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## The Treasures of the Crimea

Two years after Maria's death, a considerate private collector gave the Oslo University Library copies of some letters that Quisling had sent to his family while Alexandra was in the Crimea.<sup>1</sup> Toward the end of a letter to Arne (who appears to have been in Paris) on May 27, 1923, he wrote:

Asja sends her best regards. She is in the Crimea, where she has been since the middle of April, only interrupted by a 14 days' stay here in Kharkov. It is of course a splendid place to be, quite a riviera, and I hope it will do her good. I had actually been thinking of departing for home at the beginning of August, but I cannot say definitely when we'll be leaving.

To his parents, he wrote on June 1:

Alexandra is in the Crimea, for the second time this year. She was down there visiting her mother for a couple of weeks in April, and then came back here. But then the Ukrainian Red Cross opened a sanatorium or, rather, a convalescent home, for their nurses etc. down there, and they also invited Alexandra to spend some time there, which she very much wanted to do. So now she's down there again and will perhaps stay down there

1. NB, Quisling Archive, "Brevserie nr. 1" (Letter Series no. 1). Quotes translated by K. A. Seaver.

for some weeks more. . . . I was thinking of going back to Norway at the beginning of August, but that depends somewhat on the winding up of our relief work. So I still don't know definitely when we'll be able to get away.

Quisling knew very well that Alexandra's mother had been living in Kharkov the whole time. He was also well aware that Alexandra herself had not been away from Kharkov from the time they arrived until he sent her to the Crimea together with Nina and her mother in May of 1923. One may wonder why he considered it necessary to give his family this type of misinformation while she was away, but at least one possible answer will suggest itself later.

Those familiar with the letter from Hermod Lannung, which the lawyer Thrana placed in the Quisling Archive, will find in Alexandra's next account an echo of Lannung's comments on her appearance. According to the author himself, the description of her yellow hair, blue eyes, and altogether Nordic looks came from Quisling, which ought to make it quite evident that Lannung and his circle did not know her personally. Lannung writes:

[Alexandra] had blue eyes, one could not take that away from her, but it was clear to all the rest of us that her yellow hair had a more plausible explanation, which had nothing to do with Norwegian Vikings. Aside from that, it was interesting that despite revolution, civil war, and the like, women could obtain their principal cosmetic aids.

Alexandra could not have used cosmetics she did not own. Nor could she have changed the way nature had equipped her—since childhood she had been accustomed to people's surprise that she, a blonde, had such strong, dark eyebrows. Moreover, it looks as if Lannung's sources may have based the story of Alexandra's light-colored hair on information about how she and Nina looked when they returned from the Crimea.

She now tells about this journey herself.

The sultry and dusty Ukrainian summer was rapidly climbing toward its zenith after a spring with very little rain. Unless one could afford to go to the forested suburbs surrounding Kharkov for some thirty miles in all directions, there was no escape from the scorching sun and the hot, stifling wind that carried the dry dust of the steppes through the city all day long. I was fully prepared to spend the summer in the city, but it appeared that my husband had other ideas.

“Acia, you know that Nansen wants me to make a final tour of our feeding stations out in the districts,” Vidkun said one day. “I also have to take part in a presentation of agricultural machinery and other equipment purchased with the Nobel Prize money Nansen donated to a *Sovkhos*<sup>2</sup> near Ekaterinoslav. I’ll be gone for a week or two. If you don’t want to stay here alone in this oppressive heat, perhaps you might like to go to some *dacha* or resort for a while?”

Completely taken by surprise, I had to weigh his suggestion for a moment before I replied: “No, if I can’t go with you, I’d rather stay home. I don’t want to go away by myself.”

“Then you could take your friend Nina along.”

“But what’s the point? One can’t escape this awful heat anywhere! No, thanks. Here at home we are at least comfortable, which I’d be sure to miss elsewhere.”

Vidkun frowned, then looked at me and smiled. “Oh yes, you can indeed escape the heat and have your comforts at the same time! How about taking a trip to the Crimea? Last summer, I rested for a few days at a government sanatorium there. You know better than I how marvelous it is in the Crimea this time of year. I have excellent connections with those who run all the

2. A Soviet state-owned farm.

resorts in the Crimea, and I have the right to send members of our Nansen Mission and their families to places reserved for the Red Cross. I need only to wire to Simferopol to obtain free passes for you and Nina and first-class accommodations for next to nothing. It would be stupid not to take advantage of such an opportunity. Just the trip in itself, in a sleeper aboard the Petrograd-Sebastopol Express, provides wonderful rest and relaxation. Don't be difficult. You and Nina will have enough money and everything else you need to have a really good time. Think it over, and don't miss out on something you'll later regret having passed up!"

