

STURGEON FISHING IN RUSSIA



by ROBT. F. WALSH

THE sturgeon fishing on the Don and Volga—which are the greatest Russian sturgeon fisheries—belong to the Cossacks (Kosaks), a strangely peculiar race, who resented the chains that Tzardom placed around their peasant necks and fled to the Caucasus and the banks of the Volga. In time they multiplied, and spread to lands that border on the Ural on the east and the Don on the west. They owned no master and lived only by their enterprise in fishing and hunting.

The government of the Tzar saw the enormous capacity of the Cossack as a fighter and agreed that they should not tax their lands or their fisheries, provided the Cossacks did a certain amount of military duty when called on. This they still continue to do, and in every war Russia relies mainly upon the Cossacks for its cavalry, and does not rely in vain: they are a wonderful people and a powerful one, too, for they number half a million, and every man a soldier if needs be.

The chief seat of their sturgeon fishing industry is on the lower Don and Volga. And so careful are the Cossacks of their harvest that no boat is allowed to be rowed on the rivers when the fishes are coming up to spawn, and oftentimes they will ride miles for a bridge, rather than disturb the waters. They keep a strict eye on the river and no poaching can possibly take place.

There is need of vigilance and diligence too, for the precious harvest must be gathered within the three weeks during which only the fishing lasts. Then,

on the first day the fishing begins each year, a communal bell is rung, let us say *at* Ekaterinadas, far back from the Don, but still within the Cossack territory. That bell is answered by every township and village bell along the river. Guns are fired off denoting the commencement of the season and forthwith every Cossack male hies him to the river-side to his work of sturgeon catching. At the end of the season similar bells are rung and cannons fired, and after that time it is criminal to fish. The whole product of the fishing is equally divided between the community, no one receiving one kopek more or less than his co-worker.

After the gun fires off the word "go," ropes are fixed from river-bank to river-bank, and on these depend the hooks and lines that are to capture the unwary sturgeon.

There is a curious peculiarity about the hooks used by the Cossacks for sturgeon fishing. They have no barbs. It is a simple piece of bent hardened iron or steel wire with a sharp point. Across the river, or to a boat anchored in the river, and underneath the rope, there is a second and thinner rope to which are attached the "kords" on which are tied the hooks. These kords dangle from the line about four feet; each is distant from the other about three feet, but in the "sway of the river" they are actually side by side. The Cossacks have measured the required distance most accurately.

When the line is stretched, either to the opposite bank or to a boat anchored

in mid-stream, the fishermen wait about four hours and then pull it in—usually with from ten to fifteen fishes depending from it. But this is not extraordinary considering the great number of hooks they use on each line, sometimes numbering over 7,000.

But readers will query how are the sturgeon caught on barbless hooks? This is one of the most curious things connected with the Cossack sturgeon fishing. The fishes, as I have explained, are caught on their way to the spawning ground. They come from the Black Sea, and in their mad endeavors to reach the family depositing fresh water, pass the lines with wonderful speed; a hook sticks in some part of the body, then their famous tail lashes around furiously and in their pain they double in every direction, are hooked in several parts of the body and finally die from exhaustion. If ordinary barbed hooks were used they would offer too much resistance, and the struggles of the powerful sturgeon would most likely snap them before getting caught by a second hook.

And so the fishing goes on for three weeks every year. But in that three weeks it has happened in a favorable year 400,000 pounds of roe has been procured. How many sturgeon it would take to make so much roe—or fresh caviare—I cannot tell; but it must mean that at least a quarter of a million fishes are captured.

It will not be out of place here, perhaps, to explain what Russian caviare really is. In western Europe and in America there is an impression that caviare is a preparation of the sturgeon roe. But it is not so. What we westerners get is the salted roe of a very inferior quality. The famous black caviare is not produced by any preparation. It is simply the roe of the great sturgeon, or beluga, and it rarely finds its way to western Europe.

During the season the Cossacks have fast horses ready to carry the roe to the nearest railway stations—sometimes 50 versts distance. They pack it carefully in boxes containing about two pounds each. And the utmost speed is used in the carriage. The eggs of the roe are so delicate that after a few days they would break. This kind of caviare—the fresh—fetches a price in St. Petersburg, which is the best market, of from two to four roubles for half a pound,

whereas the salted caviare can be purchased from 20 to 30 kopeks per pound.

There is also a large business done in making up caviare for the central Russians and western European market. This is simply the inferior salted roe. But the Cossacks make large profits from it. And the epicures of Paris and London little know that the caviare they use for a *bon-bouche* or at lunch time is only the waste roe of the Cossack fisheries. In recent years some enterprising London "Italian warehousemen" have endeavored to procure a monopoly of the caviare. But that is impossible. The market in Russia alone uses all that can be got; and the idea of transporting the *fresh* caviare to London is out of the question. That is a luxury that only those who live *en prince* in St. Petersburg can enjoy.

Another industry which the sturgeon fishing creates among the Cossacks is the manufacture of isinglass. This is made from the sound of the fish, dried in the sun and afterwards cut into the fine threads in which we are accustomed to see Russian isinglass.

