

2

Alexandra's Childhood and Family

I was born on August 20, 1905, in the city of Sebastopol on the beautiful, subtropical Crimean peninsula, where my father, Dr. Andrei S. Voronin, had his medical practice at the time. I grew up believing that people arrive in this world only to have a long, happy life.

When I was about three years old, we moved from Sebastopol to Yalta, where Papa continued to practice medicine for several years. Although we were not wealthy, I had everything a child could wish for and remember my early childhood as a warm and sunlit paradise in which I was loved, humored, and indulged, with nothing demanded from me in exchange. The third of five children, I was the only one to survive infancy, which may account for the way my parents spoiled me. Even though my mother, Irina Theodorovna, tended to be strict and sparing with outward demonstrations of affection, I always had my way, even with her, and certainly with my father, my nanny, and my governess.

It is very hard for me to write about my mother. Even if I could find the words to describe her and what she meant to me, they would still be inadequate, for I should have said them while I was still near those tender and caring hands, those loving eyes. It is much easier for me to write about my father, although he

disappeared in the early years of World War I when I was still a little girl.

I know that my parents loved each other and had married despite strong family disapproval. Considering my father an inferior match, my mother's family would not consent to my parents' marriage, so they had eloped when he was still a medical student. Afterwards, Mama's relatives turned their backs on her and my father for several years, regarding their union as yet another misalliance in the family. There had been equally great consternation when my maternal grandmother (who belonged to one of a small number of Russian families descended directly from Rörek, the Viking king who played such an important part in the early history of Russia) married Theodore von Kotzebue, a descendant of an old German family that had settled in Russia during the Napoleonic Wars and had served Russia ever since in the arts and sciences, exploration, and the diplomatic and civil service. Although various tsars had rewarded several members of the von Kotzebue family for their loyalty and outstanding service, my maternal grandmother's parents considered her new husband and his family upstarts.

Instead of wishing her daughter Irina well in a situation so similar to her own, my grandmother and the rest of her family continued to look disdainfully at my father and his perfectly respectable relatives, who naturally resented this treatment. But, eventually, some kind of olive branch must have been extended, for I remember being presented to my great-grandfather when I was three or four years old. I was made to walk the length of an immense, ornate room, at the end of which an old man was seated in a large chair. When he lifted me onto his lap and bent over me, his breath was so terrible that every subsequent encounter with halitosis has reminded me of that occasion.

On my father's side, the oldest ancestor I remember meeting was Papa's mother, Maria Katroutza. She had married Sergei Vo-

ronin, whose father was, I believe, a Russian Orthodox priest in Moldavia, and my father was their only son. Grandmother and her brother Gregory were the children of a landed gentleman who lived on his large estate in Moldavia (or Bessarabia, as it is sometimes called), which at that time was a part of the Russian Empire. When, in the last century, oil was discovered on and around the old Katroutza estate, the family, which had always been wealthy, became even more rich.

Great-Uncle Gregory had two sons and two daughters, Catherine and Eugenia. Aunt Génia came to play an important part in my life, but I do not remember meeting Aunt Káthia. She was first married to an important government official in St. Petersburg, and when he died, she married a millionaire by the name of Hertza and became a very well-known opera singer, as did another relative on my father's side, Maria Kouznetsova Benoit-Massenet. Oddly enough, my two aunts had very similar repertoires, and both of them had their best parts in "Aïda." Aunt Kouznetsova sang with various opera companies, while Aunt Hertza had her own company and, when going on tour, used to rent the best theaters, "including La Scala," as my Aunt Génia often said admiringly.

Aunt Génia had been engaged to a man who was killed in the Russo-Turkish War of 1878–1879, and she vowed never to marry. Because she was disgusted with the disorder and pogroms she witnessed in Russia during the 1905 Revolution, she and Aunt Káthia went to live in Nice, France, at about the time their father, my Great-Uncle Gregory, died. Aunt Génia stayed in Nice until her death during World War II. Like other members of her family, including my father, she had, at first, received a very good income from her family's interest in the oil wells. However, when Russia ceded Moldavia to Rumania after World War I, the royal Rumanian government lost no time in "nationalizing" our oil-bearing lands, and the "just" compensation they promised to all

former owners—in the form of regularly paid installments—soon dwindled to nothing. By the time I came to live with Aunt Génia, she could barely make ends meet.