Despite my initial reluctance, I grew increasingly excited at the prospect of visiting the lovely haunts of my early childhood. But I still felt vaguely uneasy, probably because it was so unlike Vidkun suddenly to be willing to spend money on something as frivolous as entertainment for Nina and me. Hesitantly, I asked him why he could not go to the Crimea with me, even for just a few days.

He could spare no time from the work of winding up the Mission, was his reply.

I could think of no further arguments just then, so I ran off to share the exciting news with my mother and Nina. Mama approved of my decision not to go anywhere without my husband, but the moment I saw her, I realized the main reason for my reluctance to accept Vidkun's offer. I did not say so to her, but I simply could not leave Mama alone and go off on a pleasure trip, knowing that in a very few weeks I must part from her again.

When I came home and told Vidkun that I preferred to stay near my mother in Kharkov until we left for Norway, he said without any hesitation:

"Then take your mother along, as well. She might even decide to stay in the Crimea for good! Since your family used to live there earlier, she probably still has some old friends there. And

the climate is so much milder there than here. Ask her what she thinks of the idea, and tell her that I'll pay her moving expenses."

My remaining doubts about Vidkun's unusual generosity vanished when he said that if we went to the Crimea, it might be to his economic advantage.

"I'm told that there are fabulous opportunities in the Crimea now for buying jewelry, antiques, and art treasures at ridiculously low prices. When the White Army retreated south under pressure from the Red Army, these treasures ended up in the Crimea because thousands of aristocrats and other rich people flocked there, hoping to escape on ships leaving Russia. Aside from the fact that most of them didn't manage to evacuate, they were forced to abandon their valuables, or else sell them for a pittance. Now that the NEP permits private trade, those hidden treasures are beginning to appear on the black market."

"You didn't have to tell me all that," I said with bitterness. "You know very well that Mama and I were a part of that panic-stricken crowd and had to leave all our valuables behind with friends. At least we were lucky enough to get out of the Crimea and return to Kharkov."

"Well, then, perhaps your mother might be able to find those friends and get back some of your possessions? Anyway, you have good taste, and I was hoping that in the Crimea you might find good bargains on things for yourself and for our household. I'll provide you with enough money and with good advisers—knowledgeable people whom I was able to help last year in the Crimea. I'd like to buy as much as possible because this is our last chance to get such things out of Russia without trouble and red tape."

I was glad that Vidkun at last showed some concern for my mother's plight, even if his primary motivation had been the desire to amass valuables at bargain basement prices. Back I ran to my mother with this new idea of his. Now she would have nothing more to worry about, I thought, and we would not have to

separate right away if we took this lovely trip to the Crimea together. Now she finally had the chance to move back to old, familiar places where she still had friends with whom she had kept in touch, and she could exchange Kharkov's abominable, changeable climate for the gentle Crimean seasons.

It was not easy for Mama to make such an important decision at a moment's notice, however. Once again, Vidkun had plunged us both headlong into a dilemma. Although Mama was happy that she would not have to part from me right away, it would still shorten our time together if she stayed in the Crimea when I returned to Kharkov at the end of my holiday. And despite loving the Crimea, where she had married and where we had all been so comfortable once, she could not disregard the many years she had lived in Kharkov and made new and true friends there. Besides, our old family nest in Yalta was scattered to the winds, and she would be forced to start a new life, alone and destitute, in the human wasteland created by war and suppression. Last, but not least, relocating would further reduce the tiny chance she still had of being reunited with Papa.

There were, nevertheless, indisputable advantages to her leaving Kharkov, chief of which was the chance to cover her tracks and escape further exploitation and blackmail of the Paseshnikova kind. These advantages, coupled with Nina's and my enthusiasm for the trip, in the end persuaded Mama to acquiesce to Vidkun's plans.

Quietly and sadly, she brought out her suitcases and packed what she could of her few remaining mementos of our former existence. Such furniture as remained was hurriedly used for barter or given away to friends. Soon she was ready to go into her uncertain future, and too soon came the day of our departure.

In order to make sure there would be no kissing and emotional displays at the railway station, Vidkun said that he wanted to

spend a few moments alone with me and say goodbye to me at home, before Nina, Mama, and I had to board our express train at about nine o'clock in the evening.

Vidkun had also arranged for Mama and all her belongings to be taken directly to the station by her friends. Nor were we able to pick up Nina on our way to the station since Vidkun had curtly and steadfastly refused to visit the Kedrins socially on all the many occasions they had invited us over. Nina, therefore, came to our house in plenty of time, carrying her small suitcase. Since it was summer and we did not need to take very much along, she and I decided to share one of my larger suitcases instead. As soon as we had repacked, we took a car to the South Railroad Station together with Vidkun.

