

# BOOK WORLD

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## Verdict on Svetlana's story

### Da

By Mary Ellmann

With the publication of *Twenty Letters to a Friend*, everyone will be reminded of those ingenuous, eager and immoderate beings upon whom adulthood imposes the least complexity. Child souls, they are usually pushed aside. How many of them died in Russia alone, while Svetlana Alliluyeva grew up? Her own survival, in the eye of the storm, is eerie rather than virtuous. But one cannot be dedicated to Affection — her abstract principle like another's Culture and Rest — without evoking it in turn. Her book has a raw, willful and yet certain sweetness. She is heard because she represents Stalinist Russia, but its complex and awful history merely furnishes her the opportunity to recall birthday parties and late movies, to scold at abuses of power, to praise simple and immediate loyalties.

One would not have thought so small a book could surmount its own preliminaries — the press conferences, the previews and paraphrases, the attendant swarm of diplomats and lawyers and publishers, the fanfare of defection. It does so by its innocence, its single-mindedness, and I suppose by its unspoiled, countrified composition in 1963, in Russia, before the big noise. Its mode is not intellectual or political or even literary. It is only an intimate "family chronicle," a record of the persons Mrs. Alliluyeva has known and lost, through all those devices of loss — suicide, war, prison and execution — which have been most highly developed in her country.

The letter form was well chosen, by the anonymous Friend. It allows for rambling, for skipping some things and repeating others. Invaluable trivia are at home as they would not be in the presence of a formal thesis. The wording is clear and easy, banal without embarrassment, perfectly common. Successive waves of feeling, rather than any concept of precision or entirety, seem to dictate the narrative. The end comes first, Stalin's hideous death, in March of 1953, by cerebral hemorrhage. Then the letters trail back to the original family circle, which was exuberant, crowded and likable: the Alliluyev grandparents, the aunts and uncles, the children and their "teachers" (Soviet for governesses), the parents themselves — Stalin and Nadia Alliluyeva. And at the center of the book, the mother's suicide is brought in, like a heart on a plate. She shot herself with a tiny revolver in 1932, when she was 31 and her daughter Svetlana six, and all the rest here seems an aftermath of that. (Continued on page 22)

Mary Ellmann's reviews and essays have appeared in *Commentary* and other magazines.

**TWENTY LETTERS TO A FRIEND.** By Svetlana Alliluyeva. Translated by Priscilla Johnson McMillan. Harper & Row, Russian, 216 pp., \$8.50; English, 256 pp., \$5.95.



### Nyet

By John Kenneth Galbraith

Imagine a volume by, say, Mamie Eisenhower in which she tells at length of the Dowd parents and grandparents, of various collateral issue, of a disastrous brother, an unfortunate half brother, more briefly of Edgar and Milton and the other Eisenhower boys, and of the books she read as a child, the stories she was told and the flowers and trees amidst which she romped. She doesn't tell much of Ike for, though he is the only reason for the story, he was always busy and otherwise unapproachable and so she didn't see him much. And she tells nothing of his work as general or President for these things do not interest her. I do not want to press this comparison too far; I think that Mrs. Eisenhower might be a better writer. Svetlana Alliluyeva writes perfectly good sentences but she is describing what could be called a way of life and her technique of description relies excessively on large round adjectives. People are intelligent or beautiful, countryside is beautiful, marriage is happy or romantic, friends are close. Of her mother she says "she was intelligent, beautiful, extraordinarily gentle and considerate in every relationship." Possibly she senses that this is not too specific, for she later adds, "You will understand my mother and her short life only when you know about her parents." The parents are then described by similar adjectives.

It will already be evident that I do not think this is much of a book and that is right (it is incomparably inferior to Eugenia Ginzburg's *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, a breathtaking account of Stalinist terror by a high Communist victim). In addition to a singular indifference to what might interest the reader — or the recipient of the twenty letters of which the book consists — Mrs. Alliluyeva has a near genius for the inconsequential. It could be an inherited trait. Her mother was in Petrograd during the climactic days of 1917. Her letters from the scene are reproduced; they deal mostly with school and the bad weather and how dull life was at the time. They are, however, rich with interest as compared with a selection from Stalin to his daughter, which are also included. The first and possibly the most interesting of these is worth reproducing in full:

HELLO MY LITTLE SPARROW!

Don't be angry with me for not answering right away.

I was very busy. I'm alive and well. I feel fine. I give my little sparrow a big hug.

I do not want to overdo it. (Continued on page 22)

John Kenneth Galbraith, professor of economics at Harvard, is author of *The New Industrial State*.



