Khrushchev: Notes from a Forbidden Land

I NOW live like a hermit on the outskirts of Moscow. I communicate only with those who guard me from others—and who guard others from me." Thus begin the reminiscences of former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who was the most powerful man in the Soviet Union from 1955 until his downfall in 1964. Khrushchev's rather forlorn comment on his enforced six-year silence is all the more poignant coming from a man who stood for so long at the center of history. At week's end the ex-Premier, 76, was admitted to a Moscow hospital, reportedly suffering from his second heart attack this year.

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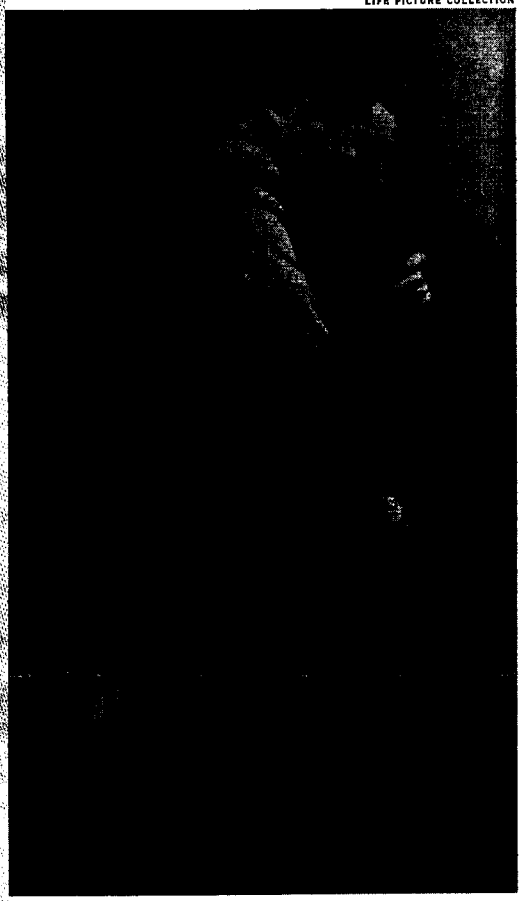

STALIN IN THE 1930s
Something admirable, something savage.

The first installment of the recollections appears this week in LIFE and 19 foreign publications, and will be published in fuller form in December by Little, Brown under the title *Khrushchev Remembers*. Several days in advance, Tass carried Khrushchev's name on its wires for the first time in six years, in issuing a statement from him denying that he had "passed on" his reminiscences to any publication. "This is a fabrication and I am indignant at this," Khrushchev said. His language, however, fell far short of a blanket denial. Moreover, British Sovietologist Edward Crankshaw, who wrote an introduction to the forthcoming book, pointed out that the Kremlin was almost forced to counter such a publishing coup in the West with some kind of denial. "They could not do anything else," said Crankshaw. "What could you expect in the circumstances?"

Something Savage. As Crankshaw points out in his foreword, Khrushchev's remembrances constitute "an extraordinary, a unique historical document" that "takes us straight into what has been hitherto a forbidden land of the mind." In Khrushchev's words: "I tell these stories because, unpleasant as they may be, they contribute to the self-purification of our party. I address myself to the generations of the future in hope that they will avoid the mistakes of the past."

The reminiscences cover a period of more than 30 years, concluding a few months before Khrushchev's ouster. The first segment recounts Khrushchev's career under the man who ruled over the Soviet Union for most of that time: Joseph Stalin. Khrushchev's overall judgment: He was a man of "outstanding skill and intelligence. In everything about Stalin's personality there was something admirable and correct as well as something savage." Nevertheless, "there was unquestionably something sick about Stalin." Absolute dictators like Stalin, says Khrushchev, "consider it indispensable that their authority be held on high not only to make the people obedient, but to make the people afraid of them as well."

