

18

Together Again in Kharkov

Maria told her biographer, Øystein Parmann, that after the fateful eye contact she and Quisling had made on the day he stopped in at Bashkóvich's office, they would sometimes pass each other in the PomGol corridors. And finally—"some months later"—they became personally acquainted at a banquet that the PomGol gave in honor of the various foreign relief organizations.¹

Parmann obtained most of his description of what took place during and after this banquet from notes made in Maria's own hand.² In listing those who had been present, Parmann left out an important piece of information, however. Maria's own notes said: "From Russian side was representative of Russian Red Cross *and Mr. B.* and from various Russian institutions." "Mr. B." was her chief, Bashkóvich.

In this story about the banquet, we have, if nothing else, confirmation that Maria worked for Bashkóvich in a trusted position because her supposed job at the PomGol telephone exchange, recently obtained with Alexandra's and Quisling's help, would not have resulted in an invitation to a banquet honoring the foreign relief organizations. It is quite likely that such a banquet took

1. Parmann, *Maria Quislings Dagbok*, pp. 30–36.

2. NB, Quisling Archive, Ms. fol. 3920: X: 11.

place while Alexandra was away in the Crimea because on May 10, the main ARA office in New York had received a message from its Moscow chief saying that Kharkov was no longer devastated by famine, and two weeks later he learned from the same source that all ARA personnel in Russia were to leave their positions by July 15.³

Reportedly dressed all in white for the banquet, Maria was assigned a seat directly opposite Quisling at the table. Toward the middle of the meal, they struck up a conversation, she told Parmann, and Quisling subsequently devoted his conversation so exclusively to her that the other guests took notice of it. When the party broke up, he arranged to walk her home, but first they made a long detour along the river in the lovely, star-studded summer night, and after a while they sat down on the grassy river bank to indulge in a long and confidential talk. Maria slept badly that night, we are told. So would, no doubt, Alexandra have done had she known what her husband was doing while she was away in the Crimea with her mother and Nina.

There is good reason to question whether Maria's story about how she and Quisling met contains any truth beyond the indisputable facts that she was working in Bashkóvich's PomGol office and that she attended an official banquet together with Quisling—especially since her account so blatantly omits the fact that Quisling was married to Alexandra at the time.

It is best not to move ahead of events, however, but to let Alexandra recount her own memories of her return from the Crimea:

Vidkun did not meet me at the station in Kharkov, but had sent a car for me. Nina's mother and sisters met our train, so I asked

3. H, ARA Russian Section, box 84, folder 7 (letters from John R. Ellington in Moscow, May 10 and 24, 1923).

the driver to take Nina and her family back to their house before I went home myself.

I ran into Vidkun out in the corridor and could not help jumping up and hanging myself about his neck. Sheer joy at seeing him again made me forget his frequent lectures against such displays. This time, however, he kissed me tenderly and said that he was very glad that I was home:

“You know, with one stroke you’ve made this place gay, lovely, and warm again.”

That, too, made me very happy to be home. And our sunny apartment looked lovely, with vases full of flowers in all the rooms in honor of my homecoming. All the windows were open, letting in the clean, cool afternoon air with its hint of autumn, and with floating gossamer shimmering in the sunlight.

Not only did Vidkun seem really glad to have me back, but while we were opening all the packages I had brought with me and placing their contents with all the items I had sent ahead, he also expressed his delight with both my purchases and the family treasures Mama had given me. When we unrolled the carpets on the floor, we saw that one of them was so large that we would be hard put to fit it into our Oslo apartment, but we decided that we could just fold it double and use it in our biggest room. He examined each of the remaining articles over and over. The heirloom watch I had given him amused him especially. Like a small boy, he kept pressing the knob that made this treasure chime out the hours and quarter-hours.

I sat there thinking: “I love him as much as I love Mama, especially when he’s so tender and attentive. He’s the closest person to me now, and so it will be to the end of our lives. He has missed me so—and I certainly could not have stayed with Mama forever.”

It was wonderful to be able to tell Vidkun all the things I had not had room for in my letters, and I talked almost non-stop until

Kátia summoned us to supper. I was so glad to be home that I even welcomed the sight of both Kátia and the cook, and of the latter's cold chicken.

After this happy reunion, our home life resumed its familiar pace, which was smooth and tranquil enough provided one disregarded the unique characteristics of our servants.

It was with many misgivings that I surveyed the "domestic staff" at my disposal when Vidkun, on rather short notice, told me that Fridtjof Nansen was expected in Kharkov and that Vidkun and I were expected to be his hosts and guides while he and his entourage were in our city. It was to be a great occasion, connected with the winding-up of Nansen's famine relief work in the Ukraine in the middle of August, at which time Nansen would transfer his activities to the Balkans.

Vidkun's attitude to Nansen was always a contradictory mixture of hero worship and bitter resentment. He often spoke about Nansen and later wrote very frankly about him in the letters he sent me until our correspondence ceased toward the end of 1929. For the most part, he complained about Nansen's lack of cooperation in providing him with sufficient tools and people to help with his difficult assignments. In addition, Vidkun felt that he had not received proper public credit for what he had so far achieved, although Nansen was quite liberal with his praise in his private letters to Vidkun.