Vidkun accompanied Nina and me out on the platform, where Mama was already waiting. Just before taking a hasty and perfunctory leave with all three of us, he gave me an envelope with my passport, our railway tickets, his instructions, and some money. He was already gone by the time I discovered that two of the tickets were for a separate compartment in a first-class ("upholstered") sleeper, while the third ticket was for a second-class ("hard") sleeper. We hurriedly attempted to obtain another first class ticket for an additional fee, but were told that this was impossible because all reservations had to be made at the train's point of origin in Petrograd.

Nina immediately declared that she would travel second-class so that I could stay with my mother. As hostess, I naturally volunteered to go second-class myself. Mama would not listen to either of us and cheerfully announced that with all her bundles and baskets, she would feel much more at home in a second-class carriage.

"And I'll feel much better knowing that you girls can enjoy each other's company," she said with such finality that Nina and I could only comply, however reluctantly.

While we helped Mama settle into her second-class carriage, I made lame excuses for Vidkun, saying that it must have been quite impossible for him to obtain three first-class tickets on such short notice. I knew that he had had to pay for at least one of the tickets out of his own pocket, but I could not admit even to myself that this awkward situation had arisen out of his frugality. I found it even harder to understand why he had not at least prepared me for this problem. I felt so sorry for my mother and so ashamed of my husband that I was near tears.

Nina and I were so young that our distress soon evaporated, especially since we quite agreed that we would, in any event, be spending most of our time with Mama, either in her carriage or in our compartment. Besides, it was the first journey Nina and I had ever taken together, and we thought everything was exciting. After Mama had left us, Nina and I stood in the passage outside our compartment, eagerly watching all the passengers who were gradually filling the sleeper, as well as all those who had come to see them off. We witnessed many a parting with tender kisses, embraces, and bitter tears.

An elderly, gray-bearded man with many kind wrinkles around his eyes was standing next to us, also watching the parting scenes. Because a train is like a ship, where strangers in some measure share each other's situation, we were not taken aback when the old man spoke to us.

"I beg your pardon, young ladies, but I am most curious to know who that tall, blond foreigner is who was seeing you off?"

"My husband!" I replied proudly and without hesitation.

"Your husband? But, my dear *baryshnia* ("Miss")—I mean, excuse me, Madam—I was watching you both, and I noticed that he did not give you a single kiss on parting. It seemed so unusual."

"Well, he considers it improper to display emotions in front of others. He is always shocked when he sees people kissing in public, even married couples. You see, embraces and kisses are

not customary abroad, especially not between men.” I was doing my best to show that I was well acquainted with such civilized customs and fully approved of them, having been well schooled by Vidkun.

Our elderly fellow traveler looked at us long and gently. “So, that’s the kind of foreigners you know? I’m sorry for you, my child; God grant you happiness in your life. You’re obviously a very nice girl. My respect and best wishes from the bottom of my heart.” He bowed and disappeared into his own compartment.

Nina and I looked after his retreating back and then stared at each other in astonishment before retiring to our own beautiful compartment, where we stayed in splendid isolation for the rest of our journey, except for our frequent visits to my mother. She preferred the friendly and informal atmosphere of her second-class carriage, but she at least came to our compartment to rest now and then, and we always went to the dining car together.

The closer we got to the Crimea, the lush and more diverse the landscape became. As if a line had been drawn slightly south of the ancient Zaporózhie Cossack fortress, the pungent smell of wild grasses, wormwood, wildflowers, and ripening grain from the vast Ukrainian steppes gave way to a strong southern wind that filled the air with the heady, salty breath of the still-distant sea. Cypress groves that, at a distance, had appeared black were now rushing past our windows in all their green glory, and every time the train stopped at a station, Nina and I would run out on the platform to inhale the sweet, heavy aroma of southern flowers blending with the smell of sun-scorched cypress resin.

Even the smallest railway stations looked clean and inviting, with whitewashed buildings and walkways covered with fine, colorful beach gravel or with crushed seashells that made a delightful noise under our eager feet. My joy swelled as I recognized from my childhood many of the uniquely Crimean place names, such

as Djankói or Bahchí-Sarái—names that were redolent of famous poems and Eastern fairy tales.

The crowds at the stations contained increasing numbers of exotically dressed people—men in Oriental robes or in red fezzes or white turbans, and a number of Tartars with multi-colored skullcaps on their smooth-shaven heads. These colorful people lived in nearby villages and came to the stations hoping to sell such specialties as sheep's milk cheese wrapped in grape leaves and all kinds of Oriental sweets and dried fruits. Their women carried pitchers of *bouzá*, a tasty and refreshing drink made from fermented milk.