Khrushchev first met Stalin in 1925, when the younger man was elected a delegate from the Yuzovka party organization in the southern Ukraine to the 14th Party Congress in Moscow. By then Khrushchev had discarded his mother's intensely religious training, fathered two children, lost his first wife during the famine of 1921 and married his second, Nina. Khrushchev recalls how, the first morning after reaching Moscow, he tried to take a streetcar to the Kremlin, but didn't know which number to take and ended up getting lost. He took to skipping breakfast so that he could get a front seat near Stalin at the meetings.

Everyone Trembled. In 1930, while he was studying metallurgy at Moscow's Industrial Academy and rising swiftly in party ranks, Khrushchev was sent to deliver funds to a newly collectivized farm in the Samara region. He and his companion were appalled at conditions there, he recalls. "The farmers were starving to death. When we told them that the money was allocated for farm equipment, they told us they weren't interested in equipment—what they wanted was bread."

Khrushchev soon began hearing other reports about the disastrous effects of collectivization. But it was not until many years later that he realized the scale of the "starvation and repression which accompanied collectivization as it was carried out under Stalin." Long afterward, for example, he heard of a train that had pulled into Kiev filled with the bodies of Ukrainians who had starved to death. Some officials wanted to sound an alarm at the time, but none had the courage to confront Stalin. "We had already moved into the period when one man had the collective [leadership] under his thumb and everyone else trembled before him."

Lucky Ticket. Yet Khrushchev's own career skyrocketed, and by 1934 he was party leader of Moscow. One reason: Stalin's second wife, Nadezhda Sergeyevna Alliluyeva, who had been a fellow student at the Industrial Academy, was impressed by Khrushchev and told her husband about him. "Nadya," mother of Svetlana Alliluyeva, committed suicide in 1932. But her judgment of Khrushchev endured in Stalin's mind, a stroke of luck that the old Soviet leader readily acknowledges. In the years that followed, he says, "I stayed alive while most of my contemporaries, my classmates at the academy, lost their heads as enemies of the people. I've often asked myself, 'How was I spared?' I think part of the answer is that Nadya's reports helped determine Stalin's attitude toward me. I call it my lottery ticket. I drew a lucky lottery ticket. Right up until the last day of his life he liked me. It would be stupid to talk about this man loving anyone, but he held me in great respect."

Others did not fare so well. Stalin had little respect for Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya and Maria Ilyinichna Ulyanova, Lenin's widow and sister, recalls Khrushchev. He used to say that he did not think either of these women was making a positive contribution to the party's struggle. "After Stalin's death we found an envelope in a secret compartment, and inside the envelope was a note written in Lenin's hand. Lenin accused Stalin of having insulted Nadezhda Konstantinovna. Vladimir Ilyich [Lenin] demanded that Stalin apologize; otherwise Lenin would no longer consider Stalin his comrade."

Few things escaped the dictator's attention. Khrushchev recounts that he was once told to telephone Stalin at home. "Comrade Khrushchev," Stalin said, "rumors have reached me that you've let a very unfavorable situation develop in Moscow as regards public toilets. Apparently people can't find anywhere to relieve themselves. This won't

do." Khrushchev relates that he and Nikolai Bulganin, then head of the Moscow Soviet and later to become Premier, "worked feverishly" on the problem.

Khrushchev recalls another telephone call, informing him of the 1934 murder of Leningrad Party Chief Sergei Kirov by a Trotskyite dissident. It was that event that set the stage for one of the most terrifying eras of modern history: the Great Purges of the 1930s, or, as Khrushchev calls them, "the meat mincer." The NKVD, Stalin's secret police and precursor of today's KGB, suddenly became all-powerful, and thousands of party officials and army officers began to vanish. Khrushchev survived the grim era in willing ignorance. "I don't know where these people were sent," he says. "I never asked. If you weren't told something, that meant it didn't concern you." The usual estimate of party members imprisoned or murdered is nearly 1,000,000, in addition to millions of nonparty members and as much as half the officer corps. "The flower of our party was stamped out in the savage violence," says Khrushchev. He recommends that all who perished "be presented to the people as martyrs of the terror waged by Stalin."

