14

The Child

While Alexandra and Vidkun were still on their way to Kharkov, ARA's relationship with Bashkóvich suffered further erosion, not only because of the difficulties in Ekaterinoslav throughout that spring, but also because of growing mistrust of Bashkóvich personally. The "Plenipotentiary" had arrived back from his financial negotiations in Moscow well pleased with himself, but a March 1 report from ARA's Kharkov office to the central ARA office in Moscow noted that Bashkóvich evidently intended to curtail ARA's activities in the Ukraine by means of sharply pared-down resources, and that in Moscow he had told a very different story from the one they'd been served in Kharkov.[1]

Quisling, too, had to be prepared to encounter unpleasantness of various kinds, especially given the unstable political climate all over the country due to Lenin's markedly deteriorating health after he had suffered a stroke as yet another consequence of the 1918 assassination attempt against him.[2] Furthermore, in a con-

1. H, ARA Russian Section, box 146, no. 30.

2. Lenin's condition was, at this time, so serious that John Gorvin at Nansen's Moscow office expressed his worry and sympathy in a letter to Comrade K. L. Landers (The Soviet Government's Ambassador to All the Foreign Relief Organizations), dated March 18, 1923. H, ARA Russian Section, box 80, folder "Nansen."

fidential letter dated March 13, Nansen warned his associate to be on his guard against speculative tendencies among the Ukrainian Red Cross and other Ukrainian organizations; it had not made a good impression that these organizations had attempted to sell Nansen-goods in Moscow. They were also rumored to be cooperating with organized swindlers charging up to twenty-nine dollars just to forward a parcel to the Ukraine. Even if these reports should turn out to be idle gossip, they served as a reminder of the need for vigilance, Nansen wrote.[3]

Just a few days later, Mr. Hartford, Nansen's representative at a feeding station run by European students in Saratov, was removed from his position after being involved in supposedly politically-motivated disturbances.[4] Both in 1922 and 1923, Bashkóvich nevertheless appears to have found it easier to work with the various European components of Nansen's organization than with the Americans in ARA; it is likely that the Russians had been reluctant to let in relief workers from such a world power as the U.S. to begin with. Although it must have been as obvious to people at the time as it is to posterity that the great majority of these Americans risking their lives and health out in the field month after month were driven by idealism and humanitarianism, the Soviet authorities probably assumed that ARA's head office in Moscow was using their work as an opportunity to gather intelligence for its own government.

Both the wealth of documents in the ARA archives and the organization's operating procedure suggest that the Soviet Russians were right to be suspicious. Not only had the Americans insisted on full control over all aspects of their relief work from

3. NB, Nansen Archive, Ms. fol. 1988 RUL_6. (On April 1, *Pravda* reported that it was now illegal to send parcels from abroad, and that from and including April 15, such parcels would no longer be delivered in Russia. H, ARA Russian Section, box 77, folder 4.)

4. H, ARA Russian Section, box 80, folder "Nansen."

the beginning—in contrast to Nansen, who worked jointly with the Russian authorities—but the ARA Moscow staff also kept a close eye on Russian newspaper reports on the work of the other foreign relief organizations. The archives from the Moscow office, therefore, contain a number of translated articles, including an interview by *Izvestia* with Captain Quisling that took place on March 5, 1923, the day after his return to Kharkov.[5] It should be noted that the account Quisling gave of the Nansen organization's further work showed good tactical judgment, for he made sure to mention that Nansen had donated his Nobel Prize money as aid to the Ukraine.

Alexandra tells how Quisling organized his private life at that time:

In Berlin, Arne, Vidkun, and I stayed at the Bristol-Kempinski Hotel, an elegant and famous hotel on the Kurfürstendamm. It was still very cold in Germany, so we immediately looked for an overcoat for me. Vidkun thought a leather coat would be the thing in Russia at that time of year, and in a fashionable leather-goods store that amazed him and Arne with its ridiculously low prices calculated in foreign currency, he bought the only garment in the store that came anywhere close to fitting me. It was actually a jacket, but on me it became an overcoat reaching almost to my shoes; I practically had to kneel to reach inside the pockets. It was made of satin soft, light brown leather and had braided leather buttons, and I thought it the peak of elegance. Over the years, it acquired a smart, well-worn look and became a familiar sight to my Paris friends.