Closer and closer came the heady smell of the Black Sea, the timeless, pungent odor of fresh fish and iodine. Our lips began to taste salty when we licked them. Nina grew pensive and then exclaimed:

“What a pity this marvelous journey is almost over!” I've grown so fond of our lovely roomette that I could easily stay here forever.”

In Sebastopol, we were met at the station by a gentleman in a neat, white tussore suit, who looked more like an Italian or a Frenchman. He introduced himself as Nikolái Ivánovich, a Red Cross representative whom Vidkun had asked to help us during our vacation in the Crimea. Immediately taking us under his protection, he got the railway porters to take our luggage off the train and over to a large, soft-sprung Crimean carriage waiting in the street, its white canvas canopy clapping and billowing in the wind like a sail.

The driver, a young Tartar, took us to a suburb all the way on the other side of town. At first, the blinding red rays of the setting sun reflected off the windows on our way, and as the light dimmed, the white houses turned the soft pink of a seashell's

interior. Our friendly guide did not share Nina's and my admiration for the beauty surrounding us, however.

"There's nothing good about such red sunsets. They forecast a strong wind for tomorrow!" But his voice was good-humored when he added that he was fed up to his teeth with this southern climate and longed for deep snowdrifts, naked winter trees, and common crows.

The sun suddenly dipped below the horizon, and out of the cool darkness rose a crescendo of sound from a chorus of frenzied cicadas. A short while later, we pulled up in front of Nikolái Ivánovich's house, where his wife was standing out in front to greet us.

"Why are you so late? I expected you home before dark. Good evening. Very glad to meet you! Gracious, you're just kids, and I expected to see middle-aged ladies. And which one of you is Mrs. Quisling? Oh, it's you? My, my, the wife of such an important person as the Captain, and you're just a girl! For some reason, I expected you to be stout and middle-aged, with a very deep voice and a moustache under an aquiline nose! I must confess I was quite worried—how could we please such a person? Our house is not large, and our children run around making a lot of noise. You can't imagine how glad I am that you're so nice and young!"

Without interrupting her steady flow of words, she embraced all of us by turn and asked us to come inside. We had no chance even to say "good evening" before she went on:

"It's just like you, Nikolái; you couldn't find a better coachman than that stupid Akhmetka, that juvenile delinquent who takes you the roundabout way for two hours when you should have made it in half an hour. I must tell you girls that my Nikolái Ivánovich has always been something of a lunatic, but here in the Crimea he's lost his senses altogether out of sheer boredom. I really don't know why I married him!"

“Judge for yourself, Madam,” she said, addressing my mother. “When we got married, before there was any war or revolution, he wouldn’t stay at home with me for a single entire year. Every year he’d go away on his far-flung scientific expeditions. You see, my Nikolái is a well-known archaeologist, and one year they would have to go to Egypt, the next year to the Himalayas, and so on. And I stayed all by myself, hoping that later, when we had children, he would spend more time at home. But not he, not likely! He’d come home from one of those expeditions, happy as anything to be at home with me again, but barely a month later he’d begin to lock himself more often in his study and start looking at me with those sad and guilty eyes. Well, I’d think, here he’s up to something really nice again! Once again he longs to go to the opposite end of the world! Yet somehow I’d feel sorry for him, and I’d say: ‘Now, Nikolái, kneel down and thank the good Lord that he sent you such a good wife as myself. You can’t fool me; I understand everything. I can see it in your furtive looks and hear it in your bored voice; you’re eager to go off on another one of your darned expeditions. Well, go, go! I just hope you manage to get home before I give birth again.’ But what good was that—every one of the children was born in his absence. He just couldn’t make it home, so I had to be satisfied with his loving telegrams. . . . Still, I have the very best husband in the world. You see, even the International Red Cross chose him to work for them, among many applicants, because of his personal qualities and his many languages. But the only reason Nikolái wanted that job was that he hoped he’d be sent on missions in far-away places! Well, now that Captain Quisling wants him to take care of you young ladies and go all over the place with you on errands, he’s got his wish. He’s excellent company and can talk about lots of interesting things he’s seen, but you girls will get tired of him very soon, I’m sure.”

When the torrent of words temporarily dried up, we noticed

two girls of about eleven and fourteen and a chubby boy of about seven waiting for us inside. Little Nikolái was the very image of his father. When he learned that it was I who was Mrs. Quisling, he approached me with an air of importance and bowed smartly, clicked his heels, and asked in a severe voice:

“But why do you speak Russian?”

I had to explain to him that although I was married to a Norwegian, I was actually Russian.

“But Daddy told me he was off to meet a foreign lady and that I’d have to speak to her in French!” He was clearly disappointed that all his preparations had been for nothing, and that he still had not seen a real foreigner. He soon forgot his disappointment, however, and was happy to play hide-and-seek with us in the garden after supper.