## Svetlana: Da

(Continued from page 1) event. The intricate issues of Russian Communism come down to the evident dreariness of a single life: the eccentric childhood in a Kremlin apartment where all the parlormaids were sergeants in the CPU, the sense of expensive neglect; and for the adult woman, only an old nurse and two children, separated from her now, to set against the ruin of all other relationships.

"I leave the political analysis to others." Anyone might say that, remembering family and friends. The difference here is that the family and friends were almost as political as they were alive. Perhaps no other group of people could be so drastically reduced by seeing them only privately. Members of the Politbureau appear here as they appeared to a six-year-old — big, hearty, kind, undifferentiated. And even later, Mrs. Alliluyeva seems to suffer from an intellectual astigmatism which allows her to recognize only the practical virtue of the farmer or the doctor, the emotional virtue of the poet. These are demonstrable, but her experience has not impressed her with the good of political and social theory. While she states a reluctance to deal with politics, she implies they are not worth dealing with. She is of course free, and probably right, to be informal and apolitical. No one expects her to compete with Isaac Deutscher. But still it is necessary to say that she does not equal others even in personal revelation of Stalin. One has only to compare Milovan Djilas' *Conversations with Stalin* or Badu Svanidze's reminiscences, in *My Uncle Joseph Stalin*, to realize how much of the man's mind is not here. The letters are more stylized than they appear at first, in the sense that the intelligence of Mrs. Alliluyeva's society is erased by her own temperament.

Still, it is she, not Djilas, who can show us Stalin as the Little Papa, a phenomenon in itself. All "loud, moist kisses" (that moustache) and hugs and pet names: Setanka, Svetochka, little sparrow, Little Housekeeper. And baskets of fruit: "I'm sending you peaches, fifty for you and fifty for Vasya." And sweets: "Go halves and don't fight about it. Treat anyone you want." The child Svetlana sends a gift in return, and Stalin accepts it:

Thank you for the fish. Only, I beg you, Little Housekeeper, don't send me any more fish.

And no one, thinking for a year of what game Stalin might invent for a child, could think of anything more like him than the game of ORDERS. It began by his ordering the child, "Why are you only asking? Give an order, and I'll see to it right away," and advanced to quasi-official forms on which the Little Housekeeper wrote her instructions and the Wretched Secretary his reply: "I submit, J. Stalin."

A game, but just for two players. Others, friends and even close relatives, seemed only to come into Stalin's sight to disappear again, to reel off into blackness like the hares he shot at night from a car. Another game. And the girl Svetlana's favor diminished too. Her error was to grow up: the fondness of father bear for baby bear was not equal to that universal shock. By bad timing, too, the girl grew individual, idealistic and perceptive in the same years that the father grew ferociously simple (and simply ferocious). Their alienation then was as primitive as their bond had been. Stalin permits his daughter to give up her bodyguard:

To hell with you. Get killed, if you like. It's no business of mine.

He breaks up her first romance, at 16, with a filmmaker named Alexei Kapler:

Take a look at yourself. Who'd want you? You fool! He's got women all around him!

He permits her to marry Grigory Merosov:

"Yes, it's spring," he remarked all of a sudden. "To hell with you. Do as you like."

Stalin's brevity, the stripping of the sentence, is con-

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firmed by Djilas' *Conversations*. In absolute power, even relative clauses die off. Sympathy itself is spoken like a tractor. Stalin writes in 1950, when Mrs. Alliluyeva gave birth to her second child, Yekaterina:

Take care of yourself. Take care of your daughter, too. The state needs people, even those who are born prematurely.

What could she possibly return to him now, except the usual mixed bouquet of recrimination and attachment which grown children deposit on their parents' graves? But others' recriminations are so strong in this instance, that the child's attachment is particularly strained. Her compromise is to accuse someone else, Lavrenti Beria, more than Stalin. If Stalin was cruel, he was credulous too, deceived by someone even more vicious than himself.

The compromise is understandable. An utter condemnation would be unnatural, as one of the father by the child rather like him. She rejects his social philosophy without considering it, she asserts dogmatically that his dogmatism was a fault. In fact, she is in danger of representing Good as he came to represent Evil, without sufficient shading. It is Stalin who seems to inspire her crude hisection of experience: that which is formal, logical and detached is paternal; that which is imaginative and humane is maternal. Invariably in the book, all but impulse is relegated to calculation, duplicity, "Oriental perfidy." Her father's purposes seem to her spiritless; her own, taken seriously, are mindless. She invokes emotion with something of the same monomania with which he invoked the state. They share an appetite for positive summary which makes nothing of nuance, qualification, disbelief.