Vidkun decided to buy a leather coat for himself and, as I recall, for Arne also. Vidkun looked very elegant in his dark-green leather coat, which fitted him perfectly. We also bought a set of

5. H, ARA Russian Section, box 80, folder "Nansen."

leather suitcases in various sizes and many other useful travel articles. On another day, our Berlin shopping spree included my long-promised wardrobe trunk.

I badly wished to buy a few gifts for my mother and my best friends so that they could know the joy of owning some of those "useless" things that were now unknown in Russia but so abundant and cheap in Berlin—clothes, shoes, perfume, and face powder, for example. But, as usual, I had no money with which to do my own shopping. I strongly disliked asking Vidkun for money, but at last I forced myself to bring up the subject.

Vidkun gave me one of his rare smiles. "But of course, of course! Why, it's very good that you thought of that. Of course we should bring some gifts for your friends, and especially for your mother."

Still, he neither gave me money nor asked what gifts I wanted to buy. It all came to nothing, and I was too proud to bring up the subject again.

The three of us spent quite a bit of time at sidewalk cafés, watching the Berlin crowds go by. Just as they had done in Norway, Vidkun and Arne discussed the catastrophic inflation and devaluation of the German currency, which had created a situation they considered a once-in-a-lifetime chance to buy everything, even houses, for next to nothing. Every day, they went out to look at properties for sale, and they usually brought me along. They especially liked some four- or five-story apartment houses in a good location. After returning there several times, they finally bought two or three of those buildings for a very low price, including an apartment house that Vidkun put in my name. I remember very well that I had to sign some papers and that I afterward told anybody who cared to listen that I owned a five-story income property in Berlin. I have no idea what happened to that house later.

Naturally, Vidkun also had to take care of official business.

Above all, he had to coordinate his own work with Nansen's Russian Famine Relief office in Berlin, while Nansen himself was in Russia negotiating with the authorities about the extension of his relief program. We were also invited to several important receptions, which both of us enjoyed. People in Europe were well aware of the work Vidkun had done in Russia, and there were many who wanted to meet the famous Captain Quisling.

I did not in the least mind spending some time by myself while Vidkun was off on business because it gave me a chance to explore Berlin at my leisure. I had never been in such a large and interesting city with so many handsome buildings, museums, and shops. When one of the ladies at the Norwegian Embassy told me that Paris was even more exciting, I was incredulous. What could be more majestic and beautiful than Berlin?

One morning, I looked out of my hotel window and saw that it was snowing. Quivering with excitement, I put on my soft Norwegian wool suit, my new leather coat, and a pair of warm overshoes with rubber soles that I had bought in Norway—very pretty overshoes trimmed at the top with black fur. I thought I had better dress warmly for both the baby's and my own sake.

It continued to snow, but the snow was dry and fine-grained and landed on the asphalt with full respect for German order. A steady and zealous wind swept it away almost as soon as it landed, leaving the pavement clean and polished.

After a while, I noticed that quite a few passersby were looking at me. Several of them gave me friendly smiles, and some even turned their heads to have an extra look. I felt flattered and in high spirits, although I pretended to disregard their attention by walking fast and looking straight ahead. Suddenly, I felt someone grab my arm from behind. I whirled around and was relieved to see that it was Arne.

"Where are you rushing off to?" he puffed. "I had a hard time catching up with you, *ma chère petite soeur!* I wanted to go for a

walk with you. But before we go anywhere, you must go back to the hotel and take off those hideous overshoes. How could you put them on in such an elegant city as Berlin? Haven't you noticed that everybody is staring at them? What a disgrace!"

I felt sick with disappointment and embarrassment. Taking a good look at the other women on the street, I now saw that they were all wearing silk stockings and dainty, high-heeled shoes. Standing there in my thick overshoes I felt crude, lumpy, and extremely silly. Overcome with shame, I dragged myself back to the hotel with downcast eyes; I could not bear to see the smiles that only a few minutes earlier I had found so encouraging and friendly.