From my earliest childhood, I had been familiar with Fridtjof Nansen's polar exploits, and I knew about his and Herbert Hoover's later great humanitarian work, so I was very much looking forward to meeting this great man. Nevertheless, I was worried by the part I was expected to play on this occasion, and both Vidkun and I were quite relieved when we learned that Nansen and his entourage had taken rooms at one of the local hotels and that they would stay in Kharkov for only a couple of days.

We were, nevertheless, expected to give a formal dinner at home for Nansen and some twenty other guests, and even with my lack of experience in entertaining I could see that we were ill-equipped for such an undertaking. We had insufficient tables and chairs, tablecloths, saucepans, crockery, cutlery, and glassware for so many people. Furthermore, during those hard times, there were no delicatessens or caterers nor so much as a bakery in the entire city. Most people had no telephone, so it was hard to get in touch with friends who could be of help on such short notice. And there was no disguising our lack of qualified domestic help!

“Never mind,” said Vidkun when I expressed my doubts, “do the best you can; *à la guerre comme à la guerre*—everybody knows that, and nobody will censure us.”

I undertook my duties as a hostess with enthusiasm, using Vidkun’s influence and the help of my nearest friends to obtain the necessary equipment. The wife of one of the top men in the government had taken a liking to me, and on hearing about the singularities of our cook, she now lent me her own good cook to help out for the occasion. Aliókhin, our office messenger, volunteered to be in charge of waiting at the table. He said that he had grown up on a large country estate and knew how those things should be done. Not only that, he was confident he could control our Kátia! I relaxed and put my faith in him.

I was introduced to Nansen immediately upon his arrival in Kharkov and was primarily struck by how gloomy and reserved he appeared as I watched him during a large reception given in his honor by the top leaders of the Ukrainian government. It was a huge, boring affair with endless toasts, but also with speeches in praise of Nansen and my husband that made me glow with pride. I think Vidkun felt gratified, as well, but Nansen remained cool and serious in his demeanor. Fortunately, he seemed to thaw during our conversation later, and he asked me several questions

about my family and about how I had liked Norway—questions that suggested he knew at least something about me already.

Then came our turn. This was the first dinner given for Nansen during this visit to Kharkov, so Vidkun wanted Nansen to meet top members of the Ukrainian government under relatively informal conditions, along with some of the most prominent Soviet Russian and American officials he had been co-operating with during his relief work. Now that I know how directly involved Bashkóvich was in this relief work in 1923, I can only wonder why he was not at our party.

Only men had been invited. Aside from our notorious Kátia, I was the only woman present. Since the party was, to some degree, also a working meeting, we did not serve wine with the food, as far as I remember, which did not make the atmosphere around the table any merrier or more relaxed. Sitting there with Nansen on my right and the highest Soviet dignitary present on my left, I tried to keep my mind on our guests, but part of my attention invariably strayed to Kátia.

Aliókhin and I had spent considerable time rehearsing Kátia in the proper way to serve food on a formal occasion: “Stand behind the chair of the guest you’re serving; hold the dish on outstretched arms between the guest and the person on his left, keep silent, and just let the guest help himself to the food.”

I was apprehensive that even this simple procedure would prove too much for Kátia, especially since she also had to remember the order in which people were to be served, but Aliókhin assured me that he would handle the main course himself and let Kátia help with just the side dishes and the change of plates.

Later, I received many compliments for what turned out to be a successful party after all, but for me, the most memorable part of that evening was our Kátia. She made a stunning entry into the dining room, solemnly carrying a large dish. Her huge

hands were grotesquely and conspicuously ornamented with the yellow gloves she had stolen from Vidkun. I could scarcely believe my eyes when Kátia headed straight for the space between Nansen and myself.

In a loud, hissing whisper I ordered her to get back into the kitchen and take off those ridiculous gloves, but she was oblivious to my command and to everything else. She was so impressed and preoccupied with her own magnificence that she failed to pay attention to her large dish, which tilted and let several pieces of meat fall to the floor. To my horror, she was bending down to pick them up, but, fortunately, Aliókhin had spotted the catastrophe that was brewing. He snatched the dish from Kátia's hands, gave her a strong shove toward the kitchen door with his knee, and continued to carry the dish around the table himself as if nothing had happened. That was the least he could do, for I found out later that it was his idle stories out in the kitchen about grand receptions before the Revolution, when all the servants had to wear white gloves, that had given Kátia the idea of wearing Vidkun's gloves while waiting at the table.

In the meantime, the conversation around the table had continued nonchalantly and without interruption, but the amused look in some of the guests' eyes showed that they had noticed Kátia's performance and had begun to enjoy themselves. Even our guest of honor, the famous, composed, and frigidly restrained Dr. Nansen (as Vidkun always called him) grew merrier and got a tiny twinkle in his eye. He went so far as to tell a little story, and although it was not particularly amusing, everybody listened to it with rapt attention, and it was a great success.

