



Pitirim Alexanderovitch Sorokin
January 21, 1889—February 10, 1968

Photograph from the Sorokin Collection,
in the Shortt Library, University of
Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada.

IN MEMORIAM: PITIRIM ALEXANDEROVICH SOROKIN

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Sorokin, (Honorary Editor of *Sociologia Internationalis*), was born in Yarensky County of Volgoda Province in Russia—an extremely northern place near the Arctic Circle. His native people were called Komi or Syrian and they belong to the Ugro-Finnish branches of the family of man. They speak one of those types of languages coming out of Asia to which Turkish, Hungarian and Finnish belong so that, as Sorokin said himself, Russian was for him a second language. He became an orphan at an early age and he made his living by travelling, first with his father and later with an older brother, mainly decorating churches and repairing religious objects, such as Russian Ikons. He told the writer in 1967 that he could no longer speak his native language. Friends of Sorokin, come more recently from Russia, said in 1967 that his Russian (of fifty years ago) had become quaint and difficult.

He studied largely by himself and, according to his own words, went on to advanced secondary school more because of an accidental opportunity than a plan. This means that he never attended any regular elementary school. His father was an alcoholic Ikon maker and wandered constantly from place to place. During more than 40 years of close association, I never heard him mention his mother, but he did

speak of his two brothers. Sorokin was reared by an aunt in some northern village. His mother died about 1892. (See *Long Journey*, Ch. I). The two brothers both died in the Communist revolution, one shot by the Communists and the other from imprisonment. At the age of 14 he started his higher education at a Teacher's College or Seminary under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church. There he became not only a leading student but a liberal revolutionary agitator against the Czarist government. For his political activities he was imprisoned first in 1906. He was paroled in 1907 but to complete his education he had to go away from Komi, since he was expelled from college there. He went to St. Petersburg (Leningrad) where he secured work as a tutor and supported himself for two years while he prepared for his university entrance examinations.

During the year 1909-1910 he matriculated in the Psycho-Neurological Institute, a private university in St. Petersburg. No sociology at that time was taught in the University of St. Petersburg, but Maxim Kovalevsky and E. de Roberty gave such courses in the Institute. Further, as he says in his autobiography, "The student body of the Institute unlike that of the University, for the most part impressed me as being more alive, revolutionary, and like myself, recruited from the lower, peasant-labor classes" (*Long Journey*, p. 67).

At the end of the year 1910, Sorokin transferred to the University of St. Petersburg for the completion of his undergraduate work. The reason he himself gives for the change was to avoid being drafted into the armed services since state university students were

exempt (*Ibid*, 72). Here he continued his social science studies to prepare himself as a sociologist specializing in the sociology of law under Leon Petrajitzky. Graduating in 1914 he was left at the university with a financial grant or scholarship aid to prepare himself as a teacher. During this time he kept up his revolutionary activity and was arrested once or twice. At one time he had to flee from Russia and hide in Southwestern Europe to escape arrest and imprisonment.

From 1914-1916 he was doing graduate work in St. Petersburg and this takes his career up to the revolution of 1917. The holocaust of Revolution and killings of 1917 put Sorokin on the other side—against Communist bloodshed. His previous arrests were by Czarist agents; now it was the revolutionary forces which considered him an enemy. At last he was arrested January 2, 1918, and put into prison by the Bolshevik government. After 57 days he was released and he moved to Moscow where the government became then located. For some time he had been associated with Kerensky, the premier, as secretary to the moderate constitutional government. But communism finally triumphed and Sorokin was imprisoned again. He was again released December 31, 1918 and returned to the University of St. Petersburg as a professor of sociology.

Here it was that finally the situation became impossible. After the famine of 1921, in which American food gifts saved a number of millions of lives—at least 10 million according to Sorokin (p. 190, *Journey*)—he embarked upon a study of the sociology of hunger and famine. The communist government had

killed the landowners and tried to collectivize the peasants. As a result of this, agricultural production declined to disastrously low levels. A former grain exporting country could no longer feed itself. A drought in 1920 and 1921 resulted in wholesale starvation. Millions died of famine. Sorokin's book about this was too much for the communists. His manuscript was destroyed and he accepted banishment September 23, 1922 to save his life. Lenin had been approached about him and agreed to banishment as a substitute for the death sentence.

A year in Prague, Czechoslovakia, enabled him to recover a part of his health. In October 1923 he came to the United States. After a year of acclimatization to English in America, he came to the Sociology Department at the University of Minnesota at the city of Minneapolis for the beginning of the summer term of 1924. From that time he taught at the University of Minnesota for six years until 1930 when he was invited to Harvard University. Since 1930 until his retirement he continued to work at Harvard. Since then he lived in a suburb, 8 Cliff Street, Winchester, Massachusetts, and continued his writing and lecturing. Undoubtedly when he died he was the world's most famous sociologist.