Trubilova published a seven-volume set of Teffi’s prose and plays, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I have addressed Nadezhda Teffi’s literary legacy and her role in forging the Russian emigre in following articles: “Nostalgia and the Myth of the Belle Époque in Franco-Russian Literature, 1920s-1960s,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 39, no. 3 (2013): 26-40; “On Nostalgia and Courage: Russian Émigré Experience in Interwar Paris through the Eyes of Nadezhda Teffi,” *Diasporas: Histoire et sociétés* 22, special issue “Écrire sa vie” (2013): 39-53, “The Construction of a New Émigré Self in 20th-century Russian Paris...
popularity among many Russians before the Revolution, and her memoirs contain reminiscences with her encounters and conversations with such diverse figures as friend to the Romanov family Grigori Rasputin, Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin, Symbolist poet Fyodor Sologub, novelist Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Zhenotdel ("Women's Bureau") founder Alexandra Kollontaï, and Nobel Prize for Literature recipient Ivan Bunin, and many others. Teffi was a frequent contributor to one of the most popular satirical Russian journals, Satyricon, which gathered such excellent writers as Sasha Chernyi, Don Aminado, Arkadii Averchenko, and others. Teffi was born into an exceptionally well-educated family: her father was an attorney and her mother was a great lover of literature. Teffi's sister, Mirra Lokhvitskaia, had become a well-known poetess in Russia. After Teffi's unsuccessful marriage which came to the end when Teffi left her husband and her two daughters and her son in his estate, Teffi came to Saint-Petersburg and soon became to enjoy a phenomenal popularity among the Russian reading public. On the eve of the Revolution of 1905, the literary soirees of Saint-Petersburg enjoyed a great cultural reputation, and their salons served as a gathering place for patrons of art and literature. In her memoir, Teffi described the literary salon held by Fyodor Sologub in Short Stories by Nadezhda Teffi, Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée 42, special issue “Migrants and Their Memories,” no. 1 (2015): 81-93 and several articles in Russian, including “Priamno udivliâesh' siâ, kak eta malen'kaia zhenschchina smogla vse eto perezhit’: Literaturno-antropolóhicheskii analiz opyta rossiiskikh émigrantok v mezhdunarodnoi Frantsiì v proizvedeniiaakh N.A. Teffi” (“One Just Wonders How This Little Woman Was Able to Go Through it all:’ The Literary and Anthropological Analysis of the Experience of Russian Émigré Women in Interwar France in the Works of N.A. Teffi,” Pushkinskie chteniï 2013. Khudozhestvennye strategii klassiceskoï i novoï literatury: zhann, avtor, tekst. Materialy XVIII mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii (Pushkin Readings 2013: Literary Strategies of the Literature of Classical and Modern Literature: Genre, Author, Text), ed. V.N.Skvortsov (Saint-Petersburg: Pushkin Leningrad State University, 2013), 163-170, and “Strashnaia toska: problema odinochestva v tvochhestve Ivan Bunina i Nadezhdy Teffi v 1920-40-ye gg. vo Frantsiì” (“Terrible Melancholia: The Problem of Solitude in the Works of Ivan Bunin and Nadezhda Teffi in France in the 1920s–1940s,” Fenomenon odinochestva. Aktual'nye voprosy gigienny kul'tury: Kollektivnaiìa monografiiìa (The Phenomenon of Loneliness: Actual Questions of Hygiene of Culture), ed. M.V. Biryukova, A.V. Liashko, A.A. Nikonova (Saint-Petersburg: Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, 2014), 159-171.

8 Teffi, Moïa letopis’ (My chronicle) (Moscow: Vagrius, 2005).
as a place of intellectual discussion and witty literary critique.\textsuperscript{9} Teffi’s popularity as well as her wit made her an important participant of the St. Petersburg’s literary life. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, Teffi made a decision to emigrate from Russia after, in her confession, she had seen a thin trickle of blood coming from the gates of a commissariat.\textsuperscript{10} Teffi became one of the most beloved readers of the Russian émigré public in France and Europe; her active participation in the life of the Russian émigré community tremendously helped the newcomers to become better integrated in the French life.