Mama was very tired and decided to go up to her room when the children went to bed. After everyone else had also withdrawn for the night, Nina and I remained on the verandah for quite a while longer, chatting and enjoying the lush, semi-tropical landscape in the beautiful, quiet night, while watching the magnificent view from Nikolái Ivánovich’s hilltop villa. Everyday problems withdrew softly into insignificance, and I was glad that Mama had decided to move back to the Crimea.

We slept long and well and awoke to another beautiful day. Nina and I put on our lightest summer dresses and walked about with our hair down, feeling as carefree and happy as if we were little girls again, although we had to grapple with some immediate practical problems. The sanatorium where we had reservations was in Alúpka, a small resort town between Sebastopol and Yalta on the southeastern shore of the Crimea, where access was difficult. The overland road went across the coastal mountains and was so steep and difficult that the trip would take two days by horse and carriage. Since there were no passenger ships going between Sebastopol and Alúpka, the only alternative was to take

a steamer to Yalta and then double back for a short and easy trip by horse and carriage to Alúpka.

Nikolái Ivánovich assured us that he could easily get hold of an automobile that would take us to Alúpka in less than a day. I welcomed such a solution, for I had made the trip by sea many times in the past and knew that, although those ships do not go very far from shore, the sea in those parts heaves and swells badly even in good weather. Mama thought that the car trip to Alúpka was a good plan for Nina and me, but she preferred to take the steamer directly to Yalta. She claimed it would be much more comfortable for her, and that she did not want to waste precious time at a sanatorium when she ought to get busy locating her friends and finding a place to live. Besides, she intended to look for a position as either a nurse or a teacher.

Many years later, I realized that her decision was dictated by a desire to be as inconspicuous as possible and to disassociate herself from all foreigners, even her own son-in-law. At the time these things were happening, however, I thought her only reason was a wish to cause as little trouble as possible. The rest of us tried to talk her into going in the car with us, but she was adamant. The very next day, the entire household saw her off on the steamer bound for Yalta.

Early the following morning, Nikolái Ivánovich introduced us to the car that was to take Nina, him, and me away from his hospitable home and family. Seeing that antediluvian open model, I could well believe it would take us all day to drive to Alúpka. It was doubtful that its ancient engine could muster as much power as two good horses.

Trying to hide our concern, Nina and I traded witticisms about our mechanical Rosinante. At first, Nikolái Ivánovich took part in our good-natured banter, but after a quick look at our silent and disapproving chauffeur, he skillfully turned the conversation upon himself.

We learned that he was an attorney by profession; archaeology was merely his avocation. Next, we got a lecture on how important it is for everyone to be acquainted with the basic principles of law, and how dangerous it is to be ignorant of what should and should not be said in a given situation. Nina and I were deeply impressed, although such dangers seemed as remote from us then as the hot and dusty streets of Kharkov. Just a few months later, I wished I had paid closer attention to our friend's admonitions.

The car crawled and sputtered its way up the narrow, winding road crowded by huge, reddish boulders. The dry clay soil supported no vegetation, and everything was covered with a yellow dust that invaded our clothes and made us itch all over. Water was nowhere in sight and, for a long time, no summit either. Despite the optimistic prognosis, it was evening before we reached the summit near the Baidárski Gate and Pass, from which the road descends to the southern shore and continues along the sea.

We would have to continue to Alúpka the following day. Although the pass was overrun by tourists who had come up from the Yalta side to watch the famous sunrise, we were fortunate enough to obtain a room at the summit inn. Nikolái Ivánovich made us promise to be up in time to see the sunrise, but Nina and I were so tired that we fell asleep right after supper and the next day missed not only the sunrise, but breakfast as well.

Soon after we finally got moving the following morning, we negotiated the highest point of the pass, the Baidárski Gate—a real gate closing a narrow canyon between two great rocks. The moment we had passed through the Gate, the yellow, arid landscape gave way to one of the most magnificent views in the world. Our driver stopped the car and suggested that we walk ahead a bit to a spot where the mountain ridge lies only a mile or two

from the sea, and from which the road descended at a dizzyingly steep angle.

It was as if a revolving stage had revealed my childhood's Crimea, the real Crimea. My beloved Black Sea stretched from the extreme left to the extreme right, darkly violet and indigo blue, with rippling spots of mauve and black playing and changing nuances in the water's transparent and oily depths. The breakers deep below us formed a long border of white foam along the shore. For a long time we stood there in complete silence, taking in the God-given beauty before us.