Arne could not help laughing at my reaction, and at the lunch table later he humorously described my morning stroll for my husband. Unlike Arne, however, Vidkun was well aware of my somewhat delicate condition and had probably guessed my reasons for dressing as I did because he said diplomatically:

"This is a large European capital, *lille venn*, and what you wear in Norway or in Russia might appear funny here. But if you feel warm and comfortable in your overshoes—here or anywhere else—I see no reason why you shouldn't wear them whenever you want. Nobody can stop you."

I was grateful for Vidkun's intercession, but Arne just sniffed scornfully. Vidkun looked at him, thought for a moment, and then added:

"But, of course, it's better not to do anything that attracts notice. It's not good to be conspicuous on the street."

That was a familiar enough tune. Although I was certain that Vidkun knew little about women's fashion and probably had not even noticed how those around him were dressed, I had learned a good lesson. I promised myself that before venturing outside in a new place, I would make a point of finding out how other people dressed there.

Vidkun was sad when it was time for Arne to leave us. I had also become very fond of him and hated the idea of parting from him for what would probably be several years, since he was due to leave for the U.S. before Vidkun and I returned to Norway. More than fifty years later, when I was a seasoned American myself, I wrote Arne a warm letter recalling our youth and sent the letter by registered mail. Arne signed the delivery receipt, but I never received a reply.

Soon after we had seen Arne off, Vidkun and I left Berlin by train for Moscow. By then, I was feeling very impatient to be back in Russia, and the nearer we came to the border the more excited I became. All thoughts of Arne and my other Norwegian relatives had given way to anticipation. I was going to see Mama again.

The weather grew steadily colder. I fished out those lovely Norwegian overshoes and wore them on the train during the whole rest of our journey—with total disregard for the opinion of the other passengers. I continued to wear them in Moscow, where it was so desperately cold that, before we left the train, we put on every bit of warm clothing we had brought along. I don't know how I would have managed without my wool suit and leather coat, for I felt chilled to the bone even when wrapped up in practically everything I owned. Still, I was elated despite the cold because I was surrounded by everything dearest to my heart, and everybody around me was speaking my own language. I was so happy to be back in my native land that my heart threatened to leave my breast.

Together with all our magnificent luggage, we were loaded into a large automobile open at the top and to all four sides. It was excruciating to ride like that in such cold weather, and I was glad when we had to slow down in order to get through the mass of people carrying on black market trade in the square in front of the ancient Súkharevka tower. The crowd was so dense that

our car could scarcely make its way through it. Our driver turned to us and warned us sternly:

"Take a firm grip on your suitcases, citizens! Hang on with all your might! The folks around here are so quick that they'll snatch everything you own before you know it! I can't be responsible for them—they are completely desperate."

He had not exaggerated. The crowd around us grew even denser, and people did indeed grab our suitcases and attempt to pull them off the car. Warned by our driver, Vidkun and I did our best to fend off the impudent robbers by holding on to our luggage with our hands and feet.

A boy of about twelve, who had been keeping pace with the car on my side, leaned quickly forward and, paying no attention to my loud protests, tried to wrest my hands from the handle of the suitcase I was holding. I suddenly remembered my experience with another young boy in the same place the year before. Having lived, meanwhile, in quiet and orderly Europe, where people were polite, reasonable, and law-abiding, and where there was a policeman on almost every corner, I now found this daytime attack completely unnerving, and I wondered if I had exaggerated somewhat the joys of returning home.

Luckily, in a minute or two more, both we and our belongings were safely past that unruly mob, and soon we arrived at our hotel, a different one from where we had stayed during our first sojourn together in Moscow. Inside, it was warm, comfortable, and so cosmopolitan that I met only two other Russians there. One was Count Alexei Tolstoy, the famous White Russian writer. He had escaped from Russia along with the White Army and was now creating a sensation by returning to Russia. I was told he had arrived in Moscow on the same train as ourselves, but I can only recall meeting him at the hotel. His appearance was certainly memorable enough because he wore his hair in a bowl cut like a peasant. His manner was somewhat diffident and nervous, and,

although he was about the same age as Vidkun, he seemed older because he was so fat. The other Russian I met was a nice young woman who was married to an Italian diplomat, and who had just arrived from Paris with her husband. She had fallen completely in love with that city and showed me many of the beautiful things she had bought there, luxury articles no woman could treat with indifference.

