

Books of The Times

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

A Rare Event

TWENTY LETTERS TO A FRIEND. By Svetlana Alliluyeva. Translated from the Russian by Priscilla Johnson McMillan. 256 pages. Harper & Row. \$5.95.

ONE gets used to things so quickly. All the same, how astonishing it is that in 1967 the daughter of Stalin should be alive and in this country! How astonishing, in part because we do not think of people like her as really existing. *Stalin's daughter?* No, not real; a nearly forgotten factor in history's imagination. And then suddenly, here she is, a woman of 41 stepping out of an obscure corner of history—or memory, fairy tale, nightmare—stepping out of an airplane at Kennedy International Airport, smiling, waving, speaking, holding a news conference, giving voice to independent thoughts.



The New York Times

Svetlana Alliluyeva

. . . Her person, weight, stance, facial expressions, candor, most of all her voice, authenticate her reality. And one struggles to retain the knowledge that this Svetlana Alliluyeva, this unanticipated but otherwise unremarkable physical presence, is indeed Stalin's daughter, always was Stalin's daughter, has had—beyond our awareness, all these years!—an independent consciousness. Now she is here to tell us what it was like, and initially, more simply and startlingly, that it was, that it happened.

Such events are rare, and last but a moment. They are sudden confirmation of reality, of the phenomena of separate existences and volitions, of consequential private action, of coincidence and accident. They make us for a moment unsophisticated; and this touching, sad, personally fascinating, historically interesting and politically minor document does, too.

Loneliness and Despair

"Twenty Letters to a Friend" was written in a village outside of Moscow in 1963, when the author was 37. The memoir is cast in the most intimate of forms, "letters" in which the author speaks directly to the reader, and it conveys a sense of loneliness and despair that borders on desperation. Its subject is suffocation; the act of writing it—as, four years later, the decision to defect—was clearly an attempt to throw off the grasp of spiritual death.

"Please don't think I look on my life as anything special," Mrs. Alliluyeva writes in an introduction dated July 16, 1963. "On the contrary, the life I've led has been unusually dull and monotonous for one of my genera-

tion. Maybe it hasn't begun yet. Maybe when I've written it all down, an unbearable burden of some kind will fall from my shoulders at last and then my real life will begin."

This is romantic—a great deal in this book is romantic—but it is also adrenal; one credits it in a way one would not credit sentimentality. Mrs. Alliluyeva evokes, in rushes, her feelings for her homeland, the great Mother Russia, and her belief in God and the triumph of goodness. But this is not routine patriotism or religiosity; it seems, in context, too authentic for that. It is affecting finally, not for its simplicity or undoubted sincerity, but for its necessity. The book is an act of survival.

The first letter, which tells of Stalin's death in 1953, is the historically most interesting and the most dramatic. Here, too, reality is authenticated; an event of crucial objective importance is documented by personal feelings. Was Beria the degenerate villain Mrs. Alliluyeva makes out? Here and throughout the book she suggests that Beria acted as Rasputin, influencing her father toward evil, and some critics have suggested this is a lamentable thing, an attempt to whitewash Stalin. Yet Mrs. Alliluyeva's judgment of her father could not be plainer. "My father died a difficult and terrible death," she writes. And then she adds: "God grants an easy death only to the just."

Condemnation and Confusion

Later, toward the end, she suggests—as Trotsky did in his massive biography of Stalin (which has just been reissued by Stein & Day)—that Stalin was a victim, or captive, of a machine—the monster Communist state. And elsewhere she invokes fate. But if this is apology, it is a daughter's apology for a father who was a tyrant and a murderer, but who was also her father, real, alive, rough, cruel, and at times kindly and fatherly. The condemnation is plain, and also the confusion of feelings. Anything harsher would be unbelievable.

Much else that is in this book—the portraits of her mother and her beloved nurse ("like a big Russian stove"), of her tragic brothers, of the man she loved and her first husband, of numerous relatives and Communist officials—and accounts of how so many of them became Stalin's victims—is now generally known. What is fascinating in "Twenty Letters" is the personal view, of a growing child and young woman, isolated from events and a witness to horrifying events, and the account of her slowly maturing awareness of the consequences of these events, to those around her and to herself. Whatever other importance the book may have, in its verification of these simple facts "Twenty Letters to a Friend" becomes astonishing and profoundly moving. In this sense, it is the rarest of events, and should be so acknowledged.