I was told an amusing story of an American who proposed to try his hand at the sturgeon fishing of the Volga. He took with him, a paraphernalia, such as is used in California, and put up at the hotel in Ekaterinadas—the Hotel Zvamiluskaya, called after the mammoth St. Petersburg hostelry.

Here he made many acquaintances and soon learned the best places to fish. Accordingly he went to a little *stanitza*, or village, where a peculiarly warlike portion of the Cossack tribe live, and waited until the closing gun of the season had been fired, watched the Cossack mode of capture and laughed at it, and then prepared to go to work. He called together a number of men; prepared his nets; got ready all the packing appliances and one night after sundown sallied out to fish. At the first haul he landed over fifty splendid sturgeon. Of course he felt leased and pictured stacks of dollars from his utilization of the Cossack's care. But he was too early in his ride. While the fish were being shaken from the net the mayor of the *stanitza* and over fifty Cossacks made their appearance, peremptorily ordered the fishes to be thrown back and placed Monsieur the American under arrest. All his apparatus was

destroyed, and it cost him 1000 roubles (\$500) to gain his release, and even then he found it exceedingly difficult to get to Ekaterinadas, where was the nearest railway station. Almost any other tribe of Cossacks would have shot him.

There is a superstition attaching to this fishing that, I believe, has never been told. The gun sounds precisely at 12 o'clock, midnight, at the chief town. Should the sound—for which the other towns have been waiting—not be heard, then ill luck will come to the community of the stanitza whose gun was not fired in time. As a matter of fact, this has proved to be very frequently the case. In the village or stanitza of Trabolsk, one year, the fishermen, knowing well the time when the gun should be fired, waited up all night, but did not hear it. Nevertheless they repaired to the fishery next morning. But the sturgeon seemed to know their line, and in the entire three weeks they did not catch five hundred roubles' worth, while the fishers at either side of them netted several thousand. And still they did not complain. In western cities, probably, the mayor or "powers that be" would enquire how it was that only their people were unsuccessful. But here the mayor and "powers that be" were part and parcel of the same community and derived the same benefit from the work as a whole as did the unlucky fishermen themselves.

It will seem to an American incredible that a harvest so rich can, among a semi-uncivilized people, be allowed to remain uncollected for eleven months and one week. But the Cossacks know that it is only during these three weeks that the roe of the fish is in a proper state for use, and they preserve the remainder of the family for the next season's harvest; for although the flesh is of importance as an article of food for domestic consumption, it is much more important to the Cossack to insure a succession of the harvests of its "roe" and "sound"—the bases of its market, or money value products, caviare and isinglass.

On the flesh of the sturgeon they do not place a high value, although it forms one of their staple articles of food. It is usually cut into steaks, sundried, and salted, and oftentimes some of it can be found in the homes of the Cossacks of the Volga region when the

next season opens. They have very peculiar ways of cooking the sturgeon. Here is one. The dried salt steak is pounded with a mallet for some minutes; then it is immersed in boiling water, where it swells considerably. After this it is taken out and wrung dry between cloths. In the meantime, two flat stones are being heated in an open fire, and when they have got just to the point of becoming red they are taken out, the sturgeon steak is placed between them and the stone oven is again put on the fire for a few minutes. The result is delicious; the flesh of the sturgeon is tender as a whiting, it has a meaty flavor, and the peculiar mode of cooking has given to it a taste that a Lucullus would envy. This dish is usually served up with oil, and not infrequently in the houses of the thrifty, with oil made from sturgeon liver, and should you happen to time your visit so as to be there during the fishing season, you will be treated to fresh beluga caviare.

At one time the government sought to levy tax on the fish captured on the lower Don and Volga. But the Cossacks refused to pay it, and the Tzar did not seek redress for the disobedience. They are too useful.

Many times it has been said that a second sturgeon season could profitably be carried on, but those dwellers by the Caucasus think otherwise. They can live at times without the flesh, even though it constitutes their staple food. And those "semi-barbarous" people—as they were called by a famous Russian writer—know just what is best for their own welfare. They understand the habits of the sturgeon perfectly, they "cut their cloth accordingly" and insist that their waters shall only be fished during the time allotted and agreed upon by the communal committee. Had the knowledge and self-sacrifice which actuate the rude Cossack been more powerful with us, we should not now be deploring the annihilation of whole species of the denizens of forest and stream before the march of our higher civilization.

I do not believe that such a peaceful unanimity exists with any other people. *Everything*—the products of the land, the factories, the fishermen and the boatmen are equally divided among them. The cripple receives as much as does

the able-bodied man, the town crier as much as does the mayor.

One strange thing about the sturgeon fishing I had nearly omitted. All the barbless hooks used by the Cos-

and Russian and German hooks have to stand aside. These hooks are about five inches long, the bend being an inch and a half wide, and the distance from the bottom of the bend to the point is gen-



"AT THE FIRST HAUL HE LANDED OVER FIFTY." (p. 158.)

sacks in far-off Southeastern Russia are made in Sheffield, England. Sometimes the product of the Baltic iron is tried; sometimes German hooks are used. But after long trial Sheffield has the market,

erally two inches. They are fastened to the lines with fine copper wire, and are renewed very often, for the breaking of one hook might mean the loss of more than one fine sturgeon.