My elation at the thought of soon seeing Mama and Nina again, and of being able to seek their advice about the baby I was expecting, came to a quick and brutal end.

Vidkun had said that we would be staying in Moscow for a week or more so he could take me around to theaters and museums. I had scarcely had time to unpack my things, however, when he announced that he had made an appointment for me with a Moscow doctor. Gently, but firmly, he explained that I must not give birth to our baby in Russia because we would be unable to take proper care of it while living and traveling under the primitive local conditions. The doctor would examine me and see if my pregnancy could be terminated painlessly and safely.

I heard his words. I understood from his manner that his plans had been carefully laid and that he would brook no arguments. And while this terrible message was sinking in, I felt as if all emotion, all feeling, was draining out of me. All that was left of me was a wooden store mannequin. Numb, mute, unable to gather my thoughts, I was bundled into my coat and taken off, hurtled into a nightmarish sequence of events that blighted the rest of my life to such a degree that I never spoke about it to another living soul except George. Not even to my own mother. I pushed the memory of it into the farthest recess of my mind, but it always tried to force its way forward, and now I must write about it so that the rest of my story can be seen in a proper perspective.

Vidkun took me to a second-rate private clinic, where I was subjected to an unfamiliar and most embarrassing examination. Then came the surgery. Everything inside me screamed, "No! No!"—but the shock had left me feeling powerless.

Through the fog of anesthesia, I heard the nurse tell someone that "it was a healthy girl." Our baby. Our daughter. They had killed her, and I was an accomplice to that murder because I had not found the strength to fight back. And, in a rush, I thought of the bundle of soiled linen I had tossed away in Moscow the year before. The old bum's crude words and raucous laughter echoed in my head like an evil omen. This time there *was* a baby inside the bundle.

Not surprisingly, given that the medical facilities were second-rate and I had been far enough advanced in my pregnancy for the nurse to tell the sex of the baby, the procedure left me physically damaged for life, and it combined insidiously with that long-ago memory of the two maids at my boarding school to influence my view of sexual relations. But far greater and longer lasting was the impact this degrading experience had on my guilt-ridden soul.

Outwardly, life went as usual. I was young and wanted only to forget what had just happened, and Vidkun went out of his way to distract and amuse me as soon as I was sufficiently recovered. He spent part of every day at the Norwegian Legation in Miórtvyi Pereúlok and in various Soviet government offices, but when we were free in the evenings, we acted like any other tourists by going to the opera, to the ballet, and especially to the many Moscow theaters, famous the world over for their excellence and innovation.

All this time, I managed to convince myself that I had shut the lid firmly on the memory of our baby and that I was having a good time enjoying Vidkun's company and the knowledge that I was decently dressed. Vidkun wanted to hear and see all he

could, and I needed to feel as close to him as possible. I still had my husband, so there would be other children. And soon I would be in Kharkov with Mama and my friends!

It was still cold and snowing when we left Moscow. The weather in Kharkov in early March was not much better, but the air in my hometown was, nevertheless, lighter and more humid from the melting snow. It smelled of spring—a scent so familiar and dear to my heart.

A car and driver took us directly to the PomGol building where we were to occupy Vidkun's old rooms upstairs. It gave me an odd feeling to return to the house where I had so recently been the most junior clerk. Now, I was returning as a privileged foreigner, protected by my Norwegian passport against all Russian problems and vagaries. Most amazing of all was being able to take over a large part of the second floor. In my eyes, there was still something magic and mysterious about this part of the building, to which only foreigners had once been admitted.

All traces of the Americans working for the ARA were gone. The rooms on the opposite side of our corridor were reserved for Vidkun's offices, accessible by a separate entry and stairwell, which the original owner's servants had probably used. One of those rooms was soon to be occupied by our office messenger, Aliókhin—a brother of the world chess champion of the same name, as he would have us believe.