In the first months after Teffi came to Paris, Teffi immediately sensed the isolation of the Russian community. In the short story “A Town,” Teffi portrayed the Russian community, defined as a “town” in Paris, as cut off from the Parisian cultural life:

The location of the town was very odd. Neither fields, nor forests, nor valleys surrounded it – surrounded was it by the streets of the most dazzling capital of the world, with its marvelous museums, galleries, and theaters. However, the residents of the town did not merge and did not mix with the residents of the capital and did not use the fruits of the culture of the latter. […] The residents of the capital looked at them with an interest in the beginning, studied their mores, art, their mode of life, as they were interested once in the cultural world of the Aztecs. Dying breed… Descendants of those great glorious people […] of whom humankind is proud! Then their interest faded away.\textsuperscript{11}

Other stories by Teffi written in emigration show an immediate reaction of alienation from Paris, French culture, and even the French.

Many stories reflect the boredom and disappointment that many Russian émigrés felt in Paris. It is a paradox because in the

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., “Fèdor Sologub” (“Fyodor Sologub”), 189-203.
\textsuperscript{10} “Seen at a morning at the gates of the commissariat, the trickle of blood, a trickle slowly crawling across the pavement, cuts the path of life for good. One cannot walk over it. One must not go further. One can turn and run. And they run. By the trickle of trickle of blood, they are cut off forever, and there will be no return.” N.A. Teffi, “Na skale Gergesinskoi” (“At the Rock of Gadarene”) in \textit{Rasskazy} (\textit{Short Stories}), ed. E.Trubilova (Moscow, Molodaïa gvardiïa: 1990), 450-4.
years of the Belle Époque, Paris embodied a great deal of aspirations and dreams of Russian intelligentsia as the symbol of Western culture. Teffi’s stories reveal that now, living in Paris, the Russian émigrés find the French lifestyle dull. In her short story “Sunday” Teffi described the immense boredom that characterized the typical Parisian ways of spending a weekend. The story unveils a romance in Paris as travesty, and shows the banality of the Parisian middle-class lifestyle. The apparel of ordinary Parisians are defined by a store where they work: if a woman is employed in a gloves’ department, her gloves are going to be expensive, but her hat cheap. The converse is true if she happens to works in a hat store. She and her date have a limited number of choices of spending their weekend: they can go out to have a restaurant meal, or attend a theater performance, or go to the Jardin des Plantes. None of these choices is satisfactory, and each of them entails an unpleasant ride either in a stuffy atmosphere of a tram or in a taxi. A weekend diner leaves a restaurant hungry because, in comparison with Russian standards, portions are miniscule, and many dishes on the menu are not available. Teffi sarcastically described such a lunch menu:

In a restaurant with lunch menu you will be given two radishes, then an empty plate, on the side of which, at the very edge of the plate, a salted morsel of meat swimming in sauce… It is served under different pennames – côtelette d’agneau, boeuf frit, chateaubriant, lapin, gigot, poulet. It is supposed to represent bull, rabbit, chicken or pigeon. None of the dishes has a smell, neither as the first, nor the second, nor the third, only a warm wisp of basting. Then you will be served with an empty dish. “Why does it smell of fish?” “Saumon suprême.” “Aha!” But there is no sign whatsoever of this saumon suprême. Evidently someone else has eaten it before you. Then you will be given a plate to lick, where spinach used to be…. For dessert, you will be given an unwashed saucer with a serving of jam to lick, and then immediately will be rushing out of the place in order to buy something edible, so long as stores have not closed.13

For the Russians who enjoyed the superb theatrical school of Konstantin Stanislavskij (1863-1938), performances in Parisian

13 Ibid., 52. Teffi used French for the names of the dishes.
theaters were little more than a triumph of commonplaces, bad acting, and vulgarity. A critique of the French theater along these lines appears in Teffi’s story “Theaters.” Teffi defined theatrical life in Paris as culturally primitive; she assumed that there appeared to be a lack of public that would understand the sophisticated language of modern theater. At the end of the day, Parisians return home, disappointed, and unsatisfied with how painfully boring their weekend was. The story ends with this confession: “They [the people] seemed to hope for something today in the morning, and [this] hope cheated them.” The short story, in general, embodies the deep disappointment of many Russian émigrés with the Parisian lifestyle. Paris, which seemed to be a magical fairytale-like city in the years before 1917, had turned out to be a city of clichés and superficiality, emptiness and solitude, deceit and ennui. In sum, Paris ended up being a myth, and the reality of living in Paris dramatically differed from mythology which the Russians created about Paris in the years of the Belle Époque.