The rest of our journey down into the valley and along the seashore was quick and easy. On our way, we passed many magnificent estates, palaces, and marble villas that had formerly belonged to grand dukes and other famous families, and that now served as rest homes for deserving workers and members of the Soviet bureaucracy. We also passed small Tartar villages with clean and prosperous-looking clay houses. Barking dogs and nude little Tartar children ran after our car, which must have been a rare sight there after the Revolution. Even adult Tartar men and their wives, who were often veiled, stopped and watched lazily as our car made its slow passage through their villages.

When we at long last reached Alúpka, our driver (who had grown noticeably more cheerful after we crossed the dangerous mountain pass) drove smartly up to the wide steps of the sanatorium where we were to stay. Nikolái Ivánovich went inside and soon returned, accompanied by the director, who then passed us on to his corpulent assistant. This formidable woman showed us to our room, handed us a copy of the strict rules regulating the daily lives of the sanatorium's residents, and left after telling us to be downstairs for supper in the dining hall at the stroke of six.

The minute our awe-inspiring adviser had left the room, Nina and I flopped down on our beds, so utterly exhausted that we did not even bother to undress or wash. Still, we were sufficiently

intimidated by the regulations to appear in the dining room promptly at six, bathed and in clean dresses.

Nikolái Ivánovich, who had managed to rent a room nearby from a Tartar he knew, was already waiting for us. During supper, he presented us with a detailed program for the next two weeks, with work and recreation neatly balanced in a manner very unlike our easygoing friend. The “work” he had in mind was, of course, the shopping Vidkun had directed me to do. Before I left Khar-kov, he had again stressed that I was to keep my eyes open and buy as much as I could find of good jewelry, furs, paintings, Oriental carpets, and antiques. Nikolái Ivánovich now told me that in addition to himself, there were three other persons who could assist me in my treasure hunt.

I said firmly that, first of all, I wanted to get in touch with Mama to see if she needed any help, so we decided that the very next morning we would all three go to Yalta, at most a two-hour journey from Alúpka.

After saying good night to Nikolái Ivánovich outside, Nina and I lingered for a moment to look into the garden, where an immense moon dimly illuminated garden walks covered with silvery sea sand while leaving the rest of the heavily fragrant landscape to our imaginations. The evening was so lovely that we had to force ourselves to go back upstairs to our room, but we had to get up early, and before we went to bed I had to write to Vidkun. As on the only other occasion we had been away from each other, when he had been visiting his parents in Telemark, we wrote to each other almost every day about what we had been doing and thinking.

Before sitting down to write, I sat for a while in the cool, dark room enjoying the moonlight and the slight breeze stirring the curtains. Nina had been resting on the bed, but now she got up, walked over to one of the windows, and said:

“What’s that thing you pinned to our curtain—a brooch?”

Before I had time to reply, she picked up something from the curtain and threw it on the floor with a yelp of terror.

“What is it? It’s hard and cold, and it’s moving!”

We switched on the light and saw a hideous creature, large, fat, and velvety dark, wriggling on the floor. I tried to kill it with a chair leg, but the armor-plated monster seemed impervious to destruction. We summoned the director’s assistant, who explained that the monster was a scolopendra, a creature so poisonous that it was capable of killing a grown man with its sting. We must be very careful and always examine our bedclothes before retiring, she advised. In a reassuring voice, she added that although there were a lot of snakes around, as well, they did not frequent the second floor. So saying, she picked up the scolopendra with the fireplace tongs and took it down to the kitchen to burn it in the stove. There was no other way to kill it.

Our holiday mood had now given way to apprehension, and we abandoned our plans for a moonlight walk in the garden later, but the thought of going to bed scared us almost as much. We did not really get over our fear for the rest of our stay in the Crimea, and it occurred to us that there was something to be said for colder climates. I also realized how protected I had been during my early childhood in the Crimea, for I could not recall having been aware of such dangers then.

Fortunately, our courage returned with the clear morning light, and we left for Yalta in good spirits. On the way, Nikolái Ivánovich pointed out to us the most famous palaces and estates and named their former owners, and he spoke longingly about what life had been like before the events of recent years had swept away most of his friends. But Nina and I refused to live in the world of memories and regrets. We believed that all of those troubles were a thing of the past and that nothing but joy and happiness lay ahead.

On a narrow and quiet side street in Yalta we found my

mother at her friends' small, wisteria-covered house. She stayed there until she was able to rent a room in the old Tartar section of the city, where she considered it unlikely that anybody would know who she was. Seeing her with her friends now, I felt reassured that it had not been a mistake for her to return to the Crimea. We were happy because we could be together again and refused to think ahead to our next parting in a couple of weeks.