Not once did I hear my mother regret having married my father against her family's wishes or hold it against him that he came from a less ancient family than her own. She believed that such things do not matter, and my friends and I were brought up to think the same way. Family background became an issue for us only after the Revolution, when our sole hope for personal safety lay in being considered of humble origin.

In the years before World War I, life was still good, both for my extended family and for my parents and me in Yalta, which had long been a fashionable summer resort to which exciting people flocked during the season. Being only a child, I spent my time reading, swimming, riding, and dreaming of becoming a writer. When I was about ten or so and living in Kharkov, Mama gave me a book with blank pages, and I wrote a novel in it, which I took to the publishing house of Sytin. That was the last I ever heard of it, and I wrote no more novels.

Most of the time my parents were happy together, and I thrived on the good times, when there was complete harmony between them. They both had beautiful voices and sang better than some professionals, and when they sang duets and opera arias together, I would sit curled up in a chair and share their joy in each other. But in looking back, I also remember signs of strain, both from stories they told me when I was a little older and from my own observations.

In addition to the stress of having been rejected by my mother's family, they had experienced, while still a young couple, the great misfortune of losing four babies. Another source of trouble was my father's careless ways and his love of good company. His rising income from the oil fields enabled him to spend more and more time in restaurants and less and less in his medical prac-

tice. My adoring mother usually tried to find excuses for his shortcomings and convinced both herself and me that he was a remarkable man, a good man, a gentleman, gifted and intelligent. He had an elegant lock of gray hair over his forehead, and I remember regretting that I resembled my mother and had no such gray lock of my own. I have never stopped thinking of my father as young and talented, handsome, and eternally carefree.

Papa skillfully avoided family emergencies or unpleasant domestic tasks by pleading urgent appointments, but I think what bothered my mother most was his popularity with women. I recall fragments of their conversations: "Why have you been seen again with Mrs. N.N.?" or "How come you were seen spending so many hours in the company of those ladies at that restaurant late last night, as I've heard?"

My father always had a ready answer: "Well, yes, I was there, but how could I refuse the invitation of my good friends? I simply had to go—I couldn't be rude. I can't live like a hermit!" At other times, my mother became upset because she had caught my father in a fib or because she had found out something even worse. I remember the time that Mama discovered a trace of lipstick on his shirt, which could only mean contact with a music hall singer or an actress, because at that time nobody else used makeup. And sometimes her friends reported something really objectionable about my father, and she became quite miserable, moving grimly about the house while refusing to talk to him.

At such moments, Papa would resort to drama, pretending he was starving; he truly hoped I might have a cookie or a piece of candy to appease his hunger, he said. If I had nothing to give him, my eyes invariably filled with tears of pity for my poor, out-of-favor father. Making sure we were within Mama's hearing, he would pull me onto his knee and say:

Well now, my little daughter, you can see that things have come to a pretty pass here in our own home. Nobody's paying any

attention to us poor, innocent victims! We're accused without reason, just because of a fit of temper. Even the servants are avoiding us, dinner is not being served. . . .

Just when my panic hit its peak, my mother would break into laughter at this familiar drama. The quarrel would be forgotten, and life went on as pleasantly as before.

At first, I was given lessons at home by my mother and my German governess, who taught me to speak both French and German, which later turned out to be very useful. When I was older, I was sent to preparatory classes at a private school called the Fierrefore Gymnasium, where I studied all the subjects required by the government. Outside of school, though, my old interests continued to occupy me.