Messages of feelings of disappointment also characterize Teffi’s stories “How We Celebrated,” “A Bird’s Day,” and “Six Days.” If Teffi presented her witty critique of ways to waste one’s weekend in her “Sunday,” these stories show how lackluster even the greatest events and attractions of the Parisians could be for the Russian émigrés. In her “How We Celebrated,” she described the failed expectations of the Russians to take part in the festivities on July 14th, the French national holiday. The small group of Russian

14 This is how Teffi described it: “There are many theaters. The French play very well. In one theater Ki-Ki plays, in another Fi-Fi, in the third Si-Si. Then you can go see the plays: ‘Le danseur de Madame,’ ‘Le bonheur de ma femme,’ ‘Le papa de maman,’ ‘La maman de papa,’ ‘La maman de maman,’ ‘Le mari de mon mari,’ ‘Le mari de ma femme.’ You can go to any of them; it is the same as attending them all. Some of the plays are very serious and substantial. In the plays in which an actor in a gray-haired wig approaches the footlights and says with feeling: ‘Faut être fidèle à son mari,’ a deeply moved public applauds and a Russian sitting in the tenth row holds his head in his hands quietly: ‘How strong their family foundation is. [They are] happy!’ ‘Fidèle à son mari’ – the actor growls and adds with the same pathos, but in a slightly more gentle manner ‘Et à son amant.’” Ibid., 52-3.
16 Teffi, “Voskresen’e” (“Sunday”), 54.
acquaintances had hoped to see spontaneous celebration and dancing on the streets. One of the members of the group promises a fabulous restaurant meal; however, because he does not remember the restaurant's address, the group ends up spending over four hours on subway trying to find it. Language barrier also plays a role in the tormenting experience of the Russians to spend “the fourteenth of July in some small picturesque free-and-easy, so the mottled crowd would dance around under the sounds of the music of a home-made violin, under the shadows of the great past.”

In “A Bird’s Day,” Teffi created the satirical portrayal of the Parisians watching and dressing up for an annual horse race. In “Six Days,” Teffi described the Parisian beau monde observing a six-day bicycle race. In these stories, Teffi underscored the social awkwardness of Russian émigrés on the one hand, and, on the other, the French lifestyle as a different semiotic system that ultimately is likely to leave a Russian émigré emotionally unengaged.

Teffi suggested the solution was the Russian émigrés to develop some appreciation and understanding of French culture. In her short story “The Tower,” she ironically described the “aesthetic directions” shared by the Russian émigrés not to like the Eiffel Tower because, allegedly, “it is vulgar, it is philistine, it is created only to épater les bourgeois.” Supposedly, the Eiffel Tower is a hideous creature (this description, of course, resembles the hostile reaction to the Eiffel Tower by French intellectuals in 1889). At the same time, at night when émigrés feel themselves lone strangers in a foreign city, it is the Eiffel Tower that symbolically connects the newcomers with the rest of the world and Russia. The end of the short story brings a reader to isolated Solovetsky monastery in northern Russia. Before emigration, several years before Teffi’s arrival in Paris, another author, who had met a monk at the monastery, confessed that the Eiffel Tower’s radio antenna helped him to keep a connection with the outside world. In Teffi’s portrayal, therefore, the Tower becomes a means to connect humankind, a symbol of humanity, and not just an engineering structure. The short story, thus, invites readers to seek a deeper meaning of their urban experience and go beyond the appearance of artifacts of French civilization even if they appear superficial. The Eiffel Tower also represents the depth of French culture and its multilayered complexity. Teffi’s short story suggests that for Russian émigrés many artifacts of French culture

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18 Teffi, “Kak my prazdnovali” (“How We Celebrated”), 61.
could only be understood in the context of Russian culture and the memory about Russia.