Although our old Yalta house had been confiscated and the friends with whom we had left our valuables had been turned out on the street, cautious inquiries had enabled Mama to locate not only these friends, but also our valuables that they had been able to save. Now, Mama turned over to me several very old icons, a couple of small, Oriental rugs, a very old Breguet gold watch for Vidkun, and a few other articles, in addition to a lot of old family photographs and papers. All of these things were eventually sent to Oslo together with the many things I purchased in the Crimea.

From then on, I made daily trips to Yalta, where I divided my time equally between visiting Mama and doing errands for Vidkun, usually accompanied by Nina and Nikolái Ivánovich. In our quest for investment bargains, we went to all kinds of small shops, even to private homes, if we had been told that there might be something good there.

A small shop that had been especially highly recommended to us was located in a somewhat forbidding-looking waterfront basement. It felt pleasantly cool and dark after the hot, bright quay outside, however, and our eyes soon grew sufficiently used to the dark to spot a fat Armenian sitting behind his counter. Taking no notice of us, he placidly poured water from a kettle and prepared tea.

Nikolái Ivánovich patted him on the shoulder and, after an effusive greeting, asked the man if he had anything new and interesting to offer. The Armenian blew with his thick lips into his

cup of tea and heaved a heavy sigh, indicating that he disliked being disturbed. After giving us a sleepy look, he was already about to turn away again in evident disgust when he suddenly squeaked in a high-pitched voice:

“Look around yourselves. It’s too hot.” He again concentrated on his tea and seemed to forget our existence.

From the rubble of old pressing irons, broken kerosene stoves, bicycle parts, and even a rusted ship’s anchor on which I hurt my foot, Nikolái Ivánovich extracted what he maintained were precious Persian and Pekingese carpets, and we had them brought out into the light. One of them struck me as particularly beautiful, and Nikolái Ivánovich said that he also preferred that one. After a lot of haggling between him and the Armenian, we finally bought two or three carpets, one of them very large.

Inside an old chiffonier with crystal doors opaque with dust, we found some old Russian silver, small, jewel-like picture frames, and a Chinese shawl with a wide fringe. It was an exquisite garment, embroidered in white silk on a white silk background that had turned ivory with age. With the proviso that I might return it later if Vidkun had any objection to my purchase, I decided to add it to the other treasures.

Everything except the shawl was to be securely crated, insured, and shipped back to Kharkov by slow rail freight. Just a few days later, I received a letter from Vidkun telling me that his mission had taken less time than expected, so that he was already back in our apartment. Evidently, a similar kind of miraculous acceleration must have affected the rail system because he had already received and examined everything I had bought so far. In the opinion of his Kharkov experts, every single piece was an excellent bargain, and he encouraged me to continue with my shopping. He finished his letter by repeating that he missed me and felt lonely, which made me feel very warm and happy. He

said nothing about the shawl, and I decided that meant I could keep it.

Despite Vidkun's conviction that hunting antiques was fun, it was far from easy to split my time between shopping and being with my mother. I could see that Mama was bewildered by this sudden change in her life, by the loss of old friends, and by my impending departure. But being young and selfish, I did not understand the real depth of her love for me or the full extent of her loneliness. I avoided thinking about her sorrow because I could do nothing about it, and I hoped that everything would eventually fall into place. Nevertheless, the situation constituted a physical and emotional drain on my energies while I continued my treasure hunt for Vidkun.

Acting on another tip, we went to a watchmaker's small shop where a stooped old man with a magnifier in one eye was bending over his workbench. At first, he would not even talk to us about jewels, but at long last we managed to convince him that we were harmless customers, ready to buy. What particularly disposed him in our favor was the sight of my old gold wristwatch, my wedding gift from Vidkun's father. Struck by the narrow black velvet ribbon on which I wore it, the watchmaker said:

"Please let me have a good look at it—it's so simple and so elegant! For many years, now, I've been out of touch with the current fashions in Europe, and I'm so happy to see what the latest trends are over there!"

After that, he brought out several dazzling pieces of jewelry of the highest quality, and I bought several rare pieces for what Vidkun later told me was an incredibly low price. I remember best a necklace of three or four strands of beautifully matched, lustrous, good-sized pearls. The strands were held together with a large clip set with emeralds and diamonds, in itself a splendid piece of French jewelry that could also be used separately as a brooch. I loved that necklace so much that, on my return to Khar-

kov, Vidkun presented it to me as a gift. Because we were to leave Russia soon, he placed the necklace with the rest of the jewelry in a safe place, together with some lovely miniature frames studded with precious stones and a couple of ornate trinkets made in the Fabergé style, including an egg. Some months later, when I finally gathered the courage to ask for my necklace back, Vidkun said that since he had not arranged for any gifts for his mother, aunts, and Ingerid, he had had my necklace separated into four or five single pieces of jewelry as gifts for them. A well-known later photograph of Mára shows her wearing a very familiar string of pearls.

