MY LIFE IN SOVIET RUSSIA

By NORA MURRAY

BEFORE me lies a map of the world, on which I survey the huge space called "Canada." I see a city in Nova Scotia with the name "Halifax." This is the place I am now thinking of as I write these lines for my readers there.

Ten years ago, running the battle of life and death in Russia, I could not foresee that in my freedom of the far-distant future I would count Canadians among my best friends and readers. But life is never without miracle. Viewing Canada across the short space which divides that land from Russia, I could not dream, travelling widely with my family, that one day I should speak the language of Canadians and Americans, English becoming my second mother-tongue.

I came into the world after the Russian Revolution, during the Civil War, in Ukraina. My birth-place was on the battlefield—in an armored train. Ukraina during that time was one huge battlefield: Whites, Reds, Greens—all colors—were engaged in a furious fight to decide the fate of the country for decades to come.

My father was 24 and my mother barely 17 when I was born. Father was an intellectual, a partisan leader, and mother —a young student hero-worshipper, taken by storm by the speeches of the young rebel who delivered his orations brilliantly wherever he had a chance: at the corners of the streets, in public squares, empty halls, schools, cinemas, theatres, church-yards. He could hold his audience spellbound. Here were two idealist young people who became engulfed in the furious stream—or waterfall—that was the Revolution.

My first nurses were daring Cossacks—the bareback riders, daredevils of the steppes. The make-up of these partisan detachments or regiments was most colorful. Though they were pitifully dressed (some of them almost in rags), they were never short of spirit or gaiety. And nothing did they love more than to sit near the camp-fire singing their songs—sad, melancholic or merry—which resounded across the steppes. Concertina, string instruments, guitars, mandolins, balalaika would accompany the singers late into the night, as the fire burned fiercer and sparks flew higher. They all, of course, could dance. It made no difference whether they had shoes, or any covers, on their feet. They fought like tigers, but they enjoyed themselves with even greater fury. None of them knew how short or long their life

was going to be. Cossacks, born in the saddle, were exceptionally tender and affectionate to their horses, which were to them all but human—Revolution and Civil War, or no Civil War and Revolution. Sitting around the fire, with horses near-by, they would rock and sing their lullabies, while I would be nursed by one of those gentlemen and would fall asleep under their soft singing. But it was not all singing and dancing and sitting around the camp-fires. Many of them never woke up to see the dawn of the next day. To live, they had to fight: the Revolution was cruel in its demand for victims. They paid with their lives for establishment of "the New Order."

The tales of the Revolution were fantastic and most colorful. All the men around me, including my father and his friends, were "great heroes"—men of Spartan tempering and fighting spirit. They all took part in the Revolution and the Civil War: they all had thrilling stories. Revolution was not soft-cushion business; it required lots of sacrifice and discomfort. But such was passion aflame; it took the people by storm, like a match set to an oil tank: it set all the skies ablaze. Many were killed on the spot or died from after-effects, but those who survived were a tough lot, without fear of anything. Inspired by the ideal of making Russia "a better place to live in," they thought little of themselves. Insight into the significance of the Revolution, and what it had brought to the Russian people, came to me slowly as I grew, and began to see things for myself.

The turbulent history of Russia was thus closely connected with my life. Always we had war and battle of some sort, if not physical, then ideological. All I desired was peace, happiness and the goodwill of human beings to one another, but this could never come so long as I remained in Russia. My father, Vassily Savvich Korzhenko, joined the Communist Party in 1917, and dedicated himself to the cause of a New Russia, calling himself "a servant of the people." A brilliant man, erudite, he took frantically to Communism as to a new religion. From the position of a young promising student at the St. Petersburg University in Tsarist Russia, he rose to prominence and distinction in the Russia that he helped to build, giving his life and his best years to her service in the Foreign Office. He finished up as "an enemy of the people," in Lubyanka.

I am the sole survivor in my family, of Stalin's rage and his Purge of the Foreign Office in 1939, when Molotov took over from Litvinov. Father was Litvinov's right-hand man, "Director-General and Chief of Personnel of the Foreign Office of

U.S.S.R." I do not even yet know what became of my father, and of my whole family. He was sentenced to ten years in Siberia, and the rest vanished into the Asiatic wilderness.

As father's daughter, I had seen the best, and the worst, of life in Russia. I had the best education that the country could give, had surveyed the whole of the Soviet Union by travelling fast and wide. Father's duty took him all over the place, so I went with him from South to North, from East to West. My knowledge of Russia is of a practical nature. I had a grand view of the men in the Kremlin and of Communism in general, born and bred in the country which now occupies one-sixth of the world and exerts a great influence everywhere. Life with father was like living in one perpetual "thriller," stranger than fiction, with enough characters to enchant not only one writer but several. Everyone was on the move. Father was a bundle of endless energy and vitality both physical and mental; one could not be quick enough for him.

