



*Pensioner Nikita Khrushchev, with his recorder and his dog, while leisurely strolling on the grounds of his country home, 15 miles from Moscow. He used the tape recorder to record his controversial memoirs.*

# Khrushchev Remembered

by Strobe Talbott

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *Strobe Talbott, author of the accompanying article on Nikita Khrushchev, is the editor and translator of Khrushchev Remembers, the best-selling and controversial memoirs of the former Soviet Premier which were first published last year. A graduate of Yale, Class of '68, and a Rhodes scholar, Mr. Talbott is a writer whose special interest is the Soviet Union.*

I felt as though I knew Nikita Khrushchev personally, even though I never met him. While working on *Khrushchev Remembers*, I spent many hours every day poring over his story, told in his own words, about his rise from a coal miner's shack in the south of Russia to the pinnacle of power in the Kremlin. I got to know him well, and I liked him.

In his day Khrushchev had been highly successful as a bureaucrat, politician, and a statesman—three walks of life not known for their fun-loving types. But Khrushchev was different. He

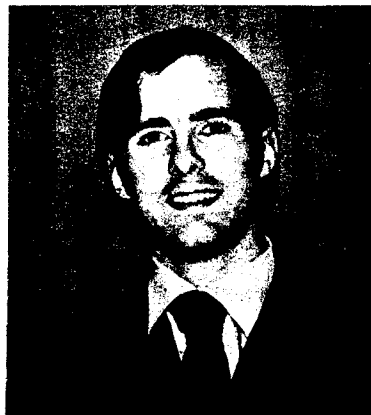
had an earthy sense of humor and a rambunctious personality which were somehow undulled by years of skulking around the back stairwells of the Soviet power structure. These qualities, his mischievous wit and unpredictable ebullience, made him far more interesting and likeable than most bureaucrats, politicians, and statesmen.

### Khrushchev's face

Among the furrowed brows, pasted-on smiles, inscrutable masks, and sourpuss expressions of most world leaders past and present, Khrushchev's comic, wart-dotted, but intelligent face was an original. Certainly among Soviet leaders, he represented an inspired bit of casting. With his turnip nose, his easy gap-toothed grin, his darting alert eyes, and his Alfred Hitchcock figure, he never looked the part he was supposed to play in international showdowns or summits—but he usually managed to play the part better than anyone expected, as John F. Kennedy learned to

his embarrassment at his 1961 eyeball to eyeball debate with Khrushchev in Vienna.

Some world statesmen, including some of Khrushchev's ideological adversaries, appreciated the saltier side of



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his personality. One prominent Western leader once remarked of Khrushchev, "Even when he pounds his shoe on the table, you've got to admit—it's a very human thing to do."

There is a lot of verbal shoe-pounding in *Khrushchev Remembers*. On every page I found a reminder that I was in the presence of a very lively human being who could be as entertaining as he was enigmatic.

### A hit with Americans

Even though he personified the "enemy" and the "Communist threat to our way of life," Khrushchev was a great hit with many Americans during his two trips to the United States in 1959 and 1960. He had made his coming-out debut to the capitalist West only four years earlier at the age of 61 when he attended the Geneva Summit Conference in 1955. Yet no sooner did he land in Washington in 1959 than he proved to be a masterful ringmaster of the Soviet diplomatic roadshow.

He loved meeting people, sightseeing, hamming it up for photographers, but most of all he loved to talk. He talked anytime, anywhere, to anyone who would listen.

And he was rarely boring. He was noticeably impatient with formal speeches. He much preferred to speak

off-the-cuff and spiced his repartee with animated gestures, jokes of all sorts, folksy proverbs, playful insults, temper tantrums, provocative outbursts, and occasionally a Biblical phrase harking back to his strict Russian Orthodox upbringing as a child.

### Worth quoting

Reporters following him around this country quickly learned that when the irrepressible Russian leader departed from the prepared text of a speech and started to extemporize, he was sure to come out with something worth quoting. To recall some examples of Khrushchev at his best:

During his visit to the United Nations in the fall of 1960, he met the press at the country retreat for the Soviet U.N. mission in Glen Cove, Long Island. He was asked by a newsman, "What can you say about your stay here, in the heart of capitalism?"

Khrushchev replied, "This is the heart of capitalism and I have the heart of a Communist." He went on to say that Communists can coexist peacefully with capitalists just as a young man sometimes finds it worthwhile to settle down with an old but rich widow even though he's not madly in love with her.

Later he quipped that if Christians could accept the idea of the Holy Trinity, the United States should be willing



*Khrushchev loved talk, proverbs, jokes of all sorts, and here the conversation flowed at the family dining table. Next to him is his daughter Lena and his wife serving.*



*A compassionate Khrushchev was sympathetic to Stalin's daughter, above, with her husband, American architect Peters, and their daughter Olga.*

## **KHRUSHCHEV** CONTINUED

to accept the "troika," or three-man Secretariat which the Russians were then proposing in place of the U.N. Secretary-General.

Asked if he was going to make a second address before the General Assembly, he answered that he had to in order to cover his travel expenses.