Drawing and painting have attracted me all my life, and Papa was my first art teacher. Like all our relatives on his side, he was quite good at everything artistic and might have been happier as an artist than as a physician. For my entertainment, he would sometimes draw stylized pictures of houses, which combined the primitive spontaneity of a child's drawing with the irony of a worldly-wise observer. As I remember them now, they had in them a nostalgia for the simplicity of a lost paradise. When drawing these houses for me, Papa always started from the ground, the way a real house is built. First he would draw a long, low rectangle and say:

"Well, here you have a foundation."

"What's the foundation for?" I'd ask.

"Why, you can do nothing without a foundation—nothing at all," my father would philosophize while he quickly and confidently completed the house with its walls, roof, doors, windows, and billows of smoke curling from the chimney.

Soon I was to learn that there was not much of a foundation under our own house. In fact, there was no stable foundation

under millions of other Russian homes, nor in the whole structure of our country's life, which had seemed so firm and permanent. When World War I broke out in 1914, the von Kotzebues in Russia changed their name to Kossuch in order to disassociate themselves from the Germans. (For the same reason, the British royal family changed its dynastic name from the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to the House of Windsor.) I was still very much a child, so this name change hardly registered with me. I was much more affected by our move to Kharkov, soon after the outbreak of the war, than by the great events set in motion around me. Later, the Bolsheviks made Kharkov the capital of the Ukraine, but at the time we moved there, it was still the capital of Kharkov Province, of which my mother's relative, General Katerinich, was the Governor-General.

The ostensible reason for our going to Kharkov was that Papa needed a new type of treatment invented by Dr. Hirschman, a famous Kharkov ophthalmologist. I don't know exactly when Papa's oil income started to dry up, or whether that loss of income had anything to do with our remaining in Kharkov instead of going back to Yalta and the possessions we had left behind there, which had been the original plan. It may well be that Papa postponed our return because he was attracted by life in the big city and by the many friends remaining in Kharkov from his days as a medical student there. My parents must, in any event, have had very good reasons for leaving our pleasant and easy existence in the Crimea for life in a large, noisy city that was too cold in winter and too hot and dusty in summer.

One of Papa's Kharkov friends, Dr. Surukchi, owned a well-known and fashionable private hospital and clinic in Kharkov, attracting patients mostly from the privileged classes. When the war broke out, however, Dr. Surukchi had turned his entire hospital over to the treatment of the war-wounded, and he repeatedly asked Papa to help him with this work. Dr. Surukchi must

have had great powers of persuasion because I vividly remember the day another friend of his, the famous and beloved Chaliapin, came to the hospital to sing for the wounded soldiers. It was a great event, indeed.

Outwardly, the city still appeared prosperous, and life there continued in a seemingly normal manner for a while longer, although the city was gradually filling with wounded soldiers and refugees from the provinces on the German border. And to assuage my nostalgia for Yalta, my parents reassured me that such a large city, with its old university and many schools, would offer me better cultural and educational opportunities. I was enrolled at the Dombrowsky Gymnasium for Girls, which accepted both boarders and day students. Much to my dismay, I was to be a boarder at first.

I was never told the real reason for that decision. It may have been that our new apartment was not quite ready, or that some family problem made my absence expedient. It is also possible that my parents had to go back to Yalta to arrange their affairs there. At any rate, I do not remember going home on weekends or during the long holidays, as the other boarders did. It was the first time in my life that I had been away from my mother, and I was quite unhappy and homesick. I was only about nine years old, inexperienced and trustful, and, like a small puppy, I needed company and attention.

There were at least twenty of us boarders, some as old as fifteen or sixteen, and we were looked after by two resident supervisors. One of them, nicknamed *mahórka* (the cheap tobacco from which poor people rolled their own cigarettes), reeked of tobacco and was always attempting to hide from us the nicotine-stained fingers that proclaimed her forbidden vice. As for the other supervisor, the school wits claimed that she sucked her thumb behind the shawl that invariably covered her face. But these humorous diversions did not make up for the long summer

recess I had to spend at school, together with just one other girl and the governess who had charge of us.