Many scholars have highlighted the efforts of the Russian literary community to revive the traditions of literary salons in France. Teffi herself was one of the key figures in creating the Russian artistic and literary community in interwar France. Her wit, her sincere efforts to help newcomers, her grace, and her wonderful capacities to be a great listener and a good friend made her a very popular member of the Russian community. Contemporaries described how Teffi could stop heated arguments by one joke. Teffi enjoyed friendship of many important members of the community such as Ivan Bunin and his wife Vera Muromtseva-Bunina (1881-1961) and many others. Teffi participated in many soirees and many fund-raising events to help émigrés and the members of the intelligentsia who were in Russia. As Katherine Foshko argues in her work, the Russian émigré community managed to create a special niche in France in the 1920s: because of such an active participation in various cultural and artistic initiatives and because of the skillful use of the legacy of Russo-French cultural exchange the Russian community enjoyed a higher status in French society in comparison with Italian or Polish immigrants. The Russian community published several newspapers, including Pavel Milyukov’s Poslednie izvestiia (Latest News), Illyustrirovannay Rossiia (Illustrated Russia), and several others. While such efforts were significant for binding the Russian community, Teffi’s portrayal of such literary efforts may surprise by its rather critical view. Teffi described soirees and salons as sometime a vanity fair, or a gathering of people who only pretended they were interested in discussing political or cultural affairs.

The Russian émigré soirees are described in her stories “Raw materials” and “Five o’clock’s.” Teffi lamented the fact that the very themes that usually inspired an intense cultural exchange in pre-revolutionary Saint-Petersburg and the sacred names of Russian literature, those of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, no longer animated a refined intellectual discourse among the Russian émigrés. Teffi pointed to the fact that they tended to repeat their old stories and to praise those who were able to obtain manual jobs in Paris and to earn their living no matter how dull their jobs were. In “Five O’ Clock’s” Teffi gave a sarcastic description of a literary salon which a Russian émigré gathered in Paris. Poverty defines

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the spirit of such soirees: food is cheap and scarce, a hotel room lacks proper furniture, and guests only pretend they are interested in discussing cultural events. Teffi advised the hostesses of such salons to serve nuts, but not nutcrackers and to hide a sink in a cheap hotel room by putting an oriental fan on the sink’s surface. Another mischievous piece of advice from Teffi is to offer a broken chair for an arrogant and difficult guest: after the chair predictably collapses, the hostess needs to say how exquisite and expensive the chair was and, thus, hints at the guest as a boor. Teffi also suggested to talk about big names in French culture in a condescending and snobbish way: neither a French ballet performance nor latest fashion appears to be good enough for an émigré. In reality, however, such an émigré is preoccupied by pedestrian financial matters such as, for instance, a high price for a shoe sole.²¹ Conversations in salons sometimes revolved around petty themes; jealously, envy, and plain folly habitually defined the spirit of such salon gatherings. Teffi suggested that if a hostess became bored with her guests, she could simply ask them to purchase tickets for a charity drawing; in one and half minute the room would be empty and guests would be gone. This is another indication of how, despite the ambitions of salon hostesses, émigré gathering could not fulfill lofty hopes for reviving the rich spiritual atmosphere of pre-war St. Petersburg’s salons.

In many of her stories Teffi explored the efforts of the Russian émigré intelligentsia to recreate the models of sociability and the culture of literary and artistic salons. Through the eyes of Teffi, these efforts often produce quite unexpected and often comical effects. In a story “A Dinner with Foreigners,” Teffi portrayed a “Russian dinner” with a special guest, a popular French

²¹ Teffi wrote: ‘One needs to direct conversations during such five o'clock's towards the topics of high society and not in the least towards topics which personally trouble you most in this particular moment. Let us assume that your mind is preoccupied by the fact that in the morning a shoemaker had made you pay through the nose for a new sole. No matter how much you are overwhelmed by this emotional experience, you should not talk about it because everybody will pretend that this kind of trifle is never of interest and would not even understand right away, qu'est-ce que c'est [in Russian transliteration] a sole? Talk about opera and attires. Just be sure not to say the truth: 'I do not go to the opera: I have no money…' It is all wrong. You need to keep up appearances. ‘The French do not understand Tchaikovsky; how would they be able, in your opinion, to convey… Scriabin?’ Or this way: ‘Paquin (courtier Jeanne Paquin, 1869-1939) repeats herself!’ And nothing more. Let them all explode [from envy].’ N. A. Teffi, “Faifokloki” (“At Five O’Clock”) in Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 3, “Gorodok” (“A Town”), 94.
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writer and the author of fashionable love novels. The main character, Anna Semënovna, a Russian émigré, has decided to have a reception in his honor at her apartment.22 She is driven by vanity and a desire to awe her Russian friends and to make them envious by arranging this fancy soiree with famous French writer, whom she describes as “the pride of French nation.”23 With a great deal of sarcasm the story characterizes the French writer, Schteînberg, as, using an adulatory characteristics by Anna Semënovna, “insane talent: his latest novel – such courage, such amplitude. A woman falls in love with one man, and then the man also falls in love with another woman, and the husband of the latter also falls in love and, in sum, everything is insanely dramatic.”24 Anna Semënovna immediately encounters opposition from her fifteen-year old daughter Katîa: her daughter makes a scandal when she learns about the invitation. Katîa sees the subject matters exploited by Schteînberg – love, jealousy, the life of beau monde and other clichés – are nothing but a commonplace in comparison with labor question that is, in Katîa’s opinion, of much greater importance. The dinner had become a disaster of immense magnitude. The writer is aloof and detached; he refuses to socialize with guests and instead spends his time staring at a carpet stain. He criticizes courses served at this Russian dinner. All guests including Anna Semënovna’s husband are cold and even hostile towards the writer. One of them called the writer “an idiot” in Russian, but because the word is pronounced almost the same in Russian and French, the writer must have understood this insult. Anna Semënovna starts declaring verses from Alexander Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin, a masterpiece of Russian literature. She wants to find support and compassion among her Russian guests and the foreign guest; she finds none. Her efforts to create a salon-like experience becomes a grotesque, and she cannot understand why everybody ends up sabotaging her soiree.