But her excessive feelings are like a serious fault in a child: they rouse an anxious dismay rather than revulsion. One feels almost personally to blame, blame is so palpable. Of the possible adjustments Mrs. Alliluyeva could have made to her climate, sentimentality is not the worst. Stalin's first child, Jakov, was little more than unhappy: it was of his attempted suicide that Stalin said, "Ha! He couldn't even shoot straight." Later, the Germans succeeded where Jakov had failed. The second child, Vasily, chose to think of his circumstances as advantageous. He swallowed everything the country could offer, especially vodka, and died of alcoholism. Svetlana Alliluyeva probably needed her emotional blatancy, as nourishing as it is naive. Told to go to hell, one grabs at the closest heaven. *People want to be happy. . . . All over the world people want the same thing — a good and healthy life. . . . Can what is good ever be forgotten?*

## Svetlana: Nyet

(Continued from page 1) Like W. C. Fields' man who hated children and dogs, a book so heralded cannot be all bad. Mrs. Alliluyeva writes with the same dignity and restraint that she showed in the press conference after her arrival in the United States. The early billing of the book gave me the impression that it would give religion a suffocating embrace. This is not so. Stalin was a heinous ogre and toward the end criminally mad. This is news only for those who bought the World War II myth of the genial and avuncular old revolutionary (the modern counterpart is the myth about the Jeffersonian tendencies of Ky and Thieu): to those who resisted all of the evidence from the great purges to the revelations of the Twentieth Party Congress; and to those who dismissed all the competent historians of the era as propagandists. And in the years of developing mania from the late Thirties on, Mrs. Alliluyeva saw almost nothing of her father. (Such was his interest in his grandchildren that he saw her older child only three times, her younger but once.) Yet it is something to have even a slight glimpse of the family impact of these events. Stalin drove the author's mother to suicide, rebuked his oldest son (Svetlana's half-

brother) for incompetence when he bungled an effort to shoot himself, jailed his son's wife and jailed or shot nearly all of his wife's relatives. Such was the impact of Stalinism at the purely household level.

More important, perhaps, one sees how horror can dull the senses and be rationalized. Mrs. Alliluyeva does not excuse her father: she is rather angry at his treatment of her mother and stepbrother. But she seems not to be very profoundly angry. As told, it all seems almost normal — certainly less dramatic than life in a Nancy Mitford ménage. And she believes the real criminal was Beria. The latter knew of Stalin's fears and suspicions and played on them remorselessly. So the blood was really on his hands. This leaves open the question of who was responsible for Yezhov, Beria's predecessor, a man whose hands were also rather red. Could it be that Stalin was prone?

The book also casts occasional flashes of light on even smaller points of history. Churchill in his memoirs tells of his visit to Stalin's apartment in the Kremlin. A lusty young girl appeared and was greeted boisterously by her father, who asked Churchill if he knew that old Bolsheviks were also loving parents. From Svetlana we learn that she was summoned specially for the demonstration. She had not seen her father for months before and did not see him for months again. Someone had evidently told Stalin that Englishmen cherish daughters as well as horses and dogs.

There are a few other contributions to history, some rather terrible in their unconscious humor. As Stalin approached death, as his daughter sadly tells, he did not receive medical attention.

He was probably aware of an increase in his blood pressure, but he hadn't any doctor to take care of him. Vinogradov, the only one he trusted, had been arrested and he wouldn't let any other doctor near him.

Finally, Mrs. Alliluyeva shows a highly developed capacity for a cliché. This is, perhaps, the most encouraging of all, for it means that, having moved to this country, she is in no danger of becoming a public charge. Any number of editors, including those of *Reader's Digest*, will feel that passages like the following plumb the deeper recesses of the human spirit, or anyhow, show a capacity for serving up platitudes by the plateful:

. . . in our time the destinies of the most dissimilar people are intertwined and woven into a single knot. People's lives assume astonishing, unexpected shapes; their fortunes rise and fall. Suddenly, after soaring to the most improbable heights, they come plummeting down. Neither politics nor revolution shows any mercy to the lives and fortunes of men. That is why I believe that family chronicles are worthwhile after all. They always contain the stuff of which history is made. Besides, what story in fiction has as much originality as the story of a real person?

Yet, transcendent or otherwise, it may not be entirely wise to encourage such thoughts in the reader. Some dictators reach improbable heights and are not brought down except by death and Stalin was an awful case in point. Readers will reflect that the story of a real person can, as the author shows, be surprisingly devoid of originality. And they will note that family chronicles can be almost completely devoid of the stuff of which history is made, as this book testifies.

According to the newspapers Professor Arthur Schlesinger tried to get Harper & Row to postpone the publication of this volume. This is the 50th anniversary of the October revolution; he thought it would be more tactful if we did not celebrate it with this reminder to the Soviets of their dark days. As so often with decent, well-meaning liberals, his instinct was sound but his efforts misdirected. He should have worried about sparing not the Russians but the long-suffering Americans.

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