I had barely recovered from the first shock when Kátia—this time without gloves and clutching a large bowl—again whizzed into the dining room like a bomb. Embarrassed by her first failure, she had decided to make up for it. Having figured out that the

old gentleman was the most important guest, she again aimed straight for Nansen, who looked into the bowl and declined to help himself, much to Kátia's dissatisfaction. I tried to nudge her on to the next guest, but to no avail. She continued to urge Nansen to take some of what she was offering—new potatoes with butter and dill. Reluctantly, he helped himself to one small potato, obviously to get rid of her, while he continued his conversation with his neighbor.

Kátia's notion of what was due hospitality was not appeased, however. Feeling herself ignored by Nansen, she put her huge paw on his shoulder, and when he looked up at her in some surprise, she said:

"You don't need to stand on ceremony! You just go on and take some more. We have plenty of this stuff left out in the kitchen, so there's enough for everybody."

Losing what was left of my patience, I told Kátia as loudly and peremptorily as the circumstances permitted: "Don't you see that this *bárin* ("gentleman" or "master") doesn't want any more? Leave him alone and do as you've been told! Please."

Kátia looked at me in surprise and replied: "Sure he'd like to have some more, but he doesn't understand what I'm telling him. You'd better tell him in that foreign language of yours not to be shy and to take some more; tell him we have plenty for everybody."

In sheer desperation, I asked Aliókhin to send Kátia back to the kitchen and take over her duties at the table.

It was still daylight when the guests had left and Nansen, Vidkun, and I went out for a stroll in the garden. I had my Brownie camera with me and took some snapshots of Nansen with Vidkun, and Vidkun took some pictures of me standing next to Nansen. When we had finished posing, I excused myself and returned to our

apartment, while the two men continued to walk and talk together in the garden for quite a long time.

When Vidkun and I finally were alone, he said admiringly: "You see, now, what an intelligent, efficient, and interesting man Dr. Nansen is! A brilliant conversationalist! A great man in all respects!"

I had to admit that, indeed, he was not as sullen and pompous as he had appeared on first acquaintance, but I was still feeling my responsibilities as a hostess and was more than a little apprehensive concerning Vidkun's impression of Kátia's antics at the table. Vidkun continued to talk only about Nansen, however, until at long last he suddenly exclaimed with disgust:

"But did you notice what was going on at the table?"

My heart sank. "What do you mean?" I asked feebly.

"Why, nobody paid serious attention to what Nansen was saying! It made my task of interpreting so much more difficult. And the table manners of some of the guests! Some of those Russians at least have the excuse that they don't know any better, but to think that even the American representative could behave like that!"

"Well, I was so busy watching our servants that I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary," I said, sighing with relief that he was not complaining about Kátia.

"Can you believe that he kept changing his fork from his left hand to his right? Worse than that—he'd spear a hot potato on his fork and hold it up in front of his face, blowing on it to cool it! An utter disgrace!"

By this time, my heart was full of gratitude to our American friend who unwittingly had managed to distract Vidkun's attention away from Kátia's escapades. I felt I owed it to him to defend him.

"But perhaps he was acting in accordance with American etiquette!" I said, half in jest.

"Nonsense! The rules for proper conduct are the same the world over."

"Well, I'm not so sure. They might have new rules in the New World. Many things may be different there. For instance, Chekhov says in one of his stories that in California they drink gin instead of tea!" I said with a smile.

"That's impossible! Chekhov is known as a very realistic writer, a kind of artistic reporter—a journalist rather than one of those writers of esoteric fiction—It really doesn't matter, Acia, but you must have made a mistake."

I knew that Vidkun had spent much time studying Russian literature, but in that area I was able to hold my own ground, so I countered:

"No, I'm absolutely right. There is no mistake as far as my quote is concerned."

"*Khoroshó*. Very well. I'll believe it when I see it," Vidkun said, obviously amused by my ardor and certainty. Then he turned the conversation back to Nansen.

I had to borrow the needed Chekhov volume from Nina later since most of Mama's books had been lost or used for fuel. The expression I had quoted was there, just as I knew it would be, in the story "Mál'chiki" ("Boys") about some small Russian boys intending to run away to America. Little Chechevitsyn was waiting and eager to confirm what I had said. But I immediately had second thoughts. It seemed so futile and petty to go to such lengths just to prove to my husband that I had been right about such a trifling matter. I returned the book to Nina and never again mentioned the subject to Vidkun.

The day after our party for Nansen, we had to attend another dinner, a solemn banquet that the Ukrainian government gave in honor of Nansen, who was to leave Kharkov the following day.

Together Again in Kharkov

287

Nansen's manner was much warmer this time, and he treated me as an old acquaintance.

Both Nansen and Vidkun were praised to the skies for their relief work. After Vidkun had translated Nansen's brief reciprocating speech into Russian, he spoke on his own behalf, and I was very proud of him.