Teffî explored the similar theme in her short story “An International Society” which analyzes the failed effort of a Russian émigré to integrate a Russian émigré circle into a French artistic milieu. In the beginning of the story, the female protagonist, Madame Livon, gives a passionate monologue: Enough to stew in our own juice! For everything is the same and everybody is the same. It is a time, finally, to remember that we live in Paris, at an international center. Why we mope in this

23 Ibid., 143.
24 Ibid., 145.
bewitched circle, in this émigré ghetto, when we can refresh our circle of acquaintance with new and, maybe, extremely interesting people, even useful people. Why then cannot we do so? Madame Livon immediately enacts this idea and plans to invite the representatives of French, British, Spanish, Italian, American, and Japanese nations as well as someone from Tahiti or another exotic place. In planning the event, Madam Livon demonstrates a remarkable lack of geographical knowledge assuming that Tahiti, Canary, and Balearic islands are adjacent to each other. Madame Livon has also sent the invitations to Sasha Guitry, Mistinguett, Maurice Chevalier, and others. The society is given a catchy title, “The First International Society of Love to Arts.” The beginning of the soiree promises to be a success as the international public pours in: there are journalists and writers from Spain, England, Korea, Brazil, Italy, and Norway. The hostesses in vain tried to make the guests to talk to each other, but, to their disappointment, the guests are only interested in food: “the guests lined up along the buffet and were eating in silence. As horses in stalls.” Then a Spaniard sees a Japanese artist and starts addressing to him in Russian. The Spaniard turns to be “Moniä Schperumfel,” whose last name reveals the Russo-Jewish origins of the guest. An American poetess who allegedly publishes in all newspapers in New York turns out to be a Russian who is married to an American and who was genuinely excited to meet her ex-husband Michael, serving as a butler at the reception. The soiree ends with a guest from Cambodia playing a Russian folk song that inspires two guests from England and Brazil dancing a Russian dance and, thus, revealing the Russian identity of the three guests. It appears that every single foreign guest at the evening is a Russian émigré, a revelation that comes as a nightmare for the hostess. None of illustrated French guests has come to the evening. The story also hints at difficulty, if not impossibility, for the Russian émigré diaspora to break out of their cultural bubble, often self-imposed, and gain acceptance in French society.

In the realm of Russian literary beau monde, intellectual depth was often out of place. A short story “Indelicacy” portrays a Russian émigré, Professor Surovin (his last name means “rigorous” or “austere”), who lives in poverty in Czechoslovakia, a residence for a considerable Russian émigré community in interwar decades. Surovin publishes articles in a Russian émigré

26 Ibid., 258.
newspaper, and he considers it great moral compromise: “To earn my bread, I write empty amusing articles [to suit] the taste of the general public. This is humiliating.”28 The Parisian public does not understand the professor’s articles and find them heavy and dull. A sensationalist article about Surovin’s suffering makes a difference, though, and the Russians decided to make a fundraising dinner for Surovin. The visit to Paris is quite a trial for the professor who must endure the hours and hours of socializing with his new rich acquaintances. After all expenses are calculated, a fundraising dinner generates a trivial amount of money, barely enough for him to buy a third-class ticket back to Czechoslovakia. The professor falls ills, however, and get stranded in a cheap Parisian hotel for another week after the dinner. His new Parisian patrons find “indelicate” that Surovin had not left Paris promptly after the dinner and pretend they are not aware of him still being in Paris. The story sadly portrays the amount of vanity and indifference that in essence define the efforts of some Russian philanthropists to save “the brilliant Russian genius in exile.”29