My first summer in the hot and dusty city was in every way an unwelcome change from the glorious summers in Yalta. I missed not only my old friends, but also my own books and all the activities that had made life in Yalta so interesting. Hot though it was in Kharkov, the other girl and I were allowed out in the garden for just a short time every day, in addition to a few trips to the Botanical Gardens or to a lake with various kinds of fishes and flowers. We were not allowed to play during those excursions, but had to walk decorously side by side.

The long summer days dragged on in the gloomy, almost deserted building with its pervasive smell of dust, dry leaves, and musty, yellow grass—the smell of loneliness. There was also a strong smell of unseen mice. One day, when the governess had to take the other girl to the doctor, I was left all alone with nothing to do. Unable to bear the quiet and the solitude any longer, I finally said to myself: “I think I’ll go down to the kitchen and see the maids and the cook! If they’re not taking their afternoon nap, they may be playing cards; at least I won’t be alone.”

I walked into the kitchen and into a scene that is engraved on my memory forever, although at the time I did not understand what was happening. The younger of the maids was lying on her back on the kitchen table in the middle of the room. She was bareheaded, and her gay, green dress with a design of red flowers was pulled up, revealing her bare legs and belly. It struck me that she wore no underwear. The older maid, in a blue-and-white striped dress and also without her headdress, was bending over the younger maid with a knife in her hand.

A familiar picture of Abraham raising a knife over the naked Isaac flashed through my mind, and I thought: “A human sacrifice!” But I immediately dismissed the idea as absurd. The poor girl was obviously sick or hurt in an accident and was being given

first aid. But, in that case, why was she not crying? On the contrary, she was giggling foolishly while the other girl was doing something to her with the handle of the knife.

“What has happened? What is going on here?” I cried, confused and frightened.

“Nothing special, Miss,” said the older maid in a manner both unnaturally calm and oddly defiant. “We’re off-duty; we’ve nothing to do; and we amuse ourselves with this game of tickling each other. . . . It’s very pleasant. You should try it, too!”

This was my introduction to sex, a taboo subject at that time in that society. It was a powerful experience and made a life-long impression on me as something both dangerous and disgusting.

It is hard to imagine what would have happened if, instead of being surprised by *me*, the maids had looked up to find our majestic principal, Mme. Dombrowsky, standing over them. She was a very strict and grand lady of whom we were all in awe. On those rare occasions when she went through our rooms, you could be certain that trouble would follow. She was always called *Maman*, in accordance with the custom established by the boarding students, who had to speak mainly French in their quarters. Whether sitting or standing, *Maman* held herself perfectly erect, as if she had swallowed a stick, and she always demanded the same posture from us. Tightly laced in a corset and wearing a crackling and sparkling dress of iridescent silk, she moved about like a fiery pillar, leading and supporting the school, the very embodiment of dignity and authority.

After several months as a boarder, I finally was allowed to move back to my family and continue my studies as a day student. Mama had found and leased two adjoining, interconnected apartments right in the center of the city, on Sadovaya Ulitsa No. 2 (2 Garden Street), at the corner of Teatralnaya Ploschad (Theater Square). The nationally famous Sinelnikov Theater was directly

opposite our house on the other side of the square, which was actually a formal city park. To the right of the square was the Kirka, the Lutheran Church. Its tower had a huge clock with golden hands and golden Roman numerals, which we could see from our apartment house. I remember it vividly because we had to watch this clock closely when the Soviet authorities had finally established their government firmly in the Ukraine. They always found an excuse to declare a state of emergency and impose a strict curfew. We had to be home and off the streets by 9:00 PM, and because the new authorities had moved summer time ahead by three, four, or even five hours, I could look at the Kirka clock proclaiming nine o'clock in the evening while the sun was still shining high in the afternoon sky. No matter, we had to stay inside.

In that part of the city, there were no private villas, only big apartment houses with large units. Some of the units in our own building overlooked the square and Pushkinskaya Street, with its noisy tram cars, but our own units, on the second floor, faced the other way, toward Sadovaya Street and the courtyard, and that was much more quiet and pleasant.