His "hunting-ground" was wide and large, his exploits and adventures were truly fantastic. Russia was working day and night feverishly to strengthen her position, with the whole world as target. The world outside was to her Communist leaders one huge enemy camp, with the people living in it divided into two categories: (i) Beasts; big, fat capitalists, with Havana cigars in their mouths, and (ii) Poor Beggars, the workers of the earth, whose blood the thirsty capitalists drenched. Everywhere outside, we were told, was "Hell"; only in Russia was there "Paradise." Such was our ideology. The insignia of N.K.V.D., or G.P.U., as it was called in the early days, was the Sword, the Flame, to annihilate, to destroy, to prevent every possible resistance and every counter-Revolution. The sheaves of the world's wheat were thus to be secured for "the workers of the world." To prevent any possible escape from this "Paradise," the frontiers were strictly guarded: Cerberus sat, not as in the old legend at the gate of Hell (the Communist conception of the outside world) but at the gate of the Russian Paradise.

My education had two sides; the official one, and a supplementary one. It is the latter which still influences me most.

The spirit of old Russia must be the voice that has been speaking in me. With my spiritual eyes I could see the Past and Future, but never the Present. Perhaps it was my father's guidance of me into the Past that worked upon me this amazing effect. My spiritual home was, and still is, Leningrad, or rather St. Petersburg—"the window into Europe" and into the world

at large of which Peter the Great dreamed. So I too, a little Russian girl, walking along the embankment of the Neva, dreamed of the world outside and at large. The years that were spent in Leningrad determined my whole outlook upon life. Wherever I went afterwards, I always wanted to come back to Leningrad. My dear mother is buried at the "Alexandro-Nevskaya Lavra" (famous monastery, cemeteries, seminari, almost a town by itself) in the end of famous Nevsky Prospect. There Gregori Rasputin used to reside, and hold his famous parties. There, too, Tchaikovsky and many another famous Russian rest. In Leningrad I started my schooling, and there I made my best friends.

While living there I had the utmost opportunity to see the most of the city. Then, as now, N.K.V.D., or G.P.U. was over all. These authorities were in charge of all royal property, magnificent mansions and palaces into which no ordinary mortal could ever go, but the men of "The Sword and Flame" (badge and insignia of authority) had free passage. Royal property had different handling. Some was left in the palaces as museum and show places; some was sold out or auctioned, but again not to the general public: mostly to Party *elite*. I visited the vaults and basements of the royal residence (like Buckingham Palace in London)—the "Winter Palace" on the Embankment. Wondrous experience, never to be forgotten! I have been in most of the royal homes in Russia, and have visited the estates of the Russian nobility, to which we had a special pass, to be shown at the gate. As soon as the main gates of the Palace were swung open for us, we entered the world that no longer existed. By the keeper and guard of the vaults we were taken downstairs, and accompanied through the labyrinths of corridors, passages, rooms. Some were larger, some were smaller, but they were all filled with treasures. Part of this area was a store-place for the magnificent wardrobe of the late Empress of Russia. Most beautiful dream-like gowns and attires swung in a row of glass wardrobes—hundreds of them, silks, brocades, velvets, for dressing the first lady of Russia. All clothing and uniforms of Tsar Nicholas II and his courtiers, as well as those of the imperial predecessors, were in another special room. Though the Palace was open to the public, an intimate side of it was known only to N.K.V.D. and to the servants, who somehow survived the time, remained as keepers and continued their employments of the past. Most of them were old, and they retained the bearing of servants.

Russia is thus full of contrasts. Nobody was anxious to buy the clothing of the late Empress, but of course one could not stop marvelling at the splendid richness and execution of the work on these gowns. I reverently touched some of them, stroking gently one gown after another. One could hardly think of Soviet Russia at that moment. For sale were such things as the Empress's bed of ivory and silver, with its gorgeous Holland linen sheets, ermine and sable covers. I sat on the edge of the bed, and viewed the whole structure, in which one could be completely lost. One of the N.K.V.D. officers bought it for his wife! Father wanted none of these things, but he appreciated their beauty. We got a few little personal objects from the collection; for example, I got a little snuff-box of the Empress, which would adorn my desk at home for many years. But some gentlemen secured for themselves the best of the royal bric-a-brac. The housing situation was very acute then in Leningrad; some of the former residences were taken to accommodate people—mostly N.K.V.D. Some lived in ancient mansions which became almost unrecognizable as occupied by the new tenants. A palatial residence was turned into a stable, valuable furniture was thrown into the fire. Spacious homes fell into the hands of those who knew nothing of how to care for them. Father shrank from the invitation to take up one of these residences for himself, but it was among his duties to come on inspection of them on the Palace Embankment, close to the Winter Palace. The place was beautiful, majestic, huge and bare: its windows overlooked the river Neva; a bitter wind was blowing. He looked around and said "No, thank you: to live here! One would be frozen to death." He was right. Nobody could heat such a place from private means: one needed limitless wood for the great fireplaces to keep it warm. In truth none of us had any wish to live there. We had a fine home, but it was not a palace, and we were happier there. Father had access to almost everything, but he wanted little. Essentially, he was a very modest man.

