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New Adjustments

The Soviet authorities in Kharkov kept Quisling under constant surveillance and probably knew more about his activities and personal traits than even Alexandra did. The cook and maid, whom the authorities had assigned to the solitary Quisling in 1922 and whom they inflicted on him and Alexandra in 1923, were not Scotland Yard material, as will become apparent from Alexandra's report both in this chapter and later ones. However, they did keep an eye on this household. So, from the moment Alexandra and Quisling returned to Kharkov in 1923, Bashkóvich would have known the most intimate details of their lives. This, too, is worth remembering for future chapters.

Alexandra and Quisling were evidently aware that the cook and maid had them under observation. Even so, it is doubtful that Quisling knew just how industrious his servants were in areas that had no bearing on housekeeping. L.T., who continued working in PomGol's parcel distribution until August 1923—in one of the upstairs rooms on the other side of the corridor and with a separate entrance—said that as soon as Alexandra and the Captain were back in Kharkov that year, Cook made a great show of crying and wringing her hands in her apron, while telling everyone who cared to listen that this was a terrible marriage, indeed. The

Captain had asked her to make up a bed for him in the sitting room!

Alexandra's account of her abortion in Moscow and her first night after the return to Kharkov also referred to this situation. She noted that their beds, which she had asked to have placed at opposite ends of the present bedroom (formerly the master bedroom's sitting room), had already been made up for the night. A woman usually does not wish to resume marital relations while still recovering from an abortion or childbirth, and most husbands would respect this. There is no reason to suppose that Quisling would have been any less considerate, but neither the cook nor anyone else in Kharkov knew anything about the abortion. The newsmongers, including those in the parcel division, would, no doubt, have assumed that Quisling was sexually frustrated because he could not share his wife's bed.

Alexandra was ignorant of her servants' contemptible actions, however, when she described how they continually put her own and Quisling's patience to the test and how complicated her emotional life was during this time.

From the time I returned to Russia, I had been bothered by conflicting, perplexing feelings that I shied away from analyzing, but which still forced their way into my consciousness.

On the one hand, I was profoundly happy to be back with Mama and my friends, to be able to read Russian books and speak my own language with everyone around me—all this while enjoying my married life. On the other hand, I had tasted life in the west, with its freedom and comforts similar to those I remembered from my early childhood. Against such a background, the wretched conditions in Soviet Russia seemed unbearable, and I could not even imagine spending the rest of my life in Russia, although the thought of leaving Mama and my country behind forever was equally unimaginable.

Added to these feelings was my growing realization that, no matter how hard life in Russia had become, every one of my surviving childhood friends had preserved a certain measure of independence in deciding what to do with their lives. They had made plans, continued their education as best they could, or perfected their skills in dance or music. They apparently envied me my fortunate situation, but it sometimes seemed to me that it was I who was at a disadvantage. My marriage had ended my longed-for career as a ballet dancer, and Vidkun did not want me to complete my education.

I had yielded to his wishes and decided to devote myself to raising a family of our own, but things had not turned out as I had hoped in that area either. My traumatic experience in Moscow had made it painfully clear to me that Vidkun did not want children in the foreseeable future and that my own feelings did not count at all. When I saw Vidkun's attitude to children in general, it seemed likely that he might not want to be bothered with them—ever.

Such thoughts made me feel rootless and suspended in a purposeless vacuum. Still, I did my best not to brood and to concentrate instead on enjoying this time in Russia. At least I had leisure enough, despite the fact that both our cook and our maid were an appropriation from the Soviet authorities and that both were doing their best to drive us mad from our first day back in Kharkov.

No matter what we ordered for the next day's dinner, our cook made no objection. She just stood there listening with her lips pursed in an enigmatic smile. Then, without any explanation, she invariably cooked the same two dishes for dinner every day: *okróshka* (a cold soup made with *kvass* and vegetables, usually served only in hot weather) and fried chicken. For supper, we would have cold bouillon or more *okróshka*, together with left-over cold chicken. Compared with what most people had to eat,

ours was a most enviable diet, but its monotony drove Vidkun out of his mind. He loudly complained that during both of his stays in Kharkov, he had never eaten anything else. Separately and jointly, we tried to discover the reason for the cook's persistence and hoped in vain that she would change her habits and her menu.

After several such futile attempts, Vidkun decided that only his authority, coupled with strict military discipline, would affect the cook. He summoned her and gave her a categorical order to pull herself together and prepare something different. With her arms folded across her fat stomach, she silently listened to his harangue, dispensed one of her enigmatic smiles, and waddled out, still without saying a word. The next day, we were again eating her *okróshka* and fried chicken. We realized then that her stubbornness could not be broken, and we resigned ourselves to our fate. I only wondered what she might be cooking during the winter when there would be neither chickens nor fresh vegetables.