Vidkun was so delighted with the riches finding their way to Kharkov that he complimented me on my purchases in practically every letter, before concluding with a few words about how much he missed me. He nevertheless advised me not to be in a hurry to leave, but to take advantage of all the fruit and the lovely vegetables available in the Crimea so I could build up my strength.

I followed his advice, hoping that Vidkun would be pleased with my improved looks—and that he would not mind another slight change in my appearance, as well. One day, Nina and I had let ourselves be talked into bleaching our hair when some of the other women guests were amusing themselves with peroxidizing their hair. I was already quite blonde, so on me the bleaching just increased the contrast between my hair and my heavy, dark eyebrows. This contrast had been the occasion of so many comments from teachers and others all during my childhood and adolescence that they no longer bothered me.

Nina, on the other hand, had ash blonde hair, and on her, the peroxide produced such a startling effect that even Vidkun obviously noticed it when we returned to Kharkov. He made no comments about my own looks, as it turned out. The only long-

range effect of that peroxide treatment was that my hair grew in much darker that it had been before, and it stayed that way.

Nina and I also found time to participate in various outdoor activities arranged by the sanatorium, but our favorite pastime was sunning ourselves on the beach that consisted of beautiful, multicolored pebbles, polished smooth by the waves thundering steadily against the shore from the open sea directly in front of us. And we never tired of swimming in the warm waves of my *rodnóie móre*, my own Black Sea.

No matter how busy and happy we were, I still missed Vidkun, and when the time came for us to return to Kharkov, my only sorrow was that I had to part from Mama. I asked Nikolái Ivánovich, who was returning to his family a few days before Nina and I left, to keep in touch with Mama and look after her when I was no longer there. I also left with him a small sum of money for emergencies, and he gave me his word of honor that Mama would be in good hands. Into Mama's own hands I gave the rest of the money I had managed to set aside from the small allowance Vidkun had given me for my personal expenses while traveling, but the sum was pitifully small.

Mama kept assuring me that she would manage just fine, but it was obvious that our impending separation was breaking her heart. To be with me for as long as possible, she decided to go with Nina and me on the steamer back to Sebastopol. There, all three of us spent a couple of days with Nikolái Ivánovich's family, although he himself was away on business.

To cheer up my mother and give myself courage, I kept telling her that I would be back soon. She would always answer:

"You must not worry about me. I know that everything will be well. You are my *úmnitsa*, my good girl—just take good care of yourself. Don't worry about writing me often if it will be hard for you; just drop me a few words, a postcard, when you can."

She did not cry. She just kept her eyes fastened on me as if

she wanted to paint my portrait, and often she would take my hand in both of her small hands and press it to her heart. She spoke very little, but her face was paler than usual, and she suddenly looked very old.

When the day and the hour of my departure came, we fared no better than people usually do under such circumstances. Stupidly and irreparably, we repeated meaningless phrases and missed our last chance of saying or doing something that might alter the course of events or, at the very least, acknowledge the horrible, dreadful pain.

The first departure bell rang. Mama gave me her blessing and a small icon before she had to step down on the platform. There, she kept talking to me while she looked at me steadily and made the sign of the Cross over me with her trembling hand. The second bell rang out, and then the third. The conductor blew a long, sharp whistle, and the train gave a sharp jolt, but then remained in place for a few agonizing seconds more before slowly, slowly, like a giant tortoise, it began to move with deafening sighs, labored puffs of steam, and a mournful cry.

Outside my window, Mama continued to walk beside the train. To my horror, I saw that her face was shrouded in tears—not just wet, but awash in tears. She was not even aware that she was weeping. Her face was not distorted, and her eyes were wide open and fixed on me as the tears gushed from them.

The train was picking up speed, forcing her to walk faster and faster. I called out: “Mama, stop, you’ll tire yourself out—please stop, *mamochka!*”

But she kept on walking and then started running in order to keep up with the train and me. I was waving to her and making signs that she should stop running.

“Stop, *mamochka*, stop!”

But she was still running, her face glistening with tears. As she dropped farther and farther behind, I had to lean far out of

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the window to wave to her. At that point, only the thought of Vidkun waiting for me in Kharkov prevented me from jumping off the train and sharing my mother's fate, come what may.

I watched Mama reach the end of the platform and continue along the unpaved gravel, still running, running after the train. Her figure grew smaller and smaller until it was visible no longer.

I never saw her again.

Although I found it hard to believe that she had survived the horrors of the Second World War and the German occupation, I never stopped searching for her. Some forty years after our ways parted, some friends managed to track her down in Russia, but it was too late. She had died just a few weeks earlier, lonely and blind, without knowing whether I was living or dead.