Another advantage of our new apartment was its proximity to Dr. Hirschman's Eye Clinic and to the Surukchi Hospital, just around the corner. This enabled my father to receive private patients at home while continuing his work at the hospital. His private practice was the reason we needed a double apartment with both a private entrance and one leading to the waiting room and the medical offices. When I came home from school, I would sometimes visit the waiting room to see who was there, especially on the one day a week that Papa set aside for those who could not pay, who were usually the most interesting people to talk to.

Following the example of Empress Alexandra and the tsar's four daughters, Mama and her friends contributed to the war

effort by taking nursing courses in universities and special schools before working as unpaid volunteers in military hospitals. It was hard and demanding work. I also went to the hospital after my classes to roll bandages, read aloud to the wounded, and help them write letters home.

School and a heavy load of homework took many hours a day. And, in addition to being a hospital volunteer, I also took ballet lessons. So, except for the summer recess, I had little time left for anything but reading. My friends and I seldom had a chance to meet outside of school, except those of our friends who lived near us and who were from our own circle.

My best friend, both then and later, was Nina Kedrina. The Kedrins lived only a couple of blocks from us on Dievitchya Ulitsa (Maiden Lane). Nina's mother, Valentína Nikoláievna, was a close friend of my mother's and the acting head of her family. Nina's father was mentally ill and always sat silently in his arm-chair, staring vacantly at everybody with his large, dark, and gloomy eyes. Everybody avoided speaking to him or about him, but his three attractive daughters made his house a popular place just the same. Most people considered Nina's youngest sister, the blonde and blue-eyed Lida, the beauty of the family, but I thought Nina looked far more interesting, with her fair hair streaked in front with a lock of pure white hair and her charming face. Ludmilla (Mila), the eldest sister, was four or five years older than I and quite reserved with us "children."

I also made new friends at my dancing school. When I was still a little girl, I had been sent to ordinary dancing classes, where the children from the so-called good families were taught ball-room dancing and the art of moving gracefully and naturally. When I was older, my mother enrolled me at the Kharkov Ballet School, which was for girls only. It had excellent teachers, some

Alexandra's Childhood and Family

27

with a worldwide reputation, and the students were accepted on a competitive basis after a strict examination.

One of my friends from ballet school, Tamára Pichahchí, was exceptionally talented, very supple, with truly remarkable acrobatic abilities. She could raise her leg higher and hold it up longer than anybody else. She and I competed for first place, and that made both of us work very hard and stubbornly. We remained good friends just the same, and I followed her later career with interest and pleasure.

One day during the middle of the war, Papa vanished without a trace. Although it was common at that time for people to drop out of sight, I have sometimes wondered whether his disappearance did not contain a deeper mystery of which Mama wanted to spare me the knowledge. Something may have happened between him and Mama that caused him to slip out of our lives, or perhaps our family's financial affairs had grown hopelessly tangled.

Although crushed by the blow, Mama did her best to comfort me and protect me from too sudden a change or privation. She was now working as a paid nurse in the same hospital where she had volunteered earlier, and she did not spare herself in her efforts to provide me with a comfortable existence. But when the upheavals of the Revolution and the ensuing civil wars were added to the deprivations caused by World War I, even her best efforts could not protect us from the gradual erosion of both our own and everybody else's living standards.

She repeatedly assured me that Papa would, no doubt, be back someday, that the police would certainly locate him, and so on. If she had any suspicion that his disappearance might have been caused by financial troubles or been voluntary for other reasons, she never let on. As war continued to rage around us, we began telling each other that Papa had perhaps been killed or met

his death in some other way. "Accidents" of all sorts were certainly all too common during those days.

At first, I did not fully realize the seriousness of our situation. I assumed the role of Mama's financial advisor and lectured her about what she ought to do. My sweet, darling mother just looked at me and remained silent.