Kátia, our maid, posed an even worse problem. A hardworking girl, she was continually and passionately cleaning the whole of the second floor. Because no polishing wax was available, she washed the floors instead, so thoroughly and so frequently that they never had a chance to dry out. It was especially bad in the dark corridor, where the permanent dampness brought an invasion of repulsive millipedes. I spent as much time fighting with them as with Kátia.

Kátia could do very little besides washing floors. I spent hours trying to teach her the rudiments of waiting at the table, but she could or would learn nothing, although she greeted all my suggestions with enthusiasm and loud expressions of joy. Even setting the table for an ordinary meal was beyond our Kátia's capacity. She would gather up random armfuls of anything within her reach, dump everything on the table in wild disorder, and

then race back to the kitchen in order to return with one or another of the cook's specialties.

It was entirely up to me to try to bring order into this chaos, for Vidkun simply ate his meals without paying attention to what was going on around him. He knew from his earlier experience with these servants that they were untrainable, and he also knew that it was useless to try to get somebody to take their place because those in charge had merely ignored his earlier attempts in that direction. Neither of us doubted that the real reason for all our troubles with our servants was that they were not a cook and a maid at all, but ordinary agents of the secret police, whose job in our household was to keep us under constant observation. We did not much mind that because we had nothing to hide, but we wished that at least we might have been supplied with people who could carry out their fictitious duties.

Kátia's greatest fault was that she was a thief. Vidkun was aware of this quirk in her character from earlier times, and he had warned me of it as soon as we returned to Kharkov.

"I think the poor girl has no idea that it's a crime to take someone else's property without permission," he had explained. "They learn here nowadays that there are no rich people anymore, and that everything belongs to the common people. Kátia sees that we have many things lying around without being used, and she sees no reason why she cannot take them for her own use."

We soon began to notice that many small items around the house were missing—handkerchiefs, ribbons, Vidkun's socks, my blouses, and so on. We did not think much about it at first, until I recognized my ribbons in Kátia's hair and Vidkun's socks on her feet. She had also turned one of my lace blouses into a sort of shoulder cape, the only way her mighty size could fit into a blouse of mine. Kátia wore our belongings so openly that we were forced to pretend that we noticed nothing at all, but we began to lock away more valuable things in our suitcases and trunks. It seemed

to me that Kátia was much smarter than she pretended because she understood and took full advantage of Vidkun's and my weakness, which was that our upbringing prevented us from insisting on our rights or engaging in altercations with our servants.

On walking home from a meeting one Sunday, Kátia's day off, Vidkun's patience was sorely tested when he suddenly came upon Kátia not far from our house. With a dementedly smug and self-satisfied air, she was parading up and down our street accompanied by a flashy sailor of impressive size who carried a bag of sunflower seeds, which he nibbled after cracking them with his teeth. He also offered some to Kátia, but she was unable to help herself because on her hands she had Vidkun's gloves, his very best gloves of yellow pigskin. Kátia kept her gloved hands prominently displayed in front of her, clearly impressed with her own appearance and anxious to dazzle her sailor.

Vidkun gasped with surprise, although he naturally pretended to have seen nothing. By the time he returned home, he was beside himself with rage.

"Oh, that swine! That lousy Russian swine!" was the first thing he blurted out before he could give a coherent account of what had upset him so much.

He soon calmed down, however, and, to my great surprise, he never said a word about the incident to our perfidious Kátia, who retained custody of his fancy gloves. Seeing that, once again, she had gotten away with her outrageous behavior, she threw aside what little restraint she had and did completely as she pleased.

Domestic irritations were not the only cause of Vidkun's ill temper. Despite his expressed admiration for the Soviet system, he could not get used to such Russian habits as forgetting appointments or being kept waiting for hours on end. He was driven to distraction by the tardiness and negligence that, at that time, were

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common among Party members of every description, from domestic servants and petty clerks to people at the very top of the Soviet hierarchy. Just as they had done the year before, high-level bureaucrats might well make an appointment with Vidkun for eight o'clock, only to show up around ten if they showed up at all, providing neither notice nor excuse. My poor husband would return home very upset and start blasting the Russians and their manners before he had even crossed our threshold.

I listened patiently to Vidkun's stories about how the Soviet authorities placed every conceivable obstacle in his way on purpose, as if they felt obliged to show this foreigner that Russia did not need help from the outside and had no intention of showing gratitude. But now I think that those prominent officials sometimes treated Captain Quisling in this manner just so he would not think too highly of himself.

Those same officials treated both of us most attentively and charmingly at the official receptions and parties we sometimes had to attend. They respectfully kissed my hand and appeared quite oblivious to my being only a very young girl who recently had been at the bottom of their bureaucratic ladder. The names of many of these men and the awesome power they wielded were known the world over, but such things meant nothing to me at that time. I avoided official gatherings as much as possible, and because I had domestic help of sorts, I spent much of my time in the affectionate company of my childhood friends.