In a short story “Carp,” written in first voice, Teffi’s short story reveals a perpetual state of confusion that being an émigré involves.30 The short story begins with a brief description of a beautiful day in Paris that appears to promise many delights. The author must finish an urgent assignment even though her many friends invite her. Unfinished papers lay on her desk. Teffi’s maid, a French, has left a live fish, a carp, on a kitchen’s table so the author would cook it for a breakfast: to the surprise of the author, the fish turns out to be still alive. (The protagonist knows that if she will decide to keep the fish as a companion, it may be come her lifelong responsibility. Parodying flimsy news, she refers to one of them: allegedly, a carp was caught in a lake in Italy; to its gills was an engraved ring attached “This fish was released to water one hundred and fifty years before the birth of Christ.”)31 The author considers taking the fish to the Seine and setting it free. Then her imagination takes her to how odd and suspicious her act would look in the eyes of two French policemen. She pictures that the policiers would immediately arrest her and that police divers would make gruesome discoveries on the bottom of the Seine: “[the divers] will find what is always found on the bottom of contemporary rivers: seven right arms, three hips, two male heads, four female ones, one child’s collarbone, one ear, one mouth, and

28 Ibid., 218.
29 Ibid.
30 N. A. Teffi, “Karp” (“Carp”) in Zigzag, 5-12.
31 Ibid., 7.
eight smalls of the back."³² She imagines her trial at which her attorney awkwardly defends her: allegedly, she is full of remorse and even tried to jump to the Seine herself, but “had missed.” Embellishing the details of the imagined trial, the author describes the unspeakable suffering of her female friends who under oath would have to tell the truth about their age, an agonizing experience for them. Judges would find the protagonist guilty of murdering all these people whose body parts were found in the Seine. In the final act of the drama, looking at the Parisian beau monde who gathered to watch her public execution, she would grasp latest fashion trends in opera cloaks before her guillotined head would fall out to a basket. The short story gives a multi-layered message: writing a story unveils differences between the French and the Russians, and acting as a Russian in Paris could end in a disaster. In the imagination of the author, pity, an essential piece in Russian emotional repertoire, could bring the author to guillotine: for a non-Russian, it would appear impossible to explain how a fish to be consumed at breakfast could so quickly become a friend and even acquire a personal name.

It was not easy for the Russian émigrés to break away from the circle of their “émigré ghetto,” using the expression of a character from Teffi’s story. Language barrier, financial restraints, a lack of interest towards the Russian community from French artistic milieu, fears that such an exchange implied a condescending attitude towards the Russian émigrés, and many other reasons made difficult for the Russians to become part of interwar Parisian cultural and artistic milieu. In a story “A Bright Holiday,” Teffi described a Russian émigré woman who being overwhelmed by nostalgia over the celebration of Easter in tsarist Russia, wants to reenact this experience by creating such a celebration of Russian Easter in Paris.³³ It is just a trouble because guests, all relatives, proved to be rude to each other. Moreover, one of her guests, Zyzy Ber’ë, a Russian woman who had married a rich French man and has changed her Russian name to a French one, clearly shows that she does not want to be around of her Russian relatives and rushes to leave the Easter dinner earlier. The story also mentions a “maison,” a fashion house, where all employees and customers are Russians, yet everybody pretends that everybody is French, speaks only French, and pretends not to understand Russian.