It was during World War II, says Khrushchev, "that Stalin started to be not quite right in the head." Khrushchev, then party boss of the Ukraine, faced an appalling food shortage caused by war damage and a severe drought. Thousands died of starvation, and Khrushchev even began hearing of cannibalism, including one report that a human head and a pair of feet—apparently all that remained after a corpse had been eaten—had been found under a bridge. Yet Stalin refused to provide food-rationing cards or reduce quotas on farm produce that was shipped out of the Ukraine. "He would say: 'You're being soft-bellied! They're deceiving you. They're counting on being able to appeal to your sentimentality.' "

Cowboy Movies. "Those last years with Stalin were hard times," says Khrushchev. "The government virtually ceased to function. Stalin selected a small group which he kept close to him at all times." Another group was purposely—and ominously—uninvited. Says Khrushchev: "Any one of us could find himself in one group one day and the other group the next.

"We would meet either in his study at the Kremlin or, more often, in the Kremlin movie theater. Stalin used to select the movies himself. He liked cowboy movies especially. He used to curse them and give them the proper ideological evaluation, but then immediately order new ones.

"When a movie ended, Stalin would suggest, 'Well, let's go get something to eat, why don't we?' By now it was usually one or two o'clock in the morning. It was time to go to bed, and the next day we had to go to work. But everyone would say, yes, he was hungry too. Our caravan [to Stalin's dacha] used to make detours into side streets. Apparently Stalin had a street plan of Moscow and worked out a different route every time. He didn't even tell his bodyguard in advance." Stalin refused to eat anything until someone else first tried it. He would say: "Look, here are the giblets, Nikita. Have you tried them yet?" Khrushchev, knowing that his host wanted some for himself but was afraid to be first, would reply, "Oh, I forgot." The only member of his circle exempt from this tasting ritual was NKVD Chief Lavrenty Beria, who ate only food transported from his own dacha.

No One to Trust. To prepare for these dinners, Khrushchev made it a point to take a nap during the day; anyone who grew drowsy at Stalin's table was not likely to remain in the dictator's favor for long, Khrushchev explains. Moreover, Stalin's soirées included a good deal of heavy drinking: Khrushchev recalls that Beria, Georgi Malenkov and Anastas Mikoyan once had to arrange to be served colored water rather than wine because they could not match Stalin's capacity. Stalin, says Khrushchev, "found the humiliation of others very amusing. Once Stalin made me dance the *gopak* [a Ukrainian folk dance] before some top party officials. I had to squat down on my haunches and kick out my heels, which frankly wasn't very easy for me. But as I later told Mikoyan, 'When Stalin says dance, a wise man dances.' "

Each year, says Khrushchev, it became more evident that Stalin was a failing man. Once, while vacationing in Afon on the Black Sea, the dictator strolled past Khrushchev and Mikoyan, muttering, "I'm finished. I trust no one, not even myself." On another occasion, he forgot Bulganin's name. At his last New Year's celebration, a drunken Stalin ordered his daughter Svetlana to dance in front of the guests. "Stalin grabbed her by the forelock with his fist and pulled. I could see her face turning red and tears welling up in her eyes. He pulled harder and dragged her back onto the dance floor."

"Bulganin once described very well the experience we all had to live with in those days," says Khrushchev. "We were leaving Stalin's after dinner one night, and he said, 'You come to Stalin's table as a friend, but you never know if you'll get home by yourself or if you'll be given a ride—to prison!' "

Despite his respect for Stalin's achievements, Khrushchev says that if he were alive today, "I would vote that he should be brought to trial and punished for his crimes." Noting that some steps have been taken to rehabilitate Stalin's reputation as a war hero, Khrushchev declares angrily: "And now they're starting to cover up [again] for the man guilty of all those murders."

Y. ERNEST SATOW—RAPHO GUILLUMETTE