We were met by the two women who had worked as servants for Vidkun the year before, when he was still a bachelor. The plump Latvian woman with her permanent, ingratiating smile was the cook, and the huge Russian peasant girl named Kátia was the maid. I remembered her well as the large, clumsy creature who had occasionally served us tea in the so-called dining room when I worked at the PomGol.

Our servants had been told to expect us that evening, so they

had supper waiting for us, but I was so nervous that I could not eat. How could I sit at the table when Mama was only a few blocks away? Vidkun excused himself from accompanying me to see Mama. He had a lot of urgent work waiting, he said, but he had no objection to my going over to see Mama by myself.

In order to spare Mama unnecessary preparations and fretting, I had not told her just when we expected to arrive in Kharkov, but I soon discovered that this uncertainty had exhausted her even more because she had been expecting me any minute since she first heard that I was returning.

The dirty condition of the backyard and the cracks in the stucco of the building, revealing large patches of bare bricks, shocked me with their brutal reality. I was appalled to see that the building was of a dirty, gray color, for in my memory it had regained the light cream color it had when we first moved in. During the months I had been living abroad, I had gradually erased from my memory all the hideous changes brought about by war and revolution. In my mind, I had wandered through our many large and airy rooms with windows looking out on the garden, whose flowering trees would fill our home with sweet fragrance. Now, as I was running up the stairway, the air practically stunned me with its heavy odor. It smelled of hard life, of years with only hunger, dirt, and uncertainty.

At the core of my memory had been the vision of Nanny's room—so sweet, clean, and peaceful, and yet exotic because of its peasant-style furnishings. Nanny's bed had been big and wide, with a bright patchwork coverlet and a pyramid of countless pillows arranged with the smallest one at its apex. In one corner of the room, close to the ceiling, she had hung her icons, in front of which a small, suspended oil lamp gave off a soft, flickering light, both day and night. In summer, the deep blue sky had arched above the skylight, and in winter, when this window was

covered with snow, the room had been suffused with a shimmering, mysterious, mother-of-pearl light. All the mysteries, all the safety of my childhood had been contained in that one small room before it became the dilapidated core of Mama's and my existence.

In this room I now found my mother.

She was scarcely above forty, but life had aged her cruelly. Although I felt so close to her that it was as if I had never been away, I could not fail to see how much she had changed in my absence. She had become so emaciated and shriveled that she was now even smaller than I, and her cheeks were hollow. Her great weight loss made her large, gray eyes seem even larger, but they were just as serious and attentive as before. People who did not know her well had often considered her proud and distant, but her close friends knew what a responsive and kind soul was hidden behind that strict, gray glance.

When I entered, she pressed her hands together for a moment, and then she folded me in her arms, crying silently and inconsolably while she lightly rocked me from side to side. My throat grew dry, and I felt such a pressure in my chest that I could hardly breathe. My swelling heart beat so loudly in my ears that I could hear nothing else. I wanted to cry, but I could not. A tightly coiled spring in my throat felt as if the smallest movement on my part could release it and make my heart explode like a balloon.

When that first overwhelming moment had passed, I realized that Mama was the one who needed help, not I, so I led her slowly over to the bed and made her comfortable before sitting down beside her.

"Well, at last you've come back, my little daughter, back to your own home. But, Good Lord, what kind of home is it now? Everything is ruined, wretched, and dreadful. What can I do to welcome you? I have only one treasure left—my little girl. I can

do nothing for you now. And then this accident came on top of everything else and ruined all my preparations!"

Then she told me that, about a week earlier, the rotted frame around the skylight had caved in under the weight of newly fallen, wet snow. Everything had become covered with broken glass and dirty, melting snow, while the room immediately turned into an icebox. My mother had despaired at the thought that I might walk in and find her in such a state. Finally, some friends had come to the rescue and helped her repair the frame and obtain new glass. The work had been done by unskilled hands and with such materials as could be found, so the skylight leaked and was still letting in cold air, but at least Mama could clean and heat the room in time for my arrival.

While I looked around the little room and listened to my poor mother's story, pity and shame overwhelmed me—shame at my own comfort and over my recent pride in having become a part of that safe and orderly western world. Although I had often felt concern and sorrow for Russia and her people, I had repressed the memory of how truly horrible life continued to be for those who remained there.