³² Ibid., 11.
Many short stories by Teffi emphasize solitude, alienation, and desperation which the Russian émigrés felt in exile. Teffi described cheap hotels, the ones in which many Russian émigrés ended up living, as the epitome of loneliness and alienation: “It is unthinkable to live in a hotel. It is very good to stay there for three days, for a week, even for a month. However, to live a normal human life there is inconvenient, restless, and expensive.” There is a sad paradox: for some Russian émigrés, Paris, which had the millions of residents, was as an isolated island, a desert where it is almost impossible to foster the meaningful relationships. In Teffi’s stories, Paris was painted as the City of Solitude, not as the City of Love, an ultimate irony considering the common mythology of Paris. In a collection of stories which Teffi titled All About Love, Teffi explored Paris as the city crushing one’s dream to find a soul mate. A story “Two Affairs with Foreigners” is about two Russian émigré women, Elena and Natasha, who both failed to find love in Paris. One woman, Elena, describes her failed engagement: her fiancé courted her, made plans about their life together, and even presented her with a charming gift to start their family nest, an iron. However, after her fiancé had learned that before he had met Elena, a very rich and very old woman expressed a desire to date him, he not only had abandoned his Russian girlfriend, but had also taken the very iron from her apartment, the one he gave to her as the token of his commitment. Elena plans to die before the eyes of her ex-fiancé: at their last meeting, Elena wants to fling herself onto the street, the act of desperation and trampled love. A moment before to kill herself, she realizes that her ex-fiancé has taken the iron with him. This little discovery brings catharsis: she realizes how absurd and comical it would be for her to die for the person who proved to be petty and selfish. The main character laughs, and with this laughter her tragedy is gone: “Lord! I said, 'How wonderful it is to live on this world! Even now, when I think of it, ha-ha-ha, now that I recall it, ...I'll probably laugh till morning. His iron! His i-i-ron! I would have crashed onto the street, my skull in smithereens, and in his hands the i-i-ron! What a picture!’” In the same story, Natasha’s fiancé cheats with her friend, a married woman. When a Russian émigré had fainted, suffered an emotional shock, and broken up with her fiancée, her

36 Teffi, “Two Affairs with Foreigners” in All About Love, 77-86
37 Ibid., 85.
mother-in-law who previously was most excited about their upcoming marriage and treated her as her daughter, sends a letter to her son: “In the letter she categorically forbade him to marry me, because if I was capable of making such an uproar over nonsense, then what would there be in the future?” Her friend, which whom her fiancé has cheated on her, chastises Natasha for her inability to hide her emotions and for her naïve belief in the sanctity of marriage. This Russian émigré Natasha has learned that the depth of her love and sincerity are not valued; moreover, in order to fit into a French bourgeois society, one needs to learn hiding one’s emotions and putting on a facade. The story also emphasizes how the cultural practices of the Russian middle class in pre-1917 Russia and post-1917 France were different. The characters in Teffi’s short stories perpetually find themselves torn between the Russian ways of expressing themselves and their emotions, and French ways of showing and hiding their feelings. In one of earlier stories, Teffi described the impossibility of expressing one’s feelings in ways how the Russians do: it would not be possible for a Russian woman-émigré to go to the Champs-Elysees, to embrace a birch tree, and to wail to express one’s sadness? Overwhelming nostalgia is essential for defining the identity of Russian émigrés in the 1920s, as Teffi noted in her story: “We think of only what happens there. We are interested in only what comes from there.”

Being honest with an only partial success of the Russian émigré salons on the shore of the Seine, Teffi questioned their usefulness in the integration of the Russian émigré intelligentsia into the French cultural life. She pointed out that too often vanity, poverty, and certain obsession over the lost motherland and the past made difficult for the Russians to become truly interested in current French culture. At the same time, she highlighted the fact that such efforts played a role in forging a new identity for the Russians, especially, women-émigrés. The portrayal of the Russian émigré community in Teffi’s works is complex and multidimensional. She underscored the creation of the new émigré self as a whimsical process: the loyalty to the Russian heritage, sophisticated Russian culture, nostalgia over the lost motherland, understanding of the limitations of French mainstream cultural production coincided with a desire to become integrated into the realm of the French culture and to articulate the “new” French

38 Ibid., 81.
40 Ibid.
self. The creation of a literary salon and a revival of atmosphere of intense cultural exchange had become one of the means to forge such a new “self.” Teffi considered writing, however, as the most important tool for articulating the language and identity of a Russian émigré, especially, a member of the intelligentsia. Writing allowed the author to be honest and not to succumb to temptations of either longing for the bygone epoch which was full of tensions and not paradise lost, in the frank assessment of Teffi. Nor would it allow a thoughtful writer to become deceived by the City of Light with its cheap mass cultural production and peculiar ways of sociability and expressing emotions that Teffi and other émigrés often found insincere and superficial. Writing, thus, became a laboratory to create the new émigré self.