

RUSSIA

No Help from Svetlana

Secretive as a salesman of obscene postcards, the visitor from Moscow scuttled from one London publisher to another showing his wares. But publisher after publisher turned him down—and with good reason. Not that his price was too high. Indeed, he was asking for no money at all. And his manuscript was certainly topical: it was a copy in Russian of Svetlana Stalina's memoirs. Reason for the publishers' turndown: they all knew that the legal rights to the book had already been sold for a record \$3,200,000 to other U.S. and British publishers, who plan to bring it out in October under the title *Twenty Letters to a Friend*.

What made the publishers even more wary was that they recognized the peddler. He was Victor Louis, a Soviet citizen who is married to a British woman, works as a part-time correspondent in Moscow for the London Evening News, lives auspiciously well, and sometimes does unofficial chores for the Kremlin. Eventually, Louis was forced to turn to a publisher whose reputation is as offbeat as his own: Alex Flegon, a Rumanian refugee who operates a small press in London and specializes in smuggling dubious literary material in and out of the Soviet Union.

Soviet Scheme. Louis' mission to London was a sure sign that the Soviet Union has given up its high-pressure, but unsuccessful, campaign to persuade the U.S. and other Western countries to postpone publication of Svetlana's book until after this November's 50th-anniversary celebration of the Bolshevik Revolution. By circulating a copy of the manuscript that Svetlana left behind with friends last year when she went to India, they hoped to force premature publication of the book in the West, thus diluting its impact before the November festivities.

For a little while, the move seemed to pay off. No sooner had Flegon announced that he would publish his version in Russian and English than Svetlana and Hutchinson & Co., her British publisher, won a London court ruling temporarily stopping Flegon's plan. In order to protect their copyright under British law, Hutchinson then rushed out a handful of Russian-language copies of the book and put them on sale in obscure London bookshops. London newspapers scooped up the copies, put Russian-reading reviewers to work, and last week the gist of the memoirs was out.

"Loving Father." Readers may well wonder what the Soviets were worried about. Svetlana remembers Daddy as a "loving father who gave out tobacco-smelling kisses" and wrote kind letters promising his daughter pomegranates from the Black Sea coast. She tries to dispose of the old rumor that Stalin murdered her mother, who was his second wife. They had a little quarrel at a Kremlin banquet in honor of the 15th anniversary of the November revolu-



STALIN & DAUGHTER (1934)

The wonder is what the worry was about.

tion, Svetlana concedes, but she insists that her mother shot herself that evening. "The fact is," says Svetlana, "that Stalin himself never killed anything in his life except hawks and hares, and did not know how to."

Perhaps. But Russia's dictator did have his share of quirks. He hated to go out in public, he said, because crowds would gather and applaud "with mouth open, the fools." He pouted when he saw wives of Soviet officials in foreign dress. He complained, "I can't breathe in here," when he smelled perfume in a room. After his eldest son, Yasha, bungled a suicide attempt, Stalin shouted: "Missed, you great fool!" He slapped Svetlana twice across the face when, at 17, she fell in love with a middle-aged Jewish dramatist. His spies trailed her when she wandered with boy friends through Moscow streets during World War II looking for a secluded place in which to kiss. The agents, she writes, were too fearful of her father's anger to report to him what they witnessed.

"Ghastly Death." Was Stalin, at 73, the victim of a doctors' plot, as some people still believe? Svetlana says no. In fact, she writes, he was so fearful of a conspiracy that, in 1953, in the last months of his life he banned doctors from the Kremlin and treated himself with doses of iodine. Svetlana was at her father's bedside in his final three days. In the last twelve hours, his breathing reflexes numbed by the spreading hemorrhage, he slowly, painfully choked to death. It was, writes Svetlana, a "ghastly death. I felt like a good-for-nothing daughter who had in no way helped this old sick man who was rejected and alone on his Olympus."

That was the way Stalin's death was reported at the time. As for the rest of Svetlana's reminiscences about him, far more damaging facts have been freely published before.