Now perhaps it is time to speak of the background of my tutors. They too were remnants from the past.

Father always believed in education and progress. He was anxious to secure the best education for his daughter. Paradoxically, the people who were my direct or indirect educators were for the most part foreigners or foreign-born: most surprising of all, they were sometimes those we described as "former people," people from the best Russian classes of the past. Eventually

these were all destroyed by the Revolution, and finished by the N.K.V.D. in one form or other. Those of this class who fled from Russia lived in penury; those who were trapped in the attempt to escape were brought to a pitiful state.

I can never forget an old recluse who used to sit on the stairs of a house in the street where we lived in Leningrad, not far from the Admiralty and the Winter Palace. She would sit on these stairs in good weather, mending and patching some old rags or stockings, and reshuffling some bundle of rubbish. She was gray and dirty; her hair was never combed. The children used to throw stones at her and call her names. She gave to all of us the impression of a witch. She looked, and indeed was, quite wild, and used to chase the children with a long stake or an iron bar. She had two, and only two, teeth left. As I went to school I passed her almost every day, eyeing her with curiosity and pity. One day, when children had again attacked her, I stepped forward, and told them to go away and leave the old woman alone. "Have you no heart?" I said. What a surprise it was when the recluse spoke to me: "Thank you, Mademoiselle, for saving me from those ruffians." I glanced at her, and saw a tear falling down her cheek. "Who is she," I wondered. Soon I was to know the answer, for from that day we became friends. I always used to stop for a moment or two to talk to the old woman. One day, when it was bitterly cold, she stood outside the gate, looking very cold and blue. I looked at her, and thought that she must be hungry, with nobody to help her in the whole world. So I told her that I would come to see her later, when I took our English pointer "Rex" out for a walk. That evening I sneaked into the kitchen, and while our cook was somewhere about, I took some bread, onions, sugar and cheese —whatever was there to take—called the dog and in two seconds was out on the street. The old woman was waiting for me, to take me to her lodging. It was dark; one could hardly see where one was going. Soon we stepped into the basement, a horrible place, dimly lit, with water and damp everywhere. There were many partitions: someone was playing a concertina, another was swearing and beating a woman, smell of vodka was much in evidence. I hardly suppressed a shudder as I stood at the old recluse's side, but she held my hand tightly. I was almost petrified, but I could not run, my feet would not move. I don't know how long I stood there; "Rex" was restless, smelling around, and started chasing rats. Finally we came to a partition and a corner that was hers. There stood a bed like a heap

of rubble, a broken-leafed affair that was supposed to be a table, and a stool. There was hardly any light, just a flicker of a candle slowly burning out. As I stood there, the old woman tried to make me comfortable. She said she had some books for me to read—I had told her of my love for books. I was still uncertain whether to run away or to stay with her for a while. Then I started looking around, while battle royal was going on in the next section and a murderous cry was filling the place.

Suddenly I lifted up my eyes and saw a painting on the wall. I stood paralyzed, for never had I seen such rare and exquisite beauty as that of the woman in the oil painting. Suddenly a voice from somewhere said "Yes, that is a picture of me, in days gone by." It was the old recluse's voice. I looked at her, hardly understanding. The picture was one of a lady at the Russian Court, in her magnificent Court robes. "How on earth," I thought, "could such a picture find its way into this rats' hole?" As we sat together, she told me her story, saying that she knew she could trust me. She had held a position at the Court of the Tsar, and her husband had been an influential courtier, named Graf N. Their family estate had been outside St. Petersburg, and they had lived in a magnificent mansion along the Nevsky Prospect. Once, long ago, she had had children, but she did not remember anything of that time. She could not even bear to speak about it. Her husband and her whole family had been destroyed in the first outburst of the Revolution. She had herself been too ill at the time to escape abroad, and later all means of escape had been cut off. At length she went on to tell me her terrible story. As I opened the little bundle that I had brought for her—the food that I had picked up at home—she wept, as I too did. In my heart there was only the deepest sympathy, and sorrow that I could not help her more. Of course from that moment I was no longer afraid of her in her terrible lodging. All the time I was in Lenigrad I made it a point to see her on my way to school. She was always eager to see me, and I too was glad of the meetings, for she had so many wonderful things to tell, and she gave me books of Old Russia. I saw to it that no hooligans or ruffians would hurt her. But I could not report her story at home, or tell of my visits to her. Our cook occasionally noticed a shortage of this or that, but I knew we had plenty at home, and this old lady was in need of very little. Many times, while wiping tears from her old and wrinkled face, she told me "God will bless you one day for your goodness." But in those now far-off