While visiting the Hollywood set of *Irma La Douce* in 1959, the Soviet Premier and his wife were watching Shirley MaLaine and a chorus line rehearse the cancan. When the dancing girls flipped up the back of their skirts to the audience, Khrushchev leapt indignantly to his feet and shielded Mrs. Khrushchev's eyes from the scene.

"Humanity's face is more beautiful than her backside," he explained.

The Russian original of *Khrushchev Remembers* reflected vividly this aspect of Khrushchev's personality: the charming, cunning loudmouth.

### **Skillful talker**

Regardless of whether he was proclaiming self-righteously about the bad old days of Stalin or boasting about his own moments of glory in the international spotlight, I found Khrushchev's reminiscences a fascinating virtuoso performance by one of the most skillful talkers of all times.

He was also a skillful liar. His recollections are full of deceptions, distortions, evasions, hoked-up alibis, and lapses of memory; but they are consistently as colorful as was the man himself.

In the murky world of Russian politics, Khrushchev was probably too col-

orful for his own good. While he was alternately delighting and bedeviling the West, he was driving his colleagues back home crazy with his erratic public behavior. Finally, the Soviet bureaucrats and politicians from whose ranks he had risen were fed up with Comrade Nikita Sergeyeovich, and they brought him down. His memoirs are packed with examples of the recklessness and impetuosity which were part of his undoing.

### **Lived in comfort**

It is a testimony to Nikita Khrushchev's most important accomplishment that despite his disgrace and unceremonious departure from office in 1964, he was allowed to live in a comfortable dacha just outside Moscow on a state pension for seven years and to die a natural death at the ripe old age of 77.

According to Stalinist precedent, if a man lost in the Kremlin power game, he lost his life—usually in a prison basement with a bullet in the back of the neck.

Khrushchev broke that precedent when he came to power, replacing Stalinist terror with a still imperfect but radically improved style of government behavior. And he benefited personally from the improvement when his turn came to fall from power. Hustled off into retirement, he joined the ranks of his own ousted rivals Nikolai Bulganin, Lazar Kaganovich, Georgi Malenkov, Vyacheslav Molotov, and Kliment Voroshilov—a circle of men whose continuing existence symbolized a momentous recovery from the homicidal mass mania which had afflicted the USSR for almost a quarter of a century.

The question uppermost in my mind

when I immersed myself in Khrushchev's reminiscences was: How was this man able to overcome his own past and force his country to break with its past?

Paradoxically, the Russian leader who at the age of 61 shook the world, particularly the Communist world, with his de-Stalinization speech of 1956 had previously spent all his life as a functionary and beneficiary of Stalinism.

Khrushchev's metamorphosis from a loyal and often ruthless Stalinist into the prosecutor who denounced Stalin's crimes at the Twentieth Party Congress cannot be explained simply in terms of self-serving hypocrisy and political opportunism.

### **His own complicity**

Granted, he decided to deliver the famous Secret Speech as part of a bold gamble to show who was boss as he maneuvered for supreme power against Malenkov, Molotov, and Kaganovich.

Granted, too, both in the Secret Speech and in his memoirs he begs the question of his own considerable complicity in Stalin's crimes while never missing a chance to make his former fellow henchmen look like stooges and thugs in the service of their late master.

And granted, during his own nine-year rule Khrushchev practiced many of the vices he had preached against in the Secret Speech.

But the fact remains that it took genuine political courage to wrench himself and his country free from the savagery of Stalinism. There were formidable forces pitted against him when he started promoting de-Stalinization. First, he had to reverse the momentum of 25 years of history. Second, he had to face a powerful coalition of diehard Stalinists who opposed him bitterly on the de-Stalinization issue.

In discrediting Stalin and insisting that the Party dissociate itself from many of the worst Stalinist attitudes and methods, Khrushchev must have gone far beyond the dictates of his purely *political* instincts. He must have

had strong *moral* instincts, too. It was incredible that a man who had gone through the brutalization of a Stalinist career could have any moral sense left.

Yet Khrushchev's basic humanity is apparent at many spots in his memoirs, particularly in the chapter where he expresses his compassion for Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter who defected to the West. While the official line promoted by his successors holds that Svetlana is a traitor and "morally sick," Khrushchev undoubtedly took pleasure in the news that Svetlana, now living happily in the United States as Mrs. William Wesley Peters, gave birth this year to a baby daughter named Olga.

Khrushchev's fundamental decency is also evident in those sections of *Khrushchev Remembers* where his memory turns, with sadness and sympathy, to Svetlana's mother Nadezhda. She was by all accounts a noble and pathetic woman whom Stalin drove to suicide in 1932.

It is, in a way, appropriate that Nikita Khrushchev has now been buried near Nadezhda Alliluyeva's grave at the Novodevichy Cemetery behind an ancient monastery on the banks of the Moscow River.

### **Second class funeral**

But at the same time, it is a shame that Khrushchev was not interred in the Kremlin wall, an honor to which he was technically entitled as a former Party and government leader. Because of the contribution he made to his country with de-Stalinization, he should have been given better than a second-class funeral.

But Khrushchev's case before the court of history is not closed. Just as Joseph Stalin's embalmed body was removed from the Red Square Mausoleum on Khrushchev's orders in 1961, so, perhaps, will Khrushchev himself one day be given the resting place—and the official recognition—he deserves.