Sitting there on the bed next to my tiny mother, I felt so helpless. Of what use could I be to her when I had not even dared ask my husband to come with me on this first visit, out of consideration for me if nothing else? I felt torn apart by my love for Mama and my love for Vidkun. But my feelings for the man with whom I expected to spend the rest of my life prevented me from giving full play to my nagging censure of him. I would have to add my latest misgivings to the secret about my baby as yet another topic I must neither think about nor mention to my mother.

Mama asked how Vidkun was.

He was fine, I assured her, only too busy to come and call on her that evening. To prevent further questions about his absence,

I described how terribly busy my husband was, and she was too considerate to torment me by pursuing the topic. But she and I knew each other too well. I saw that she was not deceived, and that she was full of compassion because I understood this. For a long moment we looked into each other's eyes, until Mama worriedly shook her head.

"I feel sorry for the poor man. He has barely arrived, and already they have loaded him with so much work. Give him my best regards, please." Then she changed the subject.

My shame and despair dug deeper into my heart when I remembered that the only gift I had for her was my own used travel blanket in a Scottish tartan pattern. Again, Mama understood everything without a word being spoken. She threw me a quiet, sideways glance and said:

"You mustn't worry about me, my little girl. I see everything, understand everything. Just be a good and obedient wife. Your happiness is the most important thing. I want nothing else. And things are improving here! The NEP makes it possible to engage in private trade and other kinds of enterprise. The worst of the famine is over, and there are so many *nouveaux riches* people around that one can make a living by going to work for such bigwigs. I now go to their houses and bake *kulichi* for them—for some reason, they like to eat *kulichi* the year round.[6] They love my baking and pay me for my work, and I even get meals at my workplaces! I'm all right, so you mustn't worry about me."

Instead of calming me down, her assurances broke my heart.

When I returned home, our cook and maid had left for the day. Nor was Vidkun at home, so I supposed he had gone for his evening walk. He had evidently unpacked our suitcase with our

6. A delicate, white and very rich cake that traditionally belongs to the celebration of Russian Easter.

bed linen before he left, however, because our beds, which I had asked to have placed at separate ends of the room while I continued to recover from my ordeal with the baby, were already prepared for the night. I now began to unpack what little personal luggage I had brought, placing my things in the bureau of our huge bedroom, which had probably been the sitting room to a former bedroom, but which was now our dining room. A kitchen next to it seemed to have been added after the house was built.

Vidkun returned soon afterward, having indeed been out for a walk. It had apparently not been entirely successful, however, because no sooner was he inside the door than he started cursing Russia and the Soviet system.

"The deuce knows how they can live under such conditions! There are no street lights, and it's pitch black out there; the sidewalk boards have rotted, and the snow has not been removed. I stepped on a spot that looked smooth enough, but it turned out to be a rotten board covered by snow. It gave way, and I sank up to my knee in a hole full of icy water! It's a wonder I did not break my leg."

I fully shared his indignation. Even I, who had been used to such conditions in Russia before going abroad, was shocked by the dirt, neglect, and disorder I found all around me on my return. I saw little cause for optimism, especially because increasing rumors about Lenin's failing health had me worried that we might soon be in the throes of another power struggle at the top.

Vidkun did not seem to share my apprehensions, however. In fact, it was only at the beginning of our return to Russia that he expressed disgust and contempt at the physical disorder surrounding us. Soon, his point of view changed radically.[7] He began to

7. In the notes Quisling made for a public lecture, probably in the autumn of 1922, he described how dependent Russia was on the rich Ukraine and gave it as his opinion that the 1917 Revolution was proof of increasing western influence in Russia and, therefore, a good thing. NB, Quisling Archive, Ms. fol. 3920: V: 3.

defend Lenin's new order in Russia and objected when I expressed dissatisfaction.

"But you must understand, *lille venn*, that such chaos is the result of the whole country having been turned upside-down in order to rid it of the hateful old way of life. It's impossible to establish a new system overnight. Everything must be changed, you see. It will require a lot of time, but they'll succeed in the end, I tell you. I'm sure they will establish a splendid new order."