days I could not foresee that indeed the day would come for me when only God's help could save me.

Though I had been taught to despise the "people of the past," I could never hate them, and as I began to know their personal history, my sympathies for them were deeply moved.

My father had a great collection of books. Some were from the Imperial Library, or from the private library of a nobleman. Some of them had come to him by the route of confiscation, but I knew little about that at the time. For my taste, the pick of the books were diaries, memoirs, letters. Those I loved most, and so did my father. They were supposed to adorn my father's bookshelves for their purely historical interest, but they had other influences upon me, which he overlooked. I am thankful now for the opportunity I had to see and read many State documents of the Old Russia and its Court, telling me "Who was Who" in the country before the Revolution.

Let me come to the realities of life in the Russia of the present time. I have to describe the other side of my education, the official side, with its dogmas and doctrines of Communism. For my own part, I was never interested in politics. It must be very unusual for a father like mine, who was very politically minded, to have a daughter like me. I had been born in the middle of the civil war, but developed a spirit very different from my father's. I remember the story he told me about our great Lady-Ambassador, Madam Kollontai. He told me this when we lived in Moscow, in the Foreign Office, at the Court of Tsar Stalin. He explained that though Madam Kollontai was the daughter of a Tsarist General, she had the will-power to oppose her father, to be a freethinker, and to join the forces opposite to his. I often wondered, since, at the moral for his own daughter suggested by this.

At a very early age I was robbed of the greatest happiness a child can have, a loving, devoted mother and a home. My mother committed suicide at the age of 26, as a protest against Communism and her personal unhappiness. This, of course, changed my whole life. There was no longer a home for me with a warm, good-hearted Russian mother. The home father then had was a very different place, externally among the best, but with no welcome for me. I dreamed of a real home for years to come.

Thus what I saw, what I experienced, what I suffered and what I inherited made me into an *individualist* who could never have a place in Soviet Russia. I dreamed of a world larger than

Russia. I wanted to open the windows and let in the fresh air, open the doors and let the people out to choose life for themselves. I had little happiness myself, but I found happiness in helping others—though it might be only with a piece of bread, an odd piece of clothing I could spare, a casual kind word. The religion that so many people in this world know, saying prayers by heart, I do not know, but what I do know is very deep in my soul. Blindfold, I can yet see and feel human needs and suffering. It does not matter how poor one is, one has always something to give, to share, to impart. We are all God's children, and love is greatest of all. By loving one another, by helping and sharing, we can promote the coming of a better world. If I am tired, desperate, downhearted, I shut quietly the door of my room, and kneel down to pray in my own manner, with the instincts of a Christian soul. To me God is made known also in people, in the flowers, in the sun bright and glorious, in the trees, in the good earth that is beneath us. There are some godly beings, and there is great beauty in the world. Whatever God made me and whatever I possess, I want to give, to share, to impart. To bring joy into the world, happiness into homes, to give hope and uphold every other iota of Faith—here is my ideal. And I think not in terms of Russia alone, or of any particular country, but of the whole world, of the future to come. For I am sure that on the people of great goodwill the world of the future depends, and there is no surplus of such people. We must gather the potential forces of the spirit and be resolute in our decision. The past we cannot alter, but the future we can shape and mould.

I do not think that I have changed very much from the days when I first dreamed in terms of the whole world. At home, in Russia, though I travelled extensively, it was only over the Soviet world, and I longed to see what was outside that. In those days, for me or for anyone to think of going abroad was out of the question, almost like proposing a journey to the Moon, to Mars, to Neptune. Yet it was in Leningrad that I first felt the pressure of that other world drawing me like a magnet. There too I came across so many things discarded from the former homes and palaces which had got into the hands of officials, the new Soviet aristocrats. At home I had a fine collection of what I held to be the most precious treasures of my childhood—a huge desk in my room, with many drawers, one containing ribbons and orders of the Empress of Russia, worn on all official occasions of State and ceremony. I had a cocked

. and feathers, stars and medals of the Fie
..arshals of Tsarist Russia; a collection of velvet masks w
black lace; the discarded tunic of some Colonel of Dragooı
At the time I knew little of their origin, but I used to look aft
them well, and occasionally—when nobody was about—I woul
attire myself in all their splendour, pull out my grandmother
voluminous skirt, put across my chest the State ribbon wit
star on it, pull well over my right eye the cocked hat with
feathers, climb on a high chair to see how I looked in the mirror, and imagine that I was the Empress of Russia or one of the admirals. Lost in the skirt, with the top-tunic falling off my childish shoulders, I had also a sea-sword. Sometimes I would put the mask on, imagining that nobody must recognize the Empress while she is about. One day my father arrived home too early, while I was adjusting my imperial attire, standing on the chair. He came in silently and stood by the door for a while, then said jokingly "Oh, little Nora is the Empress of Russia, is she not?" I jumped from the chair most embarrassed, trying to find excuse for my masquerade. Then he said "In the days past by, Norocha, the great personages used to wear all this, but the Revolution swept it aside. It can now be used only for theatrical purposes. Don't be embarrassed; go play" and he was off. Sometimes a girl-friend would marvel at my touch of splendour, and appreciate, with a trace of envy, my having such things to play with. Sometimes I would share with other youngsters my possessions of this sort, and three of us would parade. I would stand still and receive my Court-ladies, saying "Bow, lower, lower still." Of course we used to laugh, but it was a favorite sport of ours, this playing at Russian Court. A game for the daughter of a prominent Communist!

But all this and many other innocent incidents on the surface in my childhood had their influence upon me. I became quite an expert on Russian Court matters, knowing all the titles from the bottom upwards. And I loved the past, the glitter of the days gone by. How easy, after all, to set a child's imagination on fire! It was in Leningrad that I came across a forbidden book, that was destined to influence powerfully my life, the celebrated work by Henry Sienkiewicz *Quo Vadis?* Little I then thought that one day, when I should be grown up, some roads of my life would lead me to Rome. Little I dreamed that I too would pass by the little church, old and almost in ruins, where according to the legend Jesus Christ met Peter. And that I, a little Russian girl, would be received in private

audience by His Holiness, the Pope, in the "Holy Year" 1950. But in that year I was in Rome, looking back on my years of childhood. Yes, I said to myself as I walked the roads of Rome, or visited the catacombs of the early Christians—"Nora, *quo vadis*—Whither goest thou?"

Thinking of the past and of the future, I think also in terms of the Russian people, the multitude of people that I have left behind. Those people have a flicker of hope in their hearts that one day they will be free. I met them on all my journeys, I lived with them as a child and as a young girl. They were from all classes and all walks of life, but most of them whom I remember best were those who suffered, who were poor and oppressed, with little hope of life for tomorrow. Yet none of us dies so easily as that. The life of the multitude cannot be destroyed or annihilated all of a sudden. Speaking in terms of the present, knowing Russia and Russian people as I do, I cannot see how on earth the people suffering as they are suffering can wish to fight other people. When I say "the people," I do not mean the Party, N.K.V.D. and the Government. I mean the multitude, walking wearily the Russian roads, worshipping God in their secret hearts, with immediate thought for their home (however poor or humble), their children, their husbands, fathers, mothers, friends—all those whom they love and treasure. I do not know any Russian father or mother who desires a war. If they were left alone, to get on with the business of life, bringing up their families, cultivating somewhere a little patch of ground, planting a few seeds of some flower, they would be happiest of all. They have no wish to go far from their homes. They know suffering in a far deeper sense than my readers in the Canadian Review where this article appears. Perhaps that is "a Slav characteristic." But the Party, N.K.V.D., holds a terrible power over all this multitude. They are patient, bearing stoically their grievous cross, gathering their forces for one day to come. Until then, they will go on suffering. Many a Russian father and mother I saw bitterly crying when the war broke out and their sons were called up. At the same time they have a great love of their country, for better or for worse. They have reverence for the "Mother-Earth," as they call it in Russia, that bore them.

It was in Leningrad that I dreamed most of the future and of the sort of being I would like to grow into. So now also I dream of the future, with this difference—that some of my dreams come true. To me, life must have a purpose, a meaning,

and mine—*via* the medium of writing—is to contribute towards the welfare of mankind, making this world of ours a better place in which to live. If people want me to do so, I will write, pouring my whole soul into the stories and comments which will perhaps survive the time. For our time—our epoch—will be judged by our work and creation of any sort. If God has bestowed on me a little gift, then I want to be among those who in anv capacity serve the world.